

Prologue

Mankind's first contact with extra-terrestrial life was as dramatic and historical as everyone believed it would be.

They were called the Faey, and they came to Earth not as messengers of peace, but as conquerors.

On March 12th, 2005, they arrived in two immense starships and addressed the peoples of Earth via radio transmission, in every major language, that Earth had two weeks to surrender to the Faey Imperium or face war. They did not use any show of force or destroy anything to prove their might, for the images that Earth telescopes gave of their two vessels was all the show of force anyone needed. They were two miles long and nearly three quarters of a mile across, two sleekly designed monstrosities that were so massive that when they entered into Earth orbit, they affected the tides.

The next day, a lone Faey emissary descended from the vessels above to address the United Nations with the Faey demands, and the global news coverage of the arrival of the emissary caused its own confusion. The Faey representative, a high-ranking military officer, was a breathtakingly lovely human-looking female with light blue skin and pointed ears. She did not look like a warlike alien, she did not even look particularly dangerous. But when she addressed the United Nations, in English, it became quite apparent to everyone watching the globally broadcast event that she was every bit the conqueror. She was arrogant and condescending, and she made it clear immediately that there would be no negotiation. The Earth had two weeks to surrender unconditionally or face war. Earth could either surrender or be conquered, but either way, they would become a part of the Faey Imperium.

Faced with an enemy vastly superior in technology to their own, the nations of Earth met in the United Nations met for two solid weeks and debated furiously, but such a debate had only one ultimate conclusion. That conclusion was reached March 26th, 2005, when the Secretary General of the United Nations, Vladimir Kosparivic, formally and officially surrendered on behalf of all the nations of Earth.

Without firing a shot, without killing a single human being, the Faey Imperium conquered Earth.

And so, Earth became a farming colony under Faey control. The second major shock that the natives—as the Faey called them—discovered about their conquerors was that there was much more to them than first believed. The Faey were a telepathic species, and they used that telepathic power to quickly move in and root out all the resistance movements that had sprung up since their arrival. All Terran governments were dissolved, replaced by a feudal system where a Faey noble held absolute power over his or her territory. At first, the humans held hope that their conquerors could somehow be overthrown, but it was a feeble one. In two months, the Faey Occupational Forces wiped out every band of organized resistance, leaving the humans with nothing but grim resignation of the lot that had been dealt to them.

The changes were drastic. Human society was allowed to continue to function, at least after a fashion. The Faey meant for Earth to be a farming colony, and that was exactly what it became. All activity on Earth was shifted to farming or offering material or technological support for the farming effort. The verdant belts of Earth, such as the American mid-west, had every single square inch of their land taken over by farming. Entire cities were depopulated and razed to make room for farms, and the middle sections of America became nothing but a vast collection of large collective farms. Every open space became a farm, even inhospitable areas like deserts and tundra, from the northern reaches of Canada and Russia all the way to the southern tips of Africa and South America. The Faey did not cut down forests to make room for farms, and all small-scale civilization that existed within forested areas was evacuated, letting the regions go back to nature to maintain the planetary ecosystem and sending the inhabitants to work elsewhere.

Society continued on much as it did before, but all the humans who had had a job that had either been phased out as unnecessary, or had been replaced by Faey, found themselves working on farms. Every single human who was unemployed suddenly found himself on a farm, and a large segment of

the rest of the population also found themselves working on farms, having been assigned there by random lottery that was held every three months. The rest of the human race continued on much as it had before, manufacturing supplies and equipment needed for the farms, maintaining the infrastructure, rendering services and support to other workers. Because of this realignment, lawyers, politicians, stock brokers and bankers suddenly found themselves weeding fields, while doctors, construction workers, and the clerks at the local convenience stores found their jobs to be suddenly secure. For those who avoided being sent to farms, job loyalty became insanely high and performance became fanatically perfect, for being fired or quitting would lead to immediate reassignment to a farm...and once assigned to a farm, a worker was virtually guaranteed to be a farm worker for the rest of his life.

The Faey did turn out to be not quite so heartless as humans originally first believed. They installed a great deal of their own technology on the planet to clean up the environment and converted all human cars and trucks to fuel cells of hydrogen, which burned cleanly. They instituted universal health care for all humans, cured plagues on human kind like AIDS, cancer, and diabetes, and revamped the educational system to start training humans in their technology, so they could maintain the Faey systems themselves. The Faey took over the roles of police, and their telepathic abilities led to the quick capture of all criminals, which in turn led to a drastic drop in crime. They did not interfere with the arts or entertainment, allowing music, movies, television, and even the internet to remain for the enjoyment of the citizenry, encouraged careers in the arts and protected the jobs and livelihoods of those already in careers in the arts, even going so far as to not even bother to censor content, allowing people to express any opinion they wished...for everyone knew that the Faey telepathic gifts would destroy any kind of rebellion before it ever had a chance to begin. Humans were allowed to object to the Faey, even do so publicly, so long as they didn't actively do anything about it. But many saw these gestures as nothing more than guaranteeing the health and well-being of their slave work force.

Human society slowly and begrudgingly accepted this new order, however, for it was impossible to rebel. Their Faey conquerors were telepathic, and quickly rooted out any attempt to organize resistance and crushed it. Unable to counter either the vast technological superiority of their conquerors or maintain any kind of organized resistance, humans slowly came to accept that there was nothing that could be done. But many continued to try, unable to live under the heel of an oppressor. These mavericks mainly existed within the area formerly known as the United States, which proved to be both one of the most productive regions in terms of farm output, and the most troublesome in terms of defiant troublemakers. The vast majority of these malcontents were squatters who had escaped from farms or had left their jobs and homes, and moved into the unpopulated forested regions of the eastern and western sides of the continent, areas that had been stripped of human population to allow the areas to return to nature. In these lawless forest zones, they eked out dangerous and sometimes violent lives living off the land and preying on one another, living stark, almost primitive lives, but living free. The Faey allowed them to do so, not bothering them so long as they didn't raid Faey holdings.

And so things remained for two years, a continuous cycle of the indomitable human spirit seeking to organize and resist, only to have their Faey conquerors move in and destroy the attempt before it got started.

Chapter 1

*Raista, 9 Shiaa, 4392, Orthodox calendar;
Wednesday, 14 May 2007, Native regional reckoning
New Orleans, Gamia Province, American Sector*

He hated heat.

Blowing out his breath, Jason fanned the neck of his tee shirt as he scurried across the campus of Tulane University, lugging a heavy backpack full of assorted things around, just one of the many racing around campus like psychotic ants, trying to get wherever they were going as quickly as possible to escape the withering heat. Why did it get this hot so early in the year down here? Back home in Maine, there would still be snow in sheltered, shady pockets on the ground!

It was almost enough to make him want to be sent to a farm, but with his luck, they'd stick him on one of the rice or sugar plantations they had down here, instead of a nice wheat farm up in New England. It was just ridiculous. He looked at his watch and saw that he was going to be nearly a half an hour early, but he didn't care. He'd stand out in the hall and wait if only to be in air conditioning. It had to be nearly a hundred degrees! For him, that was outrageous, given back home in Portland, it was a news event if the thermometer hit eighty!

How did these people manage to live down here, anyway? He was sure that they would have melted by now.

The overshirt and backpack didn't help, but he couldn't help that. The overshirt, nothing more than a button-up, short sleeve, light blue denim shirt that was worn unbuttoned was a vanity of his. He'd worn shirts like that for so long that he felt naked if he wasn't wearing a shirt and an overshirt over it. The backpack was roasting his back where it was against him, but there wasn't much he could do but pull it down and switch to the other shoulder. It was a bit heavy today, but that was because he had today's project in there in addition to his panel display, the universal computer-like device that all students were issued, that acted as a textbook, notebook, assignment book, and personal computer. His cell phone (which he was required to carry at all times), earphones, several music and data sticks—crystalline devices that looked like little inch-long pencils made of crystal which stored information—and a few good old fashioned paper notebooks were also in the pack, adding to the weight but not about to be left behind.

If only Professor Ailan had let him build a smaller model. His project was for Advanced Plasma Fundamentals, and he had to build a functioning plasma flow model, complete with a plasma power generator, conduit for the plasma to take at least two separate paths, and an ion exchange module at both junctions. The Faey had microscopic versions of what he had in his pack, a massive dog of a device that weighed nearly thirty pounds, but he had to use the supplies that were available to him. It was a ridiculously easy project, truth be told, because all a student had to do was get the parts and put them together. His model had three paths instead of two, because he was the last student to get to the part bin, and had to use the leftovers. Professor Ailan had kept him at the podium on purpose, he privately suspected, keeping him from being able to get the necessary two-path split exchanger and merge exchanger to build the simplest version of the model. He managed to get a three-path split exchanger and two two-path merge exchangers, and used those to build a cascading model where the primary conduit was split into three paths, then two merged, then that joined path merged with the last before returning to the PPG.

Ailan was alright, at least for a Faey. Jason didn't like Faey, because they were conquering occupiers. It was well known that Jason was an objector, a vocal dissident, but he never allowed his opinions to appear to be anything more than opinions, and he also had the highest grade point average

among second semester students in the university. The crux of his attitude towards Ailan dealt with a philosophical position. Because the Faey had stripped Jason of his freedom and rights, he was opposed to their system. But individual Faey were just that, individuals, and often voiced the same objections he himself raised. But since they were Faey, he had a moral obligation to avoid them, and do his best not to like them. That wasn't easy when all his instructors were Faey, and Faey like Ailan were friendly, personable, and actually rather funny. Ailan was a male Faey, which weren't often seen on Earth. The Faey was a female-dominated society whose entire core was based on telepathic power. Females tended to have stronger telepathic abilities, so they had emerged as the dominant gender. Females and males were the same size and roughly the same strength, but it was that disparity in telepathic might that made all the difference. Males did have a place in the society, but they were not allowed, by law, to enter into any occupation that was considered overly hazardous or dangerous, outside of serving on the large starships. Male Faey tended to be scientists, engineers, inventors, doctors, and teachers, while females were just about the only Faey that most people dealt with. All military Faey were female, including the occupational forces, who served as the new police. In addition to being military, females were also allowed to enter into any career they could manage to qualify for, and pull enough strings with whichever noble ruled them to manage to get in.

That was one reason Jason got so aggravated with the Faey system. It was a feudal bureaucracy, where every Faey was tested to see where they excelled, and allowed to pursue careers within those fields. The personal choice of the person had nothing to do with these choices, which was why Jason cursed his own role every day. When the Faey took over Earth, they tested each and every human on the planet, tests of intelligence, reasoning, and aptitude. Prior education and training had little impact on these tests, and everyone tried their absolute hardest when taking them. People who scored poorly were sent to farms, and being put on a farm was a fate that every human on Earth who was not already on a farm strove mightily to avoid. In that regard, the Faey system was a great deal like the military. But people who had money or connections could get out of that mandatory placement and go wherever they wanted. They just had to have enough credits or the right lineage. Nobles never served in the military in any role other than fleet officers or non-combat logistics officers for those who washed out of the academy, because they could buy those positions. If Jason had had enough money, he could have bribed his placement assessor to get any job he wanted. Not that it mattered for humans, for virtually all forms of old Earth currency was now worthless except for gold and silver. Some rich millionaires did manage to have enough gold or silver assets on hand to buy themselves out of working on a farm, but not many.

The main reason Jason hated his position was because he scored very high on those tests, high enough to be classified as able to comprehend Faey technology. And because of that, now he was in school to learn their technology. They didn't consider that a risk because of their formidable telepathy, which would let them catch him long before he tried to use his education in some kind of harmful manner. He would be trained in some kind of Faey technology, and then become a part of the Imperium by serving it. And he hated that. He'd be serving no matter what job he was doing, even farming, but it seemed so wrong to him to be trained in their technology and then work for them. It was almost as if he were betraying the American ideals he had held so dear, cooperating with the enemy.

It was doubly agonizing for him because he was fascinated by their technology. They used plasma as a power source, and had mastered the science of manipulating space itself for use as propulsion, containing the fusion reactions that supplied plasma to power their systems, communicating over the entire galaxy, and had even learned to use it to breach the spacial boundaries and allow ships to jump through artificial wormholes...the closest thing to teleportation that had been devised so far by any race. They used plasma for everything, from lighting their homes to the energy of their weapons, and had learned techniques to alter the nature of plasma to make it safe for commercial and residential use. They used the manipulation of space as propulsion, as a means of travel beyond propulsion, and had

even learned a way to form micro-wormholes that allowed communications to pass through, giving their Imperium real-time communications over their vast empire of nearly seventy star systems. It was all so incredibly fascinating, and yet he felt he was violating his ethics and morals by enjoying his education. He hated the Faey, and yet was learning to be a productive member of their society. He hated being nothing more than a slave, yet his was the gilded cage, for they had put him in a place he loved to be.

Too hot. He had another half a block to go. Tulane and another university called Loyola had existed side by side here in the Garden District of New Orleans, but Loyola had been dissolved, its buildings taken over by Tulane to form a single campus. Not that it was Tulane anymore, it was simply called Tulane because that was the university whose buildings were still standing. Officially, it was the Basic Technology Academy, Gamia Province. His next class was all the way on the other side of the campus, in a brand new facility that had been built where the centuries-old Loyola building had once stood. Scornful of the rich history of that venerable institution, the Faey had razed the building to the ground and in its place built their five-story nightmare of glass and synthetic plastic-like material that was stronger than steel but lighter than aluminum. It was called the Plasma Dynamics building, or what the students called the “Plaid” due to the checkerboard appearance of glass and dark plastic that formed the front façade of the building, and it was where all lab-oriented Plasma courses were taught. How did these people deal with it? And it was only *May*!

Two Faey females in that strange form-fitting body armor came across Saint Charles Avenue, their rifles slung over their shoulders. He wondered how they could even breathe in those things. They were truly form-fitting, showing off all those lovely curves for which many human men secretly pined. Faey women were very lovely, all the military women were athletically thin, and most of them were curvy and very appealing. Jason had a feeling that the tight fit of the armor had something to do with its protective aspects, since it didn’t hinder their movement in any way. If there was no void space within it, there would be no jostling inside the armor. He once saw a Faey soldier get hit by an SUV that had to be going about fifty miles an hour back when they first arrived, before they got the hang of crosswalks and realized that traffic wasn’t just going to stop just because they stepped out into the street. She got thrown about thirty feet after the impact, then she got up and simply dusted herself off. The SUV was completely trashed. The armor was more than just showing off their forms, it was a powerful protective shell that surrounded them. These two had their helmets off, slung by small cords over the barrels of their rifles. They were patent Faey, high cheekbones, large, almond-shaped eyes, small, pert little noses, full lips, and that strange bluish skin. The taller one had gray eyes and auburn red hair cut short, combed over one side of her head, which seemed odd with her blue-hued skin, and the shorter one had blue eyes and hair so blond it was virtually white, short and straight as straw. Both had black armor, which denoted them not as regular army, but as Marines. They were the ones that a human had to watch out for, for they were rough, impatient, and tended to hand out very harsh punishments for the most benign of offenses. They resented their jobs as police, and took it out on the people they policed. Jason rushed past them, head down, not glancing to either side, his mind carefully neutral, betraying nothing.

And there it was. He’d come to be very familiar with that brushing sensation against his mind, the touch of a Faey who was using her telepathy against him. Jason had a very organized and controlled mind, thanks to his father. His father had been an Air Force fighter pilot, but resigned after his mother was killed in a car crash to spend more time with him. His father had been a fanatical practitioner of martial arts, and had taught his son Karate, Aikido, Kendo, and Ninjitsu, which gave him a very structured and strong mind. He still practiced, but not as much as he had before his father passed away. That mental training gave him the ability to control his mind, present to the world a repetitive train of thought which the Faey couldn’t seem to penetrate without being very serious about it, an upper layer of sorts that concealed the true thoughts beneath it. And they all tried, damn them. Every single Faey he came into casual contact with probed him within ten seconds of coming close to them. It was

automatic, and he had come to expect it every time he came within twenty feet of a Faey. Some of those brushings were light, as this one was, some were strong, and sometimes the Faey abandoned tact and literally attacked his mind to break down his defense of repetitive thought and get at the true thoughts beneath. No matter how light or strong the touch, Jason never failed to feel violated at those touches, violated and offended that they would strip him of the most private of all private domains, his own mind.

The thought he used against most Faey when he was feeling petty, as he was now, was an image of the Faey involved, stark naked and in a rather provocative pose. Except for a pair of army boots. The boots were rather important. He wasn't sure which one it was doing it, so he decided to use the redhead. She was cuter. He had several stock poses that he used, but given that this one was a but more buxom than the usual Faey, the good old cupping breasts image suited her rather well.

It was a dangerous game to play with a Marine, but it was worth it. One had to fight one's battles where and when one could. Ruffling a Marine's feathers would satisfy his sense of necessity.

From behind, he heard a startled gasp, and then then he felt a second brushing. That was proceeded immediately by uncontained laughter.

He knew he had about three seconds to make himself scarce, before that redhead got over her sense of moral outrage and got mad. He quickened his step as he heard the second one continue laughing, and he managed to get in with a group of other students moving towards the Plaid.

"Hey!" came a sudden call from behind. "Come back here!"

Jason ducked his head and broke out in front of the other students, who had stopped and turned around to see who was being addressed. They melted out of the way when they saw two Marines, one of them with a dark expression and the other trying her best not to start laughing again. Jason just barely managed to duck into the Plaid before the Marine spotted him, and he quickly got out of sight. He felt several more brushings, but instead of presenting an image of a naked Marine, he instead made his mind like smoke, empty and presenting little more to the outside world than a plastic plant would. He slipped into the broom closet between the bathrooms as he heard the sound of the Marine's boots on the tiled floor, then controlled his breathing and remained centered on nothingness, surrendering thought to the zen-like state of nothing but silence within and without, the serenity of a meditative mind.

"I know you're in here, human!" the Marine boomed in English, and she sounded quite miffed.

"Calm down, Jyslin," the other said in a reasonable tone. "I thought it was funny."

"It was funny, Maya, but do you think I'm going to let him get away with that?" she shot back, obviously miffed, because she was still speaking English. "Oh, no, not until I strip him and put him in a pair of those ridiculous high-heeled shoes the human girls wear. Now shut up and help me find him."

Jason stayed in the closet for several moments as brushing after brushing slid over him, very strong ones, as the two of them used their telepathic gifts to try to find his mind. He remained serene, allowing them to see nothing but emptiness as his mind worked beneath that misdirecting shell, curious as to why they *couldn't* find him. At that range, with as much power as he could sense in their probes, they should have punched right through his defense and locked right onto him. He could hear them not ten feet outside the door, for their armored boots *clacked* on the floor every time they moved. That close, they should be able to *smell* him, because he could certainly smell that strange copper-like smell that the strange metal of their armor exuded.

He heard them chatter at each other in their musical language for a moment, as the redhead's voice seemed to get agitated, then the blond's voice got quite serious. What was the matter with them now? She thought it was funny. What had the redhead said that changed her mind?

He heard their boots clack away, then from the sound of it, they went up the stairs. He quickly pounced up from his crouch and cracked the door open, and indeed saw them just as they turned and went up the steps, disappearing from sight.

Quick as a cat, Jason darted from the closet, his sneakers making no sound, and he rushed down the

hall, his mind racing. They *couldn't find him*. Their telepathic power should have found him easily once they got serious about it, but they hadn't. Maybe it was the door. It was made out of metal, and some people on the internet speculated that their telepathy couldn't pierce through heavy metals, like lead. If the door had a steel sheet, then maybe that was enough to weaken their probes to the point where it would keep them from finding him.

It was the only plausible explanation.

He rushed through the door of his classroom, closing the door behind him and peering through the small window. Had they heard him? Did they see him come out of the closet? He should have waited.

"Well, so glad you could join us, Mister MacKenzie!" the voice of Professor Ailen boomed across the room, followed up by the laughter of twenty others.

Jason whirled around and put his back against the door, surprise making his face flush, and found all of them looking at him. Had he been in the closet that long? When he zoned out like that, he couldn't keep track of time.

"Well, since you wanted to make such an entrance, why don't you step up and show us your project?"

He drew a blank. Project? What was he talking about? Oh, his *project*. "I have it right here, Professor," he said, taking his pack off his shoulder and approaching the table which Ailen used as a lectern and a desk. "Sorry I'm late."

"And just who were you hiding from?" he asked with a sly smile.

"You don't want to know," he answered as he put his pack down by his chair, closest to the door, and pulling out his breadbox-sized plasma system. He felt a brushing from Ailen, and he was careful to keep his mind tightly focused on the project in his hands. Males didn't have the raw strength of the females when it came to telepathic ability, but they knew many tricks and subtle nuances that actually made them much more dangerous to him. Ailen had a policy of not probing his students, but sometimes, like right now, when his curiosity was piqued, he just couldn't help himself. The first time Ailen had used his power on Jason, he had used his standard smoke and mirror trick to conceal his thoughts, and he felt Ailen immediately probe around the edges of it, trying to find a way through. Ailen had *known* that it was nothing but a defense, that his true thoughts were lurking beneath that misdirection. No female had ever managed to detect that, at least not that he knew of. Because of that, Tarrin had to use more crude but no less effective techniques, such as repetitive concentration on a single thought, which drowned out everything else. Ailen could only see his focus on getting his project set up and running, and for as long as he felt Ailen brushing up against his mind, he could think of nothing else. But after a few seconds, the tentative brushing stopped, and Tarrin dropped his repetition and got down to the business of checking the seals on his exchangers before powering up his PPG.

The incident with the Marine was brushed into the back of his mind as he displayed his working three-path plasma system, then sat down and watched as the others displayed theirs. All of them but one worked perfectly, and that one failed because of a faulty PPG, which wasn't the student's fault. Jason had the luck of being in a class of other smart people, for they had all been shipped into New Orleans to attend this particular school, which had the best instructors. Jason had already had a year of school up in Boston, but when he aced his final in Basic Plasma Systems, they shipped him here, to Tulane, where the work was more challenging and the washout rate was tripled. This was the school where they sent the humans that they thought might have a knack for the work, and pushed them hard to see how quickly and completely they could embrace plasma technology. The Tulane campus was the M.I.T. or Northwestern of the Faey upper level education facilities, where the brightest students were sent.

No one in this school wanted to wash out. They all knew that the further they got in this school, the better of a job they qualified for once they were placed, and thus the more money they could make and the more secure they would be in their new careers. The goal of any student at Tulane was to get at

least to pass Advanced Plasma Applications, the benchmark requirement for plasma systems technicians. Anything above that was good money and solid job security. Many of them, once they got to that level, slacked off, washed out, and ended up getting placed, but they didn't care. They'd reached the promised land, and it didn't matter what job they got, because it was a *safe* job.

After a bit of lecture after the presentations, Professor Ailan glanced at the clock on the far wall and gave a little start. "Good grief, I'm holding you guys over," he announced. "I hope nobody has any classes ten minutes after our class ends, cause you'll be late." He clapped his hands. "That's all, people. Read chapter nine and do the scenario questions for tomorrow. Remember, we have a test on Thursday. See you tomorrow."

The room was filled with the low buzz of chatter as the students picked up their panel displays and other assorted equipment and started stowing it in packs. Jason had to close up his spiral and stow that, for he was the only person in the class that took notes on paper in addition to the notes he typed on his panel. He preferred writing it down, because writing it helped him commit it to memory much better than simply typing it out on a computer. He finished packing everything up as Ailan started disassembling the projects they did, his hands moving quickly and surely as he unannealed the components from their metal backing, using a little device that caused molecular structures of two different objects to mingle along the border, in effect "welding" them together. He was using the "separation" mode, which caused to disparate materials to unfuse, sliding it along the base junction where the components were annealed to the backing with a quick and steady hand. He watched for just a moment, then slung his pack over his shoulder and filed out the door.

"Not so fast."

Jason froze at the sound of that voice, for it was the redheaded Marine! He whirled around and saw her leaning with her back against the wall near the door, the sole of her left boot flat against the wall, her arms crossed below her breastplate and her head slightly bowed. Her rifle and helmet were missing, probably being held by that other platinum blonde Marine who wasn't around.

He was busted. He wasn't going to run away like a coward, but he wasn't going to blubber like a little girl either. He drew himself up erect and looked over at her with a neutral expression.

"You thought that was funny, didn't you?" she asked, then she chuckled. "Well, so did I. You have more backbone than most of these sheep. But you got it wrong."

"What?"

"We tan, just like you do," she told him with a strange smile. "I'm much lighter than that."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said carefully, then he took a step back.

"Don't even," she said quickly, coming off the wall. "Just because I thought it was funny doesn't mean you're getting away with it."

"There's nothing in the laws against picturing a Marine naked," he said bluntly.

"True, that's why I'm not hauling your happy ass down to the barracks," she told him. "You put me in a pair of boots, so I'm going to put you in a pair of high heels. For real," she told him with a wicked little smile.

Jason got very defensive at that point, his eyes going flat. "Try it," he said dangerously.

"Oh, you think you can take me?" she asked with a laugh, then he felt her brush against his mind. He focused his thoughts behind a mask of utter blankness, a wall of nothing that would not allow her to find its edges and slip inside. His sudden defense made her eyes go wide, then she gave him a sudden respectful look. "That's quite a trick there, human," she told him. "That's how you got away from us before. How do you do that?"

"Practice," he answered honestly.

"Well, that's fairly impressive," she admitted. "It's going to make this a little more difficult, but that's alright. I live for challenges."

"The only way you're going to get me out of my clothes is over my dead body," he warned in an ugly tone as several students passed by, giving him wild looks.

“And not let you enjoy the experience? I think not,” she winked. She *winked* at him! “I might have to knock you out, but I’ll make sure you wake up to enjoy it.”

Immediately, Jason balled up his fists.

She laughed. “Well, I tell you what, human. I’ll actually take you on hand to hand. I won’t even cheat. If you can beat me, I’ll leave you alone. If you lose, you walk home wearing nothing but high heels.”

Jason sized up this Faey. The armor hid her body, but he knew from experience that Faey soldiers were deceptively strong. But it was their speed that one had to watch. They were lithe, graceful, and very fast. The soldiers were extensively trained for combat, and that included hand to hand. They were solid opponents, and he had to respect both her speed and her training. She was expecting him to be like any other human of his size, rather strong, maybe well coordinated, but without any kind of basic training in self defense. And since she couldn’t probe him, she couldn’t find out that he was in fact *very* well versed in self defense. He knew what to expect from her, but she had no idea what to expect from him...or more to the point, she would draw the wrong conclusion. That gave him all the advantage he needed.

He could take her.

“You have a deal,” he said confidently.

“Come on then,” she told him with an eager smile.

“Now?”

“Sure,” she answered, walking past him, towards the outer doors. “There’s plenty of room outside.”

That suited him just fine.

The students on campus realized something was going on when the Faey came out of the building, her partner standing by the door with her helmet and rifle, then backed out onto the grass and crooked a finger tauntingly at a human that came out behind her. Jason dropped his pack by the sidewalk and ventured out onto the grass, cracking his knuckles and fixing the Faey with a cool stare. “Want me to take off my armor?” she asked with a teasing smile.

“No,” he answered in a calm, almost serene manner. “You’ll need it.”

That made the Faey laugh delightedly. “I’m really going to enjoy walking you home, human,” she promised. She spread her feet and raised her hands in a guard stance. “Come on then, Rambo,” she taunted. “Show the big bad Faey what you’re made of.”

It had to end fast, before she realized he was much more dangerous than he looked, and he knew exactly how to approach her to make that happen. He skittered in with his fists raised in a boxing stance, then flicked a few ineffective and intentionally clumsy jabs at her unprotected face, baiting her. She laughed mockingly as she danced back a few steps, evading his erratic blows, then whipped her hand out to grab his arm as it came at her.

Which was exactly what he wanted.

With lightning speed, Jason opened his fist and snapped his arm outwards, grabbing her by the wrist. He stepped in towards her and levered that arm in an Aikido lock, forcing her to move the way he wanted her to move or risk getting a broken arm or dislocated shoulder. Her armor would *not* protect her against that. He jerked her to and fro for several seconds as she gasped in pain and tried to disengage herself from his grip on her even as she surrendered to his force and moved where he bade her. He got her off balance by making her weave back and forth in ever-widening circuits, until she was all but stumbling around as he moved backwards and to each side, forcing her to come along with him or get her arm broken. Just as she dipped down to follow a sudden yank on her arm, Jason pivoted and let go of her, spun in a complete circle, and then delivered a wicked spinning roundhouse kick squarely to the side of her pretty little head just as she was rising up from his pull, completely unaware of the incoming attack. The outside of his foot went satisfyingly numb as it impacted her skull, and the raw power of the blow swept her right out from in front of him. His foot swung down easily to again

stand on the earth, and the Faey Marine crashed to the ground in a boneless heap.

Jason stood there for a long moment to utter, complete, stunned silence from the growing crowd that came over to see what was going on. He watched for several seconds, until she groaned and rolled over on her stomach, then shakily started pushing herself up onto her hands and knees. He thought about saying something to rub it in, but it was best not to tempt fate. He beat her, he beat her fairly, and something told him that he'd better pick up his pack and be somewhere else by the time she got her senses back. He turned his back on her without a word, then paced over and picked up his pack. The blond--what was her name? Maya? Maya, that was it. Maya gave him a look of profound surprise, then she gave him the strangest smile, all cheeky and amused. She put her free hand to her upper chest and gave him a little bow, some kind of weird Faey custom, he supposed. He put his hand in his pocket, held onto the strap of his pack with the other, then strolled away as if nothing had happened.

But as soon as he turned the corner, he ran like hell.

He knew that there were going to be repercussions for what happened. He was sure of it. A human had kicked the piss out of a Faey, and not just any Faey. A *Marine*. It worried him enough to make it hard to study, and that was a *very* bad thing.

He leaned back from the desk in his tiny room, putting his hands over his face. It was a truly spartan affair, with a narrow bed that wasn't long enough for him in the corner, and a tiny stand with a small television sitting in the other corner. A small window facing the brick building across the alley was set in the middle of the wall, by the television. His desk was at the head of his bed, which left just enough room to open the door, which banged up against the bookshelf on the opposite wall, behind the desk, which was why he had little more than a walkway in the middle of his room. His panel was sitting on the desk on a stand so he could read the screen, like a monitor, displaying video it had taken of his calculus class he took after the fight, a class he didn't even remember. At least he had the wherewithal to set the panel to record the class, because he was completely distracted.

Distracted? More like mindlessly worried. Professor Zalda, his aged female Faey calculus teacher, seemed amused by his state, and hadn't pressed him during class. He couldn't remember getting there. He couldn't remember a single word spoken during the class. Hell, he didn't even remember leaving and walking back to his room, which was two blocks from the campus in a dorm built for the students. It was all a jumbled blur of worry over what had happened. In a way, he started thinking that maybe he *should* have let that Marine strip him and make him walk home naked. At least then, he wouldn't be eaten up with an almost panicked fear of what the Marines were going to do to him in payback.

He knew all about that. His father had been in the Air Force, so he knew all about how they were going to gang up to pay him back for what he did to one of their own.

He blew out his breath and looked at the wall over his desk, under the shelf that was mounted to the wall, where a picture of his father was pinned. He'd been dead for five years now, and in a way, he was glad he didn't live to see the subjugation. His father would have invaded a base, stolen a fighter, and got himself killed, or ran off into the forest with the other squatters who were out there now. He died of cancer, and after he died, a seventeen year old Jason Fox found himself alone in the world. But instead of going into a foster home, he got emancipation and just kept going, like his father would have wanted him to. He sold his family house and moved into a dorm when he got a scholarship to play football at the University of Michigan. He played for two years as a third-string free safety and special teams cover player, never making it to the starting lineup, but he really didn't care. He was there on scholarship, and he used that scholarship to get a free education...which was what he was after. He majored in electrical engineering, focusing on digital electronics. He hoped to get a job designing computer hardware somewhere after college, working for a place like Motorola or IBM. But then the Faey came, and all his plans were tossed out the window. Because he was in college, he wasn't shipped off to a farm, allowed to remain in school and continue with his classes until he was tested.

Not that he did much schooling in that year between their arrival and the day they tested him. He

was stuck in a holding pattern, as was everyone in school, just waiting and going through the motions. It was a very nervous time, and it gave them enough time to find out from others just what happened in the testing, and what happened if one did poorly. They tested him, then shipped him to Boston for a year of preliminary--what they called remedial--education, then he had his first semester of plasma courses. He did so well that they shipped him down here to New Orleans a few months ago to start the semester at Tulane, and so far, he'd been doing rather well.

Jason chuckled humorlessly as his father's green eyes laughed from the photograph. His father had always been so jovial, so light-hearted, so much different from his sober and serious son. But they did look something alike. Jason has his father's straight blond hair, his piercing green eyes, and the same tall frame. His father was but a half an inch from being too tall to be a fighter pilot.

There was a knock at his door, which startled him nearly out of his chair. "Yo, Jason!" a man called, and he sighed in relief when he realized it was Tim. Tim was one of his students in his only extra-curricular activity, an Aikido class he taught on campus. He had nine pupils, and so far, they all seemed to be doing rather well. Jason taught them Aikido and Tai Chi, exercise for the body and the mind to help them deal with the tremendous stress that school put on them.

"It's open," he called, and the door opened immediately. Tim came in wearing a tank top and a pair of running shorts, and he was coated in sweat. Tim was a tall, dark-haired, rather handsome broad-shouldered young man that at twenty-two was a year younger than him, but was in the same semester as he was. They only shared one class, their Physics class, and that was enough for them to strike up a friendship. It was Tim that talked him into starting an Aikido club, and was one of his most eager pupils.

"You look like shit," Tim told him as he came in, unable to close the door because Jason was blocking his entrance into the room.

"I feel like it," he grunted, leaning back in the chair and looking up at the ceiling.

"You realize that you missed the meeting," he said. "Since you weren't there, we just threw each other around for a while then went home."

Jason chuckled ruefully. "Sorry about that, but I'm a little distracted. I've had a bad day."

"We heard. Heard that a student kicked the shit out of a blueskin, and everyone in the club knew it was you when you didn't show up," he said with a sudden laugh, using the rather derogatory term humans had of the Faey. "What happened?"

"It's a bit involved," he answered, then he related the tale to him, telling about how his image of the Faey ultimately led to the challenge, and the short fight afterward.

Tim laughed. "I'll bet she's kicking herself for not wearing her helmet," he surmised.

"Probably," Jason agreed. "She never thought I could be any kind of threat."

"She broke the first rule," Tim said sagely, the first thing Jason taught his students. *Never believe that your opponent can't beat you, because the instant you do believe that, he will beat you.* "So, what happens now?"

"Now, I walk with one eye over my shoulder and ready to run like hell any time I see black armor," he answered honestly. "If she doesn't do something about it, the other Marines will. Military people like that don't let their own get beat up by a *native*. They'll come after me."

"They might," Tim admitted. "But then again, they could just zap you."

"What would that prove?" Jason asked. "No, they'll beat me up the old fashioned way. That way the don't feel inferior."

"How did you do it?" he asked.

"I've seen Faey soldiers move," he answered. "I'm familiar with them, but that Marine had never seen me before, and she just assumed that I was like everyone else, that I had no training. I had the advantage, and she thought that *she* did. She got cocky, and it cost her."

"And she got her ass kicked," Tim laughed.

"Actually, it was my head," a voice called from outside the door, which made both of them snap

their heads to look, even as Jason's stomach sank. He knew that voice. It was the redheaded Marine, and she had tracked him back to his room! She was alone, and much to his surprise, she wasn't wearing her armor. She was wearing a plain old gray tee shirt with a pocket on the left side and a pair of faded blue jeans tucked into dainty black leather boots, very *human* clothing. The only thing about her that looked out of place was her blue skin, pointed ears, and the plasma pistol holstered on her belt. Even off duty and in civilian clothes, Faey soldiers did not go around unarmed.

Tim turned absolutely white, backing up against the door and giving the redheaded, blue-skinned woman a strangled look.

She stepped up to the door, and Jason couldn't help but stare at her. She was *gorgeous* out of her armor! Her hair was neat and groomed, still combed over the left side of her face and head, and there was no visible sign that she'd been walloped in the head. No scab, no bruise, no knot. The armor made her look harsh and intimidating, but in a loose-fitting tee and jeans, she was very feminine, and quite pretty.

"Well," she said, glancing at Tim. "I thought for a moment that there was someone else here, but I think I was mistaken. It would be a shame if I turned out to be wrong. After what I thought I heard that other person say, I just might have to do something about his attitude."

Tim hugged the wall as he slipped around her, then he fled down the hall shamelessly. And Jason didn't blame him one bit.

Jason watched her as she strode into the room, then leaned her shoulder against the door. He was totally at a loss here. He had no idea what to say or do, and fear rose up like bile in his stomach as her stormy gray eyes looked down at him without expression.

"Well," she said, with a slow smile creeping into her features. "I don't need the Gift to see that you're quite at a loss. Didn't think I'd come here like this, did you?"

He shook his head mutely, staring at her like she was a cobra about to strike.

"Calm down," she said with a wink. "I'm not here for a rematch, and you don't have to worry about my squad coming down here to give you a party. I got whooped fair and square, and I can respect that. I underestimated you, and I paid for it. And that's that."

"T-Then why are you here?" he managed to stammer out.

"Because you interest me," she said frankly. "I've never met a human male that could beat me in a fight. There's that, and there's also the fact that your mind is closed to me. I can't simply look at you and hear every thought in your head. I don't know how you do it, but you keep your mind closed so it doesn't broadcast your thoughts for us to hear. Only a handful of humans can do that that we know of, humans with highly trained minds. You're a mystery, and Faey women just *love* mysterious males. They pique our curiosity."

Jason got nervous. He did *not* like the way this was sounding like it was headed.

"There's that, and there's also how you hid from us," she continued. "I've never heard of *any* human that could do that. Somehow, you blocked our talent when we searched for you, hid your mind from us in a way that made us miss you. That's pretty remarkable, since you don't have any talent yourself. I want to know how you did it."

"I just presented an empty front," he said quickly. "Meditation, no thought. I learned a while ago that if I'm not thinking, then Faey can't use it to find me."

She pursed her lips, then she laughed. "Well, actually we can, but we don't bother using those approaches when we're looking for humans. It's easy to just look for thoughts, and since I never dreamed that you could hide your thoughts, I never bothered to look for you any other way. That's damned clever." She cocked her head at him curiously. "How do you know how to do that at all?"

"You damn Faey stick your noses in my head all the time," he blurted in irritation before he caught himself. "Every single one I meet tries to probe me with telepathy. They do it to me so often I've even learned how it feels when they do it. That's how I knew when to put that image out where you'd see it," he continued, having no idea why he was telling her, but unable to stop himself. "Why don't they

ever leave me alone?”

“It’s because we can’t hear your thoughts passively,” she said after a few seconds of thought. “If you were any other human, I could stand here and hear every thought that crossed your mind without having to actively touch you. But I *can’t* hear what you’re thinking, so I’d have to actively reach out and touch your mind. If you’re looking for who to blame for why we always probe you, look in your mirror,” she told him with a wink. “Faey women adore mysteries, and a human with a closed mind is the only mystery we have on this rock.”

Well, that did explain quite a bit. He rocked back in his chair and pondered on it briefly. If she was right, then he was partially to blame for all those Faey who violated the sanctity of his own mind, if only because his thoughts weren’t out where they could hear them.

“So,” she said, getting his attention again. “Now that I got the answers to my questions, want to go get some pizza?”

“*What?*” he asked in utter surprise.

“Do you want to go out and get some food?” she repeated. “I haven’t had anything since breakfast, and I’m starved. I’m rather fond of pizza. There’s this place on the West Bank called Mo’s. It has the best pizza in the city.”

He was quite honestly startled half out of his wits. She was *asking him out!*

“Well? Don’t sit there like an idiot,” she grinned. “I know it’s a shock that I’m asking you out, but it can’t be that much of a shock.”

“Oh yes it can,” he managed to blurt as he tried to recover his wits. He hadn’t expected this. Anger, yes, maybe even spite, but not a *date*. What the hell was he going to do to get out of this without getting her pissed off?

“I, uh, I have too much work to do,” he said, motioning at his panel, which was still showing video of the class he’d sort of lost in the haze after their short fight. “I have a test tomorrow in calculus, and I’m not ready. And I have homework in about four different courses, and two tests Friday. And since I’ve been worrying about what happened between us since it happened, I haven’t been able to concentrate on school since then.”

She chuckled ruefully. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you like that,” she told him. “What’s your test in on Friday?”

“Advanced Plasma Fundamentals,” he answered immediately.

She made a face. “I hated that class,” she said.

He gave her a startled look.

“You think I want to be a Marine forever?” she said in a challenging tone. “I’m just going through the mandatory conscription. Every Faey woman has to do five years in the military. I’m pretty strong in talent and I’m a good shot, so I was put in the Marines. But I’ve been taking classes to try to get into engineering on one of the starships, as soon as I serve out my two-year initial assignment.”

“And if you had money, you could have bought your way into that engineering job,” he said with a growl.

“I see you understand the nuances of Faey society rather well,” she said in a sarcastic kind of manner. “I’m a commoner. I have to work my way where I want to go. Where did you learn so much about us?”

He pointed at his panel. “They don’t censor the old internet, and I’m not restricted from CivNet,” he answered, referring to the earth-based Faey computer information network, which was connected to the Faey “internet.” “If you know where to look, you can find all sorts of information.”

“Ah.” She looked at the screen, then stepped up and waved her hand in front of the panel’s sensor. That triggered an automatic reaction which caused the device to project out the keyboard. Jason *still* wasn’t used to that thing. It was a holographic projection that had real substance, an illusion that he could touch, and it acted just like any other keyboard. It was customizable, so Jason had set his up to mimic a standard human computer keyboard. She looked at it a moment, then nudged him with her hip

to give her space and started typing at the terminal window that popped up over the running video playback.

“What are you doing?” he demanded as she quickly brought up his calendar, which listed all his due assignments.

“Just looking for a place where you can squeeze me in,” she answered with a sly smile down at him.

“Did it ever occur to you that I might not want to go out with you?” he asked acidly.

“Why not?”

“You’re a Faey,” he declared in a blunt manner.

“So? Faey go out with humans all the time. You’re actually an attractive race to us, and I know we’re attractive to you. Our physiologies are virtually identical, and we’re even genetically compatible. Faey and humans are nearly the same race. There’s nothing wrong with us going out. It’s not like I’m some kind of scaly alien.”

“Your government conquered my world and made me a slave,” he told her in a strong manner, which made her stop typing and look down at him. “My principles won’t let me go out with a Faey. You’re the enemy.”

“Oh, you’re one of *those*,” she said with a chuckle. “Well, I’m not the government.”

“You’re a Marine. You very much *are* the government.”

“Hey, I may be a Marine, but that doesn’t mean I like what the Empress does,” he told him. “I was placed, the same as you. I’m as much a slave as you are, if you want to look at it that way. I just do what I’m told, the same as you, and work to try to improve my lot. You and me, we’re insignificant little cogs in the vast machine.”

He was surprised that she had such a strong grasp of English. He was equally surprised at her reasoning, and he often forgot that the Imperium treated the *Faey* the same way it treated the *humans*. She had been placed, just like he had, put in the Marines because that’s where they thought she would do best, and she was working to get out of the Marines and move on to something she wanted to do. The only way to do that was to show the Imperium that she could do the job through tests, then wait for a position to come open. Until then, she’d wear her armor and tote around her rifle and play policeman, because she had no other choice.

But still, she was Faey, a member of the conquering race. By principle, he couldn’t be friends with her, the same way he kept his distance from Ailan. Because, just like Ailan, this pushy Faey female was starting to grind down his defenses. She was smart, sassy, a little pushy, and she had a sense of humor. Those were attractive qualities in a woman to him.

“Well, this cog doesn’t mingle with the other cogs,” he told her tartly, pushing her hands away from his keyboard. It was the first time he had ever touched a Faey skin to skin, and in that touch he felt a strange buzzing behind his eyes.

“You *like* me,” she announced with a laugh. “You object to me out of a philosophical position, not personal preference. Well, it’s nice to know where I stand.”

He glared at her, realizing that she had somehow breached his defenses and had looked inside his mind, violating his privacy in the most grievous manner possible. He jumped to his feet and got nose to nose with her, his anger all over his face, which made her uncertain and nervous. “Stay out of my head, and get the *hell* out of my room,” he said in an ominously low voice.

“Hey, that was *your* fault,” she told him quickly. “You touched me, and I wasn’t expecting it. When we touch, it focuses the talent, makes it easier for us to see deeper into a mind. When you touched me, I was inside your mind before I realized it.”

“The one thing I know about your talent is that it takes *intent*,” he said in a savage hiss. “Now get out!”

“Alright, you got me,” she admitted. “When you touched me, I took a peek. But that’s because I wanted to see how you really felt about me. If you didn’t like me, I would have simply left. But I

know that you *do* like me, Jason Augustus Fox,” she said with a slight little smile. “I’m sorry I did that. I didn’t know how much you objected to sharing your thoughts, and I won’t do it again. So, I’ll go and let you calm down, but don’t think that you’ll never see me again. I’ll show up around every corner, and I’ll hound you until I get what I want from you.”

“You think you will,” he growled.

“I know I will,” she told him easily, holding up three fingers. “I don’t want anything other than three dates, Jason, three chances to get to know you better and solve the mystery of you. And I’ll be your worst nightmare until you give in and go out with me,” she promised. “Our first will be a real date, where we both dress up in nice clothes and go to a nice restaurant, then we go to an opera or a play, something cultured and classy.”

“There’s no chance in hell that’s going to happen,” he declared.

“We’ll see,” she said with a narrow-eyed smile. “You underestimate my resolve.”

“You underestimate mine.”

“Well, if you want to make a challenge out of it, then I’ll be happy to oblige you,” she said brightly, turning and taking the two steps necessary to get out the door. “But I’ll warn you right now, Jason. I play to win,” she warned, reaching in and grabbing the handle. “Oh, and I cheat,” she added with a chuckle, then she closed the door.

Growling several low curses, Jason sat back down in his chair. If she thought she was going to get him to go out with her, she was totally crazy. He might have considered it before she stuck her nose in his mind, violated him in the one way he could not stand to be violated. He spent several minutes trying to compose himself. He looked at the screen, saw that his calendar was still up, and he saw that she had added a few items to it, next Friday:

<i>16 May 2007, 7:00pm:</i>	<i>Go out with Jyslin Shaddale.</i>
<i>16 May 2007, 11:15pm</i>	<i>Strip naked and wear high heels.</i>
<i>16 May 2007, 11:20pm:</i>	<i>Strip Jyslin naked and make her wear combat boots.</i>
<i>16 May 2007, 11:24pm:</i>	<i>Discover that Faey girls have the same equipment as human girls.</i>
<i>16 May 2007, 11:27pm:</i>	<i>Have mind-shattering, nearly religious sexual experience.</i>

Despite it all, he blurted out a chuckle after reading those last three lines. This Jyslin certainly did have a sense of humor. He may be pissed off at her for her invasion of his mind, but he could appreciate her humor if nothing else.

And she certainly wasn’t intent on hiding her motives, that was for sure. He knew some about Faey, but not much about their culture or their society. He knew how they treated men, but not how they acted in social situations. Was this bold forwardness a simple part of Faey custom, or was she being intentionally dirty to get his attention? As far as things went with this particular Faey, anything was possible, of that he was certain. Jyslin seemed to be a very intelligent woman, much smarter than she seemed, and she was dealing with a human that liked her personally, but objected to what she represented, so that meant that she had to be creative, get his attention, make him think. And those remarks about getting him bed had certainly done that.

Jyslin was going to be a problem, he decided. But it wasn’t anything he couldn’t handle. So she was a pushy woman. He could deal with that. All he had to do was wait her out until she lost interest, and make her as unwelcome as possible along the way.

Yes, that would work. Feeling much calmer, he killed the terminal window without erasing her little joke. He’d leave that there to remind him. Then he rewound his calculus lesson and started studying in earnest.

* * *

He figured that Jyslin was going to come around every once in a while and tease him, pester him, and then her duties would force her to return to work, more or less leaving him alone.

He could not have been any more wrong.

Jyslin and her partner, the blonde, were standing out on the sidewalk when he came out of the building, standing by one of the Faey's hovercars. They were sleek devices with no sharp edges, and they skimmed above the surface of the street using spacial resistance drives. This one was a military model, armored and with flashers on its top, for use in policing the city.

"Good morning," she said brightly, coming up off the vehicle, her black armored boots clacking on the sidewalk as she walked towards him. "Ready for school?"

"What?" he asked in uncertainty.

"School," she said with a wicked smile. "We don't want you to get lost along the way, so we're going to escort you right into your classroom. And when you're done there, we'll make sure you find your next class, and then your next class, and then your next one. We'll make sure you have no trouble going anywhere you have to go today. We'll be right there behind you every step of the way. Won't we, Maya?"

"Of course," the blonde answered with a clever little smile.

"Don't you have a job?" he asked acidly.

"You're our job today," she said with a nasty smirk. "You see, we told our watch commander about a certain human who just *might* get into trouble because of a certain fight he had yesterday. You know, we wouldn't want him suffering from harassment from the occupational forces because he beat up a Faey, or gods forbid, retaliation from the Marines because the Faey in question was a Marine. So the watch commander assigned us to the task of making sure nothing happens to you today. Tomorrow, a new pair of Marines is going to escort you around, who will make life as unpleasant for you as possible without actively getting in your way. And another pair the day after that, and another the day after that, and on and on until we report back to her that the threat to you has disappeared."

Jason gave her an unholy glare, which she answered with a light, amused smile. "I told you, Jason. I cheat."

Jason took an aggressive step towards her, then he put his hand in his pocket absently. "You rushed out before I could tell you something last night, Jyslin."

"Oh? What is that?"

"I cheat too," he answered in a cold voice, then he whipped his hand out of his pocket, holding a small cylindrical object. He pointed it at her and unleashed his secret weapon, a small canister of pepper spray, and she took the full brunt of it right in the face. She gasped and gave out a hacking sound, flinching away from the small cloud of irritating mist, putting her gauntleted hands to her face. But the metal of her gloves wouldn't wipe away the agent, leaving her at its mercy.

The blonde, Maya, gave him a startled look, but he just gave her an evil smile, put the canister back in his pocket, and strolled towards school as if nothing untoward had happened.

That stroll turned into a sprint when Jyslin's outraged voice reached him. "You're digging your own grave, human!" she boomed. "Now you're going to be wearing a maid's dress along with those high heels!" He glanced back to see that Maya had fished a towel or something out of the hovercar for her, and she was wiping the pepper spray off of her face. Pepper spray wasn't like mace in that once it was cleaned off, it had no lingering effects. It was only to distract and incapacitate a moment, long enough for someone to escape from an attacker.

If she wanted to be an obnoxious little ass, then he'd be happy to meet her on that level, immature stunt for immature stunt.

He managed to get to school before Jyslin got organized enough to follow him, ducking into the Plaid and looking out the large pane windows to either side of the door nervously. It was nothing but a delaying tactic, for he was certain that she had a copy of his class schedule and thus could position herself outside the door and wait for him to come out, but it bought him enough time to try to come up with a strategy for losing her after class.

That wasn't going to be easy. He'd used up his pepper spray, and now that she had an idea how

ruthless he could be, he wasn't going to get an easy shot like that on her again. She'd be much more careful next time.

He went to his classroom early and sat down. It was unlocked, as all the classrooms were, mainly because the security system in the classrooms would catch anyone stealing anything. Every tool and piece of equipment in the classroom had an ID chip that broadcast to a central receiver. If anyone tried to steal a tool, it would set off an alarm as soon as he stepped out the door. He pulled out his panel and his notebook and went over yesterday's notes, and Professor Ailan ambled in a little bit after he arrived.

"Ah, Jason," he said amiably. "You're here early."

"I'm avoiding someone, Professor," he replied as he made a few refinements to the sketch he'd done of a plasma power generator's internal working diagram. Jason had a talent for art, and could draw, illustrate, and paint fairly well, almost good enough to be paid for it.

"That Marine, eh?" he said, then he chuckled. "She sent to me to find you yesterday, looking for anyone who came in late. What's she after you for?"

"A date," he answered truthfully.

Ailan gave him a look, then laughed heartily. "My boy, you've done absolutely everything wrong," he told him.

"What do you mean?"

"Faey women like mysterious men, and what's more, they go absolutely wild when mysterious men play hard to get. You have a closed mind, an oddity among humans, and that makes you very mysterious. And since you're obviously trying to get away from her, you're playing hard to get. She's going to come after you ten ways to peel a *goran*, until her curiosity is satisfied. The only way you're going to manage to do that is to just go out with her. She won't stop until you do, because Faey women chase Faey men who say no. It's a cultural trait."

"Then how does a man say no and mean it?" he asked.

"Men don't," he replied honestly, pulling up the chair beside Jason's and taking a seat.

"Remember, my boy, the women are the dominant gender, and there are customs that go back thousands of years at work here. Men don't say no because long ago, we weren't *allowed* to say no. Even though men aren't owned like they were back then, you have to have noticed that the Faey are not nearly as progressive as humans when it comes to gender equality."

Jason nodded, leaning on his hand and listening to Professor Ailan quite attentively.

"When a man wants to assert himself, he has to do it indirectly. Just flat out saying *no* is actually a form of flirtation. I'm sure the Marine knows you don't know Faey customs and you're not flirting, but she can't help but see it any other way, because I get the feeling she's attracted to you."

"How do you know that?"

"Because when she broadcast to the instructors in the school, she described you as 'a handsome human male with blond hair and wearing a blue shirt.' Faey don't call men *handsome* unless they're attracted."

Jason frowned. So that's how she found him. Since all the instructors were Faey, it was a simple matter of using telepathy to contact them and track him down.

"Is this the same one you got into a fight with yesterday?" he asked with a grin.

"Does everyone know about that?" he asked tartly.

"It's all over the school, my boy," he laughed. "I wouldn't be surprised that it hasn't gotten all over the city, at least among the Faey. It's news when a human can beat up a Marine. It's *big* news when he does it in a matter of seconds and never gets touched in return."

He blew out his breath. "I was just trying to make her leave me alone," he said in a resigned tone.

"That's not how you do it," he chuckled.

"Then how do I do it?"

Ailan laughed. "It's not going to be that easy now," he told him. "She's not going to give over on

you now, Jason. You'll have to go out with her. You don't have a choice."

"Oh, I certainly have a choice," he said with narrowed eyes, speaking in a low, calm, yet ominous manner.

Ailan laughed. "Well, if I can't convince you otherwise, I'll just let you figure it out," he said, patting Jason on the shoulder amiably. "I have to get set up for class. You get your homework done?"

Jason nodded.

"Send it to me and I'll grade it," he said as he moved down towards his table, where his own panel was sitting.

It wasn't long before other students filed in, and Jason's troubles with Jyslin were forgotten as the class began. Jason was rather infatuated with plasma technology, and he was always a very diligent student, making copious notes both on his panel, via the odd holographic keyboard, and on his own notebook, taking vidshots of the diagrams that Professor Ailan wrote on the board and uploading images projected onto the air behind him via a holographic imager from his own panel, a three-dimensional object projected from two emitters mounted into the corners of the wall to either side of the whiteboard. This mixture of human-type technology and Faey holography never ceased to make him curious, but he had to admit that it was effective. Ailan could project up prepared images and graphics to display, using a laser pointer to point to the areas he discussed, and when he didn't have a prepared image, he simply took the marker and drew it on the whiteboard. The images he used could be uploaded into the students' panels so they could refer to them when they studied, or use the video they had their panels recording—if they bothered—when the Professor drew diagrams, flowcharts, or wrote things on the board. Holographs didn't record well in recorded video. They looked distorted and jagged, so it wasn't as easy as recording the holographs. Jason was of a habit to record every class and go back and catch highlights of things he didn't understand, then upload the video of the class onto a stick and keep a copy of it without hogging memory in his panel.

It seemed like only a minute had passed before Ailan clapped his hands in that manner he did when dismissing class. "Alright, people, test tomorrow," he called. "No homework, study for the test!" Jason started packing his things when Ailan came over to him and leaned down. "Oh, and your friend is waiting outside," he said in a low, conspiratorial whisper.

"She is, is she?" Jason asked with a narrow-eyed look at the door. "Professor, can I check out a couple of tools?"

"Certainly," he answered. "What do you want?"

"A cutter," he answered as he zipped up his pack. "One of the good ones."

"No problem," he said, ambling back down to his table as Jason followed him. He went to a cabinet beside the door and removed a small cutting tool, a small device that severed the molecular bonds in the structure of a material to cut it apart. It was cutting at a molecular level, and it left an utterly smooth and clean cut in its wake. He went over to his panel and logged the tool as "checked out" under Jason's student ID number. That would prevent the security system from reacting when Jason took it out of the room.

Jason took the tool in his hand, and saw that it was indeed one of the better ones, able to cut more deeply than the little ones. It was perfect. He put his pack on, then flipped the switch on the tool from *cut* to *sew*, which allowed it to perform the exact same function as an annealer. Cutting tools differed a little from annealing tools in that they could do more than simply separate annealed matter, and it would take an *annealing* tool to separate matter annealed by the cutter without physically cutting the two objects apart.

It was perfect.

Jason followed Ailan to the door and waved for him to go first in a grand fashion, then stepped back and put his eyes on the small window in the door as Ailan opened it. The reflection in the glass showed him that Jyslin was leaning against the wall right by the door.

Perfect.

He stepped up to the door, then whipped around it, his arm leading as he zoomed out of the doorway, tool leading. Jyslin barely had time to react before he was on her, and the edge of the cutting tool found its mark, sliding along her shoulder and upper arm where they were in contact with the wall, merging their molecular structures and causing them to become joined as strongly as any weld.

She tried to pull away from the wall, but then she found herself stuck. She put her free hand on the wall behind her, then her foot, and pushed hard, but she was stuck fast. “What the hell did you do?” she demanded hotly as he closed the door to the classroom easily, then started walking away.

He held the cutting tool up over his shoulder so she could see it, but didn’t say a word.

She laughed. “You clever bastard!” she shouted after him.

That was the start of an episode that was rehashed by students for years to come, a cunning war of intrigue and wits between Jason and the Marine who was annoying him, as he sought ways to separate himself from her, but she sought to defeat those attempts. After her partner freed her from the wall with a borrowed annealing tool, the pair of them sought him out and annoyed him through breakfast in the cafeteria, talking loudly and making rude comments, some of them downright embarrassing, some kind of attempt to bait him into doing something which the other students didn’t know. He stalked off with the two of them following closely behind, to his next class, and they stood outside the door waiting for it to end.

And they waited long after it was over, and all the other students left. They looked in almost a half an hour later and found him gone, the window open.

Much to the surprise of many on campus, they saw Jason climb out of the third floor window and climb down the wall of the building, then walk away as if he’d done nothing any more out of the ordinary than using the door.

It didn’t take them long to find him afterwards. After all, they were telepathic, and the Faey instructors and other military Faey on campus would tell them where they last saw him. They continued to follow him, standing behind him in the library as he read from a few hard paper books—which weren’t used much anymore—and then followed him as he went back to his dorm to get a project due for physics, then returned to campus to attend his next class. This time, the redhead stood by the door as the blonde waited outside the building, so she could keep an eye on the windows.

And again, after the class was over, he didn’t come out.

Several students saw her rush into the room after the last student came out, but he was nowhere to be found. She grilled the students quite harshly as to where he went, but all of them said he’d been *right there* not a moment ago, fiddling with his panel, and they were as puzzled about how he managed to disappear as the Faey were. It was later, when a security worker reviewed the records from the cameras in that room that the truth was revealed. Jason had used a hastily jerry-rigged holographic emitter from parts from a project device he’d built for his physics class and powered by a PPG taken from a disassembled cutting tool. He’d taken a shot of the wall of the class, then after class, he rushed up to that wall and activated the hologram, hiding behind a false image of that wall. To keep it from jiggling or frizzing he had had to hold his panel absolutely still, and he’d managed to do it just long enough for the Marine to rush out of the room and try to find him. After the Marine left, he disengaged the hologram, put the cutting tool and his project back together, then waltzed out of class without a care in the world.

The Marine was starting to get just a little bit irritated at that point. Three separate times the human had walked into a class, then he found a way to leave her behind when it was over, making her scour the campus to find him. For the fourth and final class of the day, she called in reinforcements. A squad of ten black armored Marines surrounded the Plaid and lurked on the second floor, where the human was having his physics class, and she stood—nowhere near any wall—right outside the door and looked through the window, making sure he didn’t sneak out. He was sitting in the back of the class, beyond the scope of her vision. He seemed utterly indifferent to her presence outside the door, as if he’d already devised his escape from her trap, and many of the students in his class were eager to see

the class end. Word had gotten around that the same Marine that Jason had fought the day before was now following him around, and many speculated that she was going to get even with him, following him around and trying to catch him where nobody else could see. They wanted to see what was going to happen.

The class ended, all the students jumped up and rushed towards the door to get out onto the campus green and see what happened when those two came outside, and as soon as the instructor opened the door, the Marine barreled into the room.

And he was nowhere to be found.

That startled the students as much as it did the Marine. They looked all around the room, even in the storage cabinets and closets, but he was gone. There was no other way out of the room, and no other Marine was reporting in that she'd seen him. He'd vanished like smoke.

Growling in frustration, the Marine charged down to the security center for the building and had the human guards replay the video of that room to find out what happened, how he had managed to slip away. They cued up the video for her, and they watched in as much amazement as she as the cunning and resourcefulness of Jason Fox was displayed on that video monitor for them to see.

During the physics class, Jason had unobtrusively annealed his chair's feet to the floor. Since he was in the very back of the classroom, nobody really noticed him doing it, not even the teacher. Nobody was looking back at him. Then it became apparent that Jason was much better with Faey technology than people realized, because he had somehow pumped up the output of his cutting knife beyond its usual capabilities. Further analysis showed that he had swapped the PPG unit of his cutting knife with the PPG in his project, which was a much more powerful unit, then somehow jerry-rigged the cutting tool's circuitry to not melt when it was turned on. When he turned it on, what he got was a cutting tool that could cut nearly four feet deep instead of the maximum of six inches or so that most cutting tools were designed to cut. He'd turned his cutting tool into a sword, and used it to slice a circular angled hole in the floor around his chair, which was annealed to the section he had cut free. The cutting tool cut so cleanly that it didn't make any kind of evidence that it had been used until the cut material was shifted. Since the hole was angled, the circumference of the bottom narrower than the top, the freed circular plug to which his chair was annealed did not fall through the floor.

When the class was over, Jason picked up his pack, pulled his chair up, which pulled the plug out of his hole, and then climbed down into it. He had even set the chair so when he pulled on the edge, the chair and plug fell back into the hole, concealing it and hiding his escape route.

Some people already knew about this, however, but they didn't get out of class for an hour after Jason's class ended. They were all amazed in the classroom under his own, the same classroom where he had Plasma Fundamentals, when Jason seemingly dropped out of the ceiling, fell nearly fifteen feet, and landed with a roll on the floor. He then simply stood up, dusted himself off, picked up his backpack, excused himself politely to the teacher, then walked out of the classroom.

That was only half of his cunning escape. The Marines inside were only on the second floor, which allowed him to have free run of the first floor. He managed to slip by the Marines outside by exiting from the building down through the loading dock, and catching a ride with a human campus groundskeeper who was about to drive off in a school truck, riding in the open bed. They were looking for a blond student *on foot*. Jason had went right by them in the back of the groundskeeper's truck.

The battle that day clearly went to Jason Fox, but Jyslin Shaddale vowed that the war would be hers.

Chapter 2

*Karista, 10 Shiaa, 4392, Orthodox calendar;
Thursday, 15 May 2007, Native regional reckoning
New Orleans, Gamia Province, American Sector*

It wasn't easy to study, but he managed it somehow.

All that insanity with Jyslin had completely ruined a day's studying, and again, if it wasn't for his habit of recording his classes, he'd be behind. Getting behind when he had seven classes was *not* a good thing. He felt lucky that she didn't follow him home, but then again, she was probably still in the Plaid trying to find him. It was only about six, and he knew that when it got dark and curfew kicked in, she'd know where to find him.

He had that test in Advanced Plasma Fundamentals tomorrow, but he felt ready for it. They were studying conduits and PPG's in a little more detail, and anything involving plasma interested him enough to study well ahead. Plasma conduit was made of crystallized silicon, and it was actually rather pretty. It looked like hollow tubes of glass, but surprisingly tough, and the high-energy plasma was carried inside. Silicon conduit could carry any kind of phased plasma, but not plasma in its raw state. That was the clever little trick the Faey had discovered, which was the only reason they could use plasma as a power source. They phased the plasma into different states, and when so phased and set up that the individual phases of it opposed one another, it made it safe. Just like how humans had learned to use three-phase electricity, the Faey used multiple phases of plasma. But it worked much differently, for they phased plasma into alternate states of material existence, spreading out its energy into many different quantum states. That was called *metaphased plasma*, and it was why plasma could flow in a glass tube and not be ten thousand degrees Fahrenheit. They had other types of phasing techniques, such as *interphased*, *hyperphased*, and *polarity phased*. Interphased plasma was used to power spatial drives, since metaphased plasma distorted the system. Hyperphased plasma was only mentioned but not explained, because it was a military application, used to make the plasma torpedoes fired from their battleships. Polarity phased plasma was very low-energy and worked very well in microscopic applications, and was what powered virtually all very small devices.

All this plasma was generated by the PPG, the Plasma Power Generator, and it itself was an amazing creation of ingenuity. He'd read the history of the device, and it showed the boundary from where the Faey were limited to their own star system, the Draconis system on earth charts, and when they were released to conquer and rule other planets. The PPG was, literally, a miniature sun. That's exactly what it was. The Faey had technology that affected space itself, allowing them to stretch it, pull it, even tear holes in it, and that was the technology that allowed them to build the PPG. Inside the device was a "bubble" of stretched space, and inside that bubble of stretched space, isolated from the rest of space by the boundaries of its bubble, was a hot nuclear fusion reaction. Just like the nuclear fusion that took place in stars, that's what was going on inside a PPG. Within the bubble were temperatures approaching fifteen thousand degrees Fahrenheit, but because it was in that isolated bubble of manipulated space, the heat and radiation could not escape it. The bubble was breached in two places so plasma could be drawn out of it, then be fed back into it after it completed its circuit. A PPG's size and power rating varied, and that affected its shelf life. The PPG in the cutter he'd borrowed had a shelf life of about a year. After a year, the material in the PPG's bubble would fuse into an iron core, and then the PPG would exhaust itself and stop working. It had a battery of sorts that kept the bubble intact until the PPG could be serviced, for the iron core of a spent PPG was larger than the

PPG itself. If the bubble broke down, that volume would return to normal space, and make the PPG literally explode as something larger than itself suddenly occupied its fusion chamber. The device had a couple of very serious cascading safeguards to prevent a bubble breach when the device was fusing, because a breach would cause a cataclysmic fusion-induced explosion that would be about as powerful as five hundred Hiroshima-sized nuclear bombs. The bubble, or *core* as it was called, could be ejected from the PPG, sent through a micro-wormhole and out into deep space, and the PPG had protocols for doing that if it detected a disastrous breakdown in progress. It had several other conditional protocols that would lead to a core ejection, such as readings that went over certain limits or a disruption in the bubble integrity. The PPG could eject the core before a tear in the bubble led to a fusion explosion, but the backlash fed back through the tear and tended to destroy everything within ten feet of a damaged PPG.

Because of the danger a breached PPG could pose, they were heavily protected in the devices in which they were installed. They were always surrounded by a metal called *vandirium*, a Faey alloy that was about a hundred times stronger than titanium, armor to protect against some kind of catastrophic breach. Faey armor was made out of a variation of vandirium alloy that was even stronger, but was more expensive to produce.

It was funny that cost should even matter, but it did. The Faey had a good grasp on molecular-level physics, and that had led to the construction of matter replicators. But the problem with them was that they could only produce materials in base elements, and they couldn't replicate any element heavier than the metal Palladium. Silver, the next element on the table, could not be replicated, nor could gold or many of the metals that the Faey used to construct armor and vessels. It was even funnier that the human table of the elements was similar to the Faey version. They had many, many more elements on their table than the human table, different variations of known elements because of the number of neutrons in the nucleus, but it was still organizationally similar.

That was why they Faey needed Earth for farming, because they couldn't replicate food. It was also why silver and gold were valuable to the Faey. It was also why they didn't give their occupational forces the *real* armor that they equipped their soldiers with. He'd seen some on CivNet somewhere, powered armor with flight packs, integrated weapons in the arms instead of external weapons they had to carry. That armor was much more expensive, its materials couldn't be replicated, so they'd equipped their occupational forces with only the weapons and armor they needed to keep the technologically backwards humans in check. Their weapons, well, those were the real deal. Faey used tiny bursts of high-energy metaphased plasma as their primary weapon, which exploded on contact with solid matter and also tended to burn through as it penetrated. The result was like an explosive bullet, which punched into a target then detonated. Living things shot by a metaphased plasma weapon tended to explode from the inside out when blood vaporized from the heat and that steam applied pressure to the flesh, aggravating the explosive contact the plasma had with a much cooler material. The result was a charge of metaphased plasma only two millimeters thick could leave a hole nearly a foot across. It was quite gruesome; even a graze could blow a limb off the body. What made them very nasty was that the fact that because they existed in multiple quantum states, it allowed most of the energy of the blast to pass through coherent energy shields. Any plasma state that matched the state of the shield would be stopped, but the remaining energy of the weapon would pass through and hit what it protected. The Faey employed shields on their warships, but the shields on ships they attacked would be useless.

CivNet was like the human internet...someone with enough patience could find just about anything. It was all in Faey, and he didn't speak or read the language, but his panel could translate everything into English, so it made it legible. He'd found the technical specs for plasma pistols and rifles on CivNet, as well as the internal technical schematics for a PPG. Given those, and the materials, he could build his own plasma weapon, and he had this wild idea about secretly building a stockpile of weapons and using them to try to overthrow the Faey, but it was a useless dream, and he knew it. Faey telepathy would crush any attempt before it got started. He hadn't heard anything about it, but he was certain

that some other student out there had had the same idea and had tried it, but been found out and stopped before he got off the ground.

That *damn* telepathy. It just kept coming back and coming back and coming back. Without that, the Faey would not have such an easy time of it here on Earth. It made them very relaxed about their new vassals, almost arrogantly dismissive of them, because what could they do? They sent humans to school to learn Faey technology, because what could they do? They didn't censor anything, not even the internet, because what could people do? They could *think* about revolt and object to the Faey all they wanted, but the instant they tried to do anything about it, the Faey would simply swoop in, use telepathy to root out the plot, and crush it before it could even get started. And people caught trying to overthrow the system weren't killed, they were "reprogrammed" by Faey telepathic specialists, turned into good little loyal subjects of her Imperial Majesty, the Empress Dahnai. Why kill a good asset of the Imperium when you could simply use telepathic reprogramming to make him a lapdog?

To Jason, death was better. To be reprogrammed like that, to do what they wanted him to do, but he felt that somehow, deep inside himself, to know what they had done to him...that was the ultimate torture.

He leaned back in his chair and looked at the clock. Six fifteen. Curfew was at nine, when all humans had to be off the streets or have a pass to move about...which were admittedly easy to get. All you had to do was call the Population Control Center and tell them you had to go out. You didn't even have to give a reason. Tell them you're going out, they send you a pass through your vidlink that you copy onto paper, and then you go. The curfew was installed more to rein in gangs of youths that liked to vandalize things more than anything else, and the news said that it'd probably be lifted next month. Jason couldn't do that, of course. He didn't have a vidlink. He was a student, and he had a panel, which served as everything, including a vidlink. He'd download the pass to his panel and print it out from there. His panel was everything; computer, organizer, vidlink all rolled into one. Besides, in his tiny, cramped room, he didn't have the *space* for a vidlink. Those things were about the size of an old human personal computer, complete with a hard keyboard, and if he had one on his desk, he wouldn't have room for anything else. Vidlinks did about everything a phone and personal computer did, and everyone got one, even farm workers in their little rooms at their farmhouses. There were still stand-alone cell phones, tied to the same system that ran the vidlinks, itself part of CivNet, but one had to buy a phone, where vidlinks were issued to people free of charge. It was just one of the little things that humans didn't grumble *too* much about when it came to the Faey.

Bored, he paused studying to surf through CivNet's news, which was of course biased and inflamed. There was only one news service, INN, the Imperial News Network, and it was but the mouthpiece of the Empress. But, he had to admit, they did cover what they considered news rather thoroughly. They just didn't openly question her Majesty's policies or decisions. He switched over to pan-empire, the *real* Faey news, where a blond Faey sat behind a desk, wearing a strange white robe, and talked in Faey about the news of the Imperium while three-dimensional holograms showed beside her. Earth even showed up in these broadcasts from time to time, such as last week, when an earthquake had rocked California. That made the major news, and they showed holos of Faey and human workers cleaning everything up.

Nothing he could make out. They showed images of some other planet somewhere where a storm had done damage to a seaside town-a *green* ocean, weird, that was-and other images that made little sense to him. Without the ability to speak Faey, it really would be a string of unconnected pictures, nothing more.

Wait, here was something. The Faey were at war with some other race, he knew that, and they were showing images of damage to a battle fleet that must have just returned from combat. They put up statistics over the images, probably how many were killed, how many of the other side were killed, probably none of it accurate, that sort of thing. He did remember seeing a picture of one of those people, big bipedal red-scaled reptilian things that looked pretty nasty, and he wondered how they

stacked up against the Faey. He could imagine it now...big reptilian monsters that looked vaguely like guys in Godzilla suits fighting an army of dainty little female elves with big fuckin' guns.

Now that was funny.

Not that it was right to trivialize war, but if they were fighting the Faey, then maybe he should toast them the next time he had a beer with Tim.

There was no knock at the door. It opened, and Jyslin came bursting through, again out of her armor. He glanced at her absently, then went back to watching his panel screen. Today she had on a black tank-top that showed off her generous chest and a pair of curve-hugging gray shorts, with running shoes on her feet. Her skin was shiny with sweat; she must have been working out. He could smell her sweat, and found that it was a strange spicy-musky smell that was oddly appealing. Damn Faey, even their sweat smelled good. "Well?" she said hotly.

"Well what?" he countered evenly, not bothering to look at her again.

"How did you do it?" she demanded.

"You think I'm going to tell you that?" he asked with a scoff. "Please."

He expected her to rant at him or shout, but she instead laughed. "Fair enough," she said generously, then closed the door behind her. "I thought you had a test tomorrow."

"I do," he answered. "I'm taking a break."

"Watching the news, huh?" she noted, looking over his shoulder. "Damn, the *skaa* did some damage this time."

"Skaa?"

"The reptilians we're fighting at the moment," she answered. "On the other side of the empire. We're in a dispute with them over a couple of star systems. The fighting's more or less contained to battles inside the disputed territory. Neither side wants an open war."

"Why is that?"

"Our technology is better, but they're like uncountable," she replied. "I think their home planet has something like ten *trillion* people on it. They can put an army on a planet fifty times bigger than anyone else and win by sheer force of numbers." She looked at him. "Wait, why are you being nice to me?" she demanded.

"Because you're not acting like an asshole," he answered honestly.

She laughed. "Will you go out with me?"

"No."

"Well, what good does it do then?" she asked with a laugh and a wink. "I didn't know you speak Faey."

"I don't. But you can figure some things out if you're patient enough to try."

"Want to learn?" she offered.

"I don't have time for language lessons."

"Who said I'd teach you the long way? It'll take about five minutes."

He realized immediately what she meant. Telepathic instruction. The Faey didn't do it to humans in school because of certain ways things worked with their power. They could use it to implant *knowledge*, like history or language or something like that, pure data, but not any information that required the use of motor control. It had to do with the way the brain worked, and it was too complicated for him to understand. All he knew was that was why the Faey had to teach people things the same way that the humans did. They couldn't just "zap" that information into people's heads-well, they could, but it really wouldn't do much good, because they couldn't really use what they were taught without practice, and having the *knowledge* to do something without having the *skill* to perform the task was an exceedingly dangerous combination. To prevent cataclysmic accidents, they didn't teach any way other than the old-fashioned way. She could teach him Faey with telepathy, because it was purely a mental activity. It didn't require anything other than thinking, and those were the only things that Faey could implant via telepathic instruction. If she taught him Faey, he'd be able to understand it

fine, but he'd have to practice making those sounds to speak it, and practice to learn how to write it or type in it. Those were *motor* functions, and they had to be practiced until perfected.

"No," he said adamantly. "I'll learn it the way I learn everything else. You're not putting your hooks in my head, Jyslin."

"We'll see," she said with a wink. "I'll bet you fifty credits you'll be speaking Faey by next Friday."

"Not even."

"Easy money for me," she announced.

"I never said I'd take the bet. I don't gamble."

"Be glad you're not in the military, then," she laughed.

"My father was."

"Oh? What did he do?"

"He was a fighter pilot," he answered, backing out of the Faey news broadcast and returning to his homework.

"It must be something to fly one of those hydrocarbon engine planes," she mused. "No control at all. It would be scary." She looked at him. "Almost any pilot with kids teaches the kids to fly."

He nodded. "Got my conditional pilot's license when I was twelve," he affirmed. "Got my unconditional license at sixteen, just a month before my father died. It made him very happy to see me get it, and about that time, I'd do anything to make my father happy."

"He was sick?"

He nodded. "Cancer."

"It's too bad we didn't get here sooner. We could have cured him."

"If you'd have gotten here when he was still alive, you would have had to shoot him out of the sky," he said bluntly. "My dad wouldn't have accepted the subjugation. He would have fought, no matter what the odds."

"Sounds like a spunky fellow."

For some reason, Jason took exceptional offense to the word *spunky*. "I think it's time for you to leave," he said stiffly.

"Fine, but now I have the plan for our second date," she told him. "We're going flying in one of those prop planes they have sitting out at the lakeside airport."

"Keep dreaming."

"It's no dream," she said, quite seriously. She grabbed the neckline of her tank top and fanned herself absently. "I need to go clean up. I'll swing by later and see how you're doing."

"Don't bother," he said in a growling tone.

"Then I'll see you tomorrow after I get off duty," she said easily, opening the door, stepping through, then turning around and looking at him. "Then again, I'll know what's going on. Lyn and Bryn will be escorting you tomorrow. They'll keep in touch. See you later," she said with a wink, then she closed the door.

"That's what you think," he said in a low, dangerous tone, glancing at the little cord sticking out from under his bed. He already had their little surprise ready and waiting.

He grumbled a little, still feeling a tad stung by her flippant remark about his beloved father, then got back to studying.

Lyn and Bryn were willowy raven-haired sisters, identical twins, who had managed to stay together from their conscription on. They were very patient, clever, and methodical women. They served as the squad's logical reasoning, offering cool, sensible advice in stressful situations, and their powerful mental bond, the kind of bond only twins could enjoy, gave them an awesome range of telepathic contact when they were separated. This strong bond and the insane range it gave them was a useful tactical advantage in combat, allowing for uninterceptible communications between two elements of

the squad when they split up. They were careful, almost timidly cautious women who never blundered into anything without thinking it through, and weren't the kind of women who fell for stupid, inane little traps.

Except for today.

What made it even more embarrassing for them was that they'd been *warned* about Jason. They'd been there last night when he vanished from the Plaid, and they were rather impressed with his ability to foil an entire Marine squad. Jyslin and Maya had specifically warned them that Jason was a very clever and crafty man, and he knew that they were going to be out there waiting for him. She even went so far as to specifically warn them that he might have a little surprise waiting for them when he left his dorm, something to discourage pursuit.

But, like most Faey, when they got curious about something, they absolutely had to satisfy that curiosity. It was a racial trait, very nearly a racial liability, both one of the reasons they were so technologically advanced and a reason they'd gotten into a fair number of wars that could have been avoided if they'd just minded their own business.

What got their curiosity was a little silver egg that was sitting on the stoop of the dorm's main entrance. It was on a little metal stand, obviously put there deliberately, just sitting on the top landing of the steps waiting. The humans simply stepped around the egg, as if it was supposed to be there, which made it even more unusual. Lyn and Bryn got out of their hovercar-century old piece of *junk*, why couldn't they bring in some modern equipment!-and that little egg immediately got their attention. It just sat there, unclaimed, untouched, and completely ignored by the humans who stepped around it as they filed out to go to school.

"What is that?" Lyn asked a short brunette female human as she rushed out, obviously running late.

"Dunno, there's a note on the board not to touch it," she answered quickly and honestly. "It's probably an experiment someone's doing."

Lyn let the girl go, and the twin Marines regarded the egg with curiosity.

Should we? Bryn asked mentally. They almost never spoke when they communicated with one another.

It's probably a trap, Lyn returned.

We have to go get Jyslin's beaux anyway. Let's just take a look at it as we go by. We don't have to touch it.

We'd best not. I still say it's a trap.

I think so too, but the humans got very close to it and nothing happened. So long as we don't get any closer to it than they did, we should be alright.

Lyn furrowed her brow. *That's a good point. Alright, but we don't touch.*

Lyn and Bryn went up the steps, their boots clacking on the concrete, and stooped over a little to inspect the egg, careful not to get too close to it. It was a featureless, perfectly smooth egg of a shiny metal, probably refined chromium or hardened mercury. Their reflections in the egg were distorted by its curvature, making them both look like they had eyes or noses ten times bigger than the rest of their faces.

"Good morning," came a steady, almost amused call from the street, by their car. The turned and looked and saw the human Jyslin had set them on, the student Jason. How had he gotten out of the building without them seeing it? There was only one entrance to the dorm! He was in a simple white tee shirt with no decoration, a blue denim short-sleeved shirt worn unbuttoned over the tee shirt, faded jeans, and ragged old sneakers. He had his brown backpack slung over one shoulder, and the other hand held a small, featureless little device with a single flashing red button on its face. With a flick of his thumb, he pressed that button.

Bedlam!

Something smashed into them from behind, throwing them forward. Both of them tried to put their hands up to protect their faces from being planted in the sidewalk, but something grabbed hold of them

and prevented them from reaching the bottom of the steps. Both Lyn and Bryn tried to move, but found that they were stuck fast in something!

Lyn's head wasn't stuck in whatever it was, so she turned and looked behind them. It was crash foam, a special foam that they used in vehicles that, on trigger from a sensor, erupted out and filled the volume of a vehicle's cavity, then instantly hardened into a soft solid to restrict the passengers. The result was a springy, elastic material that absorbed shock and protected the occupants of a crashing vehicle from suffering serious injury, but also stuck fast to anything it was touching as it hardened, as securely as any glue, nearly as securely as molecular annealing. The foam was supposed to decay five seconds after the vehicle came to a stop, to allow the occupants to get out, but then Lyn remembered that it was decayed by a second device that deployed after the sensors told it that the vehicle was at a rest.

They were stuck fast, and they'd stay like that until someone brought a foam decay module!

"Have a nice day," he told them mildly, putting the little remote in his pocket, then turning and meandering towards school at an easy pace that looked as if he had not a care in the world.

They sent to each other frantically to make sure that the other was alright, that the foam wasn't blocking mouth and nose. Lyn and Bryn both were frozen in the foam with their heads lower to the ground than their feet, and all Bryn could see was the sidewalk just in front of the steps. The foam had hardened around her neck, and she couldn't move it more than just a little bit, since fringes of the foam were attached to the lobes of her ears, and if she tried to move too much, she'd rip her ears off.

Lyn glowered in the direction of the retreating human, then she burst into helpless laughter. Bryn joined her seconds later.

What a *man*! Jyslin was lucky she found him first! Lyn and Bryn both were just a little bit jealous at Jyslin's good fortune!

Well, do we hang here all morning, or humiliate ourselves and send for help? Bryn asked after she got control of herself. *If I remember right, the foam will dissolve on its own in a few hours.*

I'm not hanging here all morning, Lyn countered.

Well, it should be fun following him around the rest of the day.

No, Lyn replied. *He beat us fair, so we leave him alone. He earned it.*

That he did, Bryn agreed. *I just wonder where he got the foam,* she mused.

I don't think we want to know.

You're probably right, Bryn acceded, then she sputtered aloud and started laughing again.

For some reason, those two didn't come back after he glued them to the sidewalk with crash foam, but that suited Jason just fine.

He took his test that morning and got the highest score in the class, then handed in his physics project after lunch. It still worked, despite what he did to it, a little sensor that measured flux in the spatial fabric that Professor Umera had everyone build as a lab exercise. It was nothing more than assembling pre-fabricated pieces, but it was still almost fun to do.

After lunch there was calculus, then came his second plasma-oriented course of the day, one of four such courses he took this semester, also taught by Ailan. Advanced Plasma Fundamentals, Introduction to Plasma Dynamics (the physics of plasma, which he had to take in conjunction with his physics class), Theoretical Plasma Systems I, and the lab companion class for Advanced Plasma Fundamentals, the class to which he was going. The other class was both lecture and lab, but this class was for lab, with only occasional lecture if Ailan didn't get the lecture finished from the last class. Those were hard enough, but stack calculus, Imperial History I (ancient Faey history), and Xeno-Psychology I (basically the Faey teaching the humans learning Faey technology how not to insult the Faey when interacting with them).

After lab, Xeno-Psych was the next class for today, and it was held in the old Tulane building on the far side of campus, twenty minutes after lab let out. He always took his time walking over there,

and as a result, he always got into the classroom about a minute before Professor Tia-the youngest of all his teachers and without doubt the cutest-was ready to start class. She was a little doll, fairly short for a Faey woman, with hair that was actually *blue*, a very dark shade of blue that was much darker than her skin, almost midnight blue. She had the cutest little face, very cherubic and a bit mischievous, with noticeable dimples in her cheeks. She also had a very raucous sense of humor. Tia could get downright dirty sometimes, and she loved to tell bawdy jokes during class. Tia was equal measure of angel and devil wrapped up in one insufferably cute little package.

"Afternoon," she called, which was repeated rather unenthusiastically by her students. "Well, there's been a little change in plans, people. They just handed down a curriculum change, and we have to put it into effect."

That got everyone's attention. They all looked up at her from their panels.

"Usually we do the language insertion at the start of Xeno II, but they've moved that to the beginning of Xeno I, effective today. Since we're already halfway through the semester, that means we have to go back and get that out of the way now, before we continue on in our current chapter.

"Excuse me, Professor, what is an insertion?" a tall, spindly man asked from the back of the classroom. Jason didn't know his name.

"We teach you Faey," she explained to him. "Since it's a language, we can insert it telepathically. We'll do that today, and spend the next three weeks practicing pronunciation and writing. Then we'll pick up where we left off, and shift the last three chapters we used to do in this semester into Xeno II."

Jason's eyes immediately went flat, and he remembered what Jyslin said last night. Had she known? Had she talked to the school and found out about this beforehand? It seemed so.

He realized that she'd tried to scam him out of fifty credits! Geez, how low could she go!

Then he realized that she didn't do anything any worse than what he'd already done, and he had to chuckle ruefully.

The amusement faded when he realized what insertion entailed. A Faey would put herself in his mind, *deeply* into his mind, violating his innermost sanctity. And he had no choice but to allow it, to knuckle under yet again to the Faey Imperium, to be the obedient slave that he was being. He had no choice. He couldn't refuse, or he'd end up on a farm, and that was a fate worse than having a Faey rake her grubby little claws through his mind.

"Since there are thirty of you and one of me, that means I'm going to have some help. So, pack up your things and come with me down to the lecture hall, where our assistants are waiting. After the insertion, you'll be free to go."

"Umm, Professor, is this safe?" someone asked.

"It's totally painless," she assured with a dimpled smile. "There is some dizziness immediately afterward, and after you're over that, we'll tell you to go home and take a nap. That helps your mind sift through it all and digest it. If you're worried about it, Stan, I'll do it for you myself. That way you get someone you know and trust. Would you like that?"

"Yes ma'am," he said immediately.

Jason was extremely unhappy with this, but there was nothing he could do. He packed his panel in his backpack and joined the others as they went down into the largest classroom in the building, a large auditorium-style room with raised tiers on which desks stood. It held nearly a hundred people, and lined up along the base of the wall were ten Faey, five of them in the black armor of Marines, the other five in the robes or long-tailed shirts that the professors wore.

Jason stopped dead in the door. One of those five Marines was Jyslin!

She gave him a smug, victorious little smile, then shooed him on as someone nudged him from behind. Jason stalked into the room and sat down in one of the desks on the lowest tier, and he glared at her murderously. That *bitch*. She had this all set up. She knew about the change, somehow, and had managed to finagle her way into being one of the telepaths that would perform the insertion. Marines were much stronger telepaths than the occupational forces that served as the majority of the police and

other governing forces, so it was no real shock to see Marines being pressed into service as telepathic inserters.

"Now, everyone take a seat," Tia called as she came in, then waited as everyone did so. "Not beside each other. Leave one desk to either side of you." She waited as some students moved to spread out. "These helpers and myself are going to go around and perform the procedure. Don't worry, all of us have done this before, that's why we're here. After it's over, don't get out of your seat until I tell you that you can, alright?" She nodded to the others, and they all fanned out. Tia went straight to Stan, but Jyslin didn't come to him. None of the others did either, telling him that Jyslin was saving him for last, and had already warned off all the others from teaching him.

He sat there and fumed for nearly twenty minutes, not even looking behind him. She had this all set up. She'd played him last night, obviously in revenge for what he did to her yesterday afternoon. He had no idea how she knew, but she did. There was nothing he could do. She'd already fixed it so nobody else would teach him, and he couldn't get out of not going through with it.

This battle went to Jyslin.

She plopped down in the seat beside him, her armor going *clack* as she did so, then put her elbow on the desktop and gave him an amused look.

"Shut up," he growled at her.

"I told you, I cheat," she told him.

He gave her a cold stare.

"I win this time," she said in a teasing tone. "Now, turn and face me."

"Why?"

"Because we *do* have something to do here," she told him tartly. "And I pride myself on my work. When I'm done, you'll be absolutely fluent in Faey. My mother taught Faey in primary school, so I have a stronger grasp on the language than most everyone else here. So, turn and face me. *Now*."

He was surprised by the steel in her voice. He did so, and she put her hands on his desk. "Put your hands here," she instructed. "I'm going to put my hands on your face, and then we'll begin. At first, you're going to feel me brush you, as you call it, then it's going to get much stronger. The important thing you have to remember is not to fight with me," she said, quite seriously. "In order for me to do this, I need to contact your long-term memory and put things there. I promise you I won't do anything other than what I have to do," she said in an earnest voice, her gray eyes very serious. "I won't look at anything, I promise. I know how you feel about being probed. That's one reason why I arranged to be the one to do this. At least with me, it's someone you know, and someone you won't have any trouble finding and kicking on the other side of her head if you don't like what she did to you," she added with a wink.

Now that surprised him, quite a bit. In a way, she was more or less right. In an odd way, he did feel a little better about the idea of a Faey that he *knew* doing this. Because she wouldn't just disappear. She promised to stop in tonight after she got off duty, and if he was really upset about what she did here and now, he could always punch her in the nose. That declaration of recognizing the possibility of retaliation actually made him feel somewhat better about the idea of it. Not that the idea of it didn't set his teeth on edge and make him feel like he was about to be anally probed with a telephone pole, but at least with Jyslin doing it, he could throttle the administrator if it pleased him to do so.

"Now," she said in a gentle, mollifying, cooing tone, lightly grabbing his hands and setting them on the side of the desk. "You're going to feel me brush up against you, then press in, like putting your hand into water. Don't fight me," she warned. "If you do, it's going to make it very hard, and it might hurt you. I'll just press in and sit there a minute so you can get used to it. I won't do anything, I promise, not until I feel you calm down. Are you ready?"

"Let's get this over with," he grunted in a low, ominous tone.

"Close your eyes," she told him. "It will make it easier. Concentrate on what's inside, not on what's outside."

He nodded and closed his eyes, bowing his head slightly.

"Alright, here we go," she said, reaching out and putting her slender, work-calloused hands on the sides of his face, over his cheeks.

He instantly felt her brush up against him, and he did his best not to resist that feeling, but it was *not* easy. It was an automatic, almost reflexive reaction for him to close up his thoughts when he felt a Faey doing what she was doing. He felt her feel around the edges of his instinctively raised barrier, and even as he tried to figure out how to allow her through it, she found a weakness in it and punched through. It was not a pleasant experience to have her breach the boundaries of his mind and invade him like an attacking army, like a disease. Immediately, he felt her presence inside his own mind, a strange thoughtless presence, like an alien object lodged within the pathways of his thoughts. He violently reacted to that contact, the first time a Faey had ever breached his defenses and actively entered his mind, so violently that his hands snapped up and closed around her wrists, seeking to rip them away from his face. But Jyslin's strength surprised him, holding her hands fast against his strength as she rode out his reaction to her, as the hands holding her wrists slowly stopped trying to pull her away. His reaction was a reflexive one, and as the seconds passed, Jason got less and less resistant to her presence, as he tried to get used to the feel of a presence in his head other than himself.

See, it wasn't that bad, her thought emanated from that alien presence, and he could hear it clearly within his own mind. I'll hear what you think, just to warn you. Oh, you can loosen your grip on my wrists now. I'd like to keep you from squeezing my hands off.

Sorry, he thought to himself.

It's alright, she answered. I had to literally attack you to get into your mind. I hope I didn't hurt you.

It wasn't pleasant, but I think I'm alright, he thought in answer.

I'll wait a bit, let you get used to the feel of it, she informed him. When I start, you'll see a dizzyingly fast blur of images, sounds, concepts, and even pure thoughts. I'm literally going to take everything I know about Faey and put it in your mind, sending it into your long-term memory. When I'm done, you're going to be a little confused and dazed, but it'll pass. You won't make much sense of what I'm going to teach you at first, it's going to take your mind a little time to go through it all and piece it together. I'm going to put everything there, but your brain's going to have to work out how it's going to store it all.

What do you mean?

I'll put it where I can, but your brain's going to take it all and move it, rearrange it the way it wants it, she explained. If it doesn't, you'll never be able to use any of this, and you'll forget it in about a week. That's why you'll need to go home and take a nap after the dizziness fades. An hour of sleep gives your brain a chance to rearrange things to its satisfaction without dealing with all the things it has to do when you're awake.

That made sense, or at least it seemed logical, after a fashion. Since he really didn't know how it worked, it certainly sounded like it was possible.

Ready?

Do I have a choice?

She seemed highly amused. *Alright, here we go.*

She wasn't lying about what happened next. An absolute avalanche of alien, bizarre images, sounds, sights, concepts, even pure thought poured into his mind, so fast that he couldn't make out anything but a confused cacophony, unable to see the individual parts because they made up a confusing and bewildering whole. It was like a school of fish, or a waterfall. He couldn't make out any one part, but he could see the whole. The problem was, the whole made no sense to him, even though he made no effort to try to make sense of any of it.

He had no idea how long it took. It seemed that one minute she was filling his mind with dizzying information, and then she simply stopped. He felt her presence ghost around the fringes of his memory,

coming close but not close enough to make him feel worried, almost as if she were checking her work. He could feel her drawn to the darker tunnels of his mind, where all those things she wanted to learn about him lurked, but she stayed away from the temptation, keeping her word of not going anywhere or seeing anything he did not want her to be, or see.

I'm finished, she announced. I'm going to pull back now. It might make you a little disoriented for a second or two, but then again, what I put in your mind's going to do that anyway. Oh, by the way, the next time you imagine me naked, get it right.

Just before she withdrew from his mind, she shared with him an image, a visual memory, one that almost made him blush. It was a very, very detailed memory of Jyslin looking at herself in a full length mirror, in what looked like a bedroom behind her.

Wearing nothing but combat boots.

It wasn't a dirty pose, or even very provocative, it was just the idea of it. Had Jyslin got up from that desk and stripped naked right there in front of him, it would have been no different than this. She showed him her full glory, and the knowing little smile on her face told him that she planned to do it when she stood in front of that mirror and memorized how she looked, just so she could show him. She stood there, one hip raised sensually, and posed for the mirror, posed for a mental picture she shared with him now, and she was enjoying every second of it, both when she made that memory and now, as she shared it. He could tell. And he could only go over that memory with what could be called a fine toothed comb, admiring her ample chest--but not too large--and her sleek, flat belly, and her curvy hips, and her quite splendid legs, and being a male, he could not ignore that neatly trimmed patch of dark red pubic hair which stood out against her soft blue skin.

But she wasn't done. Quite deliberately, she turned around and looked over her shoulder, showing him her sleek, willowy, thoroughly sexy back and a marvelous heart-shaped backside, with long, long legs that seemed to go all the way down to China.

She was absolutely gorgeous, both in face and body. Jason never thought blue skin could be so damn *sexy* before that.

And then she pulled away from him, and he felt that presence of her, that suddenly seemed much less *hostile* now that she had shared so intimate a memory with him, vanish from within his mind. She had done everything she said she would do. She had behaved herself, had kept her promise not to invade his mind any more than what was necessary to do what needed to be done, though he could clearly feel at one point that she had been sorely tempted. Then, as she broke contact, she gave of herself freely, shared with him something private, intimate, *personal*, something she did not have to do.

If she did that to curry his favor, well, it worked.

Then came the dizziness. The ceiling traded places with the floor, and he felt himself sway dangerously. She slid her hands down to his shoulders and steadied him, and his grip on her arms gave him a foundation on which to cling while the earth seemed to bounce around wildly. "There, now," she said in a low, gentle voice. "Better?"

"A little," he said woozily. "I think I'm getting sick."

"It'll pass in a second or two," she said, then she giggled like a little girl. "You're speaking Faey. It sounds very nice to hear you speak a *real* language. English is *ugly*."

He wouldn't be able to tell her one way or the other what he was speaking, because his brain felt like it was smothered in day-old mashed potatoes.

The dizziness did ease, and it did so with amazing speed. In a matter of a minute or two, he felt stable again. It was a little hard to think, like he was on medication, but at least he wasn't dizzy anymore. He blinked and looked around, and saw that he was the last student in the lecture hall, and all the instructors except for Professor Tia were gone. She must have waited to make sure things went smoothly. "Is he alright, Sergeant?"

"He seems to be a bit sensitive," she answered. "But I think he's alright now."

"Are you alright to get back to your dorm room, Jason?" she asked him with sincere concern.

"Yeah, yeah, I think I'll make it alright," he said in a disjointed manner, which made Tia give him an amused look. "What?"

"You're speaking Faey," she chuckled. "You're suffering from a case of mnemonic transposition, where your brain can't figure out if your implanted memory or your natural memory is the one that's supposed to be accessing, so it's sorta jumping back and forth between them to try to make sense of it all. Don't worry, it's a common enough side-effect for it not to be too much of a surprise. While you're suffering from it, you're going to jump back and forth between English and Faey, and you won't be able to read anything. Even English will look like gibberish to you. So, go back to your room and take a nap, and your brain will straighten everything out. After a nap, an evening of rest, and a good night's sleep, you'll be just fine."

"But I have a test tomorrow in Plasma Dynamics," he objected.

"Postponed," she told him. "The waiver's already on the schedule. All homework and tests due tomorrow are pushed back, so you can recover. No studying tonight, Jason, and that's an order."

"Yes, ma'am," he nodded.

"Now go home," she told him. He stood up, and his legs felt a little weak. "Whoops, I think I'll have a car take you," Tia said quickly.

"No, I'm alright," he said quickly, getting his legs back under control. If everyone else walked out of the classroom, then dammit, so would he.

"I'll make sure he makes it safely," Jyslin offered.

"I appreciate that," she nodded. "See you on Monday, Jason. Enjoy your weekend."

Jason felt better after taking a few steps, until his strides were confident and long. Jyslin scurried to keep up with him as he made his way out of the building and onto the sidewalk leading to the dorm, which was the next building over. It was a walk of only about thirty yards. Jyslin followed him quietly, into the dorm, up to the third floor, and literally right into his room, closing the door behind her. "I'm here," he told her. "You didn't have to follow me into my room."

"Bed," she commanded, pointing imperiously at the narrow bed hugging the right wall of his cramped dorm room. "Now!"

"Don't order me around, woman," he said jerkily, unsure of what language he was speaking. "Trust me, as muffled as I feel right now, taking a nap is exactly what I intend to do." He sat down on the edge of the bed and slid his hands over his face in a slow, deliberate manner to try to clear the sand out of his thoughts. It was so hard to think!

"Well, I did what I promised," she said with a smile. "Think you'll trust me a little more now?"

"A little," he admitted.

"Want to go out with me?"

"No," he said immediately. "No matter how I feel about you, you're a Faey, and I'm a human. You represent something I protest, so I can't socialize with you. End of story."

"So, it's not personal," she pressed. "If I were human, you'd go out with me."

"Probably," he admitted again. "There are a couple of professors I'd be friends with, if it wasn't for the fact that they're Faey."

"I'll change that," she promised with a wink. "Remember, a week from today. You, me, fancy clothes, and a Faey opera. It's already been set."

"In your dreams," he scoffed. "I don't care what you do, Jyslin, I *will not* go out with you. Period. End of story."

"They're so cute when they think they have a choice," she said in a lilting manner as she opened the door. "Tomorrow it's Ilia and Sheleese. This time, try not to make such a mess," she said, then she leaned against the door. "So, what did you think of my little gift to you?"

"I think you need to get out in the sun more," he said boldly.

"I was in your mind when I gave it to you, Jason," she purred. "I know how you reacted to it. You think I'm dead sexy. You like me, and you like me a *lot*, you're starting to get interested in me, and you

want to get to know me better. The only thing standing between us is a stupid point of technical *philosophy*, and I'm not going to stand for it."

She gave him a very serious look. "I'm Faey. I admit it. But don't hold that *against* me, Jason. Don't blame *me* for what happened to your planet. I'm stuck here, where I was *placed*, the same as you are. What is it your people say? Oh, yes, *I just work here*. And when I come back when I'm off duty, I won't be Sergeant Jyslin of the Imperial Marines, upholding her Imperial Majesty's honor, I'll be Jyslin Shaddale, a single girl trying to get a date with a mysterious, fascinating, handsome boy," she said with a wink. "You think about that. And keep thinking about it as you do whatever unholy evil things you're going to do to Ilia and Sheleese tomorrow morning. I'm dying to see it," she laughed and winked again.

"I'll make sure it's suitably entertaining," he said dryly.

"Good. I'll see you later. Get some rest, and think about what I might look like out of those boots," she said with a naughty little smile just before she closed the door.

Confusing woman. Or was she? Jason laid down and closed his eyes. It was hard to think, but not too hard to consider what she said. In a way, she was right. She was in the same position as him, and it wasn't her fault. He was blaming her, and every other Faey, for what happened to Earth, and to him personally. It really wasn't fair.

But, on the other hand, she *was* a Marine. She was in the military, a direct representative of the power that had conquered them. And then there was also the telepathy.

Quite simply, he just couldn't bring himself to trust any Faey because of that overwhelming advantage. At any time, all Jyslin had to do was put a hand on him and find out everything he was thinking, everything he felt, and violate the utter sanctity and personal domain that was his own mind. Jason had an intense hatred of that, burned into him after two years of having Faey try to burrow into his thoughts every day, day after day. Faey telepathy was the only reason nobody had managed a rebellion--not that it would really work, given the formidable Faey weapons and armament--but at least someone could *try*.

Part of that was his own self-loathing, he guessed. If his father could see him now, he'd slap him. He was cooperating, being a good little slave, because he didn't want to end up on a farm. Or even worse...being shipped off planet like some humans were, off to work in mines and other equally unpleasant and dangerous places. His father would have stolen an F-16 and taken on the entire Faey military by himself.

And now he'd been taught their language. Just another step down the road of making him an obedient subject of her Imperial Majesty.

He drifted off to sleep with that image floating in his mind...wearing one of those flowing robe-like upper garments the Faey favored, loose shirts with tails that dropped to their shins and flared sleeves with tails on them themselves nearly a foot long, and those loose-fitting pants, or robe-like skirts that both sexes occasionally wore. That would have been even worse. Wearing Faey clothes, speaking the Faey language, and standing in front of the featureless figure sitting on the throne of the Empire, bowing like an obedient lapdog.

That was a nightmare.

Jyslin did in fact stop in to see him after work, wearing a red tank top and shorts this time, but not sweaty. She'd stopped in before her workout, and she didn't stay long. Only long enough to see how the implantation went.

Perfectly. He had a complete and utter command of the Faey language. Jyslin wasn't joking when she said she knew more about Faey than most, for her vocabulary was immense, and her understanding of the intricate nuances of the musical language was profound.

He didn't have to study, so he spent most of that afternoon watching INN, which made it more interesting now that he could understand what they were saying. They talked about a surprising range

of topics, covering the important news from many of the seventy-two planets in the Imperium. An earthquake on Aurile, a hurricane on the ocean planet of Jaxan, an explosion at a metals facility on Denet. Then they went into the arts phase, and he was surprised that they spent so much time on it. They tracked the movements of many theater troops, singers, and musicians, telling people where they were headed and when they would perform. The arts seemed rather important to the Faey for the movements of the performers to be covered by INN.

Earth even made it into their news. "The Empire-famous Triellian opera company is making its first visit to the newest addition to the Imperium, Terra," the roguishly handsome news anchorman said in a voice that feigned enthusiasm, which made Jason look at that corner of his screen. "It's the first visit from a famous performing company for our newest member of the Imperium. If you're in that part of the Imperium and would like to make reservations, access Terra's Civnet. There are still tickets available at most of their venues."

Jason was about to drift back to the other side of his panel, where he was going over tomorrow's little surprise, when the news distracted him once again. "For those of us in the Imperium who haven't heard much about Terra, we here at INN think that your interest in our newest planet might increase. The Ministry of Agriculture has announced that the newest shipments of Terran food have passed bio inspection, and will be hitting your local markets by the end of the cycle," he announced. "In addition to all the more common plants and grains, a new group of Terran-specific products will be made available, as will all the old. This includes a large crop of the newest food craze among Faey, *strawberries*," he said in English.

"Oh, I know, Deren," the female anchor said with a laugh. "I tried some at the unveiling of the new Terran foods last year, and they had to take the plate away from me!"

"I'm partial to their *lobster* myself," he replied. "In other Terran news, the Ministry of Security has announced that certain areas of the planet have been approved for tourist passes. If you're interested in seeing our newest farming planet in action, or you'd like to soak up the local culture and mystique of the indigenous population, contact your nearest travel agent and Ministry of Travel offices."

"And here with a report on what you might want to see on Terra is Lini Timira," the woman called.

Jason watched as INN ran a report on the "vacation getaways" of Terra, showcasing most of the places that humans liked to visit on Earth. Hawaii, Alaska, Yellowstone, the Alps, Africa, the Himalayas, they all rated on the natural scenery, and to his surprise, the reporter suggested visits to Paris, London, Hong Kong, Sao Paulo, Tokyo, Johannesburg, New Delhi, and even New Orleans for people curious about the culture and customs of humans. The reporter, a sharp-featured woman with dark blue skin-tanned from her travels-and hair the color of mud, made sure to point out that the local population was not telepathic, and virtually none of them spoke Faey, so a certain amount of care and caution when interacting with the natives was required.

Jason frowned and cut it off, then absently turned on the television, and switched it to the same channel. He had no idea why he was watching it on his panel when the TV carried the same stations. He wondered absently if they had stories on Earth every day, or if it was just starting to get into the news because the Imperium was about to allow civilian Faey to visit the planet. He had no idea, because up until now, all he could really go on were the pictures.

He wasn't sure if he liked the idea of the Faey getting so...*cozy* with Earth or not. They'd taken it over, and now they were going to have Faey tourists milling around. Faey developing tastes for Earth food, Faey getting more and more common...it was like the beginning of the end of the fact that Earth was the home of the *human* race.

There wasn't much he could do about it, so he blew out his breath, changed it over to the local station, and went back to his plan.

It was ready and waiting for when Ilia and Sheleese arrived promptly at seven the next morning. They'd parked their hovercar on the other side of the street, and came boiling out of it with their

helmets on and their rifles on their shoulders. They were taking no chances with this crafty human, fully intending to march him up and down the street like a new recruit and make him sing bawdy cadence songs. He'd already outsmarted the squad sergeant, Jyslin, and made a laughing stock out of Lyn and Bryn yesterday by encasing them in crash foam, forcing a mechanic to come down from the motor pool and use a dissolving module to get them out.

The little battle between Jason and Jyslin was quickly becoming all the talk among the Faey stationed in New Orleans. The rules were clear; no telepathy, no doing injury. They were rules that both sides seemed to be following, as well, and Jyslin made sure to warn them not to cheat. It was a battle of wits, and peeking into his mind and seeing what he was up to was cheating. If they even *could* peek into his mind, for she'd warned them that he had amazing, almost phenomenal mental defenses for a mundane human. She even warned them that he'd know if they tried, which surprised both of them. A non-telepathic human, sensing it when Faey used their talent? That was certainly something to talk about!

At precisely seven thirty, they were ready. They were entrenched behind their hovercar on the other side of the street, waiting for him to come out. They weren't about to get anywhere near him until he was halfway to the campus, which seemed only smart. This was his home territory, and they had no idea what manner of clever little traps he had waiting for them on that side of the street.

Seven thirty came and went. Then seven forty-five. At five minutes to eight, they started wondering if he was coming out at all, since he had a class at eight o'clock.

"You think he overslept?" Sheleese asked absently.

"We should go check," Ilia replied. "We don't want him getting in trouble. This may be fun, but it's not worth it if he gets punished for it."

"He may not appreciate us barging into his room."

"He'll appreciate being late for school even less."

"That's a good point."

Neither of them felt the very light, almost negligible touches on the backs of their armor. "Good morning, ladies," a voice addressed them, right behind them! Both of them whirled around and found him standing immediately behind them, and neither of them heard a thing! They didn't even sense the presence of his mind! By the gods, this human was *amazing*!

They stared at him in slack-jawed shock as he lobbed two little things that looked like a coin to each side of them, each of which struck the hovercar and stuck to it with a light *thunk*. He reached into his pocket and took out a tiny black box with an illuminated red button on it, shifted it so they could see, then pressed the button with his thumb.

So fast, so hard, that neither could resist it, they both found themselves suddenly getting yanked down. Both of them slammed into the side of the hovercar with enough force to make it rock slightly, and both of them found that they were stuck fast by something that was attaching their breastplates to the car, something they couldn't overwhelm!

He put the little device back in his pocket, slung his backpack over his shoulder, and then started walking away like he had not a care in the world. "Have a nice day," he said absently over his shoulder.

That should hold them. Those were quarter-sized devices that were like exclusive magnets, what the Faey used to control raw, magnetically reactive high-energy plasma before it was phased and sent into conduits. The little devices were self-annealing to whatever they touched, and it took a special tool to demagnetize them, something that Marines didn't carry around in their pockets. Until they did, the backs of their breastplates would be stuck to that car until Doomsday.

Sure, they could take the breastplates off, but he knew for a fact that Marines didn't wear anything underneath the armor. So, to get free, they had to strip to the waist.

It wouldn't hold them all day, but it would be enough for him to get to his first class.

He glanced behind himself, and frowned. One of them was already halfway free of her breastplate,

and the other popped the seals of her own and removed the front half, exposing her breasts to all of Audobon Park. They really were going to do it! They were going to walk him to class topless!

As fun as it would be to make them do it, he figured that it would make them short-tempered, so a little discretion was in order here. Grabbing the strap of his pack, he bolted across the street and onto the campus, fully intending to be in the Plaid before that other one got her breastplate off. He glanced back and saw that they weren't trying to follow him. The first to get free was inspecting the other half of her breastplate, trying to see how he did it. She rose up and laughed, then gave him a sly grin from across the street.

You clever little fox! she communicated with him with her mind, a communication laced with wry amusement, strong enough to overwhelm his outer defenses and push the thought through. It gave him an immediate, splitting headache. *You wait, Jason! I'll be outside your class when it's over, even if I have to stand there naked!*

He staggered slightly, putting a hand to his head. God, that *hurt*! It was like a semi was banging back and forth inside his skull, but the pain eased almost immediately after she finished her mental communication.

He shook his head to clear out the last of the pain. It hadn't hurt when Jyslin did it. Then again, Jyslin had already been inside his mind. What she did was different, something like forcing her own thoughts into his head as a form of communication. Sending, that was what they called it, sending thoughts to other people. It was just one of the tricks the Faey used with their telepathy.

It had been the first time that a Faey had ever done that to him, and he certainly didn't want it to happen again.

He managed to get to the Plaid, and hurried through the classroom door right before Ailan closed it. Ailan gave him an amused look, and he quickly took his seat and the class began. He drifted in and out of paying attention as he worried about what those two Marines were going to do, and if they really were going to be standing outside the door topless, or even naked, ready to follow him around and annoy him until his next class. Were they really that brazen? Or would it just be another way to play the game, trying to embarrass him by having a pair of topless Faey following him around. That was what all this was about, after all. Jyslin was trying to embarrass, annoy, or aggravate him to the point where he would finally cave in and go out with her, if only to make her stop. The way those two were talking before he nailed them showed that they thought it was tremendous fun, and that, surprisingly, they didn't want it to cause him any *real* problems. That they were willing to brave whatever traps he had laid and make sure he didn't oversleep, to get him to school on time, did touch him a little bit. But not enough to make him feel sorry.

He drifted through most of class, so much so that he didn't hear Ailan clap and dismiss them. "You know, there were two Marines sending to try to find you about a half an hour ago," he said with a chuckle as Jason rather jerkily started packing his things. "They're outside the door, waiting for you."

"Great," he growled, reaching into his pack for Plan B. "Ailan, explain something to me."

"Certainly."

"Why won't Jyslin get the hint?" he asked. "Do I have to break her arm to make her understand?"

"Yes," he said, quite seriously. "You don't understand Faey very well, Jason. Remember, the females are the *dominant* gender. They chase, men play hard to get. It's how we do things. The more you run from her, the harder she's going to chase you, because that's how a man tests a woman to see how serious she is about him. She doesn't see you saying no as *no*, she sees it as 'impress me with your interest in me more, and I'll go out with you.' She won't stop. That's why I told you that it was best just to go out on the date and get it over with. That's how you get rid of an unwanted suitor," he winked.

"How?"

"Make it clear during the date that you want nothing to do with her," he answered. "You can be blunt about it and tell her not to ask for another when it's over, or you can be a total ass during the date

and make it a bad experience for her. Just so long as she leaves the date with an understanding of how you feel, that's all that matters."

"Hmm," he mused. "Well, I will *not* go out with her. I'll just have to impress her suitably that I'm not interested. Even if I *do* have to break her arm."

"Good luck," he chuckled. "You'll need it."

"Why are the others helping her?" he asked curiously. "The other Marines."

"Because they're in her squad, and Marines do these kinds of things for each other. They're very tight-knit. They see it as great fun, as would most Faey. We enjoy little games like these, and that's what this is to them, Jason. A game. A grand and clever game where they're pitting their skill against yours. And from what I've heard so far, you're winning," he chuckled. "The whole school knows about that crash foam. Where did you get it?"

"I took it out of the physics lab," he answered.

"What did you do to those two today?"

"Plasma directional magnets with shock-annealer backings," he replied, which made Ailan laugh. "I didn't count on them taking off their breastplates to get free, though," he admitted. "I guess Marines don't have much modesty."

"Faey women aren't modest like human girls are, Jason," he answered. "It's not considered taboo to go bare-chested in Faey society. It's quite common on planets with hot climates, actually, and there are no laws about nudity. On those hot planets, it wouldn't be too uncommon to see Faey going about totally naked. Faey here simply don't show anything more than what humans do because of human customs. We don't want to offend you, so we abide by your customs."

"There was my mistake," he grumbled. "I didn't know that."

"If you want to embarrass a Faey woman, you don't make her show it off, you make fun of what she has," he told him with a conspiratorial wink.

"Well, that's handy to know, but it's not going to help me right now," he said, hefting the little glass canister in his hand, filled with a dark liquid. Plan B. "In fact, it's going to make this even less effective than I thought it would be."

"What is that?" he asked.

"Something that's about to get me in a heap of trouble," he answered honestly.

"What is it?"

"You'll see," he promised, standing up from his desk and picking up his pack, looking like a man about ready to do war.

He went to the door and opened it, and found both the Marines standing there waiting for him. They had managed to get their armor off the hovercar, and had left their helmets and their rifles in the car as well, for they didn't have them now. "Well, now," the taller one with a faint scar on her cheek said with a wolfish smile. "It's about time. We were about to check and see if you managed to walk through a wall."

He didn't even glance at them. He turned his back to them and started down the hall, then, just as he heard their armor shifting as they moved to follow, he tossed the canister over his shoulder.

"Catch it!" one of them barked aloud. He didn't look, but heard one of them try to grab it, only to have the glass cylinder disintegrate in her hands, unleashing a sudden angry cloud of grayish smoke that smelled like rust mixed with limes. They coughed raggedly and staggered towards him, then came the sound he was waiting for, the sudden angry hissing of their *vandirium* alloy armor bubbling and sizzling as the reagent dissolved it.

Both of them gasped and started to panic as the grayish smoke ate at their armor like acid, then they both seemed to relax when they realized that it was doing *them* no harm. The gray cloud was some kind of chemical that only reacted with the metal of their armor, eating it away, but doing nothing to harm anything other than their armor.

"Have fun finding new clothes," he said over his shoulder as he walked towards the door, intending

to head to the cafeteria for breakfast.

Much to his surprise, instead of angry cursing or them running after him, they were both laughing. It was laughter mixed in with the clunking of pieces of destroyed armor hitting the floor, but it was most certainly laughter. Delighted laughter.

Faey were *too* weird, he thought to himself as he turned out of the hall into the building's atrium and headed for the door.

Thus came the fatal flaw in this particular plan.

The two Marines were utterly unaffected by what he thought last night would be a devastatingly effective tactic to make them leave him alone. They marched into the cafeteria about ten minutes later wearing nothing but their helmets with the visors down, to hide their faces, but not hiding much of anything else. They were also carrying their rifles, slung behind their right shoulders. All activity in the cafeteria absolutely *stopped* when they marched in, followed by fierce whispering and buzzing as the two rifle-toting, naked Faey positioned themselves solidly behind Jason's chair, to either side of him, and simply waited.

"Couldn't find clothes?" he asked in what he hoped sounded like an unruffled manner, though he was privately quite disturbed by this little upping of the ante here.

"We figured this would embarrass you more," one of them replied in a low whisper, in Faey, and her words were absolutely dripping with sadistic amusement.

"I can take it if you can," he shrugged casually, going back to his breakfast of a ham omelet. "I'm not the one whose bare ass is going to be fueling human men's fantasies for the next few weeks."

"So long as they don't know who I am and they can't see my face, why should I care how much of the rest of me they see?" the other one returned with a chuckle.

He had no real defense against that particular angle of attack, so he fell silent and went back to his breakfast.

They followed him all over school all day, stark naked, and drawing absolutely every eye to him. They decided that just being there was all it took to make him uncomfortable, so they never talked, never annoyed him, never did anything other than follow him everywhere he went-except inside classrooms. And that meant *everywhere*. The two of them nearly caused a riot when they marched right into the men's bathroom behind him after his second class.

Jason had no other prepared tricks, and to be honest, their incredibly bold move had put him off kilter, so he did nothing more than go through the motions that day and endure it. He couldn't just give up, though, because then they'd know that they found something that got to him, and they'd *all* start showing up naked every morning to escort him around class.

Jyslin had to have a long arm, since the professors and other school administration did nothing to intervene. They just watched from a distance and enjoyed it, like everyone else did.

So, he did pull tricks to get away from them after each class, but they weren't up to his usual standard, and they didn't get him very far from them. Sneaking out a window on the first floor, hiding in a cabinet and slipping by them as they came in to search for him, and in once case climbing through a large air conditioning duct allowed him to sneak past them, but he didn't go very fast, and allowed word to get back to them very quickly concerning his location. In actuality, he didn't want them to get too far away from him, so he could keep them under control. Two naked Faey had the potential to cause unmitigated chaos on a campus attended by human students, and he wanted to minimize the potential for multi-car pile-ups, broken noses from walking into streetlamps, and bicycles crashing into pedestrians. So he steered them away from the largest concentrations of students and didn't go anywhere *near* Saint Charles' Avenue, confining himself to the Plaid, the cafeteria, the library, and the main campus building, using the sidewalks well away from the street.

One thing was for sure. The boys on campus were *very* happy for this odd occurrence.

After his last class, in a sort of grand finale, the two of them sidled along behind him as he walked

back to his dorm, clearing the path in front of him and causing a traffic jam behind them as people stopped to look, then walked along behind to keep looking. He reached his dorm and went up the steps, then turned around and looked at them. "Have fun with your sunburn," he told them as he reached into his pocket and took out the little black remote once more.

"We're done here," the taller one told him with a sly smile, just visible under the mirrored visor.

"Not quite," he said, then he pushed the button.

There was a sudden squeal of metal against concrete, and their hovercar suddenly flipped over on the side of the street, making sparks on the asphalt as the metal ground over it, then vaulted up into the air. It went up nearly fifty feet, then simply stopped, hanging upside-down in midair.

"Have a nice walk," he told them, then turned and went into the dorm.

To his surprise, to the sudden applause and whistling of the people who had followed them back to the dorm.

Both the Marines stood there in chagrin and looked at their hovercar, hanging in midair well out of their reach, as the humans around them laughed and clapped and whistled.

Up until that point, the Marines had been *winning*, damn it all. It didn't take telepathy to see that their counterattack of going around naked all day had him on the ropes. They were but one more task of walking him home to come away the victor in that day's skirmish, and he gets them right at the end! Trust that clever Jason to have the final trick up his sleeve!

Sheleese laughed. "Well, not only will the squad be coming to pick us up, but we'll have to explain how he got us out of our armor," she told Ilia.

"How did he *do* that?" Ilia said aloud, in English no less, staring up at the floating hovercar.

"I'm sure the techs'll explain it when they come to get it down," Sheleese said with a cheeky grin. "Until then, we're naked and without a ride back to the barracks."

Ilia laughed. "Jason three, Marines zero," she admitted.

"This is starting to get a bit ridiculous," Sheleese declared. "The honor of the Corps is at stake here, and he's playing with us like we're just babies."

"Maybe Yana and Myri will have better luck tomorrow."

Sheleese chuckled. "The way things are going, he'll have them in dog collars by lunchtime."

Ilia giggled girlishly. "What a man," she announced.

"Jyslin has all the luck," Sheleese agreed with a nod.

Back in his room, he sat down and blew out his breath, looking up at the ceiling.

What a day!

Those damn Marines were starting to play dirty. He was pretty sure that they could tell that their stunt had thrown him off, but on the other side of it, he was *positive* that his retaliatory stunt got them and got them good. He took out his panel and brought it up, then had it contact the address of another panel with a few touches on icons on his screen and a few quickly typed commands. He knew that that panel was now ringing like a phone, waiting for its owner to answer his call.

Tim's face appeared on the window holding his call program. "Hey," he said. The view behind him told him that Tim was in his room, which was one floor up from his own.

"Thanks," he said.

Tim laughed. "I almost got in trouble, but that's alright."

"What happened?"

"An army chick caught me planting that plasma magnet," he answered. "She had me dead to rights, so what could I do? I told her I was helping you play a trick on the Marines, and she let me go ahead and do it. I think she doesn't like Marines," he chuckled.

"You can always count on inter-service rivalry," he answered with a short laugh.

"I'm surprised it picked up that hovercar."

"I'm more surprised that magnetic field density sensor worked," he answered. "If it had malfunctioned, they would have had to send a shuttle to retrieve it from orbit."

Tim laughed. "Man, you have any idea how popular you are at school now?" he asked. "Two blueskins following you around like lost puppies, naked as jaybirds? That was fantastic!"

"They were trying to embarrass me."

"Think you could convince them to try to embarrass you again tomorrow?"

Jason chuckled. "They'll be back, but two different ones. And I think if they found out how much the men on campus enjoyed the strip show, they probably won't do it again." He explained how they had come to be naked quickly, and his short chat with Ailan. "I found out that Faey aren't too solid on our idea of modesty, but if they find out that the humans think they were funny because they were naked, they won't do it again. That's digging into their pride, and these Marines have a great deal of that."

"What are you going to do tomorrow?" he asked eagerly. "Half the school is already laying bets on what's going to happen."

"I'm not sure yet. I'll think of something, though." He looked at the box of components laying on his bed, cast-off supplies and things that instructors had given to him to allow him to experiment on his own. So far, every device he'd built came out of that box of junk, but the pickings were starting to get a bit thin in there. He'd already used up most of the choice components. "It may not be very good. I'm running out of ideas and expendable equipment."

"Say the word, and I'll get anything you want or need," he said immediately.

"No, this is personal," he replied. "I cheated a little using you to plant that magnet, but I don't really want to get anyone else involved in this. I can deal with the Faey. I don't want others getting in trouble because of me."

"I'm already in it," he grinned. "I'm not afraid to be your gopher, Jayce. And a second pair of trap-laying hands will keep them off balance. After all, they're coming at you in pairs, so why not have an extra set of hands?"

"No, Tim, I'll handle it myself."

"Well, alright. But everyone's cheering you on, Jason, so do us proud."

Jason was a little surprised at that. "Why?"

"Because this little war between you and the Marines makes us all feel better," he answered.

"Everyone looks at you and sees someone willing to take on the Faey, and so far, you've beaten them like red-headed stepchildren. After all the abuse they've put down on us, seeing them get theirs feels *very* good."

Jason said goodbye to him after that and turned on the TV, feeling a little foolish, and suddenly feeling quite dutiful. If his war with Jyslin made the other students feel better, then he wouldn't disappoint them. He had to study, but this had priority. He went over to the box of parts, rifling through them and seeing what he might be able to come up with.

He pondered on it a while, and came up with something that would at least get him through tomorrow. He set that aside and stood up, mentally telling himself that he'd have to get some new parts tomorrow at school. They went to school six days a week, a highly accelerated schedule, with only one day off. But, on the other hand, they got two weeks off between semesters.

It was a long, stressful day, and he felt dirty. He pulled his clothes off and threw his towel around his waist, then grabbed his shower kit. A long shower would be perfect just about now.

The door opened, and Jyslin stepped through, out of her armor, in the black tank top and shorts she wore when she worked out. She closed it behind him, then burst out laughing before she managed to get it closed all the way. "Jason!" she wheezed. "You're *awful*! *Wow*," she breathed in admiration as she looked on his bare torso. Jason practiced martial arts and he used to play football, so he was very well developed. But because he *did* play football, he was much, *much* stronger than he looked. Jason could bench press nearly four hundred pounds. His arms were muscular, but they weren't very large.

His arms and body held a deceptive, monstrous strength that shocked most of his students.

"What?" he asked.

"Well, I'm looking at a dream, for one," she told him with open admiration. "But what you did to Sheleese and Ilia was *awful*! Throwing that stuff on them that destroyed their armor and making them walk around naked? That's vicious! Hilarious, but vicious!"

"They decided to do that themselves," he said defensively, "to embarrass me."

"True, but I'm talking about you doing it in the first place!" she said with another burst of laughter. "I thought you using that chemical spray on me was bad, but this, this is worse! You're *terrible*!" she accused, then she laughed even harder.

"Why is it so funny if you think it's so bad?" he asked testily.

"Faey love jokes," she said with a wink, "even when they're pulled on *us*. I knew you were smart, but you're proving to be a cunning little monster. Tomorrow it'll be Yana and Myri. If you can beat them, it'll be Zora and Mil on Monday, and on Tuesday, if you *still* haven't knuckled under, our Company Commander, Lieutenant Lana, is going to take a crack at you. Wednesday, you're mine. And on Wednesday, it's *over*. I guarantee it," she said with a wink. "Then it's our date on Friday."

"Keep dreaming."

"I am. Of you in high heels, of you in a maid's apron and nothing else, of you in a bra and panties, a dog collar, and of course, you covered in sweat and with a totally rapturous look on your face while we squeak the bedsprings."

Jason picked up a conduit bridge and threw it at her half-heartedly, which made her slide to the side and chuckle. "Behave," she teased him.

"Out," he barked, pointing at the door.

"You're no fun today," she taunted. "Then again, I feel a little jealous that you stared at Sheleese and Ilia all day, and you've never actually seen me naked. Just a memory of it." She reached down and grabbed the hem of her shirt meaningfully. "I'll take mine off if you take yours off," she said with a throaty purr.

"Out," he repeated sternly.

"Then again, I have two and you have one. That's hardly fair." With a quick motion, she whisked off her tank top, exposing her lovely, full breasts for his eyes to enjoy. "There, that's more even," she said with merry eyes, tossing her tank top onto the desk and hooking the waistband of her shorts with her thumbs. "Now then, do you dare take up the challenge, Jason?" she said with a wicked smile, pulling down on the waistband sensually, letting it ride down lower and lower on her hips, until the upper edge of the dark red hair under those shorts began to peek out over the waistband. "I want to see you, all of you," she breathed in a husky voice. "Show me your beautiful body, and I'll show you mine."

It was all he could do not to swallow and gape at her like a dying fish. She was *evil*! She was baiting him with the one thing he couldn't easily ignore!

"OUT!" he thundered, pointing at the door imperiously.

She pulled up her shorts with a seductive smirk, and half of him bitterly regretted that. Part of him—*most* of him—wanted her to go all the way, to take those shorts off and let him see for himself what she'd teased him with yesterday. But if she took off those shorts and got the towel off of him, got both of them naked, he *knew* that they were going to end up in that bed. She left no doubt in his mind that she wanted him, and he had to admit that he wanted her. And he couldn't allow that to happen.

She gave him a victorious, wicked little smile as she pulled her tank top back on, then she opened the door and sauntered through in a *very* seductive manner, making sure her hips swayed like a boat rocking in a hurricane as she took those three steps out the door. Then she turned to face him as she grabbed the door.

"See you on Wednesday. Wear clean underwear," she winked. "You won't be in them long." Then she closed the door.

Evil, evil woman, he grated to himself. That stunt of sharing the image of her nude body had caused him to admit to himself that he was attracted to her, both mentally and physically. And now she was starting to tighten the noose by getting more and more sexual with him, by making statements that he both did and did not want to hear, pulling off her shirt and letting him see what she was offering. She was right before in that his objection to her was *philosophical*, not personal. Truth be told, he rather liked Jyslin, but his pride and his sense of duty to the ideals he held dear would not allow him to associate with her. To get around that, she was using his attraction to her like a cudgel to beat the resistance out of him. Jyslin was beautiful, she was sexy, and she had a body most human women would kill for. And the fact that she was more than willing to strip and shove all kinds of exotic parts of her anatomy in his face made it very hard to ignore her.

But something told him that she wasn't going to push him. She was teasing him, baiting him, enticing him, but she wouldn't force the issue. She wanted him to come to her. That was why she didn't whisk off her shorts, yank off his towel, and use some highly aggressive techniques to try to seduce him. Had she done that, both he knew and she knew that she would have succeeded. No sane, healthy, heterosexual male could say no to a woman *that gorgeous*. She wanted to hear him say *yes*, and that meant that she wouldn't push too hard, so hard that her victory might be in doubt because of her own aggressiveness.

It would be a sweet loss, that was for sure. He couldn't deny his attraction to her, but at least he'd enjoy the agony of defeat. But he wasn't going to roll over and die just because he was attracted, because he wanted what she was offering, because he also wanted to maintain his ideals. A tryst with Jyslin would be a blow to those ideals, fraternizing with the enemy as thoroughly as one could fraternize.

He'd learn their language, he'd go to their school, but they wouldn't conquer him. No matter how long he lived. If he wasn't free in body, he'd be free in spirit, and part of that freedom was the right to say *no*.

Shower. Showering would be good right now. And he'd better make it a *cold* one.

Yana and Myri arrived an hour before class was to start, and they weren't taking *any* chances.

This one was as cunning as a *tibaxi*, and there was no telling what little surprise he had waiting for them outside of that dorm. After what happened to the others, they both agreed that staying *in* the hovercar until he came out and trailing him to the campus was the best move possible. After he got there, they could get out and start following him around, when he was surrounded by the other students and had fewer opportunities to get them.

It was funny, but on another tack, this was starting to get a little embarrassing. This little game had leaked out all over New Orleans, and the Army whores were starting to dig on them because they couldn't control a single native. Marines generally held the Army in contempt, because they were the grunts who didn't have what it took to be a Marine. Many of them were *provisional*, the personal troops of whichever noble controlled a sector, where the Marines were *Imperial*, serving the Empress directly. The Marines were here in part to make sure that the nobles and their troops did what the Imperium expected of them. If there were no Marines here, there was no telling what those greedy nobles would try to get away with.

Nobles always had to be watched. If they thought they could get away with it, they'd steal the Empire blind, and there had even been instances of nobles breaking away from the Imperium, trying to establish their *own* empires. Faey history was rife with civil wars, as much as it was little private wars between nobles who took offense to one another. Terra was under the control of the house Tarlinne, which was related to the throne by blood. That was the main reason they were given Terra, because they were very well trusted by the Empress Dahnai. The house sent a Duchess to rule Terra, Duchess Gwyn Tarlinne, and she had brought in her six children to govern the six continents. North America was the domain of Baron Olen, the youngest of her six children, and every state of the three major

former nations were under the control of a Baronet or Baronen, with Olenas or Olenens controlling the provinces within those states. Zarinans and Zarinens were minor nobles that watched over cities or interests within those provinces, the lowest rung of the noble hierarchy.

Nobles. Sometimes Myri thought that the Imperium would be better off without nobles.

"Alright, what's the plan?" Yana asked. Yana was the youngest in the squad, just coming out of boot camp and still looking like a teenager with her relatively flat chest and narrow hips, but she was very smart, and she had awesome talent. Yana's telepathic powers outstripped just about everyone in the company. Despite that, she rarely used them, for some odd reason. Where most Marines sent nearly as often as they spoke, Yana virtually never sent.

"We wait," Myri answered. "I'm not getting anywhere near him until we're sure he's not packing a surprise."

"I thought this was a game to force him out on a date with Jyslin," Yana giggled. "When did it turn into a war?"

"The moment that little Army whore said that if *they* were doing this, they'd have him in a dog collar," she answered bluntly.

"They don't understand the rules."

"That doesn't matter. He's making a fool out of us, and we have to put a stop to it, even if we have to cheat."

"Where's the fun in that?"

"It'll be better than hearing those Army bitches ragging on us for the next six cycles," she growled. Myri was the oldest of the squad, the other squad Sergeant, and she had quite a reputation for a foul mouth.

Yana was about to say something, but something hit the roof of the hovercar with a *thud*, and almost immediately, water began pouring down over the windshield and side windows. They both looked around quickly, and found nobody around. "Some joker's throwing water balloons," Myri snapped in irritation, sending her mind out to find the little jokester. In the mood she was in, she felt that a serious chastisement was in order.

Odd...all she could find were human minds watching on in unsuppressed glee.

She started getting a little suspicious when the water cascading down the windows *stopped*, like it was frozen in time. Myri quickly reached for the door release button and pressed it, then pushed at the door to open it--

--and found it stuck fast!

That damned *human* dropped into sight from the roof of the hovercar, walking down the hood and to the ground with his pack slung over his shoulder. "Good morning, ladies," he said in a casual manner. Once on the ground, he turned around and held out a molecular cutter, then used it to carve a neat hole in the hood of their car!

"Hey, we signed this out!" Yana shouted at him angrily. "If you mess it up, it's our asses!"

Nonplussed, the human pulled the freed circle of hood away from the hole and reached his hand inside boldly. The car was running! Didn't he realize how dangerous what he was doing was!? Myri scrambled to turn the car off, but all the lights suddenly went out, and the car dropped to the ground with a *clunk*, clicking Myri's teeth together from the jarring impact.

The human pulled his hand out, and in his hand was the phase exchanger that fed power into the car's onboard computer. Without that exchanger, the car wouldn't do *anything*.

Without changing his expression, he put the piece of hood back exactly where it had been and annealed it back together. Then he took the exchanger and set it on the hood of the car, carefully placing it so they could see it, and it wouldn't slide down the sloped hood and drop to the ground.

Myri beat her shoulder against the door, but it was stuck fast, almost as if he had annealed the doors. But it wasn't annealing, it was that water, or whatever it was. It was unmoving, solid, and it was covering the top of the hovercar, preventing the doors from being opened.

He'd *trapped them in their own car!* And what was worse, he'd disabled it so they couldn't just drive back to the motor pool!

"Have a nice day," he concluded with two fingers to his forehead in some kind of salute, then he simply walked past the car, past the driver's side door, and started towards the campus.

Yana looked around wildly, looked at Myri, then burst into laughter.

Myri glared back over her shoulder, then she chuckled ruefully. "We didn't even make it out of the car," she sighed in lament.

Yana laughed a little more, then gave an amused sigh. "Oooh, my," she breathed. "Well, what do we do, Sergeant?"

"Send for help," she said with a rueful chuckle. "What else can we do?"

"True. I think Zora and Mil had better bring a tool bag with them on Monday," she said, then she burst into laughter again.

"They might need it," Myri agreed, then succumbed to the humor of it herself. "I just want to know one thing," she said after a moment.

"What?"

"How the hell did he get on top of the car without us noticing?"

"This one's full of surprises," Yana laughed. "What a man! Jyslin's got the luck of Zanya!"

School went in a blur, but at least it was a peaceful one.

The boys on campus were a little crestfallen that he wasn't going to have two naked Faey following him around, but the applause he got when he came on campus told him that they didn't mind all *that* much. Everyone on the street had seen him come out of the second story window of someone else's dorm room and circle wide around, then climb onto a large utility control box and jump over onto their car, which was parked right beside it. He'd used a little something he'd remembered from physics, adding a compound to the water in the large jug he'd brought with him that caused it to instantly "freeze" and turn into an extremely hard solid, like a super-strong ice. Just like ice, it would "melt," as the chemical broke down, which would allow them to get the doors open in about a half an hour or so.

They didn't come back until after his last class, Xeno I, where he spent all class practicing spoken Faey. In that one class he'd managed to get a firm grip on the pronunciations, and he could speak the language surprisingly well. Jason's mother grew up in France and as a result spoke French in addition to English, so he'd learned French as a child, and it had many similar sounds as Faey.

After class, he ran home, changed into his sweats, and rushed back to the campus gym, where his class was waiting for him. He'd missed their last appointment, but not this one. They bowed to him as he came in, wearing sweats, shorts, whatever they could find that was loose and comfortable. There were five men and three women in his class, and Tim was one of them. "Sorry I'm late," he said as he bowed in reply. "Now, let's stretch, and then we'll begin."

After stretching, he started them on their exercises. They were all beginners, so what he was teaching them first was how to *fall*, how to go to the ground without getting hurt, and how to control their bodies to be able to spring back up immediately. It was a critical skill in Aikido, protecting them from injury as they practiced the forms, and also giving them a powerful defensive weapon to use in case they were knocked down in a fight. After that was done, he instructed on the basic forms of wrist-locks, one of the more important ways to lock an opponent and force him to bend to their will. Aikido was a martial art of gentle persuasion, not an aggressive one, which used an attacker's own body and motion against him to control him and make him unable to do harm. He was well versed in much more aggressive martial arts, but Aikido had always been his favorite. Aikido allowed him to protect himself without doing anyone any permanent harm. It gave him an outlet to deal with braggarts who mistook his mild nature for cowardice. When a fellow was third string on a college football team, that happened more than he cared to admit. They didn't understand that he could have easily been *first* string, but he was more interested in the education than he was the football.

The familiar rhythms of teaching, of falling back into the Zen-like mental state required to practice the art, they relaxed him a great deal. It was a welcome break from the stresses of school and the building insanity concerning Jyslin and the Marines.

After their proscribed hour's use of the gym, they stretched once more and bowed, just in time, as the pick-up basketball had the gym in fifteen minutes, and the players were already starting to arrive. The Wednesday class took place out on the campus lawn, since they didn't have the gym, but the Saturday class they got one hour and fifteen minutes of gym time, from five o'clock to six fifteen. There was a fifteen minute cushion, then the pick-up games had the gym for the rest of the night.

"What you doing tonight?" Tim asked as they broke up.

"Dunno," he answered, cracking his knuckles.

"Want to go down to the quarter?" he asked. "I feel like getting drunk tonight."

"That actually sounds like a good idea," he said with a nod. "I think I'm in the mood for Patty O's."

"Piano bar?" he asked with a grin.

"You know it," he replied.

"I still can't believe they tried to get you to work there," he laughed.

That much was true. His mother was a music teacher, and because of that, her son absolutely *had* to learn how to play the piano. His very first memories were sitting on his mother's lap, looking at the keys. That was the one thing she had given to her son, the skill that defined his relationship with her, just as learning to fly planes had been the defining aspect of his relationship with his father. His mother had been so gentle, so kind, so beautiful. It had been a terrible blow to both him and his father when she was killed in an automobile accident, so much so that his father had resigned from the Air Force and taken a job as a flight instructor at a little airstrip in Auburn, so he could be there for his son. He still played, though he didn't have a piano now, only a little electronic keyboard that sat on the high shelf over his bed. But sometimes he felt the urge to *play*, and that required a real piano. There was one at a Catholic Church down Saint Charles, and they also had one up at the music shop on Claiborne. The week he arrived in New Orleans, he stumbled across the bar called Pat O'Brien's, or Patty O's to the locals. It was one in the afternoon on a Tuesday, so the place was pretty empty, and they had this room that they called the Piano Bar, which had two pianos on a stage to entertain the patrons. On weeknights and weekends, piano players would sit up there and play requests, which were written on napkins and passed up with a tip for the player. Playing Patty O's was *not* an easy gig, for their players were expected to be able to play *any* request. Most of their musicians had massive stacks of music books filled with sheet music for a huge number of songs. Well, he'd been feeling rather depressed because of being shipped to New Orleans, and after he bought a daiquiri, he asked if he could play. The piano bar was closed and the place was more or less empty, so the managers allowed it. They were *shocked*. Jason grew up with a mother who was a music appreciation teacher, and he had a *vast* repertoire of songs he could play. Most didn't think that a six foot two inch guy built like a football player would be able to play the piano. Playing the piano always cheered him up, and after he felt better, he bought another daiquiri, and they offered him a job. They'd just lost a player to the three month random farm allotment lottery, and they were looking for a new one.

Unfortunately, he wasn't allowed to work when he was in school. Then again, he wouldn't have had time for it anyway. He didn't work there, but sometimes when he went down, if they were short-handed that night, they allowed him to come up and play as a "guest musician." It wasn't *work*, but he was allowed to keep all the tips they sent up when he played requests. He did that every couple of weeks or so, earning a little extra money on top of the stipend he was paid as a full-time student in the Faey academy. That was how he could afford some of the parts in his little box, because he could buy them from campus workers looking to make a little extra money on the side.

"Let's go get cleaned up, and—" he started, then he trailed off quickly when six Faey filed into the gym. They wore the camouflage colors of the armor of regular Army, much like the Battle Dress that

the American military wore before it was dissolved. They were all pattern Faey, with those pretty faces and sleek bodies, accented by that armor. One of them, he noticed, was carrying a length of chain.

“Well, if it’s not the human making the Marines look like idiots,” the tallest of them, a woman with raven black hair, announced loudly in English. “We’re here to restore the honor of the Faey, since the Marines can’t seem to manage it.”

Jason looked her up and down coldly, steeling his mind against possible attack, starting the exercise that formed the wall of repetitive thought that would protect him from any attempt to invade his mind.

“We brought you a dog collar,” she said with a vicious smirk, holding up a leather collar. “We’re going to put you in it and drop you off at the Marine barracks with nothing but this on. After we have a little fun with you first,” she said with a naked leer.

Jason brought himself up to his full height and stared at them. “Faey love games,” he said in a quiet tone. “How about a little friendly challenge?”

“Really,” she smirked.

“Whoever ends up with that dog collar around her neck has to wear it until Monday,” he said. “The one collared becomes the property of the victor, and has to obey utterly until Monday. That means she does anything I say until Monday morning, when I go to school. Oh, and to make it fair, since the Marines aren’t allowed to use their talent, neither are you. Think the six of you are enough to put that collar around my neck without using your power?”

“Six against one, and you think you have a chance?” she asked with a laugh.

“If you think it’s a dead lock you’ll win, then accept,” he urged.

They looked among themselves for a second, obviously communicating with their telepathic gifts. “You have a deal,” she said. “I’m going to enjoy having you as our personal squad mascot.”

“I’m going to enjoy having a maid,” he said, cracking his knuckles meaningfully.

Tim moved away and the floor cleared as the six camo-armored Army regulars moved to surround Jason, who spread his feet out a little and kept himself squarely in front of the one holding the collar. They all started taunting and calling to him, trying to distract and unnerve him, but his eyes remained solidly on the brunette and the collar in her hand.

The other five came all at once, seeking to overwhelm him by force of numbers and pin him down long enough for the brunette to collar him. That actually wasn’t a bad idea, but they weren’t ready to face him like that. He grabbed the one that reached him first and spun her into two rushing from the other side, making them crash to the floor in a tumbled heap of arms and legs, squealing hurting everyone’s ears as their armor screeched against other armor. He surrendered the defense back to use that move, and the one behind him, the smallest of them all, crashed into him to try to knock him to the ground. He totally ignored her weight as he slapped aside the reaching hand of the fifth, then grabbed her other hand by the wrist and yanked on it. She was jerked in the direction he wanted her to go. With the sixth regular clinging to his back, kicking at him with her armored shins to get him to go down, he wove the one he had a grip on from side to side, not allowing her to regain her footing, exactly what he did to Jyslin, then spun her and crashed her into the heap of other Faey who were still sprawled out on the floor. A few slapping grabs at his flank got him a handful of armored shin, and he tore her off his back with main force. She clanged to the floor with her leg still in his grasp, but she took his shirt with her, ripping it off his back. He snatched the shirt out of her hands and let go of her, then advanced on the brunette quickly, wrapping the ends of a long strip between his hands. She backed up in surprise and raised both hands to protect herself, then her face hardened, and she attacked him with her telepathic power.

He’d never been *attacked* before, not like that, and it was something he never wanted to have happen again. The full force of her mind smashed against his own like a spear, trying to punch through the wall of repetitive thought he used to protect himself from probes. It was blindingly painful, like lights exploding behind his eyes, as he struggled with all his might to keep her out of his head, pushing back against that force with every fiber of his being. He’d been rushing forward when she struck at

him with her power, and his momentum carried him right up to her. He could barely think, barely move, but he had enough presence of mind to lower his shoulder. She gaped in shock as he managed to resist her attempt to invade and take over his mind with her power just long enough to get close enough to her to do something about it. His shoulder slammed into her upper chest, and his weight sent her flying. That impact broke her concentration, and he felt the terrible weight of her mind lift off of him like pulling away a blanket.

Shaking his head to clear the cobwebs and the pain, he lunged down and snatched the collar out of her hands before she had the presence of mind to roll away from him. Her eyes looked a little glassy; maybe she hit the back of her head on the gym floor when she fell down. He was about to reach down and put the collar on her when two Faey jumped on him from behind, one grabbing the hand holding the collar as another wrapped her arms around his neck from behind and tried to tangle his legs up with her own.

She did pretty well, for he found himself unable to shift his feet. He yanked in the Faey holding his arm and then grabbed her, and they all fell down to the floor in a pile. There was a great deal of kicking, thrashing, even some biting taking place in that twisted mound of struggling bodies, but Jason was larger and much stronger than his opponents. He managed to grab the collar with both hands as the smaller Faey tried to cover his eyes with her hands and the larger one tried to wrest the collar out of his grip. He rolled over on the Faey on his back, got his weight on her, pinning her to the floor with his shoulders, then pulled the collar out of the other's hands with a fast snap of his arms. She tried to roll to her feet, but Jason used the Faey under him as a push-off to power himself up onto his feet in the blink of an eye. The Faey had her back to him as she tried to roll back and away to get distance, so it was a simple matter to whip that collar over her head, then pull it taut around her neck and close the ends.

There was a sudden eruption of cheering from the people watching this impromptu battle, after it became clear that the collar ended up snapped around a Faey's neck.

"Awww, *DAMN!*" the Faey snapped in frustration when her hands felt the collar around her neck. She stayed on her knees, and fixed the brunette with an impressively cold, murderous glare.

Jason panted, suddenly out of breath and keyed up from the adrenalin, then got himself under control. He gave that brunette his own icy stare. She had used her power against him, had cheated, and *she* should have been the one in the collar. She was the one he wanted, but he couldn't risk her doing that again when the other Faey had a grip on him. If she did, they would have gotten the collar around *his* neck.

"Don't *ever* do that again," he hissed at her savagely as he regained his composure. The one he collared got to her feet and turned around, looking suitably ticked off. She was a cutie, with a heart-shaped face and pouting lips. Her hair was dark blond, almost brown, cut very short, and she had large blue eyes. She crossed her arms and gave him a flat look, then she chuckled.

"Well, looks like we lost, and I got stuck holding the stick," she announced in thickly accented English.

"Strip," he commanded immediately. "All of it but the collar."

That got a roar of approval from the boys watching on.

She gave him a dark look, but did start taking off the armor.

He stalked over and snatched up the chain that was laying on the floor, and waited patiently as the Faey removed her armor, then stood there, her face turning purple in a blush—red blood flushing blue skin—as the boys in the gym whistled and clapped and generally embarrassed her half to death. He locked the chain to the collar with a smooth motion, then started towards the door, pulling her along. She followed, her head bowed and throwing dark looks at the brunette for getting her into this.

She may have thought that he was going to be cruel to her, or abuse her, or take tremendous advantage of her, but she found out that she was wrong. He did parade her around the campus a little

as the students cheered, since it made them feel good, then he went back to his room and took off the chain. She stood there by the door for a long moment as he sat at his desk. He felt her mind brush against his, but she pulled away when she found nothing there for her to grasp.

“Don’t do that,” he said gratingly. “I don’t appreciate it.”

“Sorry,” she apologized. “Most humans don’t even notice it.” She gave him a long, steady look. “Well?” she asked in her accented English.

“Well what?” he asked in Faey. “Have a seat.”

“Don’t I have to clean?” she said in Faey, her face bright that she wouldn’t have to chatter at him in English.

“It’s already clean,” he shrugged. “You’ll be doing my laundry tomorrow, but for right now I don’t have anything for you to do. So sit down and watch some TV or something.”

“That’s all? You’re not going to humiliate me or make me do dirty jobs?”

“Do you want to?”

“Uh, no,” she said quickly.

“Then sit down and watch TV,” he said mildly.

“Where do I sleep?”

“That’s your problem,” he told her. “The bed’s mine. You’re on your own.”

“I’m, I’m not sleeping with you?”

He gave her a direct stare.

“Isn’t that part of my punishment?”

“I don’t consider that much of a punishment,” he said dryly.

“It is if you do it right,” she winked with a naughty smile.

“*Faey*,” he breathed, rolling his eyes. “Don’t you ever think with your brains?”

“We’re the dominant gender, human,” she smiled. “We think with our brains as much as human men think with theirs. Imagine a human man’s sex drive in a woman as happy to chase dick as human men are to chase pussy, and in a nutshell, you have a Faey.”

Her forward, graphic language surprised him, but he made the connection quite easily, and she was right. Imagine a Faey more or less as a human man, and they made sense. “I wonder how either of us ever manage to get anything done,” he chuckled ruefully.

“A question for the philosophers,” she chuckled. “My name is Symone.”

“Jason,” he returned. “But don’t take that to mean you’re not going to *really* hate me come Monday morning.”

She chuckled. “I’ll get over it,” she promised. “So, what would you command of me, Master?” she said with a grin. “Wash your clothes? Reorganize your closet? Do the Moraki Dance of Forbidden Delights?”

“Keep talking, and you’re going to be chained to the outside of my door,” he said calmly as he turned on his panel.

“What, you’re celibate?”

“On the contrary, I find Faey very beautiful and very sexy,” he answered honestly. “But there’s a principle here that I can’t violate. If it weren’t for that, you’d be pinned to the bed right now. You *are* sexy, Symone, and I’m not dead. I’d be more than willing to give you that punishment you hinted about if not for that. I’d chain you outside the door to remove the temptation.”

“Well, it’s nice to be appreciated, and I do appreciate your candor,” she said with an honest smile. “I’ll leave you alone, since there’s a matter of principle involved.” Then she turned on the television.

He was quite grateful for that. And over the entire weekend, she was true to her word. She did not flirt with him or come on to him, not even once.

Sunday was a very relaxing day, because he had himself a maid. And he worked her.

She didn’t sleep very well, because she ended up sleeping in the chair at his desk, with her head and

arms laid out on the desk. He woke her up early and got her to work. She did his laundry. She moved all the furniture out of his room and shampooed the thin, worn carpet, then moved it all back in while he and Tim sat on lounge chairs in the hallway and watched. She cleaned the window, inside and out. She stood behind his chair obediently as he and Tim sat out on the green lawn between the dorm and the main Tulane building as boys whistled and stared at her, though this didn't bother her as much as it might a human girl. Though Jason wasn't going to rub it in too much, Tim was more than willing to torment Symone by barking at her like a drill instructor, haranguing her whenever she didn't perform up to his exacting specifications, making her wait on them hand and foot, and once he slapped her on her bare butt as she fetched them beers.

"I'm going to hurt him," Symone growled under her breath as Jason sat at his desk, studying for tomorrow's classes, after Tim went to the bathroom.

"He likes you," Jason told her absently. "He's been sporting a woody since he got here this morning."

"I don't understand."

"English slang," he said mildly. "He's had an erection. He finds you extremely sexy."

"Oh, I noticed that almost immediately," she winked. "Why do you think I've been sticking my tits in his face every time I serve him? I have to get back at him *somehow*."

Jason glanced at her, then chuckled. "He's actually a pretty good guy, and a good friend. He's just enjoying the moment, that's all."

"What do you mean?"

"A lot of humans resent the subjugation, I'm sure you've noticed."

"Of course."

"Well, this is his chance to boss *you* around."

"Ohhh," she breathed, then she chuckled. "Well, I guess I can't fault him for that," she said with a wink just as he got back. "Does he speak Faey?"

"Yes," Tim answered in Faey, but not pronounced very well. Tim was still mastering the motor skills required to speak the language.

"Well then, with your permission, I'm going to the bathroom, Jason," she asked.

"Fine."

"We'll see how brave you are on Monday afternoon, Tim," she said with a taunting smile. He jumped in shock when she put the palm of her hand against his shirt and pushed her hand down inside the band of his sweat pants. Tim's face instantly flushed, and he put his back against the door as the bulge of her hand in his sweatpants moved around. "Or even better, how brave you are tonight," she added in a husky tone, brushing up against him as she slid past. She flicked her tongue out and licked the lobe of his ear as she passed, then disappeared out the door.

"Oh, shit," Tim said in a wobbly kind of voice, sitting down at his desk rather hard.

"She won't get back at you, Tim. This is all part of the game for her," Jason chuckled. "Being bossed around is part of it."

"No, I think she wants me," he said.

"Whatever gave you that idea? Her putting her hand down your pants, or sticking her tongue in your ear?" he asked archly.

"Man," he said in a panting tone. "Was she playing with me, or was she serious?"

Jason suppressed a smile. Symone was getting her measure of revenge against Tim already. She was going to put him into a fever pitch for the rest of the day, he knew she would. It was what she did tonight that would tell the tale.

"Probably playing with you," he answered honestly. "I wouldn't take her too seriously. That, or you'd better go back to your room."

"She grabs hold of my dick, and you tell me not to take her seriously?" he asked hotly in reply.

"It's your call," he shrugged.

He was right about that. For the entire afternoon, Symone absolutely *tortured* Tim by flirting with him, flaunting her assets in front of him, and taking all sorts of liberties with him. It seemed that every time he turned around, she had her hand down his pants, whispering mind-blowing obscenities in his ear. She got him back in spades for the bossing around he'd done to her earlier in the day, that was for certain. Tim couldn't look at her without his face flushing, and eventually, Jason had to take pity on him by kicking Tim out. Symone looked utterly smug with herself after Tim was banished to his room upstairs, but her smug look vanished when he had her stand outside his door with the chain locked to her collar, wrapped around his doorknob while he took a shower.

He got back, towel around his waist, and she was still standing there. "Um, Jason, you think I might go, upstairs?" she asked in a hesitant manner.

"What's upstairs?"

"Tim."

"Why don't you give that poor boy some peace?" he asked.

"Well, I was kind of going to go up there and keep all those promises I made to him," she said with a sultry wink. "You think a girl can do that to a sexy guy all day and not get horny? There were a couple of times there when I was about to pull his pants down and fuck him right on your floor."

He looked at her, then chuckled. "You would have had to clean it," he told her. "I need to study, so do what you want. Just remember that you're not done until tomorrow morning."

"When do you want me to come back?"

"Tomorrow morning. You're going to help me take care of tomorrow's Marines."

"Oh. I don't have a problem with that," she winked. "I get to have a hot night with a sexy guy, and I get to rub some Marines' faces in the dirt. Thanks. For a human, you're not a bad guy."

"For a Faey, you're not a bad girl."

"I'm about to be," she purred as she unhooked the chain from the collar.

Jason chuckled as she sauntered towards the stairs. Symone actually was a pretty OK girl. Faey, but other than that, she was alright. She had a sense of humor, she was quite candid with him, she'd respected his position, which really impressed him, she had a lot of patience, and she'd been a good sport. And her torturing of Tim showed that she certainly knew how to play the game. She was the kind of girl he certainly wouldn't mind calling *friend*.

But then again, she was Faey. He shouldn't get too cozy with her. After all, he liked Jyslin just as much, if not more, but his position wouldn't allow him to be friends with her either.

Symone came lilting back to his room at about six in the morning, knocking on his door without considering that she might be waking him up. He was already up, however, for he was in the habit of rising early. He was lucky in the fact that he didn't sleep very much, and didn't seem to need much sleep.

She came in behind him as he opened the door for her, then leaned against it sensually and fanned her face with her hand, her eyes bright. "Where have you humans been all my life?" she said in a thoroughly satisfied tone. "Your friend Tim is—*wow*," she related. "No Faey man ever made me mewl like one of your *cat* animals."

"I'm glad you had fun," he said dryly.

"Fun? That was more than *fun*," she said with a grin. "I had to take two showers afterward."

"Two?"

"I took one, then when I came back, Tim mussed me. I had to take another."

He chuckled, but said nothing.

"We're going out tomorrow night. I have a few friends in my unit who are free. Want to double?"

"No thanks," he said mildly.

"It's going to be weird having clothes on around him. It's kinda fun for me when he stares at my tits while we're talking. It makes me feel wanted and *very* sexy."

"You'll get used to it."

"Trust me, I can get *used* to feeling sexy all the time," she said with a throaty chuckle.

"That's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant," she laughed. "So, what do you need me to do to get the Marines?"

"You'll find out." He paused a moment. "What makes Tim so much different?"

"Faey men are always so standoffish," she complained. "They make you bend over backwards to get a date with them, then they never tell you where you stand. They're always hinting, teasing, leading you on, and just when you think it's going to get serious, they dump you like yesterday's garbage. Tim was honest with me right off, and he really, really wants me, likes me, despite me being Faey. You have no idea how much I liked that, how much it made me feel *wanted*."

Strange that she'd say something like that to him, but then again, he had the feeling that she'd be much more forthcoming with him, someone she promised not to flirt with, than a Faey man, or maybe even a Faey woman. "Don't hurt him," he warned.

"I won't," she said in a dreamy manner. "Trust me, Jason. I'll be on his arm as long as he wants me."

"Be careful. He might take some heat because he's going out with a Faey."

"Nobody's going to bother him," she promised. "I know how to be discrete."

"Is he still asleep?"

She nodded, then grinned in a dirty manner. "I wore him out. But he seemed to take it fairly well."

"Take what?"

"Faey can make love with more than just their bodies," she told him. "Faey can join in telepathic communion while making love. It makes it ten times better. Sometimes it's just physical, since both people have to drop their defenses, you know, let the other into their minds, so that takes some trust. First time lovers, people just having casual sex, they don't usually do that. But Tim was alright with letting me join our minds. He said it gave him a little bit of a headache, but it was the most intense sex he'd ever had," she said with a bright smile. "Sex is more fun when you can feel your partner's pleasure," she winked.

"I'll remember that."

"Well, all in all, I'm glad you collared me now," she laughed. "I didn't like the cleaning, but I have a new boyfriend. That's a fair tradeoff."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't mind it all that much."

"Not at all," she said with a smile. "Since I'm going to be going out with your friend, I hope that means we can hang out together, Jason. I like you."

"I like you too, Symone, but I can't do that," he said seriously. "I'm one of those people who object to your presence here. My principles won't let me socialize with people I consider to be the enemy."

She laughed. "You're sitting there talking to a girl who's been with you for two days, naked as the day she was born, who just screwed your best friend until he was a quivering mass of jelly. That's not *socializing*?"

He chuckled. "Well, it does sort of sound like it, but I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I started hanging out with Faey."

"You object to the Imperium, or the people?"

"The Imperium."

"Well, I'm not the Imperium," she declared. "I'm Symone Zabelle. I'm not even Imperial. I'm a soldier for House Tarlinne. I serve a noble, not the Imperium. I'm what you'd call a private soldier, or a mercenary."

"Does your noble obey the Empress?"

"Of course."

"Then you're a part of the Imperium," he said bluntly.

“Well, what would it take for you to hang out with me?” she asked.

“For the Imperium to leave, put everything back the way it was, then come back and *ask* us to join,” he answered seriously. “If they’d have *asked*, we might have agreed.”

“Well, you certainly don’t want too much,” she laughed. “Just give it time, Jason. You’ve seen how the Imperium works. You’re not a conquered race, you’re a part of the Imperium. As soon as you get used to it, you’ll be just like everyone else. You’ll be the equal of a Faey. You’re not the *only* alien race that’s a part of the Imperium, you know. The Menoda have been part of the Imperium for over two hundred years. They have noble houses and everything.”

He gave her a serious look. “We’ll never be the *equal* of the Faey,” he said grimly.

She bit her lip, but said nothing.

“I like you Symone, honestly,” he told her. “But you’re a Faey, and I’m a human. It doesn’t matter that you might agree with me. It doesn’t matter that I like you, or you like me. The only thing that matters is that your Imperium conquered my world. Did you think we’d welcome you in? Did you think that you dissolving all our nations and moving entire populations around and putting half of us on farms wouldn’t matter to us? Do you think that just because we can’t rebel, it means we all simply accept your order like weak-minded sheep? Well, it doesn’t.

“I can’t do anything about the Imperium. I admit that, and in a way, I accept it. But it doesn’t mean that I’ll embrace your Imperium, your customs, or even your people. I’ll go to your school and work for you, but I’ll never enjoy it. Whether I’m in a lab or a factory or a farm field, it doesn’t matter, because I’ll end up working for you one way or the other. I can accept that, so I’ll find the place that makes me happiest and stay there. I can’t fight, but I can resist in my own way, just to show you that we humans are *not* just conquered slaves. And I’ll do so until the day I die. It means absolutely nothing to the Imperium, but it means everything to *me*.

“It’s not personal, Symone. I like you, and you’re not the only Faey I like. The little war I’m having with the Marines is based on the same issue. The Marine likes me, and I admit, I like her. But I won’t go out with her, and I won’t be friends with her, because she represents the government that took my life away from me and made me nothing more than a slave. I’m sorry if that offends you or hurts your feelings, but it’s the truth. If circumstances were different, I’d be dating her right now, and you and me would be going out, getting drunk, and having a blast every weekend. But they’re not that way. You’re a Faey, I’m a human, and that’s all that it takes in my mind to forever put us on opposite sides of a line. I’m sorry.”

She was silent a long moment. “I can understand that,” she told him sincerely. “And I respect it. I’d try to sound impressive and wise, but that’s not very easy when a girl’s standing here naked.”

He chuckled, and gave her a gentle smile. “Your jiggling notwithstanding, I’m glad you understand.”

“I don’t jiggle,” she said primly. “I undulate.”

He gave her a surprised look, then burst into laughter.

Symone was alright. Too bad she was Faey.

She did her part against the two Marines that showed up at dawn, who immediately piled out of their patrol hovercar and set up an observation post out in Audobon Park, out in the open, where there was no way he could get at them without being seen. Her mission was to distract them, and she undertook her mission with great enthusiasm. The Army hated the Marines, the Marines hated the Navy (what the Faey called their starship military service), and the Navy hated *everyone*. That was how the inter-service rivalries worked in the Faey structure. The Marines were an elite form of combat troop who also served on starships as ship to ship combat troops and ground assault, so the Army resented them. The Navy looked down their noses at the other two branches of the Faey military, even though they were more than happy to have Marines on board their starships as security. Private soldiers, like Symone, who served a house instead of the Imperium directly, were considered part of the

Army, but more like the old National Guard or Reserves of America's dissolved army. They were here because their house was the one who had been given possession of Earth. Since the Imperium didn't have enough space available in the Navy, Marines, and the Imperial Army for all the women who served their involuntary conscription, most of them ended up in the private armies of noble houses.

Symone's help proved invaluable in getting the two Marines who showed up today. Her job was to distract, and she certainly managed to absolutely dominate their attention the instant she came out the door. After all, the last thing those two expected to see was a naked Faey woman trudging out the front door of the dorm. She spotted them quickly and crossed the street, pulling the dog collar off her neck as she came out onto the grass lawn of the park. She reached them and started chattering at them quickly, talking fast, spinning quite the tale about how her squad lost a bet with Jason, and she ended up in a dog collar as a result. She asked them for some clothes or a ride back to her barracks, and they agreed. She let them go first, towards the car, and she lightly placed two tiny devices on the backs of their armor that had been hidden in the palms of her hands. She gave him a thumbs-up as they took her to his car, then got in it with them and was hurried away.

Mission accomplished.

He reached into his pocket and pressed a little red button on his remote, put it back in his pocket, then went to school.

Those two Marines discovered later, after dropping Symone off at her barracks, that whenever they drove towards the campus, they had sudden fits of terrible itching all over their entire bodies. The closer they got to the campus, the worse it became. Zora and Mil couldn't understand what was happening, but when they realized that retreating made the insane itching ease, they both realized that somehow, some way, Jason had gotten them. Circling the campus proved that it was the campus that was at the center of this strange effect, and the itching started when they got within about a human mile of it. It started off very mild, almost kind of nice, like little feathers ghosting over their bodies, but it was all over their entire bodies, and it got worse and worse the closer they approached the campus.

They parked the hovercar about at the edge of this effect and looked at each other. "He got us!" Zora said, then she laughed. "How did he do it? What did he do?"

"I don't know—hey!" Min said. "That regular was the only one who got close to us! Do you think she was in on it?"

"It's possible, but how could she do anything? She was naked, and wasn't carrying anything."

"Unless she distracted us while Jason somehow did something," Min grunted. "Myri said that you can't sense him at all, that he can sneak up on just about anyone. Did you see him?"

"No, did you?"

"No."

They looked at each other, then burst into laughter. "Should we go pay a little visit to that regular?" Min asked.

"Nah, she was just a part of the game," Zora replied. "Besides, after being Jason's pet for a couple of days, I think she suffered enough, don't you?"

Jason enjoyed his Monday in peace, but Tuesday morning, at four a.m. sharp, he was awakened by a knock on the door. He blearily opened it—he got up at five every morning, so this was a little early for him—and found himself staring at a tall, regal-looking Faey with *green* hair. Emerald green. He had never seen that color hair on a Faey before. Despite it being green, she wore it in the short, comb-over style that many Marines favored, and it was strangely pretty with her blue skin. She was narrow-faced, almost foxlike in appearance, with large eyes, a long nose, and a narrow, sharp face that looked predatory. She was rather handsome, and it was apparent that she was older than the other Faey who had tasted defeat at his hands in the days past. Instead of armor, she wore a dark blue uniform of sorts, with sleek dark blue pants with a red sash, and a sharply pressed blue jacket that had silver buttons along its front. She had little silver triangles on her lapels, a little starburst design insignia pinned to

her left epaulet, and a gold woven rope that was attached to her right, running under her arm.

"I am Lieutenant Lana," she announced as if that meant everything in the world. "And these are yours."

She held out his two little sub-sonic induction devices, which had used extreme high-frequency sound to irritate the skin of the two Faey from yesterday. Their armor conducted the subsonic waves, acting like amplifiers, and they were set to get stronger and stronger the closer they came to his remote.

"Thanks. They took me hours to build. I don't want to lose them," he said with a roguish smile as he accepted the two button-sized devices, painted the same hue of black as a Marine's armor. "How long did it take them to find them?"

"Seven hours," she answered honestly. "We had to use a scanner to find them. They were very devious."

"Thank you," he said with a nod. "So, you're number six," he said as he turned and walked from the door, leaving it open. "At least you're civil enough to come and introduce yourself. 'Hello, I'm Lieutenant Lana, and I'll be your opposition this morning'," he said in a voice that a waiter might use to introduce himself.

She chuckled. "I'm not here as the opponent. I'm here as the mediator," she told him. "I'm here to put an end to this little war, Jason. Before I leave, we'll have an agreement."

"What makes you think I'm going to quit?" he asked. "I'm *winning*."

"Because I have direct orders from my battalion commander to end it," she told him with steady eyes. "We all thought it was funny for the first few days, but it's starting to foment discord between the Corps and the Army regulars, as their little visit to you on Saturday probably proves to you."

He nodded.

"I'm here to head things off before they get ugly. For you and Jyslin, and also for the Army and the Corps. So, before I leave here, we'll have an agreement on the table, and one both sides will agree to honor. There's no way you'll get out of the date, so be prepared to stipulate that condition right now. But, given how badly you thrashed my Marines, I'm sure you can drag some conditions out of me that will suit you and make them very annoyed," she winked.

"Why help me like that? Aren't you supposed to be on *their* side?"

"Because I believe you deserve it," she said. "After all, you've stymied my squad for six days now, and that's no mean feat. My unit is *good*. Very good. But they've met their match in you so far. You *are* winning, Jason, and because of that, you should get the lion's share in the peace agreement. You will have to concede the main point, but everything else is up for negotiation, and the current conditions favor a strong lean towards your interests."

"Well, I appreciate the praise."

"It's more than that," she said, pointing at the subsonic inducers he set on the desk. "Those little devices were *devious*, Jason, and it's something I've never seen before. I had a tech scan them yesterday, and she thinks that they have some potential uses in military or civilian applications. She was impressed by the complexity of them, and she didn't believe me when I told her that a second-semester tech student built them."

He wasn't quite happy about that. He didn't build those inducers to be used in *war*. They were built as a prank to best a pair of Marines, that's all.

"Don't worry, I had their design patented," she told him. "In *your* name. You invented them, after all. I also submitted the design to the Ministry of Technology."

"What does that mean?"

"That means that if the Imperium uses the idea, you get paid for it," she answered. "And the submission will get you *noticed*, Jason. You need that. The inducers are just one of three things I've never seen before. I've never seen that chemical you sprayed one Sheleese and Ilia that destroyed their armor without hurting them. I've also never seen anyone use a plasma magnet the way you did, with a magnetic field density sensor on it to control its magnetic force to make the hovercar hang in midair the

way it did. Those are brilliant inventions, Jason. Just *brilliant*, and it makes it even more impressive when you realize that they're coming from a second-year tech student with absolutely no background knowledge of Faey technology. To us, it's like a primitive caveman stumbling on a pile of tools and material and using them to build a PPG. If you can attract the attention of the Ministry, there's a good chance you can get into either black ops or research. That's where anyone in school wants to end up."

He gave her a long, steady look. "Why are you helping me?"

"Because I believe in helping people discover their potential," she answered. "It's my duty as an officer. I think you have what it takes to be in research, and I'll do what I can to get you there."

He was quiet a long moment, not sure what to say.

"Alright, so let's agree right here and now that there's no way you can avoid going out with Jyslin. That's an absolute."

"That's an admission of defeat," Jason told her. "That's what all of this is about."

"You're going to lose this eventually, Jason," she told him. "You'd lose tomorrow, I guarantee it. After you get out of school, Jyslin is planning to arrest you and throw you in a cell full of hand-picked cellmates, and keep you there until you admit defeat or she has to let you go in the morning. Then she was going to arrest you again that afternoon, and again, and again, until you gave up."

Jason's eyes hardened. "I thought she was better than that," he growled.

"They're not criminals," she told him with a grin. "She was going to put you in a cell with a pack of *giruzi*." Giruzi were massive canines that were indigenous to one of the worlds the Faey owned, which looked like black-pelted dogs who were five feet tall at the shoulder. Their eyes glowed red from some kind of bioluminescent reaction, and they had the capability to administer powerful electric shocks. They had bio-electro organs much akin to the shock glands of an electric eel, but they were much more powerful. A giruzi could unleash a blast of what looked like lightning nearly a hundred feet through open air. Giruzi used them to hunt prey, one of the most effective hunting evolutionary developments he'd ever seen. He'd seen them a few times, because sometimes the Marines used them for crowd control, having trained them to use their shocks to stun instead of kill. Humans might not be too motivated to disperse when faced with a few Faey in armor, but they scattered when a couple of giruzi were brought in to motivate them to be somewhere else.

Jason frowned, then he chuckled ruefully. "That's clever, but it would have backfired. I'm not afraid of giruzi."

"You would be if there's someone giving them orders to scare you," she told him with a wink.

"Wouldn't you prefer losing with dignity, or with an animal that weighs twice what you do chewing your clothes off?"

"It'll be on her when my grades go down because I can't study," he shrugged.

"I know, and that's the other reason why I've been ordered to put an end to this," she said earnestly. "It's going to do you permanent harm if we let this go on any longer. This academy is too demanding for you to be distracted for an extended period of time like this."

"I am *not* going out with Jyslin," he said adamantly.

"You will," she said sternly. "What we're here to negotiate is what happens during the date," she smiled. "And the possibility of dates taking place after the first."

He shouted, he argued, he even *threatened*, but Lana was absolutely unflappable. She talked him down from his highly confrontational stance, got him to talk. She met his posturing with calm logic, talking him down, talking him down, being utterly reasonable at all times.

She made him see two glaring facts. First, Jyslin was *not* going to stop until she won. She would be an eternal thorn in his side. And second, that an escalation of the war was going to do real harm to him, and possibly both of them. Where Jyslin and the other Marines failed, Lana succeeded by making him see reason, and that reasoning was that he should try to get what he could out of a bad situation.

So, they sat down in the common room and hammered out an agreement. Jason would go out on *one* date with Jyslin. That date would entail exactly one dinner at Copeland's (Jyslin pays), going to

the opera (Jyslin pays), and a nightcap visit to a small bar or restaurant of Jason's choosing after the opera (Jyslin pays). After that, Jason had the option to have her take him home, or he could decide to stay out with her and do whatever they pleased. That was it. During this date, Jason had to behave in a courteous manner and not cause trouble, and Jyslin would be required to treat him with respect and not grind the fact that she was getting her date in his nose.

After the date, it was agreed upon that no matter what, Jyslin would not attempt to force him to do anything he did not want to the way she had before. She could annoy him, harass him, harangue him all she wanted, but she had to do it *herself*. She couldn't bring the squad in on it, and she was absolutely forbidden from interfering with his schoolwork. Lana made that abundantly clear to him, and it hit him as rather important. She'd said that some of his little tricks had attracted attention, and now she comes in and admits that someone higher up ordered her to put a stop to it.

He wondered how high up that order came from.

"Are we agreed, then?" Lana asked in a reasonable tone, extending her hand across the table in the common room, which was filled with two couches and three large tables where students could sit and study, or watch the large flat-panel plasma screen TV hanging on the wall.

"I'm not too happy about this, but if it'll get Jyslin off my back, I'll agree to it," he said after a moment.

"Then I think we have a deal," she said. He took her delicate hand and shook it after a moment, sealing the bargain.

It was the first time that a date had been negotiated at the conference table. It was also the first date ever officially condoned and ordered to take place by the Imperial Marine Corps.

And it would take place on Friday.

Chapter 3

*Raista, 16 Shiaa, 4392, Orthodox calendar;
Wednesday, 21 May 2007, Native regional reckoning
New Orleans, Gamia Province, American sector*

Symone was absolutely outrageous.

That was the entire problem he had with her, because she was just so damn *likable*.

It was both a part of her quirky charm and the manner in which she defused any kind of possible retaliation against Tim for him going out with a Faey. She was so bubbly and energetic, and when she was in public, she acted like an absolute airhead. She gave Tim vapid, adoring stares, and she actually debased herself a little bit by acting with a kind of effervescent silliness when she was around him which made everyone comfortable with her, whether they liked Faey or not. She was riotously funny, charmingly silly, deceptively vapid, and cunningly adorable.

She was absolutely impossible not to like.

The students reacted to her presence surprisingly well, Jason had to admit. She made it very clear from the outset that she was dating Tim—her big and hunky stud, as she called him—and the way she fawned all over him defused any kind of animosity that humans might have for her. She acted like a lovestruck ditz, and the students considered her to be harmless. In private, though, she showed both him and Tim that she was a very smart young lady, and that her affection for Tim was quite sincere.

In the face of Symone, his personal intent to not socialize with Faey was sorely put to the test.

She was just so *fun*. Tim managed to drag him with them after school on Monday night to go down to the quarter for some drinks, and it was just a matter of minutes before Symone had managed to insinuate herself right into their friendship. She was a fearless woman with a wicked sense of humor, and she was very funny when she got drunk. She'd shocked Patty O's at first, since it was the first time they'd ever seen a Faey out of armor, and one that had come in to drink, no less, but Symone had the entire piano bar eating out of her hand after about half an hour. She bantered with the waitress, she made jokes with the other patrons, and after they'd called Jason up to have him play the piano, she jumped up on the stage and sang for the spectators. Symone had a lovely voice, and she was surprisingly familiar with human songs.

By nine o'clock, curfew, she was roaring drunk, hanging on both of them as they caught a streetcar back to the dorm, and Jason had to keep reminding himself that she was a Faey, because she was a very funny drunk.

Last night, instead of going out and getting drunk, Tim brought her along as they studied in the common room. She showed no signs of her indisposition the night before, spending the time reading an old human romance novel. Jason was a bit surprised she could read English. After they got ready for their calculus test, she convinced them to bring in a DVD player and show her favorite human movie on the big TV in the common room, *Braveheart*.

"That movie's like ten years old," Tim told her in surprise. "How did you find out about it?"

"I saw a commercial with that lead actor, a clip from the movie, and I had to check it out. Men in skirts always get my attention," she winked.

"It's called a kilt or a plaid, not a skirt," Jason told her absently.

"So that's where the name you students gave the lab building came from."

"Yah," Tim told her.

"That Mal Gobson is cute."

"Mel Gibson."

"Whatever. Who cares about him now that I got my Tim-Tim?" she said, leaning over the table and giving him a passionate kiss.

“Tim-Tim?” Jason asked mildly, giving him a sly smile.

His expression was a bit pained. “So she has a pet name for me.”

“Riiight,” he drawled, glancing up from his panel.

“Don’t make me come over there,” he said with an evil smile.

“Bring a spatula,” Jason remarked absently. “You’ll need it to peel yourself off the floor.”

“Talk Faey,” Symone objected. “I’m not that good with English, and you need the practice, Tim. What is a *spatula*?”

Tim explained it to her, which made her laugh. “I remember that fight you had with my squad, Jason. You’re teaching Tim how to do that?”

“Well, he might be able to do that in a couple of years,” Jason told her. “He just started learning.”

“Where did you learn it?”

“Well, when I was a kid, my father was stationed in Japan,” he answered. “When he was there, he got totally fascinated with martial arts. Unarmed combat,” he explained. “He used it to keep in shape, because pilots have to be in very good shape to handle the physical stresses of being a fighter pilot.”

“My sister is in the pilot program,” she nodded. “Her letters say she was shocked at how much they have to work out.

“What does she fly?” Tim asked.

“She flies exomechs,” she answered him. “Those machines that looked like robots. Pilots have to fly exomechs for a year or so before they get rated for flying fighters.”

“I’ve never seen one,” Tim told her.

With a few keystrokes on his panel’s holographic keyboard, he brought up a good picture of one, then turned the panel around so he could see it. “Exomech,” Jason told him. Exomechs were large robotic fighting vehicles, about twelve feet tall, that moved just like a human or a Faey. He’d read about them on CivNet. They didn’t really use them here because they didn’t really need to, but he was sure they had some garrisoned somewhere on the planet, or in the starship that was parked in orbit over the planet to provide assistance, in case of some catastrophic accident or major insurrection. The information he’d gotten on them was surprisingly detailed. Faey had yet to develop a technology that allowed machines to interface with their telepathic powers, so all their devices were manually controlled. An exomech would certainly test a pilot’s ability to handle multiple controls simultaneously. The arms were controlled with braces that attached to the pilot’s arms, and the legs and the exomech’s ability to walk or run were controlled braces that attached to the feet, and a pair of pedals on the floor. A combination of foot shifts and pushing the pedals, translated by the onboard computer, would give the exomech an utterly humanoid manner of moving. They were armed with very powerful weapons called MPACs, Metaphased Plasma Auto Cannons, a much more powerful version of the plasma rifles and pistols the Faey employed, which were housed in the forearms of the units. Exomechs were battlefield weapons, the ultimate expression of the powered personal combat armor Faey soldiers wore into combat, but unlike that powered armor, exomechs were equipped with spatial drives that allowed them to fly. The Faey’s personal powered armor had magnetic induction units that let it ride on a planet’s magnetic field. That allowed them to skim along the surface of the ground with extreme speed, and reach an altitude of nearly thirty meters.

“Holy shit,” Tim breathed, staring at the picture.

“You keep thinking that what you see the Faey using here is all they have,” Jason told him seriously. “What they use here is hundred year old surplus junk that they probably had to dust off.”

Symone nodded. “Sure enough. The only current tech they let us use around here are our weapons, well, and the hovercars. They’re pretty standard just about anywhere in the Imperium. They converted all our hot plasma and ion guns to metaphased twenty years ago.”

“Why don’t they give you the good stuff?”

“They don’t need to,” Symone told him honestly. “Our hundred-year old armor can stop the most powerful archaic powder gun you have. You can’t organize because you have no defense against our

telepathy, so that old armor is all we need.” She snorted. “My House is cheap anyway,” she complained. “We still have Polymerized Camonite armor when the Imperials have Neutronium. Trillane worries more about its purse than it does its defense,” she said, then she made a face. “Why are we sitting here talking about this shit? Let’s watch the movie!”

It was hard to say no to Symone, over just about anything. So, their studying turned into an extended screening of *Braveheart*, along with nearly the entire second and third floors of the dorm. Symone’s bubbly, infectious nature had taken hold of everyone watching the movie, and got them all into it much more than they would have been had they been watching it alone. She had the entire room cheering during the battle scenes.

But she wasn’t a friend. And Jason had to keep telling himself that about every ten minutes.

He caught her again in the morning, as she opened his door without knocking as he sat on his bed and prepared for the coming day with his thirty minutes of meditation, which preceded his morning workout. It didn’t go very well, for he had another one of those annoying headaches that he’d been suffering from for the last couple of months. They were never too severe, a dull, aching throb inside his head that tended to come and go over the course of about an hour. He’d woken up with it, and it was just starting to ease. But it wasn’t enough to prevent him from meditating; in fact, it was something of an exercise to ignore the pain and continue with his meditation despite it.

“Hello? Jason, are you in here—oh,” she said in surprise, putting a hand to her chest when she saw him sitting on the bed.

“What?” he asked, his eyes opening and regarding her. She was wearing one of Tim’s football jersey shirts, which hung down to her thighs. “You slept here last night?”

“I’m trying to get Tim to move in with me.”

“You move fast.”

“I know it’s only been a few days, but I think I love him,” she admitted, scratching her backside absently. “When he let me join our minds, what I found inside him was beautiful. I’m not letting him get away from me. He’s too good a catch.”

“I can’t argue there.”

“What were you doing?” she asked. “I couldn’t even sense you in here. It was like you turned off your brain.”

“Meditating,” he answered. “A mental exercise that helps sharpen the mind.”

“It was creepy,” she told him. “I usually get a sense of *something* from you, even if I can’t hear your thoughts. But it was like your brain wasn’t there.”

“I know. I’ve learned that meditation keeps Faey from finding me with their power. I’ve had occasion to hide from them here lately.”

“Heh,” she mused. “How do you do that, anyway? Hide your thoughts from me. I’ve never come across a human that can do that. It made me almost itch to try to probe you several times when you had me in that collar, but you said no using my talent, and I wasn’t going to cheat.”

“It’s a mental exercise,” he answered. “A false front that hides my thoughts. I’ve had a lot of practice perfecting it,” he growled. “Faey seem to go nuts that they can’t hear my thoughts, and they always probe me. I’ve even learned what it feels like when they’re doing it.”

“You can feel it?” she asked in surprise.

He nodded.

“Damn,” she grunted. “I didn’t think that was possible.”

“What do you mean?”

“You shouldn’t be able to feel us using our talent. No other humans do.”

“They probably don’t have the same training I do,” he answered. “Part of what I learned from my father involves knowing your own mind. Since what Faey do is *alien*, something not part of my mind, I can sense it when they do it to me.”

“Huh. Well, wonders never cease,” she said. “What time is it?”

“Around five thirty.”

“Fuck,” she grunted sourly. “I have to be at the barracks by six. I need to get dressed and get my ass over there before I get busted.”

“You’re not supposed to be here?”

“They don’t care where I am as long as I show up for duty on time,” she told him. “I’ve got the campus in my duty rotation today, so I’ll try to show up for lunch with you guys. But we’re not friends,” she said with a sly smile and a wink. “I’m going to be there to see Tim. If you’re there, well, I’ll just have to be nice to you. Semantics, you know. Sophistry. I don’t want to ruin your hypocrisy.”

Jason chuckled ruefully. “Bitch,” he accused.

She winked again. “The bitchiest of all bitches,” she said shamelessly. “Call me the Bitch Queen. And be sure to bow. The Bitch Queen gets bitchy when she doesn’t get the respect she’s due.”

“Work. Go,” he commanded.

“Yes, Master,” she said breathlessly. She twirled towards the door, then pulled up her shirt to expose her bare buttocks, then slapped herself a couple of times on that rather attractive posterior in taunting reply to his command, then hurried out the door.

He peeked out of the room and saw her getting ready to go up the stairs. “Someday you’re going to come into my room and manage to get out without showing me your ass,” he called to her, loud enough to wake up a few people on his floor.

“Consider yourself lucky,” she shouted in reply. “I don’t show my ass to just any guy, you know!”

Several bleary heads poked out of opening doors as Jason chuckled. “What the hell are you shouting for at five thirty in the *fucking* morning?” the girl who lived in the room beside him asked crossly. Her name was Betty, and he didn’t really like her all that much. She was a primadonna.

“Symone,” he said, and that was all the explanation he needed.

She looked towards the stairwell at the end of the hall, then laughed. “Oh. Nevermind, then,” she said, then closed her door.

Oh, yes, the whole dorm was familiar with Symone. In a way, she was the dorm mascot now.

The calculus test was surprisingly difficult, but he was pretty sure he managed to pass it with a high mark. There was a little excitement in the lab, when a PPG suffered a fatal breakdown and ejected its core, which caused the PPG’s case to overheat and catch fire. Ailan had to douse the fire with an extinguisher, showing a calm reaction to an event that caused some of the students to scream and back away.

After lab was over, Ailan called him down to the table before he could leave. “I got a message from the Ministry, and they sent me the design specs for an ultrasonic device that they say you built,” he said.

“She really did it,” Jason said in surprise.

“What?”

“Lana, she said she took scans of something I built to piss off the Marines and sent it to the Ministry of Technology. I didn’t think anything of it.”

“Can I see this device you built?” he asked. “Exactly how does it work?”

“It’s nothing but a supersonic emitter,” he told him, digging into his pack, for they were still inside it. “I read about the metal the Faey use in their armor and found out it has an acoustic signature, so I built an emitter that used the armor as a speaker. I hooked it to a proximity sensor so the sound got stronger they closer they got to me.” He handed the tiny device to Ailan.

Ailan was quiet a moment, turning the little black disc over in his supple, long-fingered hand, then he laughed. “It would feel like ants crawling all over them,” he realized, then he grinned. “That’s devious!”

“Lana thought so,” Jason chuckled.

“May I keep this for a few days?”

“Sure,” he agreed.

"I think I need to find more challenging projects for you, if you can build something this small," he said with a sly smile.

"The first thing the professor I had in Boston taught us was how to burn circuits in laminar board in Control Systems I," he answered, referring to the classes that taught moleculartronic theory and application. "She started with boardwork and worked up. Tim's in your class, and from what he told me, you seem to start with major components and work down."

"She taught you boardwork right off?" he asked in surprise.

He nodded. "She had a class of people who were in engineering before the subjugation," he explained. "Since we all had experience with electronic circuitry, she started us off on moleculartronic circuitry. She taught us so much that I tested out of Control II. It worked pretty well, actually. We all learned about trinary a lot faster since we started with how it operated on the board."

Moleculartronic technology was the technology they used for their computers and other sophisticated devices. It used polarity-phased plasma as a power source, like electricity, and behaved remarkably like electronics did. Moleculartronic circuits were built on boards of laminated titanium, and the alignment of the molecular structure of the board was what channeled plasma flow to the components which were annealed to it. Moleculartronic components were circuits built of silicon, germanium, titanium, and certain alloys of light metals and annealed to the board, again using the alignment of the molecular structure of the crystallized silicon and crystallized metals to serve as the digital circuit. It was sort of digital, actually, since they didn't use "on or off" binary logic like human electronic computers did. They had a trinary logic system, composed of *positive*, *neutral*, and *negative*, the three states in which a molecule could be aligned. Memory was a simple matter of setting aside a section of a chip for storing data, or chips that served solely as memory storage devices, where data existed within the molecular alignment of the matter of the device itself. Every single molecule in the internal structure of a moleculartronic component was a part of the chip's processing power or memory. With moleculartronics, a single chip had more processing power than a mainframe. A single moleculartronic circuit board had the power of a supercomputer. Jason's panel, a moleculartronic device, was like carrying around ten Cray supercomputers, and his panel was considered *small*. The microprocessor in the device in Ailan's hand had more computing power than the most sophisticated desktop personal computer any human ever built.

"I wondered why you weren't in a logic class this semester," he chuckled. "They don't teach Control III in the spring, so you had no place to go."

He nodded.

"Oh, I meant to ask, how did you do that melting the armor trick?" he asked.

"That was easy," he said with a scoff. "I had chemistry last semester, Professor. Vandirium armor reacts with tetrasodium bisulfate and recombines to form gaseous sodium bivandirium sulfate and titanium bisodium oxide. I just made up a solution mixed in with a little something to make it revert to gas when it came into contact with nitrogen, and put it in a jar."

Ailan laughed. "How did you figure that out?"

"I didn't. My chemistry teacher last semester did that as an experiment. I just remembered how he did it, that's all."

Ailan gave him a sly look, then chuckled. "I heard that you made peace with the Marines. I heard that their post commandant personally ordered arbitration. You sorta won."

"Geez, where do you get all this, Professor?" he asked in surprise.

"My wife is a major in the Marines," he revealed. "She works in the commandant's office. From what I heard, Monday, after she heard about that Army unit that tried to put you in that dog collar, the order came down right of the commandant's office that it stops. They were going to send in the company commander, but the squad Lieutenant requested permission to do the negotiating."

He grunted. "Well, I had to give in on the date, but I got a guarantee that it stops afterward," he said. "I can live with that."

“What stops? You shouldn’t close your mind on the idea of a Faey girlfriend, Jason. Our races are so similar we’re virtually identical. We’re not *alien* aliens,” he said with a sly wink.

“You’re right,” Jason said evenly, hoisting his pack over his shoulder. “You’re just conquerors.”

Ailan said no more. There was nothing that he could say to that, and allowed Jason to leave unchallenged.

Despite his adamant stance that he did *not* socialize with Faey, he ended up with Tim and Symone after his martial arts class. They ate pizza and studied, which was to say Tim and Jason studied while Symone read another human romance novel. After that, Tim taught Symone how to play ping-ping in the rec room on the first floor as Jason got a little work done. Symone was very agile and had good hand-eye coordination, so she quickly became a viable threat to Tim’s ping-pong supremacy.

“This is bullshit,” Tim laughed after she took a five point lead on him. “You just learned how to play!”

“Take your beating like a woman,” she said tauntingly. “Your serve.”

“Well, I heard about it, but I had to come see for myself,” Jyslin called from the doorway. She filed into the room, wearing the tank top and shorts she wore to work out, both black. “Do you have something nice picked out for Friday, Jason?” she asked with a sultry smile.

“I’ll be ready,” he said in a calm yet ominous tone. “I hope you enjoy it. It’ll be the first and last date we have.”

“Oh, so this is the one that started all this,” Symone said with a laugh, putting the paddle down.

“Who are you?” Jyslin asked in Faey.

“I’m Tim’s babe,” she said with an outrageous grin.

“The one in the collar,” Jyslin noted dryly.

“Yup. Two days hanging around Tim and Jason when you’re naked makes you want to hang around some more,” she said with a malicious grin. “They *rocked* me,” she said breathlessly.

“Symone,” Jason said sharply.

“Hey, I’m trying to give you a reputation here,” she winked.

“He already has one,” Jyslin told him with a grin. “He’s that annoying human who the Marines can’t beat.”

“We didn’t have much better luck,” Symone laughed in agreement.

“Well, I got what I want, so I’m not going to rub it in,” she told him.

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” he said dryly.

“Oh, I will, believe me,” she told him. “I got my foot in the door. All I have to do now is convince you I’m worth hanging around. Just like her,” he said, pointing at Symone.

“Oh, I don’t hang out with Jason,” she said with an insincere grin. “I hang out with Tim. Jason just happens to be in the same room. And he’ll stick to that story,” she added with a wink.

“Semantics,” Jyslin snorted. “Just admit that all Faey aren’t the Imperium, and we won’t have any trouble, Jason,” she told him. “You don’t seem to have any problem with her. Why do you have trouble with me?”

“She doesn’t want to have a relationship,” he said coolly.

“Not that I didn’t try at first,” she laughed honestly. “Well, not a relationship, actually. More like a wild night in bed.”

“You never said any such thing,” he snipped in reply.

“Would you shut up!” she said with a grin. “I’m trying to make you look studly!”

“I’m sure he doesn’t appreciate it,” Jyslin smiled. “He wants me to go away.” She leaned against the doorframe and crossed her arms beneath her breasts. “He’s not getting it, though. Friday, he’s going out on a date with me. One date. He agreed to behave like a civilized person, and I agreed to be civilized. We’re going to have a nice, civilized evening. Dinner, the opera, and an after-opera nightcap. Since we both agreed to be nice, it gives me one evening to convince him to go out with me

again. I think I can do it.”

“I think you won’t,” he said coolly.

“Oh, I think you’re wrong,” she smiled. “She proves that your vaunted ideals aren’t as set in stone as you pretend. You take her as an individual, not as a representative of the evil conquering race. I’m going to prove to you that I’m interested in *you*. Not your politics, not your philosophy, not your positions. And I’m going to teach you that it’s alright to be interested in *me*. Not *my* politics, not *my* philosophy, not *my* positions. I want to be your *friend*, Jason, and to be honest, I want to be more than that. You’re an intelligent, fascinating man. I just have to show you that I’m an intelligent, fascinating woman under my armor. I’m not the Imperium, Jason. I’m Jyslin Shaddale. Until they put the crown on my head, don’t blame me for how they do things.”

She glanced at Symone, and Jason could feel...*something*, a fringe of something that passed between them. Were they using telepathy to communicate?

He winced slightly as a sharp pain lanced into his head. The headaches usually didn’t come on so quickly.

“You alright, Jayce?” Tim asked, putting down the paddle.

“Just a headache,” he said with a negligent wave of his hand, rubbing his temple.

“I thought I told you you should go to the doctor,” Tim told him.

“It’s stress, Tim,” he sighed. “I used to get them all the time when my father got sick.”

He felt it ease into that dull ache quickly, which was much more tolerable. “Do you need some pain killer?” Jyslin asked in concern.

“I don’t take medicine unless I don’t have any other choice,” he replied. “It’ll pass in a little while. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, alright, but if it bothers you, go to a doctor,” she told him. “I’m going to go get my workout in. I’ll pick you up at six on Friday, Jason. I’ll see you then.”

After she was gone, Jason and Tim exchanged looks. He looked to Symone, his eyes curious.

“What was that about?”

“She just came by to see what I was up to, that’s all,” she grinned. “After I told her that Tim was my guy, she was alright with it. Actually, she prefers it.”

“Why?”

“She said that any friend of Jason *deserves* a Faey for a girlfriend,” she winked, then she laughed delightedly.

“I never heard anything,” Tim protested.

Symone tapped her head meaningfully.

“Oh. I meant to ask you something, Symone,” he prompted.

“What?”

“Well, why do your people even *speak*?” he asked curiously. “You talk to my mind all the time. Why don’t all Faey just do that?”

“Well, first off, because thinking requires a *language*,” she said, sitting on the ping-pong table.

“Think about it. If we didn’t have a language, how would we form thoughts? Pictures?”

“I never thought of that,” Tim admitted.

“I know. It’s something of an abstract concept, isn’t it?” she winked. “Second, the talent doesn’t start to show up and express itself until around puberty. We have to teach our children to speak to communicate with us, and for many, it’s a habit that sticks. Faey talk about as often as they send, but it depends on the Faey. Some Faey almost never speak. Some Faey almost never send. It’s entirely personal.” She held her hand out before her. “When I’m with other Faey, I tend to speak more than send, but that’s because I’m not as strong as most other women. I guess I hide my inadequacy by not making it common knowledge. But sometimes we do *have* to speak,” she explained. “Most Faey women have a telapathic range of about three human miles, on the average. Most men have a range of about a mile and a half. I’m not very strong at all,” she admitted. “Barely stronger than the average

man. I have a range of about two miles. The strongest have a range of like ten miles. Some of the strongest men are stronger than I am,” she admitted candidly. “So, if we want to communicate outside our range, we have to use a communicator. Since no machine can receive and decipher telepathy, that means we have to use our voices. Even though we *can* send, and it is more efficient, we still have a need for our voices and our language.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that.”

“Well, now you do,” she smiled. “But that info isn’t free, honey. I demand payment.”

“What?” he asked in surprise.

She pointed to the floor immediately in front of her. “Come here and curl my toes,” she told him with a mischievous leer.

“Oh. I think I can manage that,” he grinned, then came around the table and tendered up her payment.

Jason ignored them as they started getting rather involved in their kissing, worrying a little about the upcoming date. He was worried more about how well he would hold onto his ideals than what kind of trouble Jyslin might give him. She was too right, and she kept grinding it into him that she was *not* the Imperium, that she was *not* directly responsible for his position. If anything, she was in the same fix as he, for she was stuck in a job she did not want, trying to get where she wanted to go. The commoner Faey were just as much slaves and thralls to the Empress as the humans; only the nobles were truly free. And Symone was going to make it even murkier for him. He did like Symone, and her constant presence these last few days had indeed kind of numbed him to the fact that she was Faey. Then again, she was just so damned likable that he really didn’t have much of a defense against her. Nobody did. Despite the abject hatred that many humans had for Faey, even on campus, none of them hated Symone.

“Hands out of her pants in the common room,” Jason said without looking up. He didn’t *have* to look up to know what that change in the tone of her cooing hum meant.

“Yes, daddy,” Symone taunted. “Let’s go up to our room, Tim-Tim,” she purred. “I’m feeling a tad hot and bothered.”

“How can I say no to the world’s most beautiful woman?” he returned.

“Flatterer. Say it again.”

Jason tuned them out, and went back to studying.

Friday.

It was *the day*, the day of the date. But that was going to take place at the end of the day. The problem was, the day got off to a very weird start that, in Jason’s mind, was something of a bad omen.

Simply put, when he woke up, he had a message waiting in his panel, sent during the night. It was from the Ministry of Technology itself, and it reported, in flowery language, that the Empire had bought out his patent for his sonic inducer.

Not taken, not assumed control over...*bought*.

Since it was considered a low-priority technology, the message read, considered for possibilities in hypersonic short-range communications, the rights were purchased for a very modest sum.

Seventy five thousand credits.

Seventy five *thousand* credits.

For the Ministry of Technology, that was considered a modest sum.

For Jason, it was an absolutely bloody *fucking* fortune.

With that much money, he could buy a hovercar. Hell, he could buy an older model, used airskimmer, a civilian craft akin to a Cessna. He could buy a truckload of components and toys and set up a killer workshop, or he could even buy a small house in the city. It was a monstrous amount of money for someone who received a weekly stipend of fifty credits. A credit’s value was different than the old, unused dollar; a credit was worth about a dollar and a half. In old American money, it was a

sum of nearly a hundred and twenty thousand dollars.

That threw off his entire day, even more so than the worry about the impending date did. That date was common knowledge all over the campus, even if the circumstances of it were not. Some thought Jason had finally caved in to the Faey, but not many actually blamed him. After all, it really was only a matter of time before they finally forced him to obey. His weeklong battle with the Marines was entertaining, it gave the humans a little hope and some pride in themselves again, and everyone knew that it eventually would end. He had no concentration in his classes, and he got another one of those stupid headaches during lunch, and it didn't go away for the rest of his time at school. Students gave him words of encouragement as they passed, and a surprisingly large concentration of Army regulars and black-armored Marines who were patrolling the campus gave him teasing smiles and offered to make bets on just how thoroughly Jyslin would own him by midnight.

He was totally disgusted by the end of his last class, which Professor Tia mercifully allowed him to leave from early. They were practicing Faey pronunciation, and since he sounded virtually fluent, she decided that he didn't need to hang around and be bored. He went home and paced nervously in his tiny dorm, then went down to the room's bathroom and took a shower. The shower eased the headache quite a bit, and he felt less surly by the time he went back to his room and did some of his homework, still scattered by both the doom of the impending date and the staggering sum of money that was now residing in the brand new account that had been made for him at the Imperial Bank. The passcodes for the account had been sent to his panel while he was at school, and now he had access to that money. All it took was a thumbprint at any shop or store, or he could visit a branch bank and withdraw hard currency, which for Faey were small plastic coins encoded with their value.

He had no idea what to do with that money. He wasn't even sure he felt right in spending any of it. It was money paid to him by the *Imperium*. Not only had he not done anything to kick them off Earth, now they were paying him for things that *he* invented. He had become a part of the system, even if it was absolutely unintentional, the fault of that meddling Lieutenant Lana.

But, on the other hand, since it was absolutely unintentional, that meant that the money was a windfall, not pay. *He* didn't submit the inducer. *He* didn't send it off to the Ministry. *Lana* did. That they had paid to buy the rights to the design meant that it was an occasion of good fortune, not a conscious selling out to the Faey. In that respect, he did have a right to use that money without feeling guiltily about it.

Not that he really knew what to do with it.

He glanced at the clock and cursed. Where was the time going? It was five o'clock, and Jyslin would be there in an hour. He did *not* want to go, but he made a deal, gave his word, and Jason did not break his word. He changed into the only nice clothes he had, a white long-sleeve dress shirt, the sleeves of which he rolled up past his elbows, since he detested the feel of sleeves on his forearms, a pair of black slacks, and a pair of very old black loafers. A gray tie with geometric designs done in red and white was around his neck, loosened around the undone top button of the shirt, and over that went a simple black vest that was left unbuttoned.

He sat back down again and surfed around on CivNet on his panel. He did have something in mind for that money, and that was an airskimmer. He didn't know how to fly one, but he was sure he could figure it out, or pay for lessons. As long as it was a civilian model, he had every right to buy one. The idea of an airskimmer appealed to him for one simple reason, and that was the fact that it could fly. His father had had a Cessna, but Jason had been forced to sell it when the parking fees became more than his part-time job when he went to school in Michigan could support. Before that, Jason had absolutely *loved* that plane, and the sense of freedom that came with it. As long as he could afford the gas, Jason could jump in his Cessna and go just about anywhere. Before the parking fees overwhelmed him, he was quite popular with some of the other guys because they'd all pile into his plane and fly places during the weekends. Distance made going somewhere warm and balmy out of the question—a flight to Los Angeles or Florida was a twelve hour journey—but they could go to places like Saint Louis, or

Chicago, or Ottawa, somewhere other than the campus of the University of Michigan. There was such a sense of freedom that came with knowing that, at any time, you could chuck a pack into your plane and go virtually anywhere you wanted.

Selling that plane had been one of the low points of his life since his father died. It had been an admission that things couldn't be the same, a realization that he, like his father, could lose control of his life, and a loss of both a feeling of freedom and one of his father's most prized possessions, but there had been no helping it. He'd had a breakdown in Indiana and had to shell out nearly a thousand dollars in repairs, and that had been the death knell that had put him behind. The bills kept mounting up on him, and he'd been forced to sell his beloved plane or avoid having it chained to the tarmac for non-payment of his parking fees down at the county airport. If there was any satisfaction in it at all for him, he sold it to a flight school at the airport, who allowed him to borrow it from time to time without charging him for its use. Old Sam down at the airport understood the jam he was in, and sympathized with him and the pain it caused him to have to sell it. All he had to pay for was the fuel and the parking fees of the airport where he landed if it wasn't that one. They wanted him to come work for them on weekends as a flight instructor, but that required getting certifications that he didn't have the time to get, because of the demands of school and football.

The airskimmer wouldn't be his dad's old Cessna, but it would be the same thing, the sense of freedom that he'd once had, and it would make him happy. He'd have to find out where he could keep it, and pay for the parking fees, but he figured he could make enough money between his stipend and the unofficial work he got playing piano down at Patty O's to cover those fees. This time, he would *not* lose his plane. He'd just have to find an exceedingly cheap airskimmer and put back enough money to cover the fees. He could do some of the maintenance on it himself, since the schematics of an airskimmer were easily obtainable on CivNet, and he'd probably get a maintenance manual with the airskimmer.

That sense of freedom would mean a great deal to him. In this damned mouse trap he was in now, it would be one of the very few things that would make him feel free.

Probably for the first time ever, Jyslin *knocked* on his door. Somehow, he just knew it was her. It opened without him calling, and she stepped inside. He glanced at her, then looked back when her appearance struck him like a hammer. She was *stunning*! She wore a sleek, elegantly simple gown made of what looked like liquid gold, with threads so fine that he couldn't see their weaving. Each thread was burnished, and the effect was a radiant gown of a wondrous golden color that both clashed against and accented her blue skin in an amazing manner, as well as perfectly displaying her sensual, voluptuous hips, slender waist, and her full breasts. It had two slender straps that attached to the bodice of the moderately low cut neckline and flowed over her shoulders, with a sloped hem that rose to the knee of her left leg yet dipped to the ankle of her right leg. It didn't sparkle in the light of his dorm room, it seemed to radiate a warm light that was like an aura that drew every eye to her, drew his eye to the fact that she was a vision of absolute, shockingly feminine beauty. It was the first time he'd thought of her as *feminine*. She was definitely a woman, but never acted feminine. That gown made her look *gorgeous*. She had her hair combed back away from her face, held by a pair of elegantly simple silver barettes over each slender, pointed ear, with a gold chain woven into her auburn hair that ran just above the hairline over her forehead. She had on a pair of simple diamond (or some clear crystal) earrings, and a single gold chain around her neck with no amulet or pendant, an adornment of elegant simplicity that only heightened his awareness of her exceptional beauty.

She smiled at his surprised and nearly awed gaze. "You like?" she asked in Faey, quite demurely, turning this way and that so he could admire her from all angles. "I bought it this morning. It cost me a month's pay, but it was worth it."

"You're *beautiful*," he said with utter honesty. There was no way he could lie to her about that.

She gave him a wonderful smile. "Stand up. Let me see." He did so, and she put a finger to her chin as she appraised his appearance. "Well, you make slouchy look chic, Jason. I like it."

"It's all I have," he admitted.

"Well, it suits you. The vest is definitely a perfect touch." She stepped up and grabbed his tie, tightening it just a little, smiling up into his blue eyes. "I'm a little early. I wanted to make sure you weren't wearing a tutu or something," she said with a wink.

"I gave my word."

"I'm starting to understand how seriously you take that," she told him.

"A month's pay?" he asked, finally realizing what she'd said.

"Wasn't it worth it?" she asked, turning around slowly for him, modelling her gown with a mysterious smile.

"Jyslin, you shouldn't have done that," he said disapprovingly. "Not for me."

"I say you're worth it. Prove me wrong," she said challengingly.

"You bought a dress that cost you a month's pay for *one date*," he said bluntly.

"True. But it was worth every credit for that look you gave me when I came in," she smiled.

"Don't worry about me, Jason. I'm very tight with money, I had plenty held back. I could afford it." She put her hands on his shoulders. "Now, since you're ready to go, we might as well get started. I have a limousine waiting outside for us."

"A *limo*!" he protested.

"Hush," she said with a light, amused smile, putting two fingers over his lips.

"But that's too expensive!" he said loudly when she moved her hand.

"I told you, don't worry about the money," she told him firmly. "I haven't so much as bought a new pair of shoes for a year, Jason. I have the money."

"But—"

"There is no but," she said, silencing him again with two fingers to his lips. "It's *my* money, and I can spend it any way I please. I wanted to look good for you, so I bought the dress. I wanted us to not worry about driving, so I hired a limo. Well I also wanted us to get around in style," she added with a smile. "I'm not trying to impress you with my vast riches," she winked. "I bought the dress and hired the limo because I wanted to, not to impress you."

"I don't like it too much, Jyslin," he told her honestly. "You shouldn't have spent so much money. I'm not worth *that* much."

She laughed delightedly. "Jason, hon, I don't have enough in my bank account to cover what I think you're worth."

Jason flushed slightly, but said nothing more on the subject. There was little that he could say, or at least say without starting a fight. He didn't want her to spend so much on him, invest in him, because he didn't want to pursue a relationship. If he had his way, there would be virtually no contact between them after tonight. If that happened, then she would have spent all that money on the dress, the limo, the dinner, the opera, all of it for nothing. If he didn't *like* Jyslin so much, maybe he would feel differently. It would be easy to ignore the amount of money she'd shelled out if he didn't care about how it might put her into a financial bind.

She slid the hand on his shoulder down his arm, then took a gentle grip on the back of his hand. "Now, since we're both ready, why don't we just go ahead and go on?" she asked. "If we get to Copeland's early, we can get our pick of tables."

"I, alright," he said quietly. He almost didn't want to go through with this. Not because he was worried that she was going to be a pain, he was more afraid of spending time with her and giving her that much more time and opportunity to wear down his defenses.

She smiled slyly. "Don't worry about it," she said with a wink. "I don't need extra time."

He gave her a hard, flat look.

She put up her hands. "I also didn't need telepathy to see that," she told him. "You forget, I *know* you know when we're doing that. Do you think I'm fool enough to ruin this date by doing the one thing you can't stand?"

She was right, of course. Damned Jyslin, she *always* seemed to be right!

“Now, come on, Jason,” she said. “Let’s get started.”

He wasn’t entirely sure what to expect on this date, and he wasn’t sure about what was going to happen. They were going to be going to a Faey opera, and that meant that the odds were that there would be many Faey there. It said much that Jyslin was willing to bring him to a function that would be filled with her own people, where he would have the opportunity to make a fool out of her, humiliate her, in front of more than just her Marine squad. He hoped that it wasn’t going to be too long. He had no real interest in opera, and even less interest for a Faey opera, and he didn’t want to be bored stiff. Before and after that, he knew, Jyslin would want to talk. Talk over dinner, talk over the nightcap, talk in the limo. He wasn’t quite sure what she would want to talk about, but he knew it was coming.

And that was probably the greatest danger. He couldn’t get too close to her, couldn’t let her get herself too close to him, or she was going to end up like another Symone, a Faey that he liked, and allowed himself to like *too much*. They were Faey, they were the *enemy*, and he should not be socializing with the enemy. But Symone wasn’t an enemy in his eyes anymore, he had to admit that to himself. He had gotten to know her, and had accepted her because he felt that she was truly a friend. She liked him, he liked her. He could never imagine Symone on the other side of a battlefield, pointing a plasma rifle at him. He knew that were they actually fighting each other, she would, but he just couldn’t imagine it. Then again, he really couldn’t imagine Symone pointing a plasma rifle at *anyone*. If there was ever a Faey who had been utterly wronged when they assigned jobs to Faey conscripts, it was Symone. Symone didn’t have the temperament to be a soldier, because she would rather go out and have a beer with the enemy than try to kill him.

The limo was a stretch one, but not too large. Jyslin opened the door for him and gave him a sly smile, waving him in, and he couldn’t really say anything. He didn’t want to prolong this, because he noticed that quite a few people were watching from discrete distances. Many knew about this date, and he didn’t want to cause a scene. He wanted to get himself, Jyslin, and the limo out of there. She got him with him and closed the door, and the black limo pulled away from the curb.

“So,” she said, leaning against the side of the limo and smiling at him. “Now comes all that boring conversation.”

It turned out to be not boring at all, which Jason both cursed and enjoyed. He didn’t *want* to get to know her, but he found her to be a fascinating and engaging woman. He found out that she was born on a Faey mining colony called Rokan IV, which was nothing but a rock orbiting a blue star. It was enclosed in domes, and her parents were both miners. It surprised him that Faey actually *mined*, but he found out from her that Faey did just about every job that humans did. There were Faey farmers, miners, servants, factory workers, the whole gambit. They didn’t make their conquered races do all the dirty and dangerous jobs, they did the jobs for which they were qualified. Faey who weren’t too bright ended up in those kinds of jobs. But her father was definitely smart, as he was one of the mine’s engineers, while her mother worked as a secretary in the office of the mining company. She grew up in a sterile world of steel and glass, with no plants, no open air. She stayed there until she was twelve, and then her father was transferred to an arctic planet called Novira IX. Because of that, Jyslin now absolutely detested cold weather. They were there until she reached the official adult age of twenty five, when she was required by Faey law to serve five years in the military. She’d always been a very strong telepath, and since she couldn’t find any open slots in engineering school, she ended up in the Marines.

While she grew up, she had what she called a normal childhood. Her parents loved her, and since she was an only child, they may have spoiled her just a little bit. She grew up with many friends, and had always been popular in school because she was funny and she was smart. To Faey, smart kids were as popular in school as attractive humans were in human schools. Since most Faey were handsome or pretty, physical appearance wasn’t as important to them as it was to humans. She’d

expressed her telepathic powers at a very young age, a sign of her impressive power, and that was also a reason why she was so popular in school. Telepathic power was the basic measuring stick by which all Faey compared themselves to one another. While the other kids were only just starting to express, she had already gained a grasp of the basics.

Telepathy was amazing and formidable to Jason, but it was just *normal* to Jyslin. They had courses in high school that taught telepathic skills like a human would have a math or chemistry class, classes that Jyslin took when she was still four years younger than most of the other people in the class. By the time all her friends were just starting Telepathy I, she had received her certificate proclaiming her to be a competent telepath. Telepathy was an innate power, but it didn't come with an innate ability to *use* it. There were quite a few skills that a telepath had to learn, skills to protect their own minds and deal with the constant noise of background thoughts that the non-telepathic races gave off. They had to learn how to send their thoughts to others, or just *send* as they called it, which was itself an art form more than a skill. They had to learn the basics of how to defend themselves against a telepathic attack, how to maintain a defense against unwanted intrusion while at the same time allowing others to be able to send to them, which was a delicate skill that took quite a bit of practice to learn. They also had to learn how to attack other minds. It seemed odd to Jason that they taught their children how to use their power as a weapon against other Faey, but then he realized that they could use those same attacking techniques against non-telepathic creatures, and they also were simply formally training them in something that they may be required to do later in life in case they ever found themselves in a fight with another Faey. Humans brawled. Faey battled on the mindscape of telepathic power.

She reached her age of majority on that frozen rock, and was conscripted for her mandatory five years of military service. She'd tried to get into engineering, since she had the grades and had made the scores on the test for it, but that was a non-combat position, and all the slots were bought by nobles and the few rich commoners for their children. Given that she was such a strong telepath, that made her high on the list for the Marines. They engaged in ship to ship combat, and those close quarters gave the telepathic Faey a major advantage. They were also usually the first armed force to hit the ground, just like the American Marines had been. First in, last out, that was their motto. They needed powerful telepaths who could find and try to mentally dominate the initial opposition, opposition who probably had anti-telepathy measures in place to try to dampen that advantage if they were expecting the Faey.

Of course, she wouldn't tell him what those measures were, and since he'd never found anything like that on CivNet—and he'd looked—it was something he was best off simply dropping.

She'd went through boot camp on homeworld, where it was *warm*, and had been a trooper for two years. She'd been posted on ships for six months, had occupied a disputed planet called Elvar III, one of the two systems that the Faey and the Skaa were fighting over. She'd only seen one battle, and it was little more than a skirmish between her squad and five Skaa guerillas. She'd had *real* armor then, and though the Skaa's Neutron weaponry was formidable, the Adamantium alloy armor she'd had had protected her from a hit on her left shoulder. Adamantium was one of the strongest metal alloys known, and it was dreadfully expensive. As a front-line unit, she'd been issued that armor, and it saved her from having her entire left arm and shoulder surgically replaced with bionics.

That was one of the few places where he could not fault the Imperium. When it came to protecting its soldiers, they did *not* play.

After a year rotating on and off Elvar III, she was reassigned to Terra. And here she was. "I was up in New York for a while, but it was too damned cold," she told him as the waiter set their food down before them. She ordered Cajun shrimp, a Copeland's specialty, and he had blackened steak. Faey had this thing for seafood, he'd noticed from their television. They'd gotten a table out on the patio, his favorite place to sit, and they sat there in view of the pedestrians on the sidewalk and the occupants of the cars. This bothered him a little bit, but when she found out he loved sitting on the patio, she wouldn't sit anywhere else. "The squad got reassigned here to New Orleans about two months ago,

thank the gods,” she sighed. “If I had to go through one more winter slogging through snow, I was going to scream.”

“I hate heat,” he grunted. “I grew up where it’s usually cold.”

“Oh? Tell me about it,” she said as she took her first bite.

He knew he shouldn’t tell her anything, but she had told him about her, and he felt it only fair to reciprocate. He was born on an airplane somewhere over the Atlantic ocean twenty two years ago, en route from Boston to Ramstein Air Force Base, in Germany. In a way, he’d been born between nations, and his mother always joked that he was one of a very few citizens of the world instead of a nation. His father was a fighter pilot in the Air Force, and his mother was a music teacher. He was a true military brat, spending the first two years in Germany, then moving for a year in Korea, then a year in Alaska, then they moved to Japan when he was five. They were there for four years, the longest they’d ever stayed in one place, and that was where his father had fallen in love with martial arts. In four short years, his father became a black belt in four different martial arts. He didn’t see his father much for those four years, but his mother just smiled and told him that he was doing something he loved to do.

Jason had been there long enough to speak fairly decent Japanese, but it had been so long since he’d used it, he felt he’d probably forgotten it by now. He could still remember the *kanji* and the two phonetic writing systems, *hiragana* and *katakana*, though. Strange, sometimes, how memory worked.

His father was a bit disappointed when they left Japan, going back to America. In a way, though, it was probably necessary, for their only son could barely speak English. He’d grown up speaking French to his mother and whatever the local language was for everyone else, speaking a mixture of English and French only with his father. He’d caught on quickly enough, but getting rid of his accent took nearly three years. They were stationed in Washington state for two years, then went back to Alaska for another year.

It was in Alaska, just a couple of weeks after he turned twelve, when his mother was killed in an auto accident. His father resigned from the Air Force soon afterward and moved them back to the ancestral home, in a little town northwest of Portland, Maine, called Durham. He started a flight instructor’s school using his Cessna, earned a black belt and the credentials to open his own martial arts school, and Jason had to get used to living in one place. It wasn’t that bad, actually. He made friends in school, stayed in one school for more than a couple of years, and everyone spoke the same language. He started getting interested in electronics about then, but he was determined to get into the Air Force Academy and be a fighter pilot, just like his father, so he buckled down in school and started bringing his grades up to the point where they’d consider him. He started playing soccer and football, and found out that he was rather good at sports, thanks to all the martial arts instruction that his father gave him.

Then his father got sick, and eventually died. Jason was sixteen at the time, and he had no aunts or uncles—both his parents were only children—and all four of his grandparents had already passed away. Instead of going into a foster family and selling the house, he won his emancipation in court by proving he was mature enough to live on his own. The inheritance he got wasn’t that much, but it was enough to pay for him to get through high school without having to work, but it wasn’t enough to get him through college. Luckily for him, though, the University of Michigan offered him a scholarship to play football, which he got because a scout had come to watch a game he played in, but was actually there to scout the quarterback of the opposing team.

It hadn’t been easy, but Jason sold the house and moved to Michigan. The money he got from the house was enough to let him buy a car and support him as he went through college without having to work. He elected for a double major of electronics engineering and computer science, since the scholarship would pay for five years of college and he was more than willing to take summer classes. He did like to play football, but he didn’t apply himself in football as much as he could have, and as a result ended up as a third-string safety and a special teams cover player. He was there for the education, not the football.

"That drove my coaches crazy," he admitted to her as he picked at his salad. Jason always ate his salad last, as for him it was the dessert. "They knew I was better than I played, but since I was always so involved with my classes, I just didn't have the time to develop my skills. Coach Dawson always told me that if I'd give him three months, he could make me a starter. He even told me that I might even be good enough to play in the NFL, but I just wasn't interested."

"It wasn't right for you to hold back on your team like that," she said critically.

"I never held back," he said bluntly. "I just didn't have as much experience as they did. Coach Dawson said that it was raw physical ability that let me play on their level. If I'd have had the time to learn the nuances of the game, I could have been a starter."

"Did you want to be?"

"Not really," he admitted. "I was there to learn, not to play."

"Well, what happened after that?"

"Nothing," he said grimly. "Your ships arrived just when I started my senior year. That put me in limbo for nearly a year as they tested everyone. After I was tested, I was sent to Boston, and after one semester, they moved me down here."

"And here we are," she said carefully, obviously seeking to avoid an argument. "Where is your car at?" she asked curiously.

"Still in Michigan," he growled. "They wouldn't let me bring it."

"Why not?"

"I have no idea. I just know that if it hasn't been towed away, it's still sitting in the student parking lot of the dorm up in Michigan."

"Did they pay you for it?"

He gave her a flat look. "You seem to fail to grasp the situation for humans. When they shipped me to Boston, I had one suitcase full of clothes. That's all. They made me leave everything else behind. Photo albums of my family, personal heirlooms, all my things, I couldn't bring any of it. Only clothes."

She frowned. "That's not right," she declared. "They shouldn't have done that."

"There are all sorts of things that they shouldn't do, but they did," he told her. "A friend of mine in Maine told me that a squad of Faey troopers came to her house, and while one of them asked her questions, the rest ransacked it. They took everything of value, even the silverware. Then they told her if she said anything, they'd come back and burn out her brain and make her a vegetable."

"Now that's *wrong*," she said hotly. "Where was this? Durham?"

"What does it matter?" he asked.

"Humans have *rights*, Jason," she said with surprising vehemence. "You're citizens of the Imperium, and that means even though you're subject to its rules, it also means that you enjoy its protections. There are rules against soldiers doing that. Not even a noble can barge into a person's house and take everything."

"That doesn't seem to stop them," he said mildly. "That kind of thing happens all the time."

"This is why the Marines are here," she said hotly. "To put a stop to that kind of bullshit."

"You need the Marines to keep the nobles in line?" he asked.

"Nobles do what they want, so long as they stay within the law," she answered. "The Marines are here to make sure they're doing the Empress' will. We also make sure they obey her laws. I think that the Marines up in Maine aren't doing their jobs very well. We'll just have to see about that," she said in a nasty tone.

"What can you do?" he scoffed.

"My aunt is the general in command of all Marines in North America," she answered. "How do you think my squad got transferred to New Orleans? I asked Aunt Lorna for a transfer. I'll tell her about this, and she'll put her foot down on some necks."

"Don't cause trouble for my friend," he warned.

"You don't even have to tell me her name," she said. "Aunt Lorna will get to the bottom of it. And since your friend never said a word, then she's perfectly safe."

"Heh," he snorted. "So even among Faey, it's not what you know, it's who you know."

"Probably even more so," she agreed. "The Imperial military is really the only place a commoner can get any real power, because the nobles control everything else. By law, nobles can't hold high command positions in the Imperial arm of the military, so most of them don't even bother enlisting there. It prevents nasty betrayals if a noble goes rogue, so they can't have people in positions in the Royal arm of the military to disrupt things. They have their own private armies and navies, and that's where they usually end up doing their commanding. But the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines are commanded by commoners. That's how my aunt came to be a General."

"Couldn't she pull strings to get you into engineering?"

She shrugged. "She's been trying," she answered. "But I want a *Royal Navy* position, not a position in some noble's fleet. So the competition's a little tougher. If I was alright with getting any engineering position, I probably would have found one by now."

"Oh."

"You'd like my Aunt Lorna. She's an old warhorse, but she's funny," she smiled. "She's up in the command center in Washington, but she said she might come down to see me next month. I'll have to introduce you."

He said nothing to that. If he had his way, they wouldn't be seeing each other again after tonight.

"Well, I'm done, and so are you, so let's go ahead and head over to the theater," she prompted, looking up to find the waiter, then raising her hand and snapping her fingers imperiously.

He would have preferred avoiding what was coming, but there was no hope of that. So he simply got into the limo with her, and it started towards downtown.

"Don't worry too much about what to do at the theater," she told him. "All you have to do is be polite. That's all. You don't have to act any special way or anything, but there are a few things you have to understand before we go in there," she told him seriously.

"As in?"

"First, remember that among my people, *I* am the dominant gender," she winked. "That means that, if you think in human terms, I'm supposed to do all those things that men do. I'll hold the door open for you, I'll help you get seated, I'll lead you if we dance, and so on. When we walk, it's customary for the man to put his hand on the woman's forearm or elbow. Instead of you offering your arm, I'll be the one offering mine," she smiled. "There aren't any real rules about how men act, but it's considered good manners for a man to defer if a woman starts to speak. But I don't think you're worried about how cultured they think you are," she said with a chuckle, then she turned serious. "But the one thing you can't do is argue with me in public, alright? If you don't like what I ask or suggest, you're free to let me know, but don't be combative. I'm going to be very careful to try to avoid any situations like that, Jason, I promise, but if you start getting offended or don't like what I'm saying, don't get bitchy."

"Well, there goes my evening," he said mockingly.

She laughed. "I know, it's just ruined," she agreed with an outrageous smile. "When we get there, we'll have to cross the lobby to get to the auditorium, and there's going to be Faey there talking. Faey love to gossip and chitchat, so they always get there very early so they have lots of time for it before the function begins. I might have to stop once or twice and greet people, since it's considered good manners to do so if you're invited. If we do, you're not going to understand what's going on very well, because you're not going to hear the telepathic side of the conversations. Sometimes Faey just stop talking and send in the middle of a sentence, or one person is talking while the other is sending, so you only get half of the conversation. Most often, Faey will speak in the presence of humans, but not all of them will. Some Faey hold humans in contempt, as I'm sure you've noticed."

He nodded without a word.

“Well then, that’s all you need to know,” she told him, reaching out and putting her hand on his forearm, then patting it. “We’ll suffer through the opera, then go somewhere and get a drink before we go home.”

“Remember, I have classes tomorrow,” he reminded her. “We can’t stay out too late.”

“Jason, believe me when I say I want to get through the opera and nightcap as quickly as possible,” she said with a slight, dangerous little smile.

He wasn’t sure he liked that or not.

They reached the Saenger Theater a few minutes later. The original Saenger had burned down two years ago, during a riot that erupted when the Faey first arrived, so the Faey had rebuilt it into their idea of a theater. It was still the same size, but it was a black building with no sharp corners, only rounded ones. There were a set of doors in the side facing Canal Street, as people passed in front of it on their way to other places. There were no Faey standing outside, but then again, it was too hot to stand around outside. The limo pulled up, and Jyslin got out, then reached in and helped him out with a smile. He got out and closed the door, and she led him in through glass doors that opened of their own volition. The lobby within was very large, and it was done in soft earth colors. The carpet was a soft maroon red with little white diamonds intersecting in geometric patterns through it, and the walls were panelled in what looked cedar or redwood, some reddish hued wood that gave the walls a warm glow, with no decorations or artwork hanging upon them. The ceiling was covered with thousands of pieces of stained glass that had very faint lights behind them, making them glow with a riot of color that was quite pretty. There were three huge crystal chandeliers hanging from that ceiling, each radiating light from hundreds of small lights shaped like candles, refracting and reflecting off the crystal shards hanging among them. The doors to the auditorium were on the far wall, and unlike a movie theater, there was no concession stand. There was only a small booth to give information, and humans dressed in red uniforms milled about.

It was nice, very nice.

Scattered through the lobby were about a hundred Faey, all dressed in elegant formal wear. Women wore gowns of every color imaginable, some plain, some almost gaudy, and all of them had their hair done up elaborately. Jyslin looked positively plain compared to most of them. Some were dripping with jewels from their fingers and throats and ears, and as he got a closer look, he saw that the Faey seemed to have no concept of the idea of a high neckline. Every single dress exposed cleavage to some degree, and a few of them were so deep that more blue-skinned breast was revealed than concealed. Jyslin’s gown was rather modest compared to most. The men all wore simple robes of various colors, each of them a similar style, making all the men look strangely similar. Some men had jewelry and some didn’t, some wore strange flat-topped hats that flared out towards the top and some didn’t, but almost all of them wore simple sashes around the waist. There were blue ones, red ones, and gold ones, and they had to have some kind of meaning that Jason couldn’t quite fathom.

There weren’t only Faey in that lobby. There were a sparse scattering of humans, men in tuxedos, women in tasteful gowns, and a few wearing clothes that were nice, but weren’t utterly formal. He wondered what they were doing here, at least he had a good excuse to be here. Something told him that these were the ones who had managed to buy their way into affluence with the Faey regime, the rich and powerful, or those who worked with the nobles as liaisons, helping them understand the nuances of human culture and behavior so as to better keep control.

The sell-outs.

His headache flared back into life rather quickly, and he put a finger to his temple and rubbed it as they descended into what he considered to be a pit of vipers. These weren’t Faey like Symone, and Jyslin. These were true enemies, he could just feel it.

They got about halfway across the lobby when Jyslin stopped and detoured to a group of five Faey. Three were women, two were men, and all of them were rather young. He recognized the three women. One was Maya, and the other two women were in Jyslin’s squad. All three wore very simple,

unadorned gowns of soft colors, cream, a soft brown, and subdued blue, and all three were quite low cut. One of those two he didn't know was quite familiar to him; she was one of the two whose armor he had destroyed, and who had followed him around naked for the remainder of the day.

"Jason, you know Maya," Jyslin introduced as she reached them. "This is Zora, and this is Sheleese. This handsome fellow here is Vell, Maya's husband, and this is Oren, Zora's husband."

"You looked better naked," Jason told Sheleese bluntly.

She laughed heartily. "I thought you'd recognize me, though I figured I might have to pull down my bodice to remind you who I was," she winked.

"Sheleese told us all about that," the Faey man, Vell, told him with a chuckle and an extended hand. "I've heard a great deal about you, Jason. I think we really need to talk sometime," he said with a smile.

"Talk?" Jason asked defensively.

"That's all he does," Maya said with a teasing smile at her husband. "Talk talk talk talk talk. My husband dabbles quite a bit in philosophy," she told Jason.

"I didn't think they'd let you bring your husbands here," Jason said in a little surprise.

"Why not?" the other man, Oren, challenged.

"Well, this isn't exactly friendly territory for Faey."

"Of course it is," he said boldly.

He didn't miss Jyslin's warning look at Oren to back off, and the man cleared his throat. Jason was about to excuse himself to go to the restroom, but he felt one of them brush up against his mind, finding the false front of repetitive thought that he kept there to prevent them from looking into his mind. Nonplussed, he felt that touch start reaching around the edges of his false thought, trying to find a way through. He'd already had a headache, and that alien force on his mind only made it worse, turning it into a pounding that he could see behind his eyes. "If whoever's doing that doesn't stop right now, I'm going to punch all five of you in the nose," he said in a growling tone, putting the palm of his hand to his temple.

"Vell!" Maya said reproachfully, slapping him on the shoulder. And she wasn't gentle.

"I must say, that's quite impressive," Vell said, unphased by his wife's admonition or Jason's rather graphic threat. "It's the strongest defense I've ever seen in a human. I just had to see if you'd learned how to anchor it to keep someone from worming through the edges."

"Vell, I told you not to do that!" Maya said in exasperation. "I specifically told you that Jason doesn't like it when we do that!"

"You expected me to obey you?" he asked with a cheeky smile.

She gave him a *very* ugly look. "We'll talk about this when we get home," she said in an icy manner.

He grew rather contrite very quickly, and gave Jason an apologetic smile. Then he winked. *I'm sorry if I hurt you, but don't read anything into what I said to my wife. I just like to tease her.*

He was surprised that he had heard that inside his mind, for Faey supposedly couldn't send to humans in the manner in which he had just sent. They had to get a foothold inside a human's mind to pass telepathic messages to them, and Vell did not have such a connection to him. Oddly, though, his headache eased somewhat.

"Good Azra," Sheleese said quickly. "Jason, your nose is bleeding!"

Jason put a finger to his upper lip, and felt sticky warmth there. "Huh," he mused. "Where is the restroom? I should clean up."

"Just over there," Jyslin pointed to one of the side walls.

"I had the same problem when I first came here," Oren told him. "It's something in the air that was making my nose bleed."

"I'll be right back," he told Jyslin, looking around at them. They all didn't look too concerned, but Vell was giving him a surprised, somewhat speculative look.

Jason decided right then and there that he wasn't quite so sure about this Vell person.

"I'll wait right here for you," she replied, putting a lingering hand on his shoulder.

The nosebleed only lasted a moment or two, and had more or less stopped by the time he got to the bathroom. His headache had eased considerably, though. It was odd...maybe he'd had some kind of sinus pressure or something, and the nosebleed had eased that pressure. He'd had sinus problems for a couple of weeks after he came down here, and just as Oren mentioned, he *did* have nosebleeds during that time. Maybe the heat was starting to get to him, making his sinuses flare up again. Or it might have been coming out from the heat into the air conditioning of the theater. That could have done it.

After cleaning up and using the restroom, he went back out to find Jyslin. He hoped she'd just take him to their seats. He moved towards where they were quickly, but someone boldly stepped into his way. It was a Faey woman, regally tall, even taller than Jyslin. She wore an elaborate gown of dazzling white and silver, with a frilled ruff along a very deep neckline that showcased an impressively full bosom and clung to her narrow waist and curved hips appealingly. She had a sharp, attractive face with large green eyes, and her blonde hair was done up in an elaborate weave of locks that ringed her head before spilling down her back in a swaying tail. Around her neck was a web of small diamonds that fell in a triangle down to the edge of her cleavage, the small jewel at the point of that triangle nestled snugly between the top swells of her breasts.

"You are the human who gave the Marines all that trouble," she announced in an arrogant manner that made him immediately dislike her. "Perhaps they should have taught you your place more effectively."

Without even thinking about what he was doing, he drew himself up to his full height and glared down at the woman. She was tall, but she was nowhere near his height, and he used that size and his larger frame to physically intimidate the slender woman. "Perhaps your mother should have turned you over her knee more often when you were a child," he returned.

What came next was not a brushing, was not a touch, but was more like a lance of power that sought to tear through his defenses and penetrate him to the very core of his mind, to lay bare his every thought and memory, to take from him anything and everything that she pleased, to lay bare his darkest memories, his deepest desires, his greatest fears, to know the utter truth of him. He reacted quickly to this attack, understanding that he could not directly stand up to her impressive mental power. So instead of resisting her, he simply withdrew completely from himself, from his own mind, effortlessly descending into an unthinking state that left his mind little but an empty shell. The trick here, he'd learned, was that the Faey had to have *something* to grab on to in order to find the rest of his mind. He let her in, then simply withdrew everything away from her, forcing her to wander around in an empty mist that hid his mind from her power. She found out quickly that she could put herself as deeply into his mind as she pleased, but there was absolutely nothing there for her to see, nothing for her to touch, and no way she could latch onto his mind and force him to obey her. His mind was an empty void, and the edges of that void pulled away from her every time she tried to get past it and get herself into his mind.

It wouldn't last long, and he knew it. She was pushing deeper and deeper, starting to push away his deception, starting to reach towards the deepest, most private of his thoughts and memories. He reacted out of pure desperation, realizing that if he could feel her, if he could sense her presence in his mind, maybe he could do something about it. He locked in on that sense of her and *pushed*, and he pushed with absolutely every fiber of his being. He pushed away from the center of his being, driving her before him, forcing the sense of her away from the core of him. He felt her rock back on her heels—mentally, at least—and push back, but he had too much momentum. She lost more and more ground, until she was again forced out to the edges of his mind.

Once he was certain that she was suitably ejected from the recesses of his mind, he put something out there for her to see. It was an image of her, wearing nothing but leather knee-length boots, being sexually gratified by a jackass.

She instantly flushed, and her expression turned dark as an outraged snarl marred her attractive face. She must have been mightily upset and put out of sorts by his brashness, for instead of trying to attack him with her telepathic power again, she reared back a hand and tried to slap him across the face. That outrage became shock as he whipped a hand up and caught her hand before it reached him, creating a loud *smack* that caused her hand to instantly stop. He closed his fingers around her hand quickly and held it absolutely rigid. The single male Faey who had been accompanying her stared in awed shock as Jason held the woman's hand absolutely still, as the muscles in her arm flexed and bunched as she tried to pull away from him. He felt her gather herself to try to overwhelm his mind with her power, but he closed his grip on her fingers, which caused her to gasp in pain.

Without saying a word, he pulled her hand down from his head with raw physical power, as her arm continued to struggle to resist his strength, until he had her hand down by her waist. Then he pulled it up and down in a mocking version of a handshake. Then he leaned in close to her ear. "If you try that again, I'll rip off your arm," he promised in a low tone that conveyed every bit of his own outrage. He loosened his grip slightly, and she ripped her hand away from him as if she'd stuck it in a fire.

She glared at him, but her expression slowly softened, until she actually smiled. Then she laughed. *Faey!*

"Now I see why you gave them so much trouble," she said approvingly, shaking her hand before her. "Enjoy the opera. Varn," she said imperiously as she turned and sauntered away. The male Faey stared at him for a moment, then scurried after her.

"Why can't you be more like *him*?" she demanded in Faey as they merged with the crowd.

"I can be commanding, dear," he said in a placating tone.

What in bloody hell was *that* about?

"Are you out of your mind?" Jyslin hissed at him in disbelief as she came up to him, grabbing his arm in a very tight, almost painful grip. "I told you to stay out of trouble!"

"She started it," he said pugnaciously.

"You dink, you don't argue with *them*!" she hissed in a very low tone. "She's a *noble*!"

"A noble?" he asked. "She certainly doesn't look, well, noble."

"She's a Zarina," she said in hushed tones, hustling him towards the auditorium. "Zarina Marci Trillane. She rules what used to be Jefferson, Saint Bernard, and Saint James Parishes. She's responsible for the rice and sugar farming that they do down there."

"What did she do?" she asked curiously as they went through the doors and into the large theater proper.

"She tried to invade my mind," he said stiffly. "And I mean *all the way*. I know how to avoid that, so I did that, then I put an image of her being screwed by a donkey out where she could see it. That made her try to slap me."

"She did, huh?" she asked, pursing her lips. "How did you avoid it?"

"The same way I hid from you," he answered. "If you can't find anything to look at, it doesn't matter how deep you can get into my mind. After she started pushing in past that, I felt where she was in my mind, and sort of pushed her out."

"Pushed her out?" she asked in surprise as they started down a row *very* far from the stage, almost in the back. "How could you push her out?"

"Well, I realized that if I could feel her in my mind, exactly where she was, then I could do something about it," he said hesitantly. "I feel it when Faey brush me all the time, and I can always feel it when they try to push past that. They feel around the edges of my pattern of thought, looking for a way through it. Well, I could feel exactly where she was, so I just kinda pushed her out."

"You pushed her out," she said combatively as they sat down in the middle of the row, like she didn't believe him.

"I'm about to push you out of that chair," he said in a nasty tone.

She gave him a dirty look, then blew out her breath. "Sorry, but you can't *do* that," she told him.

"You're wrong, because I *did*," he said pugnaciously. "Maybe you don't know as much about humans as you thought."

She gave him a very long look, and it was *serious*. "Maybe...you're right," she said in a low, grim tone. "Maybe we don't know as much about humans as we thought. We can't leave right now, Jason, but when we have a chance to get out of here without attracting attention, we absolutely *have* to go somewhere very private and very quiet, and have a long talk."

"Why not now?"

"It'll attract attention," she said, looking around. "We don't want to do that. Not right now. Not until Zarina Marci forgets about what happened. If she stops and thinks about it, you might get into a serious pile of trouble." She looked around again. "We'll leave after the first intermission."

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded.

"We'll talk about it after we get out of here," she answered in a quiet, professional tone, like a Marine about to walk into a prospective battlefield. "Until we do, don't do *anything* to attract attention to us. I want Zarina Marci to completely forget about you."

"You think she's going to try to get back at me?"

"This has nothing to do with that. Now be still."

"You're creeping me out here, Jyslin," he said honestly.

"Don't make me muzzle you, Jason," she warned, and he could tell that she *wasn't* kidding.

This sudden change in her attitude, her very demeanor, shocked him. This was a side of her he'd never seen before, when she was all serious. But something had spooked her, something about the Zarina, and he didn't think he wanted to annoy her at the moment. Not because he was afraid of her, but she seemed honestly upset, and he didn't want her to worry. So he fell silent and sat there as other Faey started filing into the auditorium.

Maya and Vell took the seats to Jyslin's left, and Zora and her husband, Oren, took the seats to Jason's right. Sheleese, who had no date, sat down immediately behind Jyslin. She leaned over the seat between them, a smile on her face. "We were looking for you two," she said. "We figured you'd dragged him into some dark corner."

"Not now," Jyslin said in a brusque tone, but the look she levelled on Sheleese made her instantly pull back. "Was the Zarina still in the lobby when you came in?" she asked.

"I don't remember seeing her," Maya answered, her playful smile melting from her face.

"Sheleese, drift back out into the lobby and see if she's still there. Send tight, Marci is very strong with her talent," Jyslin ordered, in a crisp manner. "She's not your usual lazy noble."

"She'll never sense me," Sheleese grinned, then she got up and sauntered back down the row, towards the aisle.

"You know her?" Jason asked.

"I've met her a few times," she answered. "Her sending is very strong, and that's an indicator of her power. She's not to be sneezed at. She could easily make it into the Marines."

Jason remembered that powerful telepathic ability was a requirement for being a Marine. If she was strong enough to be a Marine, then she was indeed strong. Zora, Sheleese, Maya, and Jyslin were probably four of the strongest telepaths in the theater.

"What's the angle here, Jys?" Zora asked.

"Jason and the Zarina had a little encounter," Jyslin answered. "I want to get him out of here before she realizes exactly what happened and comes looking for him. I wanted to wait until the first intermission, but if I can slip him out the door before the opera starts, that's just as good. So long as she doesn't even see him. She's probably forgotten what happened, but if she sees him, she's going to remember."

"There are exits by the men's restroom," Vell announced. "A side exit. It didn't have an alarm on it. I think it's an additional exit for after the performances end, so everyone isn't bottled up at the front door."

"That's the better tactical choice," Maya said seriously. "It's not more than fifteen *shalka* from the lobby door to the men's restroom."

A *shalka* was a Faey unit of measurement that was about fifteen inches long. Fifteen of them was roughly equivalent to about eighteen feet.

"Marci is still out there," Jyslin frowned, putting a finger to her temple. "Wait, she's near the women's restroom. That's on the far side, and there are still plenty of people in the lobby."

"Screen?" Maya suggested.

"It should work," Jyslin agreed. "Alright everyone, up. We're going to sneak Jason out the side door. I'll have Sheleese distract the Zarina, and we'll slide him out of here."

Jason was a little confused, and not a little surprised at this commanding tone Jyslin was using. Then again, she was a squad *sergeant*, and that meant that she did do a little commanding. The other Faey obeyed her without question, hinting to him that her authority as a Marine spilled over even into this purely civilian event. He found him caught up in this sudden military exercise, as gowned and robed Faey hustled him up out of his seat and into the aisle, then against the flow of traffic up to the lobby door. They hesitated only a second before Jyslin boldly stepped out into the lobby, pulling Jason along with her by the hand. The other Faey filed out immediately behind him, blocking anyone's view of him.

"Duck down a little!" Jyslin hissed. "By Galla's moons, she'll see the top of your head!"

Jason obediently ducked down just enough to hide his head, which was usually visible over most crowds. Jason was six feet two inches tall, which was just enough for him to be considered tall. They hustled him to a large door by the men's restroom, which had an *exit* sign clearly mounted above it, in both English and Faey.

They ended up on Rampart Street, and Jyslin immediately started walking away from Canal Street. "What's this all about?" he demanded.

"I couldn't leave you in there," she said. "I'll explain in the limo."

"We'll have to call the driver."

"I already did. He's on the way."

"But—nevermind," he grunted.

They waited only for a couple of minutes before the limo pulled up by the side of the street. She made sure he got in first, then got in behind him quickly. The limo pulled away from the curb, and when it did so, Jyslin blew out her breath in relief, putting her hand to her chest. "That was almost as nerve-racking as a combat patrol," she admitted.

"Alright, we're in the limo. What's going on?"

She looked him right in the eyes. "Jason, there is *no way* you should have been able to eject Marci from your mind. That kind of action requires *talent*. But you're a human, so you don't have any."

He gave her a suspicious look.

"Hey, I have no idea either," she told him. "It must be your training. It gives you abilities that are *this close* to talent." She held her thumb and forefinger up, the tiniest of margins apart. "I didn't want the Zarina to think about what you did. She'd expect it from a Faey, but *not* from a human. If she got curious, she might give you trouble. *Real* trouble. As in hauled down to the detention center and having a Faey tear out your soul kind of trouble."

Jason shuddered at the very thought of that. "I—Thanks," he said after a moment.

"Hey, no problem," she smiled. "But you owe me now," she winked.

"I appreciate your help, but don't think I'm going to let you hold it over my head," he warned.

"I'm not. But you do owe me the opportunity to change the deal a little."

"How so?" he asked warily.

"Let's go see a movie," she said with a bright smile. "I think I'll have to go home and change first, but let's go out to the Palace in Metairie and see a movie."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's a bit too high class for a movie theater," she said with a light smile. "What do you say?"

He debated that for a moment, but really couldn't find any reason to say no. He did still owe her a date, and a movie sounded better than that opera any day. "Alright," he agreed.

"Good. Let me tell the limo driver to take us to my place. I'll release him and we'll take a cab to the movies."

He wasn't too keen on the idea of going to her place, but he couldn't really say anything. She *did* need to change, and it would be rude for him to stand out on the sidewalk and wait for her.

A little while later, after crossing over onto the West Bank, he found himself in Belle Chasse, where the former naval air station was located. The limo was allowed onto the base, and Jyslin must have been guiding him with telepathic messages, for he pulled up to one of the houses in the base housing section of the base. It was a cookie cutter house, a small affair that looked to be two bedrooms, a ranch style house on the corner of two narrow streets. He hadn't thought that the Marines would be living in the houses on the old base, but then again, since they were here and empty, why not?

Jyslin got out and then helped him out, not that he needed help, then leaned into the passenger side window to talk to the driver. "Just go back the way you came," she told him. "Do *not* wander around. If you get lost, just park the limo and wait for a patrol car to come, and they'll show you the way out."

"I'll be fine, miss. I've been on the base before," the driver answered calmly.

"Good. Thank you."

"You're welcome," he answered as she stepped back, and the limo pulled away.

They watched it go. "Come on, let me show you my house," she invited.

They entered through the front door—which wasn't locked, he noticed—and she turned on the lights to reveal a strangely *human* living room. The carpet was a bit worn, gray shag, and she had decorated her living room with two matching large, thick-cushioned sofas that flanked a large glass coffee table, which faced a television. She had a vidlink console on the wall to the left, and the open area to the right led into a small kitchen filled with aging appliances. A hallway to the left led down to the two bedrooms, and probably to the bathroom as well, and there was a glass paned door on the far wall that led to the porch and back yard. Two standing lamps were on the side walls, and she had several works of art hanging on the walls. They were all abstract, geometric shapes and colors arranged in intriguing patterns, except for one, which was a portrait of a male Faey, nude, reclining on a couch before a waterfall. The painting was impressionist, the borders enticingly indistinct, the features curiously vague. Seeking out detail made the portrait nonsensical, but stepping back and taking it all in at once produced a coherent image.

"You like that one?" she asked as she started taking off her shoes. "My mother painted it. It's my father."

"Your mother's a good artist," Jason said honestly.

"She made all these. She sends me a new one every year," she said. "Want one? I have a few in the other rooms. I'm starting to run out of places to hang them."

"No thanks," he said.

"I'll show them to you," she declared. "Come on."

Trapped by his manners, he allowed her to take him down the hall, to the first bedroom, which she had converted into a study. She had a panel computer on a desk in the middle of the room, but a large desktop one, not the portables that the students used, complete with a hard keyboard. A bookshelf holding several books and boxes of memory sticks was behind the desk, flanked by two floor lamps. There were six paintings on the walls, all of them abstract geometric paintings. "This is where I do my correspondence courses," she told him. "I'm a student, just like you."

She showed him her bedroom next, which was larger than her study. She had a very large bed dominating the middle of the left wall, a king-size with a large oak headboard holding tiny figurines, books, and little knick-knacks that made the place look strangely homey. She had a dresser on the far wall, a smaller one on the same wall as the door that had a mirror mounted on it, a large cherrywood

chest at the foot of the bed, and a pair of nightstands on either side of the bed. A wire stand of sorts was in the far corner, by a door that probably led to a bathroom, on which hung her armor. Her rifle was hanging on pegs on the wall by her armor. Four paintings were in this room, the one hanging over the bed obviously Jyslin when she was a very young child, wearing a little blue dress and holding a small little animal that looked like a gray-furred fox kit with two tails. It was not impressionist, it was a painting so carefully done that it looked like a picture.

"Now that's good," he said in sincere appreciation.

"That's me," she smiled. "When I was six, with our pet vulpar Tunny."

"Odd little animal. I've seen an animal with two tails."

"Tunny belonged to my grandparents. When they died, she came to live with us."

"She must be old."

"She's nearly fifty."

Jason gave her a surprised look as she opened a drawer in the dresser on the same wall as the door.

"They live about seventy years. She's still alive, but she sleeps a lot now. She's not as playful as she was when I was a child."

"Vulpars are truly *lifetime* pets," she told him as she quietly closed the door. She came up to him and put her hand on his upper arm, sliding it along his forearm, until she had a grip on his wrist. Then she chuckled ruefully. "I did *not* plan this," she said to him with a slightly contrite smile, but her eyes were sultry, soft, and seductive, the gray of them seeming to glow in the light of the overhead light.

This was what he was hoping to avoid. He put a hand on hers and tried to pull it away, but she simply put her other hand on his side, gripping the hand that had grabbed hers to pull it away. "Jyslin, I'm not interested."

"You're such a liar," she said with a throaty chuckle. "Look me in the eyes and tell me you're not interested in me."

That was the one thing he could not do, because he *was* interested in her, and she knew it. But he would not get involved with a Faey, no matter how much he liked her or how much he was attracted to her. "I can't," he told her. "I won't, Jyslin. You're a Faey. You know how I feel about Faey."

"I'm *not* the Imperium, Jason," she said with gentle adamance. "I'm just a girl, a girl who wants to be with you." She put her hand on his neck, and he grabbed it to pull it away. "Jason," she said with a yearning that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up, and produced an immediate urge within him. "I'll make you one more bet, a final challenge," she said. "Kiss me."

"What?"

"Kiss me. If you can kiss me and walk out that door, I'll never bother you again," she promised, caressing his side in a manner that made his skin hot beneath his shirt and her fingers. "But if you kiss me and can't walk out that door, we spend the night together, and you can't shut me out after tonight. You have to give me the chance to be your friend, the same way you let Symone be your friend."

He was very worried about the idea of it, but if he didn't agree, she would just keep trying, and that would sour their relationship to the point where she'd lose any chance at all with him. Kissing her would give her a chance to try to inflame his passion, and that was why she was offering the challenge. It was her one and only chance to seduce him. But the opportunity to get her out of his life was too much to ignore. He didn't like the idea of it, because he *did* like her, he *did* find her very attractive, but she was the ultimate temptation, Eve's apple, luring him down a road that would compromise his principles and turn him into the willing slave to the Imperium he did not want to become.

When he didn't immediately answer, she looped her hand around his neck and pulled him down, then kissed him. Jason had kissed many girls in his life, but he had *never* been kissed like that. She kissed him with such passion, such lingering tenderness, such sweet desire that his resistance against her withered in the face of her ardor. Before he knew what was happening, he had his arms around her, kissing her back with equal passion, admitting to her and to himself how attracted he was to this beautiful, interesting, sensual, intelligent, funny, and dead sexy woman. The fact that she was a Faey

now meant absolutely nothing. She was a woman, and *only* a woman, a woman who wanted him, a woman he wanted in return.

“Mmm, I knew you’d see things my way,” she purred as he kissed her neck, and as she backed them towards the bed.

It was his wildest dream, and it was his worst nightmare.

When Jyslin had jokingly put into his calendar last week that it would be a near-religious experience to make love to her, she *was not joking*. There was an intense sensuality about her that he was certain was a racial trait, a powerful awareness of senses, awareness of pleasure, and a strong empathic need to give as well as receive pleasure that made the night with her almost mind-boggling.

Just the memory of it made him shudder. It was dawn now, a little later than he usually slept, but then again, he hadn’t had such an incredible night all those other times. He was on his stomach, and she was splayed half atop him, her arm draped over his back possessively, sleeping with her face pressed up against his shoulder. It was—there were no words for it. To call it sensual, erotic, intensely intimate, they would not do what passed between them last night proper justice. Her touch had been fire, but it was a fire that gave pleasure instead of pain, and she consumed him with it.

But it was more than the sex. Halfway into it, when she had him twisted around her finger, she touched his mind. She didn’t *ask* to do it, and at that moment, he was utterly incapable of doing anything to stop her. She seemed so caught up in their lovemaking that it was an automatic response, and it was then that he appreciated her power as a telepath. She blew through his started defenses like they were dust and joined their minds into a symbiotic union that allowed all their feelings, thoughts, sensations, everything to pass between them. They had become a single mind in two bodies, and the intensity of their lovemaking before that was like a candle flame held up to a bonfire. To feel *her* pleasure in addition to his own, to know immediately what pleased her, what did not, and to feel the overpowering desire she had, an almost uncontrollable attraction to him that had caused her to go to such extremes to get closer to him, they multiplied the intimacy by an order of magnitude. She made love to him with her body and her mind, and it was an experience that had been seared forever into his memory as the single-most intense night of pleasure he had ever had. She had dropped all her defenses, joining their minds in an open connection that allowed him to look into her mind, *anywhere* in her mind, and see whatever he wanted. He could have learned her most embarrassing secrets, her darkest fantasies, her most treasured dreams, or her most deep-seated desires had he wished to do so, but at that moment he was too busy making love to her to even think to look.

That, more than anything, was what impressed him, now that he looked back on it. She had been fearless about it, more than willing to expose the totality of her being to him, to give to him freely everything that she was. He felt unbelievably honored that she would trust him like that, give him *everything* in exchange for joining their minds.

But *God*, what a night! He’d never be able to make love to a human woman ever again. She’d spoiled him, utterly spoiled him, because he knew that no human could ever match what he felt last night unless she was telepathic.

He yawned and tried to slide out from under her, but she suddenly grabbed hold of him and hooked the leg over the back of his own around the nearest one, wrapping him up and preventing him from going anywhere. “Mmmm, no you don’t,” she said in a half-awake, dreamy kind of satisfied lassitude. “I get to keep you until school.”

“It’s morning,” he told her.

“Already? Damn,” she grunted, letting go of him and rolling over on her back. “How’s your nose?”

He’d suffered another nosebleed during their lovemaking, causing a rather funny interruption as she tried to stem the flow of blood, but she was so worked up that she couldn’t concentrate on what she was doing.

"It's alright," he answered. "You must have hit it just right."

"I didn't hit it," she protested.

"Sometimes it just takes a touch," he told her. "A touch the wrong way to get a nose to bleeding again."

"Now that might have happened," she acceded, then she gave a throaty, sensual chuckle. "I can't wait for our next date," she told him, rolling back over and squirming up onto his back, holding him down. He looked up at her from the corner of his eye, seeing her bright, intimate smile. "Are you sure you have to go to school?"

"You can explain why I'm absent to the dean," he told her.

"I don't think snuggling is a valid reason to miss class," she laughed. "Well, my sweet one, I think I won our little bet," she purred in a sultry tone, leaning down and kissing his ear and cheek. "I don't think you minded losing," she breathed in his ear.

"I'm glad we made love," he told her honestly. "But I'm not glad for the situation. You're a Faey, and I'm a human. I just slept with the enemy, and now, if I'm not careful, I'm going to go back on all the promises I made to myself and compromise my principles."

"Hate what I stand for all you want, as long as you don't hate *me*," she told him seriously. "I'm more than capable of separating you from politics, Jason. At least try to do the same for me."

"That's not easy," he grunted.

"You think I'm a zealous patriot?" she asked archly. "You forget, I'm in armor because I couldn't *get* the job I wanted. I was pushed out by rich nobles who put their children where *they* wanted to go. I'm five times more qualified to be a starship engineer than most of them!" she flared. "I'm a Marine because I'm *not* a noble!"

He rolled over on his back, dislodging her, and she immediately climbed back on top of him, putting her elbows down on either side of his shoulders, her hands playing with his hair. "I don't *care* about the Imperium, Jason. I serve because I have to serve, the same as you. If I cared about the Imperium, I would have handed you over to Marci last night. If I cared about the Imperium, your little secret wouldn't be a secret."

"What secret?" he asked in confusion.

She gave him a sly smile. "I didn't seduce you *only* to share a near-religious experience with you," she told him. "I needed to touch your mind and have you let me do it willingly. I wanted to see if I was *right*."

"Right about what?" he asked suspiciously.

"Right about this," she said, tapping him on the forehead. "If Marci found out about you, the Imperium might have a conniption. There's no telling what they'd do to the humans."

"What?" he demanded.

"Think about it, Jason," she said with a slow, knowing smile. "Why can you feel it when we touch your mind? Why is that you can hide yourself from us? How could you eject Marci out of your mind? It has nothing to do with your mental discipline or your training."

He gave her an impatient look.

"Jason, you have *talent*," she revealed. "And it's *not* weak. When I joined with your mind, I found it within you, bursting at the seams to be realized."

"What?" he asked in shock.

"You're a telepath," she told him evenly. "And a damn bloody *strong* one. You're as strong as I am, and I'm considered in the top ten percent among Faey."

He gaped at her in disbelief.

"I did help it along," she admitted shamelessly. "It was there, but you didn't know how to use it, and it hadn't fully formed itself. I showed it how to fully express, gave you a little nudge. But it's there."

He was thunderstruck. All he could do was gape at her in awed disbelief.

“The headaches, the nosebleeds, they were symptoms of the expression of your talent,” she told him with a smile. “They weren’t from stress, or sinus problems. Think about it. Didn’t they flare up when you were around *Faey*?”

He was silent, thinking back...and he realized she was *right*. The last few days, there were Faey around him every time the headaches got bad. And the nosebleed, that started after Vell did whatever it was he did that allowed him to slip past his defenses and pass along a telepathic message.

“B-But it was too fast—“

“That’s normal,” she said. “Telepathy doesn’t slowly develop like you’re thinking it does. It does develop, but while it does, you can’t feel it, and it doesn’t show up. It just bursts out when you reach a certain level, which is usually around puberty for a Faey. For me, it was when I was *much* younger. I’ve had talent for almost as long as I can remember. If you’d been *born* among Faey, you’d have expressed at about the same time as me.”

“But, but humans never showed any kind of ability before,” he argued.

“I know,” she said with pursed lips. “You told me that Faey always probe you. Maybe all that telepathic contact jarred it in you. If I’m right, you’d never had expressed any talent if it weren’t for the fact that we’re here. It was latent within you, unable for you to touch it, but when we came along and started stimulating that part of your brain with our own power, it started to develop.”

He was still awestruck, but he had recovered his wits enough to understand what she was saying. But was she right? Did he really have *telepathic ability*?

“Of course you do,” she said with a slow smile.

He glared at her. “How—“

“I know your mind now, Jason,” she told him. “And we do happen to be touching at the moment. Your defenses don’t work on me like this, not anymore. I can hear your thoughts whenever we touch. And with some training, you’ll be able to hear mine.” She touched his face gently. “But if it bothers you, I won’t do it, I promise. I can tune you out.”

“What, what are you going to do?” he asked in worry.

“Train you,” she smiled. “I’m not going to turn you in, Jason, don’t be silly. I don’t care about the Imperium. I do what I’m told because I have to. If I can get away with not telling them a word, then I will. And they can’t catch me,” she winked. “I’m one of the strongest telepaths on Earth,” she said bluntly, but not in a boasting manner. She was simply stating fact. “They can’t pull it out of me by casual scans, because none of the mindbenders on the planet, the Empress’ secret police, are strong enough to breach my defenses without me knowing it. They’ll never find out from me, and after some education, they’ll never pick it up from you either.”

“I’m supposed to tell them about this, but I’m not. You’re my friend, and you’re now my lover, and I’m not about to hand you over to them. I’ll teach you how to control your power, and how to hide the fact that you *have* power from other Faey. They never have to know. And as long as we don’t fuck up, they never will.”

He stared up at her in shock. She was going to disobey the Imperium, keep him a secret. She truly *wasn’t* the Imperium, a loyal subject of the Empress that would do whatever she was told. The image of her as a cog in their vast machine melted away, and for the first time, he saw her not as an agent of the Empress, but as nothing other than *Jyslin Shaddale*.

She gave him a radiant, unbelievably tender smile. “There, see? It wasn’t so hard, was it?” she asked, sliding her finger along his cheek intimately. “I told you before, Jason, I’m not interested in the Imperium. I’m interested in *you*. As long as I have you, what could they possibly offer me that’s better?”

He was touched by her words, by her honest admission. He put his hand on her cheek, and she leaned against it, smiling down on him with her lovely gray eyes.

“Oh, if only we had a little more time,” she complained in a longing manner, kissing the palm of his hand, sliding her legs against him sensually. “But you have to get to school, and I have to get to work.”

And I have to take you to school,” she grinned. “While you’re there, don’t worry too much,” she told him. “Remember, it takes *effort* to use. As long as you don’t try to do anything, nobody’s going to notice. You might start hearing the thoughts of people around you, and you might overhear it when Faey send to each other. Those are passive actions, they don’t require effort, and nobody can tell when you’re doing them.”

“Why could I hear sending?”

“Jason, sending is nothing but a broadcasted thought that people who are telepathically adept can hear,” she answered. “It’s what you might call thinking out loud.”

“I thought that Faey had to allow themselves to hear it.”

“We do,” she answered. “We usually tune out the thoughts we hear, but we can leave ourselves open to hear sending, because it’s a little different than just eavesdropping on the surface thoughts of others.” She patted his hair with a smile. “You shouldn’t have too much trouble. The one way you’ve developed your ability is through your ability to defend yourself. Just keep that up, and no Faey is going to notice anything different about you. I’ll come over after I’m off duty and start teaching you the other aspects of it. And you *must* learn,” she told him seriously. “You have to get competent with your power and do it *fast*, Jason. Right now, when you have the power but haven’t learned how to use it or control it, this is when you’re most vulnerable. You have got to keep a lid on it and not tip your hand until I can teach you. After I teach you, no Faey will ever be able to discover your secret. I’ll even teach you ways to fool them into thinking that they *can* hear your thoughts, so they don’t probe you all the time.”

He was still a little scattered, overwhelmed by the thought of it. If someone had told him that he’d just inherited a million credits, it wouldn’t have registered to him in the slightest. He had telepathic ability. He was possessed of the one thing that separated the humans from the Faey, more than the color of their skin or the pointed ears that made them look elfin. A human had telepathic power, a *human* now possessed the one weapon against which the human race could not defend against, stand up to.

The implications were enormous, both personally and in the terms of the human race. Was he the only one? Was he some kind of fluke, or were there more humans out there with the same latent potential, which would express after the Faey stimulated it into maturity with their own power? If that were true, then the human race *could* stand up to the Faey. The difference in technology was extreme, but always before it was the fact that the Faey were telepathic which was the one overwhelming factor that the human race could not defeat, which allowed them to crush any kind of rebellion or resistance before it managed to get any kind of start at all. But if a sizable number of humans *were* telepathic, and they could somehow learn how to use their power without the Faey—

That was a pipe dream, and he knew it. As soon as the Faey realized that humans were showing telepathic ability, they would come down on the human race like a sledgehammer. They would root them out and deal with them, either with telepathic reprogramming or by killing them. That was why Jyslin got him out of that theater, because she knew what would happen, and she meant to protect him from them.

Yet another reason to be impressed with Jyslin, and be receptive to the idea of including her in his life for the immediate future. She truly was interested in him for who he was, and had demonstrated to his satisfaction that she was *not* the Imperium. If anything, she was willing to go against her own people on his behalf. That was certainly saying something.

“Let’s get dressed before I start taking advantage of the situation and make us both late,” she said with a leer, reaching down and patting him on the hip. She got off of him and went to the mirror and slicked her hair over the left side of her head as best she could, then went over to her armor and started by picking up the codpiece, the section most closely compared to a pair of metal shorts. “Why don’t you wear anything under it?” he asked curiously as she stepped into the piece of armor.

“Well, we could,” she admitted. “I could easily wear panties and a bra under the armor, maybe

even a pair of skin-hugging shorts or a tank top, and some Faey do wear a bra. But we can't take the armor off, and that makes going to the bathroom a tricky proposition when you consider the fact that this is the base on which all the rest of the armor is built," she said, tapping the codpiece as she slipped it over her hips, the locked its seams closed. "To get this off, I have to take the armor off my legs and detach it from the stomacher and breastplate, and that takes a while. I'd pee myself long before I got enough off to go without making a mess. The crotch of the armor has a locking opening that we use when we have to go to the bathroom," she told him. "If I wore panties, it would make getting them out of the way a tricky proposition. Maya calls it the 'doorway to heaven'," Jyslin laughed. "She once had sex with her husband wearing her armor. He didn't appreciate it afterwards, once the bruises started showing up."

That was certainly logical. He nodded in understanding as he sat up. "Need help?"

She shook her head. "A Marine has to be able to get into armor with no help in five minutes. It's a drill in basic training. I can handle it, love. You need to get dressed. I have to get you to your dorm room with enough time for you to get ready for your classes."

He nodded, climbing out of bed and looking around for his clothes, which were scattered all over the room. Her dress was thrown on the floor, and he reached down and picked it up, brushing it to get the wrinkles out. "You should hang this up," he told her.

"There are hangers over there," she said, pointing at the closet as she locked the leg greaves that protected her thighs in place, securing them to the codpiece. The greaves overlapped the codpiece, forcing her to take them off before she could get the codpiece off. It really was the base of the armor. She locked the flexible metal skin that filled the space between the joints to the inside edge of the greaves on her right leg, settling the kneecap protector in place. "Less time watching me armor up and more time dressing," she told him with a sly wink.

"Sorry. I've been curious how it fits together for a while."

"Trust me, love, in a month, you'll know how it fits as well as I do," she said with another wink. Jyslin loved to wink, for some reason. "Dress."

He hung up her expensive dress, then started dressing. He had to gather his clothes from various parts of the room, but he started tending to it quickly, his mind still racing with what he had learned this eventful morning. About his telepathic gifts, about Jyslin, about everything. It was all different now, and he needed a little time to sort it out in his mind, figure out what he wanted to do.

After putting on his vest, he looked and saw that she had all her armor on from the waist down. She was settling the sollaret boot on her foot, then took up the front half of the stomacher, the piece of armor that was flexible, that was between the breastplate and the codpiece. She attached it to the breastplate's bottom edge, hooked the back half to the back of the breastplate, then latched the top buckles on the shoulders of the two breastplate sections together. Then she picked up the entire assembly and slid it over her head, pushing her head through the opening for her neck. She settled it on her shoulders easily, then sealed the side seams and then tended to attaching the base of the stomacher to the inside edge of the top of the codpiece.

"Efficient," he complemented.

"I've done this a long time, love," she told him as she reached behind her and locked the back of the stomacher to the inside back edge of the codpiece without looking. "Let me get the upper greaves on, and we can go. I can get the bracers and gauntlets on in the car."

"What car?"

"Didn't you see the Toyota parked in front of the house?" she chuckled. "That's *my* car."

"I thought you guys had hovercars."

"That's the Corps' vehicle," she answered. "When we first got here, we weren't allowed to bring Faey technology vehicles here for our own personal use. Most of us bought human cars when we got here, and hell, they're just as good as hovercars, so most of us never bothered to bring in our own personal cars once they lifted the ban. I have a hovercar, but I had to leave it with my parents. I know

you've seen Faey in human cars."

"Well, sure, but I never much thought about what it meant."

"Well, now you do," she told him. "When you see a Faey in a human car, it's because she's off duty and she's about on personal business." She locked the two greaves around her right arm, over the flexible metal skin that protected her shoulder and armpit, flexing it a few times, then reaching for the flexible metal skin for her left shoulder. She quickly got that on, then the greaves, and then she picked up the forearm bracers and gauntlets and swept them into a small bag that was by the stand. "Alright, we can go," she said, locking the web belt that held her sidearm around her slender waist, then pulling down her rifle from the wall.

He nodded and picked up his tie, pulling it over his head. She handed him her rifle, letting him carry it, trusting him with it as they filed out of her room, then out of her house. She locked the door with a key on a small silver ring, then tucked it into one of the pouches on her web belt. "We have a stop to make before we go to your dorm," she announced.

That stop was at the guard post for the front gate. They didn't get out of her car—which surprised him that she could drive it with that armor, but then again, it showed how flexible the armor was—just pulled up the gate house and rolled down the window. "I want an entry pass for him," she called to the gate guard.

"What kind?" she asked in return.

"Unconditional," she replied. "He's going to be coming and going from now on."

She smiled knowingly. "Sure. Hold on a second. Could you look this way for me, sir?" she asked as she reached into her little cubby and took out a small camera. She took his picture and stepped in, seating it to a base as she started typing on a holographic keyboard. "Name?"

"Jason Fox," Jyslin answered for him.

"Thank you." She typed a few more seconds, touched the screen a few times, then reached under the shelf and pulled out a small laminated card. "Here you go," she told him, handing it to Jyslin. "Just present that card to the gate guards when you come, honey, and they'll let you in," she told him. "It'll also let you into the base exchange and the commissary, and all the other places on base. Don't lose it. It's a ten credit fine to replace it."

"I'll remember that," Jason said as he looked at it. It was in Faey, and it said he was a base resident, the "permanent resident guest" of Sergeant Jyslin Shaddale. A nice, technical term for boyfriend.

He could live with that title. He looked over at her and realized that he would very much be comfortable with that title.

"Permanent resident, eh?" he asked, putting the card in his wallet.

"Hey, I want you to have all the perks being a Marine's babe entails," she said with a wink as they pulled out onto Belle Chase Highway.

"A Marine's *babe*?" he asked archly.

"You are a babe," she told him, blowing a kiss at him. "You're *my* babe."

"Don't get me in trouble at school," he warned. "Some students are more vocal about their dissent than me."

"They're not going to see me on campus, only when I visit you in the dorm," she told him. "They don't seem to have any problem with Symone."

"Symone's different," he told her. "Everyone likes Symone."

"Well, they can all like me."

He gave her a look, then laughed. "No," he told her. "They all love Symone because she's charismatic and fun. Nobody that meets her can possibly not like her. That's not you," he said with a slight smile.

"I can so be fun," she said primly.

"Fun, yes," he agreed. "But you don't have the kind of charisma that Symone does."

"What do you mean?"

"Why don't you come by the dorm tonight and see?" he asked, leaning against the door as they got onto the West Bank Expressway, the elevated expressway that led to the bridge over the Mississippi River, back to the city.

"I certainly am coming over tonight," she told him. "We have to start your education, as quickly as possible."

"Then you'll see. Everyone is Symone's friend. To the people in the dorm, the fact that she's Faey doesn't matter. Everyone loves her, and if anyone gives her any flak, the entire dorm would take turns beating the piss out of the guy."

"Wow," she breathed.

"I don't know how the people in the dorm will react to you, but then again, if Symone says you're alright, then that's that," he said seriously. "An endorsement from Symone should be all it'll take."

"You'll have to ask her to do that."

"She'll be over after she gets off duty."

She drove him back to his dorm on Saint Charles Avenue, on the corner of the Tulane campus, and he watched the traffic go by, lost in thought. Telepathy. He had that talent. He was a human, and now he was expressing the one gift, the single advantage that the Faey had that kept the human race in slavery. But it wasn't much, because after all, he was only one man. It would take an *army* of telepaths to kick the Faey off Earth, an army equipped with weapons that could make the Faey retreat. In the end, it was nothing but a dangerous curse that could quite possibly get him killed, should the Faey find out about him.

It was a strange thought, that he had such a mysterious power, a power he had hated because of what it meant. But now *he* had it, and though it changed very little in the grand scheme of things, it changed his life a great deal. He had to be careful now, always cautious, always vigilant, to keep his dark, deadly secret. His life depended on it.

What would it be like to be telepathic? Well, from what he'd managed to figure out, he'd be able to hear the surface thoughts of the people around him. Jyslin had talked about that before. He'd be able to overhear Faey sending to each other, and from the sound of it, Jyslin was going to teach him all the tricks of it, like attacking, defending, and a way to deceive the Faey into not probing him all the time. That would be nice, a relief to him, but the rest of it...he wasn't sure how he was going to feel about that. But one thing was for sure, he'd better *learn* it. His life might someday depend on being able to attack and overwhelm a Faey who discovered his secret.

And on another angle, perhaps buying that airskimmer would be a *very good* idea. That way, he always had an escape route. He could flee up into Tennessee or Kentucky or West Virginia, states which had been *completely* depopulated of humans...or at least officially. There were squatters out there, humans who had fled into the uninhabited forest areas rather than accept the Faey order, or to escape being sent to a farm, or to escape after pissing off the Faey. It was lawless out there, as bad as any *Mad Max* movie, but that might be preferable to being reprogrammed by the Faey secret police, the Imperial Gestapo as some called them, or perhaps being *dissected* to find out why a human had somehow gained telepathic powers.

Yes, that was a good idea. He'd have to start looking into it. And perhaps discretely collect up the components he'd need to build a plasma rifle, and build himself his own suit of armor. If he did have to flee into the wildlands, it might behoove him to go into that chaos armed to the teeth and sporting an overwhelming advantage.

Just in case.

He blinked when he saw the dorm, and to his surprise, she went past it, past the campus, going all the way up to where Saint Charles ended, merging with Carrollton. She pulled over and patted him on the leg. "I think this is far enough away," she told him. "I don't want them to see you get out of a Faey's car. So you avoid any friction."

"I appreciate that," he said as he opened the door.

“Aat, kiss,” she ordered.

He chuckled, then leaned over and gave her a lingering kiss. She actually licked his nose before he pulled away, giving him a wide, bright smile. “You have a good day at school, love. I’ll be back as soon as I’m off duty. Remember, don’t try anything, and if you start hearing voices in your head, don’t panic. That’s you overhearing the thoughts of those around you. Just listen. You’d be surprised what you can learn,” she said with a wink.

“I’ll be careful. Now let me out.”

“Have a good, *uneventful* day,” she told him seriously.

“Amen,” he agreed.

Chapter 4

*Brista, 19 Shiaa, 4392, Orthodox calendar;
Saturday, 24 May 2007, Native regional reckoning
New Orleans, Gamia Province, American sector*

It was like an entirely different world had been unveiled before him.

He walked in a kind of half-daze, virutally overwhelmed by the sheer amount of *chatter* that surrounded him. It gave him a headache and scattered his concentration, because what he was hearing were the unguarded thoughts of all the people around him.

It was like hearing their voices in his own mind, just as Jyslin had described it, like thinking thoughts that were not his own in different voices. Thoughts of school, of home, of the Faey, of stresses from the workload of school, to sex. He glanced at people as he seemed to figure out whose thoughts belonged to who, sort of getting a sense of direction out of it after about an hour of practice. Each person was like a beacon of broadcasted thought, as clear to him as if they were saying everything that he was hearing.

It was damned distracting, so much so that he didn't hear a single word Professor Ailan said during plasma class. He was too distracted by the *cacophony* of thoughts bombarding him from every side. It was like being in a room surrounded by screaming people.

At least nobody said much of anything to him when he got back to the dorm. People did notice that he was dragging his ass back in the morning after, but the fact that he *walked* back left enough opening for people not to be quite sure what happened. He didn't answer any questions, simply changed and got his pack ready for Saturday classes. It didn't really hit him until he got out among the other students, close to them, starting as a faint buzzing between his ears, then growing steadily more discernible and louder, until it was at its current level, which was giving him a headache.

It was both a wondrous and frightening experience, hearing other people think. It would have made him think he was going insane had Jyslin not warned him of the possibility, had told him what it would feel like. Luckily for him, she had prepared him for this, so he was able to approach it with some calm reserve, not let it show that something was bothering him.

He sat there as the sound of it all seemed to drone on, then blur together as if the competing voices were cancelling each other out. He had his eyes closed, rubbing his temples, when a sudden *bang* almost startled him out of his chair. Ailan was standing by his desk, a heavy plasma conduit sleeve resting on his desk from where the Faey had slammed it down. "I said class is over, Jason," he said with a smile. "What's wrong?"

"Headache," he answered, rubbing his temples, closing his eyes again. "I used to get them when my father was ill. Stress."

"So, last night was the big date," he said, leaning over the desk. "How did it go?"

"About what you'd expect," he answered. "Dinner, opera, then she took me home."

"Which home?" he prompted with a sly smile.

Jason gave him a flat look.

Ailan laughed. "It's all the buzz, because you didn't come back to your dorm last night. A few people were wondering if you killed her."

"She's quite alive," he said mildly, wincing as a particularly strong throb jagged through him. "Truth be told, she convinced me that she's not at all what I expected her to be. She hates the Imperium nearly as much as I do, so we have common ground."

"I'm not much of a fan of it either, Jason, but we all do what we have to do," he admitted openly. "I *am* Faey, and I believe in the Empress, but I think she should change the way that the bureaucracy

does some things. They've become extremely corrupt, and their corruption is making the nobles corrupt, and when noble houses get corrupt, they start thinking of breaking away from the Imperium. If she doesn't do something soon, we might have another civil war. We don't need that right now, not with this war with the Skaa."

"You're complaining to the wrong man, Professor," Jason told him. "I'd be overjoyed if Earth *broke away* from the Imperium."

"Be careful what you wish for," Ailan said seriously. "You might find your yoke under a renegade noble ten times worse than subjugation under the Empress."

"True," he admitted.

"Well, see you during lab," he said. "Hope you feel better."

He didn't talk to anyone, mainly because he could hear every thought everyone around him had. He learned quite a few dirty little secrets during that time, things he would much rather have not known, and found out that being privy to the thoughts of others was not as interesting as some people might have thought. People would approach him and ask what happened last night, or try to chitchat, but their thoughts told a completely different tale. Some of them were jealous, some were angry, and few meant what they said when they talked to him. People who acted one way had thoughts which were quite different from what he knew of them. It was quite an eye-opening experience.

And not entirely a good one.

There was a great deal of trepidation involved in it. He avoided every Faey who crossed his path, moving quickly to get away from them, deathly afraid they'd somehow find out. But when he passed by two Army regulars patrolling the campus, he learned that Jyslin's other warning was also correct. He could hear Faey sending.

He's cute, he distinctly heard, much louder and clearer than the surface thoughts of the people around him.

That's the human the Marines had so much trouble with, the other answered. *He's taken*.

More the pity, the first said with regret as they wandered away.

That blew his mind anew. He heard them perfectly, and they didn't seem to notice, mainly because was careful not to let his shock register on his face. He could hear Faey sending!

He honestly had no idea what happened most of that day, only a blur of fear and amazement. He looked up after what seemed like a few minutes after plasma class and found himself standing in front of the dorm, and it was nearly four o'clock. He could not remember *anything* from the other classes. He honestly didn't know if he even showed up for them, and that scared him quite a bit.

He ambled up to his room and immediately checked his panel, to see if he'd thought to record the classes. He did. Well, that was a relief. He wouldn't show up on Monday and Tuesday with blank looks when they asked for his homework. He sat at the desk and put his head in his hands and tried to get a handle on his headache, tried to push out all the sounds of the thoughts from the students in the dorm, tried to center himself and ignore them, falling back on his mental exercises. After a few moments, the sounds of the voices retreated from him, leaving him feeling blissfully alone in his own head. It was quiet, serene, the headache eased, and he felt much better.

A knock on the door startled him half out of his wits. He reached over and opened it, and found Jyslin standing there, hand on the doorframe, waiting for him to open it. She wore the tank top and shorts she always wore when she visited before working out, but a blue tank top this time. She stepped in and closed the door behind her, then bent down and gave him a lingering kiss. "I see it's awake," she said immediately.

"I haven't been able to concentrate all day," he said wearily. "I can't even remember most of it."

"Your brain is having trouble processing all this new information," she told him. "I think the first thing you need to learn is how to tune it out. It shouldn't take you long to learn, it's pretty easy."

She sat down on the bed and urged him to roll his chair over to her. He did so, and she reached out and took his hands in her own, pulling them into her lap. "Now, let's begin," she said with a smile.

"Tuning out. You should have no trouble with this, love, because all you do is learn how to ignore what you're hearing. It's a very simple skill that most children learn within a day."

"You're not wasting any time."

"Your life and your sanity depends on learning this as fast as you can," she said seriously.

He couldn't argue with that. He nodded and gave her his undivided attention.

He'd already touched on the idea of tuning out before she came in. The idea of it was to push the alien thoughts out away from himself, sort of lock the outside of his mind and not let anything in. Because he had such a disciplined mind, and he knew his mind very well, it didn't take him very long to wrap himself around the trick of it. It helped that Jyslin looked into his mind and instructed him, showed him what he was doing wrong, give him some helpful advice. It didn't require any kind of expression of power to do this, only a desire not to hear what was going on around him.

Within two hours, he had the trick of it down rather well. It was much like she said, simply a method of tuning out the outside noise, the interference, focusing himself only on what was within.

"Good," she declared with satisfaction. "That's all there is to it, love."

"It's easy."

"It's a good thing it is, or we'd all have gone insane long ago."

"But Faey have closed minds."

"*Adults* do. Children don't. And children tend to learn together."

"Ah." Now he understood. Surrounded by the unguarded thoughts of the other children, they'd have gone mad long before reaching adulthood. "Now what?"

"Now nothing," she smiled. "You have tomorrow off. Let's go see a movie, or get a canoe and paddle around in Jean Laffite swamp or something."

"No," he said. "I have something I have to learn, and I don't have much time. Teach me something else."

"Let's not get fanatical," she said. "You need to rest, and this isn't something we can get sloppy with."

"I'm not tired, and we can do something tomorrow."

"I'm not sure," she hedged.

"I'll tell you what. Teach me something else, and we'll go out. An actual date, to make up for the theater."

She gave him a sly grin, then laughed. "Pulling out the heavy artillery, are we? Alright. I'll teach you how to send. There aren't any Faey around here, so it should be safe enough."

"I can learn this in one day?"

"The basics, yes," she nodded. "It takes a while to master, though. It takes practice."

"Anything worthwhile takes practice."

She smiled. "Alright, sending. Sending is rather simple to do, but it takes a while to get good at it. It's the third thing a child learns."

"What's the second?"

"Closing her mind, but you've already got that down."

"Oh."

"Now, I told you once that sending is thinking out loud, and that's all it is. You take your thought and push it out of your mind. If you put enough behind it, people sensitive to sending will hear it."

"That's it?"

"That's it. It's very easy, like I just told you. But it takes quite a while to learn how to limit your range, exclude people or places from hearing you, sending to only one person, and learning how to be understandable up close when you're trying to send for distance. It takes a *lot* of practice."

"Then the sooner I learn how to do it, the more I can practice."

"Workaholic," she said with a teasing smile, patting his knee. "Okay, give me a second to make sure there aren't any Faey around to hear you, then you can start practicing."

He *felt* her when she did that, sort of swept her mind out and searched for Faey, but he wasn't sure how she did it or how she knew what to look for. She nodded to him, and he began.

Again under her tutelage, for she had a light touch on his mind, observing what he was doing, she walked him through the idea of it. It was just as she said, sort of taking a thought and putting himself behind it, then pushing it out away from himself, sort of trying to *think out loud*. As she said, it was very easy to do, for he succeeded after about a half an hour of attempting, casting a thought of *hello!* Out away from him. But the way she winced when he finally succeeded to him that it was too strong, that he had *shouted* in some manner.

"Ouch," she grunted. "Well, I'm certain you did it, that's for sure," she chuckled.

"Sorry."

"It's alright, everyone does that when they first start. We get so caught up in doing it we do it with everything we've got." She laughed richly. "I'll bet they heard that down in the quarter," she said with a wink.

He paled.

"Don't worry, don't worry, they won't know who did it," she said quickly. "They'll only know that someone was shouting, and that it was a male. They won't know where it came from, or how far away you are. Now try again, and do it *softly*. Just enough to push it away from your mind, just a little bit. That should be more than enough."

He nodded, calming down a little from the scare she gave him, then he closed his eyes and tried again.

After another hour, when it was getting dark outside his small window, he'd more or less nailed down the rough basics. Jyslin told him with an approving nod that he could send gently rather well, his thought only extending a short distance, the kind of short-range communication that formed the base of some of the more advanced sending skills. "Enough, enough," she begged off, slapping him on the knee. "You promised me a date."

"So I did," he nodded. "You missed your workout."

"That's alright," she smiled. "I'd rather spend that time with you, even if we weren't doing anything but practicing. What do you want to do?"

"I think you have the agenda planned out."

She laughed. "Not really. Want to see a movie? We have a pretty well stocked *Blockbuster* just outside the front gate. We'll find a good one and put it up on the big TV. I'll have to dust off my DVD player, though."

"I think we can manage that," he said after a moment's consideration. Ending up in Jyslin's house might not be a good thing right now. He did like her, and he was *very* attracted to her, but he didn't want to get too involved with her personally. He did want to see her more, go on actual dates, but she was still a Faey, still aligned with the enemy, even if she didn't believe in the enemy's doctrine herself. That didn't exactly make her an enemy, but it also didn't make her someone he could entirely trust. He would like Jyslin, learn from her, go out with her, be her friend, maybe even sleep with her, but he wasn't about to get, *intimate* with her. Not yet, not until he felt he could trust her completely.

"What do you want to do tomorrow?"

"I have a big test on Monday, so I have to study," he warned.

"Bring your panel and your books, you can study at my house."

"You'll distract me."

"Not when it matters," she said seriously. "You should get used to spending time at my house anyway. I fully intend to get you to move in."

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"I said no," he answered levelly. "I like you, Jyslin, I'll admit that. But I'm not going to pretend to be your live-in boyfriend. I'll talk with you, I'll go out with you, I'll come over to your house to train

or just to visit, and I might even sleep with you, but I'm not ready to take any new direction with our relationship. I have *this* to worry about now," he said, pointing at his head, "and there's still the fact that I can't justify just throwing in with you right now. You may not be the Imperium, but you are *still* Faey."

"I thought we moved past that."

"*You* thought we moved past it. I never did."

There was a knock at the door. "Jayce!" Tim boomed.

"Open!" he called, silently glad that Tim came when he did. He had probably just headed off a major argument, he could see it in Jyslin's stormy gray eyes.

Tim opened the door, wearing a rather nice pair of slacks and a black dress shirt. "I—oh, I didn't know you had company," he said.

"You're a bad liar," Jason told him.

He laughed. "Alright, you got me," he admitted. "But everyone's getting curious what's going on in here."

"I'm raping him," Jyslin said dryly, though her irritation with him was obvious in her body language.

He chuckled warily. "It was too quiet for that."

"You forgot about the gag."

Tim did laugh earnestly then.

"Where are you off to?"

"Symone's taking me to a symphony over at City Park, some kind of after-dark Beethoven concert," he answered. "She went to her barracks to change."

"Why didn't you go with her?" Jyslin asked.

"She told me to stay here," he shrugged. "So, is everything alright in here?" he asked with a smile at Jason.

"We've just been talking," he answered. "We're about to go out and see a movie."

"What are you going to see?"

"We don't know yet," Jyslin answered.

"Well, have fun," he said. "See you later."

"See you tomorrow."

"Gather up your stuff and let's go," she prompted shortly.

He nodded, getting up. He had tomorrow off, so he didn't mind going to Jyslin's to see a movie. He seriously doubted that he'd make it home before tomorrow, but that too didn't bother him in the slightest. After all, Jyslin *was* an extraordinarily beautiful woman, attractive, sultry, sexy, and seductive, and his attraction to her was sincere. He did like her, and he did want to sleep with her. But until he felt he could give her his absolute trust, he couldn't risk getting too close to her. Not now, not when he was in such a dangerous situation. After all, Jyslin could, at any time, simply turn him in in order to save her own hide. He knew that. Until he was absolutely positive that that was not going to happen, he had to treat his relationship with Jyslin like it was a venomous snake. Something that fascinated him, but something that could kill him if he got careless with it.

Jason woke up in Jyslin's bed very late for him, almost nine in the morning, and he climbed out of it silently cursing himself for his weak will. She had started hinting at wanting him the instant they got in the door, and she got more and more aggressive as the night went on. He tried to be polite, not to upset her, then just to drive home the meaning of the word *no*, but in the end she was just as successful at seducing him when he *knew* it was coming as she was when he hadn't expected it. It was just very, very hard to look at a woman as gorgeous as Jyslin, knowing beyond any doubt that she was *very* attracted to him, look at that gloriously built woman and tell her no when she had her shirt off and was pushing her breasts in his face. He didn't think any heterosexual man alive on Earth, be him human of

Faey, could reject Jyslin when she was being that militantly aggressive. It was a statistical impossibility.

But he couldn't beat himself all morning, and he had other important things to do, so he put that bit of brooding aside and moved on to other matters that required his immediate attention. Jason left her to sleep as he first did some homework in the living room, then did some studying, then started hunting for an airskimmer.

He was still serious about that. If worse came to worst, he wanted a way to run like hell. It was only smart.

There weren't any for sale on Earth, so he got out onto GlobalNet, the Faey's interplanetary internet, and started looking. He had seventy-five thousand credits at his disposal, which was enough to get a used one, but not a new one. The cheapest new airskimmers ran a hundred thousand credits a piece. But there were places on GlobalNet to find used ones, dealers, private owners looking to sell, in the merchandise forums.

Jyslin came into the living room wearing nothing but a robe, which was belted so loosely about her waist that most of her breasts were falling out of it. "Hey, lover," she called. "Why didn't you come wake me up?"

"Why? I had things to do."

She leaned over his shoulder. "Airskimmers? What are you looking at those for?"

"I'm going to buy one," he answered mildly. "Your squad lieutenant took those sonic devices I planted on those last two Marines and sent it to the Ministry of Technology. They bought the patent for seventy-five thousand credits."

"You pretending pauper!" she laughed, wrapping her arms around his neck and bringing her head over his shoulder. "And here I thought you were broke."

"Until Friday, I was," he told her. "I still can't believe your squad officer did that."

"Lana tends to do things like that," she answered. "She takes all kinds of liberties with us." She kissed his ear. "You realize that you don't know how to fly it."

"I'll learn," he said calmly as he surveyed a picture of an old airskimmer that someone was selling for ten thousand credits, which was little more than a stripped fuselage. He'd already done his research earlier, so he knew what to look for in an airskimmer.

"Why are you looking at that junk?" she asked.

"It's what I can afford."

"Let's look at new ones."

"I can't afford a new one."

"If I pitch in, we can," she replied immediately.

"I can't let you do that," he protested.

"Yes you can," she smiled. "I don't mind."

"I do," he said adamantly. "No, Jyslin. I won't have you spending your money. If you get transferred or I leave, it's something I'd have to pay you back, and I may never have the money."

"I—"

"There won't be any discussion," he said bluntly. "I *mean* it."

"Alright," she sighed, patting him on the chest. "If you're serious about not letting me contribute, I'll drop it."

He took notes on the airskimmers he found, comparing engine power (all airskimmers had spatial engines, and could actually leave the atmosphere), capacities, additional features, and age, and narrowed his search down to three models. One was a six year old eight-seat airskimmer with navigation and computer autopilot. One was a nine year old six seat airskimmer with extra cargo space, a strong engine, navigation, and autopilot, and the third...well, the third had his attention. First, the seller was a Trillane, meaning it was a noble. It was an eight-seat model, only two years old, actually quite a good one. It was the ASV-430, one of the newer models, with a decent amount of

cargo room, a newer computer, intuitive navigation, full autopilot, the newest engine, and what seemed most important of all...it was *armed* and *armored*. It was armed with two MPACs, was armored with Polymerized Titanium armor, and had a ten Megajoule shield for protection against non-Faey pirates. That wasn't all that impressive if it was being fired upon by MPACs, but against other technology, like ion cannons, phased tetraon cannons, graviton beams, and tachyon cannons, that was formidable protection. All airskimmers were capable of leaving an atmosphere, but since they lacked powerful engines, they wouldn't go very fast, but this model was more or less designed to be a pleasure craft that was launched from orbital platforms and landed on planets. And since there was always the risk of being attacked, it was armed and armored, its armor and shields geared towards *pirates*, not *Faey*. That was acceptable armament and respectable armor, since a noble never goes anywhere without being able to defend himself. The noble was selling it for half what it was worth, but it was still five thousand credits more than he had. But this was his best shot to get his hands on a *weapon*, to tear it down and see how it was put together. It actually wasn't illegal at all for anyone in the Imperium to own any weapon, but the cost of them kept them out of the hands of most commoners. The nobles kept their stranglehold on their society with their money and the illusion that the commoner might better himself, not with tyranny. Anyone could do anything they wanted...as long as they could pay for it. But even if it wasn't armed, if he could talk the owner out of taking the weapons off to reduce the price, it was still the best value.

This would require negotiation.

The contact number was another planet, and after a check, he saw that it was daytime there as well. He brought up the vidlink protocol on the panel and set it on the coffee table, then entered the number.

A male with dark red hair answered almost immediately, wearing an earpiece and a microphone.

"*Arcuri Manor*," he said in a bored manner.

"Eleri Trillane, please," Jason replied.

"A human," he said with some interest. "This matter is concerning what?"

"The airskimmer up for sale."

"One moment."

His face disappeared, replaced with the dragon and sword crest of the Trillane noble house. He leaned back as Jyslin came back in wearing a pair of jeans and a tee shirt, carrying her shoes. He glanced at her, then the screen flickered back to a face. He looked at it and found himself staring into the face of a *teenager*, what couldn't be more than a sixteen year old Faey girl. She was impishly cute, with blond-white hair like Maya grown almost indulgently long, tied in a tail behind her head. She wore a glittering silver bikini top that he could see, a towel thrown over her shoulders. "Eleri," she announced. "Talk."

"You have an airskimmer for sale?" he asked.

"You move fast, I just listed it this morning," she chuckled. "Aren't you a human?"

He nodded.

"Why is a human looking to buy an airskimmer?"

"I'm going to eat it," he said blandly.

She gave him a look, then laughed. "I like you. So, you want to buy it?"

"I'm interested in it, yes," he said carefully. "But I'm five thousand credits short of your asking price."

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "I'm selling it to annoy my mother, but I'm not going to give it away. I'm selling it for half of what it's worth to aggravate mother, and I'm not going any lower than half. It's eighty thousand, and it stays there."

"Then you have a deal, my Lady," Jyslin said, coming over his shoulder and looking down at the screen. "I'll front the difference."

"Damn, I didn't think Faey would be marrying humans," she sounded. "Well, if you're married to one of us, I think I can see fit to sacrifice it at eighty thousand."

Jason absolutely glared at Jyslin, but she just winked at him and licked the tip of his nose.

“What’s wrong?”

“He doesn’t like me spending my money on him, my Lady,” she answered calmly. “He’s very independent.”

Eleri laughed.

“You know, it would make your mother absolutely scream if you just *gave* it away,” Jyslin said with a conspiratorial smile.

“I’m sure it would, but I need the money,” she said sternly. “But, since your husband is cute, I’ll cover the shipping. How’s that?”

“I think we can live with that, my Lady,” Jyslin agreed, giving Jason a glance, who was still glaring at her murderously.

“Coolies,” she grinned. “Alright, here’s my account number. Transfer away, and I’ll have the airskimmer personally delivered to you in three hours.”

“That soon?” Jyslin said in surprise, totally ignoring him.

“Trillane *owns* Terra, and it’s our ships doing the cargo freighting,” she reminded him. “There’s a freighter going out from here every two hours to bring back food, and they usually have plenty of free space on them. If you don’t dawdle, I can have the airskimmer on the next freighter.”

“That’s true,” Jyslin agreed.

“I’d love to, but I can’t,” Jason said sternly. “I can’t let Jyslin pay for any of it. I’m sorry, Eleri, but I can’t go through with it. I’d love to buy that skimmer, but I can’t let Jyslin do this. I just can’t.”

“Well, I like you, human, so I tell you what. I’ll strip the weapons and the shield off the skimmer and sell it to you for seventy-five, and sell the rest of it separately. I can get five thousand for them easy. Is that a deal?”

“That’s a deal, Eleri,” he said gratefully, ignoring Jyslin, who was now the one glaring murderously.

Jason split the window and accessed his personal account, then gaped in shock when he saw the standing balance.

Two hundred thousand credits!

“What the bloody hell is this?” he demanded hotly, quickly bringing up an account activity history.

“What’s the problem?” Eleri asked. “You have the money or not?”

“I have *too much*!” he said in surprise. “The bank screwed up somewhere. There’s more than twice in my account than there should be!”

“Quick, send the money before they notice!” Eleri said with a wicked laugh.

He looked over the summary. There was the initial deposit, but then there was a second one for twenty-five thousand, also from the Ministry of Technology, then a third, for one hundred thousand credits, which was again from the Ministry of Technology.

“They’re legitimate deposits,” Jyslin told him. “Look. The Ministry of Technology did both of them. Maybe they bought more of your patents, and the message just hasn’t reached you yet.”

“You’re an inventor?” Eleri asked, then she laughed. “You’ve only been with the Imperium two years, and you’re already inventing things? Damn, you must be one smart human. Well, brainboy, thumb up your transfer and you got an airskimmer.”

“Go ahead,” Jyslin urged. “The Ministry’s so big and bureaucratic, if it really was a mistake, it’ll take ten years for them to find it.”

“Well, since you can afford it, we’ll go back to the original deal of eighty for the whole skimmer, and for an extra ten thousand credits, I’ll throw in two airbikes and a habitat module. They came with the airskimmer, but I wasn’t going to sell them with it.”

“Deal,” Jyslin said quickly, and Jason nodded in agreement.

“Alright, send me your money, and I’ll send you a tracking code,” she said, her hands blurring on the keyboard just under the angle of the image. “Fure! Call the garage and have them load up my

airskimmer!” she shouted to her left. “The older one! And make sure the airbikes and the habitat module are loaded on it!”

“Where to, madam?”

“I’m shipping it to Terra,” she called. “Give me a minute and I’ll tell you where it’s going.”

“Going to take a trip, madam?”

“Something like that,” she grinned to the person off camera. “Well?” she asked him, looking at her screen again.

“Hold on,” he said. He authorized a transfer of ninety thousand credits, then input her account number. He touched the screen in a certain place, placing the flat of his thumb to it, and in a split second it had his thumbprint scanned. It approved his identity, then executed the transaction.

“Got it,” she said with a grin. “Let me change the registration over to you.”

“Why are you selling it so cheap?” he asked curiously.

“I ran up some debts I’d rather not let my mother know about,” she admitted with a grin. “And she’s been a boor lately. So, I can sell off my old skimmer for some quick cash and annoy my mother at the same time. It’s not the first time I’ve sold off old birthday presents and shit like that for some quick money. And it pisses off my mom,” she laughed. “She doesn’t believe in throwing anything away. She wants a garage full of cars and bikes and skimmers to impress the visitors, even when we don’t use most of it. She’s such a pack rat. Hell, I need money, the skimmer’s mine, and I don’t use it anymore, so why not sell it?”

“Why not indeed, my Lady?” Jyslin said lightly.

“Can it with that Lady shit,” she said rudely, but she was grinning. “Where is this going?”

“Belle Chase Marine Barracks, New Orleans, Gamia Province. Care of Jyslin Shaddale,” Jyslin told her.

She was quiet a moment, typing on her keyboard. “Alright, here you go. It’s logged as 375-293567. It’s going out on the freighter *Rubina* in an hour. It should be there in two and a half.”

“Now you have to get a class three license,” Jyslin teased him, poking him in the shoulder.

“You’re buying a skimmer and you can’t fly it?” Eleri asked, then she laughed.

“I have a pilot’s license, but not for an airskimmer,” he answered honestly. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Just remember not to use it until you get your license,” she warned. “You know, nobody’s ever jumped on one of my little sales so fast before. You’ve either been looking real hard or got real lucky.”

“A little of both,” he admitted.

“I like you, and you’re handsome. Do you share?” she asked, looking at Jyslin.

Jyslin laughed. “Sorry, I’m a possessive girl,” she said, wrapping her hands around him.

“Are all humans as cute as you?” she asked boldly.

“No, but many are cuter,” he said honestly.

“Damn. They just opened Terra to tourists, so maybe I’ll come over for a visit someday soon.” She chuckled wickedly. “I have to start conscription in a year, so I have to get as much fun in as I can right now.”

“Which is why you’re in debt,” he reasoned.

“You’re a smart one,” she winked. “One wild party too many, and poor little Eleri is in the red. Alright, I’m sending you the airskimmer’s command codes in a separate file,” she announced. “They’ll let you get into it and operate it. I’ve already put the registration in your name, so don’t worry about that. There are manuals for the skimmer inside it, and the keystick will be in the dash box. You have a place to park it?”

“I have a place,” Jyslin replied. “There’s open civilian space on the tarmac. We can go down and get an assigned space.”

“Good. Now, if you have any trouble with the ship, you know, the skimmer gets there all banged up and shit, or if there’s something missing from the skimmer, call me. There’s been a rash of merchant marines stealing stuff off of the freight lately. I’ll send you a manifest that has everything

that's supposed to be on and in that skimmer. If your list doesn't match mine, call me back."

"You're an honest one," he smiled.

"Hey, you make a deal, you honor it," she said seriously. "I got your number here—it's a floating panel. Weird."

"I'm in school."

"Oh, that explains it," she nodded.

"You're quick to pick that up."

"I don't spend *all* my time partying," she admitted with a smile. "Well, that's it. I have to get my laps in. Remember, if you have any trouble, call me."

"I will. Enjoy your swim."

She reached down and touched her vidlink, and her picture disappeared. "Well, that's quite an interesting young lady," Jyslin chuckled.

The promised file containing the airskimmer's command codes and manifest came in on his panel as a mail message, as well as the freight code number that identified the parcel. "Interesting, and a godsend," Jason said sincerely.

"Well, which would you rather do today?" she asked. "Practice or get your class three license?"

"How am I going to do that?"

"Well, you're already a pilot, and Zora's an accredited license instructor," she winked. "She worked as an instructor before her conscription. Her parents fly skimmers in a tour operation on Dona IV, the gaia planet. She grew up in a skimmer. She can fly one while sleeping."

"Gaia planet, eh? Sounds nice."

"It's *the* vacation getaway," she said bluntly. "But it's expensive."

"Naturally."

"So, want me to call Zora and arrange a training session?"

"Sure, if she doesn't mind."

"She'll get a chance to fly your skimmer. Trust me, she'll jump all over it."

They spent the time waiting practicing his sending, which seemed to fly by. They were both surprised when Jyslin got a call, and when she brought it up on her panel, it was the supply depot. "I have a *big* package here for a Jason Fox, care of you," the supply officer announced.

"We were expecting it," she answered. "An airskimmer?"

"A *nice* one," she said honestly. "Half my supply clerks are standing out on the tarmac, drooling at it."

"We'll be by to pick it up in about a half an hour," she said.

"Take your time," she said.

Jyslin disconnected her and called another number, and a rather petite, sharply cute Marine with hair the color of aqua—another odd color—appeared in the window. "Hey, sarge," the Faey answered.

"You still got your skimmer instructor license?"

"Sure, I keep it up to date."

"Good. I have a student for you." She pulled Jason up so she could see him.

"Oh, hey, you sneaky little bugger," she winked. "You want me to teach him to fly?"

"Class three," she said.

"The whole pot of *bala*, eh?" she chuckled.

"What's the differences?" he asked curiously.

"Class one is hovercars and hoverbikes with magnetic induction engines, those vehicles that have limited altitude," Zora told him. "Class two is air-only craft with spatial engines. Class three is spatial engines capable of space operation. The classes are applied retroactively as well. If you have a class three, you can run anything that's class one or two as well."

"How long will it take to get a license?" he asked.

"Depends. Jyslin told me you were a pilot, so I think you'll catch onto the flying quick. But there

is a written test that comes with it, protocols, rules, that kind of thing, and I'm not going to cheat."

"I don't need you to cheat, Zora."

"Ok, the first thing we need to do is meet, and I'll take you down to the barracks control office," she said. "I have to get you a class B learning permit that tells the system you're starting your pilot's training."

"We have to go there anyway," Jyslin said. "Jason bought an airskimmer, and it just arrived. I need to get a space assignment on the tarmac."

"You did? How did you pay for it?"

"Lieutenant Lana sent the designs on those sound itchers he stuck on you to the Ministry of Technology," Jyslin winked. "They've paid him two hundred thousand credits for it."

"Wow!" Zora exclaimed. "Well, then you can afford to pay me," she winked. "I'll meet you over at the office in fifteen minutes, okay?"

"We'll be there."

She cut the connection, then looked at him with a smile. "Well, let's go get your toy."

It took only five minutes at the control office. As Jyslin claimed one of the assigned civilian parking spaces on the tarmac, Zora had him over at a different desk, where she used her instructor's control number to get Jason an apprentice pilot's permit, or a Class B, which would allow him to pilot any civilian flying vehicle so long as an instructor was in the vehicle with him. A Class A gave him the ability to fly if any Class three licensed pilot was in the vehicle with him, and the step after that was a full class three license. There was a small red card with his name and picture on it, but the real license was a file that existed in the air-traffic computer network, called AirNet. He didn't *need* the card to legally fly.

After that, it was a trip over to the supply depot, where all packages, be them military or civilian, came into the base. The supply clerk directed them out behind the building, which was on the old tarmac where several Faey fightercraft were parked, sleek craft with narrow wings and a sharp nose. But what got his attention was the ASV-430 sitting on the tarmac behind the building, in front of which was six supply clerks. It was long, with short, forward-swept wings which were attached to the top edge of the fuselage. The craft was sleekly tapered from stern to bow, designed with an engine that didn't require aerodynamics but a fuselage that minimized air resistance when flown in aerodynamic ways. It was about thirty feet long, nine feet wide, and when it was on its landing skids it was about twelve feet high. The airskimmer was painted blue with a white stripe along the midsection of the fuselage. The stairs were already deployed, but the hatch to get in was still closed.

"Wow!" Zora said in excitement. "An ASV-430! And it's a D-model! How did you afford this? It's worth two hundred thousand credits!"

"We found a young noble looking for some fast money," Jyslin said with a chuckle. "She sold it to us for a song."

"You are *so* lucky!" Zora said accusingly. "Well, did she send you the control codes?"

Jason nodded, pulling a piece of paper out of his pocket. "Right here."

"Well, let's get started!" Zora said with an eager grin.

The first code was punched into the keypad by the hatch to get it open. Jason and Zora sat in the front two chairs as Jyslin piled into the one behind his, and she explained how the codes worked inside. The second code opened a small compartment which held the airskimmer's keystick, which was required to start the airskimmer, like the key to a car. Zora showed him how to start the skimmer, putting the keystick in its slot, then showing him how to use the third code on the page, which was the second half of the lockout system. To start an airskimmer, one had to have both the physical key and the code. Jason looked over the controls and saw that they were very similar to what he was used to. Each pilot's seat had a stick, and there was a throttle on each side panel—to his right and to her left. At least it looked like a throttle, for he saw that there were two controls there, separate ones. There were also two sets of pedals on the floor.

“Alright, here’s how it works,” Zora announced. “The control stick handles the pitch and roll of the skimmer. Back brings up the nose—“

“Down for dive, left for left roll, right for right roll. Just like an airplane.”

“Right. There are two slider controls over here. The one closest to you is always the altitude lever. Remember that. On your side, it’s the left lever. On this side, it’s the *right* lever. Always the one closest to you. Push it forward, you go down, pull it back, you go up, just like the control stick. The one on the outside is always the throttle. Push it forward to go faster, pull it back to slow down. Notice that the neutral position is two thirds of the way back, so that means that you can make her go backwards. There’s a stop tab in the throttle that makes it stop when you hit neutral. You have to push the throttle handle down and pull it back to get into reverse.”

“Okay, I got that,” he said, studying the two sliding controls.

“On the floor are two sets of pedals. The inside set controls the yaw of the skimmer.”

“The rudder.”

“An archaic term, but yes,” she nodded. “The outside pedals control the lateral movement of the skimmer. Hit the left pedal, the skimmer moves left, the right pedal to go right.”

“So it’s capable of moving in all three directions,” he realized. “On all three axes.”

“Just so,” she nodded as she started the airskimmer’s engine, which was a faint, high-pitched whine that settled into a hum. Jason saw her do it, which control she pressed on the console between them. “This starts the engine, this is for the radio. Traffic control is *always* channel nine,” she told him, pressing the radio button. The display already said it was on channel nine, so she picked up a small mike and clicked it. “Tower.”

“This is the tower,” the reply came from a small speaker on the console. “Who’s calling?”

“This is the airskimmer sitting behind the supply depot,” Zora called. “Request permission to move it to, Jyslin, which is your space?” she asked.

“Two seven two.”

“Space two seven two.”

“Space two seven two, roger. Go ahead. There is no local traffic, but don’t exceed twenty *shakra*.”

“Understood.”

“That craft is unregistered,” another voice called. “Bring up the command computer so we can register it.”

“Hold on.” She lowered the mike and pressed a few buttons on the console. “We’re linked.”

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“I brought up the airskimmer’s telemetry,” she answered. “The tower is accessing the computer to get its registration and log information. Here, look,” she said, pushing a few more buttons. A holographic monitor screen appeared above the console between them. “This is the registration. Here’s your name, showing you’re the owner.”

“That’s my ID number,” he said in surprise. “How did she get it?”

“That came off the sale. Remember, you had to *pay* for it. When she changed registration, it pulled the ID info for the person who paid for it, and it picked that up from the bank.”

“Oh.”

“Damn, this is an *armed* skimmer,” Zora said in surprise as she watched the telemetry go by, as the tower downloaded the airskimmer’s data. “You got a major bargain here, Jason. Weapons, armor, shields, this was definitely a noble’s airskimmer. They’re all paranoid.”

He watched in intense interest as Zora picked the airskimmer up off the ground with a light touch on the controls, then moved it to a parking spot in an empty area between two hangars. “Here we are. Alright, let’s walk this through from the beginning.”

He nodded, taking out a notebook from his backpack and a pencil. “Let’s go.”

Maista, 29 Shiaa, 4392, Orthodox Calendar
Saturday, 7 June 2007, Native regional reckoning
New Orleans, Gamia Province, American sector

It had to be the busiest week he had ever had in his life.

Never before had he had so many projects all going on at the same time, but at least now he had one of them off his desk. He had school, he had training with Jyslin, he had his martial arts classes, he had trying to balance having a social relationship with Jyslin against his need to keep himself a certain distance from her while at the same time she tried to close that distance, and he had also had skimmer lessons.

Those were his priority during the last week, for it was the one project which could be finished in a reasonable amount of time. Every day after school he would meet Zora at his skimmer, and they would go over what he had to know to get a class three license. There were a great many rules and regulations he had to know in order to fly safely, just as there were for an old pilot's license. But since he was also getting *space* qualification, he also had to learn all the protocols and procedures that other craft he might meet in space would use, from little ships Zora called "zip ships," two man shuttles that looked like giant medicine capsules, up to the massive cargo freighters and battleships. He had to learn the rules for them as well as rules for flying in the atmosphere, and it was a real strain with everything else he had going on. He got virtually no sleep for the entire week, for he had to study and practice sending on top of his flying lessons.

The flying part was nothing. It took him all of an hour to get used to the extra controls, and by the end of that hour he had gotten used to the handling characteristics of the skimmer. He'd lifted it off the tarmac a bit clumsily, but had set it down two hours later just as gently and safely as Zora would have. He had a habit of not using the extra controls, falling back on old habits, and that really annoyed Zora. But she couldn't deny the fact that he could fly the ship safely and well, and she had signed off on the practical part of his license requirements that very night. All that was left was taking the written tests.

That was what took so much preparation. He'd forced Zora to schedule him for the tests after school today, only days away, and she'd reluctantly agreed. They spent four hours each evening practicing flying, going over rules, and having her quiz him on procedures. They flew all around the planet as she took him to a certain area and let him fly to see if he knew what to do, but the truly amazing part of it for him was when she took him into space and had him do the same thing. Flying in space had honestly freaked him out at first, for they'd gone through weightlessness, and all air resistance was removed from the ship, which radically altered how it responded to the controls. The controls were unbelievably sensitive in space, where the lightest touch could send one careening miles off in a direction one did not really intend to go. She walked him through all his space procedures, from approach to communication to rights of way, and had even made him execute a landing in a Faey battleship's landing bay six different times. Three of those landings were practice, two were simulated emergencies and one was a *real* emergency, which only came about when Zora had told him she was going to the bathroom, then disabled the control circuits once she was out of his sight. But Jason had done everything he was supposed to do, by the book, and that had impressed Zora just as much as it had impressed the Faey traffic controller on the battleship where they had landed. She seemed certain that he would panic and crash the ship against the hull or something.

The tests were brutal. They weren't straightforward, they were scenarios where he had to make decisions based on the information provided to him, a practical exam using theory instead of actual hands-on work. But they were over now, all three of them, and he stood outside the air traffic control center on Belle Chasse Marine Barracks holding a little blue plastic card that had his name and identification number on it, a picture of him in the upper right hand corner, an embedded microchip in the lower right, and the numeral **3**, in a nice large typeset and in shimmering gold that clashed with the blue of the card, right beside where it said *Class*:

It was his class three license. Jason could now *legally* fly his skimmer anywhere he wanted to go.

It was such a heady feeling, and for the first time in years, he felt that same sense of freedom he had once had when he had had his father's plane. He could now pack up his skimmer and fly anywhere on Earth if he wanted to. He could spend tomorrow in the Alps, or on the deserted beach of a tiny island in the South Pacific, or among the penguins of Antarctica. Or he could go to all three in the span of a single day. By using an orbital vector, going out into space and orbiting until he re-entered the atmosphere, the same type of navigational vectors that ballistic missiles used, he could get anywhere on Earth with his skimmer in five hours. If he was willing to go as fast as an ICBM, he could be there in an hour, but that was potentially lethal to the people in the skimmer, and it was very hard on the skimmer as well.

It was too late now to think about it, but it was just so *nice* to know he could do it. It was nearly ten o'clock, and he was bone-tired. He had a test in calculus Monday and a project due in lab on Tuesday, which he hadn't even started yet. The project was to build a device that used a fusion pack that was not a device already in use. In other words, they had to *invent* something. It didn't have to be fancy, and it could do something that an existing machine already did, but they had to design and build it themselves. Most people in the class would just build a machine that made a light turn on or something, he knew they would, and that would be more than acceptable. Professor Ailan had already told him that he didn't *have* to do this lab, for his subsonic inducers were an original creation, and thus fulfilled the course requirement. He already had an A for the lab, but he wanted to do it anyway, for two reasons. Firstly, he didn't want to give any students any reason to get mad at him, and he also didn't want to attract undue attention to himself right now. By not doing a project, the students would get ticked at him, and many of them were already a little upset with him because they all now knew that he was dating Jyslin. Some of them had seen his war with Jyslin and the Marines as an uplifting morale boost, and some of them had taken it personally that he had seemingly totally caved in. It would also focus attention on him because of that, and given that he was still learning how his telepathy worked, he wanted *no* undue attention, and he also wanted *no* external stress of any kind. Emotional outbursts could trigger an unintentional use of his power, and that might get him caught. So he wanted to take no chances that a pissed off student would take a swing at him or make him angry. The risk was just too great.

He just *had* to go somewhere tomorrow. It didn't matter where, he just had to, to celebrate getting his license. He'd bring his panel and his books and fill up the skimmer's cabin refrigerator and take a little trip. He'd study for his test and come up with his project somewhere else. He had no idea where, and he really didn't want to yet. He was pondering just throwing a dart at a map and going wherever the dart landed.

Getting a cab wasn't easy after curfew, but given that he had permission to be out after curfew, the one that did come after calling his third cab company arrived very quickly. There was virtually no traffic on the road, as it was after curfew, and the cabby had no delays reaching the base. Jyslin told him to call her after he was done and she'd take him home, but when he did he got no answer. She must have fallen asleep, and he wasn't going to keep calling her until she answered the phone. He could get home just as easily in a cab.

"Got yer permission card?" the cabby asked immediately after rolling down the car window. He was a rough looking black man with wide, pudgy features, one of his front teeth missing, a scar on his lip over the missing tooth, and a battered old *Saints* cap on his head. "You ain't touchin' my cab unless you got it."

"Right here," he said, handing it to the man.

He glanced at it, and his scowl lightened immediately. "Good 'nuff. Hop in," he invited as he unlocked the doors to his cab. Jason piled into the cab and buckled his seat belt as the man turned around on the old tarmac that was used as a parking lot. "Where to? And what you doing out here on the blueskin base?"

“Tulane, and I had to take a test,” he answered. “School thing.”

“Shit, they keepin’ y’all out this late now? Least they coulda done was bussed y’all home ‘er somethin’.”

“Since when do they care how we get to and from class?” he asked.

The man laughed. “God’s own truth that. You fuhst or last out?”

“Only one out,” he answered. “I’m the only one who had to take the test.”

“Da-yum,” the man chuckled. “That musta been hell’a nervewrackin’.”

“You have no idea,” Jason agreed with a relieved sigh.

The man laughed again. “Hey, least it’s over.”

“Amen.”

The man laughed again as they turned out onto Belle Chasse Highway, and said nothing more.

At first he thought he was going to have a nice quiet evening, but things like that never seem to go anywhere. The first distraction came when he got home and found a message waiting on his panel. It was the Imperial Bank, and they were asking him if he wanted to take his account and put it into an interest-bearing plan. That made him curious, so he checked his account once again.

And found that it again had too much money in it. Now there was nearly *two hundred thousand credits* in the bank. He checked the account history and found that the Ministry of Technology had again deposited a hundred thousand credits into his account. He hadn’t touched the money there outside of five hundred credits to pay Zora for her lessons, and now it had gone beyond curiosity. Now, he had to find out what the hell was going on. So, he used CivNet to track down a contact number for the Ministry of Technology on Draconis itself, and then he called them.

As he expected, he got a holographic image of a Faey that was going to route the call, just like an automated answering system. He tried to navigate through their rather confusing menu of choices, until he somehow got hold of a live person. “Accounting,” the male Faey said in a boring voice, staring blankly at his monitor.

“Hello, I need to find out about some payments that the Ministry has made to me,” he said.

“Are they late?”

“They’re *too many*,” he answered. “They keep depositing money in my account, and I want to know why.”

The man chuckled. “Just don’t say anything,” he winked.

“No, I want to know what’s going on,” he said.

“Alright then. Name and I.D. number please.”

Jason gave him the information, and he split the display so half was his face and the other half was written record. “Well, they’re not a mistake,” he said. “There was the initial patent purchase of twenty-five thousand, then an expansion payment of seventy-five. They pay that when they change your original design to create a new system that works differently than the original patent, but is based on your patent. Then there was a usage fee of one hundred thousand.”

“What’s that?”

“That means that they’ve built something to actually use your design in a practical manner,” he replied. “Subsonic—hell, that’s *you*?”

“What do you mean?”

The man laughed. “Friend, you’re going to be a very wealthy man,” he told him. “From the records here, they’ve split your initial concept and patent into two major subdivisions, and both are actively being used. The first design is currently being mass-produced. The water planet of Aigar VIII has ordered a few million of your subsonic communicators. Seems that the water carries the sound much better than any other kind of communication technique.” He switched to another page of data. “There’s also a second design they’ve built on your patent that they use as a subsonic extermination device to kill the larva of deadly insects on Threshkal II. That was the second usage fee that they deposited into your account. In a few cycles, you’re going to start getting royalty deposits as soon as

the manufacturer that's producing the communicators starts shipping them. You get one half of one percent of the sale price of each unit. That's the standard inventor's royalty."

Jason was a bit startled. He leaned back in his chair and stared at the screen. "So...the money's mine."

"All yours, and no, we didn't screw up," the man laughed. "Your subsonic device is the current rage with the boys over at R&D. They keep building replicas of the itcher and sticking them on the cars of the bureaucrats. It's gotten to where the paper-pushers don't want to park anywhere near the Ministry."

Jason laughed. "Well, I'm glad someone's having fun with it."

"They certainly are. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"No, no, that's it," he answered. "Thank you for explaining that to me. I was going a little crazy."

He chuckled. "No problem. Have a good morning."

"Night here."

"Well, then have a good night," he said with a chuckle, then the call was terminated.

He was a little surprised. The money was legal, and there was going to be royalties. One half of one percent didn't sound like much until he realized that the man had said that there were going to be two million produced. As long as he didn't go crazy with the money, it would last him for a very long time.

After that, he sat a while and brooded over Jyslin. He knew he shouldn't be going out with her, socialize with her, but he just couldn't help it. He *liked* her, and just the invitation of sex was enough to send him running in her direction. He felt weak for that, weak that he was compromising his principles just to go out with Jyslin. He didn't see her as the Imperium, but he couldn't trust her entirely yet either. She'd shown she was worthy of some trust, but not the kind of trust that he would need to see in order to forego his philosophical stance and accept her as more than a passing friend. He was being weak, and he knew it. He was compromising his principles to satisfy his personal wishes and desires. He *wanted* to be Symone's friend, he *wanted* to go out with Jyslin. He wanted even more when it came to Jyslin, but he couldn't have it, and he was just fooling himself by doing what he was doing with her now. He was letting her seduce him into going against what he felt and believed, but it was so hard not to get involved with her. She was training him in how to control his power, and them being thrown together like that gave her all kinds of opportunity to both sway him by trying to change his concept of her, and also to just plain old tempt him into bed.

But he could only think about that for so long before it became a self-repeating loop of accusations and frustrations, so he laid back on the bed and thought about where he wanted to go tomorrow. That was a pleasant enough thought, and it was enough to lure him into sleep.

Heaven.

Heaven was sitting on a beach with the sun shining down on the sand, the waves crashing on the beach, a steady cooling breeze blowing in off the water, and him sitting under the wing of his airskimmer with a panel in his lap, a beer in a coozie on a blanket beside his chair, and him being a thousand miles away from all his troubles. The beach was about the only place that was hot that he was ever willing to go.

Of course, he couldn't enjoy that kind of heaven alone, so the very first thing he did when he woke up at five was go upstairs and knock on Tim's door. He was there, and he was alone for a change, opening the door with bleary eyes. "What?" he demanded sleepily.

"Get up and call Symone," he told him abruptly. "We're going to the beach."

"Man, Biloxi beach sucks, Jason," he complained.

"We're not going to Biloxi. We're going to Hawaii."

"What? How the—oh, you got your license?"

Jason nodded. "Pack. I want to get there to see the sun rise."

"Hell yes!" he said with sudden alertness. "Symone's gonna kill me for calling her this early."

"She'll get over it. Now hurry up."

"Yes, sir!" he barked with a grin, then rushed back into his tiny room to call his girlfriend.

Jason went back downstairs and packed up a small bag with what he wanted to take; swimsuit, towel, sunblock, sunglasses, bermuda shirt he saved just for excursions to the beach, and a straw hat. Then he packed his panel in with his lab notes so he could work on his project, and he was ready. He debated calling Jyslin and asking her along for several moments. On the one hand, calling her was doing nothing but yet again knuckling to his own desires over his perceived duty. On the other hand, he was taking very important lessons from her, and keeping in her good graces right now was a matter of some importance. If he didn't invite her along, she would likely be extremely pissed off, and that was something he couldn't really allow to have happen. Though he hated how he kept bowing his morals to pursue his relationship with her, at the same time he was more or less forced to maintain the relationship simply to protect himself. It was a delicate line on which he had a swordfish hooked, and he had to reel it in just right to avoid having the line snap.

He pulled his panel back out and placed the call, already kicking himself for doing it. But it was necessary. "You'd better have a damn good reason for calling me at five in the morning, Jason," she growled at him over the panel. The image of her showed that she'd been sleeping, for she wore an oversized shirt to bed that hung down to her knees. Her gray eyes were narrowed against the light of the lamp in front of her, shining into her face.

"Well, you *finally* woke up," he told her with an arch smile.

"I was awake last night. I got called in. Mobility exercise. I tried to call your panel, but you had it turned off."

"I took it with me, but they made me turn it off," he answered.

"That explains it. I just got back in a couple of hours ago. I'd *just* gone to sleep when you called me."

"Sorry, I didn't know. I was going to see if you wanted to go to the beach, but—"

"The beach? Hell yes!" she said brightly. "I take it from you asking me that you got your license last night. Congratulations, hon."

"Thanks. I thought you were sleepy."

"I can sleep on the flight over. Which beach?"

"Hawaii," he answered.

"I'll be over in twenty minutes. Oh, the skimmer seats eight, right?"

"Tim and Symone and nobody else," he said immediately.

"You're intent on that, I take it?"

"Completely."

She sighed. "Alright. I'll be over as soon as I find my bikini and pack a bag."

"Don't bother. I'll call you right before we leave, and you can meet us at the skimmer. Symone's coming over, and she can take us to the base."

"That works. See you in a bit." She gave him a wolfish smile. "I'm going to wear my dental floss."

"It's your sunburn," he shrugged before ending the call.

Symone was all for the idea of going to a beach, and she was over about ten minutes after Tim called her. She was carrying a woven straw bag with her swimsuit and some other things in it, though she had it covered at the top with a towel and he couldn't really see what she had. She was almost insufferably bouncy, and her banging around and loud shouting at Tim to get him moving woke up half the dorm. Jason called Jyslin just before they left and told her it'd be about a forty-five minutes before they got there, and they all piled into Symone's rather beaten-up Toyota. Symone wasn't all that good of a driver. "The barracks?" she asked as she buckled her seat belt.

"We have to hit the all-night Wal-Mart and the Winn-Dixie first," Jason told her. "We need food,

and I'd like a cooler to put out on the beach. I don't want to have to run into the skimmer and hit the fridge every time I want something."

"Good plan. Have sunblock?" He nodded. "Okay. I want to get a scooby mask."

Jason laughed. "*Scuba* mask," he corrected.

"Whatever," she said with a wink as she pulled out of the dorm parking lot.

Their shopping was very quick, for Jason knew exactly what he wanted, and so did everyone else. He bought a cooler, a small grill they could stow in the cargo hold, grilling supplies, four beach chairs, two beach loungers, and a large beach blanket at Wal-Mart. Symone got her scuba mask, and Tim bought a beach ball and a portable volleyball net and ball. Then they ran to Winn-Dixie and picked up all the things they'd need to grill hamburgers and hot dogs, bought some munchies, junk food, a couple of cases of soda, ice, and two cases of beer, then, just before they left, Symone ran back and bought two more cases. "Taking beer home is just fine, but you should *never* run out," she winked at him. It got to be a tight squeeze in the car with all the junk they had in it now, but nobody complained as Symone raced to the Marine barracks, squealing the tires as she pulled up to the gate.

"Watch your speed!" the guard barked. "Passes, please."

Both Symone and Jason gave her their cards, and she gave Tim a long look. "Who's signing him in?" she asked.

"I am," Symone said.

"Business?"

"We're just parking the car and getting on a skimmer," she answered. "We're going to spend the day at the beach."

The guard sighed. "Got room for one more?" she asked forlornly.

Symone laughed. "Sorry hon, we're just the passengers," she replied, taking a panel from the woman and signing it with a stylus.

"Well, have a good one," she said, taking the panel back and stepping away from the car, then waving them through.

Jason had to direct Symone to the parking space of his skimmer, and Jyslin was there waiting for them, standing by her car. She had on a pair of loose white shorts and a very loose see-through shirt that wasn't meant to be buttoned up the front, and beneath it she wore a rather small white bikini top. She had a floppy hat on her head and was holding a cloth bag that looked to be a bit heavy. Jason directed her to the parking spot by Jyslin, for his skimmer parking spot had two spots for cars also assigned to it, and she jammed the brakes and skidded to halt. "Damn, girl, learn how to drive!" Jyslin barked at her. "Did you remember food?"

"Food and a grill," Jason told her as he opened the car door.

"Well, then we have too much food," she laughed. "I brought some crab legs and junk food."

"We have room for it," Jason assured her. "Let's get packed up and go."

They loaded up the skimmer, packing the food in the refrigerator at the back of the passenger cabin, on the left of the door to the lavatory on the back wall, stowing the stuff they wouldn't need in the cargo compartment, then stowing their bags in the cubby spaces in the cabin. "Alright, everyone strap in and we'll be on our way," he said as he jumped into the pilot's seat and inserted the keystick. He quickly and expertly started the engines and ran the preflight checks as the others got ready to go, and then he brought up the tower on the radio. "Tower," the female voice called over the speaker, as a sharp, fox-like face appeared on his console, a mature Faey woman with greenish hair tied back in a ponytail behind her. This was a civilian Faey, one of a very few that worked on the planet.

"Skimmer CS-18 requesting permission to take off," he called.

"Destination?"

"I don't have an *exact* destination yet, but we're going to Hawaii," he answered. "I want to find a secluded beach out there somewhere. Can I get clearance into Oahu and work it from there?"

"Hold a second, let me call it through," she said, and her face winked off the console.

"I thought you had to have a definite flight plan," Tim said.

"Not under the Faey system," he said. "I just need clearance into Oahu, the traffic control hub for the Hawaiian region. They can give me clearance from there, or make me land."

"Oh."

The face appeared in the console again. "You have clearance into Oahu, CS-18," she answered. "Flight lanes are open, control is dynamic. Avoid sector 14-43, and stay under 25,000 *shakra* through division 12."

"Division 12, roger," he answered, making a note on a small panel to the right of the console holding her image. "I don't think I'll be going through 14-43."

"What's your projected route?"

"I'm thinking sub-orbital arc along the southern trajectory," he answered her. "But I'll have to make it a double-dipper to pass through division 12."

"Affirmative on that," she agreed with a nod, looking to the side. "Weather looks calm along all southern windows."

"Alright then, local?"

"No unusual restrictions and no inbound or outbound traffic. You hit us during a lull."

"Lucky me," he answered.

"Alright then, you're cleared at your leisure. Have a good journey."

"I'm going to the beach. I know I will."

She chuckled. "Got room for one more?"

"Sorry, we don't have time to wait for you to get a suit," he told her with a chuckle.

"Hell, I'll go naked," she told him.

He laughed. "Maybe next time," he told her.

"Good journey," she said with a smile. "Next contact with hand-off. Tower out."

"What did all that mean?" Tim asked with a chuckle.

Jason lightly picked the skimmer up off the tarmac, and retracted the landing skids as he turned the nose upwards and southwest. "She cleared us to fly to Hawaii. Right now she's putting me on the board, and the global traffic system will keep track of my locator beacon. When I'm about to pass outside of the control area for this region, they'll radio me and let me know. That way, if I have to call traffic control, I know who to call."

"Oh, alright. "What is division 12?"

"It's an area of latitude," he answered as he kicked up the speed, and they all sunk into their seats a bit. "Division 12 is an area just off the west coast of America and out about 500 miles. I'll have to descend to under 25,000 *shakra* before we enter that area and fly under the ceiling until we pass through."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but they've called the control, and I have to obey the rules," he answered. "We're going to do a high arc out to California, descend and stay under the ceiling, then do another short hop out to Hawaii," he explained.

“Why arcs?”

“The higher we go, the faster we can fly,” Jyslin answered for him, glancing back at Tim. “Skimmers are subject to air resistance, so by going into thinner air, we can travel faster.”

“Actually, the skimmer can go that fast at any altitude, but it’s hard on the fuselage,” Jason corrected her. “And they don’t like you to break the sound barrier under 20,000 *shakra*. It’s an unwritten rule of courtesy.”

“Sonic booms?” Tim asked, and Jason nodded. “I thought so.”

The Faey traffic system was surprisingly loose. All he had to do was tell them where he wanted to go, and they more or less let him get there along any path he chose. He was passed to the Brownsville controller after passing out of the New Orleans control area, then he was passed off to a Mexican town called Zajuatineo, which was on the Pacific coast. He had to descend and get under the ceiling once he hit division 12, then he ascended again on the outside as he was passed to Easter Island control, doing a pilot’s arc to Hawaii. They were moving west, through time zones that were earlier and earlier, and the sun actually set in the east behind them and sent them back into darkness as they moved towards Hawaii. They reached Hawaii control about 5 a.m. local time, and Jason slowed down, put it on autopilot, and accessed Civnet to peruse detailed atlas maps of Hawaii. He and Jyslin pored over them, then Tim and Symone joined in with panels that swung out over the seats from the fuselage sides, just under the windows, as they all looked for a good beach.

“Here, here, Molikakaiha,” Symone called. “It’s one of the tiny islands, it says it’s uninhabited, and it’s public land. The beach there is open.”

Jyslin accessed the data for that island and nodded. “It says it’s a wildlife refuge, but not closed,” she affirmed. “It specifically says that the beaches are allowed to be used by boaters.”

“That might not be isolated enough,” Jason said, then he grunted when he saw that the island, little more than a fly speck, was at the extreme western side of the island chain. That island chain was nearly a thousand miles long, which put the island literally out by itself. The nearest inhabited island was nearly two hundred miles away. “I take it back. I’ll call in and ask.” He turned on the radio. “Oahu control, CS-18.”

“Tower,” came a male voice, and a young Faey man appeared on his console.

“I have a destination, and a question,” he said. “Destination is Molikakaiha. Civnet says it’s a wildlife sanctuary, but also says the beaches are public. Is it still public?”

“Hold on,” he said, looking down and typing on his keyboard. “Yah, still public. You’re cleared to destination Molikakaiha. There are no local restrictions and no traffic south of Oahu line. If you cross north of Oahu line, be aware of restricted air space around Oahu proper and Pearl Harbor and call in for further instructions.”

“Understood. CS-18 out.”

“Tower out.”

“And that meant?” Tim asked.

“It meant that we can’t fly north of the Oahu control station without calling for information about flight restrictions,” Jason answered. “A line is a border that runs through the control station itself, and he defined which way it runs by telling me that north of it was restricted space.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

“I’m so glad,” Jason said dryly.

Molikakaiha was a ribbon of sand with some trees in the middle, and a very small, steep-sloped extinct volcano at its center. Jason circled the island twice until he found a good place to land, and gently touched down about a twenty yards from the waterline on a flat sand plateau whose edge gently angled down to the water, just to the edge of the treeline of palm, coconut, and banana trees. After he put the stairs down, they all filed out and set up their camp. Jason threw his large beach blanket over the sand under the wing, and Jyslin set up the grill as Symone and Tim set up the volleyball net. Then Jason filled up the cooler with ice, drinks, and some chilled snacks. The air was still a bit cool, and the breeze was strong, but he didn't care at all. After that, they put up the habitat module behind the skimmer, so they could have access to its bathroom and shower without having to go into the skimmer. The habitat module was nothing more than a glorified tent, but it did have a shower and a bathroom in it, so that made it very, very handy. After they got it all done, they sat down in the chairs and faced east, then watched the sun rise over the ocean.

That single thing made the entire trip worth it, for it was a truly beautiful sunrise, with the perfect colors filtering through the slightly hazy sky, giving color to the air itself. They watched until the sun became too bright to see, then they donned their sunglasses and got down to some serious relaxation. Jyslin revealed the rest of her bikini, and the term *dental floss* pretty accurately described the back of it. It was a thong bikini, little more than a G-string, in his opinion, which showed off her virtually every square inch of her very shapely backside. Symone's bikini wasn't much better, a black bikini with little fringe along the straps of the bottom, which was also a spaghetti-strap thong cord that disappeared into the cleft of her buttocks. Black fringe hung down partially over her bottom, presenting an illusion that something was being hidden when in actuality it showed off everything. Tim couldn't keep his eyes off her backside, and Symone enjoyed every second of his avid attention. Those two made Jason's bermuda shorts seem positively prudish, and Tim's higher-legged swim trunks conservative.

Jason was an avid swimmer, for swimming was a great way to beat the occasional heat in a Maine summer, but he wasn't used to swimming in the ocean. The water temperature of the ocean around Maine never got much over 60 degrees, which was a major difference from the warm water lapping at the beach here in Hawaii. The salt water was something new and a bit surprising. They all went for a swim, and Jyslin and Symone paid for their choice of swim suits very quickly. Thong bikinis made them look sexy, but all that motion made them bind and pinch in some *extremely* sensitive areas, and repetitive motion could cause that cord that ran down into the cleft to chafe the inside cleft of their buttocks. They raced up to the habitat module and took a shower immediately after they were done swimming, and looked much more comfortable when they came out.

But the trip wasn't only about having fun, so while Jyslin cooked some breakfast, and Tim and Symone played one on one volleyball, Jason pulled out his panel and books and started pondering his upcoming project. He wanted to design something interesting, but not something that would take forever to build. He pondered on it after Jyslin gave him some breakfast, as well as after Tim and Symone got tired of volleyball and laid out on towels in the sun while Jyslin sat beside him in his shady spot under the wing of his skimmer and read a book, almost until noon. What he eventually decided on was a magnetic flux propulsion gadget, that would pick up a piece of iron and carry it along a track, just like a monorail. The only difference here was that the one he was thinking of building would throw the metal across the room. It was a magnetic slingshot, something he remembered seeing in the Ministry of Technology databases when he was researching them for a project he'd done for Ailan at the start of the semester. The design was a thousand years old, obsolete by modern standards. He realized that he still had a copy of those specs in his panel's memory, and he brought it up again to look at it.

It was very small, built from outdated components, and according to the application parameters, it

was designed to launch small, hand-sized probes from ships for extreme distance scanning. It could fire the probes at something like twenty thousand miles an hour, designed back when the Faey sensor systems were primitive compared to what they were now. It was an ancient, obsolete technology.

At least as a *probe launcher*.

Jason studied the design. All he'd need was a modest PPG, some flux cabling around a Tritanium core, a loader, and some kind of recoil absorber mechanism, and he'd have a perfect *weapon*.

He blinked. Why was he thinking about a weapon? It had never really crossed his mind before, but looking down at the specs, he could just see the potential here. It could be a weapon, and a damned *good* one.

Yes, it would work. When fired at twenty thousand miles an hour, a round fired from that gun would go through *anything*. It would even go through polymerized Neutronium, the current standard armor of front-line Faey war machines. A steel-jacketed lead round, a heavy metal of some kind coated with a magnetic metal, would serve as the ammunition.

There was a name for what he was considering, and it took him a few minutes to remember it.

A *rail gun*.

He could build it, and the materials would very easy to acquire. The magnetic catapult and a spatial compressor behind it to absorb the recoil without having the weapon rip off the shoulder of the person firing it, a case, a place for a weapons clip and the PPG so both could be easily exchanged. Yes, it would work. He started sketching out a design quickly. He could base it on an M-16 case, or maybe an HK227, or even the Faey's MPAR-9, their current plasma rifle design. Put the catapult module towards the back, just before the stock, and set the recoil absorber in the stock's front section. Put the catapult on a floating mount that caused the entire assembly to pull back after a shot, which would allow the next round to feed in from the bottom. Spiralling the flux cable around the core would produce rifling to spin the round to provide accuracy, and the weapon's barrel would serve to further improve aim—wait, he'd better install some flux cabling in there to keep the round from making contact with the barrel. A bare scrape might make the entire weapon disintegrate. Put in a crude microprocessor and some sensors to prevent the weapon from firing if it detected a jam or malfunction, add an ammo counter and maybe a rangefinder or some kind of night vision scope, and he'd have a functional weapon. All he had to do was make rounds, using some kind of heavy metal and coating it with steel, which was both durable and magnetic.

Wait...he'd be making his first rounds with a replicator. Iron was a replicatable element, was moderately heavy, and it was magnetic. Titanium was *also* a replicatable element, and though it wasn't magnetic, it was extremely strong, much stronger than steel. If he swapped it around, created an iron round coated with laminated titanium, he'd have a very strong round that wouldn't shatter from air resistance after going twenty feet. And the best part was both materials could be *replicated*, allowing him to crank out an unlimited number of them cheaply. He'd just need a replicator and a molecular sprayer to do it. Just replicate the iron round in the pre-determined shape, make the titanium, and then the spayer would coat the round in layers that would bond and form an armored shell much tougher than pure, unlaminated titanium.

He fleshed out his crude design a bit more, adding in a display on the back of the weapon, then a scope mount, then settling on a place for the weapon's processor. He mentally went over what it would cost to build it. He'd need about four yards of flux cabling, a class V PPG, a low-end processor like an MG-14, a very small display panel, and a replicator. The replicator could make the parts for about half of the weapon, such as the case and some of its mechanics. When it was all said and done, he thought, he'd end up with a weapon that only weighed about seven pounds, and if he made its outside case out of a composite carbon, a poly-plex compound, or laminated titanium, he could shave another half a pound off of it. He could buy the parts he'd need to build it for about two hundred credits or so. The most expensive part would be the Tritanium core, because it would have to be hollowed out, and that would run him about ninety credits.

But...the core could be *replicated*. Tritanium was merely an isotope of Titanium, and thus was within the ability of a replicator to produce. He'd need one of those special X-model replicators, the ones capable of high-end replication, but it was more than possible.

Without a replicator, it would cost him about five hundred credits, since he'd have to order them. But if he bought his own replicator, it would cost about two hundred. The replicator itself wouldn't be cheap. A decent one was about five thousand credits, and an X-model that could replicate exotic isotopes would run him nine thousand.

He considered the parts and labor required to build a prototype. He'd need a programmable processor board, something very, very small yet capable of at least twenty simultaneous functions. He'd have to write a program for loading, firing, error detection, calibration, diagnostics, display graphics, and sensor operation. He'd need access to a replicator to produce the case and mechanical parts, and that...well, that was it. He could build it by hand using the parts. The program would take him about a day to write, since it wouldn't be a complicated one.

He almost deleted the program and notes in a sudden fit of uncertainty. Why would he even want to build it? For the glory of the human race? He didn't *need* this thing. If he really wanted a weapon, he could simply buy a plasma rifle. He had the money. So there was no real need for this weapon, there was only the challenge of seeing if he could do it.

Then again, some part of the back of his mind realized that having the ability to build a weapon capable of penetrating Faey armor and do it vey cheaply and quickly might be something he'd want to know about.

He would build it. He just needed to design the parts and get access to a school replicator, which he could do tomorrow in Professor Ailan's lab. Ailan would let him use the replicator without any questions about what he was doing, even if it wasn't for his project.

It took him about five hours to finalize the design. It would be a fairly simplistic device, with very little in the way of moving parts or complicated machinery, relying on the magnetic thrust of the catapult. The only real mechanical part of it was the round loading, passing the round from the clip to the chamber. He decided on a round that looked just like a regular bullet, because of the characteristics of air when something travelled at the speed that this was going to travel. At supersonic speed, air became *laminar*, acting as if it was made of differing layers, and the round had to be able to move through that. A standard rifle round that would have been used in any gun would work just fine, as long as it had a long tapered body. The back was left flat to produce drag, which would limit the range of the round to about four miles, he deduced after doing a few calculations. The drag created by the sharp corner at the end would eventually destabilize the round in flight, causing it to tumble, and at that speed even a round encased in laminated titanium was going to shatter when it turned its wide edge into the wind. If the round didn't break up, it would conceivably travel for miles and miles, and he didn't want to run the risk of a round fired from New Orleans conceivably coming down and killing someone in California. It was either shape the round so it would effectively self-destruct or implant a charge in the round to destroy it after so many seconds.

It was about lunchtime, and Tim was studying for a test he had tomorrow as Jyslin and Symone laid out in the sun, taking advantage of the isolation to do so nude. They weren't afraid of sunburn because Jyslin had brought along a chemical compound with her in an aerosol that instantly healed sunburn when applied to the skin. Tim had already discovered that it also worked on humans, so he had stayed out until he was as red as a lobster, sprayed himself down, which converted his burned skin into a very dark tan, then he rushed back out into the sun once more.

"What have you been doing over here, Jayce?" Tim asked curiously. "You've been at it all day. Your project?"

"It started out like that, but now it's something of a personal challenge," he replied.

"What is it?" he asked. Jason offered to show him his panel, so Tim got up and went around his chair to look over his shoulder. "Holy shit, is that a *gun*?" he asked.

“Yes and no,” he answered. “It’s something I found in the Ministry of Technology archives. I’m just modifying the design a little. I want to see if I can make it work.”

I hope you’re lying, Jyslin sent to him, doing so in a tight manner that meant that only he would hear it. He didn’t deign to reply, mainly because he hadn’t quite worked out the trick of sending that tightly yet. If he answered her, Symone would hear it, and then he’d have way too much explaining to do.

“It’s based on the idea of a magnetic catapult,” Jason explained. “This array of flux cabling creates a magnetic pulse that picks up the projectile and launches it. The original design was meant to launch probes the size of an orange from starships. I’m adapting it to fire rounds about the size of a .30 caliber bullet.

“How far can it throw a bullet?”

“That depends on crosswinds, the strength of the round, and the angle,” he replied. “If I had a strong enough round that could survive the trip, I could shoot one from here that would land in Nevada.”

“Bullshit,” Tim laughed, then he gave Jason a startled look when he saw Jason’s sober expression. “You’re serious!”

“Totally,” he answered. “I already worked out the projectile velocity. Using ten gauge flux cabling triple-wrapped and spiralled around the core to produce rifling, and a class V PPG, it’ll have an initial muzzle velocity of 27,495 miles per hour. The rounds I think I’ll use will have a shape that will make them self-destruct after they go about four miles, but they’d go as long as the round could survive the air resistance if I used a different shape.”

“Holy shit,” Tim said, then he laughed. “What would you use it for?”

“Nothing,” he shrugged. “I just want to see if I can build it, and if it’ll actually work. The math says it will, but sometimes math and reality don’t match up.”

“Why build it if you never use it?” Symone called from her blanket. “Hell, sell it to the Ministry of Technology. They buy any weapon patents they find, even if they don’t use them, and I doubt they’d use that. I mean really, what use is a gun that’s not an energy weapon? It probably won’t even go through titanium armor.”

“Because I don’t want to build something that the Imperium uses to kill people with,” he answered flatly. If she only knew what it meant for a round to be fired with that kind of velocity.

Jyslin obviously did, for she sat up and looked back at him curiously. *You’re serious*, she sent. *That thing will work? Like really work?*

He nodded to her.

Damn, Jason, I’d send that to the Ministry. They’d pay you a bloody fortune for the design if you can make it work. A weapon using a Class V PPG that can penetrate any armor we have, that would take at least a ten megajoule shield to stop? They’d make you a damn noble.

“I do need to work on my project,” Jason said, giving Jyslin a stern look. “Maybe I’ll do what everyone else is doing. A device that turns on a light.”

Tim gave him a look, then laughed so hard that he almost fell over. “After making those inducers, you’d show up in class with a *light*? Ailan would skin you!” Tim wheezed. “He’s expecting you to come in with something *titanic*, like a device that totally explains women or something!”

“Watch it, love,” Symone said sharply, rolling on her side and looking back at them, her sunglasses pulled down her nose and staring over the rim at them.

“Now you’re talking about an impossibility,” Jason told him mildly. “There’s no device that could ever explain women. It would work on logic, and no device that operates on logic could possibly understand creatures whose very natures are *illogical*.”

“I think someone needs to be dunked in the ocean,” Symone mentioned idly to Jyslin.

“It’s starting to sound like it,” she agreed conversationally.

“I’m so completely afraid of two naked women,” Jason said with scathing disregard, saving his

work and shifting to another schematic file. “This is what I’m turning in for the school project.”

“What is it?”

“Something everyone in school would kill to own,” he answered.

“What?”

“Well, it’s one of my unused ideas for back when I was battling the Marines. It’s a device that will cause any Faey that gets within a hundred feet of you to lose her hair.”

“What?” Tim gasped, then he laughed riotously. “How in the hell did you figure that out?”

“Well, Faey have a diet that’s not exactly like ours,” he answered. “They eat things from other planets, and those foods have chemical compounds in them that stay in their bodies. There’s a specific chemical compound called Selenium RiboDioxide that doesn’t occur naturally in humans, because it’s found in fish that are only found on Draconis, and like virtually every Faey eats them because they import it out to all Faey worlds. This compound gets used by the Faey’s body, and it ends up in their hair. Just like humans have traces of gold and arsenic in their hair, Faey build up this compound in their hair when they eat that fish. So would humans if they ate that fish, for that matter. Well, this device emits a harmonic tetrayon pulse that causes that particular compound to change into a kind of acid that only reacts to the organic material that makes up hair, but won’t hurt living flesh. So, turn it on, and anyone who’s eaten that fish even once during the last year will have his or her hair literally melt.”

Tim gave him a startled look, then howled in laughter, falling onto the blanket and kicking his feet. “Jason, that’s, that’s, that’s *EVIL!*” he shouted, then he totally lost it.

“You were going to use that on *me*?” Jyslin flared hotly, putting her hand on her auburn hair defensively, but Symone was too busy laughing to care.

“When you said you cheat, I decided to play dirty,” he answered with a level stare. “You’re just lucky Lana intervened, or I’d be calling you *cue-ball* right now. Then again, if I’d had the money to buy the components to build it, you wouldn’t have a single hair anywhere on your body more than ten days old.” He put his panel aside. “I think the threat of losing their hair would have kept *all* the Faey well away from me.”

“That *is* evil!” Symone laughed, gasping for breath. “And damn *clever!*”

Jyslin made a face. “I think we got lucky Lana ended it when she did,” she admitted. “Else he’d have found some way to turn us all into frogs or something.”

“Just give me time,” he said mildly, standing up. “I’ll find a way. Now if you’ll excuse me, there’s nothing but beer left in the cooler. I need a soda.”

“Just drink a beer,” Jyslin told him.

“I’m flying us home. I can’t drink,” he told her calmly.

After lunch, Symone and Jyslin taught Jason and Tim how to ride the airbikes. Airbikes were just like motorcycles in shape and behavior, but instead of wheels they had pods that went where the wheels were on a motorcycle containing spatial engines that provided the lift and thrust. The controls weren’t like a motorcycle, however, for the the throttle was a pedal at the right foot and the brake was a pedal on the left, where the gear lever would be. The main difference was that an airbike was capable of movement through three directions, so the handlebars were free-moving to allow for that. The operation of the bars were just like a control stick, and you could make the airbike move laterally from side to side with buttons on the inside edges of the handles. Moving vertically was accomplished with another set of buttons on the inside edge of the handles, just under the lateral movement buttons, both placed in a way that would allow a thumb to slide over and press them very easily. Jason got the hang of it very quickly, but Tim, who was a bit drunk, almost crashed his airbike three times before Symone finally realized that he wasn’t in any condition to be operating a vehicle. Jason flew them around the island as he got accustomed to the wind in his face, looking down from an altitude of about a hundred feet. Airbikes had no crash equipment at all, only seat belts, so one took one’s life into his own hands when he rode one.

Were you serious about building that gun? Jyslin sent to him. *Go ahead and send, we're far enough away from Symone for you to send tight to me without her picking it up.*

Yeah, I'm serious about it, he answered. *I'll never do anything with it, but I'd like to build it, just to see if it works.*

I still say you should send it in, she told him. *If you did, they'd pull you out of school and put you straight into research. That's money, Jason, and prestige, and real power. The people in research write their own rulebook.*

No, he sent back, his emotions creeping into his telepathic voice. *I will not provide the Imperium with tools to fight wars or subjugate other races. Ever.*

If you end up in research, you will, she warned.

I'll never end up in research, he answered.

The hell you say. You're more than smart enough, and you seem to have a knack for our technology that goes quite beyond simple understanding. You're a natural..

I won't go to research, he told her. *After next semester, I'm going to wash out.*

Wash out? On purpose? she replied, shock creeping into her mental voice.

After next semester, I'll qualify for a systems technician job, and that's what I'll get. I was serious, Jyslin. I won't become an asset to the Imperium. I'll work for it because I have to, but I won't advance it if I can help it. I don't care how much money I'm passing up, or how much prestige. In my eyes, becoming a asset to the Imperium would be a betrayal of my beliefs and the memory of my father.

You're being stupid.

You've never believed in anything, have you? he asked her pointedly. *Humans are strongly tied up in their beliefs, Jyslin. Humans will die for what they believe in, and do it willingly. The Faey have become too jaded over the years, so pragmatic that they've lost their ability to have faith in anything, to the point where you don't really believe in anything anymore. Like you, for example. You don't go to church, so you don't really believe in your Faey gods. You don't like the Imperium's treatment of you, so you don't really believe in your government. You don't like your job, so you don't believe in your present, and since you're so uncertain about getting into engineering, you don't believe in your future. You're not alone, either. Since many Faey seem to hate the way the Imperium works, they can't even believe in their own government. I haven't seen a single Faey chapel built on Earth yet, so your people obviously don't believe too much in your Faey gods. All the Faey I've seen just go through the motions in their jobs and try to forget about their lots in life after they get off work. I guess the only people who believe in something are the ones in power, but all they believe in is the power that they've managed to amass. And living for nothing but power is an empty life. So, I may be giving up money and power by not going into research, but at the end of the day I can look in the mirror and like what I see, because I'll have held to what I believe in. And that makes me richer than every noble in the Imperium.*

She was quiet for a very long time, her hands almost rigid against his shoulders from her grip on him, then she finally sent. *Put us down,* she ordered. *I need to go to the bathroom.*

He swung them around and flew back to the skimmer, then set them down on the sand in front of it. Jyslin got off the bike and walked away without comment, and Jason worried for a moment that he had mortally offended her. Symone wandered over in his direction and joined him in watching Jyslin go up the stairs and into the skimmer, then she put her arm on his shoulder and leaned against him. "So, what was that about?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he replied. "I think I offended her."

"She didn't club you in the back of the head while you were up there, so I think she wasn't all that offended," Symone winked.

"I guess not. Are you going to put your bikini back on any time soon?"

"I'm teasing Tim-Tim," she said with an evil grin. "My mission is to get him to bang me silly in the habitat module before we leave. He won't play for some reason," she said with a slight pout.

"He's in company," he answered. "He'll carry on with you alone, or even with me around because I'm his best friend, but not with Jyslin here."

"Ohhh," she said, nodding. "I get it."

"Where is he?"

"Taking a shit," she answered directly. "He didn't lock the door, and Jyslin went back that way. She might get lucky and get a peek of my Tim's big dick."

He ignored that. "You'd better get some of that spray. You're looking a bit purple," he told her, looking down at her breasts boldly.

"Yeah, I know," she said, cupping one of her breasts absently and poking the purpled slope of her breast with a finger, testing her skin. "I certainly don't want to forget before I get Tim in the module. Trust me, it hurts more than it feels good when a guy grabs hold of a sunburned tit. The only thing that hurts worse than a guy grabbing your sunburned tit is when he bites your sunburned nipple."

"I'll have to take your word for that," Jason told her with a light smile. He never felt awkward talking about sex with Symone, mainly because she was Symone. Despite the fact that she was a woman, he just saw her as one of the guys. One of the guys with a very foul mouth, but still one of the guys.

"Sunburn your nipple and let Jyslin bite it, and you'll know exactly what I'm talking about," she said with a wicked little chuckle.

"No thanks," he told her. "And I'd think that that wouldn't be the *worst*," he noted.

"Well, it was for me," she answered. "I wouldn't even dream of trying to fuck Tim with a sunburned pussy, so that wouldn't even be an issue. I've fucked a guy when my tits were sunburned, so I have some personal experience with that. I don't think I want to even try it with a sunburn on the major equipment. I'm not into pain. I'm no bondage babe."

Jason chuckled. "Personal experience, eh?" he asked.

"Yeah, before I started my conscription. I was at a beach, and convinced a guy to do me as a going-away present. I shoulda thought to bring some burn-heal though, or it might have been more fun."

"Don't tell Tim, he'll get jealous."

"He knows I'm no virgin, Jason," she laughed. "But maybe I should. It might get him horny, and I like it when he gets possessive over me. It makes me feel *sooo* wanted," she finished with a little trill of her voice that told him how much she liked it. "There is something rather serious that you should know, though," she told him with a slight, arch little smile.

"Serious? From *Symone*?" he said with mock surprise, and she punched him in the arm.

"Yeah, serious, you little prick," she shot back. "I can't tell Jyslin this, but I can tell you. She shouldn't send around me."

"Why?"

"I'm not very strong with talent, but I have a trick. I can hear it when other Faey are trying to send privately."

Jason whistled. "That's some trick," he complemented her.

"Thank you. I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone. If the Imperium found out that I can do that, they'd put me in the Secret Police, and I don't want to be a mindbender."

"Not a problem, Symone," he told her evenly. "Your secret's safe with me."

"Oh, and *please* stop trying to pretend," she told him with a knowing grin. "I know all about your talent, Jason. I heard you use it last week, when I bet Jyslin was teaching you how to control it. Nobody else may have recognized that sending, but *I did*. I know your voice. And earlier, Jyslin was sending to you like you could hear her, like *normal* sending. You can't *do* that with someone that doesn't have talent."

He gave her a startled, almost strangled look, but she just put her hand on his shoulder and leaned in, then kissed him on the cheek.

"I told you my secret," she said to him in a whisper. "Now we both have a secret to keep."

"How long have you known?" he asked in surprise.

"Since the day half of New Orleans heard you," she winked. "I knew what kind of trouble you'd get into if the Imperium knew, so I kept quiet. You can't tell Jyslin about me," she said again. "She might be keeping you quiet, but she's an *Imperial* Marine, and I can't entirely trust her. She won't turn you in because she wants a relationship with you, but I don't have that kind of ammunition to use against her here."

"I wondered why you weren't being as pally with her as you are with us."

"I'm still feeling her out," she answered. "I kinda like her, but I don't know enough to know if I can trust her with that kind of information yet." She grunted. "I need to get Tim going. My tits are burned and that's making them like hyper-sensitive, and anytime I start thinking of my tits, I want someone to play with them, and that just gets me thinking about sex. Care to bend me over a chair and relieve some of my tension if I can't get Tim in the mood?" she asked boldly.

"What? I thought you were in love with Tim."

"Oh, I am. I'm not asking you to make love, Jason. I'm *just* asking for you to get me off. It's no big deal."

He forgot that Faey had a radically different attitude towards sex, and also that they quite distinctly separated the concept of making love from the concept of physical gratification. It was common practice for good friends to engage in casual sex, for a Faey didn't attach such powerful emotional ties to sex in the physical sense. For a Faey, the emotional ties and intimacy came when they joined minds, and that caused a dramatic separation of the physical act from the emotional act, so much so that each one had a separate standing in their society. In her mind, she wasn't asking for anything emotionally *intimate*. To Symone, it would simply be *sex*, and that was in no way even close to *making love*.

And, in a way, he realized, she was offering to make their friendship closer. She had never *offered* sex before, at least not since those first days when he had her in the collar, when she found the idea of having sex with him to be an erotic fantasy. By offering sex now that they'd gotten to know each other, she was telling him *I want to be a close friend*. Faey wouldn't have sex with casual friends, but a close, personal friend was more than fair game when a Faey felt frisky. He understood that now, saw that first she shared a secret with him as an act of trust, admitted that she knew his secret to show that she was worthy of his trust in return, and then she offered to share sexual pleasure with him, telling him that she felt so comfortable with him that she was willing to perform a very intimate physical act with him, and that she liked him enough to find the idea of it pleasing. Symone wasn't offering sex—well, not *just* sex—she was offering to be his friend. And not just a casual friend like they were now, but a *personal* friend, an *intimate* friend. She wanted to be a *best friend*.

"I doubt it'll come to that," he said carefully. "Tim's too attracted to you to ever say no when you're serious. I'll take Jesmind somewhere and take her out of the equation, and that'll make Tim comfortable enough. But," he added, understanding that he needed some kind of positive response to her proposition in order to make her understand that he knew what she really was asking for, "if Tim won't play, I'd be happy to take care of it for you, hon. We can't have you running around in a state of frustration."

"I knew you'd understand," she said with a bright smile and a wink, then she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek once more. "I need to find that spray bottle. If you see Tim before I catch up with him, let me know."

"Sure," he said. He watched her saunter away, watching her bare bottom, which was just slightly tinted purple, and chuckled. "Get the back, too," he called.

"I can feel it," she replied as she went up into the skimmer.

Tim came out the back hatch of the skimmer as Jason went to go sit back down in his chair and wait for Jyslin to come out, and he came over and sat in the chair beside him. He noticed that Tim looked just a little bit out of sorts. "Man," Tim said hesitantly.

“What?”

“Er, well, I was in the skimmer’s bathroom, and Jyslin came in,” he told him. “I told her to get out, that I was using it, but she just said she wanted to use the sink. Well, she took off her bikini bottom in front of me.”

“So? Jeeze, Tim, you know that Faey don’t care about that kind of thing. Both of them were laying around naked for half the morning.”

“Jason, she *bent over*. You know how cramped it is in there. I saw it all, and it was like right in my face! At first I thought she was coming onto me or something, but then I realized that she wasn’t when she turned on the water and threw her bikini bottom in the sink.”

He smiled knowingly. “It’s not a big deal, Tim,” Jason assured him, leaning back in his chair and waiting for Jyslin to come out. “Faey aren’t modest.”

“I asked her what the hell she was doing, and she said she had sand in her—er, her crotch,” he said. To his amusement, Tim didn’t want to use more base terms about Jyslin in front of him. “She said she had to wash the sand out, grabbed a washrag, and leaned on the lip of the sink *facing me*, you know, like ready to do that right in front of me. I bailed at that point. I’m just glad I wiped before she came in. I was like three seconds from getting off the john when she barged in.”

Jason laughed. “I think she was trying to put you at ease, Tim,” he explained. “She knows that Symone’s getting a little anxious, and I think she’s trying to show you that she’s not all that worried about it if you and Symone go off and have some fun.”

“Like *that*?” he asked in a strangled tone.

“Faey aren’t humans, Tim. They tend to get their points across through example, not through words. More often than not, instead of saying something, they’ll *do* something that tries to prove their point. By sticking her butt in your face and fully intending to do something like washing sand out of her crotch in front of you, she was telling you *I’m familiar with you*. She’s saying ‘hey, I’m willing to do just about anything around you because you’re a friend and I’m comfortable with you, so don’t feel that you can’t do something you want to do in front of me or when I’m with you.’ She’s not telling you she wants to be in the room with you and Symone, but she is telling you that she knows that you and Symone want to go make love, and she’s okay with that.”

“I, okay,” he said, then he was silent a moment. “You know, she coulda just *said* something.”

“Tim,” he said steadily. “They may be Faey, but they *are* women. Since when does a woman ever come out and *say* what she means?”

Tim glanced at him, and burst into laughter. “Point,” he agreed. “At least it wasn’t something for nothing, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I didn’t exactly pull up my pants *before* I got off the commode, and she was staring right at me when I did. She got a good look at my johnson. She even looked down at it and everything without even being tactful about it.”

“You expected her to be tactful after she did *that*?” Jason asked pointedly.

Tim burst into laughter again. “I guess that was a kinda stupid thought,” he agreed.

Jason paused a moment. “Symone’s looking for you,” he said. “She’s feeling *very* frisky. I suggest you take her into the habitat module for a while.”

“I want to, but, you know, Jyslin was here,” he affirmed.

“And now Jyslin just told you that you don’t have to hold back just because she’s here. In her

own special little way,” he added.

Tim laughed, then grinned at him. “I certainly got the message. Where is Symone?”

“In the skimmer. You came out the back just as she went in the front.”

“So she’s in there with Jyslin. Making comparisons, most likely.”

“Maybe,” Jason answered noncommittally. “This might be better coming from me, so I’ll tell you now.”

“What?”

“Symone propositioned me,” he said mildly. “But—“

“No, that’s alright, you don’t have to explain that,” Tim interrupted him. “Symone told me about that kind of thing, about how Faey friends—you know, have sex the same way they might meet at a coffee house and talk, and how it doesn’t mean she wants to date you. She said she might ask you someday, when she felt that I was comfortable with it, because that’s what friends do. That’s when I understood it, you know, how she totally doesn’t think it’s wrong to be my girlfriend yet have sex with one of her friends. She kept thinking that you were too sexually frustrated or something,” he chuckled. “You were sleeping alone, and she said a guy with a girlfriend shouldn’t be doing that. She kept telling me that if you didn’t get some from Jyslin soon, she was going to have to go down to your room and take care of it, in her words.”

“I’m glad you understand what that means,” Jason said with sincere relief. “I didn’t want you taking it the wrong way.”

“Hell, if she’s going to sleep with another guy, I’d rather it be a friend,” he shrugged. “That way I know what diseases I’m getting.”

Jason looked at him, then burst into helpless laughter.

“Alright, time to go find Symone,” he said.

“Make sure she used the burn-heal.”

“What?”

“She’ll understand.”

“Oh, okay. See you soon.”

Jason watched Tim rush into the skimmer, and not a moment later he and Symone rushed towards the back of the plane, where he’d set up the habitat module. The module looked just like a big circular tent, with a rubber-like door that had actual hinges. It was climate controlled, powered, had its own kitchen and bathroom, and also had a collapsible vidlink built into one of its walls. Using a habitat module was like having a portable house, but to the Faey, it was *roughing it*. Jyslin came out a moment later, still without her bikini bottom on; actually, she was carrying it. She sidled over to where he was sitting and flopped down in the chait Tim had just vacated. “I see it worked.”

“What worked?” he asked.

“I was in the bathroom, sticking my pussy in his face to get him horny, so he and Symone would go bang each other in the habitat module and leave us free to talk,” she told him bluntly. “He kept holding back while Symone was inviting him. I just wanted to push him over the edge.”

Jason chuckled. “He told me about that. I told him that you did it to hint to him that you wouldn’t mind if he and Symone went and had a little fun.”

“Same result,” she shrugged.

“What did you want to talk about?”

“I thought about what you said a little,” she said seriously. “I was going to send in that gun’s techs without you knowing, like Lana did with the itchers, but I’m not going to do that now.”

“I appreciate that. And I appreciate you being honest with me,” he told her gravely.

“I still think you should,” she pressed. “Look at what the itcher got you, Jason. A skimmer. Sending in the techs on that gun would let you buy a *hangar* full of them.”

“I admit, I love my skimmer, but at least they won’t use the subsonics for killing people, or to oppress another world like they oppressed mine, Jyslin. And I *didn’t* send it in. As far as I’m concerned, this is just a lucky windfall,” he told her. “They told me that they’re using the idea of it for communicating on an ocean planet, and they also adapted it to kill deadly bug larva on another planet. I guess the larva are sensitive to subsonic frequencies.”

“I won’t try to give you pep-talk propaganda bullshit, Jason,” she said honestly. “You know how I feel about the Imperium. Hell, you know a hell of a lot more about it than I thought you did,” she admitted. “But we’re *stuck* with it. There’s nothing either of us can do but try to make the best of it. You asked what I believed in, but I never answered you. I believe in *me*. I believe in trying to get as far in the system as I can go to make myself happy. Sometimes the system pisses me off, but what else can I do? I just have to keep fighting for what I want. Because if I don’t, I’ll have nothing but misery and regrets. Even if I fail, at least I can say I *tried*.”

“I can’t blame you for that, Jyslin,” he told her, putting his hand over hers and patting it. “But we’re not going to agree on this point. So let’s just agree to disagree and leave it at that.”

She nodded, then sighed and looked at him. “I want you to move in with me.”

“No.”

“But—“

“Don’t start—“

“I’m not going to get combative,” she cut him off in a level tone. “Just listen to me.”

He was a bit surprised. “Alright,” he agreed.

“Look me in the eye and tell me you’re not attracted to me,” she challenged.

“I *am* attracted to you,” he admitted with a straight face.

“Alright then, you’ve stipulated that you think I’m a sexy beast,” she said with a slight smile. “And we established last week that you don’t see me as the Imperium anymore. So, why not? You’re not moving in with the Imperium, Jason, you’re moving in with *me*. Jyslin Shaddale, remember? If you can’t trust me by now with this between us,” she said, tapping her temple meaningfully, “then when will you ever trust me?”

“Remember when I told you about belief, Jyslin?” he asked in reply, and she nodded. “You represent something every fiber of my being opposes. No matter how much I like you, or how much I feel you’re not the Imperium, my beliefs simply will not *allow* me to move in with you. If I do that, I’m admitting defeat and allowing the Imperium to win.”

“But we go out. We have fun, we talk, we get along great together, we have great sex, and we do that other thing,” she protested.

"I know, and sometimes it destroys me," he answered candidly. "Every time I come back from a date with you I'm kicking myself for being so weak, for compromising my principles because I wanted to spend time with you. I know you're the enemy, but I keep falling right back in with you, because I *do* like you, and I *do* want to be with you. I know I have to keep with you because of that other thing, and that contact always breaks my will and leads to the dates and the sex. Part of me wants to move in with you, but that part of me that opposes the Imperium won't allow it, and I know that if I did, I'd never be able to live with myself. Doing that would be admitting defeat, and that is something that I will *never* do."

She sighed, looking at her knees. "So your pride won't let you be anything more to me," she said.

"My pride, my beliefs, my upbringing, my conscious, just about everything but my affection for you and our stipulated mutual attraction," he answered honestly.

"So...at least I have one thing going for me. Aside from my cute ass," she said with a wan little smile. "What would it take to change that?"

"Oh, just your resignation from the Marines," he answered bluntly. "I cannot even *think* of having a relationship with a Faey who's a direct representative of a government I despise. No matter how much I understand that you are not the Imperium, Jyslin, you still represent it, and that makes you untouchable to my conscious. If you were a civilian, though, I probably wouldn't feel that way."

"I can't resign. I'm still in my conscription."

"Then we'll just have to wait," he told her.

She sighed, then chuckled. "So we wait. Don't make any long-term plans, Jason. In three years, I'm coming for you, and I won't take no for an answer."

"I'll be waiting."

"Good. Oh, and please don't feel bad when we go out," she told him. "Just think of it as practice for when I'm out of the military. I promise I'll burn my uniform before every date, just so you have some kind of symbolic gesture."

Jason laughed. "That might get expensive."

"Hell, money well spent in my opinion."

He was quiet a moment. "Sophistry," he sighed.

"What does that word mean?"

"Hypocrisy," he elaborated. "I'm making up reasons to go against my morals just to justify doing what I want. But I know it's going to happen anyway, so at least why fight in that regard?"

She laughed. "It's the power of the cute ass," she winked at him.

"It's called thinking with the little brain," he grunted.

"Well, you can't justify being my lover or my boyfriend, but can you at least accept me as a *friend*?" she asked.

"I think I could," he replied, "as long as you don't try to make it anything more."

"Well, In Faey society, good friends often have sex," she told him with a coquettish smile. "Would your towering morals find fault with that? Since we'll be having *platonic* sex, not *romantic* sex. You'd be what we Faey call a breakfast friend. A friend we'll have sex with, that often stays for

breakfast.”

He laughed. “More sophistry,” he accused. “That very idea is a contradiction in terms. *Platonic sex*.”

She smiled at him. “Only to a human,” she replied. “So, I promise to back off and be your friend, and *only* your friend. You promise not to shut me out, and we both agree that we have the major hornies for each other, and we may, when the mood hits us, have mind-blowing sex. Just *platonic* sex, no strings,” she winked. “We also continue doing that other thing, until you don’t need me to help you with it anymore.”

“I think I can live with that,” he agreed honestly.

“Alright then, we have a deal,” she announced, standing up and extending her hand to him professionally, though he wasn’t sure how professional she would look, standing there in a white bikini top and naked from the breasts down. He took her hand and shook it, sealing the bargain. “Now then, you can do something for me,” she announced.

“What?”

She turned around. “Could you *please* find the burn-heal and fix this?” she pleaded, showing him the dark purple on the top half of her buttocks, which were rather noticeably sunburned. So was her back, all the way up to her shoulders. There was a light strip along where her thong bikini had been on her. He saw the pattern of it and realized that the most burned areas were what was exposed when they were riding the airbikes. “I don’t want to put my bikini back on until it’s healed. Every time the strap shifted, it got *very* uncomfortable. That’s why I’m walking around bottomless, hon. I promise, I’m not trying to seduce you,” she said with a wink over her shoulder.

“Symone had it in the skimmer,” he said. “She didn’t come out with it, so it’s probably still there.”

“I’ll go find it,” she said.

Jason watched her bound up into the skimmer, then he leaned back and sighed. He hoped that their agreement would keep her from getting too aggravated with him. He didn’t really want to go as far as he did, for she would be an eternal temptation to him, but he also knew that she was his only hope of mastering his telepathic ability. And because of that, he had to stay with her. But, he could admit to himself that he could be a friend to her. As long as she respected his ideals and knew where the line was, he thought that they’d actually get along rather well.

He knew he was compromising his principles, but not by a great degree, at least not enough to really feel guilty over it. At least now he felt that Jyslin understood him and understood how he felt, and she was also willing to accept that, work around it, respect his principles. He couldn’t fault her for that, not one bit. She was being *very* understanding.

He felt it would work out. He’d had a week of training, and had learned how to tune out the stray thoughts of the other humans around him, and had learned how to send. He still wasn’t very good at it, but he was learning. If he pushed himself, he’d be to the point where he was competent with this new power within two months. And when he was, he’d be safe once more.

At least he fervently hoped so.

Chapter 5

Kaista, 13 Oraa, 4392, Orthodox Calendar
Friday, 1 July 2007, Native Regional Reckoning
New Orleans, Gamia Province, American Sector

Life had definitely become weird, and finals had very little to do with it.

Monday was the start of finals, finals which had had the entire campus in a frenzy of activity. This most-elite of all native educational institutions had gone into an uproar of intense driving, as instructors worked hard to prepare their students for finals, as school officials and administrators rode the teachers, as the *Zarina* of New Orleans rode the administrators, as the *Olena* of southeastern Louisiana rode the *Zarina*, and the Baron of North America rode the *Olena*. Everyone on campus from students up were short-tempered and almost obsessed with the final exams, so much so that both the regular Army and the Marines had placed extra patrols on campus to keep the tension from exploding into fights.

Jason had his own tension and anxiety as well, but for him, finals was only a small part of it. The core of his tension laid mainly in Jyslin. Though he did truly like her, his moral and philosophical beliefs were more and more causing some friction between them, though it wasn't anything so huge that they decided to quit one another.

Truth be told, Jason had become quite amicable to their relationship. He *liked* Jyslin, and he was strongly attracted to her, and she had been true to her promise to back off, to treat him like a friend and not a love interest. Under those conditions, he was able to at least partially justify in his own mind being around her, and they'd had a pretty good time. She continued to train him in telepathy, which was the primary focus for both of them. She wanted him not just competent, but quite skilled with his power by the end of July, when she'd have absolutely no qualms about him operating around Faey without worrying. He agreed with her and worked very, very hard to train himself, often at the expense of his schoolwork, though his average never dropped below 94. When not training in telepathy, they had a pretty good time. He started teaching her Aikido and started working out with her, they would watch movies or play bridge or just pal around with Tim and Symone when all four had free time. Every Sunday, they all piled into his airskimmer and they went somewhere. They'd been to the beach, to the Andes for some summer (winter down there) skiing, and had gone on a guided car-safari in Africa. Jyslin seemed to have no problems befriending Tim and Symone, and for her part, Symone warmed up considerably towards Jyslin over the weeks. Obviously, Symone had gotten more comfortable with the Marine.

But there were fights, and some of them got passionate. Most of them revolved around Jason's lack of interest in trying to get placed into Black Ops (where most weapons and top-secret military systems were designed) or R&D (where *everything* was designed). Jyslin seemed totally incapable of fathoming that doing so was going against the fundamental bedrock of his personality and moral standing, for he had vowed that he would *never* help the Faey by designing, building, or maintaining anything that would help them continue to keep their hold over Terra or allow them to conquer another planet. Jason still had every intention of washing out next semester and getting a job as a systems technician, maintaining generic Faey technology on Earth, but nothing sensitive or military in nature. Despite two months of being together, Jyslin still could not understand the intense hatred he had of the Faey and what they had done to his world. It was almost like she refused to see the forest for the trees, because she seemed to think that if he could accept her and Symone, then he should be able to accept any other part of Faey government, society, or culture, at least after he got enough exposure to it. She kept trying to bring him into her world, and every time she did so, he set his heels in and absolutely would not budge. She became aggravated that he had no trouble bringing her into his world, but would

not even for a moment come into hers.

The only ground he'd given over that was to meet Jyslin's aunt, Lorna. Lorna was a general in the Royal Marines, who worked in their command center in Washington, the Pentagon. The Faey had taken a liking to the building after the dissolution of the American military, and had annexed it for their own use. Lorna was much as Jyslin described, a blunt, straight-talking woman with a broken nose, a scar on her chin, a cybernetic left eye, and a very direct demeanor. They'd met over dinner about a week ago, when Lorna came down to visit her niece, and Jason had to admit that he did rather like her.

Right now, he and Jyslin were in a "cool-off" phase, for they'd had another fight last night when he refused to attend a barbecue that her squad was giving in Audobon park on Sunday. Every month, Jyslin's squad got together for a social occasion, which included the staff officers that didn't always mingle with the enlisted. It helped maintain unity within the squad. Lately, the squads had started playing baseball on Saturdays, when schedules allowed, and Jyslin's squad was currently 3-1 in intersquad scrimmages. Faey seemed have a curious like of the sports of baseball, soccer, football, and basketball, and it wasn't odd to see off-duty Faey walking down the streets or in malls with New Orleans Saints tee shirts or hats. Much to Jason's surprise, he'd even seen a professional baseball game televised on ISN, the Imperial Sports Network, the Faey Imperium's version of ESPN. That game had high ratings, where the Boston Red Sox crushed the New York Yankees, 7-2. Granted, it was at four in the morning by Imperial Standard Time, the time by which the Imperium operated, but given that every world had its own time, but every retransmission station delayed programming to coincide as closely as possible with IST. It was virtually impossible on some worlds, though. IST consisted of a 30 hour day, a 10 day week, and a 30 day month. Local time was impossible to corrolate to that because of the 24 hour day. Generally, they let the programming slide for a couple of weeks, then edited a block of programming to resynch local programming with IST. The only stations that didn't adhere to IST were INN and a couple of entertainment networks.

Thing on other fronts were going rather well. Jason had scrapped his project idea, and instead had built a panel "remote keyboard," which was basically just a stand-alone holographic keyboard that linked back to the main panel. It included a redirector to allow the panel to send its video display to another monitor, allowing someone to sit in a chair and use a standard television as the display, while the panel sat on a table across the room. One couldn't use the touch features of a panel's standard display, but it was useful for just writing out reports and such. Jason had built it in about three days, getting his hands on a broken panel's holographic emitter and the keyboard programming, then adding in a few simple programs to allow the hardware to receive panel video information and relay it to a remote receiver. He bought the remote receiver from a mail-order company on Arcturus IV. All in all, his project cost him about 74 credits to build, and it worked.

Not that he needed money. He'd received his first royalty payment for the hypersonic communicators, which were based on his design idea, and it had been quite shocking. That first monthly payment was C67,289.18443. Decimals beyond two places weren't often used with credits, but when it came to royalties, where he had a percentage, they were kept in to keep the books straight. That was 67,000 or so credits for *one month*. And he'd receive a royalty check every month, his cut for every unit that was produced. He had yet to start getting royalties for the larva killer device, because they'd had a production glitch and had had to push back the schedule. They even sent him an email to tell him that, keeping him informed on what was going on. He appreciated that.

Now those things, he didn't *mind* being paid for. They were non-military, and in the case of the larva killer, they actually helped people. He liked the idea that someone had taken something he thought up and had adapted it so it was being used to help keep people from getting sick. That was probably the only reason he ever thought to spend any of that money, instead of just transferring it into hard currency and throwing it off the Huey Long Bridge. Jason had no beef with the people in the Imperium per se, as long as they didn't represent the system. He had no problems with them using his ideas to help make life better for his fellow oppressed citizens...even if it *was* an arm of the

government that was doing it. In that way, and that way only, he was able to bend his moral position, because his ideas were serving a greater good. The government was just a messenger, and in this case, he wasn't going to shoot the messenger.

There was one thing military he had going on, and that was the rail gun. It was already built, sitting on a rack on the wall over his desk, sitting there taunting him a little bit. The gun was assembled, but so far, he'd had no luck with it. The technical specs were good, and the weapon had been built correctly, but his problem laid in the software. Jason wasn't that bad using TEL, Trinary Encoded Language, the standard programming language of most non-military Faey devices, but he was having a devil of a time trying to get everything just so. So far, the weapon had remained inoperable because of a software-hardware conflict, and he just hadn't had the time to iron it out. Every time he loaded the new code for it, the weapon would go into emergency shutdown mode either as soon as he tried to bring up the processor, after he loaded a round in the chamber, or after he disengaged safety and went hot. He hadn't even got to where he could fire the weapon yet. It wasn't like he was really all that worried about it...after all, he was only building it to see if he *could*. And with everything else going on, it wasn't like he had all that much time to play with it.

It had certainly driven Ailan absolutely *wild* with curiosity when he asked to use the replicator, then was very secretive about what he was doing. Ailan kept a very close eye on the things his star pupil did, wondering what new idea Jason would come up with next, and actually wanting to get into the design of it a little bit. Ailan had the soul of an engineer, always wanting to tinker or experiment, and had actually done some pretty clever things with the subsonic inducer that Jason had given him.

"You know, I think I've figured out how you think this stuff up," Ailan had confided last week, as they went over his project after Jason brought it in to show him, his one and only chance to have the instructor check his project. "You come into this with absolutely no pre-conceived notions. You have a fresh outlook on things, you know? I almost envy you for that, you know."

"All you have to do is open your eyes and look at things, Ailan," Jason chuckled.

"Yes, but you see, I have years of training jading my point of view," he answered. "You *don't*. You look at something and see something I never considered, because your lack of training lets you approach it from an angle I wouldn't consider."

"You might be right," Jason had acceded.

That was a pretty interesting point, Jason had to agree. Jason *didn't* come into this thinking in only one manner, because it was all so new to him. He saw something and immediately his mind started thinking of how it could be used, without knowing what it really *could* be used for. That let him see a way to use something that Ailan might not, because he'd discount that to be used in that manner, or ignore it because something else also did that.

The railgun was a perfect example of that. No Faey would think of something like that, because it seemed *primitive* in the age of energy weapons. But in its own way, Jason's railgun was the equal of any MPAC in production, it just worked in a different way. If he could ever get the damn thing to *work*, anyway.

Caffeine. He needed caffeine. Jason backed his chair away from the desk, where a five line calculus problem harangued him from the display on his panel, then scrubbed his face with his hands and lightly slapped his cheeks. It was four in the morning, but he'd been up since two, unable to sleep. He had no classes today; in fact, he had no classes until Monday, when their finals began. All week he'd only had one scheduled class, his project turn in with Ailan. All other classes were cancelled, but the teachers remained in their classrooms during the normal class hours to answer questions or tutor any student who wanted help. Despite no classes on the schedule, almost every student had been on campus every day all week, studying in class to ask questions, studying in the library, on the green, in the halls of the Plaid, out in Audobon park, virtually everywhere. The campus had been quiet, subdued, and not a little tense since last Monday.

Everyone was anxious to get it overwith. There would be a three week holiday between semesters,

and everyone was looking forward to some major decompression. The school wasn't letting everyone just run off, however, nor let them just do nothing but drink beer for three weeks and come back to school trashed. For one, they were being very stingy with travel permits for students, but were much more lenient with granting permits for relatives to come visit *them*. They were also offering several holiday trips to students, field trips to let them see Faey technology in action, and many of them had filled up with volunteers. The most popular trip without a doubt was the one up to a Faey battle cruiser, giving the students the opportunity to tour a military starship. They'd had so many sign up for it that they were going to have to use three shuttles to get them all up to the ship. In addition to the voluntary trips, everyone had a mandatory physical they had to take during the holiday, and everyone also had to attend a mandatory job fair of sorts on campus the week before the next semester, so they could get an idea of the many different professions from which they had to choose, and start working towards trying to qualify for one. They had one every semester, but they all had to go anyway, if only to get updated information about certain choice job fields. Jason felt it was stupid, but it wasn't like he was in a position to do anything about it.

Ailan had bugged him for days about getting on with the ship tour, but Jason had just blown him off, then stated in a casual manner that if he wanted to go visit a starship, he'd just fly up to one. He'd been on one before, after all, even though he'd never gotten out of his skimmer. Ailan had just laughed and admitted that he forgot that Jason had gotten a pilot's license, and happened to own his own airskimmer.

He'd used his money in other ways as well. For one, there was a beat-up old Toyota Corolla sitting out in the student parking lot. It looked like it was about to fall apart, a ratty old rust-colored sedan whose paint color concealed the rust all over the chassis rather well, but Jason wasn't about to flaunt his financial independence on campus. Despite its outward appearance, the car ran well, was very dependable, and it got him to and from Bell Chasse and his airskimmer quite well. Tim had keys for it as well, and they tended to share it, because he went out with Symone so much and it was often hard for her to come get him every time. So he just took the car and went to meet her, with Jason's blessing.

Standing up, Jason opened the small refrigerator crammed up against the side of his bed and grabbed a new soda, then drank about half of it in a single draw. Calculus was kicking his ass, as usual, because the Faey concept of calculus would make Einstein's brain melt. But it was absolutely critical for Faey engineering, for metaphased plasma required massive numbers of variables to be taken into account to mathematically predict the behavior of metaphased plasma in real time. Even though the computers handled those calculations in operating equipment, an engineer had to be capable of the math to deal with some problems, as well as design. So any engineer worth his hair had to be able to handle equations with large numbers of variables. Calculus was, after all, a math that dealt with changes in real time, but the kicker was that these equations dealt with a substance that operated in multiple states of reality, each of which caused changes to every other variable when they changed, including a change to *itself*. An infinitesimal shift in one variable altered every other variable and totally rewrote the entire equation. It was almost maddening. Jason couldn't believe that there were any sane Faey engineers left.

His panel beeped that an incoming call was waiting, so he sat back down and punched it up. Tim's face appeared in the display, his hair a mess and a paper towel to his nose. His nose was bleeding. "I figured you'd be up. Still studying?"

"I slept a bit and got up early. Gone to bed yet?"

"Naw," he answered. "I'm about to though, when this nosebleed stops."

"What happened?"

"I dunno. I just rubbed my nose, and it started bleeding. Guess I hit it just right. What you studying?"

"Calculus."

Tim winced. "You're braver than I am. I think I'll invent some numbers on the spot and put them

on the test. Maybe I can get some points for originality.” Jason laughed. “Symone wanted to know if you’re free next Saturday for a trip. She saw a TV show about Yellowstone, and now she wants to go.”

“Any place cooler than here would make me very happy,” he sighed, looking at the heavy condensation on his window. His room was about 65 degrees, and it was about 85 outside, which caused his window to be totally covered in dew. Jason and some of the other people on his floor had something of an ongoing war about the thermostat, because it controlled the temperature on the whole floor. But it had been upwards of 105 during the day with heat indexes of 115, a heat wave even for New Orleans, so they hadn’t complained too much lately when Jason turned it down. They’d come to realize that if they let it get really cool in the rooms at night, it didn’t get too hot once the doors started to fan and let that blistering heat inside during the day. “It was nice to be out in the snow again, when we went to Argentina.”

“I thought Jyslin was going to kill you,” Tim laughed. “She’s a good skier, though, I’ll give her that.”

“She spent her teen years on an arctic planet. There wasn’t much more to do than ski,” Jason chuckled. “That’s why she hates the cold.”

“So, you’re in for Yellowstone?”

“Yeah, but I’m not paying the parking fees this time,” he warned. “If Symone wants to go, fine, I’ll take her. But she’s responsible for paying to park the skimmer.”

“I’ll warn her,” he said with a grin. “How much do they usually run?”

“Depends on the airfield, but usually no more than 30 credits. Oh, have her check and see if there’s skimmer parking in the park itself. It might be more expensive, but it saves us from having to get a cab or take the airbikes.”

“I’ll tell her. Well, think this nosebleed’s about over, so I’m going to bed. See you in class tomorrow.”

“Don’t oversleep.”

“You won’t let me,” he said, then ended the call.

Jason blew out his breath as his calculus problem returned to the screen. He couldn’t evade it anymore; it was time to get back to work.

*Koira, 18 Oraa, 4392, Orthodox Calendar
Wednesday, 6 July 2007, Native Regional Reckoning
New Orleans, Gamia Province, American Sector*

It. Was. Over.

Jason came out of Calculus feeling a bit dizzy. That was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the hardest test he had ever, *ever*, taken. One of the questions had 32 independent variables, and took almost a three pages of scribbling to solve. It was the first non-literature course he had ever taken where the number of pages it took to complete the test exceeded the number of questions it contained.

But, they certainly saved the worst test for last, because that was it. He’d taken all the other tests already, and he was done for the semester. Outside of a physical and the job fair, his time was now exclusively his own until August. He intended to spend that time not training with Jyslin either in air conditioning or over at the indoor pool.

Well, and finish the railgun. That little project could now have his undivided attention.

He just felt so, so *free*. He didn’t have to get up, he didn’t have any homework, he didn’t have any tests, all he had was free time. Glorious, wonderful, beloved free time.

He did need to decompress. He felt like someone had just pulled his brain out of his nose with a pair of salad spoons. He didn’t want to do anything even remotely resembling rational thought. Problem was, Tim still had 2 more finals to take, so he couldn’t really go celebrate with him. Jyslin

and Symone were on duty, and he didn't really socialize with anyone outside of them. Jason was an exceedingly private person, and was slow to make new friends. Besides, he'd been too busy to do much socializing.

Without much to do, he dropped his stuff off at his room, then caught a streetcar down to the French Quarter. He went to his favorite bar, Patty O's, and sat out in the courtyard sipping on a daquiri while listening to jazz music piped in over the bar's audio system. It was exactly what he needed. It was the middle of the day, the place wasn't busy, and it was the perfect place to sit and just unwind after two weeks of hell.

For over an hour, he just sat there nursing his single daquiri, then sighed and leaned forward in his chair. He couldn't stay idle for long, so he started scribbling some lines of code on a napkin to try to get around the hardware conflict preventing the railgun from working. He went through about four napkins before a shadow blocked the light, and he looked up.

He'd never seen this Faey before. She was very tall, one of the tallest Faey he'd ever seen, with translucent green hair that was long and very straight, tied behind her head in a tail. Unruly bangs hung over her violet eyes, waving every time she moved, and her face and body alike were very narrow. She wore a uniform he'd never seen before, a charcoal gray uniform with a light jacket over a black shirt, and a knee-length skirt. She was carrying a black attachè case. He'd become somewhat familiar with Faey military rank, and the silver diamond insignia with a bar under it on her collar denoted her as a Lieutenant Commander. She had an oddly excited look on her face, and she got the initial attempt to scan his surface thoughts out of the way almost immediately, a scan that met nothing but that false front of inane thought that protected him from curious Faey.

"Greetings," she said in very thickly accented English, almost as if she were trying to sing the words. "You are Jason Fox, yes?"

"I am," he said cautiously, in Faey.

"Oh, thank the Trinity!" she said with an explosive sigh, pulling the chair out on the other side of the table and seating herself uninvited. "I'm still having tremendous trouble with English. I did so want to conduct this initial interview in your native language, but I'm very relieved you're willing to use Faey."

"Who are you?" he asked bluntly.

"Lieutenant Commander Lirrin Ulala," she said, extending a blue hand. "And I'm *very* excited to meet *you*, Jason Fox."

Jason stared at that hand, then met her eyes until she cleared her throat and withdrew it delicately. Jason didn't feel too social at the moment, but on the other hand, he avoided skin to skin contact with Faey at all costs. Their telepathic powers were amplified if they had physical contact, and he couldn't risk that. "Yes, well, please excuse me for inviting myself this way, but I didn't really expect to meet you so soon. I was just touring the French Quarter and stopped here to use the restroom, and happened to spot you from the doorway." She pointed down the hall, to where the rather archaically placed restrooms were located. Patty O's was not restroom friendly. "When I realized I had the good luck to cross paths with you, I couldn't pass it up. It saves me having to call you and disturb you with setting up a formal appointment."

"An appointment for what?"

"I've been sent to interview you and a few other people in several academies on Terra," she answered. "I'm a divisional recruitment officer for the Technological Advancement division of the Ministry of Science. You know, Research and Development."

That sent a chill through him. R&D? What did they want with him?

"Why would you come to see me? I'm just a student."

"That's *exactly* why I came to see you," she chuckled. "My division handles recruiting students into R&D. We oversee academies and, when we see someone who has the test scores to conceivably qualify for R&D, we send someone like me to meet the potential candidate. My job is to educate you

about what goes on in R&D, so you might consider it a career choice and actively work towards qualifying for it. I don't have them with me, but I have some literature and some passcodes for you, so you can access the candidate section of R-net, the R&D network. I'd usually give it to you during the interview, but as I said, this wasn't planned." She smiled. "You'll receive some other visits, I'm sure. Anyone who becomes a potential candidate for R&D is also a potential candidate for Black Ops, which is something like the bastard stepchild of R&D. They deal only with developing weapons, arms, armor, that kind of thing. You'll also most likely receive several visits from Naval Engineering, the division of the Royal Navy who designs and build starships.

"Well, I'm not going to intrude myself on your private time any longer. I'll call your panel later and set up a more formal appointment, because it's clear to me that you're trying to relax after your finals. I'll have to request a copy of them and see how well you did," she smiled. "I'm sorry if I disturbed you, Jason. Try not to get *too* drunk after you finish finals, though I know how hard it is. I seem to have lost track of two or three days after I finished my finals in my last semester before graduation," she laughed.

"It's not much of a bother," he said in a neutral tone.

"I'll probably interview you and the two other people I'm scheduled to meet sometime next week, so please do try to keep that in mind and make no set plans for early next week. I can be quite flexible, but I *would* prefer to conduct all three interviews quickly, and yours at your *earliest* convenience."

"Just call me," he said evenly.

"I'll send you a message, since we've already been introduced. I'd like to try for, what do you call it? *Monday*?" she said in English.

"*Monday* is fine with me." Fine to get it out of the way, so he could immediately forget all about it, he added silently to himself.

"Very good. It was nice to meet you, despite it being quite accidental." She offered her hand again, and her eyes were curiously deliberate.

Jason stared at her hand, then held his hand up defensively. "No offense, but I don't shake hands with Faey," he said quite directly.

"Why is that?"

"Because I know what it means if I do," he said cryptically. That incited an immediate attempt by her to read his surface thoughts, and he put the very reason why out there for her to see, a fear that that touch would let her read every thought in his head, an exaggeration of the truth. He had little doubt that she knew that he was social with a Faey, and that he had an understanding of how their telepathy worked. It wasn't entirely accurate, but to her, it would be accurate enough.

"Fair enough," she said with a nod. "Though you should really be more trusting," she said with a slight smile.

He didn't bother to reply. He watched her walk away with her little black case, and his mind was storming with thought. He had never expected a *personal* visit from R&D. That was the last thing he ever thought would happen. It frightened him, *deeply*, at the thought that the Imperium knew he existed, but here shows up Lieutenant Commander Ulala, descended from the on high of the Ministry of Science, declaring to him without doubt that he was *not* anonymous. Maybe they hadn't fixated personal attention on him, but his name was on a list with other students that had the grades that had gotten them noticed.

That scared the socks off of him, because he was *not* like other students. He had a secret, a dark, terrible, life-altering secret that could get him killed if it became public knowledge. If Commander Ulala had touched him, had used that contact to more sharply gain access to the real workings of his mind, his secret could have been out...and he might very well end up on some Faey dissection table.

That, more than anything, was what he feared the most, and was the primary motivation for him to wash out and get a nice safe job somewhere on Earth. That was what he just couldn't make Jyslin understand. She was under the impression that once she had him trained, that he'd never have to worry

about ever being discovered. But he didn't hold the same view, he knew that it would only take the most minor of slips, and then it was over. He didn't want to be around any Faey at all if he could help it, and he would be if he worked for the Imperium. Yes, his primary reasoning was an absolute refusal to aid the Imperium, but there was also the issue of this power that he wasn't supposed to have, and might get him killed if the Imperium discovered that he possessed it.

Pinching his nose between his fingers, he actively suppressed the thoughts of the few people around him. Any time he thought about his rare gift, it caused him to become aware of it, and that led to him opening himself just enough to eavesdrop on the broadcasted thoughts of those people around him. Sometimes it was hard to resist, and that practice had gotten him a reputation for being creepy around the dorm. Jyslin felt that his training was moving along quite well, had declared him proficient in sending, and had been teaching him the basics of psychic combat lately, focusing on defending from another telepath's attack. That was something he needed to learn, just on the off chance that he was discovered, and had to resort to defending himself from another telepath. Jason had tremendous strength with his talent, so much so that only either a very well trained telepath or someone with similar strength, like a Marine, was going to be able to overwhelm his defense. She was teaching him how to attack as well, but the standard Faey methodology for training a telepath focused first on defense, then on attack. It had parallels with the other aspects of the training; first learning how to protect, how to be defensive, and then learning how to be active or offensive. Learn how to protect from unwanted thoughts, then learn how to listen to them. Learn how to block out broadcasted thought, then learn how to burrow into another's mind for information. Learn how to defend, then learn how to attack. Jason was getting pretty good at the defense, but still had much to learn as far as attacking went.

Water under the bridge and all that. He'd just have to endure this official visit from this Lieutenant Commander Ulala, then get on with his life. It wasn't like he was actually going to *be* in R&D anyway. Next semester, well, the pressure would finally get to him, and he'd crack and do very badly.

By this time next year, he'd be in career training, being taught a specific job, because his time as a student at Tulane would be over.

Until then, he had a problem to solve. He looked down at his napkins and started studying the code once again. Maybe he wasn't being specific enough, or his math was too restrictive. Yes, maybe that was it. Perhaps there was more going on here than he first realized, and he was using the wrong mathematical formulas. Maybe that was preventing the programming from understanding what the weapon's sensors was telling it. Well, bloody hell, he knew everything in the weapon *worked*, he just couldn't get the processor to let the weapon go hot. That was a sensor problem, it had to be. And since he knew that there was nothing wrong with the sensors, that meant that the problem was how the processor was handling the data the sensors were supplying to it.

He picked up his pen and started to scrawl on a napkin, then blew out his breath and flagged the waiter for the check. He needed to write on something better than a napkin to figure this one out.

Closed up in his room, ignoring the loud, banging music that was rattling the window, Jason was lost in his own little world. It was a world of trinary logic, and it seemed to sing to him this night in a way it had never done so before. He knew he was in the zone, and he couldn't lose it.

His fingers flew on the holographic keyboard before him, as he completely rewrote the code block that dealt with how the processor received data from the sensors, and what that data meant. He referred liberally to several pages of chaotic notes that were spread out around the panel on the desk, hanging from the lamp, taped to the wall, and even set on the bed where he could see them. Several other pages of mathematical calculations were stacked on the floor, as he'd gone over his math to make sure he'd gotten the correct answers (he thought he had, it all matched with previous calculations, and the panel ran the numbers in several simulations and agreed with his results). It was rare for him to have such clarity of thought when it came to programming, for it had always been his weak point. He knew the language, but he just wasn't that good at writing complicated programs. Everything he'd done up to

that point didn't require much in the way of complicated programming, maybe only a few hundred lines of code backing up a piece of equipment's hard-encoded operating parameters. But this system had no hard-coding, it was all coming from him, and it had been quite a learning experience to have to build that from scratch.

It took him almost ten hours to build the code and debug it, then compile it. What he got he put on a memory stick, then took down the railgun, powered up the processor, and inserted the stick. The code downloaded, and as it instructed in the first lines, the processor incorporated it into its programming in the proper place, updating its subprocesses and revising its database.

The door opened, but he barely heard it. He saw the display on the side of the railgun read, in yellow English characters, [Updating.....]. He had to resist the urge to hold his breath.

"Still working on that thing?" Jyslin asked. Jason glanced back at her and saw she was still in her armor, her MPAC slung over her shoulder with her helmet hanging from the barrel. "How did your tests go? Got your scores yet?" Jyslin always spoke when she visited him in the dorm, *always*. It was part of the masquerade they used to hide his power, for extended bouts of silence or odd speech patterns might draw attention, such as one person answering a question which hadn't been asked. They didn't follow that rule in Jyslin's house, where they sent almost exclusively, both to let him practice and because they both actually preferred it that way. Jason found sending to be much simpler and more effective to use than speaking, for he could send much faster than he could talk, and he never had to worry about whether or not she heard him. It was something of a bitter pill that he actually preferred sending over speaking, but he could only use with Jyslin and Symone, and never when they were together. Jyslin still didn't know that Symone knew about his talent. That was one secret they both kept from her.

"Hush," he said absently, watching the display. The display blinked. [Updated. Reloading OS.]

"Well?" she asked.

"I haven't looked yet," he told her.

"Phaugh, let me," she said, sliding past him in the cramped room and getting in front of his panel. Her gloved fingers quickly banged out a few commands, and a couple of touches on the display got her the information she wanted. "Wow!" she breathed. "Jason, you got all A's! Your lowest score was a 94! That's *wonderful*!"

[Railgun X-1 OS loaded. Boot Diag] "Whatever," he said without much so much as moving his eyes from the display. A series of alphanumeric characters scrolled across the tiny display, each one denoting that a memory block had been tested and proved either true or false. Then it spat out a sequence of hardware diagnostic test results, as it tested every subsystem for functionality. [Boot Diag complete, Raingun X-1 operational.] scrolled across the display. Each subsystem passed the boot test, he saw as that blinked off, replaced by a visual readout of the number of rounds in the clip. The rounds in the weapon were actually dummy rounds, made of nonmagnetic material, but they did serve to test the ammo counter, and the round would be recognized by the weapon when it was chambered, they just wouldn't fire even if he pulled the trigger, since the magnetic catapult couldn't affect them. "Now, time to roll the dice," he breathed quietly, reaching behind the trigger assembly and flipping the safety selector off.

The display's background color turned from green to red, and the yellow numbers turned white.

The weapon went hot.

"Yes!" he hissed triumphantly. "It worked!"

"What worked? It actually got past the safety?" she asked. She looked over his shoulder and saw the red backlit display, then gave a short cry of delight. "I knew you could do it!" she told him, kissing his ear. "When are you going to test it?"

"Tomorrow I guess. I'll take it out somewhere safe and see if it blows up in my hands," he said with a rueful chuckle.

"Well, I have tomorrow off, so I'll come along," she said. "Zora traded days off with me, she needs

Friday off because her son's coming in to see her."

"I didn't know she had a son," he said.

She nodded. "He goes to a boarding school on homeworld, a really fancy one," she told him. "Zora puts every credit of her paycheck into that place. Poor girl, I don't think she's eaten a meal outside the chow hall for over a year that wasn't bought for her by someone else. That's why she was so happy about giving you those lessons. She really needed the money. That money got her son here to visit."

"Well, I'm glad she could use it," he mused, putting the safety back on, issuing a few commands on the tiny touch-screen display on the side of the weapon, then setting it back on its rack. He wouldn't power it down, to make sure the code was stable. The weapon's program was in debug mode right now, dumping data back into the memory stick he's put in it, which he could use to analyze the weapon's performance later on.

"So, you wanna go out and celebrate the end of term?" she asked.

"Not tonight," he told her, then he told her about the visit he'd received from the R&D representative. "I'm a little worried about that, but I'm sure it'll pass after she's gone."

"That's no reason not to go out," she said archly, brushing her red hair out of her face. Jason had just idly remarked that he thought she'd be quite lovely with long hair, and she'd started to let it grow out as a result. Faey hair grew almost insanely fast, almost a quarter of an inch a day; Jyslin had been getting it cut once a week before he made that remark. The customary comb-over style was gone now, as she'd let the left side of her hair grow out to the same length as her right, had it cut to even it out, then let that evened hair start to grow longer. It was down to her shoulders now, and it wouldn't stop growing fast until it was halfway down her back. Only then would it slow down to a more *human* rate of growth. She'd soon have to start tying her hair up in a bun to get it all under her helmet.

"To be honest, I really don't want to go out tonight," he told her. "I can't believe I started working on that thing, but I did. Now that I'm done, I just want to sleep."

She chuckled. "Now that I can understand," she told him. "We'll go out tomorrow, ok?"

"Sure," he said, yawning.

"Get some sleep, baby," she said with a giggle, leaning in and kissing him on the cheek. "I'll come get you tomorrow morning, and we'll see if that contraption of yours works."

"Oh, it'll work. How well is the question," he said confidently.

"Then we'll find out, won't we?" she said with a wink. "Hi Tim," she called as she squeezed past him and sauntered out of his room, then stopped just outside the door. Tim had just appeared at the open doorway, and he looked haggard. "What's wrong?"

"Finals," Tim groaned. "And I've had the king of all headaches today."

"It'll clear up after you're done and get roaring drunk," Jyslin grinned. "You done?"

He shook his head. "I have Control II tomorrow morning, then I'm done," he answered.

"Well, there's the end of your headache," she said, slapping him lightly on the shoulder.

"Amen."

"You ready?"

"Yah, but I have more studying to do, just to make sure."

"Smart man. See you two later."

Tim watched her go, then came into his room. "She have evening shift today?" he asked.

Jason nodded, sitting down at his desk. "You look a little pale, and your nose is red," he noted. "You getting the flu or something?"

"I must have lost a quart of blood today," he grunted. "Lisa Porter hit me in the face with the door coming out of Xeno I. They sent me to the campus clinic to stop the nosebleed, then they found out my nose was broken. Hairline fracture of the nose," he growled, then he swore. "They had to fix it, and that really fuckin' *hurt*. I thought those bone fusers were supposed to be painless. My nose is still a little sore, and it gave me a headache that still hasn't gone away."

"I didn't know they worked on cartilage," Jason mused aloud. "That might be why it hurt."

"Whatever. I plan on accidentally knocking Porter down the stairs tomorrow morning."

"That's not an accident," Jason chuckled.

"That's accidentally on purpose," Tim answered. "God, I want to sleep, but I have to study."

"It does no good studying with a headache," Jason told him. "Get some sleep, wake up early, and study in the morning. You'll be better off."

"I think you're right," Tim grunted, putting a hand to his nose, then wincing. "See you tomorrow."

"I'm going out in the morning to test that, but I should be back in the afternoon," he said, pointing at the railgun.

"You got it working?"

"I hope so. If I come back tomorrow without both arms, you'll know something went wrong."

Tim chuckled humorlessly. "Good luck."

"Good luck on your last test. Just keep saying that, *last test*. It helps."

"I know it does," Tim agreed, then filed out of his room.

Jason blew out his breath, then leaned back in his chair. He looked up at the railgun, whose display was still steady, and reached over to turn off the display of his panel. Well, he'd find out if it worked tomorrow.

It was a windswept rock, barren and uninhabited. It had a narrow pebble beach on the north side, and a long, narrow plateau that formed a gulley leading up to a sheer rock face of the solitary hill at the center of the island.

That made it absolutely perfect.

The place was called Seal Rock, and it was an island off the coast of Maine. Jason remembered it well from kayaking trips with his father, for it was often used as a camp by kayaking troupes as they traveled up the coast from Portland, towards Rockland. It was about a mile off shore from the coast, but that coast was almost always shrouded in fog or mist. Seals often basked on the pebble beach on the west side, or along the rocks on the jagged coast on the other sides of the tiny island, but there were none there when Jason landed his airskimmer on the pebble beach. The surf pounded on the east side of the island, sometimes sending spray up far enough for them to see. Jason felt this was the perfect place to test the railgun because there was absolutely no chance of anyone getting hurt so long as the weapon wasn't fired towards the coast. If it all worked properly, of course. The wind was strong and crisp, and even though it was July, it was noticeably cool. Jason climbed out of his skimmer with the railgun in his hand and breathed in the salty air, a thousand memories floating through his mind. This region, it had been his home, the first permanent home he'd known. He'd been to Seal Rock a dozen times with his father, and he had fond memories of it. They'd lived only fifty miles from here, in a small, steep-roofed house built out in the middle of the woods, with the woodpile out by the shed that held all their camping gear, and the canoe hanging between two trees by ropes tied to the ends. Thirty miles from here was the tiny airport where his father ran his instructor business, with the airstrip with the big pothole near the end that always got those who didn't land there often.

Memories of another time, another life, something he would never have again.

"I hate cold," Jyslin growled as she came down the steps after him.

This is summer, Jason noted idly. *You don't want to be here for winter.*

I lived on a rock that had never seen liquid water occur naturally, Jayce hon, she sent with an audible grunt. *This would be considered volcanic by those standards.*

Then don't complain, he sent absently as he set down the small case, then opened it. He removed the clip from the railgun and then pressed the button that ejected the chambered round, which dropped from the empty magazine holder and to the ground. He then loaded the new clip and pressed the button that caused it to chamber the first round. "Well, let's not waste any time," he told her aloud as he took off the safety, and the weapon went hot. "You might want to back up. If this thing blows up in my

face, I don't want you getting hurt."

"You're my only way off this rock," she snorted as she came up beside him. *If you go, I go.*

"You can swim," he teased.

"Riiight," she drawled, then she chuckled. "Let's see it."

Jason set the weapon against his shoulder. He hadn't installed sights or a scope, so he had no guide to aiming it. He did have a large hillside to serve as a target though, so he wasn't exactly worried about missing anything. He prepared himself for a possible heavy recoil, and then, as soon as he was ready, he pulled the trigger.

There was no recoil, but the weapon most certainly did fire. There was a strange sound, a high-pitched punching sound like a *BEEEEeaaaaah*, and instantly there was a corkscrew trail of smoke that led away from the muzzle of the railgun. The iron-cored round, sheathed in laminated titanium, was at the vanguard of that spiral tail, and it slammed into the rocky face of the hillside at speeds that almost defied rational comprehension. The round penetrated deeply into the rock face, until the energy involved in stopping the round transferred into the rock and caused a spectacular explosion. The sound of that impact was compounded by a sudden miniature sonic boom, a very loud *crack*, noticeably loud but not as loud as a gunshot. The air that had been displaced by the slug formed a shockwave that accompanied the sound, a sudden pressure in the air that washed over them, almost like getting slapped in the face by a child. Startling, but not painful at all.

The rocky side of the hillside simply *shattered*, spraying dust and chips out from the point of impact. The shockwave of that impact startled Jason and Jyslin, who instinctively dove to the ground as a billowing cloud of dust boiled angrily away from the impact point, and a sudden rain of small rocks dropped on them..

"Holy *shit*," Jyslin gasped as she looked up, then she laughed. *I'd say that that was a successful test fire!*

I'd say so, Jason mirrored, getting back up onto one knee and looking at the dust, which was quickly blown away by the wind. It exposed a crater in the side of the hill that was almost eight feet across and three feet deep. The slug had stuck the side of the hill with the velocity of a falling meteor, and had blown a crater out of the side of the hill. *The sonic boom wasn't as loud as I'd expected.*

"By Trelle's garland," Jyslin breathed as they advanced up to look at the impact crater. *I bet it'd go through neutronium.*

I'm not sure, but it'll go through any armor the Imperium has here, Jason answered. *Neutronium's very resistant to physical impact, and that's all this is.* He read the velocity display on the panel of the weapon and frowned. "Only 14,732 miles an hour," he grunted. *It was supposed to go faster than that.*

You don't think that's fast enough? Jyslin asked archly, then she laughed again. *It works, love! You actually made it work!*

Yeah, it worked all right, he sent, inspecting the weapon for any signs of stress or damage. It looked just fine, though, and a diagnostic showed him that everything was operating as expected. The weapon's recoil absorption system had worked perfectly, completely absorbing the massive recoil of the catapult, a recoil that would have ripped his arm off had he fired it without the recoil system working. He shouldered the weapon again, and Jyslin managed to turn around and put her hands to her pointed ears just as he pulled the trigger again. Another bluish corkscrew of smoke was the only indication that the weapon had fired off the round, with that same punching sound that was quickly replaced by a loud *boom* from the sonic boom and the fact that the slug had blown another huge crater out of the side of the hill. He checked muzzle velocity and found it to be only different by 37 miles an hour, then quickly fired the weapon again, before the dust had been blown away from the last shot. The muzzle velocity was only 12 miles an hour off from the original shot, showing that it was going to consistently fire around that 14,700 mile per hour mark.

"Well, this calls for a celebration," Jyslin said with a grin.

“We’ll go out with Tim and Symone tonight,” Jason told her. “Right now I want to get this back home and take it apart to make sure there’s no damage inside.”

Hold on, I get a turn, she sent quickly, holding her hands out.

Sure, here you go, he agreed, handing it to her. *It automatically chambers the next round. Just pull the trigger when you see the indicator turn green here,* he instructed, pointing at the green light. *That tells you that the flux cabling capacitors are recharged and ready to fire.*

About how long is the recharge time?

About a half a second, but it also takes it about half a second to chamber the next round, so you’re not really losing any time either way, he answered. *It’s not an automatic weapon like an MPAC, Jyslin. It’s not really meant to be anything, really, except an experiment.*

“That’s slow,” she complained aloud.

I didn’t design it to be fast, he countered. *It’s not a military weapon, girl, it’s an experiment.*

“Well, it works,” Jyslin chuckled, putting the weapon to her shoulder, then firing off four rounds in rapid succession, creating a huge cloud of dust. She lowered the weapon and waited for it to clear, and it exposed a destroyed hillside that had nearly had a hole blown clean through it. Both Jason and Jyslin had been hitting the same general area of the hill, causing each round to dig even deeper into the crater left behind by the original round. They weren’t exactly on target, but that didn’t really matter when the craters overlapped.

Nice, it doesn’t even twitch, she said appreciatively. *Even my MPAC has some recoil. This has none at all.*

There’s not enough recoil in an MPAC to justify recoil reduction, Jason told her. *With this, you have to have it, or it’ll rip off your arm.*

That’s no lie, she agreed, looking at the devastated hillside. *I don’t suppose I could convince you to send this in?*

He gave her a flat look.

“I didn’t think so,” she chuckled. *It was worth a shot.*

You should have known better than to even ask, he sent with an audible snort. *I’m almost afraid to think of what would happen if one of these slugs hit a person.*

I’ve seen space dust injuries, she told him. *When I was on board. That’s when dust or microrocks hit people out doing maintenance on the hull. This would probably be similar.*

Was it bad?

Actually, not as bad as you’d think. The thing moves so fast that it doesn’t have the chance to rip a person up. Flesh and bone doesn’t really hinder it, you know. It leaves a neat hole all the way through. I’d imagine that it hurts like hell, but rock strikes are more dangerous because of suit decompression than they are from the wound itself. Well, unless it hits something vital, that is.

Huh. Well, here’s for hoping that this experiment never ends up hurting anyone.

Nothing wrong with that, hon, she nodded. “You ready to go? I want to get back to someplace warm.”

“You mean back to the boiling cauldron,” Jason grunted.

“It’s nature’s revenge for making me go to Argentina,” she winked.

“All you had to say was no,” he countered.

Jason picked up the case of slugs from the ground, and offered his hand to take the railgun back, but Jyslin just cradled it in her arm. *Let’s get back. I wonder how Tim did on his exams. He was really worried about calculus.*

He should be about done by now. I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough.

Railgun safely stowed in a duffel bag in the back of his car, Jason drove back to Tulane in a relatively good mood. The railgun worked, and worked pretty much well how he expected, though he’d have to figure out why the round velocity was slower than his mathematical projection. Maybe he

hadn't taken ambient air pressure enough into account, or used the wrong pressure formula. It was just a good thing that that wasn't a vital part of the weapon's operation. If he was going to mess up, it was best to mess up on something trivial like round velocity. He pondered that as he motored up Saint Charles Avenue, his mind only half on driving. He stopped at a red light beside a Faey hovercar, which had two Army regulars in it.

I wonder if they're going to call us in, one asked the other.

I doubt it, I think they have half the Marine barracks over there right now. They need us out here to keep a presence on the streets, the other answered.

Jason glanced at the pair, a dark-haired Faey and one with whitish hair, older than the first, with the tip of her left ear missing.

I wonder if it's just a rumor, or if it's really true, the first asked in a kind of nervous voice.

We'll find out soon enough. Oria's got campus duty today, she's in the middle of it.

Campus? There was only one campus around here, and that was Tulane. Jason wondered if someone had a nervous breakdown and went nuclear or something. It had been known to happen before.

Well, something was certainly going on. Jason had trouble getting past all the hovercars to get to the student parking lot. Marines in their black armor were swarming all over the campus, along with a good number of Army regulars, and the sendings were thick in the air, almost like a chatter, as commanding officers relayed orders, soldiers reported in, and so forth. It was so thick that he had trouble sorting one voice out from the others, but that was due to a lack of training. Jason had no experience dealing with multiple sendings at once, for there was no way that Jyslin could teach that to him. It was a kind of blur of voices, each one competing with the others for attention in his head, and making them all incomprehensible.

Jason passed a pair of Marines who were picketed at the edge of the parking lot and moved up to the steps of the dorm, where several students were standing, watching the Faey run around. "What's going on?" he asked, shouldering his duffel bag.

"Someone flipped out I think," a girl with short dark hair answered him, wearing a white tee shirt and jeans. She was Mary Liston, she lived up on the third floor. "I'm not really sure. I just know that they cancelled exams for today to sort things out. They had the Plaid surrounded for a while."

"They cancelled exams? Woah," Jason breathed. "That *is* serious."

"Well, someone just washed out," someone said with a chuckle, which caused a few people to laugh. "I wonder who it was."

"It makes me wonder why the teacher didn't just zap him," someone else mused in a thoughtful tone. "I've seen them do that before. Professor Korten's really liberal with his telepathy. I mean, how could a student go bonkers like that? A teacher would just zap him."

"Certain states of mind make it hard for telepathy to work," Jason said absently. "If this person was totally off his rocker, he'd be really hard to subdue with telepathy. That's probably why they called in the Marines. They'd be able to do it no matter what."

"And you'd know that how? From that blueskin you date?" someone asked acidly.

"Try looking around on Civnet," Jason answered coolly. "You'd be surprised the kind of stuff you can find out in the public domain."

"Jayce, I'm glad to see you back," Tim called as he came up the sidewalk. "Did you hear what's going on?"

"I just got back," he answered. "I haven't yet. Do you know?"

He shook his head. "I just know that they evacuated the Plaid, and not long after a big mess of Marines blocked off the building, then sent in a team wearing full battle gear," he related. "I don't know if they've brought anyone out yet or not. We all think that some student went psycho and like got hold of an MPAC or something, or has a PPG and is threatening to make it nuke or something." He sighed. "At least I got my test finished before it happened. I was leaving the Plaid when they called

for us to evacuate.”

Jason tuned out the students and Tim to concentrate on what was going on with the Faey. He labored to pick out individual sendings to try to understand what was going on, but it wasn't easy. It was all nothing but a big jumble. Whatever it was, though, it had all the Marines *very* agitated. Something quite serious had just happened. He knew it was *really* serious when an airskimmer carrying the crest of Trillane landed out on the campus accompanied by two Dragonfly fighters, and the Baron of North America *himself* appeared in the doorway as the two fighter mecha hovered over the airskimmer protectively.

Jason fidgeted a bit, and realized that he had the railgun in the duffel bag in his hand. That might not be a good thing to be carrying around with the Baron of North America within his line of sight. He was about to go up to his room when one of the Marines behind him sent, and she was close enough for him to single out her message and understand it. *The students at the east dorm are calm, she reported in. They're trying to figure out what happened. They think that a student suffered a nervous breakdown during a test and became violent. There was a pause. Aye, Captain.*

I just can't believe it, the second sent to the first. It seems impossible. How can any of these, these, natives have any talent?

Jason almost dropped the duffel bag. Talent? Someone had expressed telepathic ability? Right in the middle of exams?

Well, they are remarkably similar to us, the first answered. Just less developed. Maybe this woman is just that one in a million that's similar enough to us that she has talent. These humans have had psychic ability threaded through their myth and history, though they've never proved it. Given their violence against things they don't understand, maybe anyone who could prove it wasn't brave enough to come forward. Maybe they really do have it, but it's just ridiculously rare. I feel sorry her, truth be told. The mindbenders are going to probe her, and it's not like she did anything wrong. She probably couldn't help it. Actually, I think it's a good thing that humans might have talent.

He felt like his entire world was about to turn inside out. It was over. The Faey now knew that humans could express talent. He had no doubt that that meant that soon, mindbenders from the Secret Police were going to start showing up on Earth, and they were going to start watching everyone, watching them *very* closely. And in a way, it told him that he actually was *not* unique, that he was *not* some freakish accident of nature. He was *not* the only human to express telepathic ability. And now that the Faey knew, knew that humans could express that one ability that gave them an absolute stranglehold over Earth, they were going to come down like the sword of Damacles.

His knees felt a little weak. He sat down heavily on the steps, trying to get over a storm of near-panic. What was he going to do now? It was going to be almost impossible to hide from the Faey if they had teams of mindbenders running around checking everyone out. How was he going to do it? How was he going to keep his secret with them running around trying to ferret out others?

Maybe he was overreacting a little bit. They'd found *one* telepath, and it was going to take them time to figure out why she was one. It was irrational to think that they were going to send an army of mindbenders down here and scour each and every human on Earth because *one* expressed telepathic ability. For the moment, he still had a cushion of relative safety. It was going to take the Faey time to figure out what was going on, and decide on a course of action. They very well might start looking for other telepathic humans, but it wasn't going to happen *right now*. And with him being out of class right now, he had time to address this issue calmly and rationally, to think things through and decide what was going to happen. Because from this moment on, he knew that things could never be the same.

The game was over.

“Jayce? Jayce, you ok?” Tim asked, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah, yeah, I'm alright. It's just the heat. You know I can't stand heat,” he said, though his attention was again more focused on the sending flying around him. He was starting to get the hang of

it, and from time to time he could pick out a snippet of legible sending. They were still a bit disorganized, it sounded, trying to get everything settled down. He did hear that the student that expressed was still in the building, under active subdual from a pair of Marines. Odds were, the girl's panic had given her a desperate strength on top of the powerful defense her unhinged mind had presented to the Marines, so it had taken two of them to get her under control. So far, there has been no order to lock down the school, and Jason had a feeling that not being on campus just might be a good idea right now. "I think I'm going to go down to the Quarter," he told Tim quickly. "Too much activity around here to suit me, and nobody's gonna do anything all day but talk about what's going on. I don't feel like being aggravated all day. Wanna come?"

"Sure," he said. "We taking the car or riding a streetcar?"

"My car's already cool from the AC, so let's take that," he said, standing up and shouldering his duffel bag. "Just do me a favor and run up to my room and get my panel," he asked quickly, handing Tim the key to his room. "I'll get the car started and pick you up over at the sidewalk."

Tim eyed the duffel, and seemed to understand that Jason had his prototype railgun in it, so he nodded. "Sure," he said seriously. Jason didn't want the railgun to be found in his room, and that was a serious possibility right now.

"Like smoke," Jason said quietly, and Tim nodded. Jason opened himself just enough to listen to Tim's thoughts, and found that he was doing as Jason ordered, using some of the tricks that Jason had taught him to hiding from Faey eavesdropping. He wasn't very good at it, but then again, Jason was *actively* listening to him. The two Marines over there weren't focusing on any one person, so Tim would just kind of fade into the background noise when he passed, offering no thought that would make them focus attention on him. Jason walked past those two without attracting much attention, but one of them did look back at him when he reached his car. She watched him open the trunk and toss the duffel bag in, then seemed to lose interest, putting two fingers to her head as a powerful sending drowned out all others, so strong that Jason too took note of it, as someone with impressive strength addressed all Faey in the area with an open, broadcasted sending.

ALL UNITS ARE TO FORM A PERIMETER AROUND THE CAMPUS IMMEDIATELY, the sending boomed across campus. INFORM STUDENTS THAT THEY ARE TO REPORT TO THEIR ROOMS FOR A BRIEF PERIOD WHILE THE CAMPUS IS SECURED FOR THE BARON TO CONDUCT A TOUR.. ENSURE YOU ARE POLITE, THE STUDENTS ARE NOT UNDER ANY SUSPICION, AND ARE PROBABLY UPSET. SQUAD LEADERS, CONTACT COMMANDER LYRE OVER COM OR BY SENDING IMMEDIATELY FOR ZONE ASSIGNMENTS.

That was not good.

"Excuse me! Excuse me, you at the car! I'm afraid I have to ask you to go back to your dorm room for a while, they're asking all students to return to their rooms!" one of the Faey called loudly to him. "It shouldn't be for too long, they're just securing the campus for the arrival of the Baron!"

"If that's all it is, why does it matter if I go? I'll just be one less person underfoot," he answered reasonably, closing the trunk.

"My, he has a point," the other one laughed. "But I'm sorry to say that orders are orders, babe. Back to your room. You should be free to move around again in about an hour."

Jason hesitated, caught in a brief dilemma. He did *not* want to be on campus with that telepathic girl out there making the Faey concentrate here, demonstrating that humans had their talent. He was very afraid that they might take that opportunity to interview other students, and he didn't want to end up in that position, facing an unknown Faey across a table who might use her power against him. Jason had never been in that position before, and he didn't know if he could keep his power a secret if he was confronted in that manner. But, on the other hand, openly defying a Faey command at this moment would be monumentally bad. He had to choose between risking being exposed, or doing something that was going to get him into very real and immediate trouble.

Then again, maybe it just required a little subterfuge. "Tell you what," Jason said, going around to

the far side of his car. "I'll arm wrestle you over it." He put his elbow down on the blistering hot metal of his trunk's hood.

"You two go get those other students back into their rooms," a voice called behind him. He turned and saw Jyslin standing there, her black armor gleaming, and a sober expression on her face. "I'll get this one. He always likes to fight." *This one is my beau. I'd prefer to get him off campus and out of your hair, because he'll do nothing but fight with you,* she added her thought, supposedly a private instruction to them, or it would have been had Jason not been able to hear it.

We have orders to get them into their rooms, she protested mentally.

We have orders to secure the perimeter. Where he is doesn't matter so long as he's not wandering around campus, right? Letting him and any other student that wants off campus accomplishes the same thing, it secures the campus.

Probably, but I'll have to send in for some clarification, the taller one said dubiously, turning her head towards the airskimmer and increasing the strength of her sending. *Commander, I have students here at the east dorm that want to get off campus instead of report to their rooms. Is that permissible?*

That's fine, so long as they remain outside the perimeter until the Baron leaves, came the response.

Well, there we go, the taller one mused. *He's all yours, Sergeant. Sorry to go over your head, but I didn't want any doubt as to orders with the Baron on the site.*

No problem, Corporal, that was the smart thing to do, she answered gracefully, grabbing Jason's arm. "I think you need to take a little walk, mister," she told him with a false smile. "Stop bothering the Marines."

What are you doing here? Jason demanded in a tight sending just to Jyslin, as the two Marines started towards the other students, calling for them to either return to their rooms or leave the campus, as they wished.

I got called in, what did you expect? Do you know what's going on? she replied quickly.

I know enough. It's been too thick for me to make out everything, but I managed to get the main parts. This is not good, Jyslin, he said, making a few abstract gestures. *Not only are there telepathic humans, but now the Imperium knows about—no, they know that I might exist. You know how messy things are going to get, right?*

She scratched her face, then thrust her hand at him to reinforce her point. *Yeah, I know, but let's not get too hasty, she pressed. Things haven't developed yet. Let's see where they go before we start making any kind of serious decisions.*

I know, but it's got me nervous, he sent with an audible sigh, motioning back towards the dorm. *Right now I'm waiting for Tim to get down here with my panel. We're going to go down to the Quarter and sit in Patty O's for a while and wait this out. You have the range to reach me down there?*

Please, she answered with a snort. *Just don't try to reach back up here to me. You have the range, but you might get intercepted trying to reach that far. Call me, don't call me,* she said, holding up her little com device, to which Jason had the contact number.

I know better. They're way too many Faey up here who are too keyed up to try that. Are you going to be alright?

She chuckled. *Hon, that's what I should be asking you. Are you ok?*

Yeah, just nervous as hell, he answered, scrubbing his face with a hand.

Just calm down. Go down to Patty O's, but don't drink anything. Keep a sharp wit about you right now.

I don't plan to, he assured her.

Unassigned personnel report to the staging area by the main science building, an open sending broadcasted across the campus.

"There are my orders," Jyslin told him aloud, looking back towards the Plaid. "I'll see you later tonight, ok?"

"Tim's bringing my panel, so call me if something comes up," he answered.

“Yah, Tim is,” Tim called as he rushed up, Jason’s panel in his hand. “Those two Marines didn’t want to let me pass at first, til I told them you were waiting to pick me up. Then they let me by. You ask them to let me through, Jyslin?”

“No, they’re letting students get off campus instead of staying in their rooms,” she told him. “And that means you two had better get moving before they wonder why you’re not in your rooms.”

“Good idea,” Tim said, going around the car and quickly climbing into the passenger seat.

Jason drove slowly and carefully down to the French Quarter, and even parked in a pay garage instead of trolling the usual hidden areas where free parking could be found. He was just too unnerved. They walked down from the parking garage just off Royal Street to Patty O’s, and Jason went straight into the piano bar. He didn’t ask, he didn’t wave to any of the bartenders, he just sat down at the piano and started playing. He started with Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata, then moved immediately into Bach, then Chopin. His eyes were closed nearly the entire time, as he used the sound of the music to relax him, to calm him, to settle the sudden chaos of his life and allow him to step back and think about things more rationally. Rationally, the best thing he could do right now was not panic, not make any rash or hasty decisions. Yes, the secret was out. The Faey now knew that there was a telepathic human. But, it was *not him*. That rather dubious honor had gone to someone he didn’t even know, a poor girl who had expressed in the middle of exams. The stress. That had to be what triggered it, the stress of exams.

Right now, the Faey didn’t know if it was an isolated incident or not. That worked in his favor, because they weren’t looking for others yet. First they had to find out what happened, they’d probably study the girl, find out what had happened to her. He did not envy her position right now. There was a very good chance she wouldn’t survive that examination. Faey were anything if not efficient and thorough, however, so it wasn’t going to take them long to complete that initial study and draw some conclusions.

Two to three weeks, at the most. At the absolute most. That was how long it was going to take them, and that was when he was going to have to make a decision.

Decisions. If they considered the girl an isolated incident, then he was probably going to be alright. He’d have to exercise extreme caution, because the spectre of another telepath might be lurking in the backs of their minds. He would lose that expectation of not being telepathic, and would probably not be able to send to Jyslin anymore. Ever. It would just be too dangerous. It was a small price to pay, however.

But, if the Faey didn’t consider the girl to be an isolated incident...hell. He really had no idea. They’d be looking for new telepaths, and that would make things exceptionally dangerous for him. He really didn’t see how he could continue to operate like that, being on guard every moment of every day for the rest of his life, and that only if they weren’t *actively* hunting new telepaths down. If they brought in teams of mindbenders and did personal interviews with everyone, he’d have no chance to go undetected. That would put him in danger, it would put Jyslin in even more danger, because she *trained* him and never told anyone about him. There was definitely more at stake here than just his life. There was Jyslin, and maybe even Tim and Symone, maybe even the career of Jyslin’s aunt Lorna. There was a great deal to consider, more than he really cared to ponder.

He would have to think about it, but later. He already had enough worries, and the moody music was earning him some scowls from Pete, the day manager, who was standing in the doorway of the piano bar. Jason winked at him and played the opening bars from *Dragnet*, which made the tall, willowy man break out into delighted laughter. Then he broke out into one of his favorite pieces, Scott Joplin’s *The Entertainer*, one of the best pieces of ragtime music ever written.

“I love it when you play that,” Tim said from the closest table, two empty daquiri glasses in front of him already. Two other people quietly filed into the piano bar and sat down near the back, and much to his surprise, they were *Faey tourists*. He could hear their chattered sending quite clearly, and they were dressed in what Jason thought to be rather amusing touristy garb: New Orleans tee shirts, the lady in a

blue pleated skirt, the man in a pair of jeans that looked brand new, and both were wearing cheap plastic visors one could buy in any tee shirt shop or off some of the roving vendors. A waiter rushed in and asked to take their order, but they looked up at him blankly. "English...not good," the Faey woman said, looking up at him.

"He wants to know what you want to drink," Tim told them in Faey, turning around.

"Oh, you speak Faey! Thank the Trinity," the woman said with a relieved laugh. "Tell him I'd like something fruity, and I'm not that worried about how drunk it makes me," she said with a wink.

"I'd like to sample one of your stronger ales or beers," the male told Tim.

"Stan, the lady wants a fruit punch Hurricane, and the gentleman would like a Guinness," he told the waiter.

"Thanks Tim," Stan said with a sigh. "They're the fourth pair to come through here today."

"Thanks much handsome," the woman told Tim with a wink. "I know they're getting frustrated with us, but at least they're still very courteous and friendly. This city has been everything our travel agent said it would be. I'm glad we came here."

"Not many here speak Faey," Tim told them as Jason started playing *All of Me*.

"Well, we should have had *English* implanted before we left, so it's really our fault," the male chuckled. "We just weren't sure if we were coming here or going to that *France* place, so we decided to risk it."

A sign of the times, he guessed. They were the first Faey tourists that Jason had seen, but in a way, he should have expected it. Earth was more and more part of the Imperium, more and more deeply being tied up with it. They were nothing but a farming colony populated by an indigenous population that was still partially resistant to the Imperium, yet here they were, Faey tourists that had the money and the approval to come to their world on holiday. Jason finished up that song and started playing the piano portion of the song *Cursum Perficio*, an old, old song from an Irish singer named Enya.

The two tourists remained in the piano bar as Jason continued to amuse himself at the piano, and the place slowly started to fill up. Some of them were regulars, and they knew how the piano bar worked, so he was more than happy to take their napkins with the names of songs on them and credits folded up inside them, tips for playing the songs they requested. It was a nice diversion from reality, and it made him feel better and made the people sitting in the piano bar happy as well. He was a bit surprised when Rose, one of the *real* piano players, came through the door behind the pianos with her huge pile of sheet music and walked past his piano to the one that faced his on the other side of the stage. "Oy luv," she said in her British accent, looking over her glasses at him. Rose was a middle aged, portly woman with her graying black hair done up in a bun and a habit of wearing voluminous flower-print dresses with a floppy woven straw hat. She was quite a character, and Jason was rather fond of her. "How long have you been here?"

"No idea," he replied.

"When are you going to cut off that hair?"

"As soon as you wear pants."

"Never, then," she laughed. "Want a break?"

"I'm not here to work," he told her. "I'm having fun."

"Shh, don't tell them that this is fun," she said as she sat down. "They'll expect us to do it for free!"

"Nah," he smiled.

"Well, you'll have to get off that rig in a half an hour. Alex is back in the dressing room getting ready for his shift."

Jason finished up the song, then took a napkin from a doe-eyed young girl with black hair, who looked a little flushed when she handed it to him. Inside was a ten credit note, the words *Piano Man*, and a phone number.

Jason had to chuckle. He got that almost every time. "Got your harmonica Rose?"

"Oh, *that*," she said, then reached into her pile of sheet music.

Jason had never been much of a singer, but he certainly wasn't afraid to do it. He warned the now full piano bar about his terrible singing, then proceeded to prove it as he sang the lyrics of the song *Piano Man* as Rose played the harmonica portion. Towards the end of it, there was a bit of a commotion as Jyslin entered the piano bar, in full armor. What was more, Symone was with her, also in full armor. Jason nudged at Tim's table with his chin, and Jyslin nodded and moved down to the front with Symone in tow.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, it's time for Rose to take over for me for a while," he announced to them after the song was finished. "Don't worry, she sings much better than I do."

"Only to cats, doll," she replied as she took a napkin from a young man, which made many in the bar laugh. "Now then, friends, I see here we have a request for—oh, you wicked boy," Rose called with a laugh. "Now, as you know, I have to play whatever I get a request for, within certain reason, of course," she said with a grin. "But young Andrew here has requested I play the theme to *Scooby Doo*. Well love, you asked for it!"

The bar broke into a riot of laughter as she dutifully played the theme of that ancient cartoon, which still was shown on television, and had even started creeping into Faey galactic casts on what was called *Terra TV*, a network that broadcasted entertainment made on Earth to the rest of the Imperium. Every planet in the Imperium had such a network devoted to their entertainment. What was worse, she sang it with enthusiasm, which made it even funnier. Rose was a bit of a ham. But Rose's singing and playing created a perfect atmosphere for Jason to talk to Jyslin and Symone without many people overhearing them. "What happened on campus after we left?" he asked in Faey, leaning over the table. The other three did the same.

"Well, they took that girl to Houston, and from what I've heard, they've started examining her. There was a detachment of mindbenders there waiting for her," she said with a shudder. "The Baron walked around and looked at things, then he left. Odds are, he went to Houston too, then he'll probably go up to the orbital station to meet with the Duchess. She came in on a transport about two hours ago."

"Shit," Tim growled. "It's that serious?"

"They're taking it seriously, Tim-Tim," Symone told him gravely. "You don't understand what that girl represents to the Duchess."

"A direct threat to Faey control," Jason said grimly. "Faey telepathy is the main noose around the neck of the human race."

"Exactly," Jyslin nodded. "They'll run all kinds of tests on her to find out how it happened."

"Then what?" Tim asked.

"Well, if she survives that, they'll probably take her to Draconis, *fix* her, train her, then use her as an agent for the mindbenders," Jyslin said with a dark look. "A *human* telepath could go many places in the galaxy that other races would never allow one of us, because they know we're telepathic, where they know from our own records that humans *aren't*. She'll end up being one hell of a spy."

"That's the truth. Every time I set foot on a free station or planet, I have a team of telepaths following me around," Symone grunted. "That's why Faey really don't go outside the Imperium that much. We're much more comfortable around people who aren't always so suspicious of us."

"I didn't know other races were telepathic," Tim whistled.

"Not as a whole, but most other races have *some* telepaths," Jyslin told him. "The skaa don't, but most other races do. They're usually very, very rare, like less than one percent of the population. Faey are the only race in the known galaxy that's naturally telepathic."

"Well, if that's true, why is it such a shock that humans might be telepathic?"

"Because there's six billion humans on this planet, and *none* of them have any talent," Jyslin told him. "This girl is one in *six billion*, Tim."

Almost, Symone sent to Jason privately, giving him a sly smile.

"So, she's some kind of freakish fluke," he reasoned. "Why is that so scary?"

"Because she's a fluke that represents *a real threat* to us, Tim. Even an untrained telepath can be

dangerous. Probably even more dangerous than a trained one. An untrained telepath has raw terror boosting their power, and they're *very* hard to subdue. They can *kill* people, Tim, even a trained telepath."

"Oh, ok, I get it," he nodded.

"Any word yet on what's going to happen?" Jason asked.

She shook her head. "There probably won't be any orders coming down the pipe til they finish their examination of her," she answered. "Right now, they're trying to get over the shock of the discovery. We'll have to wait and see if they overreact."

"You got that from your aunt?" Jason asked.

She nodded. "Right out of her mouth. She'll keep me abreast of what's going on."

What else did you find out that we can't tell Tim? Jason sent tightly, glancing meaningfully back at the two Faey tourists in the back of the bar.

Not much, really, she answered, looking sideways at him as he did her. *So far there's been absolutely no word about how the Trillanes are going to respond to this. But it goes further up than them, really. Some of the decisions that come down may be Imperial. If the Empress doesn't like how the Trillanes respond, some orders may come down from Royal Command, and that's nothing but the Empress' commands. The Trillanes might have to take orders from Empress Dahnai if they don't handle it in a way she approves.*

I'm not surprised they're so spooked, Jason informed her grimly.

It might all change tomorrow, so we can't really hold any rumors up to the light of truth right now, she told him. *The dust hasn't settled yet. We have to wait for that before we have anything to go on, really. It's going to hinge on what they find out from that girl that expressed today. If they consider her a fluke, as Tim called her, we'll be alright. But if they determine that she might not be...* she trailed off without finishing, but Jason certainly understood the implication.

Big trouble.

"So what do we do?" Tim asked.

"There's nothing we can really do," Jyslin told him. "You guys are on break right now, so I'd just say enjoy it. It probably won't have anything more to do with you two now that the campus has cleared out."

"That's a relief," Tim sighed. "So, we going somewhere on Sunday?"

"I doubt it," Symone frowned. "They have us all on standby. That means we can't leave the city."

"Same here," Jyslin nodded. "But it was scheduled for us, we're up in the standby rotation. I told you about that last week, Jason."

"I remember," he nodded.

"But, I do want you staying with me tonight," she told him directly. "Both of you. You and Symone can stay in the guest room, Tim," she told him.

"Why?" Tim asked.

"Let's just say that there's a case of the jitters on campus," she said uneasily. "You two might get a bit of flak because of *us*, so I'd like to give the place a night or so to calm down before I let you go back. The Trelle only knows, I don't want you two going back there and beating people up when they start giving you attitude. They'd call me out of bed to come down there and break it up, and you know how cranky I am when I'm woke up."

"I think I'd rather avoid that," Tim laughed. Tim had tasted Jyslin's surliness when being roused from naps.

"At least it gives you a reason to get your clothes out of my laundry room," she told Tim flintily.

"Hey, I've been trying," he objected. "I'm almost out of socks. Every time I go to get them, you're not home. I can't get past the gate without you signing me in, remember?"

"Why didn't you just have Jason come with you, you dink?" Jyslin told him. "He has base access."

"He was studying."

“*Men*,” she huffed. “You always have to make things so difficult!”

“That works with me, but I’ll have to call in and let them know where to reach me,” Symone said. “Can I give them your phone number Jys?”

“Sure,” she answered. “I’m in a hovercar, and it’s kinda doubleparked fifty *shakra* over Bourbon Street at the moment, so I’d better go get it down. I have to turn it back in anyway, so I have to go. I want you two at my house in an hour,” she said sternly, pointing at Jason and Tim. “Where are you parked?”

“The garage off Royal,” Tim answered.

“Well then, I suggest you wander in that general direction,” Jyslin stated.

It hadn’t been easy for either of them to relax.

Jason walked along Saint Charles absently in the already stifling July heat, hands in his pockets, eyes on the ground, and lost in thought. Last night had been rather tense, because Jason just couldn’t put what was going on out of his mind, and for that matter, neither could Jyslin. She’d been forced to resort to a sleeping pill to make Jason sleep, and it had left him feeling groggy and hazy in the morning...the reason he never took drugs unless he had absolutely no other choice. And for him, with what he could do, feeling like he wasn’t in full and complete control at all times was a scary proposition.

One stark reality hung over his head, something he had realized that morning. The physical. It was the semi-annual physical, conducted on all students every July and December. That was next week. Well, one segment of the standard physical, unless they’d changed it, was a brain scan. There was a very real possibility that the standard signature of his brainwaves was now different because he had no talent the last time they did one, but he did now. And if that girl who expressed had them spooked, they might pay much closer attention to those scans than they usually did. The usual reason they did them was to catch certain diseases and mental disorders very, very early, before any symptoms appeared, and treat them. Things like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, disorders that humans had always either treated with drugs or could do nothing about, those the Faey could treat with their much more advanced medical technology, or sessions of telepathic treatments conducted by what they called “psi-surgeons,” telepaths who specialized in using their abilities to treat mental or psychological disorders.

Concerned. That was such an understatement. The more correct word would be *terrified*. He’d seen how they reacted to that girl, whose name he still didn’t know. What would they do if they found out he was also telepathic, that there were *two* humans with the talent? That wasn’t a fluke, that was a *pattern*. What would they do to him? And how would that change how the Faey treated the human race as a whole? Would they take him to Draconis and *fix* him, reprogram him to be obedient and faithful, then train him to be a spy and unleash him on the rest of the galaxy? Would they crack down on the humans of Earth, weed out the latent telepaths from the rest of the population and fix them too? Or maybe just dispose of them, since a block of telepaths on a planet that still wasn’t totally assimilated into their Imperium would represent a serious threat to their control?

The more he thought about it, the more worried he got. That made him agitated, and that caused him to be more aware of his own power, and his endless need to keep it under total control at all times. He was as much a prisoner of it as he was a prisoner of the system, possessed of a wondrous gift that he truly enjoyed, but forever denied the freedom to use it as he wished he could. He *did* enjoy having talent. He really did. If he didn’t love it so much, he’d have quit Jyslin long ago, the instant she taught him enough to keep it a secret. But he had wanted more, wanted to learn how to master this ability, and was well on his way. He was solid on hiding his power, was competent in sending (though he had much more to learn and much practice was needed), and he was good in the fundamental basics of attack and defense. He wouldn’t be defeating Jyslin in a telepathic duel anytime soon, but at least he could protect himself from her long enough to run over and punch her, which would disrupt her

concentration. He wanted to *be* a telepath, and everything that it entailed, but he didn't want to be able to openly enjoy that gift if it meant becoming even more the slave to Empress Dahnai and the Faey Imperium. But, at least he found acceptance with Jyslin, and when Jyslin wasn't there, with Symone. It was a small thing, but never failed to make him happy.

Telepathy. It was the cornerstone of the Faey's hold over Earth, even more than their overwhelming technological advantage. With that weapon hanging over them, the human race could never, *ever*, break free of that control. It could not be prevented, it could not be countered, and it could not be defeated. Having an MPAC in one's hands and pointing it at a stark naked Faey did no good if that Faey could simply use her telepathic abilities to prevent one from pulling the trigger. It was the only weapon, the only advantage, that the Faey *needed*. If they wore woven grass skirts and used thighbone clubs as weapons, they would still hold the advantage over the human race.

And there was nothing he could do about it.

God, how he hated admitting that to himself. All his life, he had *always* been able to do something about anything that got in his way. He didn't want to go into foster care, so he got himself emancipated. He couldn't afford college, so he got a scholarship. It wasn't until the Faey came that he had truly understood what it felt like to be helpless, to have no control, to be subject to the wills and wants of someone else.

To be a *slave*.

His father...Jason chuckled. His father would have picked up a slingshot and went after the Faey if that was what it took. He was such a brave man, even after he got cancer. He'd fought to the bitter end, no matter what the odds were, exhibiting that ferocious tenacity for which the Fox family had been famous. Sometimes, Jason had believed that his father would beat the cancer if only because he just absolutely refused to die. But in the end, his father's body just gave out, and his will just couldn't keep everything going all at once. It hadn't been a lack of will or spirit, it had been the weakness of the flesh that had finally caused his father to succumb. Even at the end, his father had recited the last words of Captain Ahab from *Moby Dick*, "*from hell's heart, I stab at thee...with my last breath, I spit on thee,*" and then he died. Not "goodbye," not "I love you Jason," but a steadfast declaration of defiance that even though the cancer had conquered his body, it would never defeat his spirit. He had been fearless.

His father had been a *man*.

Certainly not like his son was. Meekly accepting that which he hated because he was afraid. Afraid of death, afraid of losing his position of relative comfort...of losing Jyslin. Yes, he had to admit to himself, that was now a factor, as much as he hated to say it. Jason Fox, admitting that he didn't want to lose his rather weird relationship with a Faey. The guy who refused to be friends with some Faey that he would really like, if not for the color of their skin, the shape of their ears, and the government that controlled them as much as it controlled him. He was such a hypocrit. His father would be so disappointed in him. It would have never been rejection of him or hatred of him, but he would certainly be disappointed.

Jason stopped in front of the Burger King, and realized he'd walked almost all the way down to the West Bank Expressway. He sighed and moved to turn around, but a tiny sign hanging from a streetlight stopped him dead in his tracks. It was made on a piece of spiral notebook paper, in crayon. It looked to have been done by a 10 year old.

It was a flag, with only seven stripes and a bunch of dots done in white crayon for stars on ragged blue. And under that were these simple words:

Don't forget July 4th. Happy Independence Day.

Jason looked at it for a *long* time, then reached up and pulled it down. It had been put there by a child, a young boy or girl who hadn't been afraid to tape it to a streetlamp, despite strict no-posting laws instituted by the Faey. The fourth of July. It had come and gone, and he had totally forgotten about it. It reminded him of the last Independence Day he'd had with his father, wheeling him around in a wheelchair in Portsmouth, a city on the border between Maine and New Hampshire. They'd just

come back from Boston for the Pops Goes the Fourth concert they held out at the harbor. They were at a Shell station, the Pathfinder was still fueling up as they came back from the bathroom, and his father was chattering on excitedly about how good the concert was, how they'd managed to synchronize the fireworks with the music so perfectly, then he sighed and chuckled and said that his mother would have been there playing...that she *was* there playing. That was the first time that Jason had heard anything like that from his father, and Jason knew at that moment that his father was going to die. He did die, three weeks later. He remembered that moment, not the concert, not anything else, because they'd watched a black 1962 Cadillac convertible go by with New Hampshire license plates, and his father had pointed and said "that's why I've always liked New Hampshire, son. They don't mess around."

The motto on a New Hampshire license plate: *Live Free or Die*.

Live free, or die.

Damn right.

He was so *tired* of being afraid. Damn tired of it. Afraid of being found out, afraid of losing Jyslin, afraid of being with her, afraid of what he would end up doing after he left school, afraid of compromising his principles. Afraid, afraid, afraid. He wasn't living, he was *existing*, existing in a continual state of fear...which was just what the Imperium wanted. Be afraid, stay timid, accept everything because you're too scared to do anything else.

Well, Jason Fox wasn't going to be frightened anymore. He was going to be what he wanted to be, he was going to redeem himself in the eyes of his father. Oh, there was nothing he could do about the Faey, and his father would probably disapprove of him throwing his life away. But he could honor his father by doing what he would have expected him to do.

Live free, or die.

Jason carefully folded up that ragged little piece of paper, put it in his pocket, then turned around and marched back the way he came. His strides were long and confident, and his expression was one of both relief and resolve. He knew exactly what to do. The Faey didn't own the entire world. There were certain places, places where squatters and outlaws roamed, the wild forested areas where the Faey had allowed things to go back to nature to maintain the planet's ecosystem. The Appalachian Mountains and the forests extending to the west of them were uninhabited areas, at least *officially*. But everyone knew that there were people there. Squatters, survivalists, outlaws, people who had refused to accept the yoke of the Faey conquerers. Those were the people who had chosen to live free or die, and they remained in those forests, surviving the best they could, living day by day on whatever they could hunt, scrounge, and keep. The Faey didn't bother them, leaving them to their own designs, so long as they didn't interfere with the Faey. They had shunned the rest of the world, sacrificed everything just to be free.

That was what he wanted to be.

He would lose Jyslin. He would lose his life of luxury. But he would have his *freedom*...and there could be nothing that could ever take the place of that.

He was back at Tulane before he knew it. He walked briskly up to the steps of the dorm, past a couple of girls who were talking, and towards the door. A burly fellow that looked like a football player came out the door, then snorted and blocked it. "Well, if it ain't the blueskin's bitch," he sneered.

He didn't say another word. A single blow to the nose sent the man flying back into the foyer, and he lay there, rolling to and fro and groaning with both hands covering a broken nose, as Jason boldly stepped over him. "Have a nice day," Jason grated as he went straight for the stairs.

He forgot that he gave Tim the key to his room, so he simply kicked in the door. The loud *BANG* made every occupied room's door open, and they watched as Jason Fox calmly moved a large piece of door out of his way, then waltz into his room as if he'd done nothing unusual. He reached under his bed and pulled out his backpack, then opened his locker and dumped a drawer of clothes onto the bed. He realized that it wasn't big enough, so he piled all the clothes he could get on the bed, then pulled the

blanket's corners up and tied them to form a makeshift bag. He used his backpack for what few personal effects he had, pausing for a moment when he took the picture of his father off the pegboard over his desk. He smiled, then tucked it safely away. He then reached under his bed again for a small suitcase, and started filling it with those tools and pieces of equipment which belonged to him, things he'd paid for with his own money. He wouldn't take so much as a coaster if it was something that the Faey had supplied to him. His money was *his*, even though it was paid to him by the Faey, because it had come from the fact that his ideas had been used to help people. That money was clean money, as far as he was concerned.

"Shee-it," Tim said with a grating chuckle. "You know, you could've come up and got the key." He looked at the bed. "What are you doing?"

"Leaving," Jason said brusquely. His panel's display started flashing, and the device started beeping, warning him of an incoming call. Jason grabbed it, and without blinking an eye, threw it at the closed window. Tim flinched as the sound of breaking glass washed over them, and Jason's panel sailed out the window and down out of sight with a shower of glittering glass.

"Holy shit, you're *serious*!" Tim gasped. "Are you out of your mind? Where are you going to go? You know they're going to drag you back here!"

"They have to catch me first," Jason said, pushing him towards the door so he could get back to his locker.

"Shit, Jayce, it ain't no reason to go bonkers or nothin'," he said. "Jyslin said there wasn't nothin' more gonna happen on campus. Don't flip out."

"I'm not flipping out," he said. "I just realized something a little while ago, Tim."

"What?"

"Live free or die."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Just what it says," he declared, punching a moleculartronic toolkit into his suitcase. He'd *paid* for that, damn it, it was *his*. And he was taking it. "I won't be afraid anymore. Not of the Faey, not of me, not of what I can do, not of what the Faey would do if they knew it, not of anything that I can do something about. And damn it to hell, I can *do something* about being a good little slave to the Imperium. So I quit."

"You can't *quit*! They'll send you to a farm!"

"Big *fuckin'* deal, and keep your voice down," Jason snapped, then glanced at the broken door and lowered his voice. "Work here, work there, assemble circuit boards, pick corn, it's all the same. Do your job, pretend that it matters, delude yourself into thinking that you're happy because you're afraid they'll fix you so you *are* happy. No matter how much money I could make as a technician, I'm still just that sorry son of a bitch out in Iowa picking corn. I just have a bigger room and no callouses on my hands."

"Don't do this, man," Tim pleaded. "Think about what you're about to lose."

"What the *hell* am I about to lose?" Jason hissed in a low but intense voice. "My cushy little job as a Faey lapdog? No thanks. Jyslin? Yeah, I'm gonna miss Jyslin, I really like her, but she's not worth it if I can't look myself in the eye in the mirror when I wake up every morning. But I'll tell you one thing, Tim McGee, I have a *hell* of a lot more to lose by staying here than I ever do by leaving."

"Like *what*?" he shouted.

"Like my *pride*," Jason said in a seething tone. "Like my *self respect*, like my *freedom*! I'd rather die in a gutter a free man than live to be a hundred knowing that I'm nothing but a cog in the wheel of the Imperial machine," he said with remarkable calm and control, zipping his backpack shut. "If you keep screaming, you're going to tip off the others about what I'm doing, and I won't have the time to get away. So, kindly get your ass out of my way," he declared flatly, picking up his makeshift bag of clothes.

"You're crazy if you think I'm letting you—"

The rest of that declaration was lost in a wheezing “*whuaaff!*” as Jason planted his foot solidly in Tim’s belly. The dark-haired man literally sailed out of his room, across the hall, and then slammed into the door on the opposite side. It split in two under the weight of the impact, and Tim spilled into Angie Harmon’s room, blood flowing out of his nose as Angie screamed in shock and outrage, scrambling to grab the towel on her bed to cover the fact that she was nude. Jason stepped out of his room with his backpack over his shoulder, a bag of clothes in one hand, and a small suitcase in the other.

“Later, Tim,” Jason said from the hall. “I’ll call you when I get to my campsite. Er, you tell him that when he wakes up,” Jason told Angie after realizing that Tim wasn’t going to be coherent for a few minutes. “By the way, might I say, *damn*, woman,” he said with a sly smile and a wink, looking her up and down.

Angie blushed furiously, but did give him a smile.

“Call me if you ever need a date,” he remarked as he walked back towards the stairs.

Everyone who was in their room was now at the door, and they watched Jason march past with strangely respectful eyes. Jason had his chin up, his shoulders back, marching into the dark realm of uncertainty with dignity and courage. He went down the stairs and to the foyer, then stepped back over the man who had accosted him earlier, who was still laying there groaning, holding his bloody nose. They were following him, filing out of the dorm behind him as he went to the student parking lot, towards his beat-up old Corolla, shimmering in the hot summer sun. He threw the bags in the trunk, dropping them on top of the duffel that held his prototype, then slammed it shut. That was when he saw them all, standing there, staring at him silently.

“Time for a vacation,” he called to them. “I’ve been feeling a little stressed lately.”

“You think?” someone called with a laugh. Then, for the oddest reason, they all started clapping and cheering. He had absolutely no idea why.

Certainly, Jason wasn’t stupid enough to just drive off without some understanding of harsh reality. He was planning on going to a lawless area with no real supplies or provisions, so that had to be addressed. He had a plan, a simple plan; he was going camping. He was going to outfit himself for a camping trip, and as far as the Faey were concerned, he would simply vanish during his trip. If he did things right, they’d never find him, because by the time they realized he was missing, he’d have too much of a head start. It also held the dual benefit of allowing him to buy everything he needed to do this, since camping equipment was exactly what he’d need in order to set up somewhere.

He made a few stops on the way to his destination, buying nonperishable food, camping supplies, and after he got to Bell Chasse, he went to the Base Exchange and bought some extra gear, including one more little piece of equipment that might be useful to him later on, and something he could get nowhere else.

Guns.

The clerk almost had an apoplexy when he demanded a PK-319 metaphased plasma rifle (the hunting version, with an energy output that wouldn’t make the target explode from the plasma) and two AM-10 plasma pistols, along with enough PPGs to power them to last him five years. But his thumb on the reader showed her he had the money, and there *were no laws* against him buying weapons, not even as a native. Anyone could buy anything in the Faey system...they just had to have the money for it. She did try to probe him almost the entire time, but he put up a false front of buying them as a birthday present for his Faey girlfriend, whose relationship with him was the reason he had access to the BX in the first place.

He also bought a new panel to replace the panel he threw out the window, one that didn’t have a tracking device in it like his school panel did, and a personal cell phone to handle communications with the outside world, one of the generic ones. They’d be able to track him if he used it, but he wanted some way to talk to Tim and Jyslin if it was needful. They might just send a search team, or train

sensors in his direction, because they didn't *know* he was running. As far as they'd know, he vanished during a spontaneous camping trip. That story would even let him keep his airskimmer, if he could find some way to hide it once he got to a place he liked. They'd have no idea what happened to his skimmer, and he really didn't care what they believed. He bought two pair of hiking boots in the BX, plenty of spare socks and underwear, and even remembered to buy a fully equipped first-aid kit. Everything a camper would need for a trip to the woods.

He made one more stop, at a bank, where he withdrew C10,000 from his account and took it as hard currency.

He had everything he needed now. He drove over to the flight line and parked his car by his most prized possession, his airskimmer. He spent maybe a half an hour transferring his gear into the skimmer, then parked his car in its space, just like normal. He even locked it and took the keys, since Tim had keys to the car. He climbed up the steps and into his skimmer, then sat down in the pilot's chair. He ran his hand along the display, then gripped the control stick gently. He knew keeping it was going to bring them on him, but he didn't care. It was *his*, he bought it, he owned it, and he was *keeping* it, damn them, even if he never flew it again. If it brought them to him, well that was too bad for them. He fully intended on parking it somewhere, some parking garage in some abandoned city or getting it under some trees, so long as it couldn't be seen from orbit, so it would be there if he needed it. He might even live out of it, he didn't know yet, but he'd be *damned* if he gave it up. He wasn't going to be afraid of the Faey anymore. If they wanted to come after him, then they were more than welcome to do it. But Jyslin and her Marine squad had discovered how dangerous it could be to keep coming after Jason Fox.

With a cleansing breath, he turned on the radio. "Tower."

"This is tower." It was Mari, a controller he knew rather well. "Hey Jason."

"Hey Mari. I'm requesting clearance for take-off."

"Destination?"

"North," he said. "I don't have a set destination yet."

"Gonna go wandering again, eh Jason?"

"Something like that."

"Let me call it through," she said, and there was a long pause. "Ok hon, I got you cleared up through Cleveland. You'll get passed off to Montgomery control," she answered. "I'm showing no flight restrictions under 50,000 *shakra* or low-flying traffic along a northern vector between here and the hand-off point, so you're clear, but Montgomery's got some heavy traffic right now, so they'll probably have some local restrictions. Just stay under 50,000 and you're in the green."

"Got it. Local?"

"Hold for local traffic. About three minutes. We have a freighter dropship inbound."

"Understood," he said as he started the skimmer's engines, hearing that familiar high-pitched whine hum under his feet. "They got the cruisers doing recon today?" he asked casually.

"The Duchess is visiting, so they're all probably busy with that protocol shit," she said candidly. "The Duchess loves to inspect the warships, you know." He'd forgotten that the Duchess Trillane herself was here, in the orbital station that controlled space traffic over the planet. She probably had a host of warships along with her personal ship for protection, but they'd all be too busy right now worrying about her than they would be worrying about a single airskimmer who was flying an approved flight plan.

A hovercar screamed onto the tarmac, racing towards him. He glanced at it, but paid it little mind. He was inside, the door was closed, and he was about 90 seconds from lifting off. He finished his preflight checklist and glanced out again, then felt his heart seize a bit when Jyslin jumped out of the hovercar, with Maya getting out of the driver's side. *Jason Fox, you idiot!* she boomed at him with a powerful sending. *Tim called me! Get your ass out of that skimmer right now, do you hear me?*

He looked at Maya, then flipped on the external speaker. "No," he answered bluntly. "It's been

real, Jyslin. I really enjoyed it, and you're about the only thing making me regret this. But I can't do this anymore. I can't live in fear all the time, I can't pretend that I can live like this anymore. I'd rather lift off this tarmac and get blown out of the sky than live one more day under the Faey. I have no idea where I'm gonna go or what I'm gonna do, but damn it all, I'll be *free*. And that matters more to me right now than anything else in the world."

Jason, do not do this! They will come after you, don't you understand that? You're not just any other student, you're a candidate for research! You're too valuable to just let you walk off! If they catch you, they'll reprogram you, or worse!

You don't seem to understand, Jyslin, they won't start looking for me until a few days after I miss my physical, Jason told her with an edge to his mental voice, sending tightly so Maya wouldn't hear it. *I'll have at least a week's head start. They'll never find me.*

Oh, they won't. I will. You think I'm gonna just let you run out on me? You've got another thing coming, buster! You can't hide from me, Jason Fox!

You'd better calm down and shut up before Maya realizes that you're open sending and not sending to someone without talent, Jason snapped at her tightly. Maya already had confused eyes, looking at Jyslin like she was trying to convince herself that she was wrong about what she was thinking.

"Local traffic is clear," Mari called over the radio. "You're clear to take off, Jason. Have a good one, hon."

"Thanks Mari." *I'm not going to vanish,* he told her. *I have your phone number. I'll call you. I, I'm sorry to run out on you Jyslin. You were the only thing holding me here, but I've had enough of sacrificing my honor because I want to be with you. It's time to start living up to my principles instead of compromising them every moment of every day that I stay in the Faey system. But I won't be a stranger to you, I promise. As long as you and Tim keep your mouths shut, they'll think I vanished on a camping trip, and I can keep in touch with you. It's only if you start spouting off at the mouth that you'll get me in trouble. Think about that.* With a light touch on the controls, Jason urged his precious skimmer into the air. The skids lifted off the tarmac, and he looked through the windscreen down at Jyslin. He regretted leaving her, but she was one of the reasons he had to go. Staying with her would just make him more and more a Faey slave...and he just couldn't live like that. It wouldn't be her fault, not really. He'd just want to be with her, and to be with her he'd have to compromise his principles more and more every day as he got out of school, took his final training, became a part of Faey society, became a part of the Imperium. He just couldn't do that, not if he wanted to become the man he wanted to be.

So, it was time to go. Time to be the man his father would be proud of, time to be what he wanted to be, no matter how much it cost him.

To be *free*.

Jyslin, however, didn't look like she was going to be quite that forgiving. She turned and reached into the hovercar, then came out with her plasma rifle. He saw her clearly bring it up and disengage the safety. Jason had a brief moment of panic; she was going to *shoot him down!* He scrambled to raise the ship's shields, though they'd do very little against a metaphased plasma weapon...only shave about ten percent of the power of the plasma off, the part of the metaphased plasma that matched the state of existence of the shield. His skimmer's hull had no reinforced armor, that plasma rifle would blow holes the size of garbage can lids all through his ship. *Are you crazy, woman?* Jason sent frantically as he tried to turn the ship so she couldn't hit his engines. *If you hit the engines, you'll blow us all to hell!*

Jyslin didn't seem to care. She raised the barrel of her plasme rifle, and Jason had a moment of terror where he realized that the only way he was going to save his ass was if he tried to subdue Jyslin with telepathy. That, or open fire on her with the airskimmer's defensive weaponry.

But Maya reached over and put her hand on the top of the rifle's barrel, and then gently started pushing it down. Jyslin glared at her murderously, but the serenely calm look on her face, with just a

hint of disapproval, seemed to take the fight out of her.

Now I understand exactly what's going on, Maya sent openly, which both of them clearly heard. She looked right at him, and gave him a sly, slight smile. Be more careful from now on, Jason, she warned. That was an open send. Now I understand what brought you two together, even though nobody in the squad could understand why Jason would do such a major about-face and go from hating Jyslin to being her beau. You, Jason Fox, have talent. And unlike that girl yesterday, you've had it for quite a while. Probably since that night at the opera, I'd wager. Jyslin saw what the rest of us missed, and she got you out of there, got you someplace safe. And she trained you, didn't tell anyone about you, because she likes you and she didn't want the Imperium to hurt you. She knew what the Imperium would do if they knew about you.

Jyslin gave Maya a strangled look. Now it was *really* over. Maya would go straight to Lana, and both Jyslin and Jason were in big, big, *big* trouble. The only recourse they had was for Jason to land and bring Jyslin along, because they'd probably make her wish she was dead.

Well, far be it for me to rat on a friend, she sent with gentle eyes. Go on, Jason. You'll be much safer wherever you're going than you'd ever be here, because I'll bet my breastplate that the Imperium won't consider this girl to be an isolated incident. Even if they do, that'll change the instant another human expresses talent, which I'm sure will eventually happen now. You never need worry that they'll ever hear of it from me. Me and Jyslin, we've been together too long, and besides, if I weren't married to Vell, I'd probably have done the same thing. You're worth it hon. Just don't forget that I exist. I expect a phone call from time to time, she said with a wink.

Maya, Jyslin started, her mental voice anguished, upset, showing her raw emotion.

Hush, girl. We're partners. You'd think I'd give up our friendship when I agree with what you did in the first place? We'll only get in trouble if we blab. You intend to suffer a bout of conscious and confess?

No!

Well, Jason, you intend on coming home and revealing yourself?

Hell no, he answered immediately.

Well, we're all perfectly safe then, she reasoned. So, you get going, Jason. I suggest you keep your skimmer powered down unless you need it, and hide it in a cave or inside a tall building. Faey sensors can pick up the plasma signature from something as big as a skimmer from orbit, no matter where you put it. Not unless you encase it in a very heavy metal, like corbidium. Burying it under a few hundred standard tons of stone will block their sensors from detecting it by its metal signature. If worse comes to worse and you can't find a good place to park it, just park it under a large bridge. The bridge's sensor signature will hide the skimmer well enough that only a master sensor officer specifically looking for it is going to find it.

I'll remember that, he promised, looking at Jyslin. I'm sorry, Jyslin. Don't be too mad at me.

It's too late for that, she growled back at him. But if you're dead set on this, may the Trinity keep watch over you. And if you don't call me soon, you'll regret it.

Jason chuckled audibly. *Keep her out of trouble, Maya.*

That won't be easy, but I'll do my best, she replied with a smile. Never forget, Jason, you do have friends here. Don't forget us, and don't hesitate to think of us when you need us.

I'll remember. Thanks Maya. Jyslin...behave. The tone of his sending betrayed the simple words. It held within it all the regret he felt leaving her, all the worry of the danger she might be in because of him, all the concern he had for her, and it contained all of his feelings for her, his true affection for her, concern for her, maybe even a little bit of love for her. But it also contained all the nervous excitement at the prospect of chasing a dream denied to him for years, to find that which so fundamentally made up what he was that it defined his very soul. He was going to find something that meant as much to him as life itself, the only thing that could ever convince him to leave Jyslin, the one thing that he had craved since the day the Faey appeared and had been denied to him.

Freedom.

It was a very uncertain path he had chosen for himself. He was going into the unknown, and he was leaving behind him the possibility that his past would search him out, try to hunt him down. But it was worth it. It was all worth it. Jason was willing to die if that was what it took, just to taste freedom for one single day, to stand on a hilltop and watch the sun rise and know that for that moment, for that fleeting moment, he was the master of his own destiny, he was the one that controlled his fate. The only thing he came close to regretting was leaving Tim, Symone, and Jyslin behind. But they couldn't follow him. Tim wasn't ready, Symone needed Tim, and Jyslin was part of the system, no matter how she felt about it. He wouldn't forget about them, and he wouldn't break contact with them, but they could not go where he was going. Maybe someday, much later down the road, but not now.

Right now, he had some maps to look over, to find the best place to set down. He didn't look back at Jyslin as he brought up the throttle and left them behind, then put the skimmer on autopilot and brought up the planetary maps, looking for a destination. It had to have access to a good-sized abandoned city, so he had scavenging opportunities, but not one so large that it was going to be swarming with squatters. It would help if it was beside a large river, to give him a bridge to park under temporarily until he found something better. It would help if the city itself was designed in such a way that he could quickly get from that bridge to a forest, for cover. And he'd prefer that location to be somewhat close to Faey territory, probably within a hundred miles or so, so he could make forays into "civilization" for emergency supplies if it was necessary. That was what the hard cash was for.

Here. This place had most of what he needed, and was ideally located. Huntington, West Virginia (or what used to be West Virginia). It bordered the Ohio River, and the maps showed that it had three bridges spanning it. The city wasn't that large, built as a long strip nestled up against the river, meaning that he had to go no more than a mile traveling north or south to clear the city and get into forested wilderness, but, it was large enough. It was probably picked over fairly well, but some of the things Jason would be looking for probably wouldn't be seen as too valuable to most squatters. The city was about seventy miles from the bright red line on his map that marked the border of patrolled Faey territory. They had many farms out in Ohio, out where the foothills petered out and the land became flat and fertile. On an airbike or in a car, that wasn't far at all. He'd have to be careful until he got the hang of crossing that border, but he didn't plan on doing that unless he had no other choice.

That was where he was going. He punched up some information on the town, accessing old archives that the Faey had absorbed from the United States. It had once been a manufacturing town and important railroad junction, but like most American cities in the '80's, '90's, and the early '00's, it lost its manufacturing plants to overseas competition. The city had had a large university, Marshall, and had still had a metal smelting plant in operation before the subjugation closed it down. The city was located in a valley formed by the Ohio River, and the land of that region was dominated by rolling hills and thick forest.

That was very good. Access to scavenged goods, cover and concealment, relative proximity to Faey territory, and the opportunity to hunt. He'd never really been hunting before, but he'd better learn.

He glanced back at his railgun. It was a good thing he had the scope he'd meant to mount on it in the box of junk he'd brought from his room. With that scope on it, he'd be able to sit on hill and shoot the deer on the other. All he needed to do was see them; anything he could see using that thing, he could shoot...no matter how far away it was.

He had a destination. He had the supplies. He had the will. He had a plan. He was ready. It was time to live the dream.

Chapter 6

Oira, 19 Oraa, 4392, Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 7 July 2007, Native Regional Reckoning

Huntington, West Virginia (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

Jason Fox arrived late in the afternoon at his new home in a heavy, pounding rain, sliding his ship up under the concrete and steel of a green bridge that looked to connect the downtown area of the abandoned city of Huntington with a series of houses on the other side. The skimmer was protected from the rain by the bridge, and to his relief, there was no one under that bridge when he got there. He'd been worried that maybe there were squatters there, but then again, in a city this size, all the squatters were probably in abandoned buildings and houses. Many of the houses he'd seen when he flew over had chimneys, so that was probably where most of them were living...if there were any. This city, like all cities in the Appalachain Forest, had only been abandoned about three years ago, so most of everything was still in moderately good repair. He'd noticed that the streets were riddled with potholes, and all the grass in the city was heavily overgrown, but aside from that it looked almost like there were still people living here. It was an eerie ghost town that would look alive if there was electricity.

It was a park of some kind, where he was parked. Thick grass was all around, and he was up against a floodwall that had once protected the city from the river. Further to the east was what looked like a small ampitheater built out over the water, and there were picnic tables and parking lots just inside where gates breached the wall. It had to be some kind of riverfront park. Jason opened the hatch and stepped out with a pair of binoculars, then used them to scan the opposite bank, what had once been the state of Ohio. He saw the houses over on that side, but he could see no activity out there. From the way it looked, at least for now, he had the place to himself.

Carefully, Jason checked the radio channels, and then the proximity sensors, for signs that they noticed he'd landed. He'd given no destination, and the last communication he'd made was with Columbus flight control about twenty minutes ago. Their sensors would show that he'd descended, but unless they had a satellite overhead or were using a ship's sensors, they'd have lost contact with him at about 500 feet. Ground-based sensors had the same line of sight issues as old radar when it came to hilly terrain, because Faey sensors weren't all that good at penetrating thick rock. Not the kinds they used for tracking air traffic, anyway. Space-based sensors didn't have to worry about mountainous terrain, so they had the perfect vantage point. He'd descended under that level some 50 miles upriver, then flown down here literally skimming the surface of the water. He'd flown under most of the bridges easily, except for one at a place called Point Pleasant, which looked to have been damaged by something and had been partially collapsed.

Aside from that, everything looked eerily *normal*.

With a sigh, Jason shut down his precious ship, then went back into the cargo hold and pulled the portable PPG out of the habitat module. That device would power all his Faey-based equipment easily, acting like a portable power generator, and it wasn't so large that it would be detectable by Faey sensors. He jacked it into the cabin's power system and isolated it from the rest of the ship's power system, which allowed him to bring up the radio, television, and other cabin systems except climate control without activating anything else. The skimmer's computer was connected to its own always-on backup PPG, so the computer had no trouble controlling the active cabin systems. He kept an ear out for the regional command and military comm traffic, listening for any references to him as he pulled out his railgun and inspected it for any damage, then fitted it with sights and the scope, a scope that was

both a laser sight and a telescopic sight. He also tweaked its operating system to have it chamber and recharge the firing capacitors faster, which effectively allowed the weapon to fire as quickly as the reload mechanism could chamber the next round. That was effectively as he could pull the trigger. Both of those actions were governed by the software that operated the weapon. Jason glanced down at the little ammo case he'd been carrying with it. Inside that box was 1,500 rounds of ammunition, as well as five extra clips. Each clip held 30 rounds; the rounds themselves were actually quite small, around the size of a .22 caliber bullet. The size and shape of them would even allow him to manufacture them without a replicator, since they were fairly simple. All he needed was a molecular sprayer to get the laminated titanium on them. He had two sprayers, and he had a good stock of titanium in his box of junk.. He could make the rounds out of *any* magnetic metal, even the sheet metal of a car. He could make a mold of a bullet in about 3 minutes with some wax, and he could use that mold and a molecular sprayer to take sheet metal as fuel and just spray the metal into the mold, like pouring water. Coat them with titanium, and he was ready to go. The sheet metal in one car would make a few hundred thousand rounds, so he wasn't all that worried about getting ammunition for his railgun. He'd need to restock his titanium, but a visit to a hospital would help there. He seriously doubted that scavengers had taken all of the surgical instruments out of them, and many of them were made of titanium. If worse came to worst, he'd cross over into Faey territory and visit a home supply store. They had replicators on premissis, which they allowed people to use to replicate raw materials for a fee. The lack of a replicator was his one glaring deficiency, but they were just too big, and consumed too much power.

By the time he was done altering his railgun (he'd set the reload time like that on purpose to make sure it was going to work properly, though the weapon was capable of literally firing as fast as the trigger could be pulled), the rain had stopped, and the sun broke through a hole in the clouds and painted the muddy water of the Ohio River a golden brown. Jason opened the hatch again and stepped out, breathed in the warm air, muggy from the rain, but it was the sweet smell of freedom that filled his nose with its intoxicating perfume. He put a plasma pistol in the waist of his jeans, hidden behind his back by his denim overshirt, then affixed a carrying strap for his railgun and slung it over his shoulder. It was time to go out and see what was about. He went down the steps and touched the remote of his skimmer, which caused it to retract the stairs and close the hatch, sealing itself up. The lightly armored hull would repel anything a squatter could conceivably throw at it, unless they had some plasma weapons, anyway. It was invulnerable to gunfire, but it was more than vulnerable to metaphased plasma weaponry.

He had to walk a while to get to the floodgate, and decided that a bicycle might be handy for a while, til he could find something better. He came out behind what used to be a Red Lobster, its faded sign hanging precariously over a street that went along the floodwall. He kept going up towards the town, and it was when he got up there that he noticed the first signs of habitation. Some abandoned cars had been pushed to block some streets, most of the glass windows of the stores along—he had to look at a fading sign at the corner—3rd Avenue were broken out, and whatever had been on display in them was gone. Shopping carts and other debris were piled up in intersections to impede traffic, and he had to climb over a couple of them to continue up into the city. He came up through what had looked like a plaza of sorts, and when he reached 5th Avenue, he saw his first citizen of this abandoned city. It looked like about a thirty year old man wearing faded, dirty jeans and a black tee shirt, with a denim jacket over it despite the summer heat. He had the hood of a car open that was parked a bit further up 5th Avenue, a green Buick Century with four flat tires that had been parked at the side of a street, yanking on something.

"Excuse me! Hey, you, I need some help!" Jason called, turning towards the man, going around a large overgrown bowl of sorts that held an overgrown shrub. He opened his mind just enough to hear the man's surface thoughts, so to better get a grip on what the man might say...and what he wouldn't say. Sure, it was cheating, but he needed all the information he could get.

The man whipped out from under the hood with some kind of car part in one hand, and a revolver in the other. His hair and beard were brown and unwashed, and his face was smudged with dirt. Jason saw the fear in his eyes, sensed the rise of panic in his mind, and that made him react. Jason turned and dove behind the potted shrub as the man brought up his revolver and fired. He heard the bullet ricochet off the huge pot just before the loud report of the gun. Jason got up to his knees and unslung his railgun, keeping crouched behind the large pot, but he could hear the steps of the man as he fled back up the wide, four lane street, and heard his terrified thoughts as he fled. *Gotta get back to the hill! Gotta get back to the hill!* he thought over and over and over, and from the sound of it, that was when he'd feel he was safe.

Holy *shit*! Were they really that paranoid around here?

"Ok, important safety tip," Jason breathed, trying to get over the scare. God, that had been *close*. If he hadn't have been eavesdropping on that guy, he might have gotten himself shot.

Why was he so afraid? What was around here to be afraid of? Jason stood up when the man was over a block away, then did what he should have done in the first place. He swept the area around him with his gift, searching out other active minds, the very trick that Jyslin and Maya had once tried to use to find him, what seemed like a lifetime ago. Jason was a very strong telepath, and his ability to seek out and detect other sentient minds had a range of nearly a mile. He wouldn't be able to make out any thoughts, but he'd know that they were there.

There were 73 responses, and they were concentrated mainly to the east, down towards where the maps had shown Marshall University to be located. There were eight people in his general area, moving in pairs, and all four sets of those paired responses were moving in his general direction. They were coming to check out the gunshot, he realized, find out what was going on.

Jason looked around, and saw that he was beside a public library. He raced up to its rotating door, then found it jammed. The window had been broken out of a handicap access door, so it was a simple matter to duck in and run into the building. It had been ransacked, and moldering books, decaying in the unconditioned air, were littering the floor. There was a check-in desk immediately in front of him, and he jumped over an access gate and knelt behind it, waiting for the first of those patrols to arrive.

It took about five minutes, then he saw them. Two men on bicycles, each with hunting rifles slung over a shoulder and pistols in holsters on their belts. They had hand-held radios as well, very nice ones for that matter, and one was using it. "Yeah, Jim, we're at the library. Nothin' here."

There came the distant sounds of several gunshots.

"*We're up by the park,*" came the response. "*Whoever it was got up the hill. Lucky bastard.*"

"You need to learn how to shoot, Jim," the man called with a chuckle.

"*Why don't I practice on your ass, Trev? It's big enough.*"

Hmm...that sounded odd. Both of them weren't really thinking about anything interesting, just bored and a little tired from biking around. One was waiting to get his shift over so he could go home. They weren't much help. Jason needed more information, but he also wasn't going to hang his butt out where they could shoot it off. He crept around the desk and through the access gate that kept people at one time from running out with the books. He crept on all fours through the broken window, mindful of the glass, then got behind that same planter as the two rode up to the edge of the street. He unshouldered his railgun, then rose up and aimed it at them. "That's about far enough, gents," Jason called loudly. Both froze, then one went for the pistol holstered in his belt. "Keep reaching if you want to keep your head," Jason snapped as he read their thoughts. They were shocked, surprised, and now they were starting to become afraid. They couldn't see him, had no idea if he was armed or not, but both of them were pretty sure that he was. "Both of you, hands up." They complied, as the one on the left started immediately wondering if he was fast enough to grab for his pistol and shoot, but the fact that he was still on his bike would make it really hard for him to turn around. "Now then, both feet on the ground." They complied. Jason swept the area with his power, and found the closest pair of rovers was three blocks away, moving away from them. That was good. He slipped around them,

coming into their view, and both immediately locked their eyes on his railgun. Both of them registered surprise, and the one that was now on his right noted to himself that Jason's clean clothes and hair meant he had to be new, and that he'd gotten his hands on a Faey weapon. He relaxed just a little, as his mind saw the potential for having him join their gang.

Gang. He read more and more of the man's thoughts, and saw that he was a member of a gang that held most of downtown and Marshall University. They defended that turf from squatters out in the hills, who snuck in to steal anything that might be of use, tried to get in and steal the dwindling supplies of gasoline or canned, nonperishable food that the gang had managed to amass.

"Well now, it's nice to finally meet someone who didn't shoot at me first," Jason said in a grim tone, motioning with the barrel of his railgun. "You, pull out your pistol with two fingers, and drop it on the ground."

The one on his left slowly reached down for his pistol, then he started preparing himself to lunge for it. His mind told Jason that he was betting that this newbie didn't have the reflexes or the killer instinct yet to shoot him. Jason replied by firmly shouldering his weapon and aiming it at the man's nose. "Carefully," he warned. "If you think you can move that fast, maybe you can get your finger up fast enough to plug the hole I'll put in your forehead."

Fear rippling through his thoughts, the fellow decided that going for it wasn't such a good idea. He pinched the butt of his revolver between two fingers and pulled it out, then dropped it to the ground. "Good boy. Now the rifle, one hand on the strap only." He complied, then Jason nudged his rifle at the other man. "Same thing, slim. Pistol first, *real* slow, then rifle." The man, holding the walkie-talkie, realized that he had it, and that he could warn the others of their situation just by pressing the transmit key. "Well, let's start with the radio," Jason said, looking him in the eyes. "No reason to invite anyone else to our little party, is there? After all, we're not here to shoot each other up. At least I'm not. So drop it."

Disappointment welling through his mind, the man dropped the radio to the ground, then carefully relieved himself of his pistol and rifle. "Very good, gentlemen," Jason said. "Now scoot back from your toys, but don't take either foot off the ground."

"How you expect me to do that?" the one on the left, the taller of the two with greasy long black hair tied in a tail, asked.

"Shuffle," Jason answered, bobbing the end of his weapon. "Back."

They shuffled backwards awkwardly, for the bikes between their legs didn't want to cooperate, their hands still up. Jason used his foot to hook one rifle, then used it to sweep all four weapons out from in front of him. He did not reach down for them. Jason backed up a few steps, then sat down on the concrete edge of a raised earth bed, the kind of thing that probably once held flowers. It was about fifteen feet across and the lip was about two feet off the ground. Jason lowered his weapon slightly. "Now then, gentlemen," Jason said in a reasonable tone, openly listening to every thought they had, "as you've probably guessed, I'm somewhat new around here. I decided that I'd had just about enough of the Faey, and decided it was about time to take a little trip. As you can see, I managed to grab a few toys," he noted, bobbing his railgun meaningfully. "Now, since it's obvious that people aren't that friendly around here, you're going to tell me all about who's around. You see, all I really want is a nice quiet place to move in and be left alone, and you two gentlemen are going to tell me where the best place might be."

"I ain't sayin' shit," the one on the right said. He was kind of portly, with brown hair and was missing one of his front teeth. His face was a bit round and reddish, either from sun and wind or some kind of medical condition, and he had close-set brown eyes and a Cincinnati Reds baseball cap covering dirty hair.

"Hey Mike," someone called over the radio.

"That's me, I have to call in," the man with the Reds cap said, though his thoughts betrayed that statement.

"You just came down with a case of technical difficulty," Jason told him bluntly.

"They know where we are," the other said, the one called Trev.

"Sure, but they don't know you're in trouble," Jason said with an evil little smile.

"If you don't let him answer, they'll come looking for us."

"Fine. Let's just wait right here for them. But while we're waiting, you're gonna tell me all about what's going on around here. You know, all the juicy gossip, like who lives where, what places I should avoid, that kind of thing. I'm sure you're just the veritable tour guide to the stars around here."

The man Trev—probably short for Trevor—frowned, and his thoughts told Jason that he was very worried, that Jason was way too comfortable. That confidence had the man rattled.

"*Hey Jim, this is Mike,*" someone called. "*What you need?*"

"*Swing out towards First Street and check the roadblock on Washington, then pull back in.*"

"*Sure, we're not far from there.*"

"Aww, ain't that too bad. I guess someone else thinks he's Mike too. Too bad that other guy believes it," Jason told the other man with a sly grin. "Nice try. So, start talking, and don't be shy."

Jason listened, with both his ears and his mind, as they started talking. Their words were meant to get him killed, but their thoughts painted him a pretty stark picture of what was going on. The city itself was controlled by three gangs. This one, led by an evil-natured man named Joe Bueller, controlled downtown. There was a smaller gang that controlled the eastern part of the city, and a third gang that controlled the west. Beyond the city there were no gangs, just individual squatters and small groups that laid claim to this or that piece of territory. Some of them, mainly the gangs, were armed. The Faey had collected up most of the native weaponry, but in a state like West Virginia, where just about *everyone* owned a gun, even they couldn't get them all. They'd missed quite a few, and one of the first things those who had avoided the evacuation had done was tear apart the cities to find them. In pawn shops, in residences, in one case an overlooked State Police armory, there were guns out there, and the squatters had managed to get their hands on them. The Faey hadn't bothered trying to collect up the ammunition, so there was plenty to go around. Those State Police weapons were in the hands of the gang that controlled East Huntington and the towns of Guyandotte and Barboursville, that gang's territory. They had a few M-16's with mostly nine millimeter pistols and shotguns, but the gang here in downtown had managed to loot some street weapons out of an abandoned police warehouse, where those guns had been evidence in crimes. These two didn't have machine guns, but some of the guards out there did; Uzis, Tek-9's, and some other street weapons. Joe Bueller kept those guns closer to the seat of his territory, which was a bar on 4th Avenue not far from the Marshall University campus. Joe Bueller's gang had twice the people as the other two, but their position in the middle didn't allow him to kill off one without the other invading from the other side. The gangs on each side hated each other even more than they did the gang in the middle, so there was no chance that they'd join forces and crush the ones in the middle. So it was a balance of power that kept things from going all to hell. The gangs maintained their members through the food they'd collected and what their foraging parties could find, or steal, out in the wilderness areas. They were banded together for mutual protection, but unlike what Jason might imagine, they also took anything they could from anyone else, and killed them if it came to it. Both of these men had killed people before, Jason discovered as he read their thoughts, both in defense of their territory and out on raids to take food or valuable equipment from individual squatters out in the hills. Those squatters out there were very careful to keep hidden, because if a gang's raiding force found out where they were living, they'd attack them. So most individual squatters were semi-nomadic, moving from place to place, and were as nervous as rabbits. Groups of squatters were out there, and their locations known, but they were too well entrenched or had too many people in them to make a raid on them successful. Those people had literally walled themselves into defensible positions. Joe Bueller would love to kill them off and take their stuff, but he'd lose too many men trying to take their camps, and those were men he couldn't afford to lose if he wanted to protect himself from the other gangs. So Joe Bueller's policy was to have his foragers simply go out

and ransack houses out in the rural areas, and kill anyone they came across—at least after they got them to take his raiding forces to where they kept their goods.

Neither of these guys liked Joe Bueller, but he had a major mean streak and the loyalty of most of the people in the gang. Nobody really liked him, but he kept them all alive and fed, so they overlooked his violent temper because they were afraid they'd be overrun and killed by another gang if he wasn't there. In general, just about everyone was going to act the way that first fellow did. These people didn't trust anyone that they didn't already know, and thanks to roving groups of people like this gang who went out to steal anything they could get their hands on, they'd shoot first and ask questions later.

Fear was the watchword out here in the wilderness, it seemed. And those remaining behind had quickly degenerated into bands of vicious thugs who took by force anything they could, from anyone weaker than themselves.

Such a pitiful, sorry remnant of what their once proud nation had been.

Jason glanced down the street. So, that single guy had come down to scavenge a car part... probably for a vehicle he either had or thought he could get running. He'd noticed a lack of cars on the streets. When they were evacuated out, the people were allowed to keep their automobiles. So that hadn't left too many behind, just those ones that nobody had cared to bring along, or ones that had no real owners. Oh, he was sure that there had been cars galore to be had on the lots of auto dealerships, but that was only so many. And after three years, even with such a limited number of cars out there to be had, those places that had gasoline had to either be empty by now, or that gas had turned to varnish and was unusable.

Well...he had to find a new place to park his skimmer. He wasn't about to leave it down here. He wasn't going to get involved in these ridiculous turf wars. Though it was apparent that the opportunities to scavenge weren't going to be as plentiful as he'd hoped, on the other hand, he already had just about everything he needed. He had enough food to last himself a month, and that should be enough to figure out how he was going to get himself set up. If it came down to it, he'd just go to Faey territory and buy himself a major stock of food. He had no qualms against buying from the Faey; they may be the conquerers, but they weren't commanding *him*.

Hmm...there was an old interstate south of the city. He wondered if an overpass bridge over that highway was enough to hide his skimmer. It would have the vertical clearance, that was no problem, since his skimmer was only a little higher than an old semi rig's trailer. Maya had told him to keep the skimmer under a bridge over a river, one with lots of concrete *and* steel. An overpass would have lots of concrete, but maybe not enough steel.

It wasn't like he had much choice. He had to find a place for his skimmer, he wasn't going to lose it. It meant so much to him, and it represented a part of his freedom, as much as his dad's old Cessna had meant freedom for him before. He was willing to face down the entire Faey military to keep it. He would fight to keep possession of it. It was *just that simple*.

No, there was an easier place to park it...the other side of the river. He just had to make he wasn't going to be bothered. Well, that could be done.

Blowing out his breath, he stood back up and looked at the two men, who were now repeating themselves. Their thoughts told him that they had no more viable information. "Very good, gentlemen, I think you've told me enough," he said calmly. "Probably more than I ever wanted to hear," he sighed. "Disgusting. To think that we've come, we've come to *this*. Fighting like wild animals over scraps. I thought Americans had more dignity than that."

"Fine for you to talk, waltzing in here with your full belly and nice clothes," the one named Trev spat vituperously. "You ain't got no idea what it's like being out here."

"Fine. Go to the Faey," Jason told him with cold eyes. "They'll take care of you. All you have to do is live under their rules."

"That's worse," he growled.

"Then you deserve the life you've chosen. Just don't bring others into it. Kill each other, leave

those who want to stay out of it alone.”

“I didn’t say nothing about anything like that!” he protested.

“I’m not an idiot,” Jason said coldly. “It doesn’t take a genius to piece together how you work. Well, you’re a big fan of turf, aren’t you? Well, here’s a new one for you.” He quickly bent down and picked up the radio, and he keyed it up. “Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” he said steadily into the microphone. “Welcome to the new world.”

“Who is this? Get off the channel Terry! We got no time for your jokes right now!” someone said immediately.

“Oh, this isn’t Terry. This is the new kid in town,” Jason said as he backed up and sat back down. He set down his railgun, and both immediately started planning on lunging for the guns laying on the ground. The shorter one was about half a second from it before Jason reached behind himself and brought out the plasma pistol, then levelled it at them. Both of them seemed to know exactly what it was, and both of them froze, their thoughts both fearful and angry. “I have your boys Trev and, what’s your name?” he asked the other man calmly.

“I ain’t tellin you shit!” he shouted. “We’re at the library! We’re at the library!”

“Yes, we do happen to be at the library right now,” Jason agreed pleasantly. “I have your boys here standing with their bikes between their legs and their hands in the air. You need to send someone down here to come get them. I think they’ll need help getting home.”

“Who the fuck is this?” someone called over the radio. *“Whoever you are, you’re the stupidest son of a bitch I ever heard of! We’re gonna come down there and chop your fuckin’ head off!”*

“Don’t worry too much about me, neighbor, I’ll be just fine,” Jason said, leaning back a little.

“See, I just got here a couple of hours ago, and I find out that the place I picked to live is nothing but a war zone. Well, I didn’t come here to get into a war. I came here for peace, and quiet, and solitude, and I won’t have a bunch of idiots screwing up my good time. So, ladies and gentlemen, here are the new rules. See that river right over there to the north? That’s the point of no return,” he told them. “Anything that goes over that river won’t come back. *Ever*. This is your side of the river, ladies and gentlemen, and that side is *mine*. So all you people over on the Ohio side of the river, I suggest you clear out. In one hour, I’m taking possession of that side of the river, and I won’t be held responsible for anyone I catch on my side of the line. Do we understand one another?”

“You got some real fuckin’ guts, punk, I’ll give you that,” a new voice called. From the thoughts of those two, he knew that this was Joe Bueller.

“It’s not guts, Joe my man, it’s just plain old tiredness,” Jason answered. “See, I got really burned out after living under Faey rule for three years, and I’m at the point where I just don’t give a *fuck* anymore,” he said with narrowing eyes. “I came here to get away from the Faey, to find a new life, and I’ll be damned if a wannabe warlord with delusions of mediocrity is going to piss in my Wheaties. Different rules are in the game now, Little Joe. I’m the new king of the hill. Now, if you want to do something about me, why don’t you just try to cross my bridge? I’ll even let you get to Ohio. But remember my warning, Joebob; you cross my bridge, you don’t come back. Understand?”

Jason sensed the approach of two people, coming from the west, up 5th Avenue. They were about four blocks away, and they were approaching fast. Jason glanced in that direction, then stood up and picked up his railgun. “Off the bikes you two,” he ordered, though he had the radio still keyed up. “And if either of you lean in the direction of the guns, you’ll lose anything that goes in that direction. Understand?” They quickly got off the bikes and backed up. “Good, now turn around, kneel, cross your ankles, and put your hands on your head.” They complied. “Very good. Now, if either of you value your hides, you’ll clear out,” he told them as he shouldered his railgun, then collected up their rifles and pistols. He stomped on the tire of the smaller bike, bending it to the point of unusability, then picked up the larger bike and mounted it. “Oh yeah, Joe,” he called over the radio. “Trev here thinks you look sexy in leather panties.”

“You son of a bitch!” the one named Trev shouted hotly.

“Don’t see why, myself. I’ve never thought beached whales in dead cowhide were particularly attractive,” Jason mused conversationally. “Guess I’m just weird that way.” He unkeyed the radio and put his foot on the pedal. “Well gentlemen, I hope you’re not too inconvenienced. I’m off to claim my side of the river. I suggest you find a new line of work. Oh, and have a nice day,” he added, then pedalled off quickly.

It wasn’t easy riding with three rifles slung over his shoulders, but he managed well enough. He didn’t have to far to go, and all he had to do was beat the first patrol back to the park. The closest of them was the one moving in from the west, and they were going to go to the library first, to try to catch him. He was already halfway to the park by the time they got there, threading his bike between two burned-out cars on 3rd Avenue. By the time those roving guards had reached the other two and found out what was going on, Jason was already on the far side of the floodwall and riding back to his skimmer. By the time they were at the street leading to the bridge, Jason was back inside his skimmer and had it powered up. The skimmer wasn’t visible from the top of the bridge, so Jason just leaned back in his seat and put his hands behind his head and waited, using his telepathic ability to keep track of what was going on out there. He let those two get about halfway across the bridge, as Joe screamed and yelled over the radio for them to find him, then brought up the skimmer’s engines and lifted off the ground. He urged the skimmer forward, out over the river, quickly overtaking the two bicycles above. He punched up some speed and came out from under the bridge, then swung the entire ship around as he rounded the edge of the bridge, establishing himself right in the middle of the end of the iron gridwork that acted as support for the bridge’s weight.

The two bike riders saw that blue monstrosity appear at the end of the bridge, and one of them fell off his bike, rolling on the bridge several times. The other slid to a halt, his wide face fixed with shock and a little terror. Jason flipped on the external speaker and fixed the headset on his head. “That’s right,” he called. “Mine’s bigger.” He picked up the radio he’d pilfered and keyed it up. “Go ahead and tell them, boys,” he called over that radio. “Make sure they understand.”

“*He’s—he’s—he’s got a fuckin’ plane!*” he heard the one still on the bike reply.

“That’s right, boys and girls, I’ve got a plane,” he affirmed over the radio. “And what do you know, I know how to fly it. So, let’s make this clear one more time, people. That side of the river is yours, this side of the river is *mine*. Anyone crossing my bridge is going to get the shock of his life.” He engaged the skimmer’s defensive weaponry, which caused gunports on each side of the ship to open, and the barrels of MPACs to extend. “Tell them what you see,” he prompted over the radio.

“*He’s pointin’ guns at us,*” the mounted guard said in a frightened voice. “*Guns mounted on the plane.*”

“Now that everyone understands exactly what’s going on,” he said over the river, urging the skimmer forward just a little, “we can come to a mutual understanding. That understanding is simple, Little Joe. I *own* this side of the river. Come over here, and you won’t be going back to your side. And believe me, I have no intention of going on your side.”

“*Are you crazy buddy? You stole a Faey plane! They’re gonna come after you!*” Joe said fearfully.

“Let them,” Jason said coldly. “I told you before, Joe, I *don’t fuckin’ care anymore*. If they want this plane back, they can bring their bony blue asses down here and try to take it from me. I’m not going to be afraid of them anymore. *No more*. It’ll be quite the show for you guys on that side of the river, I’ll wager.”

“*Buddy, you are crazy,*” Joe said grimly.

“If that’s what you think, then you’d better not push things,” Jason growled. “Because I *will* make sure that anyone that comes on this side of my river never gets back across the bridge. And if you’re thinking of trying to sneak over here and harass me, well, you never know, I just might snap and burn Huntington to the ground in a psychotic fit. I certainly have the means.” He blew out his breath; he was getting just a little angry. “Anyway, that’s the deal. I won’t bother you, you won’t bother me. I’m

willing to be a quiet neighbor, but I won't ever help you, and be assured that I will *never* take sides. You've made your way by killing other people, other *Americans*, for what you have. No matter how bad you think things were, you made them worse by turning your back on your fellow man. So go ahead and fight your stupid war, but keep it on *that* side of the river. As far as you should be concerned, that land on the other side of the river is the far side of the moon."

He turned off the radio, blowing out his breath again, then realized those two were still there. "Go back to your side," he called over the loudspeaker. "And *never* come back."

The one still on his bike turned and pedalled furiously towards the other side of the bridge, and the other one didn't even bother trying to get his bike back. He just got up and ran for the other side.

That went moderately well. Now they understood that they were dealing with someone with vastly superior firepower, and seemed crazy enough to use it. Jason withdrew the skimmer and slid it back under the bridge, parking it on a little street that went under the bridge. He didn't want to live out of the skimmer with it being exposed to the other bank of the river, so he needed to go back to that little town to the west of the bridge and find a house to occupy. It had to be close to the skimmer, but out of the direct line of sight of the opposite bank. He could tell by using his talent to sweep the far bank that they were well away from the bank of the river, but he also didn't want to run the risk that someone he thought was far enough away happened to have a very accurate gun. It was almost sunset, so it was best to just wait until it was dark.

He didn't have long to wait. He watched the sun set in the west as he listened to the Faey traffic control frequency, listening for any sign that they were coming for him, then he shut down the portable PPG, picked up a backpack and a flashlight, and headed out.

Protected from view by the dim murk of sunset, Jason crept along several streets just off the riverbank, inspecting houses. He ranged several blocks from the bridge on both sides, until he found the house he was looking for. It was about a block and a half from the skimmer, facing away from the riverbank with a block of houses hiding it from the riverbank. It was on the corner of 2nd Street and Oak Avenue, a large three story brick house with two chimneys and several nice windows that faced away from the riverbank. The door was unlocked but not broken, and the interior made it obvious that the place had been pillaged. But the rooms were large and spacious, and the place had plenty of room for him and all of his stuff. It even had an attic and a full sized basement. The place seemed defensible enough as well, placed on a corner which allowed him a good view of the surrounding area. It was the tallest house on the block as well, giving him an unobstructed view of the other side of the river if he was atop it.

He stood on the large porch, his mind already working. It would take about a week to get everything set up to his satisfaction, and he'd have to work mainly at night. He seemed to recall a pair of night goggles in that gear he bought, now that he thought of it, in the camping gear. They'd let him see as if it was bright as noontime outside. He bought so much, so fast, it was kind of hard to remember exactly what he had. Maybe a detailed inventory was in order. If anything, he'd have the time.

The first step, obviously, was securing the skimmer and the bridge itself. There were any number of things he could do to make those more than untouchable by anyone but a Faey. He also had to take into account the possibility of one of the Huntington gangs using boats to cross in unexpected areas. After those were secured, he'd have to secure the house and the area surrounding it, then devise a means of alerting him when people approached using the other two bridges across the river, both to the east and to the west. His talent was more reliable than anything else he had available to him, but he *did* have to sleep.

He was confident. No two-bit gang boss was going to interfere with him now. No way. He'd chosen this place to set up, and damn it, he was *not* going to budge. This was *his* place, and he was not going to give it up. Not to Joe Bueller, not to the other gangs, not to the Faey, not to *anyone*. This was his territory, and he would defend it to the death if that was what it took, because he was not going to

move. This was his home, that was the line, and God help anyone who crossed it.

Pugnacious, yes, but he'd been feeling a tad aggressive since the epiphany that led him to find his freedom. But he did mean it, oh yes. It was better to die free than to live a slave.

Kaira, 26 Oraa, 4392, Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 13 July 2007, Native Regional Reckoning

Huntington, West Virginia (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

The sun was warm, maybe a bit too warm, but Jason really wasn't all that worried about that. Gently biting his tongue, he worked out in the yard of his new house, lining up with mechanical efficiency a little purple flower in the flower bed outside his house.

He was more than open about where he lived now. After all, the gangs in the city across the river had no intention of ever bothering him again, the chatter on the radio he'd stolen made that abundantly clear. They'd tried, that was for sure. He couldn't fault them for tenacity, but no matter how clever they were, they were no match for Jason Fox.

Obviously, the first attempt was using the bridge, for it was the fastest way across the river. Joe Bueller had sent four men armed with their precious machine guns over that bridge the day after Jason arrived, at dawn. What they didn't know was that Jason had been working all night on defending that bridge, and he was more than ready for them. They rushed across the bridge on foot, knowing that the skimmer was parked under the bridge near where it joined to the ground, intent on capturing that prize for whatever might be inside it, before the Faey came to retrieve it.

They never got off the bridge.

They got very close to the edge, and then every piece of magnetic metal they owned suddenly slammed to the ground. Their Uzis and Tek-9's were ripped from their hands, their belt buckles yanked them to the ground, metal pocket knives tore holes in their jeans, and one unlucky fellow had his earlobes ripped when his earrings suddenly slammed to the ground. It took them a few minutes to disengage their metal objects, for all four had to take off their pants and squirm out of them due to metallic objects in their pockets, or rivets in the pants themselves. They all tried to yank their guns off the bridge, but found them stuck fast. When Jason appeared on top of a house near the bridge, railgun prominently displayed, they all turned and ran back for the other side of the bridge. Jason used binoculars to look over on the other side of the bridge after getting down off the roof and saw Joe Bueller himself, looking through binoculars back at him from the top of a building on the other side. Jason blew him a kiss, which made him start silently shouting and throw his binoculars to the ground.

Later that day, Jason came out, collected up the items left behind, protected from snipers by the curvature of the bridge, then retreated back out of sight.

Oh, the joys of plasma magnets.

The next attempt was by boat. Bueller sent over three men in a boat in the middle of the night, and they were very good. They used oars instead of a motor, and got across the river and to the far bank. They quickly moved towards the skimmer, moving stealthily and covering each other, until they were all up to the skimmer. The stairs were down, but the hatch was closed. They seemed nonplussed at that, for the access panel beside the door was open, waiting for someone to come along and open the door. One of them whispered that this was way too easy, and the other two agreed. So they all got back and looked around, then carefully touched the access panel with a stick they'd found laying nearby. Nothing happened. A few other careful tests displayed nothing untowards, so they calmed down a little and tried to get the door open.

A few seconds after they tried again, the entire area around the skimmer suddenly became alive with electricity. Arcs of electricity danced around the skimmer, impacting the bridge, the ground, and the three men, making their hair stand on end and causing their muscles to lock in electrocution paralysis. The lightning storm lasted almost five seconds, then ceased as quickly as it began. All three

men collapsed to the ground with smoke wafting up from their clothes, though all three were very much alive. A little while after they'd been hit by the skimmer's theft prevention system (which was standard on most skimmers), Jason came out and stripped them naked, then left and hid a discreet distance away. He waited for them to wake up, then came back with his railgun as if to finish them off. The three naked men scrambled back down to the river and jumped in their boat, then started the engine and raced for the opposite bank. Jason let them get about halfway, then he allowed them and the men watching from the far bank to see his railgun fire. There was that familiar *BEE-yah* sound followed up by the loud *bang*, like the crack of a large whip, but the round was already buried twenty feet in the opposite riverbank, below the water's surface. It had gone right where Jason had aimed it, through the neck of the outboard motor and through the back of the boat. The round struck with such speed and force that it didn't shatter the boat, it simply punched a hole in it. The outboard motor, however, had the neck snapped in half from the impact, which broke the propellor away from the motor. The three men looked back in surprise, and saw the outboard motor suddenly start to smoke. They saw the dissipating corkscrew smoke trail that led back to the far bank, and it didn't take them long to make the connection. They jumped up and jumped overboard just as another corkscrew trail simply *appeared*, hitting the outboard motor squarely, then igniting the gasoline in it. The boat caught fire immediately, and illuminated the heads of the three men as they swam frantically for the far shore. Jason lowered the railgun and looked on with satisfaction, then simply went back to his house.

That taught them that they weren't getting anywhere near the skimmer, so, since Bueller wasn't dumb, he knew that the only way to get past the skimmer's security system was to have the owner shut it off. The next attempt was the next night, as a group of six, armed with more machine guns, crossed the river by boat a goodly distance east of the skimmer, then made their way to the bridge on foot. After they got there, to the little town of Chesapeake, which was where Jason had set up shop, they fanned out and started searching for his house. He let them come in, let them get close to his house, and then he activated his countermeasure.

The little town of Chesapeake suddenly began to *vibrate*. There was no other explanation for it. The ground buzzed like an angry hornet, which spooked the invaders, and caused them to retreat back towards the bridge. Or at least try.

One by one, they all went to set foot in the street, and when they did, they found their feet *sinking into the asphalt*. Whatever it was didn't affect the ground or the concrete under the asphalt, just the asphalt itself. They all found themselves ankle deep in what was supposed to be a solid rock surface, and much to their horror, the now permeable asphalt street clung to their feet like thick mud, making it extremely hard to pull a foot out of it. It didn't help that every single one of them had fallen when the ground had grabbed their feet, so they all had their hands in it as well, and most had their knees down in it too. Jason observed from the window of his house, and when his talent told him he had all six ensnared, he shut off the device that was causing a rare effect called *liquifaction*. It was a phenomenon where a solid material became semi-liquid when exposed to a certain frequency of sound or vibration. By setting his emitters to a specific composite frequency, it allowed them to induce liquifaction into the asphalt—specifically the tar that glued the asphalt together—but cause no damage or harm to any other material. When the device was shut off, the asphalt instantly hardened, entrapping them all within it.

He gave them a few minutes to struggle frantically, then came out of his house. He was carrying a baseball bat, a pair of large pruning shears, and a portable radio/CD player. All six were trapped within two hundred feet of each other, and he would be visible by all of them by setting up at the corner leading to the bridge. He did so, putting the radio down and turning it on, filling the street with the gentle melodies of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. He then put down the baseball bat, and snapped the pruning shears shut a few times. "Good evening, gentlemen, and ladies," he had told them, nodding at the two women and four men calmly. "I seem to recall warning you not to come over here. Well, I'm going to have to do something about that, I suppose." He had shouldered the shears as he stood up. "I know I said you'd never go back if you came over here, but I'm really not into murder. It's not my

thing. I'm the kind of guy who much prefers letting you drag your asses back over that bridge thoroughly humiliated. Death isn't much of a life lesson, you understand. So, let's commence, shall we?"

They were probably afraid he was going to torture them or cut off their noses or something, but when he started on the first person he reached, a middle-aged woman with tanned skin, some wrinkles, and dark hair, they understood. Jason used the shears to literally cut the clothes off her body, took her weapon, then used those shears to cut the hair off her head. What he left behind was so laughably uneven that only a shaved head was going to fix it. She screamed bloody murder as he cut off her hair, and continued to curse vituperously after he moved on to the next person. He had gone right on down the line, systematically stripping each person, then cutting off their hair. When he was done, he collected up their guns and the scraps over their clothes, then wandered back to his house. He left them stuck out there all night, and went back out in the morning to get them out. He activated the harmonic emitters he had buried around his house and allowed them to pull themselves out, then marched them all to the bridge after forcing them to remove their shoes and socks. He made them march over that bridge naked as they day they were born and with their hair cut off with pruning shears...so needless to say, they were a sorry looking lot indeed.

Joe Bueller had an absolute fit, he heard over the radio after he sent the invaders packing. Not only did they fail, but they also lost four more machine guns, and they were running dangerously low on them.

With that afternoon came the culmination of Joe Bueller's temper. Twenty men and women launched from boats at the park and motored over in what could only be called an armed assault. They landed about a quarter mile east of the bridge, then stormed towards Chesapeake with Joe Bueller himself leading them. Jason's skimmer's sensors picked them up and relayed the alert to his remote, and Jason just sighed and closed the book he was reading and went to deal with them. Instead of going outside, he instead went to his basement, then waited for them to get close enough. Once they were, he simply activated the last and most effective of his personal safety measures, yet another sound-based concept. It was the same basic idea as the itchers he'd had Symone plant on the armor of the Marines that last day, but since he didn't have the materials to build a bunch of individual ones, he instead went with the idea of a speaker. It was located atop the steeple of the church down the block, and when he activated it, it emitted a hypersonic frequency that would create a similar effect. The closer they got to the steeple, the worse the itching would get. Jason had a damper going down in the basement, which was why he retreated to it.

He waited until they were literally on top of the church, and he turned it on. He had a camera up there as well, so he had the opportunity to see it in action. He felt it against his skin as well, despite the damper, as a feathery touch all over him. Those outside, however, suddenly felt like they were dipped into vats of live fire ants. He watched with clinical interest as they all suddenly went wild, squirming, thrashing, most of them dropping to the ground and rolling around, doing anything they could to make it stop. He let them endure it for about five minutes or so, when they started drawing blood clawing at themselves, then he shut off the speaker. He picked up one of their radios and keyed it up. "Fun, wasn't it? That was the low setting. Want to see high?"

"No, I don't think you would," he added when Joe Bueller went for his radio. "Now that you've done went and put yourself on my side of the river, it's time for one of those important life lessons I'm so fond of handing out. All of you out there on my street, start stripping. All of it."

"*You son of a bitch, there's no way in hell—*" Joe Bueller started, but Jason simply turned the speaker on again. His transmission was cut short when he dropped the radio and started rolling around on the ground again. He let it go on for about a minute, then turned it back off and brought the radio up to his mouth again. "Temper, temper," he chided lightly. "Face it, Joebob, you're not getting out of here with your clothes. Now, you can continue to fight and be an idiot and make *everyone else* suffer with you, or you can behave like a good little madman and start stripping. And if you do do that, I'm

fairly sure that they'll all be really unhappy with you when you do manage to get back on your side of the line. Now, all of you, start stripping. You have one minute, and the clock is ticking."

Everyone else immediately started tearing off their clothes. They did *not* want to go through that again. Joe Bueller, however, seemed unwilling to do so. He got to his feet, his shoulders huffing as he seemed to be trying to control a violent temper tantrum. The others started shouting at him—Jason couldn't hear it, his camera was video only—and Joe Bueller suddenly reached down and snatched up his M-16. Jason quickly got to his feet and reached for the button on his remote as he whirled around and brought up the barrel of that weapon, his intent obviously to cut down *his own people*. Jason realized he wouldn't have time, that the hypersonic speaker wouldn't stop him in time. He had to take direct action.

Jason had never attacked another before in earnest, but Jyslin had taught him well. She had taught him how to attack and take control of a human mind, and he executed that attack instantly. He drove a spear of consciousness into Joe Bueller's mind, and felt that mind instantly yield to the power of the blow; human minds, which had no active talent, were defenseless against a telepath. In an instant, he was inside Joe Bueller's mind, and he moved at the speed of thought. His power sought out the part of Joe Bueller's brain that dealt with motor control, and then wrapped his power around it to smother any activity.

Joe Bueller's muscles locked up, even in the act of pulling the trigger. The others looked at him with strangled expressions, then their eyes furrowed in confusion, for he was standing as still as stone, though his own eyes were wild and almost frenzied.

Jason brought the radio up again. "Would one of you kindly relieve Mr. Bueller of his gun?" he asked grimly. "I assure you, right now he can't move or speak, so it's perfectly safe. What I'm doing to him will do him harm if I keep it going for too long, so do it quickly." A young, rather pretty woman rushed up and ripped the rifle out of Joe Bueller's hands, then trained it on him. "That'll do, young lady," Jason snapped, even as he reached deeper into Bueller's mind. He touched on the man's memory, then carefully wiped out the last few seconds, the part that would allow Bueller to remember the attack and realize that Jason was telepathic. Then he touched one of the baser functions of his brain and caused Joe Bueller to pass out. The portly man collapsed to the ground in a boneless heap. He'd remain unconscious for about an hour or so, but that was more than enough time. "When he wakes up, he won't remember what happened," Jason told them. "But we digress. All of you, strip. And when you're done, strip Bueller. The clock is ticking, ladies and gentlemen."

He watched the monitor as the nineteen men and women quickly stripped bare, then two of the bigger men dutifully pulled the clothes off Joe Bueller. Bueller, it turned out, was noticeably fat, where all his followers looked undernourished. "Very good. In the brown house on the corner behind you, you'll find a wheelbarrel in the garage. Someone go fetch it, then dump Bueller into it. I'm not going to make you carry him. As fat as he is, that'd be cruel and unusual punishment."

One of the men rushed over and pulled the large, dirty wheelbarrel out of the garage, then four men hauled Bueller up—none too gently either—and dumped him in the wheelbarrel. His arms and legs dangled out of it.

"Very good. Now, this is the *third* time you've come and broken the rules, people. I'm losing my patience. I've been accommodating this far because I know that you just couldn't resist the temptation, and I really don't like to hurt people. But, now that you see just how forbidden this fruit is, I do hope you'll realize that it's out of your reach. I'm growing tired of being merciful, people. Next time you come over here, I send you back in a box. Do we understand each other? Just nod if you do, I'll see it." Every one of them nodded. "Good, good. So, who's rolling Bueller back over the bridge? Raise your hand."

They all looked at each other, then one man raised his hand.

"Ok, you who raised your hand, put your shoes back on. You'll chew your feet up trying to roll that heavy load up the bridge." They all watched the man put his boots back on, the young pretty lady

who'd pulled the gun from Bueller's hands trying to cover herself with her hands. Jason found that amusing for some reason, like the stubborn denial of truth. When he was done, Jason disengaged the power to the speaker. "Alright, all of you, march. Up the bridge, leave everything behind. I will be watching, so don't get any ideas. Oh, and have a nice day."

That was the last time he heard anything from Joe Bueller's gang. The gang in the west end, after hearing about Jason, certainly made their own attempt, but their four man raiding party, riding in on bicycles in the middle of the night, had the bad luck of getting there after Jason had time to dig into his box of junk and scrape together the parts to build a proximity sensor that automatically activated the hypersonic irritator. Jason simply moved his bedroom down into the basement. They too left Chesapeake naked, but unfortunately for them, they had a mile's hike to get back to the west end bridge.

Needless to say, Jason had quite a collection of guns and bicycles now.

But, things looked to be calming down. He still had the radio the gang used, and from what he'd pieced together, Joe Bueller had met with an unfortunate end soon after getting carted back over into Huntington. He wasn't sure what happened, but odds were that one of the people who'd had the business end of that M-16 pointed at them took serious offense to the idea that Joe Bueller was going to shoot *them* because he was angry. He had no idea who was in charge now, but the last couple of nights he'd heard sporadic gunfire to the east. It seemed that Bueller's replacement was having a territorial issue with the gang that controlled Guyandotte and Barboursville.

As long as they kept it over there, he really didn't care what they did.

Today wasn't like any of the other days, though. He didn't know exactly when it was, but he knew that his physical appointment had to have come and gone, so they knew that he was not in New Orleans. Well, they knew that already, but now they knew that he hadn't come back. So, it meant that from here on out, he wasn't going to be overlooked. He still listened carefully to the Faey traffic channels, listening for any hint that they had a transport or search party out looking for him, because he knew that they were going to start looking for him soon. If they had any logs or records of his flight path from the space-based sensors, they were going to know where he was, and were probably going to send a detachment out to find him pretty soon. Many of the defenses he had up around his skimmer and his house were intended for the Faey as much as they were for the gangs. He'd have many more up, but he simply didn't have the parts to put anything else in place, not without starting to take apart some of his other equipment. That simply wasn't going to happen. He would simply have to rely on what he had. He was pretty sure that the sonic emitter on the steeple of the church was going to be *very* effective. It was going to make it clear to the Faey that he wasn't about to budge, but it would be effective.

That morning, he had done what was necessary. He had emptied his skimmer out of all gear and equipment, then shut it down. He didn't even leave the security system on, since the *threat* of it would most likely more than suffice. From this day forward, they were going to be looking for it. The plasma signature of his smaller PPGs may or may not have showed up on their sensors, so he shut down the largest one, the one that came from the habitat module, and relied on the small ones to power a piece of equipment by itself, and only when it was needed. He had one on his Faey transceiver, so he could monitor traffic frequencies, and also used that one to power his portable stove. He relied on portable lamps for light.

He'd gone out to do some scavenging of his own yesterday and today. There were lots of houses on his side of the river, as well as a K-Mart and Walmart a few miles west, which had been all but stripped bare. He wasn't after what most others were after, however. He scavenged some furniture and some decent dishware (which required extensive cleaning before it was usable), and also hunted down some supplies and equipment to get his house back in proper working order. Things like flashlights and batteries were long gone, but Jason found lots of light fixtures and light bulbs at the Lowe's home improvement store just past Walmart. He scavenged some of those things, then used it to repair the

wiring in the house. After severing the house from the unused power grid, Jason was able to get the electricity back on in the house using one of his smallest PPGs and a simple generator he built out of his rapidly dwindling supply of spare equipment. Generating electrical power was something that was considered child's play to the Faey, and that tiny module with its slapdash generator could probably power the entire city block by itself. The lack of running water had Jason concerned, so he went through the plumbing section in Lowe's to try to come up with some ideas. A water tank with a portable pump, maybe. He'd have to dig up the water line and break into it, then hook up the water tank to it. Wastewater wasn't much of an issue, since the house was connected to the city's sewer system, and that gave it somewhere to go. Purifying the water was another issue, but not a hard one to solve, for the habitat module had a water purification system installed in it. He could take that out and install it somewhere in the water line.

Getting water and power back up in his house were important, but it was also important not to draw *too* much attention to himself. The Faey would know exactly where to go if they saw a single house with lights on, given his background in engineering. Getting the power back on in a house would be child's play to him, and they knew that. He'd already addressed that problem, however, by scavenging some very heavy drapes that weren't in too bad of shape from several houses. They weren't exactly going to match his hodgepodge furniture, but he wasn't doing this with an eye out for fashion. He was *not* going to live in the dark. He just needed to take certain precautions.

Jason looked up as a gust of wind blew past him. Wind. It was always blowing out here, most likely because of the river. With a little work, he could get a windmill of sorts up that could generate some electricity, get the whole block some power. And the water system was still intact, it just lacked the power to operate...well, and qualified technicians to watch over it. But, he could tap into the river's water and set up a very small purifying plant of sorts, a single large tank with one Faey water purification system on the intake valve. Rework the piping to close off the other blocks...he shook his head. There was no reason to do any of that except for maybe the challenge of it. It might be fun though, give him something to do. Having things to do was important right now. Keep his mind occupied. The game with the gangs across the river was entertaining, but very, very short. In a way, that was very good, because he didn't feel like endlessly scrapping with them. It did, however, keep his mind occupied, kept him from worrying too much.

Kept him from dwelling on the past, and that was past was his friends. He hoped Tim was doing alright, and as much as he hated to admit it, Symone, and Jyslin...and also Maya now. He'd never thought he'd be worried about Faey, but Jyslin and Symone, they were friends. Friends. Jyslin was more than a friend, he had to admit. Yes, he had Faey *friends*, and he was strongly attracted to a Faey. But fate had written a different set of circumstances. Everything about Jason that made him what he was wouldn't allow it, and if he changed to allow it, it was making him something other than what he was. He'd realized that before he left, realized that by bending for Jyslin, he was turning his back on his highly regarded principles, and those principles defined him. Maybe he was too proud, a bit too arrogant, but that pride was a part of him, and without it he would be lesser of a man. He'd been so infatuated with his telepathic talent that he had bent over backwards to justify fraternizing with Jyslin just so he could explore this strange, exciting power. And even now, he had to admit that he *liked* Jyslin and Symone, that he did care about them. It was hard for him to rationalize that, for they *were* Faey. He was having feelings for the enemy. He hadn't wanted to, but it was so easy to see Symone and Jyslin as something other than Imperial agents after spending so much time with them.

Yes...Symone and Jyslin were *friends*.

Ok, he admitted that to himself. *Finally*. He did find, though, that it didn't change his mind all that much. They had made decisions that placed them on the other side of the line he had drawn in his own mind, and so had Tim for that matter. But then again, Tim wasn't really ready to do something like what Jason had done. He would be too afraid, and despite not liking the Imperium, he *did* like the luxuries of his position. Tim hated the Imperium, but not on *philosophical* grounds, only on *personal*

grounds. If they treated him well, he would be content. If they did not, he would not be. Jason couldn't really fault Tim for that, though. He was a generous man, with a good heart and a kind disposition, but he, like most humans, was more concerned with his personal well-being than the state of the human race as a whole. That attitude stemmed from the feeling of hopelessness that almost every human felt, knowing that there was absolutely no way to escape from Faey domination. So Tim, like so many people, was just trying to make the best of it he could. Many saw his relationship with Symone as selling out—those who didn't know Symone, in any case—but those who did knew better. Sometimes one just had to close one's eyes to certain boundaries when two people who were meant for one another managed to meet. He had no doubt that Tim and Symone would be together until death parted them. May God see to it that that was seventy years down the road.

Despite their political or philosophical views, they were still his friends, and he would always care about them.

Wiping his brow, he looked at his little flower garden and nodded. He'd found the plants at Lowe's growing wild in a grassy patch in the parking lot. They'd somehow managed to take root and grow in that patch, until Jason dug them up and brought them home, that is. It took a while to separate them, and he wasn't sure they'd all live, but they looked a heck of a lot better in his front yard than they did competing for sunlight with the weeds that were overgrowing them. After he was done, he pulled an ancient manual grass mower out of the garage of the house beside his own, one of the old, old rotary clipper styles, then proceeded to mow the lawn. Yes, it would make the house stand out, but he just couldn't stand to see that knee-high grass any longer. It took him about an two hours to mow around the front and side yard, since the grass was so high, then another hour to mow the back. He went in for a drink and to check the Faey traffic radio, then came back out and started raking up the clippings.

About halfway through, he started hearing it. It was distant, faint, but approached rapidly. It was an engine, a gas engine, and from the sound of it, it was a motorcycle. It got very close, and from the sound of it, it passed by on Route 7, north of his street. It got to about the bridge, then it seemed to turn around. Jason swept out with his power and touched on a single mind, the rider of that motorcycle. The thoughts of that mind told Jason that it was specifically looking for *him*, but had no hostile intentions. Jason realized that the magnet trap was still active, and he fished in his pocket for the remote that would turn it off in case whoever it was went up over the bridge, but by the time he had the remote out, he spotted the motorcycle and the rider.

It was a woman wearing a pair of dirty blue jeans with black chaps over them, and a white tee shirt with a black leather vest atop it. She wore no helmet, but did have on a pair of old-fashioned goggles. Her hair was very, very long, black and straight, and it looked tangled and dishevelled from her riding about. She looked in both directions, then spotted him and turned her bike towards him. She was riding a Harley Hog, a massive machine that most women wouldn't dare to ride, due to the motorcycle's great weight. But this woman seemed to have no trouble with it, coming to a stop on the street right in front of him, then putting a booted foot down for a moment before turning off her machine. She kicked the stand down, then leaned back on her bike and raised her goggles. She was a surprisingly lovely black woman, without the wideness that was pattern in people descended from the cradle of civilization. There was a delicate fineness about her features, with her high cheeks and sharp chin, and a slight slant to her eyes that hinted that this woman had some Asian ancestry somewhere in her bloodline. But the mixture of Asian and African lineage gave her the best of both worlds, for this woman was both beautiful and *tall*. He realized that when she stepped over the bike and stood before him. She was easily six feet tall, maybe a bit more, and possessed of a figure that was perfectly proportional to her height. Her thoughts were guarded, but were also hopeful.

"Well, you must be the new guy," she said in a distinctive Southern drawl. "Welcome to the neighborhood, sugah."

"Excuse me, but who are you?" he asked.

"Temika," she answered. "Temika Daniels, sugah. I just rode down from Chilocothe and heard

that someone done went and kicked Joe Bueller's ass. Ah just had to come meet you. Maybe kiss you, I hated that vicious bastard."

"Well, nice to meet you. I'm Jason Fox," he said, extending his hand. She looked at it, then gave him a nervous glance.

"Sorry, sugah, I don't like tah touch people," she hedged. "It ain't no offense or nuthin', I promise. Hope you understand."

Curious, Jason opened himself to listen to her thoughts. She was *very* worried about touching him, or just about anyone else, for that matter. She didn't want *it* to happen. He had no idea what *it* was, but whatever it was, Temika was quite fearful of it. It wasn't an irrational fear, it was an almost cold, logical fear. Odd.

"Might you see fit to offer a gal a drink? It gets dusty out on the road," she said hopefully.

"Just water, I'm afraid."

"Sugah, that's about all there is," she laughed. "I heard you just come from outside, it certainly shows."

Jason gave her a second look. "Hold on. You wouldn't be the Temika Daniels who played for the Volunteers, would you?"

She laughed. "I'm surprised anyone remembers that," she said. "But yeah, sugah, that's me."

"Surprised to see you out here," he said. "Come on in, I'll get you some water."

"Well, it wasn't entirely my choice," she told him as she followed him. Jason closed his mind again; he had a strange feeling that this strange woman could potentially be a friend, and he didn't want a stray word to slip and make her suspicious. "Ah bitch-slapped a blueskin cause she got in mah face, and got hauled to one of their 're-education centers'," she grunted. "Had a mindbender mentally rape me with a cattle prod, then they sent me to a farm. Ah was never much of a farmer, so Ah skipped out a few days after Ah got there. Mama always said my temper'd get me in hot water," she said with a chuckle. "Ah been out heah for about two years or so. I do pretty well for mahself. Ah get by running stuff back and forth for some of the more friendly people out heah. Between what Ah can get doin' that and what Ah can scavenge, Ah get by. Long as Ah can get gas for my bike, Ah'm as happy as a pig in mud."

"You trade?" he asked, looking back at her as he opened to front door.

She nodded. "They ain't all like Jim Bueller and the gangs in Huntington, sugah. The peoples up in the hills, they more friendly, if'n you approach them the right way, you understand. Cause Ah got a bike and the nerve to run the roads, Ah do fairly well enough deliverin' stuff from one place to anothah. The Becketts up in Fort Gay send eggs to the Prices ovah in Ona, who send a jug of milk down to the McMarrins in Wayne, who send some meat back to the Becketts. That kinda thing, you see."

"And you're the delivery girl."

"You bet, sugah," she grinned as she sat down at the kitchen table, where he motioned. "Ah also shuttle information around, keep everyone in touch with what's goin' on. Every gang and the unfriendlies around heah would just love to shoot me off mah bike, but they ain't managed it yet. They lost count of the raids Ah done ruined when Ah spotted them slinkin' up into the hills."

"How many people are out there?"

"Not as many as it sounds, sugah," she answered. "Once you get out of the bigger towns, you can go twenty miles before you see a single soul. The towns are where the stuff is, though, so that's where most people come. If they lucky, they get shot. If they not, they become those bastard gang members," she spat.

"Why don't those people out there just move away from the cities?"

"Cause they ain't as self-sufficient as some others," she answered. "The lucky ones, they got small farms out there, livestock, stuff like that. They's the ones that live way out, way down the back roads, where the raiding parties won't go. Those people who live by scavenging, they gotta live where the

stuff is, you understand. They mainly nomads, you see, moving into an area and tryin' tah find the houses ain't nobody else found, then move on when the food's all gone. And when they get desperate, they come down into the cities, tryin' tah find stuff and get out before they done get caught. Some have learned tah hunt, and some tah fish, but most that don't got the setup still have to scavenge food tah make it. The raids the gangs send out, they more to catch those kinds of folk than they are to catch the locals. They know bettah than to go aftah some of the locals."

"Why is that?"

"They'd get dead, that's why. The locals who live near town, they're dug in like an Alabama tick, sugah," she answered. "The gangs learned that lesson the hard way. Those raids, they generally just go 'round and try tah find new houses, and pick off anyone they catch out in the open. They know where it ain't healthy tah go, cause they ain't all gonna come back." She took a long drink from the glass of water he gave her. "It's cold!"

"I got the electricity going," he told her.

"Well, Ah'm gonna come visit you more often, sugah," she said with a brilliant white smile. She obviously kept up with her oral hygiene. "When it gets hot. Why ain't you got the AC on?"

"I have to fix it," he answered.

"Get tah work, sugah," she laughed.

"So, what made you seek me out?" he asked.

"Just checkin' out the new neighbor, sugah," she smiled. "And of course, an opportunity for a new customer. If'n you ever need anythin', or need somethin' sent somewhere else, you're lookin' at the gal for the job. Oh yeah, y'all need a CB, sugah, most people 'round here use CB channel 19 tah talk tah each other."

"They should listen in on the gangs," Jason grunted. "They use radios."

"They do, sugah, they do," she winked. "The ones with scanners do, anyway."

"I have, what, eight of them? You can have a couple."

Temika laughed. "War trophies?"

"Something like that," he answered. "The only guy that came to my side of the river and got back with anything managed to get away with his shoes. Every other person went back over the bridge naked. I got it all. Clothes, pocket knives, radios, guns, you name it."

Temika laughed brightly, slapping the top of the table. Then she seemed to perk up a bit. "Guns, you say? Well, I know a few people that might like tah do some business with you on the guns. If'n you don't want them, that is."

"As long as they don't use them on me, sure," he answered. "I don't need them."

"Yah, we've heard. you got some Faey guns, and a Faey airplane."

He nodded. "I've been watching to see if, or when, they're coming after it," he told her. "I have a pilot's license, I know how their system works. I think I did a good job in evading their systems, but I'm not sure. If they had any orbital tracking up when I pulled my Houdini, they know where I am. If they didn't, then I have a good chance of them now knowing where I am."

"You were a pilot on the outside?"

He shook his head. "A student. I just got lucky and came into a little money, and used it to get a Faey pilot license. That skimmer down there is mine. I didn't steal it, I *bought* it."

"Wow, sounds like you had a good life. Why'd you give it up tah come join the rat race?"

"Because I remembered what it was like to be free," he said simply. "And I got tired of living in fear under the Faey all the time. I decided it was better to live out here and be free than have all the money in the world, yet be part of the Faey system."

"Heh, I ain't sure I woulda done it if our places were swapped," she said. "Sometimes I miss feelin' safe. And I certainly miss air conditionin'," she laughed.

"A person who is willing to give up part of his freedom to feel more secure deserves neither," he quoted. "Benjamin Franklin said that, or something close to it. Not sure what he had to say about air

conditioning, though.”

She looked at him with those almond shaped brown eyes, then burst into laughter. “Yeah, well, at least you got here with more stuff than most of us. I got here with the clothes on mah back.”

“Looks like you did well enough. A motorcycle, nice clothes, and whatever it is you have I haven’t seen yet.”

“Yeah, I do alright, but it certainly wasn’t easy,” she said with a wistful sigh. Jason had to resist the urge to listen to her thoughts. An attractive woman struggling to make it out here? He had no doubt it would have been hard. Then again, Temika Daniels was known for ferocity, not timidity. She’d been the starting center for the University of Tennessee women’s basketball team. He remember watching her play once when they played against Michigan. She was a wolverine out on the basketball court, huge compared to the other players, powerful, and *very* aggressive. They called her the Queen of the Glass, because she was the most prolific rebounder in college women’s basketball. Some not too kind to her in the press called her the Dennis Rodman of women’s basketball, but she really wasn’t that bad. She had the same aggressive demeanor on the court as that infamous professional player, but she didn’t pull the same off-court antics. It would have been closer to call her the Shaquille O’Neal of women’s basketball, for she had the same towering presence, but lacked the ego.

“Would you mind, sugah?” she asked, holding out her glass.

“Sure,” he said, taking it. He went back to the refrigerator and poured her another glass of cold water, then brought it back to the table. “How hard is it to find gas?”

“It’s gettin’ harder,” she grunted. “Ah know a few places out in the boonies where they ain’t got all the gas out of the underground tanks yet, but Ah’ve been havin’ tah range out further and further. Ah’ve been makin’ contact with more people, which is good, but Ah also don’t know the areas as well, and that ain’t good. More and more, Ah’ve been demandin’ gas as pay, but Ah can’t eat gas, you know.”

“You need an airbike,” he told her.

“Ah *wish*,” she said with an explosive sigh. “Ah’ve wanted one of those things since Ah saw it. Ah don’t see how Ah could ever get one, though.”

“Don’t you ever cross over into Faey territory?” he asked.

“Surely, sugah,” she said. “Ah’m one of the few who does, cause you have to sneak through their security. But not many people out heah have Faey money, and the shops out there, they don’t take trades.”

“What do you do over there then?”

“Ah deliver messages,” she answered. “They’s people on this side with kin on the outside. Ah deliver messages back and forth. They either write letters that Ah mail, or Ah use pay phones on the outside tah call ‘em.”

“Why don’t they just get cell phones? They’d never track them back in here. Hell, the Faey wouldn’t even care. As long as the people in here don’t mess with the system, they just leave you alone.”

“Them phones cost money, sugah,” she reminded him. “And that most certainly *ain’t* reality. Every once in a while, the blueskins send patrols out. They fan out and interrogate anyone they catch, then let ‘em go. Ah’ve been caught a few times, and it ain’t no fun, trust me. They get in your mind and take anythin’ they want. It’s like gettin’ raped,” she said with a sharp snort. “Then, if they like somethin’ you own, they just take it. That bike out there, it’s my third. They done took the other two. They don’t like send troops in heah or nothin’, but they don’t just leave us alone, either.”

“So, you know how to sneak across the border,” Jason mused. “I think we’re about to do business, Temika.”

“Yeah? Over what, sugah?”

“You’re gonna teach me how to safely get across the border, then take me across. After you do, I’ll pay you.”

“And just what are you willin’ tah pay, sugah?” she asked. “What you want’s a fair piece dangerous. Sneakin’ over the border ain’t for greenhorns, sugah. It ain’t easy. You’d better have something good tah pay for it.”

“How about an airbike?”

“As *if*,” she protested.

“I have two in my airskimmer, Temika. Teach me how to get across the border, and one of them is yours. I’ll even teach you how to ride it.”

“You’re serious,” she challenged.

“I’ll show them to you right now,” he offered. “I don’t need two. Teach me how to come and go across the border as I please, and one is all yours.”

“Deal,” she said instantly, putting her hand out, then blinking and quickly pulling it away.

“Don’t you want to see the airbike?”

“Sugah, you just became mah best friend,” she laughed. “Yeah, Ah’d love to see them.”

They walked out into the noontime sun and towards the bridge, and Jason took a moment to take stock of this woman. She walked easily, fluidly, but there was a tension to her steps, like she was ready to bolt at the drop of a pin, the wariness of a woman who survived by her wits and her reflexes. But there was an aire about her that let Jason trust her. He didn’t know what it was, almost like a feeling that exuded from her, but he knew that she was sincere, and that she’d do exactly what she promised in return for the airbike he had promised in return. Well, there was that, and the butt of a pistol jutting out from under the flap of her vest. A *big* handle.

“That’s a piece of hardware,” he noted, looking at her chest, and not at her generous bosom.

“Aww, this ol’ thing?” she asked, reaching behind her. To Jason’s surprise, she pulled out a long-barreled .44 Magnum revolver...one of the most powerful handguns ever manufactured. “It ain’t nothin much, sugah. Just for crackin’ the engine blocks of cars chasin’ me, that’s all,” she added with a sly smile.

“I’m surprised you’d carry a gun that big around. It must be hard to shoot with one hand.”

“They all know Ah have it, sugah. Just the threat of it alone’s usually enough tah make ‘em think twice. And yes, sugah, Ah can shoot it with one hand. Ah just gotta lock mah elbow, that’s all. Hurts like hell and always makes mah arm sore, but Ah can do it.”

“I wouldn’t even try to shoot that with one hand. You’re a better man than me.”

“Sugah, Ah ain’t no man,” she laughed, boldly patting her breast. “Ah think these prove that.”

“Hey, in today’s world, you never know...” he tapered off, which made her laugh again.

“Ah got Ol’ Betsy here, and Ah have a 30-30 and a sawed-off shotgun in the saddleskirts of mah Harley,” she confided, replacing the weapon in the shoulder holster that was hidden under her vest. “A girl of independent means has tah be able tah protect herself, you know.”

“I can see that,” he chuckled.

“Ah heard you got Faey guns. Care tah give a gal a peek?”

“Not on me,” he answered honestly. “I’ll show them to you later, if you still want to see them.”

She tutted. “That’s not a good idea, sugah. *Nevah* go out yo’ door without a gun on you. *Evah*. you’d be smart tah carry around a gun with you when you’re inside, tah boot. Ol’ Betsy heah don’t evah come off mah shoulder, less Ah’m takin’ a bath or Ah’m sleepin’.”

“I don’t need a gun, Temika. I have this.” He held out his remote control.

“And what’s that, sugah?”

“An absolute guarantee that nobody within a quarter mile of my house is going to do *anything*,” he answered. “It turns on that,” he explained to her blank look, pointing at the emitter on the top of the steeple. “It generates a hypersonic harmonic that causes severe itching. Anyone within a thousand feet of that emitter would feel like they were dropped in a vat of itching powder if I turned it on. Nobody would have the ability to shoot at me.”

“Well, what about you?”

"It would affect me too," he admitted. "But I have a safe room in my house."

"So you ain't got no protection right now, 'cept maybe me," she said with a sneaky grin.

"I'm perfectly safe," he said calmly. "I'm not sure the gang across the bridge even has any more guns to bring over here."

Temika laughed as they went under the bridge, then she pulled up short and gawked at his sleek winged skimmer for a moment. "Ah always did love blue," she sighed. "She run?"

"Yeah, but I have it powered down. The Faey would detect her if I powered her up."

"Then they know you came heah."

"They weren't looking for me when I left," he told her. "They probably are *now*, though. I've missed an appointment that made them notice I'm not there anymore. Come on, we'll use the cargo door in the back."

"Can you open her up without power?"

He nodded. "The doors are only power-assisted. They work just fine without power." He unlocked the doors with his skimmer remote, then pulled them open. The two airbikes were stowed inside, side by side, at the very back of the rather small cargo area. "There they are," he told her. "Two *JX-31* recreational airbikes," he recited, using the Faey language to give their names, as there was no way to translate it.

"Yah speak they language, eh?" she said, leaning in and looking at the bike with undisguised longing. "Yah know, they'd probably hunt me down if'n Ah started ridin' around on an airbike," she sighed.

"Why would they? Don't squatters have some Faey technology out here?"

"Yeah, but nothin' quite so showy," she said. "Biggest thing Ah of is the vidlink that the Johnsons down by Milton have, but it don't work no more. Ah'd be afraid they'd come flyin' in and shoot me down."

"I doubt it. Even if they did notice you, I doubt they'd mount an armed expedition to come in here and try to capture you. It would be a big waste of time. Besides, it's not like you have to ride it *all* the time."

"When the gas runs out, Ah will," she sighed. "But then again, at least then Ah'll have some reliable transportation."

"It's up to you, Temika," he told her seriously.

"Ah want it," she said immediately.

"Alrighty then," he said, reaching in and touching a button on the side of the skimmer. It caused the maglocks to disengage. He then turned the key on the airbike, which started its engine and caused it to rise off the deck. A single hand on the seat pulled the machine out, where it hung in midair.

"Now?" Temika asked. "Sugah, Ah ain't got no way to get it outta heah."

"You're not taking it yet," he told her calmly as he mounted it. "But you do need to learn how to ride it. I won't give it to you until I'm sure you won't immediately fall off and get yourself killed. So," he said, reaching behind himself and patting the saddle. "For once, you have to ride shotgun."

Temika laughed. "Sugah, Ah ain't *neva*h rode in the bitch seat, and Ah ain't about tah start now."

"It's the back seat or the Harley," he said seriously. "You can't learn riding one on your own, and I won't let you have it until you can."

"Yah can teach me on the ground."

"I can teach you the controls, but until you ride one, you won't understand what it's like," he told her. "These aren't a Harley, Temika. Trust me."

"Ah, uh, well, hellfire," she said with a rueful chuckle. "Alright. But mind you, sugah, Ah ain't neva^h rode on a bike that Ah wasn't drivin' mahself."

"I'll be careful," he promised.

She reached out and put her hand on his shoulder, then moved to straddle the airbike after getting a foot on one of the footbars. Her hand slid up his shirt, then the side of her finger made contact with his

neck. That physical contact acted like a conduit, awakening his talent almost against his will. Her concern poured into him, her wariness, but also a desire, a *need* to trust him, to know that there really were good people out there besides the ones she already knew. She was much more nervous than she seemed to be, but she felt oddly comfortable around him, more comfortable than she'd ever felt with any stranger. The very idea that he was brave enough to walk around without a gun amazed her, impressed her so much that she was inclined to trust him, to take him at his word, even when every bit of her past experience warned her against doing that. He was so calm, so confident, he radiated a strength that reassured her, put her at ease. She felt very much at ease around Jason Fox, even though her instincts cried out against it.

She was aware of the contact. He sensed her suddenly react to the realization that she was touching his skin by immediately moving her hand, with a surge of fear accompanying it. She didn't want *it* to happen again. The last time *it* happened, it took days for her to recover.

Now, now he just had to know. He opened his mind and touched her thoughts gently, listening to her surface thoughts, and also listening for the deeper thoughts that he could pick up without having to actively enter her mind. Like any mind, there was much more going on in there than even Temika realized. There were thoughts beneath thoughts beneath thoughts, a web of mental activity of which Temika was only dimly aware. He listened, ignoring those thoughts that didn't answer his question, actively ignoring the opportunity to listen to any number of juicy secrets about her, like private thoughts, desires, fantasies, and needs. He kept a mental ear out for "it," but nothing crossed her mind where he could see it. He reached out with extreme gentleness, touching her mind, trying to gain access to it without attacking or intruding. He didn't want her to know what he was doing. She said she'd been probed before, so he had to be careful. She was a nervous, defensive woman, but her mind had no defenses in place, and he found that he could gain access to it by simply applying the lightest of pressures for a period of time, until he slipped through the natural defense that all sentient beings had around their minds, that wall of self that marked the boundary between them and the outside world. Once he was inside, he was very, very careful not to do anything that would betray what he was doing. He moved through the upper layers of her mind like a ghost, doing nothing, not looking at any of her upper-layer thoughts. What he needed to look at were her memories, so that was where he went. He touched on her memory gently, carefully, kind of rolling through them looking for any memory that involved being touched. He found one, then used that reference to track down the root cause of the event.

What he did only took the blink of an eye; the rules of time in the mindscape were much different. But when he was done, he pulled away from her, both disturbed and disgusted at the cruelty that some could exhibit.

Her fear of physical contact was a triggered reaction to what the Faey had done to her the last time they'd captured and interrogated her. That kind of deep probing required physical contact by anyone short of a Marine, and the Faey who had probed her hadn't been all that good. She'd been damn clumsy for that matter, and caused Temika to suffer psychotraumatic shock. What that Faey had done to Temika's mind was equivalent to someone whipping her with a scourge in a physical sense, tearing her mind open and leaving it raw and exposed, then withdrawing without trying to repair the damage she'd done. It was a miracle that Temika was even sane, but somehow, she had managed to recover, her mind healing from that brutal experience. Temika had buried the memory of that mental torture deeply into her mind, only remembering that it had involved touching. So now she had a near phobia involving physical contact, terrified that if someone touched her or she touched another, she'd suffer that pain again. *It* was a panic attack induced by touching, and it took her days sometimes to recover from them.

Jyslin and Symone represented the best of the Faey's traits, and knowing them had softened his concept of the Faey Imperium. But it was times like this that he was reminded that they were the *exception*, not the *rule*.

He said nothing, allowing her to get comfortable, then he felt her lean over his shoulder to look at the controls. He explained them to her, showing her the differences involved in operating a bike that could move in all three directions, then he launched them from the street like a rocket. Temika cursed in surprise, then laughed as she got a firm grip on his waist. He turned hard, letting her feel the G-forces involved, making her understand that flying off the bike was more than a possibility if she wasn't careful; airbikes did have seat belts, but not even those would save someone if they did a bad turn and submarined right out of the seat belt. Jason never bothered with the seat belt himself; properly driving the airbike, he'd never be in a position to need them. He was careful not to take them over Huntington, instead flying them out over the hills of southern Ohio, letting her enjoy the thrill of riding on the airbike and gawk at the view.

When he set them down by the skimmer, Temika was out of breath. "That was great!" she cried as she jumped off the back.

"Yeah, they're fun, but did you understand how I drove it?" he asked pointedly.

"Yeah, sugah. You have tah bank into your turns or you'll fly off, and you have to be careful with speedin' up and slowin' down, especially when y'all are climbin' or droppin'."

Jason nodded appreciatively. "Not bad, you *were* paying attention."

"Sugah, they ain't a bike been made that Ah can't ride," she said with a grin. "Ah want a go. Your turn in the bitch seat, sugah."

"Not with that hair flailing the skin off my face, it's not," he told her bluntly. "You need to tie it up."

"Ah like it loose, Ah love the feel of it flyin' in the wind," she protested.

"Yeah, and you'll get dreadlocks if you keep it up," he said, dismounting from the bike.

"Ah know. It's hell pullin' a comb through mah hair every night, but Ah do it cause Ah don't want dreadlocks."

"Well, I'm not riding behind you, so I'll get the other bike out and you can ride with me," he said.

"I think you'll be alright, you just need practice with the controls."

"It ain't all that much different from a Harley. You just got extra buttons, that's all."

It certainly wasn't planned, but the afternoon turned out to be rather fun. Jason tutored Temika in operating an airbike, and though she was very clumsy and tentative at first, she learned very quickly. Airbikes really *weren't* that hard to fly, and it took Temika only about two hours to get the hang of it. By the time the sun started to set in the west, Temika was zipping her airbike around as easily as she rode her Harley. She had her goggles down, her vest flapping in the breeze, and she looked like she was having the time of her life. She was visibly disappointed when they landed the airbikes by the skimmer, and he told her he had to put them away. "Shit, Ah'm spoiled now," she laughed. "Mah Harley ain't gonna feel like no fun at all."

"You can take your airbike any time," he told her calmly. "I trust you to hold up your part of the bargain."

She nodded. "Any time you want tah go, sugah, just let me know."

"It won't be anytime in the near future. Not until I'm sure the Faey can't find me."

"Okay, sugah. Ah don't listen to the CB while on the road mahself, but if I miss it, you put out the call that you're lookin' for me. It'll find its way tah me, and I'll be on the way tah you. Ah'm usually where Ah'm called within two days of the call goin' out." She sighed and stroked the side of the airbike she'd been riding fondly, then patted it. "Ah'll come back for this later, sugah," she told him. "Though Ah do much appreciate you teaching me tah ride it today. Ah haven't had that much fun in months."

"Yeah, I had a good day too," he agreed. "You gonna get home before dark?"

She shook her head. "Ah don't have much of a home, sugah. Ah live off my bike more than anythin' else. Ah do have a couple of places where Ah keep some stuff, but it ain't really like no home or nothin'. Ah know a safe place to camp tonight, and it ain't too far from heah."

"The houses around mine are all empty," he told her. "Just pick one. Or, if you trust me enough, you're welcome to crash at my house tonight. I have some clean blankets and stuff you can borrow if you're not cool with that. You'll be completely safe no matter where you stay, that I can guarantee you. Beyond a shadow of a doubt."

"No offense, sugah, but Ah'd feel much more comfortable campin' somewhere Ah *know* Ah'm safe. After Ah see you've been around a while, Ah'll feel alright with crashin in yo' area. Ah have no doubt *you* think yo' safe enough, but *Ah* ain't so sure."

"No offense taken, Temika," he said calmly. "Well, if you're going to go camp out, the least I can offer is dinner. It's gonna be TV dinners, but it'll be better than whatever you manage to shoot out in the forest."

"You got yo'self a guest," Temika said brightly. "Ah never turn down a free meal."

It wasn't fancy, but it was different, and that seemed to please Temika quite a bit. They literally had TV dinners, with water to wash it down. Afterwards, he showed her his plasma weapons, his railgun, and the collection of pistols, rifles, and machine guns he'd stripped off the gang members. He kept them in a box down in the basement. "Why do you sleep down heah?" she asked curiously.

"This is the safe room that protects me from the sound-based defense," he answered honestly. "I have a damper installed down here. It nullifies the hypersonic sound." He had no qualms with revealing those things to Temika, because the past touches he'd made on her assured him that she was trustworthy.

"Nice," Temika said, picking up one of the Tek-9's in his box. She was careful not to pull the trigger. "Ain't these the ones that use nine millimeter ammo?"

"I guess so, I don't know much about guns," he replied absently, checking the diagnostic readout on his railgun. "You like that?"

"Yeah. This is some firepowah, sugah. If you didn't notice, Ah'm a gal that loves her firepowah."

"Keep it," he shrugged.

"Sugah, this gun ain't something yah *give away*," she protested. "Shit, sugah, you could get a year's worth of fresh eggs out of the Becketts for this thang."

"It's yours," he told her. "If only because you're the first person I've met out here who didn't immediately start shooting at me. I've got six more in there," he said with a slight smile. "So it's not like I'm giving you the shirt off my back. Find one that has the shoulder strap. If you want, you can take it out and make sure it works, but *no* shooting up the houses," he warned.

"Bring one of those out too," she said, pointing at the plasma rifle he had in a gun case in the corner. "Ah ain't never seen of those fired before."

"Those are hunting versions, they're nowhere near as powerful as military-grade weapons," he told her. "You'd be disappointed. All you'd see is a red laser-beam like light, and a smoking hole in whatever it hit."

"That sounds powerful enough to me."

"The military grade weapons tend to make any small target they hit explode," he explained. "Including people. Even being grazed by a military MPAC can blow off your arm. If you took an MPAC shot directly in the chest, they'd need a broom and a wetvac to pick up all the pieces. They're very *brutal* weapons."

"Eww," Temika said with a shudder. "Too much information, sugah. That sounds really gruesome."

"I suppose it is. The armor the Faey wear helps absorb some of that. If you shot a Faey with her own gun, she'd get injured, but it would blow her to pieces. From what I remember reading, the *real* armor they use can take several hits from an MPAC before being compromised."

"What do ya mean, real armor?"

"The stuff they use down here is hundred year old surplus junk," he told her. "The only things they have that are current are their guns and their hovercars. That armor the Faey wear, they stopped using

it years and years ago. They use it here because conventional guns can't penetrate it. It's all the protection they *need*. Their biggest worry is that somehow someone gets hold of an MPAC, and that's not much worry at all."

"You got two right there."

"No, I have two hunting rifles. Those aren't MPACs. *This* is an MPAC," he said, holding up his plasma pistol. "It's not as powerful as a rifle, but it's an MPAC."

"What's the difference?"

"Those fire a static charge of plasma. This fires a charge of plasma that exists in multiple quantum states. Think of it as the gunpowder in a bullet," he said to her blank look. "Those use weak bullets, this uses a really strong one."

"Oh, kinda like comparin' a .38 to a .44," she reasoned.

"More like a regular gun to a magnum, but yeah, something like that," he agreed. "Well? Pick out your gun."

She did so quickly, a Tek-9 with a shoulder strap, which she immediately slung over her shoulder. She practiced a few times with reaching down and grabbing the weapon, then pulling it forward to aim in front of her while it was still slung over her shoulder. "Good, this'll work. Ah'll have tah find some way tah pay you for this, sugah," she said appreciatively. "Clem knows all about guns. Ah'll go see him tomorrow and have him show me how tah break it down so Ah can clean it." She laughed. "All that nine mil ammo Ah had and traded away, and now Ah got a gun that uses it. Ain't life just the shit sometimes?"

"I can't help you there, all I got were the guns. If you want the ammo, just go over into the city and find out where they keep all the ammo they have stockpiled."

She laughed. "Too bad you couldn't get some of that Faey armor fo' me," she told him. "Ah'd love to be bulletproof. Ah could march down intah Huntington and take on all the gangs by mahself."

It was like a little light bulb turned on in his brain. What a *great* idea! "Temika, I could kiss you," Jason said ruefully. "I *never* thought of that."

"What?"

"Armor. All that access I had to stuff at school, and I never *once* thought of making armor."

"You can make armor?"

He snorted. "*Easily*. Or I could have, back when I had access to the school's fabrication lab. With the equipment I have here, it wouldn't be easy at all. *Unless*, I get some that's already made," he mused absently, rushing over to the desk by his bed and sitting down. He pulled out his new panel which, thanks to backup memory sticks, had everything in it that his school panel did. Including the phone number of a certain enterprising young lady. He wasn't too sure about accessing Civnet from here, because they might be able to use the signal to track him down, so he avoided doing that. He instead ensured that Eleri's number was still in his panel. It was.

He put it in standby mode and stood up quickly. "I'm going out Temika. Get what you need, cause I'm locking the house up."

"Where y'all goin', sugah?"

"I want to check Civnet, but I can't do it from here. They might use the panel to track me down, so I have to do that somewhere else. I'll go up to the border with Faey territory, it might not look *too* odd up there. I'd be close enough to other traffic." He grabbed a satchel that was the carrying case for a panel, then stuffed the panel down inside it, then slung it over his shoulder. He picked up the plasma pistol, then stuffed it into the belt of his jeans behind his back. "I can think of several things that would be bulletproof off the top of my head. I need to check them out, and figure out some way to get them here."

"Okay, sugah," she said.

It only took him a few minutes to get the house ready for him to leave. Temika climbed up onto her Harley and turned the key, then gave him a grateful smile. "You gonna be alright, sugah?" she asked.

“I’ll only be gone a couple of hours,” he told her. Oh, don’t come back tonight. I’m gonna turn on my intrusion deterrent system. You don’t want to be here when it’s active.”

“Alright. Ah’ll come by tomorrow afternoon sometime and get that airbike, sugah. That okay with you?”

“Fine. We’ll probably be going into Faey territory sometime very soon. Next week sometime, I think. After I’m sure they’re not coming for me.”

“Ah’ll keep in touch with you, sugah,” she promised, then she started her Harley. The loud sound of its engine roared through the neighborhood. She waved to him as she rode off, and Jason watched her go. That, he told himself, was going to be one *very* good friend. He already liked her, and he just knew that he could trust her.

In five minutes, he was on an airbike and skimming the hilltops as he traveled northeast. He had the windscreen fully extended because he didn’t have a good visor or goggles or anything, and he spent as much time looking at the map display on the console of the airbike as he was paying attention to where he was going. The bike was in collision detection mode, causing it to gain altitude whenever its lateral forward sensor detected an obstacle within a half mile. That was the only autopilot an airbike had, but it was good enough for him as he studied the map. The Faey border ran through southeastern Ohio, and the closest populated city of any size to Huntington was Columbus. That was about an ninety minutes away by airbike, or a few hours by car. But the border was some fifty or so miles southeast of Columbus, running just north of the abandoned town of Chilocothe, which was where Temika had come from, now that he remembered. The closest settlement of any size on the border that was within what he considered to be his area of travel was a brand new town called New Eradin, which the Faey had built to be a collection area for produce and grain grown out in the fields. It had evolved into an actual town, though one built of Faey plas-crete modular buildings. It was only two miles from the border, and was about twenty miles north-northeast of Chilocothe.

That was where he was going.

He turned to line himself up with New Eradin, then opened the throttle as he tucked in behind the extended windscreen. The airbike was screaming along at nearly two hundred miles and hour, but the widscreen kept the majority of that powerful wind off of him. It didn’t keep it off his overshirt or clothes, though, so by the time he slowed down and dove down to the treetops, he realized that the tail of his overshirt was a little frayed and torn. The border of the Faey territory was about five miles ahead, and it was a dramatic one, for it marked the border of the forest. There was not a tree in sight anywhere past that line, it was all neatly maintained farmland all the way to the horizon, a horizon that held the small skyline of the town of New Eradin. He looked down in the fading light of sunset and spotted an old abandoned road, and dropped down and eased back on the throttle to follow it. He was under the treeline and out of sight. He got to within a mile of the border and set the airbike down, then hid it in the gulley made by a stream flowing beside the road and continued on foot.

When he got within five hundred yards of that border, as the trees started showing peeks of golden light from the setting sun, he stopped. That was close enough. He sat down on an old log and brought out his panel, then accessed Civnet. He knew what he was looking for, so it only took a few minutes to bring it up.

He was curious about two ideas. First, a formal set of combat armor that made it abundantly clear that he was there on *business*. The second was some kind of armored cloth that would be capable of stopping any bullet.

The first idea took about ten seconds. There were any number of Faey security companies that made armor for individuals, no questions asked. After all, in the Faey system, nothing was really patently illegal, you just had to be able to afford it. There were any number of these firms who manufactured combat armor for nobles. After a single search, he came up with at least 200 listings for companies that sold armor, either off-the-shelf (which wasn’t very good) or custom made to spec (which was much more common practice).

The second idea wasn't as easy, because of the archaic nature of Terran weapons. He had to reword his search to look for *impact* armor, not *ballistic* armor, and that tagged a few matches. There was an armor material called *meralite* that was capable of stopping high-velocity impacts of up to 2,800 *shakra* per second. The armor was actually a *component* of an armored cloth that was designed to help protect against MPAC fire. Since MPAC fire actually relied on the velocity of the plasma charge to help induce penetration, stopping that round's velocity was a critical aspect of protection against MPAC fire. The heat of the round coupled to its velocity caused it to burn into its target, then when it slowed, the heat interacted with the material it touched to cause the MPAC charge to explode. The volatile nature of the plasma charge caused it to start detonating the instant it hit a solid object, but the velocity of that plasma drove the explosion *into* the target. That's why MPAC fire blew people apart. Most MPACs fired with a muzzle velocity of about 2,000 *shakra* per second, which made the weapon almost a line of sight weapon against anything within that 2,000 *shakra*. This MPAC armor was designed to stop the round and redirect the explosion *outward*, since the velocity of the MPAC charge would be stopped by the meralite layer. The armor at the impact site would be destroyed by the MPAC detonation, and the heat and some of the explosive energy of the MPAC strike would get through the armor and deal injury, but it would stop the shot and prevent instant death from being blown to pieces by the MPAC charge. MPAC armor was literally one-use armor, and it didn't *prevent* injury, only *reduced* it. After it was hit, it was ruined, and the wearer had some burn injuries. But it *would* help protect the wearer against the instant death that accompanied a direct hit from an MPAC.

The reason this meralite material worked is because it was called *phase cloth*. It was a material that itself existed in multiple quantum states of reality, and from what read as he researched it, it was actually a *biological* product, woven from the silk of certain arachnids called Mera Crawlers in the Meruki cluster. This raw silk had the unique aspect of existing in multiple states because the Mera Crawlers preyed on another organism called a Phase Beetle, that had the ability to shift its mass out of quantum phase, making it intangible and untouchable to the *normal* world. Evolution had provided them with a weapon to catch the phase beetles, and as a side effect, created probably the only material in existence—that he knew of—that was capable of stopping an MPAC. The Faey had since created a synthetic version that was a component in their heavy armors, but the phase cloth was still the material of choice for personal inobtrusive armor.

Very, very interesting. The Faey were using the product of an animal to help protect themselves from the lethal aspects of their own weapons. Then again, given the bloody and contentious history of the Imperium, a Faey probably needed to protect herself against her own kind much more than she did any other sentient race.

Jason did some figures in his head, and realized that this meralite armor would stop virtually any round fired from any gun. *Easily*. It would leave spectacular bruises and might break some bones, but it would stop the round. According to the specs of it, it was both very light and extremely strong, and was easily made into clothing. But, the material itself was rather coarse, so it wasn't usually made as clothing, but instead sewed as an internal layer within clothing. It was most often used as a lining within clothing, but it was so light that it added very little additional weight. It was sold by some of the same armor companies that built armor for people, and either came as rough material, or came as pre-made clothing.

Alright, so there was armor out there. Now came the problem of getting it to him. He had three options that he could see. First, he could have it sent to New Eradin, then find some way to pick it up. Second, he could have it sent to Jyslin, and find some way to have her get it to him. Thirdly, he could somehow have the armor sent directly to him *inside* the lawless area. Each option presented its own problems and advantages, though. The New Eradin option made it easiest for him, but forced him to either place his trust in a stranger or go out there and find some way to have his items delivered to a location...maybe to a mailbox or something like that. But then he'd have to make sure that he was there at the right time to get it, then get away with his shipment. The Jyslin option put his stuff with

someone he could absolutely trust, but she'd have no easy way to get it to him, and he had no easy way to get to her. The direct delivery idea got past those messy delivery issues, but it would give the Faey a hard location within the lawless area from which to start in order to find him, as well as make the deliverer answer all kinds of questions as to why they were delivering stuff inside a zone filled with squatters and outlaws.

Hmm. There was a fourth option, actually. Instead of sending it to New Eradin and finding some way to deliver it to a certain place, instead he could just pick it up directly off the drop ship, or have the drop ship meet him at a certain place in Faey territory. Those options required using an agent he could trust, and he knew just the woman.

Eleri.

For a fee, she'd deliver what he bought just about anywhere he wanted.

The heavy armor...there wasn't much he could do about that now. The fit of the armor was critical to its ability to protect, that was why off the shelf armor was so poor. But the impact armor, that he could get immediately, and it was important to get it as quickly as he could. It was dangerous out here, and his defenses only worked as long as they were actively turned on, and they utilized Faey energy sources that might be able to be picked up by Faey sensors. Besides, he *did* have to leave his safe area, and eventually, someone was going to get close enough to take a shot at him, talent or no talent.

Despite having no way to get it to him yet, he needed to secure it. For now, he could either have Eleri hold it for him or have it sent to Jyslin, and then figure out how to get it later. Using the panel, he called Eleri's number. He again reached a switchboard of sorts, manned by a bored-looking Faey man wearing the crest and livery of the Trillane noble house. "Arcuri manor," he said.

"Eleri Trillane, please."

"What does this concern?"

"I'm following up on a piece of equipment she sold me. She told me to call."

The man nodded, and his face was replaced by a picture of the Trillane family crest. A few minutes later, as the forest became darker and darker with the approach of night, Eleri's pert little face appeared on the panel's display. The last time he'd seen her she was wearing a bikini. Today she had on a tank top of sorts that left her arms bare, but ended just below her breasts, but was all that he could see of her. Her white-blond hair was longer now, tied behind her with the tail thrown over her shoulder, to dangle down past his view. It was some kind of exercise outfit, he reasoned. "Eleri," she said in her brusque manner, then she seemed to recognize him. "Well, if it ain't that human inventor. Jason, wasn't it? What'cha calling for, babe?"

"Hello, Eleri," he returned. "I have a question and a favor to ask. You have a minute?"

"Yeah, I was about to go do some running," she said, rising up out of the camera's view and giving him a good look at her very flat belly for a moment, then she sat back down a bit closer to the display. "Sorry, had to sit down. So what can I do for ya babe?"

"If I gave you a list of a few things to buy, would you do that for me?"

"Well sure, but why don't you just buy it yourself? I—oh, hold on. I see outside behind you, and it's dark there. You're in trouble, aren't you!" she said with sudden excitement.

"Well, I'm going to be very soon," he admitted with a slight smile. "Let's say that I got tired of school, so I decided to take an *extended* vacation."

She laughed. "Damn, Jason, you just make my heart sing. I've been contemplating heading for the hills myself, what with my conscription coming up and all. But I just keep telling myself that I've only gotta do it for five years, then it's back to normal. You okay? Got a place to live? Doing alright?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I'm hiding in one of the nature preserves where the Faey don't patrol. It's filled with squatters and other people, and not all of them are friendly. I came here with some equipment, but I wasn't really prepared for the idea of having to actively fight to protect myself as much as I thought I was. I need some extra stuff, and then I'll be just fine. I can't really buy it myself now, so I have to find someone to buy it for me. You're about the only option I have."

“That’s good. I kinda like you, babe. Sure, I’ll give you a hand, and it’s yet another chance to piss off my mom, though she won’t know about this,” she said with a wicked smile. “What do you need me to buy for you?”

“Armor mainly,” he said, sending her a small file with some pictures of things he was looking at. “I need protection against the old ballistic weapons my people used before the Faey came. This meralite armor cloth I found on Civnet is *perfect* for that. I surfed around and found a few places that sell it. I need you to buy it for me, then hold onto it until I can figure out some way for you to get it to me without either of us getting caught.”

“There ain’t no list here, babe, just some descriptions and images. What exactly do you need? I need a shopping list.”

“I don’t have one yet. This call was just to see if you *could* do it.”

“Yeah babe, I can do it, no problem. I’d be happy to help you.”

“You have no idea how relieved I am to hear that, Eleri.”

“I like you,” she grinned. “I do things for people I like. The fact that it’s more or less illegal just makes it more fun.”

Jason laughed. “Thanks, Eleri.”

“Call me Kumi,” she ordered. “All my friends do.”

A *kumi* was a female *vulpar*. It was the English equivalent of calling her *vixen*. “Kumi, eh?”

“That’s right, because I’m such a clever little tease,” she winked. “Besides, if you call and ask for Kumi, I’ll immediately know it’s *personal*.”

“Ah, I understand, Kumi.”

“Ok, so, what do you want to get?”

They went over some of the armor that was available, using an interactive window on their panels that both could manipulate and see in real time, and Jason decided on a few sets of rugged outdoor-like clothing, armored boots, and three duster-style long coats. They discussed heavy armor, and Eleri agreed that he needed to be personally fitted for it, as well as agreeing that a set of heavy armor was *definitely* something he should have.

“How are you on supplies? Guns? You got reliable transportation?”

“I’m fine. I have my skimmer parked under a bridge to help hide it from sensor sweeps, but I don’t have it powered up. I’m getting around on an airbike, but I’m probably going to have to park it now that they know I’m missing. I’m afraid the energy signature will be detectable from space-based sensors.”

“It will,” she affirmed, “but there’s a way around that. You need some military-grade airbikes, with signature maskers. Let’s add those to the list. You can just trade me the bikes you got for the new ones when I deliver this shit. You’ll have to pay the difference between them, though,” she warned, writing that down on a notepad she had by the panel. “Oh, shit, yeah, you’d better check to see if they froze your account.”

“They don’t know I ran away yet, only that I’m missing,” he reasoned. “I don’t think they’ve taken that step yet, because they know I have the airskimmer. Right now, they probably think I’ve either lost track of time or I might be injured out somewhere. But, if I did it right, they don’t know *where* to look for me. I know how the traffic control system works,” he grinned.

“If they didn’t have the space-based arrays on you when you ditched, they lost contact with you at about five hundred *shakra*. And I know for a fact that they don’t have the entire planet covered by the space arrays on Terra,” she said with a grin. “It’s a low priority.”

“Exactly. I’m glad you know how it works too.”

“I’ve had my class three since I was twelve, babe. Let me figure out what this is gonna cost, then you can try to thumb me the money. That way you only have to access your account *once*.”

“What will you say when they ask you about it?”

“Give me some credit, babe,” she laughed. “They’ll never find this bank account. It’d take them

three cycles to figure out that the listed account owner doesn't even exist. And even if they do, why I never *dreamed* you were a fugitive! I'm just shocked, you were such a nice guy!" she said in a little-girl voice, with a wide-eyed, innocent expression.

Jason laughed delightedly. "You're a wicked girl, Kumi."

"I know. Ain't it fun?" she grinned. Then she became thoughtful. "You trust me, babe?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What money you have in that account's gonna get frozen when they realize you've relocated. You won't be able to use it. I can deliver you *cash*. You thumb me your whole account, and I give you the difference in cash. For a transaction fee, of course, say five percent," she winked.

"You have the soul of a swindler, Kumi," he chuckled.

"I like ya babe, but business is business," she smiled. "I'll leave that up to you. After all, you'll be handing me the whole bundle, and there's no guarantee that I won't just take it and run. Then turn you in to top it all off."

"Hell, I won't be able to use it. I'll agree to that, and you wouldn't turn me in. You have a deal."

"Coolies," she said, scribbling on her notepad. "This isn't gonna be cheap, babe. I'll just claim that the new airbikes are the reason you thumbed me so much, but there might not be too much left over. We're up to about seventy thousand here. You're looking at over thirty thousand a bike to cover the difference in cost, going on list values."

"I had about a hundred and seventy thousand in the account before I left," he told her.

"Shit, new patent?" she asked with a laugh.

"Royalty payment."

"Ah. Okay, I got it, I'm sending you my account number. Go ahead and thumb it over. I promise I'll give you the rest in cash when I deliver your stuff."

"I trust you, Kumi," he said calmly. And he really did. So long as she thought she was getting into trouble but wouldn't get caught, she'd help him. Eleri was just like that. Jason accessed his account, then authorized the transfer of his entire bank account, rounding it up to the nearest thousand to make it look official, and sent it to Eleri's account.

"Damn, that's a sweet sight," Eleri chuckled when she looked at her account balance. "Okay babe, I'll get to work on this. Call me tomorrow and we'll work out where you're going to meet me."

"Meet *you*?" he asked in surprise.

"Of course babe, meet *me*. In person. That's how you're getting this stuff. I won't trust this to a freighter. So, I've decided I'm going to take a trip to Trillane's newest holding. Mother's been on my ass about taking a more active role in house operations, anyway," she sniffed. "I'm going to visit Terra, take in the sights, and perhaps go on a nature walk," she winked. "Oh shit, what's your size? I need those, both shirts and pants. And your height and weight. Oh, and stand up and step back so I can get a good look at you. Your body proportions matter."

He gave her his sizes, then put the panel down and let her get a look. "Take your shirt off."

"What?"

"Take your shirt off, babe. Pants too."

"Why am I doing that?" he demanded.

"Because proportions *matter*, babe. I can get your height weight and size, but if the proportions are wrong, they're not gonna fit. Don't worry, you don't have to take it *all* off. Just the shirt and pants."

He gave her a long look, but she seemed serious about it. "Alright," he growled, setting the panel down. He then removed his shirt, shoes, and pants, and stood there in his boxer brief underwear.

"That's good, I got a pic of it," she told him, rather professionally. That surprised him. "You can get dressed." He did so quickly, and she continued to talk as he did so. "Okay, let me get on this. Remember, call me tomorrow, and do your best to do it as far from where you're set up as possible. They'll notice if a panel's accessing Civnet from an uninhabited zone."

“Yeah, I’m sitting on the border of Faey territory right now,” he told her, sitting down to put his shoes back on. “Close enough for them not to be too sure where it’s coming from.”

“Clever boy,” she winked.

“Only problem is I had to ride my airbike over here, and it’s not too safe for me. I’ll have to go back home then come back later.”

“Hmm. Well, there’s really not much you can do about that. Just stay under five hundred *shakra* and hope whoever’s on sensor duty isn’t paying too much attention. Airbike signatures aren’t that big.”

“Heh. Whee,” he mused aloud.

“Just hang in there babe, help’s on the way,” she grinned. “I’ll be leaving for Terra the day after tomorrow, most likely. You should have this stuff in three days.” She clapped her hands and rubbed them together. “I get to try out the new yacht,” she said eagerly.

“Well, I’m glad for you. I need to get off here, since I’m in the area, I need to make some other calls,” he told her. “You pull the number off this panel? It’s a new one.”

She nodded. “But I know better than to call it,” she winked.

“Good. I’ll call you about this time tomorrow *my time*,” he stressed. “Twenty two *standard* hours,” he said after he converted the time.

“Got it. I’ll make sure I’m free about that time.”

“Kumi...thank you. I can’t tell you how much a lifesaver you are,” he said sincerely.

“Hey, I’m getting paid, babe,” she winked. “And I’m happy to help. I like you, and I’m looking forward to meeting you.”

“Me too.”

“Ok, twenty two hours. It’s a date.”

“Not much of one, but one I intend to keep,” he smiled.

“Don’t start digging the hole already. By the way, you’re drop dead sexy,” she said with a wink and a wicked smile, and started reaching for the disconnect button. “Fure! Get in here! I need—“ and then she ended the call.

Calling Eleri was *such* a good idea, even if she couldn’t resist ogling him a little bit.

That was the good one, now it was time for the *bad* one. He punched up Jyslin’s number, and waited both anxiously and nervously. It had been nearly a week since he talked to her, just that last day, so he wasn’t sure if she was still angry or not. He waited...and waited...and waited some more. Almost a minute went by, and no Jyslin, and what was odd, no answering machine. He was about to end it and call Maya before she finally picked up the line. It was audio only, only showing a still picture of her and her name. “Hello,” she called shortly.

“Jyslin?” he called.

The picture of her was quickly replaced with a live image. She was wearing a simple black tee shirt, sitting at her vidlink console. “It’s about time,” she told him. “Are you alright? Are things well?”

“I’m alright,” he said carefully. “My vacation’s gone rather well so far. I had a few run-ins with some unfriendly residents, but nothing I couldn’t handle. Are things going alright over there?”

She nodded. “Fairly well. Oh, two things. First, your physical is on *Friday*,” she said strongly. “I highly suggest you get everything ready before then. You don’t want to miss it. Second, you need to call in to traffic control. They lost contact with your skimmer, and they don’t know where you are. They thought you crashed until they brought in a space-based sensor array and searched the area, and saw nothing wrong.”

He could have kissed her. That meant that they weren’t *actively* looking for him yet. That gave him two days of relative freedom. She also managed to tell him that he had in fact managed to get his skimmer down and hidden from sensors without them knowing where he was. That bridge was doing its job, hiding his skimmer from detection. “I understand,” he said with a slow nod.

“Tim’s really missed you.” She pursed her lips. “We need to talk about him, Jason.”

“What about?”

She glanced around, then looked at him with a grim expression. “I’m starting to think that he has *the same problem you do*,” she said intensely.

Jason was taken aback. Tim? Tim might have *talent*? “Why do you think that?” he asked.

“He’s showing some of the same symptoms you did,” she answered evenly. “Now that I saw you come down with this condition, I’m starting to pay more attention to some other people. Tim certainly seems to be showing some symptoms, but hasn’t come down with a full-blown case of it. I’m not entirely sure he will yet, but I’m starting to think that he might. The symptoms haven’t abated yet.”

Jason swore. “How long?”

“Days. Weeks. Months. It’s impossible to tell. If he does have it at all, it might never show up. If it does, there’s no telling how bad of a case it’s going to be.”

“Is he going to be alright?”

“As long as he doesn’t have too much outside interference, he should be just fine. It’s nothing that someone like me can’t fix, and it’s certainly not something that he’d want bandied about. That kind of embarrassment, I think he’d prefer to avoid. If it turns out that he does have too much outside interference, though, he might have to take a little vacation too, to settle his nerves.”

Jason looked down. If it was true, if Tim *was* expressing talent, then he fully understood what she meant. If that really was the case, then she and Symone would train him, the same way Jyslin trained Jason. She’d be a hell of a lot better at it than Jason ever would be. But, if the situation with the Faey got too sticky, she’d have to pack him up and send him off to Jason, to live away from the Faey and away from danger. It would be much more dangerous to train Tim than it had been to train him, because nobody would even conceive that a human could have talent when Jyslin trained him. But since that girl expressed and they knew that humans weren’t completely devoid of telepaths, it would make training Tim a bit more dangerous. Jyslin would probably have to really clamp down on him if it really happened, or have Symone stay with him nearly at all times to prevent an accident like the one that got that other girl discovered.

“I understand. Does Symone know?”

She nodded. “We decided not to say anything to Tim. We want to see how this plays out. We don’t want to worry him. If it turns out to be nothing, then he’ll never have had to worry about anything at all.”

“That’s a good idea. Tim’s a bit high strung.”

“I noticed,” she said with a slight smile. “I also found out that Symone knows *you* suffer from this condition. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it was between me and her,” he answered simply. “She wanted to let me know it didn’t bother her,” he said carefully.

“I’m a bit cross that you didn’t tell me, but I guess it’s alright,” she said with a slight snort. “I’ve been wondering, Jason, and thinking a little bit. I think there’s a common denominator here.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, first you get this condition. Then someone else we know does,” she said pointedly without referring to that girl who expressed during finals. “Now it looks like Tim *might*. The common thread here is *us*. For you, me. For Tim, Symone. And I found out that other one also had a *friend*, an Army regular. Seems like some humans might be *allergic* to Faey or something. It’s the only reason I can think of.”

Jason scratched his cheek, pondering her unspoken words. She might be right, maybe exposure to the Faey was causing telepathic ability in humans. First Jason, who gets probed every day for years, then this girl, who, if Jyslin was right, had a Faey lover. And now Tim, who had extensive, *deep* telepathic contact with a Faey. That had to be a connection. Maybe...maybe the Faey themselves were causing this, causing humans to express, by exposing them to their telepathic power. He wasn’t sure, but from what he had in front of him, he could see a clear connection to link the fact that he had talent,

and this girl had talent, and Tim *might* have talent, and all of them had a history of extensive exposure to Faey telepathy. Jason in small periods of exposure over the years, Tim and that girl though intense exposure over a short amount of time... at least he was speculating in that regard about that other girl.

Maybe not *every* human was going to express, because they certainly would have by now. Some humans served in the Faey Imperium as liaisons or governmental officials, and they'd been exposed to the Faey and their telepathy on a daily basis for years. Perhaps it was like what he remembered Jyslin and Symone saying about other races and telepathic power. Maybe the humans too had some telepathic ability, but only a very small portion of the population. So far, most of that portion of the population hadn't been exposed to the Faey, exposed to their power, because only a very tiny fraction of the human population of Earth had any extensive, continual contact with the Faey. Most people saw a Faey only once a week or so, maybe got probed once a month. Jason got probed *daily*, for *years*. And Tim, though he'd only known Symone for a couple of months, they had shared an intensely deep telepathic communion. She joined their minds when they made love, and he was certain she sent to him quite a bit, and kept a link with him so she could hear his thoughts in return.

It could be that telepathic contact was triggering it in humans, could be making humans become telepathic. Almost like it was showing them the way.

Jason found that it did make a certain kind of sense. If only *some* humans had the potential to be telepathic, it explained why it was taking so long for it to show up, since only now was there more and more extensive contact between the Faey and humans. Or who knew, maybe *every* human had the potential, but some were more sensitive than others, more susceptible to whatever it was the Faey were doing to them to make it come out. People like Jason and Tim and that other girl, maybe they'd been not far from expressing true telepathic ability even if the Faey weren't here, and the Faey's presence just nudged them in the right direction.

"Jyslin...that is one hell of a point," he agreed with slow words. "You might be right. You very well might be right. It might be rare because perhaps not every human is susceptible to this condition, that only a few humans with the potential to come down with it don't come into enough contact to develop the condition. Or maybe we all do, but some of us have much lower resistance to it than others, so we started suffering from it first."

"Hmm, that's a good point," she said after thinking a moment. "So, you're okay with me watching Tim?"

He nodded. "You're the best one to deal with it if it turns out he has it," he assured her. "Just like you said, you can fix it if it happens, like you did with me. He wouldn't like having to take a vacation. You couldn't drag him away from Symone."

"That's Trelle's own truth," Jyslin grunted. "Sometimes I think they'll have to be surgically removed from each other."

Jason chuckled. "Listen, it's getting dark here, and I have to hike back to my camp. I'll do what you asked me to do when I get back. I'll *see* you on *Friday*, okay?"

"Friday it is," she said with a slow nod. "I'll meet you at the regular place."

"I'll be there. I'm sorry to cut it short."

"Hey, hon, that's not a problem. I know you're busy relaxing out there," she said with a sly smile. "See you on Friday."

"Be good."

"Be careful," she returned, and then she cut the connection.

Jason sighed, standing up, then he shut down the panel and started back towards the airbike. Tim, having talent. That idea scared him, not because he didn't think Tim could handle it, but for what it meant. He had the sneaking suspicion that Jyslin was right on the money with her reasoning. He'd bet that extensive telepathic contact between humans and Faey was inciting telepathic ability in humans, or at least *some* humans. The link between Jason and Jyslin, and Tim and Symone, and now that other girl and her Faey lover, it was a very strong piece of circumstantial evidence supporting Jyslin's theory.

Oh, God...if that was true, then there were going to be more. And more. And even more. The Faey were going to have *dozens* of human telepaths on their hands, maybe *hundreds*, and that was going to force them to respond. If it was indeed the Faey causing this telepathic expression, and they discovered the link that was causing humans to develop talent, then they were in a serious quandary. They really relied on the food from Earth to feed the Imperium, for they didn't have very many planets that had the right climate for food production. They couldn't leave Earth, they *needed* the food, but if they were causing humans to express telepathy, then their remaining here was creating a group of natives that had the power to oppose them. But what would they do?

Well, odds were, they were going to do to them what they did to that girl. Get them off the planet, reprogram them for loyalty to the Imperium, then either send them back to work for the Imperium on Earth, maybe hunting down other human telepaths, or employ them as spies for the Imperium. They would start *really* looking for humans on the verge of expression, start monitoring medical records, using telepaths to start digging for memories or information that would hint that that human had some latent talent that was about to awaken. They would try to find them and pacify them *before* they expressed, *before* they became a threat. The expression of telepathic power was not an issue so long as they remained in control, and was able to nullify the potential threat it posed before it *became* a threat.

And they would do that for as long as they were able to keep finding them faster than they could express. But if they couldn't...he had no idea.

One thing they would certainly do would be to outlaw "social interaction" between humans and Faey. That would slow down the number of new telepaths. But Jason wasn't sure that it required a human and Faey to be lovers for one to express talent...after all, Jason really hadn't. He would have expressed no matter what, Jyslin said so herself. That other girl may also have expressed no matter what, it just would have taken longer for it to happen. And if Tim really did have talent, the same might apply to him as well. In that scenario, it severely limited the fundamental way the Faey kept control of the human population, by using telepathy to prevent any kind of resistance from forming before it had a chance to start. If the Faey were forced to restrict how they used telepathy against the native population, given the fact that humans would rebel the *instant* they thought they could get away with it, it would *really* stick the Faey in a bind. They used telepathy to quell resistance, but using telepathy was potentially creating human telepaths capable of defeating that primary weapon. It was the proverbial catch-22. In that situation, their reaction might be rash, swift, and *very* ugly for the humans under Faey domination.

And he really didn't want to think about it.

The ride back to his house was uneventful, if not a little nervewracking. He had to rely on the airbike's rather rudimentary collision avoidance system as radar, since it was after dark and he wasn't about to turn on the bike's lights. He navigated by compass and maps, and they faithfully got him back home without him missing the mark by more than a mile west of his destination. He swept the area with his power and found no one around, so he shut down the hypersonic emitter and landed under the bridge. He stowed the airbike and locked up the skimmer, then made his way home, mentally adding a few items to the shopping list for Eleri—Kumi. For Kumi. An all-weather riding suit would be nice, and a spare pair of night-vision goggles, maybe one that was in the visor shape. He was *sorely* tempted to ask to see if she could find a replicator, but that was infeasible. They were huge, and they drew so much power that they'd be a beacon on a sensor array, shining out here in the unpowered lawless zone. There were some components and assemblies that he should see if she could get, general components to act as spare parts and a pool of available components if he had the need to build anything else. Yes, that was only smart. He'd have to make a list.

Now there was something he *should* ask for. Maya said that if he wanted to power up his skimmer, it had to be covered by a very heavy metal, one of the ones that didn't appear on the human table of elements, like carbidium. Well, he had that PPG-powered generator down in the basement, and a PPG was powering his hypersonic emitter. He needed to ask for a few cubic *shakra* of carbidium sheet

metal, so he could fashion some covers for his power systems.

Tim. He hoped, he really hoped, that Tim really didn't have talent. But, something told him that that wasn't the case. Jyslin was usually very sharp about things like that, and Jyslin was more or less convinced that he did. He knew it wasn't going to be easy for Tim. Tim really was high-strung, even though it didn't show that much. It was going to be tremendous pressure on him to learn how to control his power in an actively hostile environment. Jason sighed, and reminded himself that he was in very good hands. Jyslin and Symone would take very good care of him, and do everything they could to teach him how to control that power without giving himself away. Jyslin was *good*. She could have been in the Secret Police, she was *that strong*, and she was *very* skilled in her talent. After all, she had years more experience than other people her age in it, since she expressed so early. But she had managed to avoid that, going instead to the Marines. Jyslin would protect Tim, of that he was absolutely certain. She did like him, and it was doing Jason a favor. And Jason and Jyslin were willing to put their necks on the lines for each other.

He sat down in his new favorite chair down in the basement and turned on the television. All he could get out here was satellite broadcasts, and that meant he had a wide variety of choices between "native" programming and Faey programming. The Faey had left the entertainment sector intact when they took over the planet, giving the natives something to occupy their minds when not working. They had even gone in and upgraded all the networks and local television stations with Faey equipment, then trained the workers in how to operate it. He had some 632 channels to choose from, local stations that broadcast globally from all over the world, global networks like CNN or HBO, Faey networks that were considered local, and Faey networks beamed in from the Imperium. He surfed for a few minutes, stopping for a moment when he found a French channel doing news. Jason could speak French, thanks to his mother. He listened for a moment, then moved on when he found the story to be rather boring. He finally settled on an old movie called *Groundhog Day*, which was showing on one of the movie channels, about a vain, egotistical man cursed to relive the same day over and over. He'd always loved this movie, because it was a unique concept, wasn't the same old assembly-line kind of movie. He'd always wondered what he would do if he was in a similar situation, living the same day over and over.

He sighed. Well, now he guessed he was going to find out. Living out here was kind of living the same day over and over, because there was only one thing he had to do. Live to see the next day. Over and over again.

He hoped Tim would be alright.

He hoped that Kumi wouldn't get in trouble, and he really was grateful that she was willing to help.

He sighed and leaned the recliner back, watching the movie through half-open eyes, then, the day catching up with him, he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 7

Giira, 27 Oraa, 4392, Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 14 July 2007, Native Regional Reckoning

Huntington, West Virginia (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

As promised, Temika returned early that morning, as Jason was taking some measurements to study the feasibility of installing an external water tank at that location. The work kept his mind off worrying about Tim, and besides, it really needed to be done. He'd woke up before dawn, unable to sleep and with a sore neck from falling asleep in the recliner, then made the plans for it while waiting for the sun to come up. He needed to pick a location along the path of the original water line, which he could only guess at given he had no ground-penetrating portable sensors. He'd found the water shutoff valve down by the sidewalk, and could only assume that the water pipe was going to go in a generally straight line to the house. If he didn't want to dig up his yard, he'd have to install the tank's connection to the house's piping inside, and run the pipe into the house from the tank outside. That was probably what he was going to do, for digging up his hard with a shovel was going to be a very long and exhausting proposition. This location, by the house in the back yard, was a possible tank location if he hooked the tank into the plumbing inside the house. He'd already surveyed a few possible locations if he decided to hook the tank into the plumbing outside. Either way he went, he had to make sure that the tank was connected so it could fill the hot water heater. He looked at that and saw that it was electric, so that wasn't an issue. It had shut itself off when he got the electricity back up, because the water tank was empty. The fact that this house was all electric was a lucky coincidence, given that most other houses around used natural gas appliances.

He was in the back yard when he heard her Harley rumble in the distance, then steadily get louder and louder as she approached. He finished writing on his little note pad, then closed it and walked around front just as she turned the corner, still wearing the same clothes she'd had on the day before. She parked her bike in front of his house, then turned it off and raised her goggles as he walked out to her. Jason made sure he wasn't listening to her thoughts as he approached her. He would respect her privacy. "Mornin', sugah," she greeted. "Y'all have a good night?"

"Well enough," he answered. "There's been a change in plans."

"What?"

"You'll get the bike in a couple of days," he told her. "I made contact with a friend on the outside last night, and she told me that the space-based sensors *can* pick up an airbike."

"Shit," she grunted.

"So she's going to trade me the two bikes I have with two bikes that *won't* get picked up, ones that have special signature maskers."

"Sounds like quite a friend."

"Not *precisely* a friend," he chuckled. "I'm paying for them, believe me. This friend has the soul of a robber baron. But she has some connections and can get her hands on what I need, and she'll help me despite the danger of it."

"She must be a blueskin."

"She is. I have a few Faey friends, I'll admit it. But they'll help me even with me being out here, so that means that they really *are* friends."

She grunted, then chuckled herself. "Ah can't argue with that, sugah. Ah never really got tah know any of them. Ah was too busy thinkin' up ways to make life hell for them."

"Some of them aren't that bad," he told her. "I've always had a towering hatred of the Faey and their system, and I guess I still do. But I've met a few Faey who—" he chuckled ruefully. "Well, a few Faey who weren't about to take that as an excuse not to get to know me. One was quite militant

about it, and in a way, I guess she managed to make me see that not *all* Faey are bad. There are some good ones out there, it's just hard to see them, I guess."

"Girlfriend?"

"After a fashion," he admitted. "She certainly had that kind of interest, but no matter how much I liked her, I couldn't justify that kind of a relationship with her. Because she *is* Faey. She got me to accept her as a person, and I do care for her, but she's still part of a system I can't live with. When I started getting too close to her, I realized that getting into a relationship was going against everything I believed in. It also made me see that I was becoming a part of their system, and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if that happened. And well, here I am."

"Sorry tah heah that, sugah," she told him. "So, when do you want me tah take you across the border?"

"Next week, probably," he said. "This friend who's going to swap bikes will need me to meet her when we do it, and I'll have to take the bikes there. So I might need your help with that."

"Sure, sugah. After all, one of them is mine."

"Yeah," he agreed. "So I'm kinda stuck til I find out when and where that's going to be. Want some breakfast?"

"Hell, why not? Ah don't never turn down a free meal. You got that AC fixed yet?"

"Nope."

"Then Ah ain't stayin' long," she grinned. "It's gonna be hot today. Ah'd rather be out on the road with the wind coolin' me off than sittin' in a swelterin' house."

"Yeah, I noticed it was a bit warm, and it's still early. Maybe I should get the AC going. I *hate* heat."

She laughed. "Get that AC goin', and Ah might move in," she teased.

"And give up being able to wander around the house naked? I don't think so," he said dryly.

Temika broke up in laughter.

He fed her a breakfast of frozen pancakes and eggs, then said his goodbyes and let her get on her way. According to her, the Josephsons back in Lavalette called her in, and they probably wanted her to deliver some mail to Abe's son over in Gallipolis. She also got a call from the Parkers down near Williamson, who probably had some chickens they wanted sent to someone. Jason was curious how she carried anything big, given she was on a motorcycle and all he could see on it were the admittedly voluminous saddlebags. But then he remembered that that model of Harley could tow a bike trailer, and he'd bet she had a couple of them sitting here and there.

He gave over on the water for right now, because a look out at the thermometer he had hanging from the post of the porch showed him it was already 85 degrees, and it was only 10:00am. He took his toolkit outside to the air conditioning unit, then started working on it. He really *would* like some air conditioning, he had no idea why he waited this long to deal with it. He guessed because though it was July, they'd had a few pleasantly cool nights, and he'd been outside most of the day.

An hour into the operation, he discovered that the problem with it was just a simple case of rusted fuses and a decayed set of belts. The unit was designed to sit outside and endure the elements, and had fared very well in the years since it had last operated. He rode a bike down to the Lowe's a few miles away and scavenged for the parts, and found what he needed. Without electricity, materials that dealt with repairing electrical equipment was still laying around. The belts he found weren't in all that good of a shape, but they'd do until he found something better to use as a replacement. Three years of sitting without climate control had done some dryrot damage to the rubber, but they were still strong enough to do their job for now.

He rode back to his house and installed the parts, regreased the axles, and then cleaned everything up, then went in and turned it on. The smell coming out of the AC ducts was pretty stale and acrid, but after a few minutes, he felt cold air flowing against his palm.

It was working.

Jason sighed in relief and closed the front door, then cranked the temperature down to a nice 60 degrees, both to cool it off and to suck out all the humidity and moisture that had permeated the house for over two years. That would help clear out that dank smell that still lurked in some rooms. He meant to go out and continue working on the running water, but decided that he was just going to sit in his nice cool house and enjoy it for a while. There were things he could do inside.

He did get back out there around two o'clock, after having finally decided on installing the tank near the house in the backyard and hooking it into the plumbing inside the house. He went out and shut off the water valve that connected the house to the rest of the unused city water system, then marked where he was going to drill the hole through the wall to connect the pipe. He made a list of the things he was going to need to make it work. The external tank for sure, and he'd have to install a water pump, filtration, and purification system in the basement, probably beside the water heater. The tank would feed water to that system, which would clean it and pump it out to the house. He could connect it into the main incoming water pipe, which he'd found coming through the basement wall in the same room as the water heater. By cutting that pipe and connecting the pump there, it was just as if the water was coming from the old city system. He'd have to install a smaller pump on the external tank, and the best thing to do would be to run a pipe down to the Ohio River, draw water directly from there. He'd also need a filter on that one, or the external tank would quickly fill with sediment from the muddy water of the Ohio.

Those pumps were added to the list he was preparing for Kumi.

The tank itself wasn't an issue. If he couldn't find one that suited him, he could just make one. There was plenty of sheet metal to be had, and designing and building a water holding tank was child's play.

He ranged out that afternoon to look for a good water tank, but after finding none, he used the airbike to drag a couple of abandoned cars back close to his house. Their sheet metal would be good for the tank. After that was done, he saw it was about time to go back to the border, so he locked up the house, pulled out an airbike—remembering his night goggles this time—then activated his intrusion deterrent system after getting a safe distance away. He returned to the same place he had called her from the day before, then sat down and dialed her number. He got the very same operator when the line was answered, who took one look at him and glanced down. "One moment," he said before Jason could say anything. He was put on hold, and seconds later, Kumi appeared on his panel display. She was wearing a very elegant gown, made of what looked like black silk with a low neckline. There was red material gored into her voluminous sleeves, and a necklace of glittering crystals, probably diamonds, graced her sleek neck. Her gown was both simple yet elegant, without elaborate embroidery anywhere but along the upper edge of the bodice, what looked like birds with twigs in their mouths taking flight along the edge of her neckline, flying towards her shoulders. "Wow," Jason said in appreciation.

"You like?" she asked girlishly, stepping back and turning a circle for him.

"It's very pretty on you, Kumi," he said honestly.

"Thanks, babe," she grinned, sitting down in front of her panel. "When I told my mom I was going to go to Terra to inspect the house holdings, she decided to throw me a party. She thinks I'm starting to get all respectable and shit."

Jason laughed. "If she only knew."

"She'd burst a blood vessel for sure," Kumi said with a wolfish grin.

"At least you'll be the best dressed girl there."

"Flatterer," she accused. "So, hit me with your new list. I know it's coming."

He laughed. "You scare me sometimes, Kumi."

"Hey, I'm young, but I'm not stupid," she told him bluntly. "I'm sure you thought of several things you need after we hung up yesterday."

"You're right. Let me send you the file." He did so with a few presses of keys.

“Got it. Hmm, I don’t even know what some of this stuff is, but I’m sure Fure can find it. What do you want carbidium for?” she asked, looking at him.

“To shield the PPGs I’m using to power some stuff I have in my house. It should be dense enough to shield the PPG signatures from sensor sweeps.”

“Oh. Shit, babe, that’s a good idea. I didn’t think of that. Raw carbidium ain’t too expensive, either.” She wrote a few lines down on that little notepad by her desk. “Ok, here’s the deal. I’m leaving after the party, in about six standard hours. It’s only gonna take us about two hours to get there, so I’ll be in orbit over Terra in about eight standard hours. Now, I have to go through some stupid meetings with some other house people, and I’m supposed to get a tour of Washington by the Imperial staff, then my time’s my own. So, let’s give me a few hours to get some rest, and then I’m all yours.” She brought up a map of the eastern United States on an interactive window, then touched her panel display, which caused a red dot to appear on the map. “I’m gonna land *inside* the nature preserve, and I’m gonna set it up so I land there in the late afternoon, then leave after dark. We’ll do our business after the sun goes down,” she told him, dragging that red dot back and forth. “I already told them I want to check out the nature preserve and see if I can find some interesting stuff to take home.”

“You get a tour of Washington? Nice.”

“I hate it, but they expect use to do it when house nobles of our rank visit. Especially since my mom decided to go with me,” she fumed a bit.

“What are you in the house, Kumi?”

“My mom’s ninth in line for the house throne,” she answered immediately. “I’m twenty-second. I’m a Countess. My mom’s a Duchess. We’re *way* up there.”

“I see,” he said with a whistle. “No wonder she wants you more involved in house affairs.”

“Yeah,” she grinned. “She missed out on being the Governor of Terra by *this* much,” she said, holding her thumb and forefinger an inch apart. “But the Grand Duchess decided to give it to one of her daughters instead. Anyway, so let’s pick a spot. Make it close to where you are, but not *right* where you are. There won’t be no trouble with me getting there, cause I already told my mom to stuff all the security. She knows I’ll just leave them behind anyway. We’ve been through all this before,” she grinned. “I’m bringing a personal security detail, and convinced her they’ll be enough. She won’t know I’ll leave them in Washington too. Only people coming with me are Fure and a few servants I can trust, and a couple of personal bodyguards I *know* I can trust. I figure you’ll have chased out anyone on the ground that might cause us problems.”

“You’re right,” he agreed, looking at the map. “Does it being in the open matter?”

“Not at all,” she answered. “The ships in orbit know better than to spy on *me*. I’ll kick their asses if they try.”

“Meanie,” he chuckled.

“I’m a girl who likes her privacy, and I *mean* it,” she said bluntly. “The drop ship I’m bringing has some anti-surveillance gear, and it’s going to be running when I come down.”

“Ok, how about right here?” he asked, touching the screen over an old national park called Beech Fork Lake. It was only about ten miles from where he was, but it was an open area with access for a dropship as well as immediate access to the cover of the forest. “It’s an open area by a lake, you should be able to land there.”

“Can you get there in time?”

“Yeah, I can get there. I’ll wait in the forest until after sundown, then come out to meet you.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll park an airbike in the clearing to tell you where I am.”

“No, just wait. My dropship has sensors, once we’re close they’ll lock onto you. We’ll land in the nearest clearing.”

“I understand,” he assured her.

“Okay, so, be there at sunset tomorrow *your time*,” she ordered. “I’ve added a bike carrier so you can carry this stuff off, so don’t make any other plans for that.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s an anti-grav attachment for an airbike, for hauling shit.”

“A bike trailer,” he mused.

“An archaic word, but yeah. Military airbikes are all capable of pulling a carrier. Just one should do it, there won’t be *that* much. Just don’t pull it all the time, the *carrier* won’t have a signature masker.”

“Alright.”

“I gotta go. Tomorrow, sunset, here,” she said, causing the light to illuminate Beech Fork Lake.

“I’ll be there.”

“You better, I’ve got all your money,” she said with a wolfish grin.

“By the way, you’re dead sexy in that,” he teased, returning her compliment from the day before.

“Well thanks, babe,” she said with a demure smile. “Don’t be late.”

And he wasn’t. He arrived at Beech Fork Lake very early, at four o’clock, but it had been slow going. He’d wanted to get there *much* earlier, to give himself time to check over the area, but an unpredicted glitch had slowed him down. Temika hadn’t come back yet, so he was forced to tow the second airbike by starting it up and putting it in “neutral,” which was just making it float, then dragging it with a rope using the other airbike. The riderless airbike’s computer didn’t want to move, trying to retain a static position, so it was like pulling an anchor sometimes, especially when he went downhill. He ended up going at a virtual crawl almost all the way, because the faster the towed airbike was pulled, the stronger the engines tried to retain its position. There was nothing he could do about it; it was either tow the airbike like that, or turn it off and drag it on the ground, and that wasn’t really an option. He ended up moving at a speed that was just a bit faster than a walk all the way down the pothole-infested Route 152 that linked Huntington to the road leading to Beech Fork Lake.

It had been a nervous ride. He’d seen movement up in the hills several times on the way, but he wasn’t sure if it had been wildlife or people. Three times he nearly cut the rope with a knife and bolted, but there had been no attacks or anything like that.

He arrived at what used to be a narrow parking lot in front of a strip of waist-high grass that covered the ground between the forest and the lake’s edge. This was some kind of a spur off the main lake, for the lake looked more like a narrow estuary; it was only about a hundred feet to the steep opposite bank, which rose up directly into forest. There was the rotted remains of a rope in the water, and the faded signs told him that this had been the swimming area. Well, the partially overgrown parking lot was perfect, for there was enough open space that wasn’t overgrown with high grass for Kumi to land her dropship, and he was only fifty feet from the treeline.

With his railgun in his hands, he carefully patrolled the woods around his chosen site, and found them to be empty of any human life. That took him about two hours. So, confident he was alone, he rode each airbike up into the treeline one by one, then sat down on a log and played a game of chess against the computer using his panel to pass the time and wait for sunset.

About a half hour before sunset, he heard the high-pitched whine of the dropship’s engines. He suspended the game and put his panel away in the backpack he was wearing, then set it down by the airbikes and moved up to the treeline to look. Kumi’s dropship was *huge*, painted bright red, and emblazoned with the crest of Trillane on both sides and on the undersides of each large wing. It was a whale-looking vehicle, with a wide beam and a shallowness that made it look like it wallowed through the air, but the pilot maneuvered it with surprising agility as he lined up in the old parking lot and the landing skids extended. He set her down as gentle as a feather, and the back doors opened as the back ramp extended, even as the pilot was shutting down the engines. There were two people in that doorway, two women wearing bright red combat armor but not helmets, carrying MPAC assault rifles

readied in their hands as they walked down the ramp. They were either sisters or twins, because they looked *very* similar, and had the same bluish-white hair cut in a pixie style. A tall, thin Faey male stepped out behind them, and then, to Jason's surprise, he was followed by a three foot tall humanoid-looking creature with bright red skin, short white hair, a pair of red whip-like antennae jutting out of that hair, dead black eyes, and seven fingered hands. Kumi herself appeared a moment later, wearing a black jumpsuit of sorts with the Trillane crest sewn onto the left side of the chest, over her heart. He felt four separate mental sweeps pass over him, but he kept his mind carefully silent, causing them to slide over him without recognizing him. It was an automatic reflex for him to do that, but he wasn't quite ready to give himself away yet.

You think he moved before we landed, my Lady? the Faey on the right asked in an open sending, which Jason could pick up.

No, he's right around here, Kumi's mental voice replied. *I checked him out before we came here Meya, he's supposed to have unusual mental discipline for a human. So much so that he can defend himself against talent.*

I thought humans were defenseless, the one on the left mused.

Not all of them, I guess, Kumi answered. *Cause he's within two hundred shakra of us right now, but I can't find his mind.*

I think there's more to this human than he leads you to believe, my Lady, the male sent with quiet reserve. *Given this kind of remarkable defense the human seems to have, and given the fact that now we do know that at least one human has expressed talent, I think it's safe for us to assume that this human ran because he feared backlash. After all, it is very well known and documented that he has exceptional mental discipline and a strange resistance to our talent. It might entirely be possible that he has talent himself, and if that's the case, you should have nothing to do with him.*

You have the soul of a worrier, Fure, Kumi scoffed mentally. *Even if through some miracle he did have talent, I really could care less. He's paying me very well to help him, and besides, I like him, and he needs me. If he really did run because he's afraid they'll think he has talent, or he really does have talent, then hell, he did the smart thing.*

That's almost a treasonous position, my lady.

If you're so patriotic you're willing to let someone turn you into a walking zombie for the good of the Empress, then why don't you prove it? she challenged with surprising vehemence.

Ah, I'll pass, my Lady.

Then can the hypocrisy, she sent at him shortly. *If you knew the Secret Police were coming for you and you had a place to hide, I'll bet my panties you'd be gone so fast your shadow wouldn't know where you went.*

That caused both the Faey bodyguards to start laughing.

I probably would, my Lady, Fure admitted candidly. *Shall we begin to unload?*

Jason looked back to check on the airbikes, then moved to a different tree for a better view. He had no idea why he was hiding, but he had to admit, he was picking up some good information by doing so. He was easily within their sending range, and he was eavesdropping on it all. So far, he had to admit, what he'd heard endeared him to Kumi more and more. If she didn't care if he had talent or not, maybe that would help her keep silent if it ever became common knowledge that he really *did*. He doubted that would ever happen, but it seemed that Kumi would never rat him out, no matter what she heard about him. That was good, and made him feel better.

A faint sound to his flank caused him to glance that way, then he caught a glimpse of something move. Immediately he raised his railgun and aimed it in that direction, opening himself slightly to listen for any random thoughts that would tell him if it was an animal or a person. He wouldn't actively sweep, because that was *active*, and one of the Faey might notice it when his mind ghosted across theirs. So he was instead using the passive version, listening for thoughts. It wouldn't do much good against a Faey who had her mind closed, but it would tell him if another human had somehow

managed to slip in on them. Jason went hot on his railgun, and the cable capacitors gave off an ascending audible whine as they charged, which only took about half a second.

“Freeze!” a harsh barking command came from behind him, in thickly accented English. He glanced over his shoulder and saw one of Kumi’s bodyguards on the other side of the tree, about ten feet away, with her MPAC aimed at his back.

“Hold on!” Jason called in Faey. “I’m here to meet Kumi!”

“Turn around,” she ordered in Faey, and he saw her partner step out from behind a tree in front of him. She’d made the sound he’d heard, and he was *impressed*. In that brief moment he’d looked away, both of them had slipped off, and the one in front of him had gotten that close to him before making any sound that he could hear, and she did it wearing all that armor. She was *good*.

Jason complied, raising both hands with his railgun held by the barrel. “I’m here to meet Kumi,” he repeated.

Stand down you two, that’s him, Kumi ordered with her mind.

She lowered her weapon and nodded. “What is that thing? Some kind of human weapon?” she asked him curiously.

“Something like that,” Jason answered as he lowered his arms, put his weapon back on safety, then slung it over his shoulder.

“Well, don’t just stand over there,” Kumi called to him as she came down out of the dropship.

Jason met her outside her ship, and she offered her hand to him with an impish smile on her face. He took it, careful to hide his true thoughts from her the way Jyslin taught him, and shook her hand firmly. Jason was very certain to totally lock his mind so he couldn’t hear them send anymore. He didn’t want to give away that he *could*, and since he was almost too comfortable with being able to do it, he might let something slip in conversation that he wouldn’t have heard any other way. He didn’t want to run any risk at all that Kumi would leave here thinking him to be anything other than a normal native. He figured that Fure was already *very* suspicious of him, so he had to be very, very careful. “I’m glad to meet you in person, Kumi. You’re taller than I expected.”

“You never saw me with anyone else,” she grinned. “Ok, I have it all packed onto this carrier here,” she said, pointing up into the dropship at a squarish device that was sitting on the deck. “Everything you asked for is there. Korm,” she prompted, holding out her hand. The little red guy reached by the door’s bulkhead, then brought out a large black case that he had to carry with both hands. He waddled down the ramp and handed it to her, then she gave it to him. “This is your money. There’s about thirty thousand there, more or less. It’s the leftover minus five percent. Here’s a list of it all, and how much it cost, so you can doublecheck the figures.” She handed him a small panel display, which was really nothing more than a display for showing very small embedded files. A Faey’s version of a spiral notebook.

“I trust you, Kumi. Even if that is a bad thing,” he added with a smile, pushing it back at her.

She laughed, pushing it back. “Keep that,” she told him. “I put a few things in there I thought you might need, that you didn’t ask for. But I didn’t get exotic or expensive,” she assured him. “Oh, yeah, give me your panel.”

“Why?”

She took the case from him, then knelt down and put it on the ground. She opened it, then took a sleek black panel off the top of a series of neatly stacked credit notes. “Because of this,” she told him. “Just dump your panel on a stick and trade me. You want this one.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s got a hardwired tightbeam link to an orbiting transceiver, about this big,” she explained, showing him her clenched fist. “And that one’s set to tightbeam directly to a Civnet satellite. It’ll redirect your panel’s Civnet signal so they’ll think it’s bouncing directly off a satellite, and they can’t track that unless the sensor array literally gets directly into the path of the tightbeam signal. That way you can use Civnet anywhere in the nature preserve, and they won’t see it.”

“Wow, that’s—*thanks* Kumi. This is *nice*,” he said sincerely, taking his backpack off his back. He set down his railgun and started working his panel out, then he reached into his pack for a memory stick and inserted it in the stickjack. He brought up the panel and had it dump to the stick, wiping out the panel’s onboard memory in the process. It only took it about five seconds. Then he removed it and offered the panel to Kumi. She took it with a nod, but her eyes flashed as Jason noticed motion to his side. He looked that way, and saw that one of Kumi’s bodyguards had picked up Jason’s railgun.

“Myra!” Kumi snapped authoritatively.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before,” she told them all professionally. “It’s *custom*. Did you build this, human?” she asked him curiously.

“I’m not going to answer you,” he told her flatly. “And I’d appreciate it if you gave it back.”

She just smiled at him, then to his surprise, she disengaged the safety. She must have seen him do it. The indicator light went green as the backglass panel turned red, indicating the weapon was hot and ready to fire, and she quickly turned and brought the railgun up to her shoulder. Jason jumped up, having to crush the urge to actually try to attack her with telepathy—a suicidal stunt given his current company!—but he was too late to prevent her from aiming the weapon safely at the opposite bank of the lake, then pulling the trigger.

There was that familiar *BEE-yah!* sound followed up by the sharp *crack* like a whip, and the instant corkscrew smoketrail that linked the muzzle of the weapon to the sudden explosion of mud, dirt, and buried root on the steep hill of the opposite bank, as the slug impacted the embankment and was stopped, which caused the backblow effect that made the weapon’s round blow huge holes in things it couldn’t go through. Bits of dirt and wood arced high into the air, dropping into the lake like rain, and one particularly large piece of root landed not five feet from Myra’s foot.

“Trelle’s garland!” the bodyguard gasped.

“Demir’s sword!” the other bodyguard exclaimed.

“Holy *shit!*” Kumi said, somewhat less diplomatically, but just as emotionally, as her bodyguards.

“And *that* is why I’m here,” Jason snapped angrily, ripping the weapon out of Myra’s hands. Now it was time to talk fast, and he clamped down tightly on his own thoughts, projecting only the thoughts that would back up what he was saying, so it would seem to them that his thoughts reinforced his words. They would see his thoughts suddenly become audible to them for a moment, as if he’d lost his control of his mind in a moment of anger, and what they saw there would back up his statements. “I will *not* give this to the Faey. I will *not* give them weapons to use to oppress my people, or any other people.”

“What is this thing?” Myra asked, pointing at it. “Some kind of mass driver? It fired a solid mass, didn’t it? How did you propel it? Is it explosive? Have you tried it against armor?”

“Myra!” Kumi shouted at her. “Get back on the dropship, *now*,” she ordered hotly, pointing at the red craft. “That—I’m sorry. I did *not* give her permission to do that. I swear to you, Jason.”

“I believe you, Kumi,” he said shortly, glaring at the Faey bodyguard openly.

“But I have to say, I’m *impressed*,” she said appreciatively, looking at the gun. “I’m surprised a student could build something as complicated as a weapon, and make it actually *good*.”

“Thanks. I think,” he added uncertainly.

“You weren’t planning on taking over the Imperium, were you?” she asked with a wink.

Jason laughed ruefully. “Actually, it was just an experiment,” he answered honestly. “It worked, but a little bit too well. When I ran, I brought it with me, and it’s the best weapon I have right now.”

“I thought you said you had good guns. I’ll give you a couple of MPACs, Jason.”

“I have a couple,” he told her. “But this is lighter, and easier to carry.”

“That it is,” Myra agreed before she started walking away.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure, thanks for offering, though.”

“Okay,” she said with a nod, as Fure backed the first airbike down out of the dropship, the one with

the carrier. The carrier looked like a big black box, complete with a lid. “There’s just you, so you’re going to have to tow the second airbike. I have a tow cable for you, we’ll just hook up the airbike with the carrier to the other one, and you can tow both the bike and the carrier.”

“I had to tow the others here, and it took *forever*,” he growled. “The bike didn’t want to move.”

“These are a bit different,” she chuckled. “When you hook up the tow cable, the bike will go into *tow* mode, and it’ll follow the towing bike.”

“Thank God,” Jason said fervently. “I wasn’t looking forward to creeping along all night to get back home.”

After Fure backed the other airbike down, Jason got a good look at them. They were bigger than his other airbikes, though they were built on the same basic design concept. Both were painted black, and they had the familiar extending windscreen and backglass display in the dash, but these also had a heads-up display that appeared on the windscreen, and a few more controls on the panel below. “These ride just like regular airbikes, but they go faster,” she told him. “I have the manuals for them on a stick in a box in the carrier, so you can read up on the extra controls they have. These are *military*, babe, remember that. They’re *armed*. I didn’t take the weapons off. The only things I took off them were their locator beacons. So don’t just go and randomly press buttons, babe, you might be in for a nasty shock.”

“I’ll be careful,” he nodded.

“Ok, here’s the tow cable port, and here’s the hook for the hard connection,” she said as she pointed, then Fure handed her one end of the tow cable. It had a looped eye and a plug, with a data cord wrapped around a reinforced metal cable. She deftly plugged in the data cord, then hooked the towing cable into the receiver. She unlooped it as she walked to the back of the other bike, then pointed out the reciprocal parts on the other airbike before hooking them in. “There, now the towed bike will follow the one you ride,” she told him, going back to the first one and pointing at the display panel. It had [TOW MODE: SLAVE] blinking across the top border. “When you take them, just inch out til you pull the cable taut, then wait a few seconds for the towed bike to calibrate. After that, just go. The towed bike will mirror every move the bike you’re riding makes.”

“Okay, I can handle that.”

“Good. Now, come up into the dropship so we can do one more thing.”

“What is that?” he asked as she started up the ramp. He followed out of curiosity, up into the dropship. He saw that only about half of it was the cargo compartment, and there was a door at the far end for the cabin. They went past Myra, who gave his railgun a long, speculative look, and he followed her into the crew cabin. The short red-skinned servant scurried out quickly as he moved into a cool cabin with rows of deeply cushioned chairs covered in what looked like beige leather or some kind of synthetic material, like vinyl or something.

She turned around, and to his surprise, she was unzipping the front of her jumpsuit. “Strip, babe,” she ordered.

“What?” he asked in confusion.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to rape you,” she said with a naked leer. “You can’t wear *this* with clothes on.” She turned a chair around, and pointed to an open-topped box with black armor in it. “Remember when I had you strip down to your undies?” she asked with a wink. “Well, I got a good enough vid of it to get your proper measurements for heavy armor. So I had it made. I’m going to teach you how to put it on, using this,” she said, turning the chair on the other side, which had a box of armor as well. “I do it, then you do it, because I want to make sure it fits properly before you leave. Oh, and I get a picture.”

“Of what?”

“Of you naked. It’s for my collection,” she winked. “I collect naked pictures of handsome guys. Nothing sexual or anything, just a naked picture of you. Call me a soft porn collector,” she said with an outrageous grin. “Now, if we had more time, I’d be jumping all over your bones in a heartbeat,

babe. You're drop dead sexy. But my mom will start looking for me if I stay here too long, and I don't think either of us want to see a squad of fighters drop in on us. Especially if I'm banging an outlaw native in my dropship at the time," she grinned.

"No, that would be a bit embarrassing," he said mildly.

"Embarrassing my ass, I'd just have trouble explaining all the equipment sitting outside the dropship," she snorted, pulling her jumpsuit down off her shoulders, exposing a pair of firm, smallish breasts. The breasts of a teenage girl, and that reminded him that that was exactly what she *was*. It was easy to forget that, since she seemed so mature. "Mother doesn't care who I'm fucking, babe, as long as I don't make it common knowledge if I'm banging commoners. She says it'll tarnish my reputation. She's such a hypocrit," she growled, shimmying her jumpsuit down over her hips. "I think she's had every servant in our house between her legs, and they're all commoners." She pushed her jumpsuit down, then bent over and pulled off her boots before stepping out of it. She had no panties on, showing off a very tone, very tight little body, complete with her pubic hair shaved down a single narrow strip. "You can stare to your heart's content after we get this done," she told him.

"Sorry," he said calmly. "Just had to take a moment to appreciate you."

"Why thank you babe," she said with a demure smile, turning around for his benefit, tilting her hips, putting her hands on her hips, and looking over her shoulder at him before turning back around. He understood Faey mentality enough to know that she would not be offended by that kind of remark. In fact, she'd take it as very high praise. "I work out enough. I'm proud of this body."

"You do a good job," he complimented sincerely.

"You're so sweet," she gushed as he started undressing.

He felt a tad awkward as he stood there naked, but she didn't seem to notice. The first thing she did was pick up a small camera. "Okay, I get my picture first. Just stand there, babe, you don't have to pose or grab yourself or any shit like that. Like I said, I just want a picture of you," she told him as she backed up a few steps and brought the camera to her eye. He felt *very* uncomfortable at the idea of that, but she'd done so much to help him, he couldn't really refuse her. Not over something that was just mildly embarrassing. She seemed to take several, then put the camera back on the seat from which she'd taken it and grinned at him. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, I guess," he said uncertainly.

"Don't worry babe, I won't do anything with it. I just like to collect them. I don't even jerk off to them."

"I did not need to know that," he said ruefully.

She laughed and picked up the codpiece of her armor. "Okay babe, this is what you start with. It all anchors to this, so we put this on first."

Seeing Jyslin put on her armor was not the same as doing it himself. He watched Kumi and tried to mimic her, but he didn't do it very well. She had to help him with each piece, showing him how they locked together. At first he was afraid that those joints would pinch him, but after he got some of it on, he realized that the interior of the armor blended together, the padded lining actually seemed to anneal with itself to form a continuous surface. He brought that up to Kumi, who just nodded. "It's a kind of gelatinous material that merges with itself when it's touching," she told him. "Before they discovered it, they wore a skin-tight body suit under the armor. Now the inner lining does that, so it's one less thing we have to put on."

"That makes sense," he said, picking up the front of the breastplate. It had a *gorgeous* etched relief of some kind of large, majestic looking bird, its wings spread to cover the upper chest and its head just under the upper edge of the breastplate. Very detailed, very life-like and just damn *beautiful*. He also noticed after looking more closely at its edges that it had dataline fibers embedded in the edge. "This is *powered*?" he asked in surprise. There was no other reason there would be dataline fibers in the armor.

"You think I'd have them make you those outdated pieces of *shit* they make our soldiers wear here?" she challenged. "I wouldn't put my *vulpar* in that junk! This is *mainstream* armor, babe, not

hundred year old surplus shitty-ass junk. Crystalized neutronium carapace, laminated neutronium interior carapace, environmentally sealed, climate control, on-board computer, anti-grav system, on-visor display with multiple vision modes, comm and ECM integrated into the helmet, nested MPAC autocannon pods in the forearms, smartgun links for rifles and weapon systems, bio-reactive servo strength augmentation, what you'd find in a suit of *real* fuckin' armor."

"I've never seen this before, and I've never heard of some of that. I have no idea how it works."

"I've got manuals and tech specs for it," she assured him. "You'll be able to figure it out. Oh, you like the bird?"

"I *love* it!" he said immediately. "What is it?"

"A picture I found in your human literature. It's called a, er, *fee-neex*," she said in uncertain English.

"*Phoenix*," he corrected absently, looking at it. It did kind of look like a picture of a Phoenix. Very majestic. "That explains the flame relief on the greaves."

She nodded as she locked her breastplate to her stomach. "I've always been one for fashion, even in armor," she grinned, holding out her own. It had the profile relief of a Vulpar on it, the ring pattern on the tip of its two tails marking it as a female. "Just like my name," she winked, then reached down for the back of the breastplate.

She walked him through getting the armor on, then once it was done, he let her inspect him. "Good, it fits perfectly," she nodded. "Is it pinching anywhere? Does the weight feel distributed equally? Feel any gaps? You should feel the lining against every square *kidin* of your skin. There shouldn't be any gaps, except maybe in the cup," she said with a teasing wink. "I had to kind of guess there, since I didn't get to see."

"No, it's very comfortable," he told her, rotating his shoulders and swinging his arms back and forth. The armor was thin, it was light, and it did not hinder his motion in any way. He felt curiously naked with it on, because it didn't feel like clothing. The only thing that told him it was there was the weight on his back, for the back of the armor was built out a little and probably enclosed the armor's power generation system, and maybe a few other systems, like climate control and life support. It felt like he was wearing a light backpack, actually. He put on the helmet and felt it lock to the neck collar, and he found himself looking through tinted glass. It suddenly became alive, Faey text scrolling across the edges of his vision, which he didn't both to read. He looked at her, and a little yellow circle appeared around her chest, with a little line pointing at Faey text [Faey—COM] it read. The air he was breathing in the helmet was fresh and cool. He went to take the helmet off, but found it locked. She showed him where the release locks were, buttons he had to press down on both sides of the helmet to make it come off. He did so, shaking his head back and forth. "I'll need a bandana or something for my hair," he noted to himself.

Satisfied, she showed him how to take it off. Once they had all of it off, again standing there facing one another naked, she sat down on the chair behind her and looked up at him. "Alright babe, put it back on, I won't do anything but explain if you get stuck this time."

He did his best, but he got stuck once or twice and she had to explain what he was doing wrong. He got all of it on, then took it all off, then she had him put it on by himself one more time. That time he managed to get it all on without any guidance, then remove it. "I think that's enough," he said.

"Yeah, that's good," she agreed as he bent down to grab his pants and underwear. He looked down at her, and she had an odd expression on her face. "What?"

"I'm wondering if we have enough time," she said, looking him up and down boldly, then she sighed. "Probably not though. A pity. If I had you home, you wouldn't get out of my room for three days. Your body just screams *all night long*, not a quickie in the seat of dropship. Not that that wouldn't be fun, though," she added with a giggle.

"Well, I'll take that as a compliment," he said evenly, stepping into his underwear.

"I'm pretty sure I'll get a chance at you," she winked. "I'll have to invite you up to *my* home

sometime for a weekend holiday. And if it ever gets too hot for you here, you can always come hide out with me. You can be one of my *personal* servants,” she said with a sultry smile.

“Jyslin would kill you.”

“Jyslin’s not around,” she said with a little sigh when his briefs covered up the object of her attention. “Besides, she wouldn’t really care all that much. I don’t like *love* you or anything. Besides, all that time out there by yourself? Men aren’t suited for it, they need sex every few days or they get bitchy. If you get desperate, just call me. I’ll sneak over here and relieve your frustration. Trust me, I’d love to do it,” she said, leering at him again.

Given his exposure to Jyslin and Symone, he knew that she was quite serious, but also that she meant it as a compliment. It was one way she was trying to exhibit her willingness to be friends with him. After all, in Faey society, casual friends often engaged in sexual relationships, because Faey didn’t equate sex with love or monogamy. He remembered when Symone made him a similar proposition, so at least this wasn’t too much of a shock. It was only shocking in that Kumi was offering friendship, and maybe a bit surprising that she was taking that step so quickly. Unless, of course, her *only* motivation was sex. She was a noble, maybe nobles had different ways of doing things than commoners.

“Well, thanks,” he said sincerely. “I appreciate the offer.”

“If I find I have some free time before we go back home, it’ll be a solid offer,” she warned. “After I did all this for you, I fully expect a little action from you if I can find the time. Business is business, but part of this was a *favor*, and I expect a little favor in return.”

He gave her a look, and saw she was serious. “Well, I guess it would be extremely rude of me to decline,” he said honestly. “And I do think I’d enjoy it,” he said, looking her up and down boldly, just as she had done to him.

“You understand Faey better than I thought,” she said with a sly smile.

“I lived around Jyslin too long not to,” he told her as he pulled his shirt back on. He reached down and picked up her jumpsuit, then handed it to her. She grinned as she took it, then stood up and started putting it on. He put the armor back in the box, pausing to admire the Phoenix etched into the breastplate, then he picked it up and carried it out to the airbikes along with the case of money. He put them in the carrier, glanced at all the other stuff in there—it was almost completely full—then closed the carrier’s lid.

Kumi came down the ramp, hopping a bit to get her boot back on, then boldly slapped him on the butt. “Was it good for you, baby?” she asked outrageously.

Jason laughed. “Thanks for the armor, Kumi. I hope I *never* have to use it.”

“Amen,” the other bodyguard, Meya, said with an agreeing nod.

“I need to get back in the air, no doubt my mom thinks I’m up to no good out here,” she grunted. “Remember, you can use that panel anywhere, anytime, and they can’t track you. So never be afraid to call me up if you need anything, or if you just want to talk or something. I’m sure it’s gonna be lonely out here,” she told him.

“I’ve met a couple of squatters that are pretty friendly, so it’s not like I’m completely alone out here. If I were, I wouldn’t need the armor,” he frowned.

“Well, the clothing and that suit will stop just about *any* kind of weapon the humans have out here,” she told him. “So rest easy, babe. You’re much safer now.”

“That I am, and it’s thanks to you,” he told her with a nod.

“Any time, babe. As long as you can pay for it, of course,” she grinned.

“You’re a pirate, Kumi,” he chuckled lightly as he mounted the airbike that would tow the other.

“At least I’m a *friendly* pirate,” she winked. “If you need anything else—”

“I’ll keep it in mind, but I think we need to make this our first and last business meeting,” he told her. “In a little while, it’s going to be very dangerous to know me. Right now, they know I’m officially missing, because I missed my semi-annual physical. They’ll realize I’m gone by tomorrow,

when they look back through the records and see that I went out in my skimmer and never came back. I figure they'll have search parties out along my flight path by Sunday."

"Seems quite a fuss over a single student," the male, Fure, said.

"A student who's a candidate for research," Jason told him evenly.

"Ah. Yes, they *would* look for you," he agreed.

"Well, I'd say you could certainly pull your weight in research," Meya told him, looking at the railgun slung over his shoulder. "I'd love to borrow that for a while."

"Meya and Myra have an obsession with guns," Kumi told him with a chuckle. "They're twins, sometimes I think they share the same brain. They have a collection of guns from all over the galaxy. I think they even have a couple of those ballistic guns from Terra."

Meya nodded. "We have a hunting rifle and a pistol," she told them.

Jason got the airbike ready to move. "I'll be on my way, Kumi," he told her. "Thanks again for all your help."

"Hey, no sweat, babe," she told him. She stepped over, then leaned up and kissed him. It was *not* a chaste kiss. "Remember, if you need anything, call me. You've got plenty of money to pay me," she winked.

"You are a pirate," he chuckled.

"I've done the looting and pillaging," she whispered in his ear. "I'm looking forward to the raping part."

"You're an evil girl, Kumi," he accused lightly as he engaged the airbike's engines, being very careful not to hit any of the extra controls.

"I'm not evil, I'm a noble," she replied with a wicked smirk. She then stepped back while he pulled the airbike slowly forward, until the cable became taut. When it did, the towed airbike lifted up a bit more off the ground, as did the carrier, and a message [TOW READY] flashed on the display panel of the airbike he was riding. He waved to her, then pulled forward carefully. The bike and carrier behind him followed along easily, and he immediately got comfortable with the idea. He drove them out of sight of the dropship, along the road that would take him home. He wasn't going to go there until well after he was sure Kumi's dropship was out of sight of this area, though. Not because of Kumi, but because it was only smart, just in case. So, when he reached the junction of 152 and 75, he turned left instead of going straight, starting towards Kenova. He'd go that way for a while, then double back and get home a little later.

One thing was for sure, though. Kumi was a lifesaver.

The clothes she'd picked out for him were not bad at all.

He'd gone through them already. She'd obviously done her homework, for everything in that box of neatly folded clothing was Terran style, in Terran-looking fabrics. She'd sent him several pairs of jeans, some slacks, tee shirts, button-down shirts, even three denim overshirts which he was so fond of wearing. There was a baseball cap, a billed hat with a cloth drape that fell down over the neck, even a pair of soft fabric slippers. On further inspection, he found that the fabric wasn't really cotton or denim or whatever, but an ultra-thin fabric that just *looked* like it. There were two layers of it with the armored cloth in the middle. He put on the jeans, and found them to be light, comfortable, and surprisingly soft. They also fit perfectly. He reached into the second box and found a full-length black duster-style coat, nice and baggy. It had an internal holster built right into the coat for a plasma pistol, one on each side, as well as quite a few pockets on the inside and outside of the coat. The coat was surprisingly cool, probably made of some kind of material that breathes or something, even when he took it out in the warm, muggy night and saw how hot it was out of air conditioning. There even socks and some underwear in that box.

Armored underwear. Kumi certainly had a sense of humor.

He went through the rest of it, and found everything he asked for in the carrier, which he had

parked outside the house while he unloaded it. The equipment he wanted was there, a good supply of generic parts, and at the bottom were a bunch of small tiles of carbidium. He picked one up, and was a bit startled. That small tile, only about a square foot and one inch thick, weighed almost a hundred pounds. There were twenty of them in there, which was about a ton of carbidium he could use to build shields for the PPGs he had powering stuff. Kumi was very thorough in picking all kinds of different kinds of components and equipment for him, and she even included some bench tools for fabricating things. That was when he realized that she didn't really know what to buy, she simply bought a package for a workshop. Tools, materials, all of it bundled together for an engineer looking to set up a new workshop. He remembered seeing something like that on Civnet.

He set up some of the tools in the room in the basement that held the water heater, then put away the clothing and stored the bolt of armor cloth that Kumi had included, in case he wanted to make armored clothing of his own. He took the carrier and the airbikes down to the skimmer, then had to fuss with them a bit to get all of them into it. They filled up his entire cargo hold. He had to unhook the carrier from the second airbike, which took him a little bit to figure it out, then store the carrier in the back and the airbikes in the front. They were wider than his recreational airbikes, and just *barely* managed to get in there side by side with one facing the front and one facing the back. He locked the skimmer back up and walked towards his house, when Temika's Harley started tickling his ears. It was about time, she was only a few hours late.

She'd gotten to his house before he did, and he didn't like what he saw. She was slumped over the handle bars of her bike. He moved towards her and saw her trying to get her leg up and over the saddle, and that was when he saw the blood. Her shirt was soaked in blood on the upper right side, and her jeans had blood soaking her right outside thigh and trailing down, leading from a rip in them that exposed a deep laceration.

Jason ran up to her and grabbed hold of her, then pulled her off the bike. "Temika!" he said quickly. "What happened?"

"Ah wasn't payin' as much attention as Ah should have," she said ruefully through a wince of pain. "Mind the shouldah, sugah. Ah got clipped."

"How bad is it?" he asked as he pulled her arm over his shoulder, looped a hand around her waist, and started helping her to his house.

"Not as bad as it coulda been, that's fo' sure," she answered through gritted teeth. "The bullet went all the way through."

He got her inside and into a bed in an upstairs bedroom. She didn't object when he cut her vest and shirt away with a pair of scissors, removed her shoulder holster and set it aside without having to damage it, then pulled her bra strap down to get a look. The bullet had hit her in the right shoulder, just under her collarbone, and did indeed pass all the way through. There was an exit wound high on the back of her shoulder, above her shoulder blade. From the angle of the bullet, whoever fired it had to be below her when he did so for it to travel like that. The wound wasn't life-threatening, more than a graze but less than a hard hit from the bullet, but he'd bet that it hurt like hell. He was tremendously relieved when he saw that. The only issue that might cause problems was how much blood she'd lost. "Let me go get my first aid kit," he told her.

She nodded. "Ah ain't movin', that's fo' sure, sugah."

He fetched the kit, full of what a Faey considered emergency first aid supplies, half of which he wasn't entirely sure of what they did. He did recognize the liquid bandage, a material he could apply to a cleaned wound and cause it to seal over and stop bleeding. It was as good as stitches. The liquid had a compound in it that urged rapid healing in the damaged tissue, he remembered. "I'm going to have to clean you up some, Temika," he warned. "That means you're going to have to—"

"Ah ain't gonna fuss about modesty with mah doctah, sugah," she told him with a weary smile, reaching up with her left hand and unhooking the two cups of her bra, where they joined.

"Okay, just so you understand," he said. "I think I'll have to cut the straps. I don't want you

moving that shoulder.”

“Go ahead. Ah’ve written all these clothes off anyway.”

With his scissors, he cut away the straps of her bra, then removed it. He did have to take a brief look of appreciation at the generous curves of her breasts. Temika was *built*. He then cut down the sides of her jeans and removed them, exposing her legs and the nasty gash in the side, that continued to stain the sheets with blood. “Okay, try to roll up on your side, so I can get at both sides of the gunshot wound,” he instructed.

She did so, and laid very still as he washed the blood off her, then cleaned the wound with antibiotic wash and applied the liquid bandage. Luckily the gash in her leg was on the same side, so she remained in that position as he cleaned that wound as well, then applied the liquid bandage. It certainly wasn’t that good of a job, but he figured it was good enough. “There, you’re done,” he said, looking at her back. He saw several scars on her back, old injuries that marked the battered life of a woman who lived in a society of anarchy. “I’m going to have to move you to another bed, this one needs changing,” he told her. “What happened?”

“Ah got ambushed by some people Ah ain’t nevah seen before, just south of Ironton,” she answered. “There was four of ‘em. Ah managed to get past ‘em, but one shot me with a little holdout pistol as Ah was ridin’ ‘em down. They just two of ‘em now,” she said grimly. “When Ah shoot someone with Ol’ Betsy, they ain’t gettin’ up.”

“What about this?” he asked, touching her leg above the gash.

“After Ah got hit, Ah almost lost control of mah bike,” she said. “Ah caught the tip of a tree limb of a tree that was fallen across the road.”

“Ouch,” he winced.

“Yeah, ouch,” she mirrored. “Give me a hand and help me where we’re goin’.”

He didn’t help her to another bedroom, he carried her. He set her down in the bed in the master bedroom, which he’d cleaned up for his own use before he started sleeping in the basement. He checked to make sure that the liquid bandage had held, then pulled the blanket up. “I’m not much of a doctor, but I think you lost a lot of blood, so you need to drink some juice or something,” he said uncertainly.

“Ah’ve lost more blood than this,” she told him. “Yo’ right, sugah. I need tah eat and drink, and stay warm.”

“Let me go get you some, and try to find you a shirt.”

“Forget that, sugah,” she chuckled. “You done already saw ‘em, ain’t no reason hidin’ ‘em now. Besides, it’d hurt too much right now tah try tah get my arm through the sleeve. Ah would ask if you could find some panties, though. Ah don’t think I want to wear this pair for the next week or so. Ah don’t have any spare clothes in my saddlepacks right now. Ah had to take ‘em out and stash ‘em in one of mah hidin’ places to make room for some stuff Ah was deliverin’.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

After feeding her and making sure she drank lots of water, he ranged out in the darkness and tried to scavenge some clothes for her. It wasn’t easy. Clothes were a desired item, so there was very little out there to be found. He returned empty-handed, and told her as much when he went to check on her.

“Well, shit,” she sighed. “Alright then, plan B, Ah guess. Whatevah you have layin’ around that you think might fit me.”

“I should have better luck tomorrow,” he told her easily. “If worse comes to worst, you can just send me to one of your hiding places for them.”

“Ah think you’d have too much trouble findin’ them. We’re bettah off jus’ goin’ with what you have that might fit me.”

He nodded in understanding. “There’s a bathroom right through that door,” he told her, pointing. “I’ll find a crutch or cane or something to help you walk.”

“Mah leg ain’t that bad, sugah. Ah can limp around.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, sugah,” she agreed. “All I really need is a sling for mah arm.”

“I’ll make something up,” he promised.

A sling was easy enough. He had it made for her in a matter of minutes, and found a solution to her clothing problem. He ripped the sleeve out of a button-up shirt that had been in the house, one of the ones he’d washed, then ripped it most of the way down the side. That way she could simply slide her arm through that hole, which was then closed using a couple of safety pins he’d found in the house. He found that a pair of his old shorts fit her well enough, though her hips were wider than his, but they served their purpose. She fell asleep rather quickly after eating and dressing, and he monitored her thoughts as she drifted off to sleep, just to make sure *she* didn’t think the wounds were that bad. And she didn’t. She was more angry with herself for not being more vigilant more than anything else. She considered the wound an annoyance, not a life-threatening ordeal.

He waited until she was asleep, then wandered back downstairs. He had lots to do.

Bajra, 14 Suraa, 4393, Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 29 July 2007, Native Regional Reckoning

Huntington, West Virginia (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

Temika was his houseguest for nearly two weeks, while she recovered from her injuries. Though he did rather enjoy having someone to talk to, he found that Temika could be rather irritating at times, mainly because she hated being injured and hated feeling like she was being a burden to him. Temika was a doer, not a sitter, and having to sit around was driving her nuts.

Despite that, she was nice to have around, if only because she was a *fabulous* cook. She could even make boiled water taste good. She’d grown up in the bayou regions of Alabama, and had learned how to cook from her mother and grandmother, from women who took cooking as seriously as most human beings took breathing. Cooking was about the only activity she could do without earning a dark scowl from him, and only when she wasn’t trying to cook fifty things at once. He had nothing against her moving around or anything like that, but she kept wanting to use her right arm, and every time she did she slowed down the healing process in her shoulder.

Those two weeks were both quiet and tense. Jason was now officially missing, and he knew that they were out looking for him. They’d probably already searched his flight path, but luckily for him, his flight path continued past his current position, and went by some nintety miles east; he’d descended under sensors *north* of where he was, then doubled back. So they wouldn’t start seriously looking for him until after they got past where he’d vanished. When they didn’t find him, then they’d think to start looking in other directions from where he disappeared, because by then they’d know that he didn’t crash, and his skimmer was nowhere to be found. That’s when they’d start suspecting that he didn’t have an accident or fall prey to a squatter, that’s when the suspicion would arise that he vanished on purpose. And that was when they’d get serious about finding him. They might even bring in a space-based sensor array to sweep the area.

That was what he was preparing for. He’s already worked out how to conceal the PPGs he used for power, by using his molecular sprayer to coat prefabricated pieces of sheet metal with carbidium. It didn’t have to be an inch thick to be enough to block sensors from picking up the energy signatures of the PPGs under them. He fashoined little standing boxes of sorts with ventilation grills in all four sides, and just put them over his generators. He had two built within the first three days, one for his electric generator and one for the PPG that powered his hypersonic repeller. He built one more for his water system, then took a day to scavenge the plumbing he’d need for the tank and its connection and to design the tank itself, ensuring to design in the carbidium shell for the PPG that would be on the tank itself.

Once he was done with that, he called Kumi to let him know he was alright, then called Jyslin to do the same, and get an update on Tim. There was no change, just the suspicion that he was going to express. Jason called every day after that, at a time of Jyslin's choosing, so she could keep him updated. During those calls, he also found himself talking to Tim, and to Symone, and also found himself talking to Maya. It was starting to get complicated over there, he was sure. Jyslin knew that Jason had talent, and that Tim might. Symone knew those too, but didn't know Maya knew about Jason. Maya knew Jason did, but didn't know about Tim and Symone. Tim didn't know about Jason, or even about himself. Jyslin probably had to juggle quite a bit over there to keep Symone and Maya from crossing paths.

Jyslin never called him, despite knowing that he had an untracable panel, but Kumi had no such reservations. She called him several times over the two weeks that Temika was recovering, at odd hours of the day and night, and once when she was roaring drunk to wish him a happy new year. She really had nothing important to say, just seeing how he was coming on learning how the armor and bikes worked, then riding him for not working on that first. She'd never lived without running water, even "roughing it" camping in a habitat module, so she had no idea what it was like. She couldn't fathom why getting the water going in his house was his primary objective, even over learning how the military hardware worked, until he told her to go one day without using any running water, for anything. *Then* she understood.

It took him just one day to build the tank out of scavenged sheet metal, using an annealer, a shaping tool that softened molecular bonds to allow a rigid material to be bent, and an old-fashioned gas powered powered circular grinder, for stripping the rust and paint off the metal. The result was a low-built, oblong cylindrical water tank that would hold about 1,000 gallons. He used the sprayer to spray the interior with copper to make it rustproof, then installed the water pump and filter. After that was done, the next day he started the rather grueling task of laying the pipe from the tank down to the river. That took him an entire day, mainly because he absolutely refused to leave it exposed. He dug a long ditch to the edge of his yard, then broke out a concrete sidewalk section and pried it out to run it to a storm drain. Then he ran the pipe into the storm drain and under the street, then realized that the storm drain was big enough for him to crawl through *and* went all the way down to the river in virtually a straight line. He ran the PVC pipe all the way down to the river, which opened about four feet over the surface of the river (though he knew that the water level would rise and fall with the weather), then simply installed a bend and dropped the pipe down into the water. He made sure it went down far enough so low water level wouldn't rob him of water, then sat there with his butt in the trickling water for several moments. He was filthy, he was wet, and he was tired, but he managed to finish that part.

He waited until the next day to finish, because he was just too tired to do it the day before. That only took about five hours, to run the pipe, drill a hole in the wall, then cut the existing pipe and hook it in. When he was done, he went out and started the external pump and let it fill, making sure it was working right. There was a wastewater pipe leading off it that went back to that same storm drain, which was the filtered mud and sediment in the river water, and he saw to his satisfaction that the tank was filling with absolutely clean water. It was utterly pure; the filter would get absolutely everything, down the tiniest virus. It took about three hours to fill the tank, and when it was full and the pump shut off, he went in and turned on the inside pump. Temika, her arm in a sling and wearing the same torn shirt and a pair of sweat pants, looked surprised when he came in and turned on the sink, and a sudden spurt of reddish water spewed out erratically. "Well, hot damn, you got it workin', sugah," she laughed.

"Yeah, we have to bleed the pipes now," he told her. "Get three years of crap out of them."

"Yah know what this means, don't yah? A *hot showah*," she said dreamily.

"After I turn on the hot water heater, yeah, but I want the pipes flushed before I do that, cause we'll have to flush the heater too."

About five hours after he got the water on, he had all the pipes flushed, the heater flushed, and they

had hot and cold running water. Finally, he felt like his house was a *home*. He had comfort, he had security, and he had protection.

He was *home*.

After that was done, it was time to learn, time to do *anything* besides worry about Tim and Temika. He started with the armor. He read everything that Kumi left for him about it, and he practiced using it during the night, when he couldn't be seen. It had a bunch of different systems, and he learned how each of them worked. The armor itself had signature maskers in it, part of its ECM capability, for remaining undetected was *very* important for just about anyone. He wasn't that good at using the anti-grav system, which would allow him to jump extreme distances, even fly for very short distances and rise to an altitude of about fifty feet. It was *short* because space constraints demanded that the two spatial engines that supplied that ability were very, very small, only rated to lift a few hundred pounds *combined*. They were little more the antigrav pods found in many floating platforms. It was very hard to control his flight, because of the limitations of the engines. They would quickly overload if he stayed up too long. But, it was a very useful ability. He got the hang of using the several vision modes of the helmet, as well. It had normal mode, which was unchanged. The visor would darken to deal with bright light, and the helmet could shift into low-light mode or shift into the infrared spectrum to see heat patterns, and could also shift into the ultraviolet spectrum for unparalleled night vision outdoors. The heads-up display on the visor's glass was very useful, highlighting human or humanoid shapes and targets, giving range to target in *shakra*, and it was able to discern an armed target from an unarmed target by item recognition routines in the programming. The armor could identify weapons, and when it did so, it often put up a very brief summary of that weapon's specs and particular dangers on the side of his visor. Testing it on the airbike showed it could also identify other kinds of military hardware, though it did not recognize his airskimmer as a military piece of equipment. It did identify it as a skimmer, but denoted it to be a non-combatant. The helmet had a radio in it as well, capable of all grav-band and short range threaded hyperfrequencies, but he didn't worry about that too much, because he doubted he would use it. It also had directional microphones of a sort, sound-enhancers that let him hear faint sounds coming from a single direction, kind of like a boom microphone, and the helmet's mikes were very sensitive, picking up just about everything, while the speakers just over his ears adjusted volume to ensure that no sound that they broadcast would be so loud that it would hurt him. The result was a setup that let him hear a mouse skittering over a floor in the direction he was looking, The ability to hear most every sound from the flanks and behind him, and an assurance that a nearby explosion wouldn't deafen him. Most of the systems were controlled by a tiny keypad that flipped up on his forearm, just beside the flare where the nested MPAC autocannons were recessed into the armor, and the helmet vision modes were changed using buttons on the side of the helmet, just behind where his ear was.

Those autocannons scared him just a little bit. They were rapid-fire versions of an MPAC pistol, and were not as strong as a rifle. They were considered personal defensive weaponry for a soldier who lost his primary weapon, like an infantryman's sidearm was his backup protection should he lose his rifle. They had no controls on them as to extending them or retracting them, that was a function purely of positioning his wrists and hands in a very specific position, with his thumbs pressed up against the first joint of his middle fingers. He accidentally had them extend on him a few times, and when they did, they were *hot*. They were fired by pressing the thumb in a certain place against the side of the first joint of the forefinger, and *they did not have safeties*. Fortunately, they wouldn't fire if that place were pressed by anything other than the thumb, due to sensors in the thumbpads of the armored gauntlets. He simply had to learn not to put his hands in that bent-down position while touching the tip of his thumb to the first joint of his middle finger, which was what caused the MPACs to extend and go hot. The only kind of safety they had was that they wouldn't fire if they detected that his hands were raised and possibly blocking the line of fire of the weapons.

After that, he worked on the airbikes, and Temika sat in with him as he did so. One of them was

hers—he had already made the deal—so she had to learn how to operate it. These airbikes were *much* more complicated, because of their extra systems. They had MPAC autocannons mounted on them, fearsome armament for their size, as well as a retractable belly-mounted unidirectional MPAC for attacking ground targets without having to strafe. The airbikes had comm systems, had sensor jammers (they were recon-infiltration models), signature maskers, and much to his shock, they were equipped with *shields*. He'd *never* heard of shields being installed on such a small piece of military hardware. They were fairly weak shields, only 18 kilojoules, but they were harmonic resonance shields, which meant that they were about twice as strong as their energy output. The shields were absolutely no defense against MPACs, which were shield-penetrating by their very nature, but they would make him and Temika absolutely invulnerable to any gun in the lawless zone when those shields were up. The only problem with the shields was that they produced an energy signature that the maskers couldn't hide, so they were a defense of last resort. And he was sure to drill that into Temika's head; if she used them, she'd have Faey all over her. *No* human should possess such sophisticated military technology. If they saw it, Jason felt it to be an absolute guarantee that they would investigate.

The liquid bandage certainly seemed to do the trick. After two weeks, he checked her shoulder injury, and saw that the wound had closed. It was still very tender, but at least the risk of infection abated once the skin closed over the injury. She could raise her arm over her head now, meaning that he didn't have to tear up any more shirts for her, and she was starting to go without the sling. The nasty gash in her leg had not healed over yet, though, and she still walked with a noticable limp. But once her shoulder was well enough for her to ride her airbike, they both took them out—slowly and carefully, both to get used to them and because of Temika's shoulder—to one of her hiding places so she could get clothes and some personal effects. That hiding place was an abandoned private mine way down an old logging road in central Wayne County, not far from the town of Wayne. To his surprise, she had another vest something like the original that had been ruined, but not quite the same, in that stash. There were assorted clothes, undergarments, jeans, and even a leather jacket for when it was cooler.

But he, quite simply, was not going to keep her sedate any longer. That ride out to Wayne proved to her that she was capable of riding again. She came down from the bedroom she'd been using wearing the clothes they'd gotten from Wayne, and she had her gun holster back on, checking the drum of the revolver as she came into the kitchen. "You're feeling chipper this morning," he noted as he took a pan of oatmeal off the stove.

"Ah'm getting' back out on the road," she announced. "Mah shouldah can take it, and Ah don't need mah leg on the back of a bike."

"I suppose I can't stop you?" he asked mildly. Personally, he didn't really want to try. She was an adult, and he'd come to learn over those two weeks that she wasn't impulsive or rash. If she believed she was ready, she probably was. Besides, he was going to tear her hair out if she stayed much longer. She got *annoying* when she was bored.

"You can try, sugah. Ah doubt you'll manage it," she winked. "Where's mah Tek-9?"

"In the basement, where you left it," he answered.

"Ah need to go see Clem, buy back some of that nine mil ammo Ah sold him," she mused to herself as she limped towards the basement. He set her a bowl of oatmeal, and she sat down at the table when she came back up. "Ah'm takin' my airbike. Can I park mah Harley here for now?"

He nodded. "You can leave it in the garage."

"Thanks, sugah, yo' a lifesaver," she said with a bright smile. "Ah can't wait to take that airbike out for a long ride," she said with eager anticipation.

"Remember, no shields, no weapons, unless your life depends on it," he warned. "Use either, and the Faey's space-based sensors will have your location pegged to the inch."

"Ah remember."

"You can use the threaded shortband to talk to me," he told her. "It has a range of about fifty miles,

but won't go any further."

"Can the airbike's radio pick up CB?"

Jason blinked. "It's capable of picking up the signal, but it wouldn't know what to do with it," he speculated. "Unless the bike's onboard computer understands what FM is. We can always go see. Let me go get my panel."

"What you need that for?"

"So I can download what it needs to understand FM," he replied. "In case it doesn't."

And it didn't. Jason jacked his panel into the port for the airbike's control computer, then surfed Civnet until he found a nice FM translation module. Faey programs were more or less interchangeable between different pieces of hardware, because most of their computers used the same architecture. He transferred that module into the control computer, which automatically added it to its communications code. Then it was just a matter of defining FM radio frequencies to the computer so it knew when to use the FM module.

"Cool, thanks a million, sugah," she said, plugging a headset into the console of the airbike which let her hear the radio, and also speak. She slid the earpiece into her ear, adjusted the microphone stem, then clipped the cord to the edge of her vest. She took the key that Jason offered to her and started the airbike, creating that now-familiar high-pitched whine that spatial engines gave off. "Wow, mah own airbike," she said dreamily. "Too bad it's two weeks past when Ah wanted tah be ridin' it."

"Better late than dead," he said seriously. "Be careful out there, woman. When they see you on this, they *will* gun for you."

"Sugah, they gunned for me when Ah was on mah Harley," she said seriously. "Besides, now that Ah got this, who needs roads?" she grinned, then punched the airbike into the air. She was a thousand feet up in the span of two seconds, then shot off to the southwest, back over the western side of Huntington.

Crazy woman. But in a way, he was happy for her. At least she'd have fun.

With Temika out of the house, Jason had more time to worry about other things than her wounds. He still worried a little, but he knew that she was going to be alright. That seemed a given to him. He started worrying about Tim more now that Temika was out of the house, and without a new "project" to occupy his time, he really had trouble *not* worrying about Tim. But he'd got his electricity going, his water going, he'd learned how the armor and the airbike worked...there wasn't much for him to do. So, that first day after Temika left, he tore down the railgun and started trying to tweak it to get it closer to that 20,000 miles an hour he thought the rounds should travel. He recalculated that velocity based on his coiling and cascading magnetic catapult design, and discovered several minor mathematical mistakes that showed that it really *should* only go about 15,000 or so miles an hour, if fired in a vacuum. He kicked himself a bit, but even he had to admit that he was only a *student* of Faey calculus. If it had been error free, *then* he would have been surprised.

He *did*, however, somehow eliminate that sonic boom sound from the weapon when he put it back together. Now this one, this one had him just *stumped*. He had *no idea* why it stopped doing that. Hours and hours of rechecking his math and assembling and reassembling the weapon did not divulge the secret of this strange mystery. All he really knew was that the rounds were creating that loud whip-like sound before, and now they weren't.

They *should*. That's what had him so confused. Those rounds were going at a ridiculous speed, like Mach 21, and *anything* that exceeded the speed of sound created a sonic boom. But after that first time he got it reassembled and test fired the weapon into the river, it had stopped making the sonic boom. Now there was just that *BEE-yah* sound, the sound of the flux cabling capacitors discharging and the cabling energizing in its staggered pattern. Nothing else changed at all. The rounds still created that blue-white smoke corkscrew trail, they still went several miles before air resistance shattered the rounds (at least he thought so, he had no way to test that), and they still went somewhere

around 14,000 miles an hour. Nothing changed except now there was no sonic boom from the rounds splitting the air when they fired. It drove him crazy all day, made for a sleepless night, but no amount of investigation produced any result other than *gremlin*. This one he just had to chalk up to one of those weird things that would never really have an answer.

Who knows, maybe he just didn't know enough about the behavior of air molecules in such extreme conditions to figure it out.

Without a new project, Jason was relegated to aimlessly surfing around Civnet, watching television, and keeping a wary ear and eye out for the Faey who were certainly looking for him. But there had been no traffic or transmissions yet that hinted that they were coming, and no skimmers or dropships or fightercraft had appeared in the sky, only the occasional sighting of a freighter taking off from Columbus, heading for the stargate that the Faey had constructed about halfway between Earth and the moon. He did research this "smartgun" technology incorporated into his armor, and discovered that it was a link between weapon and control computer that allowed the armor to put up a sight of where the weapon was pointing, and also displayed certain critical information about the weapon to the control computer when needed. Jason saw the use of it, and started tinkering with the idea of trying to install smartgun technology into his railgun. The only problem with that was that he'd have to totally rewrite the software governing the operation of the weapon to allow it to work with the armor's computer.

He *did*, however, install a smartgun pad into the railgun. He had one already, in the plasma pistol he had, for that was a military-grade MPAC, and it wasn't a loss to the pistol, because the nested MPAC autocannons in his armor meant he'd never *use* the pistol while wearing it. He just had no idea it was there. It was built into the pistol grip, a transceiver pad that operated on a tightbeam threaded hyperfrequency, with a range of only about a foot. There was a receiver pad in each of his armor's gauntlets. All he had to do was take it out, then put it under the grip casing in the railgun and run a dataline up into the chassis. The railgun couldn't use that smartgun link, but at least it was there, because he fully *did* intend to make it work. It gave him a new project to work on, something to occupy his mind.

It required some extensive research of Civnet, that took almost two days. He found examples of TEL code that governed smartgun links, then went through the code of his railgun to see where and how it would need to be changed to allow the railgun's operating system to communicate with the smartgun pad, then send information the control computer in his armor could understand. It wasn't as easy as just downloading a smartgun module for the railgun, because his railgun ran a *unique* operating system. It wasn't module compatible, and it would *never be* module compatible.

The third day, he started coding in those changes into the code he had stored on his panel. He'd decided on going "lean," on only making the smartgun link give the armor command computer access to limited information. The smartgun link would only communicate current aim (through the scope), range, ammo count, and weapon status (safety on, hot, down, emergency shutdown mode), and the error code that caused an emergency shutdown should one occur. That was the easy part. The hard part was teaching his railgun control computer how to "talk" to the smartgun pad, then telling the smartgun pad how to transmit and receive its data in a format that the armor's command computer could understand. That was the *tricky* part, and it gave him a massive headache.

There was a knock at the door, which startled him out of his train of thought, and he wisely picked up his plasma pistol and went to his panel, even as he swept his mind through the area. There were only five people out there, and their thoughts were agitated and very nervous, but not hostile. One of them had thoughts that were chaotic, disjointed, as if they had trouble thinking about anything for very long before some nameless fear disrupted their reasoning. He had his intrusion system deactivated at the moment, mainly because it was two in the afternoon, and he'd been relying more on his power than his system. And he'd had his mind buried in that stupid code...it was just a good thing these people didn't shoot through the door instead of knocking. He'd caught a major break, and it taught him a serious lesson about remaining vigilant. He used his panel to access the button camera sitting on the

porch, and saw that there were four people standing there. Two men, two women, all of them armed with rifles, but those rifles were slung over their shoulders. A very young child appeared at the edge of the porch, and Jason chagned the camera angle to get a better look. It was a little girl of maybe eight or nine, with long red hair done in two braids behind her head, wearing a torn, faded yellow sun dress.

These visitors brought a *child*? Were they crazy?

Jason went to the door and opened it just a crack, looking out at them. They all quickly turned to look at him through the screen door, and they all looked *exhausted*. The camera hadn't quite caught the haggard look of them, for they looked like they'd walked a thousand miles carrying a battleship. Each man was in jeans and tee shirts, the taller man with a Pirates baseball cap who looked to be about forty, while the other man looked to be about thirty. One of the women was middle aged and with graying brown hair, wore jeans and an old Nike shirt, while the other, who looked about thirty, wore a pair of coveralls and a tank top. They looked to be two pairs of married couples, maybe a mother, father, child, and child's spouse, towing along the grandchild.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," the older man said, taking off his ball cap respectfully. "Might you be Jason Fox?"

"I am," he answered carefully. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Well sir, I'm Clem Wilson," he answered.

"Clem? The gunsmith?"

"Yessir, that's me," he answered immediately. "I had Temika drop by a couple of days ago, and we had a long talk about you."

"Temika? What did she say?"

"Well sir, she explained how you'd chased the gangs back across the river, and how you'd made this place more or less safe. She also said you were a wiz at fixin' stuff."

"She did? I think Temika talks too much," Jason grunted darkly.

"She said enough, sir," he said wearily. "A couple of days before she came to visit, my place got attacked by a gang ain't none of us never seen before. They killed six people, and one of them was one of my grandkids," he said in a quavering voice. "A fine family and a six year old boy, dead. Well, sir, we're just sick and tired of it. Mika said that this place is safe enough, from the spanking you put down on Joe Bueller and them being afraid to mess with you anymore. We'd like permission to settle somewhere nearby."

Jason was a bit startled, and it took him a long moment to even consider a reply. Before he did anything, he looked at the man's thoughts, and they proved the utter sincerity of his words. He'd lost his six year old grandson in an attack on his heavily fortified compound by a group of nearly twenty armed men, as well as most of the other family that had grouped together with them for common defense. The middle-aged woman wasn't Clem's wife, she was Ruth Mercer, the *only* survivor from that other family. Only five survived out of a host of eleven, and one of the dead was a six year old boy.

"It don't have to be right here, sir," he said earnestly, his weary eyes pleading. "Just somewhere close enough that the gangs won't bother us. Down near the east end bridge, or maybe up on the west end of Chesapeake. We'll pay you for the privilege. I got lots of guns, and Luke here used to be a mechanic in the Army. If he can't fix it, it's *broke*. We don't expect you to protect us or nothin', all we want is to live near to this place, cause the gangs are afraid to come here. We just want somewhere *safe*."

Jason looked at them. They looked so pitiful, so *tired*, and their thoughts were just as weary, as despairing, as their faces. The little girl, she was still in shock from the attack, she was the one with the chaotic, disjointed mind, caused by the trauma of the assault. They had been through utter hell, and then had packed everything they owned into an old National Guard deuce, a very large truck, and left. That truck was parked up on route 7, out of Jason's sight, and they had made the very dangerous journey here, including running the gauntlet over in Huntington to come through the city and across the

west end bridge. They had left their home in Fort Gay behind, had driven almost 40 miles to get here, and had risked being killed by only God knew how many people on the way...they had done it all just for the *hope* that they could find a place of relative safety. Jason looked at their thoughts, saw that in these people's eyes, he was literally their last hope to reclaim their shattered lives and try to find peace.

He was overwhelmed with emotion, and there was little he could say, little he could do. These people needed the safety of his claimed territory more than any excuse he could ever give to turn them away. He could not look that poor little girl with her trauma-plagued mind in the eyes and deny her the chance to find someplace safe, someplace the bad men could not get her.

He sighed and bowed his head, getting his mind back under control, getting control of his emotions. They couldn't know about his talent, and he was about to give that secret away. He looked Clem in the eyes as he opened the door. "I don't claim to own all of Ohio, Clem," he told him evenly. "If you want to settle in someplace around here, I won't tell you that you can't. Just mind two things, Clem. One, I'm not your guardian angel. Two, the area around this bridge *does* belong to me, and I have some pretty nasty defensive traps set all over this place. If you want to live in Chesapeake, you're more than welcome. Just make sure you find something a few blocks *that way*," he said, pointing west, "at the very closest. And for God's sake, don't come stumbling over in this direction. I don't want someone getting killed by accident. If you want to come see me, come straight up Oak here. That's safe. But once you cross 4th Street coming this way, you're in the danger area. I won't be held responsible if I come out some morning and find what's left of you scattered all over the block. Is that understood?"

"It is, sir. And *thank you*," he said with such profound relief that Jason was surprised he could express it in words.

"You're welcome. And despite the way it sounds, I won't be an invisible neighbor, Clem. I just wanted you to understand the situation."

"I understand, sir. Like I said, I never expected you to protect us. All we want is to live in the shadow you put over this part of Ohio, the one the gangs are afraid to enter."

"It's not much of a shadow," Jason said grimly. "It'll last until the next time one of the gangs thinks I'm not paying attention, and they'll be back. If they see new people over here, they'll come back quicker. It's too bad it has to come to that," he sighed.

None of the others said a word, which Jason thought was odd. But from the looks on their faces, they were too tired, too numb, to much care, even when it was apparent that they were going to be allowed to stay. There was a brief surge of elation, and then nothing but relief from them, though subdued. The younger couple—Mary and Luke—were still deeply grieving for the loss of their son, and the older woman, Ruth, was all but in a depressed funk after losing her entire family in the attack. Clem was the only one that seemed to have the strength to talk.

"Whatever you need, Mr. Jason sir, you just let us know," Clem said sincerely.

"Right now I need you people to find yourself a good defendable house," he answered. "So I know you'll be ready for nightfall. If I recall, there's a nice brick two-story about three blocks that way that has burglar bars on the windows, and a very high fence around the backyard. That might do you."

"We'll go check it out, Mr. Jason sir."

"And don't call me that," he added quickly. "You're older than me, and I'm certainly no gentleman."

Clem actually laughed. "This is your house, it's only proper," he said. "But we'll go look at that house and get out of your hair, sir."

"Be careful."

"We will, sir," he promise with a nod.

Jason left them to their own devices, a bit worried. Having them in the neighborhood was going to make it harder for him to do his own things, but he couldn't look at them and say no. Not after what they'd gone through. If it caused him a little inconvenience, then so be it. He was not going to look

that terrified little girl in the eyes and deny her.

Nobody with an ounce of compassion in his soul could.

Suira, 23 Suraa, 4393, Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 7 August 2007, Native Regional Reckoning

Chesapeake, Ohio (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

Well, Clem had proved that he was anything if not a helpful neighbor.

They'd settled in down in the house Jason had suggested, and had immediately started preparing for the winter. Ruth, who intended to stay with them, usurped every yard in front of every house on both sides of the street, and had them tilled over and fast-growing vegetables planted by sundown the next day. They had a few chickens and some dogs, which they kept down on their side of the neighborhood. Clem and Luke moved their things into the house, and as Mary got things situated inside, they ranged out to scavenge the furniture or other things they wanted to go with the new house. Ruth had the yards plowed by sunset the next day, and though Jason hadn't seen in their house yet, he had the feeling that it was all clean and organized within. Instead of just tossing trash out in the streets, they'd done what Jason had done, piled it all up in an out of the way place and burned what they could, or placed in an abandoned house's back yard, out of sight, what they could not burn.

Despite him saying that he was not their guardian angel, he could not ignore them down there. During the night, he installed the last of the button cameras that Kumi had added into his care package so he could keep an eye on the far side of the neighborhood. There was one camera trained on Clem's house, but at a distance so as to preserve their privacy. The rest kept a watch over the river and the streets beyond Clem's house, and he added them to his proximity warning, which was now residing on his panel. It would alert him if someone crossed the boundary he had defined to now include the blocks around Clem's house, using a combination of motion sensors and face/shape recognition, which the panel used by analyzing the feed off all button and regular cameras. The panel would endlessly keep a watch out for humanoid shapes invading his established territory, but it wouldn't go off if Jason, Temika, or any of Clem's group were picked up by the sensors or cameras. That was easy enough to do, since the watchdog program he was using to was a module he got off Civnet.

They were quiet and inobtrusive, and did not bother him, or even contact him, for four days. Jason used that time to go back to working on his railgun, importing the smartgun pad from the pistol into his railgun. It took him almost thirty hours of continuous work to get the gun to even recognize the smartgun pad, and then another fourteen hours to finally—*finally!*—get the gun to send data over the pad. Once he finally got that ironed out, it was a simple matter of modifying the program code of the processor to send certain data received to the smartgun pad. The microprocessor in the pad would then decide whether or not to transmit that data, depending on if it sensed the presence of a receiving smartgun pad within proximity. It was a one-way datastream, from the gun to the armor, which made it easier to code into the railgun's software.

The only problem was, he had to all but completely armor up in order to test it. The only things he could keep off were the legs and helmet, and he couldn't be wearing anything other than very small underwear, like speedos, under that armor. And he didn't have any speedos. So he stripped down, methodically donned his armor, then tested the smartgun link. And to his aggravation, it didn't work.

After taking the armor off and putting it on several times as he recoded the weapon and tested it, he just gave up and kept it on while he worked on fixing the problem. Besides, it gave him a chance to get a feel for how it would be to wear it for long periods. It wouldn't get dirty, for that gel-like lining would draw sweat away. It was also self cleaning, requiring him only to clean filters in the thighs, biceps, and lower sides of the armor every couple of weeks. But, he discovered that using the bathroom while wearing it was certainly an educational experience, as was sitting at a desk. It wasn't hard for him at all, but it wasn't easy on his bare wood chair. He'd had to get a pillow to keep from

tearing his chair up every time he shifted his weight.

Perhaps it was only perfect timing that someone would decide to knock on his door right about then. He checked his porch camera, and saw that it was Clem and his daughter Mary. They *knew* he was home, it would take too long to take the armor off, and he was afraid that they might come in to see if he was alright if he didn't answer the door. So he went upstairs and up to the front door, then opened it just enough to peek through. "Clem, miss Mary," he said respectfully.

"Evenin', Mister Jason sir," Clem said, taking his hat off. "Ruthie wanted to know if you wanted to come to dinner."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm kinda busy," he answered. "And not really dressed right now to entertain."

"Damn, sorry Mister Jason sir," Clem said apologetically. "Didn't realize you were about to take a bath."

"That's alright. Maybe some other time."

That was when he heard it. That high-pitched whine of a spatial engine. Downstairs, he heard his panel suddenly start sounding a very loud alarm. He looked past Clem, and saw two small dropships moving slowly over southern Ohio, going from west to east. They were too low to have any business being there. Jason threw the door open and grabbed Clem by the arm, then yanked him inside. Mary rushed in behind her as she looked back and saw it. They both gave him a gawking look as he left them at the door, charging down into the basement. He got to the panel and hit the hotkey at the top of his holographic keyboard that automatically shut down every Faey-based system the panel controlled. The water system, the electricity, and the external sensor system all immediately shut down. He took the panel back up with him as he went back to where Clem and Mary was, and saw them looking out the narrow windows to each side of the door, watching the two lazily drifting dropships, short-winged, stubby craft that served as infantry transports.

"What are those, Mister Jason?" Mary asked fearfully.

"Faey dropships, troop transports," he answered darkly, looking out the window over her head.

"They're not just flying over. They have sensor pods on them."

"What are they doing?" she asked.

"Looking for me," he replied with a frown.

"They after that stuff you stole, son?" Clem asked, looking at his black armor.

"No, for who I am," he answered.

"Well, we heard you were a pilot for the Faey, and that you stole a plane," Clem whispered as they watched the two ships slowly move east.

"I didn't steal it, it belongs to me," he answered. "So does this armor, and everything I have. I didn't steal *anything*. They're looking for me because they think I'm smart enough to work for the Imperium in research and development. That's an asset they won't easily give up."

"Ah, you planned ahead," Clem noted.

"Not as well as I thought," he said ruefully. "I brought some stuff, but I didn't come expecting a gang war. I have a friend outside, she bought me this armor and some other things I needed, and brought it to me."

"You think she gave you up?" Mary asked. "I mean, only a *blueskin* could do that, bring stuff here."

"She wouldn't give me up," he whispered confidently. "And yes, she's a blueskin. *Some* of them are alright."

"Look, they're stopping," Mary said fearfully. Jason looked out and saw that they hadn't stopped, they'd changed course. They were now slowly flying right at his house. Their path would take them right over it. He frowned, trying to guess out if they could see the skimmer from that angle. He realized that he'd failed to put up netting on the sides of the bridge to conceal the skimmer...an aggrievous oversight on his part. Then again, he wasn't all that familiar with this military stuff yet. He

could only hope that their angle wouldn't let them see the skimmer.

They were all as quiet as church mice as the two dropships passed directly over Jason's house. He could hear their engines, could almost feel his skin tingling, but it wasn't his skin that had him worried the most. He quickly formed a shield of thought, then pushed it out away from him, one of the advanced techniques that Jyslin had taught him before he left, creating a barrier of talent that would protect him *and* the two people with him. To the Faey, this house was devoid of any sentient being. He felt several light touches on the edge of that shield of thought, press against it lightly, and then move on. They were hunting for minds, and weren't expecting active concealment, so they didn't test his shield in any way. He could only hope that the house's brick was thick enough to conceal some of the *metals* that were in his house from their sensors, metals that wouldn't be found anywhere else, metals that would give away his location. He realized that he had no sensor blocking technology on the *house*, and none on the skimmer, leaving them open and exposed.

That was a *glaring* deficiency. He had to start being more thorough about things like this, before it got him captured. This was *not* a game. Not being familiar with how things were done was absolutely no excuse. He had to completely rethink how he did things, research how it was *supposed* to be done, then for God's sake, *do it*. Before he ended up in a windowless black room on Draconis Prime strapped down to a gurney and a mindbender with her hands on his face.

The three of them crept silently to the back of the house and looked out the kitchen window, towards the river. The two dropships were still moving lazily south, out over the river and to the far side. They watched as they drifted further and further out, then were hidden behind the houses that blocked his house's view of the river.

They had missed them.

He blew out his breath, leaning on his hands, which were planted on the counter. "That was close," Clem said in a hushed voice. "They certainly ain't stoppin'. It's not another sweep. Maybe they really were lookin' just for you, Mister Jason sir."

"I wonder if they saw anyone out on the streets," Jason mused.

"No sir," Clem told him. "That sound makes *everybody* go to ground."

"That's good." He stood back up and put the curtain back down. "Well, you two had better get on to dinner. I'm going to try to get this to work."

"Get what to work, if you don't mind my asking?" Clem asked.

"A little project that helps take up my time," he answered.

"No offense, but you should put some garden out before winter," Clem said. "I've been here four days now, and ain't never seen you hunt or plant. How do you eat?"

"Right now I'm living off the food I brought," he answered. "I've got about a month left of food. I do need to start learning how to hunt, though."

"I can help you there, Mister Jason," Clem said. "Next time me and Luke go up to try our hand, we'll take you along."

"I can help you put in a garden," Mary offered with a shy smile.

"I think that would be a good idea," Jason told her with a nod. "We're not plowing up my yard though. I like my grass, thank you very much."

"We noticed," Clem chuckled. "There's lots of available ground around here, though."

Jason nodded. "We'll just pull up some sidewalks and use the ground across the street," he said. "After I move my traps, though," he added absently. "And I need to do some more work. I realized a few holes in my security when those dropships passed over us. I have to fix that, quickly."

After saying his goodbyes and seeing them out, he got back to work on the railgun. He wanted to get that finished, so he could use the railgun without looking through the scope, and then without using the scope at all when he realized that it was the scope providing most of the data fed to the smartgun pad. It wasn't that hard to install a laser sight or write a rangefinder program, since that was a simple exercise in basic math dealing with the refraction of the laser bouncing off a target, but writing a

targeting program and installing a new sensor by the muzzle to detect the laser sight was a bit tricky.

Seeing those dropships gave him a new urgency, so he worked on it non-stop. For nearly thirty continuous hours he worked on it, using no-doze tablets out of his first aid kit to stay awake, because it was *that* important. But after those thirty hours, after all the coding and recoding and recoding and testing, he came out of his basement with a railgun that could now do anything the attached scope could do, *and* could communicate over the smartgun link. It could find the range to target, it put a crosshair on the heads-up of his visor when he had the railgun in his hands and the weapon was hot, and it supplied certain choice bits of information to the visor's display, mainly ammo count and weapon status, and would flash critical error codes to his visor if they occurred. He then taped clips together in a flip-flop array, letting him reload quickly by yanking the current clip and flipping it over for the fresh one, much like he'd seen them do on military documentaries, and placed the fifth odd clip in case on his belt. The second taped clip went in a compartment on the thigh, because it was too big like that. That allowed him to carry some 250 rounds clipped, and a couple of other belt compartments were filled with loose rounds, which gave him a very good supply. The last chore was installing carrying strap anchors and fashioning a sling strap, and he was done.

The railgun was now completely finished. It worked, it worked well, it worked either with his armor or with the scope (for when he wasn't wearing armor), and he felt there was nothing more to be done with it...though someday he *would* figure out why the rounds stopped creating the sonic boom. But that could wait, because he had too much to do.

After a long, needed sleep, he got up in the middle of the night and got to work. The first order of business was netting. He scoured the city in the dark, wearing full armor because he was in *no* mood to take *anything* off *anyone*, until he found an old military surplus store in Barborsville. After evicting a bear who had taken up residence inside, he raided the place for a goodly supply of netting, which was one of the few things that someone else hadn't taken. He also raided the National Guard detachment, then the Air National Guard detachment up at the old airport, collecting up more of the netting that nobody else seemed to want. He was forced to use his trailer for his airbike, risking them detecting it because he needed its carrying capacity. After that, he added coating the spatial engine casing of the carrier in carbidium to his list of things to do, so it wouldn't be detected.

After he collected up all the netting he could get, he pulled it out, tied it together as needed, then hung it off the edge of the bridge around his skimmer. He had more than enough for both sides, but he ran out trying to go across the underside. It left a fifty foot gap, so he centered that gap so one had to literally be looking straight in through the middle to see inside. He anchored the netting directly to the ground and the concrete using an annealer—which almost caused it to overload trying to anneal one composite material to another, something that they did *not* do very well—and rode around on his airbike to look at his work at varying altitudes and distances. It was the wrong color, he realized as he inspected it from a distance, drawing his eye to it. He then tracked down some paint from Lowe's and literally painted the netting to match the ground, grass, and concrete underneath where it hung. After doing that, it looked *very* good.

That took him two days. After that, he addressed the problem of blocking sensors. There really was no dependable technology to do so, at least none in the public domain (though there probably were a bunch that were considered top secret), relying instead on hiding the sources of energy that would be detected by the sensors. Faey sensors had a very wide array of detection capability, but they weren't as sensitive as Jason would have thought. With their other technology, he'd have thought that their sensors could find an individual human in a city by his unique biorhythms, but they could not. They could detect "life," but couldn't discern between organisms of the same general size. They could tell a tree from an animal, but couldn't tell a fox from a coyote, or a bear from a human, and they could *not* pinpoint a return that faint from a great distance...such as from orbit. From orbit, the area around Huntington was just one big blur of "life," with no hope of separating individual life signs. The closer the sensor array was, the more accurate it could get...which was why those sensor pods on those

dropships were so dangerous to them.

That sent him back to Civnet, for an intense search on the exact way that Faey sensors operated. They had two modes, passive and active, much like the old sonar used by ships and submarines. Passive was “listening” for certain energy signatures, and active was bouncing a signal off an area to check for the specific pattern of the return. How the signal was returned would tell them the physical makeup of the material in question, and those were rather sensitive. Maya had him hide the skimmer under the bridge to protect it against that sensor technique, while keeping it powered down protected it from the passive type.

He brainstormed constantly for *days*, often forgetting to eat and sleep. Temika returned during that time, but he barely remembered it. He would come up to his kitchen and find food sitting on the table, left by Clem’s group, and have no idea how it got there, if he cooked it, or anything. He’d been leaving his door unlocked. Every iota of his attention was focused on the single task of devising a means to defeat Faey sensors, to hide him and his equipment from scans. The carbidium defended against the passive sensors by shielding the energy signature of what was behind it, but there was no way to defend that piece of equipment against an active sweep, because it would detect the carbidium itself, as well as the energy signal it was hiding.

The airbikes didn’t have any kind of protection against the active component of Faey sensors, but the active portion wasn’t as much of a danger to him because of the great distance involved between him and the sensors. At that range, the airbike’s active signature was so small that the computer that washed the return for the sensor operator very well might attribute it to a magnetic anomaly, where a shift or disruption in the Earth’s magnetic field caused a “bounce,” or a false return. That’s why Kumi hadn’t been worried about the airbikes, feeling that all they needed were signature maskers. The skimmer, on the other hand, was way too large to avoid detection. But, if those sensors were *closer*, like those dropships using sensor pods, then the smaller items were going to get detected. Either dropship would have picked up his airbike had it not been in his skimmer, which itself was under the bridge.

He thought of his skimmer again. It was relying on a combination of defenses to hide it from the sensors. It was powered down, to prevent passive sweeps from detecting its energy signature. But, it was also hidden under the bridge, where the tons of concrete and steel were over it, scrambling the active signal that was reaching it, then scrambling it again when it bounced back into space, which effectively concealed the active signature of the metals of which the skimmer was constructed.

So, he needed some kind of hybrid concept, a combination of physical shielding to defeat passive sensors and some way to defeat the active sensor. He studied the hyperthreaded pulse that the Faey used as their active sensor signal, and found that it too was a *metaphased* concept. That signal was a composite of an infinite number of individual frequencies that shifted slightly into alternate quantum states, in effect existing in multiple states at once. It was by no means as complicated or far-reaching as metaphased plasma, however, only reaching slightly into alternate quantum states, what they called *quantum shift*. That was how the active sensors could also detect metaphased plasma operations, because they detected the alternate quantum states. But exceptionally heavy metals like carbidium blocked that, because they were *so* dense that they literally reached just enough into quantum shift to present a physical barrier to a signal that only *just* extended into quantum shift. It was kind of like the idea of a black hole, a gravity field so dense that nothing could escape it. Well, carbidium was so physically dense that not even the partially metaphased signal of a Faey sensor could penetrate it, even if it was sprayed onto a casing using a sprayer.

He added that into his list of requirements. His solution needed to be able to defeat a hyperthreaded signal, that would possess quantum shift.

He looked, and looked, and looked. He surfed through engineering boards, research sites, even hunted through the archives at Research and Development that he could access, and found no answer.

He literally pounded his head on the desk at one point, disrupting his holographic keyboard. He

then leaned back in his chair so deeply that his head flopped upside down behind him, and he was presented with a flip-flopped view of the far side of his room. Over there was stored his stuff and some excess material. His armor was hanging on the wall on pegs for each piece, his railgun on a rack over it, and that spool of excess phase cloth was leaning in the corner.

Phase cloth.

Phase cloth!

Holy *shit!* That *just might work!*

All he needed to do was find something that would be effective against the *entire* signal, including the segments that were quantum shifted. The nature of the signal was in itself one of the problems getting around it, since it was a hyperthreaded pulse, possessing quantum shift. Just like how phase cloth could defeat metaphased plasma, he needed something that could deal with the metaphased aspect of the hyperthreaded pulse.

So he needed to fight fire with fire. He needed to stop a quantum shifted signal with a quantum shifted *material*.

Phase cloth was a layered armored cloth with the phased silk of those arachnids in the middle of it. It was designed to stop MPAC fires by defeating the metaphased aspect of the charge, presenting a physical barrier to a substance that existed in a different quantum reality...or multiple quantum realities, in the case of an MPAC.

What he needed was something along the lines of a similar concept. He needed a material, a *layer*, that would intercept that hyperthreaded pulse and either absorb it, refract it, or redirect it, either capture it or scatter it so no coherent reply got back to the receiver. It had to be the outermost layer of the object it was hiding, to prevent anything in front of it from bouncing back a signal. It had to possess quantum shift, to be able to defeat the sensors on that level, but still had to be constituted of a material dense enough to block passive sensors from detecting energy signatures.

If he wanted a barrier that existed outside all others, then he either needed a *field* or a *shield*. A *field* was a broad area of energy, like the volume inside a microwave oven, where the energy signature saturated a volume. When turned on, a microwave oven created a *field* of microwave radiation, trapped inside the oven itself, which excited water molecules. A *shield* was an active projection of coherent energy with defined borders, not saturating a wide area of volume. The shields in his skimmer were the perfect example of that.

The shield idea was immediately out. It would be too difficult to design, and he didn't have the parts on hand to build one anyway. But a *field* was doable. The simplest form of a field he could create would be a *white noise generator*. That was simply a Faey hyperthreaded pulse emitter set down here that fired the entire signal back back into space, blinding their active sensors by hiding actual returns behind a wall of responses. The drawback of that is that it would be pretty darn obvious, when they saw this hole of *nothing* smack dab in the middle of a grid of defined response.

Given that the idea here was to trick them into thinking nothing was there, that meant that he needed the second idea of it, an inverse emitter, or *black noise generator*. If he could get his hands on the sensor signatures of certain materials to the hyperthreaded pulse signature, he could simply build a device that detected those patterns then immediately generated a counter-signal at *inverse phase*. When signals at inverted phase encountered one another, they cancelled each other out.

Now that...that had *potential*. It would be very easy to build, he had the materials to build it, and all he really had to do was hook it up to an emitter strong enough to cover several blocks. That wouldn't be hard at all, and would be *child's play* to program. He already had an emitter, it would just take telling it to listen at a microphone and immediately emit the frequencies that non-native objects would reflect, inverted to the incoming signal. The delay would be in the nanoseconds...that wouldn't cause a *complete* cancel, but would so seriously weaken the outbound signal that it would be effectively unreadable. And since the device was *only* blocking signatures of things he wasn't supposed to have, it would let the signatures of things like wood and rock and such through, but hide

the presence of carbidium, neutronium, and so on.

All he needed was the sensor signatures of Faey-based materials, a Faey sensor receiver, and the control box he was using on the hypersonic emitter. And God bless, he already had all three. The sensor signatures were readily available on Civnet; the *signatures* were in no way classified, often part of the basic scientific description of the metal or material, because they in no way gave away the technological secrets behind the sensor itself. After all, the hyperthreaded pulse was just a pulse of virtually *every* frequency, from ELF (Extremely Low Frequency) up through theta-band quantum. There was a Faey sensor receiver in his skimmer, part of its own sensor system, and the frequency generator was already being used for something.

It took him two hours to remove the sensor array out of his skimmer and install it in the church steeple. It took him two more hours to connect it to the control box and reconfigure his hypersonic emitter. It took one hour to change the emitter so it was capable of generating the required energy signatures when he found out the one he had wasn't capable of it. It took him three hours to program the control box with what to listen for, and what to emit when it detected it. Then, it took him an hour to go over his work and make sure.

After that, he just turned it on and stood up there, watching and waiting for a sensor satellite to pass over. That took almost three hours. But when it did, when he saw the signature spike that warned that a hyperthreaded pulse had been detected, the emitter immediately generated a counter-pulse with the combined composite frequencies in inverse phase to eradicate the signature of every Faey-constructed object within 700 yards of the emitter.

He had no idea if it worked, but that was a *very* positive sign.

The only real way to test it was to do something absolutely *drastic*. He had to put something out that they absolutely would not miss on a sensor sweep, let the satellite go by, then see if they responded to it. The only thing that he had like that was the *skimmer*.

He saw no other choice. He had to make sure this worked.

But moving it presented a problem, because as soon as he powered it up, the Faey's *passive* sensors would detect it. If it was a military skimmer, its armor and its signature maskers would hide its energy signature, but it was not. If that black noise generator worked, then they wouldn't detect the skimmer with active sensors...so now he had to figure out a way to move the skimmer without it being detected.

Well, the simple answer was that there wasn't one. The skimmer was way, way too big to even try shielding its power sources with carbidium, because he'd have to plate the whole damn skimmer. Not only would that ruin the paint job, but he didn't have enough carbidium to do that. He wouldn't have even if he still had it all. He wasn't even sure if that would work, because of the huge power plants in the skimmer, and the very large power signature it gave off. After all, it had PPGs *and* spatial engines that could move 12,000 standard tons *and* weapons *and* shields *and* tertiary systems, all of which would contribute to that energy signature. He wasn't sure a coating of carbidium was going to pull that off. Now, if he was to modify the skimmer's shields to reflect the energy signature back, or absorb it, that might do it, but that would take a team of scientists a long time to pull off. That would take designing a shield generator from the ground up, way out of his league. Then he'd have to figure out how to hide the energy signature of the shield itself.

Actually, he could probably do that. If had access to a full lab and a year or so to experiment, he could probably manage that. Shields could be designed to be *physical*, like a force field, physically opposing kinetec energy or force, or they could be *energy*, creating a matrix of power that performed a specific task. He remembered that from Plasma I. Certain forms of energy actively absorbed other energy. Most starship shields were a hybrid of those two principles, shields that carried both a physical component and an energy component. They were like that so they could both attempt to deflect hostile energy and also absorb it. The combination of those two defenses greatly reduced the destructive power of an attack executed against them. It was just a matter of finding the right composite harmonic shield frequency with the right type of energy forming the shield matrix that would cause it to absorb

low-energy emissions, like the energy signature of a PPG.

Something he'd love to have, but just didn't have the year to discover.

No, the skimmer was out. He couldn't move it out to perform the test without it getting picked up, so that wasn't a viable test subject, because if it *was* picked up, he'd have no idea if it was the energy signature or an active sweep that gave it away. And he had nothing else so large that it would get immediate attention...so he really had no way to test it, not without giving away his position. He'd just have to trust that he did it right, and pray every time he saw that emitter display show the spike of a hyperthreaded pulse.

He came down from the church, feeling both relieved and nervous at the same time. There was no real way to know how effective it was going to be, but he had high hopes. In any event, he'd find out the next time a dropship cruised by with its sensor pods going.

When he came down, he saw Temika sitting outside his house, sitting on her parked airbike, leaning over the handle bars as she talked to someone he'd never seen before. It was a black man of medium height, but monstrous dimensions. He was *huge*, built like a mack truck, obviously a bodybuilder. Those thick arms were more than visible with the white muscle shirt he wore, and his legs strained the faded, dirty jeans he wore. Curious, Jason ambled over towards them, carrying his tool kit in his hand.

"Hey Sugah, glad tah see yah out among the livin' again," Temika winked in greeting. "Jason, this is Kevin King, but most everyone calls him Tank. Ah think it ain't too obvious why," she grinned.

Jason briefly listened to the man's thoughts. He was a bit nervous at meeting Jason for some odd reason, and hoped that he gave a good first impression. He had to remind himself to offer his hand. "It's good to meet you, Mister Jason," he said in a mild accent that he remembered hearing from some people in New Orleans. This man had spent enough time there for it to flavor his speech, but not totally infect him. The New Orleans drawl was almost like a virus, but it had never infected Jason. He'd spent too much time traveling around as a child to have any identifiable accent, other than it being uniquely his own.

"What are you doing in my neck of the woods, Tank?" he asked.

"Well, I got a couple of people down at my place that say they know you," he answered, and his thought matched his words. Jason's eyes picked up when Kevin thought about the *blueskin* he had tied up in his basement. "One's a blueskin, the other's a young guy about my height, kinda skinny, with dark hair. Calls himself Tim."

Jason's eyes widened. "You have *Tim*?" he asked in shock. "And Symone?"

"I can't really say I know the blueskin's name, Mister Jason. She was unconscious when I found 'em. The guy, he's just coming around."

His thoughts told Jason everything he needed to know. He'd come across them yesterday out in the forest, both knocked out, after coming out to see what was making a bunch of noise not far from the little house where he lived, down near Williamson. The blueskin—Symone—was in full combat armor, armor that had *burns* all over it, and her helmet's visor had been shattered. Tim had a broken arm and some burns on his legs, not too bad though, and had just woke up a few hours ago and started going on and on about how they were trying to find Jason. Kevin knew from the way he was talking that he had to be talking about *the* Jason that he'd about from Temika, who visted every few days—he really fancied her, but he was too shy to reveal that to her—and she'd brought him up here to see if he was lying—well, she followed him as he rode a dirt bike up...no way was he getting on the back of that airbike with a crazy driver like Temika driving it. Kevin's brother, Willy, was watching them, using the blueskin's fancy plasma gun to keep the blueskin subdued if she woke up. Kevin was no doctor, but he'd patched up Tim's arm with a splint, and hadn't really touched the blueskin. She gave him the creeps, even knocked out. He did take off her helmet, though, and aside from a bloodied nose, he didn't think she was hurt too bad. He thought she might have a few burns where the armor was burned real bad, but nothing else. He figured she was knocked out from whatever gave her the bloody nose,

maybe a concussion.

"Let me get my airbike," he said immediately, fear and concern flooding through him, so much so he forgot himself. "You're taking me to them."

"You know this guy, Mister Jason?"

"He's my best friend. Symone's his—well, let's call her his wife. She's a *good* blueskin. You have a CB that Willy can hear?"

"How did you know about Willy?" Kevin asked, giving him a strange look.

Jason cursed, then blew out his breath and scrubbed his hand through his hair. "It's a long story. Let's just get down there. Wait here while I get my airbike."

Kevin's thoughts were confused and suspicious now, and so were Temika's. He'd slipped, he'd blundered, and now he had to find a way to either explain it or reveal the truth. That wasn't about to happen, though, because any wandering squatter that knew about his talent would be an open book to any Faey patrol that picked him or her up. He debated what to do while he got his airbike out of the skimmer, then pulled it to a stop in front of Temika. He ignored them as he got off the bike and ran into the house, getting his railgun and his MPAC pistol, and stowing his panel in a shoulder satchel and bringing that along as well. He remembered to put the scope back on the railgun before he left the house, then locked the door behind him and activated the house's security system via his panel after he got back to his airbike. "You can ride with her, or you can ride with me," Jason told him bluntly as he mounted his airbike, then stowed his railgun in the holster behind his right leg specifically designed to hold and secure a rifle. "Choose."

"I wanna know how you knew about my little brother," Kevin said adamantly.

"I'll explain it to you when we get there," he said impatiently. "But we're going *now*, even if I have to lasso you and drag you behind me. Now choose a bike."

"Uh, I'll ride with Mika," he said warily.

"Mika?" he asked her.

"It's what most folks call me, sugah," she told him, though not as warmly as she usually addressed him. "Ah guess three syllables is one too long or somethin'."

Jason reached into the storage compartment where the gas tank would have been on a motorcycle and produced a pair of one-piece visor sunglasses that had a strap on the back, then snugly secured them over his eyes. They acted both as sunglasses and protection against the sharp wind. "Let's go," he ordered, kicking his bike into the air.

He hadn't talked to Jyslin in a few days, so something like this was possible, he pondered grimly as he followed behind Temika's airbike at an altitude of about a thousand feet. But *why* was the question. What had brought them out here, and what had caused their injuries? Had they fought their way out of New Orleans? Had they fled to the wildlands to protect Tim? Or had they just been on their way to see him, visit him, and had something catastrophic happen? Jason zoomed up to Temika's side, then waved at her to get her attention. He fixed his earpiece in deliberately, and she nodded in understanding. She pulled up her own, then got the extra out and passed it back to Kevin, shouting instructions to him. When he got it seated in his ear and the mic over his mouth, Jason held up one finger to tell her which shortband channel to use, which was purely for local communication. With a range of only about ten miles, there was no chance that anyone was going to pick it up that shouldn't be hearing it. "You on?" Temika called over her radio.

"I am," he said. "Kevin, explain what happened before you found them."

"Well, I was hearing a bunch of popping sounds coming from the south," he explained. "I went to look, and saw something falling down burnin'. It landed in the Big Sandy River. Well, me and Willy went out to see what it was, but whatever it was had already sunk by the time we got out there. We found that blueskin and that other fella laying out near the bank. They were soaked to the bone, but both had burns on 'em."

"You didn't see any Faey craft around?"

“No sir,” he answered. “Willy thinks it was an accident of some kind, that the ship they were on blew an engine or somethin’. I ain’t too sure, cause the burns on that blueskin’s armor didn’t look like they were made by fire. Now, how did you know about Willy?”

Jason blew out his breath, seeing no way to make up a good story about it. “I’ll explain on the ground, and *not* over an open comm channel,” he said pointedly.

“That won’t be but like five more minutes, sugah,” Temika called. “It ain’t but like fifteen minutes tah Williamson at this speed.”

And that was about what it took. They flew into a strong afternoon thunderstorm that was settled over southern West Virginia, quickly soaking all three of them. Temika had to circle in the rain a few times to find Kevin’s small house, in the back of a short, deep valley with trees knocked over the dirt road leading into it, about two miles from the abandoned city of Williamson. They landed right outside, as a tall, very thin young black man with dreadlocks stepped out of the front door brandishing a plasma rifle. Jason jumped off his airbike before it was even fully down, then charged past the surprised young man and into the house. He could tell from their thought patterns that Tim was afraid but alright, maybe a little scared, and that Symone was unconscious, her thought patterns subdued and withdrawn. Worry and concern were raging through him as he found the open door to the basement, then charged down the steps three at a time. He found himself in a full-sized basement, with no walls to section it off, filled with boxes and old furniture. Against the nearest wall were two figures, both laying on a blanket on the concrete floor, Tim and Symone. Tim’s left arm was splinted to an old broom handle, and his face was a bit pale. Symone was sprawled out on the floor in a heap, her helmet off and her silky blond hair matted with blood and stained with ash and soot. “Jason!” Tim cried out with sudden relief, joy and excitement rushing through his thoughts. Jason rushed over and knelt between them, putting his hand on Tim’s forehead. He wasn’t cold, meaning he wasn’t in shock or suffering from blood loss, he was just pale from worry.

“What the *hell* are you doing out here?” he demanded immediately as he turned to Symone. Kevin was right; some of the burns on her armor were *not* from fire. They were MPAC strikes. Even though the armor they used was century old surplus junk, it was *still* designed to deal with plasma weapons, as the Faey had them back then. She’d been hit three times by MPAC fire...in the left shin, in the left thigh, and in the left shoulder. All three strikes penetrated the armor, and after Jason got her boot and greave off her leg, he saw that the two hits to her leg had left her with second degree burns with a charred circle about the size of a silver dollar in the middle, the direct impact of the MPAC charge. That was a third degree burn. “Shit,” Jason growled. “Who was shooting at you?”

“About half the Faey army,” Tim said weakly, sitting up. “Is she alright? Is she going to be alright?”

“Shut up a minute,” he snapped as Temika, Kevin, and Willy came down into the basement. There was no physical trauma to her head, but a touch on her mind showed that she was suffering from psychotraumatic shock, an aftereffect of a Faey who had fought a vicious telepathic duel. Symone had probably won, which was why they were here...or more to the point, she had defended herself and Tim from repeated telepathic attacks, until it overwhelmed her.

“I, I *felt* that!” Tim gasped.

Jason glanced at him. “They didn’t tell you?”

“Well, they told me yesterday,” he answered with a weak chuckle. “I just didn’t believe them.”

“Now I see why you’re here,” he said grimly.

Tim nodded. “I fucked up,” he said honestly. “Same as that other girl, I blew it in the middle of my plasma dynamics class. But Symone was on campus, and she wouldn’t let them take me. She fought us out of New Orleans, and we hid in Crown City while Jyslin talked to some woman that knows you, that knew generally where you were. Then we stole an airskimmer and flew north.”

“Kumi,” Jason realized.

“They chased us, but Symone had stole a really fast skimmer. We managed to stay ahead of them,

at least until a couple of *fighters* showed up. They blasted us to hell. We crashed into that river, and then I woke up here. Is Symone going to be alright?"

"After a very long sleep," he nodded. "Her brain just needs time to recover. These burns are another matter," he said with a frown, looking at the charred flesh surrounded by savage burns. "I think I have something in my first aid kit that should help with it, though."

"So you do know each other," Kevin said soberly.

"He's who we came to find," Tim told him quickly.

"Suspicious that you're traveling with a blueskin, boy," Kevin said with a hint of threat.

"Symone's no threat to any of you," Jason told them curtly as he carefully locked her armor back over her leg, then put her boot back on. She'd be best off in her armor til he got her home.

"Now, you're gonna answer my question, Mister Jason," Kevin said sternly, taking the plasma rifle from his brother. "How did you know about Willy?"

"It's simple, Kevin," Jason said calmly, picking up Symone's helmet. "It's why I'm here."

Temika gave him a curious look, then gasped heavily. "Omigawd, yo' a *telepath*, ain't yah!" she exclaimed. "A *human* telepath!"

"That's right," he agreed pleasantly. "I have talent. I'm here because I don't want to be a weapon for the Faey. And I'm not the only one," he said, looking right at Tim. "There have been other humans showing telepathic ability. I'm not unique. I'm just lucky that I happen to have Faey friends who were willing to teach me how to use it without turning me in. But you three shouldn't worry too much about it," he told them.

"Why is that?" Willy asked dumbly.

"Because you're not going to remember it," he answered bluntly.

"How—oh. *Ohhhhh*," Willy said, understanding. "You can do that?"

"I can," he answered evenly. "Trust me, it's not because I want to, but it's safer for *everyone* if you don't remember. If a Faey caught you in a sweep, they'd know about me in about two seconds, and then it's my ass."

"What does that mean?" Kevin demanded.

"He's gonna do that *tepathic* thing on us," he said, mispronouncing the word. "Make us forget what he said."

"You ain't doin' nothing to me, boy!" Kevin shouted, raising Symone's MPAC rifle.

Jason struck with the speed of thought against Kevin, driving a spear of consciousness into his mind. Just like any other human without talent, his mind was utterly defenseless against that attack. He was inside in an instant, and had Kevin's muscles locked to prevent him from raising that rifle an inch more in about a millisecond after gaining access to Kevin's mind. Less than a second after that, Jason had carefully snipped out the parts of Kevin's memory about Jason's admission, and the slip that had caused it in the first place. He didn't even bother replacing it with anything, because it was obvious enough as to why he was here and what he was doing. He shifted and struck Willy next, which only required him to erase that last few seconds of his memory, then moved and hit Temika.

He was almost knocked back on his heels. Temika's mind was like a steel curtain, and he failed to penetrate it. He shifted his focus and sharpened his attack as her eyes widened, striking *much* harder and *much* more precisely, trying to punch through her defense. This time he managed to penetrate her very strong yet unskilled attempt to protect her mind, an automatic reaction of a mind that had been raked over the coals by a telepath before, and was not going to just let it happen again.

Holy Lord, Temika Daniels had *talent*! It was still unrealized, unexpressed, but the simple fact that her mind had the strength to defend against him where Kevin and Willy did not told him everything he needed to know!

He purged her short-term memory of his admission, then gave her a very long, very serious look. She had talent. It might never express, given she had very limited contact with the Faey, but *it was there*. No doubt it was urged out of its deep hibernation by the mental raping she'd received, which

had made her almost phobic about being touched. Exposure to Faey telepathy had awakened the *potential* in her, and now it merely slept, perhaps to awaken or perhaps not...but it was *there*.

All three of them began to blink, looking around in confusion. Jason turned and looked at Tim, then sent openly. *Can you hear this? Nod if you can.*

Tim winced, then nodded, rubbing his temple gingerly.

Jason toned down the power a little. *I wiped that out of their minds. Do not mention it. As far as they know, I'm just as normal as anyone else, and it has to stay that way.*

He nodded soberly, then looked at Symone with worried eyes.

"Don't worry, she'll be alright," he said aloud. "Let's get you two up and to the airbikes. I need that, please," Jason said to Kevin, holding his hand out and pointing at the MPAC.

Kevin looked at him blankly, then woodenly handed him the rifle. "They gonna be ok, Mister Jason?"

"They're banged up, but okay," Jason replied. "I need to get them home. You know any doctors, Temika?" he asked.

She shook her head blearily. "Yeah, Ah know one ovah in Logan," she answered. "Ah could get him tah come, but he'll want you tah pay him somethin'."

"That's fine. Come back to Chesapeake with me so you can bring Tank back to his bike, then could you please go get him? Tim's gonna need a cast for his arm, and I have no idea how to do that."

"Sure, sugah," she said with a nod, though her eyes looked a little confused.

Jason picked up Symone, shifting her a bit because her armor was making her heavy, then Willy blinked and helped Tim get to his feet. Willy helped Tim up the stairs with a gentle hand, and Jason and the others followed him outside, out into the rain. Jason mounted his bike with Symone still in his arms, then settled her in front of him as Willy helped Tim get on the bike behind him. "There's a seat belt back there," Jason told the young black man. "Could you help him get it on? He won't be able to hold on very well."

"Sure," Willy nodded, then helped belt Tim in as Temika and Kevin mounted the other bike. "Got room for me, Mika?" he asked hopefully.

"Sure, sugah," she nodded, jerking a thumb behind her as Kevin swung his leg over the saddle and sat down. "Behind Tank, and you'd better hold on, sugah. Ah don't go slow."

Jason stuffed Symone's rifle in with his railgun in the holster, which locked both in place, then he gently pulled his airbike off the ground. He had to get these two back to his house, get them someplace safe. He also had to figure out what to do. Tim had expressed. Tim *did* have talent, and the bad part is that the Faey knew about him. Symone had literally fought tooth and nail to get him here, and now she was an outlaw to her own people. She had thrown her lot in with Tim, for better or worse, and now she was stuck with her decision. She had fought with her own people for the sake of her man, a man she would not give to them without one hell of a fight, from the look of things. She had done much more than desert. She had committed treason against House Trillane. Now, Symone was an outlaw, just like Jason and Tim. She was one of them.

He *had* to talk to Jyslin. He had to find out what happened, find out if she had gotten involved. Oh she had, he knew she did, but he doubted it was anything that was noticed. Symone was a house soldier, but Jyslin was an *Imperial Marine*. She would not do something as drastic as open armed rebellion against established authority. She'd helped by contacting Kumi and finding out where she'd delivered the care package he'd bought, but wouldn't help any more than that. And in its own way, that was all she needed to do.

If anything, this changed *everything*, he was sure of that. It would introduce all kinds of headaches for him, but at least he knew they were safe now. He had to get them back to health, and he and Symone would have to have a long talk about what to do with Tim, but at least they were safe.

That made him *so* relieved. They were safe, they were with him, and he'd do his best to protect them from the wrath of House Trillane.

That was what friends were for.

Chapter 8

Chira, 1 Toraa, 4393, Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 15 August 2007, Native Regional Reckoning

Chesapeake, Ohio (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

The rain down in Williamson drifted up to Chesapeake after a couple of hours, but by then it didn't matter. They were all inside, and Temika had managed to return with Doctor Adam Northwood from Logan. They were both a little soaked, but Northwood wasn't complaining. Northwood was an older man, around 60, with a full head of silver hair cut in a crew cut and some dark spots on his forehead. His face was gaunt and drawn, but his eyes were lucid and gentle, a pleasing green, and he had a manner about him that put people at ease. The most casual inspection of his thoughts showed him that this doctor was absolutely trustworthy. His lifelong passion was healing the sick and injured, and he held unswervingly to the ideal of the pure doctor...one who heals anything he can, regardless of what the injury is or who had it. Northwood would treat Symone without questions, because she needed a doctor. Jason showed him upstairs to the room where he had both Tim and Symone, and he didn't bat an eye at seeing a Faey. Jason told him what he'd seen, and he just nodded and sat down to inspect them himself. He took all of ten seconds checking Tim's arm, then tutted and set it back down gently.

"Clean break of the ulna and radius," he diagnosed. "Nice splint, it perfectly aligned the break. Who did it?"

"The guy who found him," Jason answered.

"He's good," Northwood nodded. "All we need is a cast on this, and this young fella's gonna be up and about in no time," he said with a smile at Tim. "All you need, young'un, is a little something to help take the edge off the pain." He reached into his medical bag, and produced a single white pill. "This'll help you get along to sleep, son," he told Tim. "That's the best thing for you right now."

"Okay, doctor," Tim said, swallowing the pill. He leaned back in the bed and closed his eyes.

Northwood went over and sat down on the bed beside Symone. He checked her pupils and inspected her face and head carefully, then used a penlight to check her pupils again. "Hmm, I don't see any evidence of trauma," he announced. "Good pupil response. It's most likely a concussion. You said she had some burns?"

"Under the armor."

"Then show me how to get it off, if you know," he ordered. "I figure you can, if you saw the burns in the first place."

Jason chuckled and nodded and, with Northwood's help, they stripped Symone's armor off her. The two burns on her leg looked bad, but the one on her shoulder looked *nasty*. It had punched through her armor much harder than the hits to her leg, leaving a charred burn as big across as an orange, charring well into the soft tissue under her skin. By then, Tim was already asleep, so he didn't see just how badly his girlfriend was injured. "These are pretty bad," Northwood admitted as he inspected the burn on her shoulder. "I don't have anything that's going to help treat this. The best we can do is excise the destroyed tissue, bandage her up, and hope she heals naturally."

"I have a bunch of Faey first-aid stuff," he told the doctor. "Do you know how to use any of it?"

"Actually, I do, son," he said. "Go get it."

Jason retrieved his first aid kit, and Northwood rifled through it quickly. "Not bad, son," he said, taking out a bottle filled with powder. "I need a glass of water and something we can use for bandages."

Jason retrieved the water, and a sheet that they quickly tore up into strips. The doctor poured the powder onto a press then added water to it, which made it start to bubble and foam. He then applied it to her shoulder. There was a strange acrid smell, and smoke wafted up from under that press.

“This is a compound that dissolves away inorganic matter,” he explained. “It’ll also remove most of the charred tissue, since it’s been oxidized. After this, we apply some of what’s in that vial right there, then bandage her up. That’s a bio-organic accelerator, it causes her natural healing mechanisms to go into overdrive. Using that compound, she’ll be fully healed in about six days.”

“They must have trained you in Faey medical technology,” he reasoned.

“A year’s worth, until an argument with a Faey doctor in a hospital sent me to a farm. I didn’t much like it there, so I decided to come live somewhere else. I can assume you have a similar story, just from the technical side, given the toys I’ve seen.”

“The airbike? Something like that,” he agreed. “I was a student in one of their schools, then decided I didn’t want to help the Faey oppress my own people. So I relocated.”

“Some of them are actually quite good people. I think you know that as well,” he said, glancing at Symone meaningfully.

“As long as you don’t piss off a noble,” Jason said bluntly.

Northwood chuckled. “That’s exactly what I did. About half the Faey doctors are nobles, for some odd reason. I guess because it’s a non-com job or something.” He applied another press to each of Symone’s leg burns, then peeled the one on her shoulder up to inspect the progress. “She’s quite the looker, isn’t she?” he said conversationally.

“That’s a strange thing for a doctor to say,” Jason said with a smile.

“I’m a doctor, but I’m also not dead yet,” he grinned in reply. “There’s nothing in the hippocratic oath that says I can’t appreciate the view.”

“As long as you don’t do anything else, I suppose.”

“Exactly, son. Never have, never will, but when I get to treat a woman like this, it’s something of an informal job bonus.”

“Uh, doc, she’s Faey. She’ll know you ogled her.”

“Son, she’s Faey. She’ll take that as a compliment.”

“True,” Jason admitted wryly.

After the dissolving agent did its job, Jason helped Northwood apply the salve to those wounds, which now were pink and raw instead of charred black. The burn in her shoulder almost exposed her collarbone, and looked really ugly. He applied the healing agent, then they bandaged her three wounds and used cloths to clean some of the ash and smoke film from her. Then he injected her with something from Jason’s first aid kit, then pulled up the blankets. “For a concussion, there’s nothing I can do,” he admitted. “We just let her sleep and let her ride it out. Her vitals are strong, I’m sure she’ll be fine. We need to scrounge up what I need for a cast, son, then I can get a cast on that boy’s arm. That’s all he needs. All I need for a cast are bandages and plaster.”

“I don’t have any plaster, so we’ll need to go scrounge for it.”

“That’s fine, son, I have some at home. Someone just needs to take me there. Now, care to explain how she got injured by MPACs? Or is her being here the only explanation I need?”

“More or less, doc,” Jason replied as he showed him out. “They’re both friends of mine from outside. I’m not entirely sure on the details yet, but it must have been ugly. Symone and Tim are virtually married, doc, nothing will separate them. I’d guess that when Tim decided to run after whatever happened happened, Symone decided to come with him.”

Northwood whistled. “That’s some loyalty.”

“Symone’s like that,” he nodded in agreement. “Tim is more important to her than her own people. Something really bad must have happened, and she must have fought her way out. From what I heard from the people who found her, and what Tim told me, they were shot down not far from here by the Faey. I guess the Faey figured they were dead, because they didn’t check the river where their skimmer crashed to make sure.”

“They were coming to find you?”

He nodded. “I have a contact in the Imperium that knows more or less where I am, and another

friend that knows about her. They talked to a friend who knows that person, and they found out generally where I am. They were coming here to join me.”

“You still have contacts in the Imperium?” Northwood asked in surprise.

He nodded. “Yeah, and they’re trustworthy,” he said as they opened the front door to his house. The rain had stopped, but the skies were still heavy and threatening, introducing a heavy mugginess to the air that made it unpleasantly warm. Temika, Kevin, and Willy were waiting out by the curb, talking with each other, and Luke and Clem had joined them. “They’d never turn me in. They’ll still help me as much as they can get away with it, if I need it. But I have most everything I need now. Like you said, doc, *some* Faey are good people.”

“So I did, son,” he agreed with a warm smile.

“Temika,” Jason called. “Doc Northwood needs to get some plaster from his house. Can you take him?”

“Sure can, sugah,” Temika said with a grin. “If the doc promises not to try tah squeeze me in half this time.”

“Then you should learn not to ride that thing like a bat of hell, girl,” Northwood said accusingly.

“Slow is borin’, sugah,” she winked.

“Then pick, dear. A fun ride and bruised ribs, or a safe ride and no nagging pain.”

Temika laughed and mounted her airbike, then turned and patted the seat behind her. “Jump up, doc. Ah’ll have you back here in an hour.”

“Then I hope you like purple ribs,” he said as he climbed on behind her.

Jason sat with Tim and Symone while Temika went for the plaster, wondering what had really happened. Tim had mentioned messing up in school, so Jason could only guess that Tim had accidentally done something in class that made the instructor realize he had talent. He’d said that Symone was on campus, so odds were she picked up on the sending chatter and barged in to collect him up before they could secure him. After that, he could assume that they’d managed to get away, hide somewhere long enough to contact Jyslin and have her find out from Kumi where they’d delivered his goods, then they’d managed to steal some kind of transportation. They got made during that, and were chased with some determination from the Faey. They’d even called in fighters to shoot their skimmer down.

That was probably about their whole story, in a nutshell.

He pondered the problems it might cause. They probably thought that both were dead, since they didn’t bother to land and search for bodies. Jyslin might have some problems, because now that was *three* people she personally knew that had either gone missing or went crazy and rebelled. He had little doubt that she was going to get a little visit from someone in the Secret Police soon, but that in itself wasn’t too much of a worry. Jyslin was more than a match for almost anyone out of that little organization, they wouldn’t get anything out of her she didn’t want them to get in the first place. Jyslin really was that strong...sometimes he wondered how she’d managed to avoid being drafted into the Secret Police in the first place. For him, there might be some problems. Some of the squatters around here might not like the idea of a Faey being out here, and might actually forget who was protecting her and come after her. Well, that wouldn’t last long, that was for sure. After all, they’d better not forget just who it was they were dealing with. Symone wasn’t going to be their problem...*Jason* was. He now had three mouths to feed, so he wasn’t going to be able to live off his stores for very long. It was now seriously time to learn to hunt, or fish, or find some way to trade or barter with some of the squatters, through Temika, to secure food. That last option might be harder if they refused to deal with him, because of Symone.

Then again, if worse came to worst, they could always just go buy food from the Faey. Symone being with him might actually make that easier, at least as long as they didn’t recognize her.

His mind circled those same trains of thought over and over, until a knock at his door brought him out of it. It was Temika and Northwood, carrying a cannister of plaster powder, a large plastic bucket,

and a pair of old sheets. "Okay, son, let's get that arm fixed," he announced.

Jason helped Northwood make that cast, which was actually a simple process. A cloth lining wrapped around the arm was covered over in strips of sheet dipped in plaster, then it was smoothed out and allowed to dry. It took Northwood all of about a half an hour after they got the plaster mixed, leaving behind a very professional-looking cast. "Give that cast about an hour to set, then he's all done," Northwood told Jason. "He won't need a sling, but don't let him stress his arm, which is just common sense. As for her, you won't have to use the inorganic dissolver again, but you will need to change her bandages twice a day. Apply the healing agent to the bandage press and she'll be fine, it has a built-in antibiotic that will prevent infection. She stays in that bed until at least noon tomorrow," he ordered. "If she's not awake by tomorrow morning, get on the CB and have them relay me a message. She might experience dizziness, disorientation, or loss of memory when she wakes up, and might have vertigo issues when she stands for a couple of days after. If she's still suffering from vertigo after three days, I need to know. Make sure she drinks at least twenty glasses of water a day," he ordered. "She also has to eat at least five times a day. That biometric stimulator's going to wreak havoc on her metabolism, so she has to eat and drink a *lot* while she's healing."

"I'll take care of it," he said with a nod. "Temika said you deserved some kind of compensation for coming out here, doc. So, what do you take? I doubt you'll accept Visa anymore."

Northwood laughed. "Well, I heard that you managed to pick up some guns from one of the Huntington gangs," he said. "Have any good hunting rifles?"

"I got a few," he answered immediately.

"Good, my Winchester is starting to get a little old, and nobody has any they're willing to part with. Let's go take a look at them."

For his trouble, Northwood left Jason's house with two hunting rifles. Jason didn't use them, so it wasn't like he was giving him anything absolutely critical. Temika took Northwood home, Tank and Willy retrieved Tank's motorcycle and they started back home, and Clem and Luke went back to working on something over at their house, leaving Jason's house unpopulated. Jason moved a TV up to the room and watched it for a while, waiting for them to wake up.

The first to wake up was Symone, not long after sunset. She groaned quietly and shifted, and immediately he felt her mind reach out. She didn't bother to open her eyes, just sighed in relief.

Thank the Trinity, you talked to Jyslin.

"Good morning," he said quietly, looking at her. She opened her eyes and regarded him. "Feeling better?"

You can send, hon, she told him. I'm better. She winced and put a hand on her shoulder. *At least mentally, she amended. I'm surprised you found us so fast.*

I didn't, he answered, getting up and sitting on the bed beside her. A couple of squatters did. Tim was awake and told them they were looking for me, and word reached me. I went down and got you.

How is he? I can't get any sense of him at all.

Broken arm, the doctor that bandaged you both up gave him something to make him sleep, Jason answered, pointing to the bed across the room.

That musta been one hell of a sleeping pill. It knocked him completely out. There's not even a sense of him sleeping, it's like he's not there.

It was for pain, he told her.

Ah. That'll do it. How bad am I off?

You were hit three times, he answered. The two burns on your leg aren't bad, but the one on your shoulder wasn't pretty. The doc that came had Faey training, he used the medical stuff I brought with me to get you pretty well patched up. He said you should be fully healed in about six days.

That's good to hear. Tim?

Broken arm and that's it, he answered.

He musta broke his arm when we went down, she grunted mentally, squirming up to a half-seated

position. *I didn't think either of us were going to make it there for a minute. One of the fighters sent a plasma bolt right through the cockpit. That blew out the whole ship, and we dropped like a rock. Thank Trelle for crash foam,* she sent fervently.

That might be why they didn't bother looking for you, he reasoned. *If one of them aced the cockpit, they probably figured they took both of you out. What happened?*

Worst possible scenario, she sent heavily. *Tim expressed the day before it all went to hell, but he had to go to school. He slipped up, an instructor caught it, and she called in a containment team. I got to him first though, and all but stole him. We managed to get out of town, and hid down in Crown City long enough for Jyslin to talk to someone that knew generally where you were. We stole a skimmer and got chased, then they called in fighters. We didn't last long after they caught up with us.*

Well, you made it. That's all that matters.

That is so true, she sent fervently, closing her eyes. *With nothing but the clothes on our backs...or armor in my case. Guess I get to cavort around naked for a while.*

You'll fit in some of my clothes for now, he told her. *We might have to bargain with some people for things like underwear though.*

Speaking of my armor, how bad off is it?

Just those three holes, and one murdered paint job, he answered. *I have some carbidium and phase cloth, we should be able to patch it decently enough.*

Yeah, that'll do it. Part of what that Faey noble sent you?

He nodded. *Let me get you some food and water. The doc told me to make sure you eat at least five times a day, and drink lots of water.*

Yeah, sounds like he's got me on bio-accelerant, she noted.

I think that's what he called it, but I'm not sure. That stuff, he said, pointing at a large vial on the nightstand between the two beds.

That's it, she affirmed. *I'll eat and drink like crazy until I'm healed.* She moved her arm, and winced. *Ugh, this won't be fun. But it doesn't feel like it's too serious.*

Not life threatening, but it certainly looked nasty.

Burns usually do, after they dissolve out the crap. It's not the first time I've been tagged by an MPAC.

You've been shot before?

Yeah, an accident during basic training, she said, holding up her right arm. *Everything from here down isn't what I was born with,* she explained, pointing just under her elbow. *They regrew it.*

I didn't know they can do that.

Faey doctors can regrow almost anything, she answered. *It wasn't pretty, and it hurt. I was in a flex-cast for a month.* She grinned at him. *You're really good at this now. Tim would never understand you, you go too fast.*

I actually prefer it to speaking, he shrugged. *It seems simpler, easier.*

You've been converted, she winked.

If that's what you want to call it. Let me get you some food.

After feeding her a healthy meal, he left them to sleep out the rest of the night, though he didn't sleep well at all. He spent most of that time down in the basement, planning on moving his room back up to the master bedroom, then watching for any Faey dropships as he listened in on the traffic frequency for any hint that they were moving through the area. There were none, at least during the times that he was awake. He woke up from an unplanned nap and realized it was past sunrise, then wandered upstairs. He was greeted in the kitchen by Tim and Symone both, Tim sitting at the table with a bowl of oatmeal in front of him while Symone rooted through the refrigerator. Tim was in his boxer shorts, and Symone hadn't bothered putting on anything but a sling for her arm.

"That's not quite how I'd like you wandering around the house, Symone," he said evenly as he stepped past her. "It's not that it's not pretty, but I do have neighbors."

I met one of them. Mary, wasn't it? she sent absently. *She seemed a bit surprised to see me.*

"That's not a surprise," he noted as he sat at the table, which made Tim chuckle.

I had a robe on, silly, she chided him. *You find me some clothes, and I'll be happy to put them on. But that robe wasn't mine, so I'm not going to risk getting it stained with food.*

"That's good to hear. You feeling alright, Tim?" he asked.

"Yeah, just a little sore," he answered, clumsily trying to bring a spoon of oatmeal up with his left hand. "And this cast already itches. Symone said she told you what happened."

He nodded. "So...what do you think?"

"I think I'm scared as hell," he answered immediately, understanding what he meant.

"It's not as bad as you think. Actually, you might start to like it after you get a handle on it."

"Do you?" he asked.

Jason nodded immediately. "I actually prefer it over speaking, but there's more to it than that. Guess you get to be the teacher, Symone."

I know...I don't think I'm going to be as good at it as Jyslin was, she sent.

You'll be better at it than I would be, he told her. *I'll probably have to take lessons from you too. Jyslin didn't finish teaching me.*

I think she taught you well enough, she answered. *You can just wait until I get Tim up to that level, then you can sit in. By then, I might be good enough at teaching to not look stupid.*

Tim chuckled. "You'd never look stupid, honey," he told her.

"You're just being sweet because I'm naked, Tim-Tim," she said audibly with a wink.

"You certainly don't have any trouble hearing," Jason noted.

"No, but *not* hearing is the trick," he grunted. "That's what got me caught. I got all disoriented in class because of all the voices, and got so confused that I made the instructor worried. She used sending to call for a nurse, and I told her I didn't need one. That did it. She was all over me in a heartbeat. After that other girl expressed in class, I guess they were told what to do if it happened again."

Probably, Jason agreed with a nod. *Since both of you are awake, you need to understand how things are around here. First off, they do not know I have talent. That's a secret. He went on to tell them about the gangs in Huntington, Temika, his stuff and his defenses, and Clem and his family. Now that you two are here, draining my food reserves, we'll have to either start gathering it, or I finally go with Temika to breach the border and buy some from the outside.*

That might not be a good idea, Symone warned. *They've been looking for you, hard. You get picked up on any camera tied to Milnet, and they'll know exactly where you are. That'll bring a capture squad down on you in a matter of minutes.*

When did they start implementing face recognition? he asked in surprise.

Since forever, she chided him. *Your best bet is to send that Temika woman after it. It's too dangerous for you to do it. Just give her money and a shopping list.*

Temika...might not be the best choice, he sent hesitantly. *She's got a temper.*

Something tells me you're not saying everything.

I'm not. Why Temika's not a good choice is something you two don't really need to worry about, he sent bluntly.

"Couldn't we just take someone up there and have them do it?" Tim asked.

"I think we need to start looking into being self-sufficient," Jason told him. "You ever do any hunting, Symone?"

"Not religiously, no," she answered. "But I do love to fish."

"That's a start. Clem said he'd teach me how to hunt, and Mary wants to help me put in a garden. I have the guns I took from the gangs to use to buy some food—"

"Do they have any more?" Symone asked with a wicked little smile.

"What?"

"Guns. They're obviously enemies, Jayce. When I heal up, I'll put on my armor and go over there and take anything we need."

"I'd rather not start a war, Symone," he told her sternly. "As long as they stay on that side of the river, as far as I'm concerned, they don't exist."

"That's not smart, Jayce," she said seriously. "You don't leave an enemy around to bite your ass when you're not looking. Want to make them go away? You and me put on our armor and make sure they can't do anything." She pulled frozen pancakes out of the freezer. "Besides, they have stuff we can use. This isn't civilization, cupcake. It's there for the taking."

"Then we'd be no better than they are," he said with an edge to his voice.

"Of course we are. We're cuter."

He gave her a dark look. "So, we go over there and take everything they own. Then what do we do about the people?"

"They can join us or take their chances," she shrugged.

"I won't trust any of them."

She tapped her forehead. "We can weed out the fakers, and with me here, you don't have to give yourself away."

"And what about the others?"

"Hey, they're on their own," she shrugged.

"Okay, we clear out downtown. Then the gangs on either side take it over, and we're back to square one."

"Then we take *them* out," she said with a short sigh of exasperation. "You're not a military woman, Jayce."

"I should hope not."

She laughed. "Sorry, you know what I mean. Leaving them out there isn't smart, especially since they don't like you, they're armed, and you have to go to sleep sometime."

"They've tried, they failed, they haven't been back in almost a month. Everyone who's come over here got sent back naked. They're very much afraid of me."

"Well, are they that afraid of Clem?" she asked pointedly.

Jason fell silent, frowning at her.

Think about it, she sent with a seriousness in her thoughts, sticking the frozen pancakes in the microwave. "I see you got power and water going," she remarked.

"It took a while," he told her. "Especially with the water. Just for this house, though."

"You should set up water for Clem," she told him. "And power."

"I don't have the material," he told her. "Besides, I don't do that kind of thing. Clem just happens to live close to me, that's all. I'm not protecting him, Symone, he just lives close to me because the gangs are afraid to come here."

She gave him a sly look as she retrieved her pancakes, then slid past his chair and sat down. "Think about it, Jayce," she said. "We clear out the gangs, and we seriously reduce the threat level. Maybe that would convince more people to come here."

Why does that interest you, Symone? he sent curiously.

Simple, Jayce. I probed Mary when she came over, so I have an idea of what's going on around here. I may just be a house soldier, but I do understand basic military tactics. We're living in a lawless area, so the only way to ensure our safety is to establish our own law. You did that over here on this side of the river, but it's not enough. Those gangs over there will take a shot at Clem, and I don't know about you, but I rather like Mary. She's a sweet girl. I see no reason why we should make them fend for themselves when we can do something to make sure that raid never happens in the first place. You can't afford to be reactive about this, Jason. We have to be pre-emptive. And it goes beyond that. We have limited supplies and limited resources. To better ensure a decent long-term solution, it's only logical that we try to pool our resources with other people out here, people we can

trust. Clem's a good start, because Mary thinks he's the water of Miri when it comes to those old ballistic weapons they use out here, and her husband can fix almost anything. Get a few more people to fill critical roles, like that doctor that treated me and Tim, and you can build a foundation that will attract people to come here, people who have things that we don't. That way we can all live in one place that's relatively safe and share our resources, making everyone's lives better.

Jason had to admit, much as he didn't want to, that she did have a point. The idea of trying to start a community of trustworthy people, helping each other make a better life for themselves out here in this lawless wilderness, had merit. Jason couldn't hunt, knew nothing about gardening, but he could invent things, and what he had here would provide real protection for anyone who lived here. If Clem was here to maintain their weapons, Luke here to fix things, and maybe get Doc Northwood and people who had livestock, and people who knew how to farm, and people who had things that they could use in a way that would help everyone, while they shared the responsibility of keeping the violent people away from their borders....

It wouldn't be easy, that was for sure. It wouldn't be that hard to evict the gangs, but defending their claimed territory from mobile gangs of thugs was an issue. And attracting trustworthy people and finding a way to get everyone down here and set up also would not be easy. It would take a *hell* of a lot of hard work, for one of the main keys of attracting and holding people would be the promise that living here would be in some way better than living where they were now. The promise of something as simple as power, or running water, might be enough to attract a great many people.

Power. Could he find some way to restore power to a large area? Probably. The PPG running his generator could easily power something much larger, since it wasn't even running at 2% maximum running his home generator. He could clamp that bad boy onto a *real* generator, something capable of powering several city blocks. Two of those huge generators in a hospital or other power-critical buildings could probably do it, but it would be safest to get three or four. He'd have to come up with some way to get a single PPG to power all of them, though.

Water. Now that wasn't going to be easy, no matter what he did. Supplying clean water would mean tapping into the current water system, which would mean that he'd have to design a system that pushed around 100,000 gallons of water a day, and deliver it clean through a water pipe system that had been neglected for three years. The easiest approach would be to try to utilize the city's water treatment plant and find some way to get it running. That would be doable if he could get power back to it, but he'd need some people who knew what they were doing to try to get the thing back online. To put out enough pure water, and have enough pressure in the pipes to move it, he'd have to use the current facility. There was nothing that he could easily design or build that could accomplish that task, not that wouldn't take at least a year to get up and running.

Water...that might not be a go. But power, power he could handle.

"What are you thinking about, Jayce?" Tim asked.

"I'm mulling over Symone's idea," he answered. "I have to admit, it's not a bad idea. I don't much like the idea of becoming the police around here, but I have to admit, just the possibility that we might attract just a few people who have what we lack and are willing to join the community makes it an idea worth thinking about."

"You just have to think like a general, Jayce," Symone winked at him.

"And you're what, a corporal?" he asked with a sly smile.

"I'm a general now," she said impudently. "*General* Symone, thank you very much."

"Fine, let me go find a star to pin on you," he said, looking at her bare breasts deliberately.

Symone laughed. "It's six days til I'm up and running, Jayce, so that gives you six days to think it over. I just need you to patch my armor sometime in there, no matter what you decide. I don't want to go out in a situation with my ass hanging out the back of my armor."

"At least I'd love marching behind you," Tim grinned.

Six days. Jason thought about it almost continuously while Symone rapidly healed, thanks to that compound he applied to her bandages that rapidly accelerated her healing process. She ate like a rabid wolf the entire time, putting a *huge* dent in his food reserves, so much so that Jason had to put himself and Tim on a rationing schedule to make sure they had enough food to last til the end of the month.

Symone certainly didn't just lay around. She spent almost every waking moment with Tim, starting to train him in the basics of his talent, which was how to close his mind, and how to open it to varying degrees to leave himself able to hear sending, or hear the thoughts of just one person in a group, and so forth. That took him three days to master to the point where Symone was satisfied, then she moved into the next stage of the training, the basics of sending.

While Symone and Tim did that, Jason attended to a few chores, the first of which was to patch her armor. The laminated yterium armor she had didn't like being patched with raw carbidium, but Jason more or less rammed the patch down its throat regardless of how it might feel about it. He had trouble getting the metals to anneal together, and spent almost a day melding the phase cloth he had with the synthetic phase barrier layer in the armor. Jason had the *organic* version, but what was in the armor was the *inorganic* version, which was actually much stronger than what he had, and they didn't like being fused. It took him two days to complete the repairs, which included buffing out the dings, painting the patches so they matched the surrounding armor, and putting some soft cloth padding inside to replace the gel backing that had been blasted away where the holes had been. He had no spare gel backing, so Symone would just have to make due with the cloth.

After he got that done, he went on a hunting trip with Clem and Luke, learning the basics of hunting. They didn't bag anything, but Clem and Luke were very skilled hunters, and they taught him quite a bit about the basics of hunting deer. Jason had other ideas about how to go about it, though, which basically revolved around firing on deer he spotted from the back of his airbike, but he had to learn how it was done the *normal* way.

That gave him three days to consider the benefits and drawbacks of Symone's idea. The benefits were obvious: gaining access to resources and people with skills that would better his situation and the situation of those within the community as a whole. Securing a section of the wilderness and turning it into more than just a mad competition to survive, a place where people could live in safety and security, and help restore civilization to the wilds, and *dignity* to the citizens.

The drawbacks were also obvious: lots and lots and *lots* of work, on everyone's part. The knowledge that he would be taking on responsibility for others in addition to himself. The requirement to secure the territory, which meant that he might find himself in a position where he would have to fight...for *real*. There was a chance he might have to kill someone.

In a way, that scared him...but in a way, he'd accepted that the instant he decided to abandon the safety of living in Faey society. He didn't like the idea of killing, and he hoped it would never come to that, but he had left New Orleans with a determination to be free that went so far as to defending that by any means necessary, even if it meant killing. He'd always imagined that the first life he'd take would be a Faey, killing one of them when they finally tracked him down and tried to take him, but more likely was the prospect that the first blood he would shed would be human.

Was he willing to kill to protect himself, protect this place, protect the people who came here to seek out a better life? Was he ready to take that ultimate step? Was taking a life worth that?

He looked into his heart and found the answer, late that night as he stared up at the full moon, then saw the shimmering light that was the reflection of the sun off a Faey battle cruiser in orbit.

Yes.

He had been willing to die to be free. Now, he knew that he was willing to kill to keep the freedom he had won for himself.

But he saw much more, laying on his roof and staring up into the shimmering light that was the cruiser slowly traversing the heavens from horizon to horizon. He saw that no matter what they built here, it could be destroyed by that one Faey cruiser up there. They were utterly at the mercy of the

Faey, and no matter how free he remained out here, he would forever enjoy the false sense of freedom a gerbil might feel inside a large cage. Spacious and the occupant wanting for nothing, but still trapped within boundaries that made that sense of freedom a lie.

But there was very little that could be done about that. He would be a single man challenging the might of an empire that spanned 72 star systems, armed with little more than the proverbial stick while they had plasma weaponry. The only equalizing factor he possessed was his own telepathic ability, which would not allow them to take him without a *real* fight. If they wanted him, they had to come down here and battle him with *real* weapons, putting *real* lives on the line. So long as the Faey held the advantage of telepathy, they would retain control over Earth.

He heard Tim's voice down in the front yard, as he and Symone sat on the porch and chatted with Clem and Luke. Clem and his group didn't seem to mind Symone at all, part of her bubbly charm that just made everyone like her. Then again, her being out here probably told them everything they needed to know about where her loyalties were.

Tim. Tim was another telepath. Temika had the potential. There was that other girl too. There *were* human telepaths on Earth.

For the first time, Jason understood just what that really meant. Oh, he knew what it meant to the Faey, but he had never seen it from the other side before.

Telepaths threatened Faey dominance over Earth.

Telepaths *threatened Faey dominance over Earth.*

Telepathy was the only weapon against which the humans had absolutely no defense. Now that humans had reasonable access to Faey technology, now there was only that one advantage separating humans from the Faey.

Talent.

And that was *no* advantage if a Faey came up against a human telepath who had sufficient training.

So, the playing field was technically even now. The only disparity came with numbers and training. There was all of *one* trained human Telepath that Jason knew of on Earth...himself. The Faey vastly outnumbered him, had superior technology, nearly endless resources...and here he was pondering trying to start a rebellion against them.

Could it be done? Probably. It would, however, require three critical things to happen, though:

First, there had to be *many* more telepaths. Jason could probably protect three or four people from telepathic attack if they were close to him, so that meant that it would be five people against the world. Any reasonable attempt to rebel would require them to field enough telepaths to make an operation successful.

Second, there had to be some way to establish a home base and have it be either unassailable or totally unable to be found. That wouldn't be easy considering the enemy could see everything from orbit, and he couldn't even power up his skimmer without it getting located, since they were now actively looking for it. He would need to equip that base with enough resources to carry out a campaign against the Faey, from vehicles and weaponry to food and other essential supplies, and find some way to prevent that line of supply from being disrupted.

Third, they had to come up with a plan that would succeed in freeing the human race *without* having Earth break away from the Imperium. The Faey were now almost dependent on the food grown on Earth to feed their colonies, and any rebellion that threatened that food supply might cause the Faey to destroy the human race out of retaliation. That would be a very, very, *very* tricky proposition. On the other hand, now that the other spacefaring races knew about Earth, they were probably going to *need* the Faey's military protection, or they'd just replace one conquering race with another. The human race was now, for better or worse, bound to the Faey by ties that neither side could afford to have broken. What the human race could only hope for in that situation was to win the right to govern itself, but still deliver the food that the Imperium desperately needed and be subject to the Imperial crown. A subject principality, autonomous to a point yet still answering to another government.

Three nasty little problems, any of which was by itself a monkey wrench in the gears. But everything else hinged on the lack of telepaths.

If he could get the telepaths, he would need to find an untouchable base. If he could find the base and man it, they could rebel against the Faey. And if he rebelled, he would walk a razor's edge trying to balance the severity of the attacks against angering the Empress Dahnai. Be a thorn in the side of Trillane, but not so greatly disrupt things that Dahnai sent in Imperial troops to deal with him. Keep it against the humans and House Trillane, try to make them look so incompetent that Empress Dahnai would take Earth away from them, then try to convince her to give the humans a chance to do it themselves.

In the short term, the heavily outnumbered humans would need an edge, an aspect that made them exceptionally dangerous to the Faey who would be opposing them. The railgun he designed would help arm them, if he could mass produce it, and would be effective enough to put them on an even footing. But he had to plan for when Trillane brought their *real* military equipment, the exomechs and the fighters and the hoverships and the autonomic battle robots. They needed weapons against *those*, not against the small numbers of infantry holding the planet, who were outfitted in obsolete gear made for a war some century ago.

He had several ideas. Jason had researched those military machines—at least as much as he could find out in the public domain—and though they were formidable, they were not invincible. With some ingenuity and some experimentation, he could devise counters to them. But to do that, he needed *real* equipment, he needed more information, and he needed the ability to move heavy equipment around without detection.

He already had his skimmer and his airbikes, and that was a start. The skimmer could be his means to the outside world. The skimmer was parked because he couldn't move it without detection...so he figured that was his first major objective. He had to find a way to be able to move the skimmer without the Faey picking it up.

He needed...a *cloaking device*.

Corny as it may sound, that was what he needed. But, since there were no Klingons around to show him how the ones from the old *Star Trek* universe worked, he needed a way to figure out how to make one for himself, something that hid the skimmer from sensors, and even from the naked eye. If he gained the ability to move at will, undetected, it would open up the entire world to him, maybe even the entire universe. After all, that stargate was out there, just beyond the orbital track of the moon, and it *never closed*. Any ship could go through it, and that stargate went directly to Draconis Prime. Off of Earth, he could buy things they needed, using what money he had left, things Kumi wouldn't buy for him when she realized that he was actively opposing her noble house.

Houses. The nobles houses of the Faey didn't like each other. They were a feudal society, where each house looked after its own, then worried about Imperial concerns. If he could find another noble house that might help him overthrow the Faey, believing that they were going to get Earth, he might be able to trick one of them into helping him evict Trillane, then backstab them when he tried to get the Empress to give the human race the chance to run their own world.

God, this was insane. Even if he tried, the chance of him pulling it off was virtually infinitesimal. It would take wild luck, dedication, and an unswerving dedication to independence. It would take years, it would take patience, and it would take a willingness to sacrifice his life if need be to further the cause.

But what else was there? Life inside the gilded cage? He'd rather die free than live in this glass bottle.

Symone appeared in front of him, climbing up the ladder. Her wounds were almost completely healed, just a small sore in her shoulder now. They did leave very faint scars on her legs, and there was going to be a noticable scar marring the blue skin of her shoulder, but it wasn't going to be disfiguring. It was too bad that healing compound wouldn't work on Tim, but they had no way to apply it to his

broken bone short of injecting it directly in there...and they didn't have the equipment to do that. They certainly did in a Faey hospital, but not out here. They wouldn't do that anyway, they'd just use a bone fuser. Five minutes, bone mended, just like that. She sat down beside him, then flopped on her back as he was and looked up at the sky. *So, tomorrow you answer me*, she sent.

We're doing it, he replied without much enthusiasm, his distaste of it clearly in his sending. *But it will not be a bloodbath. Do we understand one another?*

We won't have to fire a shot, Jayce, trust me, she answered. *I don't like killing people when there's no need for it, you know me better than that. We just slip in, track them down, then capture them and strip them of their weapons. Remember, they're humans, totally defenseless against our talent. We don't even have to get within sight of them, just doink 'em and that's it. We have Clem or Tim or someone watch over the ones we catch until we have them all, then we lay down the law and let them go. We'll be done by dinner.*

I hope it's that easy, he sent with an audible sigh.

Something else is bothering you, cutie. What's wrong?

He got up on his elbows and looked at her. She saw the grim look on his face, and the playful smile faded away as she sat up as well. *Symone*, he sent soberly, then he blew out his breath. *How far would you go to protect Tim?*

That's a stupid question, hon, she answered. *My being here should answer that question. I faced that decision already, and I chose Tim.*

I know. You were willing to fight your own people to protect him. But the question is, Symone, would you fight your own people if they weren't threatening him?

What do you mean? I don't understand, Jayce.

You said it yourself, Symone. We need to be pre-emptive. I guess I'm asking you just how pre-emptive you're willing to go.

You just lost me.

Okay, let me put it this way. If I found a way to take on House Trillane and drive them off Earth, would you help?

She gave him a very long look. *Jason, that's treason!* she gasped audibly.

And what you did with Tim isn't? he asked. *And if you'll note, I didn't say rebel against the Imperium. I said rebel against Trillane. There's a difference.*

What kind of difference is that? she asked.

Jason explained his concept to her via sending, using images and feelings as much as he did using words. When he was done, she was quiet for a long time. *Shit*, she sent absently. *Okay, cutie, I'll grant you that it could work, but it depends on so many things to happen just absolutely perfectly that it's really infeasible. It could work, but I could grow hair on my chest and start cracking kobo nuts with my pinkie.*

Jason laughed audibly. *Point taken, but, you know, I—*

I know how you feel. If I were a human, I'd probably feel the same way you do. You want things the way they were. But think about it, cutie, even what you're thinking of doing doesn't make things the way they were. They won't ever be again. Besides, what you're talking about is virtual suicide, and let's not even talk about the kind of force you'd need. There are a million or so Trillane troops on Earth, cutie. To face them, you'll need, oh, about half that number of troops, since you're going to be fighting a guerilla war. Now, not every one has to have talent, but about one out of three does, so they can protect the others. That's a hundred thousand or so trained telepaths, Jayce. There's like no possible way to find that many, train them, then hide them. Then consider that there are about fifty thousand Imperial troops here, and they will fight. It would be really, really hard to run by an Imperial Marine and tell her that your fight isn't with her, cause she'll shoot you in the back. And if you do fight her, you just got Empress Dahnai pissed at you. It makes it really hard to plead your case with her when you're shooting her troops.

But, I'll tell you what, some of your ideas make sense to work for even if you never go to that next step. Faey-proofing a piece of this place is a good idea. Being able to move around in the skimmer is a great idea. Arming some people we can trust out here with weapons that my old house will respect is another good idea. Creating a hiding place to use as a last resort in case we have to run is another very good idea. Inventing a few new things to whip out as surprises is a good idea. This is our turf now, cutie, and we should defend it, even from my former house. If they poke their noses around, they get them shot off. After we give fair warning, anyway, she sent with a wink.

Jason sighed. He didn't consider some of those possibilities, and she was more or less right. *Okay, so it is a bit far-fetched, he admitted. But I won't ever give up on the idea of it, Symone. Even if it's utterly hopeless, I'll still work towards it, because so long as I do, then I haven't given up, and I'll be able to look at myself in the mirror every morning.*

Nothing wrong with that, cutie, she sent quite seriously. Nothing wrong at all.

Thanks, Symone. I didn't realize you were so military-minded.

I did manage to stay awake during basic combat training, she grinned, looking over at him. Actually, I'm pretty good at it. I have my first class sniper ribbon, I'll have you know.

Have you ever fought anyone?

Sure, she answered. House soldiers fight a hell of a lot more than a Marine does. I've been involved in four separate incidents between my house and another. Basically all four were just skirmishes, but we did shoot at each other. The Empress frowns on it, but it goes on.

What kind of skirmishes?

Just basic stupid shit, she answered. Defending my post from raids. Once they slated me to go on a raid, but it got called off.

Raid?

When one house sends soldiers to attack a position belonging to another house, she explained. This military position, that factory, just idiotic stunts the nobles pull to piss each other off and get commoners killed. The Empress doesn't like houses to raid each other because she says it weakens our overall defense and industrial output. Personally, I think she's right, but they should stop it just because it's damn silly. So you didn't like what that Countess in that other house said, fine, but that's no reason to send a dropship of armed women down to a hovercar windshield factory and blow it up. That's just stupid.

Jason chuckled absently. "I guess it is at that," he agreed aloud. "So, we have a date tomorrow. You feel like you'll be ready?"

Hell yes, she answered, putting her hand on her injured shoulder and rotating her shoulder a few times. The only place it hurts is right on my skin, everything else is healed up. There wasn't any permanent damage, and what little's left'll probably be healed by tomorrow morning. I already tried on my armor, and those patches you did really look good. Those cloth swaths inside feel weird, but until we get some extra gel-back, I can live with it. How we gonna play it?

Disarm, round up, then lay down the law, he answered. No killing unless they start throwing explosives at us or something, you know, like using weapons that might actually hurt us. I want this to be as bloodless as possible.

Aren't we chasing them out?

He nodded. *But we're not throwing them out with nothing. We find their food storage and split it up evenly between them, then let them leave with it. We'll hit the west end gang first, then hit the downtown, then hit the east end gang. With some luck, we'll have all of Huntington cleared out by sunset.*

We giving them any warning?

And ruin the surprise? That's not smart, he smiled. You'll use the hoverbike, I'll use the antigrav pods in my armor. That way we can move fast if necessary.

Trelle's Garland, I'd love armor like yours, she said with a lusty sigh. That's what we get issued

when we're just about anywhere other than here. Most of the career types buy their own armor. I think now I wish I would have done that, but a good suit of armor costs about a year's salary.

What, about thirty thousand or so?

Try about fifty thousand.

Hmm, he mused. I think I need to find a way to get access to my bank account without anyone noticing. They're still sending royalty payments to it.

Call that overly clever Trillane. I'm sure she knows someone that knows someone that can pull it off. She'll probably keep half of it, but getting some of it is better than getting none, she added with a wink.

That's an idea, he sent with a nod. In fact, I'll do that now.

Cool, I'll go make something to eat.

He went back down into the house using the attic window, then went to his bedroom. He moved everything back into the master bedroom, mainly because the itcher wasn't in use anymore. Now all he had were his street mines and proximity sensors, but with Clem here, that was enough time to get back to the house and get weapons. His panel was open and up, currently just showing a map of Chesapeake and the status of his sensors and traps, for the panel now ran the defenses. He put that process into the background and brought up the comm, then called Kumi's private number.

She appeared wearing a floppy shirt of some kind, and the room was dark. Jason cursed to himself and blew out his breath. "Damn it, I'm sorry Kumi," he said before she could say a word. "I misread the time."

"Not a problem, babe," she answered alertly. "I was *about* to go to bed. If you'd have called twenty minutes later, then I'd have been mad."

"What time is it there?"

"Midnight," she answered. "I'm turning in early. So, what'cha need, babe?"

"How hard would it be to find someone to make the royalty payments I'm getting from the Ministry of Science to go to another bank account?"

Her eyes brightened. "I've been waiting for you to ask me about that," she grinned. "Hold on a second." She vanished from in front of her vidlink for almost two minutes, then came back and furiously typed something. "Okay, babe, thumb your panel."

"Why?"

"Just do it, nit," she told him brusquely.

Uncertain over her motives but trusting her, he did as she asked. "Okay, babe, there should be an account file uploading to your panel."

He looked down, and saw that there was indeed. He also noticed that their comm session had shifted into a secure mode, something he'd never seen before. "Yeah, welcome to Trillane's *Goreda* Security Protocol," she winked. "Not even the Secret Police can track what we're doing now. Okay, that account file is a bank account out of Moridon. The First Bank of Moridon, to be precise. It's a neutral planet, sovereign, that specializes in banking and finances. Nobody conquers them because most governments in the galaxy use Moridon as a kind of neutral meeting place."

"And I bet that's where you have that secret bank account you have set up," he smiled.

She nodded. "Moridons don't tell anyone *shit* about their customers," she told him. "And their computer security makes us look like we're still using electricity. Now, open the file."

He did so. It was a bank account file, and to his surprise, it had his name on it. "You already set it up?" he asked in surprise.

"I set up that part of it," she answered. "When you thumbed up, you activated the account. I can't fake that, like I said, Moridons have pretty strong security. Now, just give me a few minutes. Those royalty payments right now are being channeled to *my* account," she admitted with a grin. "I figured what the hell, you couldn't use it, and the Ministry won't stop sending the payments unless you're confirmed dead. That's the law. Even if you were in prison, they'd still pay you."

“You were stealing my money?” he asked, then he laughed. “Kumi!”

“Hey, I never said I was nice,” she winked. “I’ll give it back to you. Minus a twenty five percent fee, of course,” she said with a smirk.

“Kumi, you’re *evil*!” he laughed.

“I know,” she admitted. “Hold on, I gotta remember how to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Redirect the money. Someone else did this for me, and he left me instructions on how to change it if I ever wanted it to go to a different account. He’s a computer wiz, someone I met at one of my parties. He’s a *zarin* in House Trefani. Trefani’s infamous for being the main house behind organized crime,” she told him. “Here it is. Give me a few minutes. I have to go to the Ministry and change the account number. Hold on a few.”

Jason wasn’t sure whether to be mad or amused. Kumi had had that friend of hers hack the Ministry and redirect Jason’s royalty payments to her own account, and hadn’t said anything. She could have offered to do it for him, but had instead kept quiet. But, on the other hand, the instant he asked about it she came clean. So, it wasn’t like she was going to be deliberately deceptive...she was just seeing how much she could get away with. He watched her face as she typed on the keys of her comm panel or panel or whatever she was using, and decided that he’d forgive her this time. “Okay, I’m done. The contact info for the bank is in that file, you just connect to them through Civnet or call them. They’ll demand a retinal scan before I can send any money into the account, you thumbing it just activated an application. So call the bank and get that done, then call me back.”

“Got it. Talk to you in a few.”

She nodded and her picture vanished. Jason noted that the panel came out of that secure mode, then deleted a bunch of data out of its memory. Probably the client program for that security protocol.

Jason called the number in the file, and found himself looking at a rather scary-looking creature with black skin, glowing red eyes, and large curled horns growing out of its head. If Jason had ever imagined a demon, that’s what it would look like. “First Bank of Moridon,” the creature said in a surprisingly pleasant voice.

“Uh, yeah, I just activated an account I set up over Civnet,” he told the creature. “I was told I needed to call in and provide a retinal scan before I could deposit money in it.”

“Race?” he asked.

“Human—er, Terran,” he corrected, recalling that they weren’t called *humans* by the Faey, at least officially.

“One moment while I call up a biological profile. Retinal scan is an identity method we use for *some* races,” it explained, obviously seeing the question in Jason’s eyes. “Once I have your biological data, I’ll connect you with a bank officer which can assist you.”

“I understand. You have to find a way for secure identity with my race.”

“Yes,” it nodded. “I have the data. One moment while I transfer you.”

Jason found himself looking at a tasteful logo for the bank, with three pyramids pointing corners at a white globe in the middle, almost reminiscent of the old nuclear symbol that used to be prevalent on Earth before the subjugation. After just a few seconds, he found himself staring at another black-skinned horned creature, but this one had glowing green eyes, and had a sharper face. “Mr. Jason Fox?” it asked in a higher-pitched voice. A female? “I am Gurath Ka’Than, assistant account officer. You wish to verify identity to fully open the account you applied for?”

He nodded. “What do you need me to do?”

“One moment please,” it asked, reading something to the side of the window where Jason’s face probably was. “I see here that I have several options for secure authentication. You’re remarkably similar to the Faey,” it noted. “You used a unique external signature to activate the first phase of the opening process, a unique digit print. Our policy is to require at least three separate and unique biometric signatures for personal transactions. This print pattern of the thumb will serve as the first. I

read here that your retinal patterns are also unique, so that will be the second. A spectrographic pattern will serve as the third.” It typed something on its keyboard, then looked at him. “Look at your monitor please, and remain still.”

Unsure, he did as it asked, and there was a dull red flash over his monitor window. He blinked a few times and got a minor headache. “Thank you. Your biometric data is being added to your account. Remember that any time you wish to conduct business over Civnet, you need access to a vidlink-enabled communication device. Our automated computer banking services require video ability to authenticate your retinal pattern and spectrographic pattern.”

“That’s all you need?”

“For authentication, but there’s some paperwork that needs filled out before your account is fully open. I’ll need your thumbprint signature on this form,” it said, and a text form appeared in place of its face. “Please take a moment to read it, then sign on the line at the bottom and press your thumb to your monitor in the red box when complete.”

Jason read it over. It was a contract agreement between him and the bank, spelling out the bank’s services and fees and its security, and a list of conditions that went with the account. He found their banking policies quite attractive, but also noticed that the fees for this account were rather high. But then again, this was a “numbered account,” completely anonymous to the outside world and all information about it savagely defended by the bank, the kind of account a criminal or very rich person would have. The fees were high, but the account offered quite a few services. Virtually any financial service he could dream of, legal services, all conducted with the utmost privacy and anonymity, and since his was a very prestigious kind of account, they even offered transportation services and concierge services on planets where the bank had a branch.

Jason pressed his thumb in the proper place and then used the rarely used dowel to sign on the line, which caused the form to flash a few times and then vanish. “Very good,” the creature whose face reappeared said. “Your account is open. Verification is being sent to your comm panel now. May I register this comm panel as your personal contact number? I assure you, it will *never* be used unless there is an emergency that requires your immediate notification. The privacy of our clients is our utmost concern.”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” he answered.

“Welcome to the First Bank of Moridon,” it said with a smile that showed all kinds of nasty-looking, pointed red teeth. “Your account is now active. Please keep in mind that you need to transfer at least five hundred credits into the account by the end of business tomorrow, standard time, to cover the initial fees.”

“I understand.”

“If you have any questions about our services or your account, feel free to call or access us through Civnet.”

“I will. Thank you.”

It nodded. “Have a pleasant day.”

Jason had to shudder a little bit. *That* was a Moridon? They were *creepy*.

He called Kumi back quickly. She appeared again, but with the lights on this time. “You done?” she asked.

He nodded.

“I already changed things at the Ministry so your payments go to your new account. Now I need to transfer over what I already got, and you have to set up the transfer of my twenty five percent to *my* account,” she said with a greedy little smile. “You’ll do that through the bank. Just call them back and tell them that you want a quarter of payments from the Ministry transferred to another account. They’ll be able to set it up.”

“A quarter? Well, we might have to talk about that, seeing as how you tried to steal it in the first place,” he said with a slight smile.

She laughed. "Okay, you got me. Twenty percent."

"Let's try ten."

"Fifteen."

"Deal," Jason said immediately.

"Okay, I'm transferring your money over. You *do* trust that I'm sending what I'm supposed to, don't you?" she asked winsomely as her fingers flew across her keyboard.

"I guess," he chuckled. "Do you need me to authorize it?"

"Nah, the bank will accept any *deposit* without you having to authorize it. In fact, it's there now," she told him. "I've got three royalty payments, totalling about two hundred thousand credits, so I'm sending over a hundred and fifty. I *still* get a quarter of what I already have," she said with an outrageous grin. "Besides, I need that money. I threw a wild party a couple of days ago, and I paid for it using this money. I'm sending over one fifty cause it's all I *have*."

"Well, you might just have to go into debt," he mused, then he laughed at her outraged look. "It's alright, Kumi," he assured her.

"Don't make a young girl old, babe," she said darkly. "Oh, is that other one with you now?"

"What other one?"

"I'm a *Trillane*, babe. I heard about another human expressing, one that's a friend of yours. They shot down him and a Faey who helped him not far from where I met you, so I guess they were coming to see you. Did they reach you?"

"They think they're alive?" he gasped.

"Not for sure, but they sent back a recovery dropship to find the bodies and recover the wreckage of the skimmer. They got the skimmer, but couldn't find the bodies. They think they were swept away by the river current, but then I got to thinking. If that Faey was in her armor, she'd survive the crash easily, so I think they're still alive."

Wow. Tank and Willy must have collected them up, then Jason arrived and took everyone away before the recovery ship arrived. Luck and *timing* had saved Tim and Symone...and him too.

"I see from your reaction they made it to you," she winked. "Well, your secret is safe with me, babe. Okay, I'm sending you my bank account number. Remember, fifteen percent. I trust you."

"I'll take care of it. You need to get to sleep, Kumi."

"Yeah, that's a good idea. I have a long day tomorrow," she said.

"Doing what?"

"I have *bartha* practice in the morning, then I have my *tumiya* lessons," she said, looking down. Bartha was a game, vaguely similar to hockey or soccer, played by teams of seven. The objective was to knock a ball through the opposing goal, but the ball had a suspensor field in it that made it float, and the players wielded large bat-like devices to hit the ball. What made it different was that the goal was about thirty feet in the air, and was defended by a robotic blocker operated by one of the players, the "goalie." That person had to both play the game and defend the goal, which made it the most demanding position. He remembered watching it late one night on TV. A *tumiya* was a ten-stringed instrument similar to a guitar, but it sounded more like a plucked violin. It was one of the instruments played in most Faey orchestras. "I also have a doctor's appointment. I forgot about that," she grunted. "After that I have a party to go to," she winked.

"Sounds like a full day," he noted.

"Yeah, usually I don't have that many things happening on one day. Just a schedule convergence, I guess," she chuckled. "Oh, yeah, thought you should know something."

"What?"

"All my girlfriends think you're *gorgeous*," she said with an outrageous grin. Then she ended the call.

Think he's—she *didn't*! She did! She showed that picture of him she took to her friends!

That, that, that *rat*! She promised she wouldn't do anything with it!

He felt a sudden flare of indignation, and not a little embarrassment, then he laughed helplessly. She did say that, but she didn't promise not to show it to her friends.

Oh well, he'd have to come up with a way to get her, that was for sure. No way he could leave that alone.

Awful brave of her to say that *before* he set up giving her her split.

But he was a man of his word, and giving her 15% wasn't much to ask for getting access to his money. With an untracable panel (also thanks to Kumi), he could buy things...he just had to figure out how to get it to him.

Kumi, of course.

He'd have to avail himself of the Kumi Delivery Service soon. There was something he wanted, and besides, he had to get her back.

Clearing out Huntington was an exercise in amusement if anything else.

By sunrise, they were armored and ready. Symone fidgeted a bit as she got it settled on her, and Tim, his cast now covered in little drawings and sketches that Symone had put on it (many of which were quite nice, Symone was talented as an artist), sat in front of Jason's panel with a headset on his head and ready to do his part. Jason had reconfigured both his and Symone's telemetry to broadcast on a threaded hyperfrequency with a range of only about five miles, and the receiver was patched into his panel. That telemetry included audio and video, for Faey armor came standard with cameras, microphones, and sensors that kept track of the wearer's vital signs. Armed with an accurate map of Huntington and surrounding towns, Tim was ready to track their movements and serve as a second pair of eyes for them. Though his broken arm and lack of armor meant he couldn't directly help, he could still do what he could to further the cause.

"Ready, Jayce?" Symone asked as she had Tim push down on the shoulders of her armor, to settle it into place.

Jason nodded, and then went over and turned on the CB he'd gotten. He tuned it to channel 19, which was the channel everyone used, and a channel he was positive all the gangs listened to in order to try to track down and catch others. "Keep an ear on that channel, Tim," he told his friend. "That's what the locals use. And on the desk is a radio the downtown gang uses. If you hear anything interesting, let us know."

"You got it, Jayce," Tim nodded, sitting down and slapping the tabletop. "I'm ready."

"Let's go clean out some low-lives," Symone winked at Jason before putting on her helmet.

With Tim directing them, they quickly and efficiently swept Huntington clean. They started in the west end, all the way in Kenova. Symone and Jason used their talent to track down anyone in the vicinity, then Symone did the honors of subduing them with telepathy, to hide Jason's talent from them. It was done at a distance, and since at first nobody realized what they were doing, it was ridiculously easy. They were disarmed, tied up, then Symone transported them to a central location with her airbike while Jason tracked down their next target. Symone was putting them in the old Redmen Bingo hall at the foot of the west end bridge. Tim would guide her back to Jason, and they'd do it again.

It took just two hours to round up the west end gang, first by capturing their patrols, then assaulting their home base. Jason was impressed by Symone when she barged in and quickly subdued twenty humans in a matter of moments, letting them shoot at her to their heart's content. There had been one injury when a ricocheted bullet hit a man in the shin, but it wasn't serious at all. They then ranged up into downtown Huntington, and it took them about three hours to round up the sixty or so members of the downtown gang, first the patrols and then the two concentrations of unmoving gang members. The east end, though, was a bit trickier. They had more territory and were spread out, and besides, by then they knew that something was going on. The last remnants of the downtown gang suspected that someone was out there taking out their patrols, and the east end gang immediately realized it when their

first patrol didn't respond. Rounding up the last remnants of the gang had required some actual firing, because they'd lobbed some hand grenades at Symone as she approached the State Police barracks where they holed up. Jason and Symone backed off, and Jason demonstrated some of the more interesting aspects of his railgun...such as its ability to go through concrete and steel like it wasn't there. Seeing an array of bluish corkscrew trails appear over their heads, and seeing the neat holes that it put in the walls—*both* walls!—even punching holes in glass without shattering it, took the fight right out of them. They quickly realized that Jason could just stand outside and turn the building into swiss cheese, and there was absolutely *nowhere* they could go to escape from it.

Surrender was inevitable at that point.

By sunset, they had captured all three gangs, which were tied to chairs at the bingo hall, and it was over. Jason and Symone transported the sixteen gang members that were the last ones caught back to the bingo hall, and then they got up on one of the tables so they could all see them. They weren't surprised at all when Symone took off her helmet, but they were a bit surprised to see Jason under the other suit of armor.

"Good, I have your attention," Jason told them as he looked over the hundred and twenty or so people tied to chairs in the hall. "As you can see, I've been joined by a Faey. She's a good friend of mine from the outside world, and after a little altercation, she decided that living out here was better than spending the rest of her life in a prison. But enough of that. When she got here, she raised some pretty valid arguments as to why I tolerate you people living over here, especially since I *know* you know that another family's moved in down the street from me. She also raised some interesting notions about attracting people to this area and forming a community that works together instead of fighting each other, and wouldn't you know, I think she had some damn good ideas.

"So, this is what's going to happen. My lovely assistant here is going to find out where you keep all your weapons and food stores. All of them, right down to your oldest pellet gun and dented can of beans."

"That's me," Symone said in English with a wide grin, waving at the crowd. "Emphasis on the lovely, of course."

"Of course," Jason drawled. "Given she's a Faey, and it's pretty obvious *how* she's going to find out, we can all be pretty sure that we're not going to miss anything. If you know about it, *we'll* know about it. Once we collect up all your guns, explosive, knives, sharpened toothbrushes, women's frying pans, rubber chickens, you know, everything, we'll let you go. Each of you will be rationed an equal portion of the food stores we collect, allowed to gather your personal possessions, and then you're on your own. That basically means you'll be run out of town, and you'll have to find somewhere else to live.

"But, if you decide you'd rather stay and be a part of the new system, you'll get your chance. My lovely assistant here will verify the sincerity of your claim, and if she deems you honest about wanting to live a more peaceful life, you'll be allowed to remain. Anyone she deems untrustworthy is gone. And do keep in mind, she *is* a Faey. You can't lie to her, you can't hide anything from her, and if you decide later on after you win your chance to live here that you change your mind, she'll know about it immediately."

Jason looked around, and listened to their thoughts. They were shocked, afraid, nervous, and very, very uncertain, but not a few of them seemed to contemplate the possibilities of living without carrying around a gun. "Now, everyone's going to be untied in small groups so you can get a break. I'm sure that some of you need to go to the bathroom, and some of you have been here for a while, so I'm sure you're hungry. We have water and some cans of food in the other room for you, so don't worry."

It went rather well. In groups of ten, Jason and Symone untied them and let them relieve themselves outside, then let them eat and drink quickly in the other room, whose only door opened out into the main room. That left twenty at a time free, but given that their captors had put their helmets back on, which rendered them absolutely invulnerable to anything that the unarmed gang members

could throw at them, took the fight out of them almost as fast as the first and only time Symone used her telepathy to subdue one of the first men she untied. He'd lunged at her, but she didn't even flinch as she took total control of him. She paraded him back and forth for the benefit of the others, even made him strip down to his underwear and sing *I'm a Little Teapot*. That display sucked the resistance right out of them. Some of them had never seen a Faey in person before, having run off to the hills before the evacuation, and only had stories and rumor to go on about Faey telepathy. Seeing it in use, in person, was an eye-opening experience.

By ten, Symone had correlated with Tim on the location of every weapon and food stash owned by all three gangs. By two in the morning, with the help of Luke, Clem, and Mary, they had every one of those stashes. By five, every single scrap of food held by all three gangs was stacked neatly in the bingo hall. All the gang members were all tired from lack of sleep and sore from being tied, which made them perfectly set up for Symone, for their responses would be much more genuine. One by one, Symone took them into the back room. Jason sat in on those sessions while Tim, Luke, and Clem kept guard over the others, as he observed how Symone went about probing the deepest thoughts of the gang members. She would ask them questions, and those questions would trigger thoughts and feelings that she would read, which she used to probe even deeper until she got at the truth she wanted. The time of mindscape was much faster than the physical world, and each interview only took about five minutes.

When all was said and done, 127 people, over 90%, were deemed too much of a risk to be allowed to remain. Oddly enough, the woman who had replaced Joe Bueller as the downtown gang boss, a sharp-faced woman named Regina Thompson, was allowed to remain. Those people were given an equal share of the stockpiled food, and were escorted out of the hall by Jason in groups of five, taken to their homes, allowed to collect up what was theirs, then were driven to the city limit at 5th Street Hill and was effectively kicked out. Jason had no sympathy for them. They were offering them a chance to live *safely*, but many of them wanted nothing of it. They reminded him of the old saying *it is better to rule in hell than serve in heaven*, for that was their mentality. Some of them weren't like that, but their mistrust of Symone was so deep-seated that they couldn't be trusted to stay near her, for they were violently prejudiced against *any* Faey, and not just the *system*. Even Faey who had gone against that system themselves were hated and reviled. Those he did feel a bit sorry for, but Symone had proven herself a hell of a lot more than any of them had.

By noon the next day, the 14 people left were untied and sitting in chairs in the bingo hall. Jason and Symone were still armored, but both had their helmets off. Neither of them looked very tired, but in actuality, Jason was *exhausted*. But he'd never show them that. "We won't hold you here much longer," he told them, standing up on the raised area where they used to call the numbers. "But before we let you go, we need to arrange some things. You'll receive a share of the food here to hold you over for a little while, while we organize how we're going to do things. For right now, I'd like all of you to come over into Chesapeake, or the buildings right around the downtown bridge in Huntington. There are lots of empty houses over there, and it's safer if we're all closer together. We're going to abandon most of Huntington for right now, mainly because we won't need it. Tomorrow, we're going to sit down and have a meeting. We'll find out who can hunt, who can fish, who can farm, and who can fix things. Then we start doing what we're good at and start preparing for winter.

"We have three primary interests," he told them, sitting on the dusty table on the dais. "First, we secure a viable food supply *without* stealing it from other people. Hunting, fishing, farming, gathering. Second, we restore power to as much of Chesapeake and parts of Huntington that we can, both because I think you're all tired of living without power, and getting some freezers going will help us have more food put back for the winter. Third, we get as much farming in as we can before winter. What we can't hunt, grow, or forage, we buy from squatter groups using the guns and equipment that your former gangs had stockpiled. Security is *my* problem," he told them. "This armor and some of the Faey weapons I've managed to get should be enough to discourage just about anyone. And if that doesn't, *she* will," he said, pointing at Symone. "As you know, we humans have no defense against

Faey telepathy, and believe me, right now she's as much in this with us as anyone else. If her people get their hands on her, she'll probably be executed."

"What did you do, miss?" one of the men asked curiously.

"Nothing much hon, I just shot up a military base and rescued my beau from their custody," she winked. "My man's a human, and I'd much rather have *him* than *them*, if you get my meaning."

Their thoughts told him that many of them were impressed by that, because after all, she *was* out here with them. "Keeping everyone safe will be our job, but don't worry, we won't make you *depend* on us. In a couple of days, after everything settles down, you'll each be given back a pistol and a rifle, for protection and for any hunting you might want to do. We're also not going to just be the guys who replaced the old gangs. Everyone will have a say in how we do things, I'm not going to *tell* you what to do. We're trying for the good old days, people. Just trust that I'll do my best to keep us all safe, and that I'm not going to try to be a king, and let's all try being what we used to be, not what the Faey have made of us."

That got him a few nods, and a rumble of consent among them. "Okay, Luke, is the Deuce outside?"

Luke, who was standing by the front door, nodded.

"Alright, me and the lady are going to drive you guys back to where you have your stuff. If you have vehicles or know where to get one, load them up and bring them up to the downtown bridge, but *do not cross it*. It's still trapped, and I don't want anyone getting hurt. If you don't have vehicles, just let us know, and we'll swing back by where you are in a couple of hours and get your stuff moved over. Everyone understand?"

They all nodded.

"Okay people, let's get moving. I'd like everyone settled into a new place before nightfall, so everyone can get some sleep. Including me," he chuckled. "Remember, if you drive over in a car or truck, stop at the bridge but *do not cross it*," he emphasized.

They all stood up, and just a cursory look at their thoughts showed him anxiety, worry, uncertainty, but a little bit of hope. They'd accepted the new order of things because of fear of being alone, or hope that it might actually work out, but one thing he got from these 28 people whom Symone had cleared was that just the *chance* that they'd get power back made them enthusiastic.

Small favors, he guessed.

By nightfall, they had everyone more or less situated. By midnight they were done. Jason was very tired, but he also felt very good.

He'd been surprised at the number of vehicles those old gangs had had. It took a few hours for them to move them all into Chesapeake, parking them on and around Route 7, and every one they brought was filled with the stockpiled goods of the gangs who had owned them. They brought clothes, furniture, their rations of food, personal effects, tools, boxes and boxes of batteries of all kinds, and just about anything Jason had ever seen that was battery operated, anything they thought might be of use and anything they didn't want taken when the scavengers in the hills descended on the city like a pack of wolves when it became common knowledge that the city had been abandoned.

But they certainly wouldn't find much. The former gang members knew where everything was, and they were very efficient about stripping virtually anything of use and bringing it with them. As per Jason's request, any large-scale tools or equipment were left in the houses beside his, which had become the official storage buildings for tools and were close at hand to be defended, because they were going to need tools. Surplus clothing or gear that had been gang property rather than personal property was also stored in the houses on his block, to be handed out or traded as it was needed.

Jason finally crawled into bed about two in the morning. He was utterly exhausted, but he had hope.

That next day was just as busy. Jason sat down with everyone, including Clem and his group, on

chairs and benches assembled outside his house. As per his request, nobody had claimed a house on either his block or the one his house faced, a safety zone around him and their communal property that would help protect critical equipment in case of attack. It left him plenty of room to set out traps without worrying about killing someone by accident. What started as an official meeting quickly became an unplanned barbecue when Mary and Ruth brought out two entire butchered deer and started cooking it for everyone. In that 14, Jason was pleasantly surprised to find an engineer, one Steve Harris, a short fellow in his late thirties with prematurely balding blond hair and a pair of glasses taped on one side hanging precariously from the end of a narrow nose. His face was narrow and drawn, but his blue eyes were excited. Steve, it turned out, had been an electrical engineer for an oil refinery in Texas before the subjugation, and his knowledge of industrial electrical systems would be absolutely critical for building a new power grid in Chesapeake. What made it even better was that he'd been trained in basic Faey systems, having gone through their school, and had been working as a systems technician in Columbus. He'd been in the west end gang, but out of happenstance more than anything else. He'd ended up in the wilderness after he'd hit a car in a traffic accident, and had panicked and ran away because he had already had two arrests for drunken driving. A third arrest for *anything* would mean being packed off to a farm, and he'd been terrified of that idea, so much so that he risked death in the wilderness rather than face a farm. He'd managed to live long enough to make it to Huntington, and after the west end gang caught him, he offered to fix things for them in exchange for food and protection. Steve was by no means a survivor or warrior.

Steve was the only true technical find in that group, but Jason found himself with quite a few proficient hunters, and a few that were rather good at gardening, and several who were good at car repair. There was also a carpenter and a construction worker in that group.

Jason liked the odds now, though. With him, Tim, and Steve, they should be able to come up with something.

That would be later though. After a good meal, they held their first town meeting.

"What's a town meeting for?" one of them asked, a tall black man named Leamon Lacy, who had the body of a basketball player and an impressive flat-top.

"Well, there's, what, twenty-two of us?" Jason asked, then he nodded at his count. "We need some kind of *official* leadership. I told you I won't order you guys around. So, we're going to elect a city council and a mayor. Three council seats who advise the mayor, and the mayor who'll be responsible for most day to day decisions. Anything important comes up for a vote by the council, and major issues are voted on by the whole community, not just being decided by a few people," he cautioned. "Just like the way things used to be."

"Couldn't this mayor just change the rules?" Leamon asked.

"Well, I guess so," he said, glancing at Tim, who just shrugged. "If you guys let him, anyway."

"Okay then, I nominate *you* for mayor, Mister Jason," he announced. "You I think I can trust, cause you've done everything you said you'd do so far. I don't think I trust any of these other yahoos."

"You're one of us yahoos, Lacy," someone called with a laugh. "But I'll second that nomination."

Jason was a bit flustered with that, because in short order, he was elected mayor of the community. Leamon Lacy, the old gang boss Regina Thompson, and Clem were elected to the city council.

After that was dropped in his lap, they finalized their immediate plans. The hunters would fan out and start bringing down game that would be stored in every working freezer that they could find that they could fit into the house on the other side of his house from the storage house, which Jason was going to patch into his working electricity so they had a way to store it. Ruth would take her farming group down east of the bridge and start cultivating that land out there, at least after Luke and a few men went down there and tore down some houses to make room for farmland by using a bulldozer that Luke had managed to get running. Tim and Steve were going to get the electricity going in the house by Jason's for the freezers, and Luke was going to take a few of the younger, more burly men out and find those freezers, then go clear room for Ruth's farmland. There were only 21 people and several major

tasks, so some people found themselves working on a farm in the morning, then running out and hunting in the afternoon, for example.

Jason tracked down the community's best tailors, and got a group of four who had extensive experience. He told them about the phase cloth he had, how it was bulletproof, and assigned them the task of making each and every person a shirt or jacket and a pair of pants with the phase cloth as a lining. Getting people into armored clothing quickly was very important, for it would help protect them if a large group of armed attackers raided their community. How they accomplished this task was up to them, but it was a task that was very important, and one they had to accomplish quickly.

They also elected two "deputies," Luke and Irwin Preece. They would be given Jason's two hunting plasma rifles, and they would be at Jason's call if he and Symone needed reinforcements while dealing with invaders. Both Luke and Irwin had been in the army, and both had seen actual combat, back in the second Gulf War on top of the battle experience they'd received out in the wilderness, so they were sensible choices. Jason, Symone, Luke, and Irwin were the group's official "army," responsible for protecting the community from outside aggression.

It was rather late, so Jason called the meeting to an end and told them they'd get to work tomorrow, and they spent the rest of the night getting to know each other and enjoying the venison that Ruth and Mary had graciously cooked for them.

Jason was surprised at the willingness of these people to work together, but their thoughts and their attitudes showed them to be sincere. Not two days ago, most of them were enemies, but now they were working side by side. He was a bit surprised, at least until he looked at them and heard their thoughts, and heard the *hope* that was blossoming there. These were the people that Symone had assured him were most receptive to the idea of living in a community that worked together instead of stole what they needed, and she had been proven right on the mark so far. They were willing to give it a try, even if things seemed unusual, and they were just a little intimidated by Symone and her power. They hoped that it would mean a chance to get electricity in their houses. They hoped that it would put a stop to the violence and insanity that their world had become. They hoped for a chance to raise children in a safe place. They *hoped*.

And that was a good thing.

The lack of children had been something that Jason hadn't really thought of until he heard it in their thoughts. None of the gang members had children, not even infants. The only child in the entire community was Mary and Luke's daughter, Jenny. That struck Jason as odd until he asked Regina, who explained calmly that all *her* women stayed on birth control pills, that having infants around was a major liability for a group that made its living through armed conflict. And in a way, he realized that that was probably the truth.

Late that night, Jason, Tim, and Symone sat on his porch, enjoying the surprisingly cool night air and watching a thunderstorm move in from the northwest. *You know, setting up power in a wide area is going to attract my people*, Symone warned him.

I don't see why, Jason replied. *I'm sure that a few squatter groups out there somewhere have managed to get power back on somewhere.*

And I'm pretty sure that that attracted my people too, she answered. *I'm not saying it's a bad idea, but let's not light up all of Huntington.*

"Well guys, I'm *really* tired, and I want to get an early start in the morning," Tim said with a yawn. "Not sure how much use I'm going to be with this cast, but I'll do my best."

"I'm sure you'll do just fine," Jason told him. "You want to do the patrol first, or me?" he asked Symone.

"We need to install a better sensor system," she grunted. "It'd be nice if we could see them coming from the hilltops."

"We'll add it to the list," he said. "Right now I need to go call Jyslin. She hasn't answered her phone for like four days now."

"You haven't tried to call for two."

"Well, if I don't call, then she didn't answer, did she?" he asked with calm logic.

She laughed as he got up, then she smacked him fondly on the backside. "I'll armor up and go look around," she said. "Then it's bedtime for me."

Jason went inside and to his room, then sat down in front of his panel. He called Jyslin's number, and was relieved when she picked it up within three seconds. It was audio only, a picture of her on his screen. "What?" she demanded.

"It's about time," Jason said.

She appeared immediately, and Jason gasped. Her hair was a frazzled mess, and her eyes looked hollow and slightly unfocused. There was a bit of dried blood on the corner of her lip as well. "What happened?" he asked immediately.

"I just got back from a long chat with the Secret Police, that's what," she answered wearily. "They seem to think I know something, given how you vanish, then Tim expresses, and Symone steals him out from under the nose of House Trillane and gets them both killed trying to escape." Of course Jyslin knew that wasn't the case, but he realized quickly that they probably had a tap on her communications, so she had to play this carefully. "That's three people gone, and I'm in the middle of all of them."

"They're looking for me?"

"Of course they're looking for you, dink," she said waspishly. "And they know you talk to me. They want me to try to convince you to come back, because nobody has the faintest bloody fucking idea where you are, and there's certainly nothing that anyone can do to find you using your panel. They've already tried tracking your signal, but they can't figure out where it's coming from. How did you do that?"

"A good magician never reveals his secrets," Jason smiled.

"Well, you have about half of the comm people over here tearing out their hair," she told him. "One guy swears your signal is coming from the moon. So, are you coming back?"

"Hell no."

"Well, I tried," she grunted, closing her eyes and rubbing her temple gingerly.

"Are you alright, Jyslin?" he asked.

"I'll be alright," she said with a sigh. "Having a little chat with mindbenders is never very fun, especially when they think you're hiding something. They drug me behind the *topo*, but they found out I don't know any more than what I told them, that I really did have no idea you planned to run, and I have no clue what wild hair got up Symone's ass to make her do what she did. I'm still a bit shocked that Tim expressed, but it's not like it matters now." He had no idea what that expression meant, but that last part told him that Jyslin's formidable telepathic ability had managed to repel the mindbenders who had probed her, fooled them using her ability that she knew no more than what she claimed. Jyslin was a *very* powerful telepath, and was more than a match for the average mindbender. Though she was young, Jyslin had been a fully expressed telepath for a *long* time, since she was just a little girl, and that gave her the experience to cross swords with telepaths twice her age. "And all that time, I thought he was having an allergic reaction to something Symone was wearing or using, with the nosebleeds and headaches and shit, just like you did for a while." She saw his concerned look. "After a long sleep and pain pill for a splitting headache, I'll be alright, Jayce, I promise."

"I'll let you get some rest then, hon," he said compassionately, sincere worry flooding him.

"I think that's a good idea," she grunted, putting her head in her hands. "I would tell you to call tomorrow, but I don't think you will."

"Not when they expect it, that's for sure," he told her. "I hope you feel better."

"I will, I just need time."

He sighed. "I miss you."

She gave him the longest look, the blariness gone from her eyes. "I miss you too," she said in English. She put her fingers up against her monitor, and he did the same...and in the strangest way, it

was almost like he could feel her touch. God, he could use her support right now, with all these new people around, and him being thrust into the unwanted role of leader. If anything, he had always felt more secure with Jyslin near him. He could use her smile, and her sense of humor, and her wisdom, and her electrifying touch—

Well, best not to dwell on that.

“Call me soon, alright?” she asked quietly.

“I will, I promise.”

She gave him a longing look, then took her hand from her display. Then her image vanished from the screen. He closed his eyes and blew out his breath, worry for Jyslin flooding through him. God, he hoped she was alright. No telling what those mindbender *bitches* did to her, but Jyslin was a strong telepath, a strong woman. They’d never get anything out of her. He felt the oddest pride that she’d be willing to risk so much for him, that she saw him as that worthy. He also felt pride in her strength, and that she felt he had strength similar to hers.

Well, he’d make her proud, as proud of him as he was of her, that was for sure. He’d do what needed to be done, what was expected of him, and what he had to do to fulfill his promises and keep everyone safe. He had duties now, duties and obligations. He had brought them on himself, but he would carry them out. There were 34 people here now, 34 people who would look to him for protection, protection he had promised to provide to them. And he would provide that protection. He would do what he could and he would keep them safe.

Kiraa, 11 Toraa, 4393, Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 2 September 2007, Native Regional Reckoning

Chesapeake, Ohio (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

The cheer that roared across Chesapeake was almost deafening when the lights came on.

Ten days, that was all it took to restore power to almost fifty different buildings on seven city blocks, a stunningly short amount of time given the amount of work it took. But it worked, and it worked well.

The secret had been in the planning. Tim, Jason, and Steve pored over old electrical grid layout maps of Chesapeake for almost a full day, though that wasn’t the subject at hand for most of that day. The subject was how to generate the electricity. They kicked around several ideas, from pulling a generator from a large building to using the PPG by itself to building their own, but each either would be too hard to implement or wouldn’t provide the power to handle the demands on it. The answer was a combination of home built and the PPG. Steve and Jason used components out of the workshop that Kumi had bought for him to build a generator out of flux cabling and a microprocessor to control the cabling’s magnetic field, with a core yanked out of a pole transformer. Generators usually required that the conductor cut through lines of magnetic force, usually accomplished by turning a core of coiled copper wire inside a magnetic field created by huge stationary magnets. But Jason had flux cabling which created a dynamic magnetic field, just like the magnetic catapult in his railgun, which would create a *moving* magnetic field cutting through a *stationary* core. The only requirement they had was getting a core big enough to handle the power demands that would be placed upon it. Writing a software program to create the necessary 60 Volts had taken all of an hour, and it had been *Steve* who had written it. Steve, it turned out, had quite a bit of experience with Faey TEL language, having learned the basics in school, then finishing his education of it himself out of curiosity.

It took them three days to build the generator. It was about the size of a washer and dryer side by side, flux cabling carefully wrapped around the insulated core with industrial wiring connected to the core. They tested it and confirmed that it did indeed work, though they couldn’t test its ability to carry a load until they hooked it up to something.

Temika dropped by right after they finished the generator. At first she was *very* cautious, for she

had heard all kinds of rumors about what had happened down here, and her first contact with anyone was with people she knew were gang members. But it didn't take long to assure her that Jason was still there. He gave her some lunch and explained what had happened and what they were doing, and after that she left very quickly. She left so fast and without any word that he worried that she was never coming back.

After that, they spent four days setting up their grid. The main thing they did was isolate their habitation area by creating a local grid block, then they inserted the generator in an abandoned store beside the bridge, between the two "minigrids" they had designed. The west grid was residential, and the east grid was to power anything down at the farm that Luke and his bulldozer were still making. After that was done, they installed pole transformers on the pole just outside the generator, which had taken nearly a day because the pole didn't have mounts and those things were damn *heavy*. Then they went out and took the bulbs out of every street lamp that was within the grid while everyone else went into each unoccupied house on the grid and shut off circuit breakers.

Once that was done, they tested the grid for nearly two full days without turning it on, using test equipment. They searched for bad sections of wire, faulty transformers, and any shorts in the lines that would overload the grid and make the generator shut down. After all three signed off on it, they decided to turn it on. They had to have a little ceremony of sorts, of course, so they waited until morning the next day, so they'd have a full day of light to find any problems if it didn't work.

Tim did the honors. He was the one down at the generator—what everyone now called the "power plant"—and he flipped the switch. Both Jason and Steve were holding their breath when he called over the little hand radio that he was bringing up the grid, but they released that breath explosively when the front porch light of the house across the street from Jason's came on.

And they cheered for nearly ten minutes. A few of them danced around. Getting power back was like a dream come true for most of them, and that simple fact more than anything else had made it worth throwing their hat in with Jason. That night, they would sleep in houses that could be lit up just by flipping a switch, not lighting a candle. Some of them would sleep in air conditioning, those whose houses had them and whose units still worked.

Then they got back to work. Jim Wilson was assigned the task that day of bringing the freezers up in stages, the freezers that had been put in the house beside Jason's. They couldn't all be turned on at once or they'd overload the house's wiring, so Jim had to go over every hour and turn on five more freezers, until all 24 were going. The house's wiring started overloading at 15, and the breakers couldn't take anymore at 18, so a change of plans was devised on the spot. The freezers distributed evenly through the houses from that house beside Jason's to the one at the end of the block, which consequently gave them much more room for more freezers. Luke, who was done with bulldozing out room for farms, and Leamon Lacy went out and found more freezers and brought them back while Jim Wilson started turning the freezers on, five at a time, in each house. Jason didn't like the idea of spreading the freezers out among several houses, since it decentralized their food storage, but the house by his just couldn't handle the electrical load, and besides, every house on his block was defended by nature of its location in the middle of the community. People lived on every side of him, just not on his block or the block facing his house.

People started snagging window units out of empty houses after that night, as those without any air conditioning, or with broken air conditioners, sought them out, and there was something of a comical mad dash on the empty houses for working appliances. After seeing people setting things out on the sidewalk, though, Jason called another town meeting that night, and they organized a coherent trash disposal system. They designated the old parking lot of the K-Mart down on Route 52 to be the town's dump for inorganic trash, which was nearly five miles away. That put it more than far enough away. Luke, however, wasn't totally happy about that, and asked that everyone bring their broken appliances to him and Leamon first, to see if they could fix it. If they couldn't, they could strip them of usable parts, then what was left could be sent on to the dump. Organic trash would be taken down to the farm

and dumped on the compost heap to serve as fertilizer for their crops.

Those crops were already growing. They only had about two months of growing season left, so Ruth, who was the farm forewoman, had planted fast-growing crops that they could harvest before the first frost. She was confident that they'd get a good yield, and that combined with the food they had stockpiled already, and at the steady rate that the hunters were bringing in meat, she was confident that they'd have a comfortable winter.

When the power was back up, it gave Jason too much time to worry about Jyslin. He hadn't called her yet, since they'd be expecting it, but there really wasn't much he could do for her. She'd resisted the mindbenders, and knowing her, they wouldn't bother her again, but he just felt bad that she had to go through that. She suffered because of him. Jyslin had really put her neck on the line for him, and for Tim and Symone as well, when by all rights she should have turned them in. It was her Imperial duty. The only thing that had stopped her was their personal relationship. It wasn't even love—at least not love like most people would expect—it was just that they *liked* each other.

He tried to keep his mind off Jyslin with work. The abandoning of Huntington had drawn in a great number of scavengers, most of which were the former gang members, who had indeed waited to see what would happen. While Jason was busy with the power and Luke was busy with his numerous projects, it had been Irwin and Symone who had kept watch over the city. Irwin had already gotten used to his plasma rifle, and he was a *nasty* marksman. He and Symone had had a friendly competition, and he proved the equal of Symone's sniper rating. Symone taught him how to ride the airbike, and he traded patrols with her. The armor making group had hurried to get Irwin the first finished pieces of phase cloth armor, which consisted of regular clothes sewn with thin cotton linings that held the armor cloth between them. They'd used some old sheets they'd taken from the gang stockpiles, and though Irwin complained that it felt weird, and that it was a tad hot to wear in the early September heat wave, he certainly didn't mind *too* much. After the power was restored, the four of them traded patrols in a rotation that kept someone watching over the city most of the time. They did nothing against the scavengers that invaded Huntington, looking for scraps and leftovers, but they *did* actively intervene when any of them tried to cross the river, or came towards their enclave from the Ohio side. Several times over those days they worked on the power, they had all heard the report of a plasma rifle being discharged, as the sentry fired down in front of scavengers from the airbike to scare them away. The airbike's scanners could easily pick up scavengers with its onboard scanner, so there was no way they could sneak up on the enclave. Jason tightened their patrol to ignore most of Huntington and focus mainly on watching over Chesapeake, virtually allowing the sentry to park the bike over the houses of Chesapeake and get everything within a mile in any direction in scanning range, because what happened in Huntington really no longer concerned them. They had everything that they wanted out of the city, and what was left was available to anyone who could find it. Some of the old gang members were very angry, because they couldn't find any guns left behind; Symone had been *very* thorough. But there was little they could do. Everyone in the enclave now had a pistol and rifle, and they were armed at all times. That would matter if they could even get close enough to threaten anyone, because the airbike was over them and they got plasma rained down on them as they tried to get close. And then, even if they got to the edge of the settlement, there was the fact that there were the *traps*. Those gang members still remembered the nasty traps Jason had devised, and they had no idea where any of them were now, since there were many more people over on that side of the river. If they even lived to reach the outer edge of the community, they'd have to deal with armed opponents when they had nothing but homemade weapons.

The strangest part was seeing the scavengers, some of which were old gang members, standing on the West Virginia bank of the river and looking over in the evening hours, just before sunset, and seeing houses with *electric lights* going. Even from across the river, some of them could almost hear them sighing.

The sensor system was first on the list of things needed after getting power restored. That was

simple enough to set up, for they already had a sensor array in a position to do the job. It could *easily* perform the double duty of scanning the valley while it defeated Faey attempts to scan the area for Faey-origin materials and energy signatures. Jason, Tim, and Steve set that up before they started working on the power, because all it took was a little programming of the sensor array to stagger cycles of sweeping the valley with searching for Faey sensor sweeps, and a protocol that told it to stop scanning the valley if it detected a Faey pulse inbound and devote all resources to defeating the pulse. The sensor fed its data back to Jason's panel, letting him see the movement of absolutely everyone from either side of the valley, and about ten miles in both directions in the valley proper. It was also set up to broadcast a warning if it detected any activity in the "danger area" inside a mile of community's defined boundaries on all sides but the river, and using the far bank of the river as its border on that side, so it wouldn't go off when scavengers were going through downtown Huntington. It broadcast the alert using the same frequency that the old downtown gang's radios used, which let anyone with a radio hear the warning. There were enough radios for every person to carry one, so everyone would immediately know if someone was approaching them. There was some trouble with it at first because it was going off any time anything larger than a large dog got in the danger zone, but Jason and Steve worked out a sensor filter that only caused it to react to anything human-shaped, the presence of firearms or PPGs, or the movement of any mass greater than five hundred pounds. That would catch squatters, Faey in armor, their weapons, drones, and any vehicle moving towards them.

Temika came back two days after they got power restored, and she wasn't alone. Not only that, she had three huge barrels tied to the undercarriage of her airbike, hanging by thick ropes. She landed outside Jason's house with an older fellow on the back of her bike, whom Jason immediately recognized as Doc Northwood. Jason, Tim, and Steve were sitting on his front porch, going over contingency plans for bringing up more sections of the city for power if it was needful, and were also in the first stages of trying to work out the rather sticky water situation. Everyone was still drawing water from the river or streams, and they were looking into ways to get running water going to everyone... *not* an easy task.

"Well, I see you wandered back," Jason said. "What are you hauling now?"

"Mah stuff," she announced. "Ah'm movin' in."

"Oh really," Jason chuckled. "And did you ask anyone?"

"Ah don't have tah," she grinned. "Ah seem tah recall a certain someone sayin' Ah was welcome heah any time, if'n you don't recall. Besides, Ah told you Ah'd do most anythin' for some air conditionin'," she added with a wink. "Ah took some stuff tah Doc, and he wanted to come up and check on his patient up heah, so he came up with me."

"That's right," Northwood said as he dismounted. "I need to make sure that arm's healing up right, Timothy."

"It's doing fine, Doc," Tim told him.

"Well, lots of new faces," Northwood said as he looked around. "We heard that you attacked the gangs and kicked them out of the city, and that some people started moving in around you."

"Something like that," Jason told him. "Most of these people *are* the old gang members. They decided to try a life of honest work instead of stealing. So far we've done rather well. Everyone more or less gets along, and we're actually getting things done by working together rather than waste all our time fighting."

"Well, let's not waste time, Timothy my boy. May we borrow your house, Jason?"

"Be my guest," he said, motioning to the door.

Jason walked up to Temika after excusing himself from Steve. She was righting the barrels that had fallen over when she landed. "So, you want to move in," Jason chuckled. "I hope you realize it's not just my decision. We have a rule here that any newcomers have to be accepted by a vote at a town meeting. You also have to pass a screening from Symone, the Faey. If she deems you trustworthy, you're in."

“Yo’ serious,” she said in surprise.

“Deadly,” he answered. “But that’s no biggie. We could really use your contacts and your airbike right now, because winter’s coming, and we need to start trading with the other enclaves for some things we need for winter.”

“Well, Ah should ask for a meeting then,” she said nervously. “Though Ah *really* don’t like the idea of that blueskin pokin’ around mah brain.”

“I’ll call one for tonight. Until then, make yourself at home.”

She did. She ate half of the contents of his refrigerator, then wandered around and talked to people. She seemed a bit leery of some of them, probably old grudges, but she quickly got a general feeling for what was going on. Everyone was busy getting ready for winter, and she saw activity on multiple fronts. Jason didn’t see much of Temika until that evening, when they met down at the Chesapeake Town Hall on the corner of Route 7 and the bridge, in the old auditorium in the building that had been a church before becoming a town hall. It had no air conditioning, but fans in the meeting hall kept the interior cool. Everyone was there but Irwin, who was on the airbike running a patrol, and Jason, Regina, Leamon, and Clem sat at the table at the head of the meeting room. Temika and Doc Northwood sat in the front row, looking around in curiosity. Jason banged the gavel down on the table to call the meeting to order, and everyone quieted down. “Settle down people,” he said as he stood up. “It’s a quick meeting guys. Temika here wants to move in, so we’re voting on that tonight, and that’s it. Some of you probably had run-ins with her in the past, but remember that this place is all about forgetting that stuff and moving forward. Besides, with her airbike and her contacts through the region, she’ll be key in getting us set up for winter. With Temika horse trading for us out in the field, we’ll have a much more comfortable winter. So, anyone have anything to say?”

“Only that she packs a mean punch,” someone shouted, which caused some chuckling.

“That’s it? Any other remarks?” Jason called, then he waited a moment. “Fine, all in favor?” Just about everyone raised their hand. “Opposed?” Nobody raised their hands at all. “Symone, it’s your turn.”

“You got it, cutie,” she told him, standing up from her seat. “Alright, Temika, come with me. This’ll just take a minute.”

“You gonna look in mah head?” she asked nervously as she stood up.

“Afraid so, hon,” she nodded. “Nobody lives here that we can’t trust, and this is the only way. Everyone else did this, so you have to too. Don’t worry, I’ll only look where I have to look to make sure you won’t backstab us. Your privacy is very important to me.”

“Alright,” she said, putting her hand on her stomach. Jason opened himself up just enough to hear her thoughts, and found them to be a whirlwind of fear. She was deathly afraid of Symone and the power she represented, but that fear was overwhelmed by what she saw as a once in a lifetime opportunity. She had reserved judgement on Jason’s crazy idea because she didn’t think it would work, but seeing them get the power back on had made her realize that this might be her only chance to find a better life for herself.

“I think from now on, people who ask to join should go through Symone before we vote on them,” Regina announced as Symone took Temika into a side room. “In fact, I put it on the floor as a motion.”

“That’s a good idea,” Leamon agreed. “I second.”

“In favor?” Jason asked. All four raised their hands. “Okay, motion carried. Symone screens any applicant before they come up for vote.” He looked out over the people. “While we’re here, anything anyone wants to bring up?”

Ross Michaels stood up. “Yeah, I know you’re still working on the water, and we know it’s gonna take time, but you think you could come up with something temporary? Getting clean water is getting harder. Just a central tank somewhere we can draw water from will do.”

“We know, we’re kicking around an idea for that right now,” Jason answered. “We were thinking of finding a tanker trailer somewhere and using it for holding water, at least after we get it cleaned out.

But yeah, it's going to be a *while* before we figure out a way to get running water in the city. There's only three of us on the tech team, and working on a water system isn't anything any of us have done before. But we'll figure something out."

"We'll come up with something," Tim called to them.

"Until then, a central tank of clean water will work just fine," Ruth called.

"We're starting to run low on ammo for the thirty-thirties," Clem called. "Anyone who's carrying one, keep a mind on that and try to conserve ammo when you hunt. If you want, bring it to me and I'll trade it for an aught-six or nine mag. I have some extras, and plenty of ammo."

"You're running low on everything, or just the slugs?" Jason asked.

"Just the slugs. I have plenty of casings and powder."

"We can make a mold of a bullet and I'll see what I can do to make you some," he promised.

"Talk to me tomorrow, and remember to police your brass, people, I can reuse it."

Symone came back out with Temika. The woman was pale and shaking, but she had a grin on her face. "Temika's got my stamp of approval," Symone called to them. "She's trustworthy."

"Okay then, welcome to the community Temika," Jason announced, then he waited for a round of enthusiastic applause to cease. "Mary, would you show her around and explain the rules?"

"I'd be happy to, Mister Jason," the young lady replied.

"Any other business?" Jason called.

Steve stood up. "I wanted to announce that when I have the time and the equipment, I'm going to set up a little cable service for everyone," he told them. "Nothing fancy, mind you. If we can get a transceiver and a good satellite dish, I can pipe the signal out on the old cable company system's wires. It won't be fancy, but at least we'll get some TV out here. I'll need a couple of volunteers to help check the cable though, and we'll need to find a transceiver capable of picking up Faey channels."

"Ah think Ah can get one of those," Temika said. "Some of the squatters that live up near the border have stuff like that, and if they don't have it, they can get it. They do black-market business with the Faey guards that patrol the border."

"Well, talk to Steve about that. Any other business?" Jason asked. He waited a moment, but there was silence. "Okay then. Next scheduled meeting is Friday. That's it, we're adjourned." He banged the gavel on the table, and that was that.

On the way out, he talked to a few people about the water situation, then found himself being pulled aside by Northwood. "Would you mind if I stayed the night, son?" he asked. "It's a bit too late for Temika to take me home, and I don't think she really wants to right now, with all her stuff sitting in your house."

"You're more than welcome to, Doc," Jason nodded. "You can stay in my house. I'd be happy to have you."

"Thanks, my boy," he said with a nod.

Temika fit in rather quickly, though she was a bit shocked at how *nice* everyone was. She admitted at breakfast that she expected everyone to be more combative, more fussy, but nobody was like that. She also expected some of them to be ugly to her, but again, nobody was like that. Jason explained that he was a bit surprised too, but perhaps it was because maybe they'd seen what they could do if they worked *with* each other instead of *against* each other. Sure, their thoughts didn't always match their words, but that was human nature. The fact of the matter was that everyone was cooperating, because now they all understood that they had to depend on each other in order to make it through the winter. These people had had the courage to try, and already they'd seen some of the rewards for working with the system, in the form of power. Some of them had been a bit skeptical until he had delivered on that promise, and now they had faith in the idea of the community.

She wasn't there long though. She stayed a couple of days, only leaving to take Northwood home the next morning. She was there long enough to find a house, move her stuff in, make a couple of

deals, then lock it up and head back out. She was leaving with a rifle and a thousand credits of Jason's money, that the city council had released to Steve so he could trade for a transceiver for his television project. Temika had been on the CB most of the afternoon, finalizing the deal with a small group that lived near the border in Chilicothe. Jason's money would buy the transceiver and pay the agent doing the buying, and the rifle was payment for the squatters who were acting as the middle men.

She came back early the next morning with two things. Steve's transceiver, and Northwood again. The doctor had his medical bag with him, and he approached Jason as he, Luke, Leamon, and Tim tried to get a backhoe going down on Route 7, outside the old pizza place. Luke had this obsession with heavy equipment, but Jason saw the use of having some big equipment around for doing really big jobs. The bulldozer he'd got running had already proved its worth, and a backhoe would make it much easier to dig trenches for pipes, or dig pipes up. Jason and Tim stood there with the maintenance manual for it, which was badly sun-bleached on a few pages from where it had sat in the seat of the enclosed cab for two years, while Leamon and Luke, the community's two best mechanics, tried to get a fuel pump out of it. Jason and Tim had no experience with heavy diesel engines, but both of them were curious to learn.

"Hey Doc," Tim said brightly as they watched the two mechanics working. "What you doing back so soon?"

"Well, I was making a house call, and Temika came over and picked me up so I could see you, Jason," he said seriously. "I recalled you saying that you had another town meeting tonight, right?"

Jason nodded to him. "Eight."

"I'd like to apply to live here," he announced.

"Really? That's great, Doc!" Tim said brightly as Luke said "we could sure use you, Doc."

"That's not a problem, Doc," Jason told him calmly. "Believe me, having a certified doctor around would make *everyone* much more secure. Just be at my house at noon, so Symone can screen you. If she passes you, you'll be the first order of business tonight."

"We could get that done right now, son."

Jason shook his head. "I need Symone right now," he told him.

"Ah, okay. Just so you know son, I'll still be traveling to visit patients outside the community. I'm the only doctor around, and I'm needed. I've never played favorites and I never will, but you have *power* here. I can set up a good clinic here, even do some minor surgery if it's needed. That can help people much more than where I am."

"Moving here doesn't mean you lose your outside life, Doc," Jason assured him. "As long as you abide by the rules, you can do whatever you want." He looked at his watch. "Damn, I'm late," he grunted. "Sorry guys. Doc, feel free to wander around if you want and talk to some people. I gotta get home."

"What are you late for, son?"

"An appointment."

"It's one of his secret Mayor things, Doc," Leamon chuckled. "He won't tell us what it is."

"It's what I need Symone for," Jason told him. "I need to get her a replacement piece for her armor, so I'm going to deal with a Faey contact I have on the outside. She's going to buy it for me, and then arrange to deliver it."

"Oh, I get it. I see her wearing her armor all the time, though. What's wrong with it?"

"It's patched," he answered. "Symone got shot up escaping with Tim from the Faey. I patched it up with what I had laying around, but it's not entirely safe the way it is. If she gets hit in the same place, the armor won't do much to protect her. I want to get her replacement pieces that aren't jerry-rigged."

"Ah."

He sent to Symone to have her come to the house, then he got home and claimed his panel and called Kumi's number. He tried to call yesterday, but she wasn't home. He left her a message telling

her he'd call back around this time, which was about noon her time. This time he got her and not her answering service, wearing a tight halter top that she commonly wore when exercising. "I thought you forgot," she teased. "What's up?"

"I need something delivered," he told her immediately. "Can you swing it?"

"As easy as a man pees standing up," she replied with a wicked grin. "You got a list ready?"

"In a minute, important things first." Symone came into the room, and he glanced back at her. "I was wondering," he told her.

"What do you need me for, Jayce?" Symone asked as she came up to him.

"Symone, meet Kumi. Kumi, this is Symone," Jason introduced.

"So she's the one that rescued your friend," Kumi said, looking at her. "You're brave for a commoner."

"And you're awful young to be the conniving noble Jason talks about, my Lady," Symone replied with a wink.

"I'm a bad girl," she admitted with an outrageous grin. "So what do you need?"

"Armor for her," Jason answered, nodding his head towards Symone. "*Real* armor, like mine."

"Armor? How the hell are you going to manage that, Jayce?" Symone asked.

"He can swing it, girl," Kumi chuckled. "I can have it there in two days."

"How do they make it so fast anyway?" Jason asked curiously.

"It's already partially made," she answered. "The company I deal with keeps virtually every size of every piece on hand, and they just pick the piece that's closest to the size they need and customize it for an exact fit. With the machines they use, they can have a full suit of fitted armor ready in about six hours after getting the order."

"Nice," Jason said with a nod.

"Symone, is it? I need you to strip," Kumi ordered. "I'm going to take a vid of you so I can get your exact size. That way the armor fits right when you get it."

"No problem, my Lady," Symone said, immediately reaching for the tail of her shirt.

"Can it with the Lady shit," Kumi told her. "Just call me Kumi."

Symone did as she was told and stripped, even taking off her panties...which probably wasn't really necessary. He couldn't see how those bikini-style undergarments could possibly interfere with Kumi's measurements. But, Kumi told her to strip, so Symone stripped. Jason moved out of the way so Kumi could get an unobstructed angle on Symone, who did more than Kumi had asked of him. Kumi had her turn around, raise her arms, bend this way and that, until he realized that Kumi was just dragging it out. "You about done Kumi?" he asked pointedly.

"Almost," she said. "Men don't have the same curves as women, babe, so the armor's fit is a bit more important to let us move freely. That and I had enough vid of you dressing and undressing to compile a good dynamic size. You moved the right ways," she winked. "You don't want her armor to break her ribs the first time she bends sideways, do you?"

"Yeah, they measured everything you can imagine when I was in basic, in a bunch of different positions. This isn't unusual, cutie," Symone told him.

"Sorry, I thought you were just messing with her or something," he said contritely.

"I don't mess with girls, babe," Kumi told him with an evil grin. "I don't get much out of seeing something I can see by looking in a mirror. I dabbled with girls a couple of times out of curiosity, and I admit it wasn't bad, but it just wasn't as much fun as having sex with boys."

"That was too much information, Kumi," Jason said with a grunt.

"You're such a prude," she accused with a laugh.

"I'm just not as worldly as a spoiled noble debutante," he replied, which made her howl with laughter.

Kumi had Symone do a few other things, like deep knee bends, kicking her leg, and then she gave Jason a wicked smirk and had Symone touch her toes. Now *that* was just to get at him. He added that

to the list, for she was going to get hers when she delivered Symone's armor. "Okay, that's enough," she told them. "I have enough for a good sizing. I'll send this through and get them to work on it. I'll pay for it, and you can pay me back tomorrow, babe, when we arrange the meet. That work for you?"

He nodded as Symone gave him a curious look. "Meet?" she asked as she pulled her panties back on.

"That's how he gets what I buy for him," Kumi winked. "You need anything else? May as well make a shipment out of it."

He uploaded a small file to her. "Actually, I do. I'm going to need a replacement sensor transceiver pod like what's in my skimmer, to start off with. I also need ten cases of double-stranded twenty gauge flux cabling, a box of twenty-ten plasma magnets, three spools of dataline fiber, thirty PGX-10 PPGs, twenty AJX-3 lasers, eighty EI-21 multipurpose microsensors, twenty PCM-1021 moleculartronic microprocessors, twenty AT-2 smartgun pads, and twenty MK-2 backglass displays. It's all in the file. Oh, yeah, I want something else, Kumi. Something you might not be able to get. Something that might get you in trouble."

"What?" she asked curiously.

"I want a replicator," he told her.

She whistled. "Babe, those are pricy. You're talking a hundred thousand credits, at *least*, and that's *used*. And the armor's going to run you about sixty."

"You can get one, though?"

She gave a snorting laugh. "Babe, I can get *anything*. Replicators aren't controlled like you must think they are. Any industrial supply company sells them. I'll have more trouble buying the armor than I will a replicator. The main issue for you is *cost*. You're talking money when you start talking replicators. You can buy a *skimmer* for less."

"Oh, I thought they were because in school they—"

"Well, there you are. They lock them down in schools to keep the students from doing something stupid with them," she told him, then her eyes widened. "Jason! You're building *more* of them?"

"A few," he admitted with a nod, understanding what she was asking about. "Enough so the group I'm with can protect itself."

"I want one!" she said immediately. "I'll trade you—hell, I'll *buy* one from you!"

"Remember what I told you, Kumi?"

"Yeah, but you really think I'm going to give it to the Imperium?" she scoffed.

"No, but that's puts it out there for them to find, take apart, and copy. I'm sorry, hon, but the answer's no."

"Jason, I will trade you a *hundred* Mark IV MPACs for one of those guns," she said seriously. "You can stick a bomb in it so it explodes if I try to take it apart, I don't care."

"I can't do that, Kumi, I'm sorry."

She knows about the railgun? Symone sent.

He looked over at her. *One of her bodyguards fired it when she delivered the airbikes*, he replied. *She's doesn't know what it is, but she's seen what it can do. She was impressed by it.*

I can tell.

"Come *on*, babe," she almost pleaded. "I *want* one."

"Why?" he asked. "You can never use it, Kumi. If you do, someone's going to want to know what it is, where it came from, how it works, and I told you that I'll *never* give it to the Imperium. You'd be buying something you'd have to keep in your closet."

"I can keep it in the closet, just so I *have* one," she told him.

"I'm sorry Kumi, but no. It's not that I don't trust you, but you're not the only one there, and I can't risk something happening that puts it in the hands of the Imperium. If that happened, both of us would be in serious trouble."

She gave a squeaking growl and slapped her hands on the top of the table. Kumi had a bit of a

temper, he noticed, and she didn't like not getting her way.

"He's right, Kumi," Symone said seriously. "If the Imperium caught you with it, they'd hang *you* out for the *korpas*, then they'd come swarming down on *Jason* like a pack of *giruzi*. It's safer for everyone if you don't have one. But I'm sure Jason will let you play with it for a while when you're here," Symone winked.

"Now that I can live with," Kumi said with a slight smile. "This is going to get expensive, babe. All that equipment *and* armor *and* a replicator? Tack on my fee, and we're talking a minimum of two hundred grand. Probably more, it's going to depend on what kind of replicator you want and what's on the market."

"The bay only needs to be about four *shakra* by four *shakra* by two *shakra*," he told her. "I don't need a *big* one, just something that can produce some material for me."

"Like parts for that gun of yours?" she asked with a grin.

"The stock, yes," he admitted immediately.

"You know, I could probably figure it out," she said with a sly little smile. "Going on what you ordered."

"Maybe, but am I going to use *all* of it for the gun? Some of that stuff is for other purposes, you know. You have no idea what's in my gun or how it works, so you have no idea what I need for what's inside that pretty black casing now, do you?"

She gave him a sour look. "You're being mean to me, babe."

"You're the one who's beating her head against the wall, Kumi," he said seriously. "I really like you hon, but you're edging into dangerous territory here. My *life* stands in the balance, hon. I'm not going to take any chances."

She sighed. "You're right, you're right," she admitted, waving her hand absently. "I'm sorry, babe, but it's just such a fucking *cool* gun. A girl couldn't help but want one."

Jason chuckled. "Well, thanks Kumi, I appreciate the compliment," he told her sincerely. "And I've got, um, a little over two hundred fifty thousand in my account right now. That should cover it. That's the limit, hon, so work with that figure, and don't forget your five percent."

"Another deposit?"

He nodded. "Two, actually. Seventy thousand and forty thousand this time."

"Got it, babe. Call me this time tomorrow *my time* so we can work out when we're meeting. Oh, and make sure you bring something *big* to get the replicator. I'll try to find a small one, but even small ones are pretty big."

"This time tomorrow *your time*," he affirmed, doing the conversion on his panel. "Oh yeah, I forgot. Think you can throw in one more panel, one that you don't have to worry about Civnet access for? My panel's getting a little stressed with everything I'm doing on it, I need a backup."

"Off the shelf?" she asked, and he nodded. "No problem, babe. I'll get you a couple, that way you have a spare."

"You're a lifesaver, Kumi."

"You know it," she grinned. "Talk to you tomorrow. Later, babe." Her image disappeared from his panel.

That's an interesting girl, Symone noted as she finished putting on her boots.

She's a pirate, he told her immediately. *Don't ever think that's she's not. But she's trustworthy. She's loyal to the money I pay her.*

Where are you getting that money?

It's mine. Kumi had someone hack into the Ministry and redirect my royalty payments to a bank on Moridon. She gets fifteen percent of each royalty payment as a fee for it, but it's worth paying her. That money's buying your armor, and it's buying me the materials to build more railguns.

Symone laughed. *The Imperium wouldn't dare trying to take on Moridon over that account! she sent, her thoughts amused and mischievous. Your little noble friend is a clever monster.*

She's moderately monstrous, yes, Jason agreed blandly.

I'll never be able to pay you for the armor, cutie, she warned him.

You'll use it to defend the community. That's payment enough, he told her. After I get enough money built up, I'll buy armor for Luke and Irwin, too. But that's going to be a couple of months down the road.

They won't mind, that's for sure.

I'd hope not, Jason sent with a chuckle.

Jason wasn't alone this time, as they waited for Kumi to arrive. He was hidden in the woods in the same place where he was before, at the swimming area of the old Beech Fork Lake. Symone was with him this time, and they had Luke's Deuce hidden under some low-hanging branches in the overgrown road that led to the swimming area. The Deuce should be able to carry a replicator; they were about a ton in weight on the average, well within a Deuce's carrying capacity. Jason had called Kumi the day before and arranged this meeting to take place at sunset today, which was now. Kumi was coming in person again, but this time she wasn't staying on Earth. She had come on a freighter, she would make the delivery, and then she would go back home. It would take her about six hours after all was said and done. It was about the closest thing to real work she ever did, he reasoned. She probably had her butler, Fure, do most of the legwork when it came to collecting up the things she bought for him.

He hoped she hurried up. There was a front coming through, and it was going to start raining soon.

Remember, they do not know I have talent, Jason warned Symone as they heard the dropship's engines in the distance. I'll have my mind totally closed, even to sending, so don't even try. Fure already suspects I have talent, so don't give him any reason to think he's right.

Who's Fure?

One of Kumi's servants, he answered as the lights of the dropship appeared, as it descended through a cloud. Remember the plan?

Symone laughed wickedly. *She's going to hate you, Jason.*

I know, but she has it coming. Remember, it won't be personal, and I apologize in advance if I do something that offends you.

Jayce hon, you're my friend, she reminded with a pat of his shoulder. Trust me, I won't take it personally. I'm going to enjoy it, truth be told, and I did agree to do it. I won't back out, and I know what we have to do.

I know, but it's good to make sure.

They watched as the dropship circled the area, obviously sweeping the place with sensors, then it landed. Jason and Symone, neither wearing their heavy armor, walked out into the clearing as the back doors and ramp opened on the dropship, and Jason saw the same five people who had greeted him the first time; Kumi, the twins Meya and Myra, Fure, and that little red-skinned guy whose name Jason did not know. Everyone but Kumi was wearing similar clothes since the last time; the twins in their armor, and the two servants in their livery, but Kumi was wearing an odd half-top of shimmering black cloth that had flared half-sleeves, whose lower hem was also uneven. It revealed a hint of a peek of the lower sloper of her right breast, but the left side hung down to the waist of her sleek black pants, which were slung very low on her hips and were quite form-fitting. The outfit left her flat stomach bare, showing off that figure that Kumi was so proud of. There was a *big* container behind them, somewhat reminiscent to Jason of a semi's trailer, just square, with smooth, polished sides, and built out of what looked to be titanium. It looked like a giant mirrored cube, and he could see no door on it. Jason waved to them as Kumi started down the ramp, but Meya and Myra were already moving to the sides of the ship to investigate the area.

"Hey babe," Kumi greeted as they met at the base of the ramp. "We gotta do this fast, I'm on a tight schedule. It's all in the container. You have something to carry it?"

He nodded. "An old vehicle we salvaged out here. Wait here, I'll go get it."

With Symone spotting him, Jason backed the Deuce up to the edge of the ramp of the dropship and parked the huge truck, then climbed down as Fure used an antigrav pod affixed to the top of the container to transfer it to the open truckbed. The chassis of the truck settled noticeably onto its tires when the weight was put in the bed, but the container fit...almost. It stuck out almost two feet on either side of the bed, and took up the entire length of the bed as well. Fure annealed the base of the container to the metal bed of the Deuce so it wouldn't slide off as Jason looked over a list that Kumi supplied him, everything she had bought. "The replicator's an older model and it's used, but it works. I tested it and everything. It's also not too big as reps go, so it shouldn't take up your entire workshop," she grinned. "Everything else is here. I have her armor in the cockpit, she should try it on before we go to make sure it fits."

"Let's go then, I have to get that truck back to its owner by tomorrow, and we have a ways to go," Jason told her.

Jason and Symone followed Kumi up into the cockpit, and after he looked around, he realized that this was the *same* dropship that she'd used the last time. He recognized it. "Armor's right there, girl," Kumi said, pointing. "Now give me the gun. I get to play with it while she tries it on."

"Fine, just stay where I can see you, and don't try to take it apart. You won't like what will happen if you try," he warned.

"Trapped?" she asked.

He nodded. "I'm going to help Symone with her armor," Jason said, handing her the railgun. She took it and literally ran through the cargo compartment and down the back ramp. She was quickly joined by Meya and Myra, and the *BEE-yah* sound of the weapon echoed through the ship as they took turns blowing craters in the hillside on the far side of the lake spur.

"Okay, try it on," Jason whispered to Symone in English. "We'll do it when she burns up the ammo, after you finish."

"Got it," Symone said with an evil grin, pulling her tee shirt over her head.

Jason helped her put the black armor on, mainly because they didn't have much time. He did pause to admire the same phoenix design on the breastplate of her armor that was on his. After she was done, stuffing her blonde hair up under the helmet, she moved around to ensure the armor was a good fit, then she tested its systems. Unlike Jason, who had had no idea what anything did, Symone immediately knew what everything did, and where it was. She tested the forearm MPAC ports but didn't fire the weapons, and her feet came off the ground after she flipped up the armored flap hiding the control console of the armor's systems, on her left wrist just under the flared pod of the MPAC.

"It all works," she whispered to him.

"Okay, let's get you out of it," he said, watching Kumi and her guards, as Fure kept an eye on *him* from the ramp. "You're *sure* you don't mind?"

"It'll be fun," Symone winked.

After burning up all the ammunition, Kumi made her way back to the cockpit, but Jason quickly disappeared from her view. Fure rushed forward, but Kumi was closer, so she reached the cockpit hatchway first. She was greeted by the sight of Jason engaged in a passionate embrace with Symone, who was nude, the armor and her clothes scattered all over the floor of the cockpit. Symone had him backed against the bulkhead, and his hands squeezed her shapely butt liberally as she kissed him with aggressive hunger. Jason kept a watchful eye on Kumi as he broadcasted intense, downright pornographic thoughts about Symone, which he *knew* Kumi was hearing. He continued the game, but it wasn't easy to concentrate on Kumi because Symone was maybe being a little bit *too* serious about kissing him. She was a damn good kisser, and she was having fun.

Though he couldn't hear Kumi's thoughts, he had no doubt it was getting to her. Kumi's skin flushed, turning a faint shade of purple, and she watched them with hungry eyes. Jason then opened his eyes enough for Kumi to see him looking at her, and she was suddenly assaulted with graphic fantasies about him, her, *and* Symone. He pushed Symone aside, who played it to the hilt by kissing his neck

ardently while her hands were all over him; she even stuck her hand down the front of his pants and grabbed him. He advanced on Kumi, who stood in the doorway, one hand on the bulkhead and the other cupping her breast, and she stared up at him with sultry eyes when he reached her. He leaned down and kissed her, still assaulting her with graphic images of what he intended to do to her, and she wrapped her hands around him like a vice, even wrapped her legs around him when he picked her up and carried her towards one of the passenger seats.

Kumi didn't see the huge grin on Symone's face, or the fact that she'd stopped pawing Jason and was now hurriedly collecting up her armor even as she rushed to get dressed.

He deposited Kumi in the very chair in which she'd sat naked and propositioned him, still kissing her with passion, and honestly enjoying it. What was it with Faey and kissing? Did *every single one of them* have to be a fantastic kisser? Jyslin just blew his socks off every time she kissed him, and he'd just discovered that Symone was a fabulous kisser, and now Kumi was doing her race proud. He ran his hands up inside her top, getting a thorough feel of her breasts, then wormed a hand inside her tight-fitting pants and got a feel of what she'd offered him the last time he'd met her. She almost sucked the breath out of him when he touched her, and he knew he had her dead to rights.

He withdrew his hand slowly, almost sensuously, and when she let go of him to return the favor, he quickly pulled away. Every lascivious thought pouring out of his mind just *stopped*, and he rose up from his half-kneeling position quickly and effortlessly, pausing only to adjust his shirt. "Thanks for everything, Kumi," he told her with a neutral expression, though his eyes were dancing with mirth. "I have to get that Deuce back before I get in trouble. It was good to see you again."

She looked up at him in total confusion, breathing heavily, and her exposed blue skin was sheened over with sweat. He'd got her going, and then he just stopped cold. She didn't quite understand what was going on, lost somewhere between her ardor and his mystifying behavior. He leaned down, as if to kiss her, but instead leaned in and brought his mouth close to her ear. "By the way, my girlfriends think you're *gorgeous*," he whispered in her ear.

He pulled away, and it suddenly dawned on her that he was doing nothing more than playing with her. She turned absolutely *purple* as she blushed furiously on top of the flush of her ardor, and the look she flashed at him from that chair was positively *murderous*.

"Think about that the next time you show my naked picture around without my permission," Jason told her with a slight, clever little smile, reaching down quickly for the railgun that Kumi had dropped to the floor when he kissed her. Symone handed him her box of armor, and she bowed outrageously to the flustered noble and took it back.

"Was it good for you, baby?" Symone asked Jason outrageously.

"Symone, you make a man beg to die in your arms," he answered with a dry drawl.

"I—You—She—I—*grrrraaaooohhhh!!!!*" Kumi stammered, then her words turned into a growling scream, slamming her hands against the armrests of her chair as Jason and Symone hastily made their escape. Fure gave him a shocked look, then he chuckled ruefully as the two of them rushed past. They managed to get out of the dropship before they both erupted into uncontrollable laughter, which he had no doubt was audible to Kumi inside the dropship.

They got to the Deuce and hurriedly climbed inside, but Kumi was already at the ramp. "Jason Fox!" she screamed loudly. "You *RAT!* That was *MEAN!*" Then she started laughing. "Don't even *think* you're gonna get away that easy, you tease! Next time I see you, I'm gonna make you do every single thing you were thinking at me!"

Jason poked his head out the window and looked back at her. "Then let's call it a date!" he shouted back to her. "Gotta go, Kumi! Have a safe trip home, and I hope you enjoyed the show!"

"I will *own* you, Jason Fox!" Kumi threatened, pointing a finger at him. "When I'm done with you, you won't be able to walk straight for a week!"

"Confident, isn't she?" Symone chuckled as Jason started the Deuce, whose engine drowned out her voice, and they got moving.

They didn't look back until the truck was almost to 152, but then they saw the dropship rise up from the behind the hill they'd driven over and bolt off into the night sky. They didn't stop laughing until they were halfway home, when Symone sighed in amused contentment and leaned back in her seat. "Oh, Trelle's garland, that was *great*," she said, then started giggling again. "She was so hot for it that she was about to rip her clothes off, and then you just *stop*. Demir's sword, Jayce, you must have ice in your blood."

"Oh, I was tempted, I won't lie," he admitted, "but revenge before fun, as they always say."

Symone laughed, then she reached over and put her hand on his shoulder. "After that, I think I'm going to have to take Tim up to our room and try to melt his cast," she told him. "You managed to get *me* as worked up as *her*. Trelle's garland, Jayce, I never thought you could be that *dirty*," she admitted with a laugh.

"Jyslin corrupted me," he drawled. "I might have to take a cold shower tonight, but it was worth it. First I get kissed by you, then by Kumi. I don't think many men could stand up to that for long."

"Cold shower? Bull *shit*," Symone told him. "I'll take care of it, Jayce. Friends don't leave friends frustrated. I wouldn't be much of a friend if I did."

"You don't have to do that, Symone," he assured her.

"Hell, now I *want* to," she winked at him. "You got me wound up tighter than a tenday clock, cutie. I think you deserve the honor of popping my spring."

"I'll let Tim take care of it," he told her.

"I told you once before Jayce, it's no big deal. You *are* my friend, and you need a woman. Faey women don't let their male friends go without. *Ever*. You need some sex, and you're getting some tonight. You can fight with me about it all you want, but in the end you're gonna end up letting me fuck you, and you know it. Just accept it gracefully and enjoy it."

"Tim might have something to say about it."

"Tim thinks I'm already fucking you," she told him bluntly. "I reminded him when we got here that any time I thought you needed some I'd take care of it, since Jyslin isn't here and it doesn't look like you're fucking any of the human girls on the side. He's known what Faey women do for their male friends, cutie, since back when we went to the beach. I won't be doing anything other than what he thinks I'm *already* doing."

Jason blew out his breath. Dissuading Symone was probably a lost cause. She was his friend, and that was something that Faey friends did. As long as they didn't join minds, it would just be casual sex, and that was more than within the bounds of a Faey's concept of a healthy friendship with a member of the opposite sex.

And, to be honest with himself...he *was* most certainly in the mood, and outside of calling Kumi back down, Symone was about his only option. He felt a bit awkward about the idea of having sex with his best friend's girlfriend, but she saw nothing wrong with it. And it wasn't like he could just go up to one of the women in the community and ask her to come sleep with him. He'd have to ask Tim about this. If Tim told him that it was alright, he guessed he may as well. If only because Symone wouldn't leave him alone.

"Well?" she demanded.

"I'm considering it," he said seriously.

She gave him a look, then laughed.

"I'm a bit uncomfortable with the idea of it Symone, I won't lie," he admitted. "You're my best friend's girlfriend. In human society, that makes you out of bounds. But, I know you're not human," he said, cutting off her inevitable reply. "You're just doing what you think is right, just like I am."

"You don't understand as well as I thought," she said, pursing her lips. "Tim's looked into my heart and soul, Jayce, through the bond we share. He knows that nothing will ever take me away from him, not even hot sex with his hunky best friend. That's why he doesn't mind. Hell, cutie, you can *ask* him when we get home. I bet you ten credits here and now he'll give you his blessing."

"I may have to do that, for my own piece of mind if anything."

"Then it's easy money for me," she grinned.

"Easy money? Hell, woman, you're about sixty thousand in the hole to me for your armor."

"Then I'm ten credits closer to breaking even," she winked. "You wanna get rid of me, cutie? Get a human girlfriend. I'd put some money on that brown woman, Tomika?"

"Temika."

"She's cute—at least for a human—built like a Marine, and she's stacked," she told him.

"I'm not her type. She likes guys who are ripped."

"Hunger makes the best sauce, cutie," she winked, then she frowned. "Did you know she has talent?"

He nodded. "I've had to edit her memory before, when I messed up. She has potential."

"Not potential, Jayce. *Talent*. She's like a little girl who hasn't expressed yet. It's *there*, just not awake. It's just a matter of time."

He glanced at her, moving the big truck across the road to avoid a fallen tree, which caused it to hit a cavernous pot hole that shook the whole truck. "How soon?"

"Days, months, no idea," she shrugged. "Once it's like that, it just takes something setting it off, if it doesn't wake up on its own."

"You could have told me earlier."

"I'm not entirely sure how to approach her, Jayce, and I wanted to come up with something before I told you."

"How do you mean?"

"She's *terrified* of talent, cutie," she said seriously. "Someone must have done something very bad to her to make her like that. I'm not sure how she'll react when she finds out *she* has it. I've been trying to come up with a safe way to tell her that won't cause her too much harm."

"I'll do it," he told her. "If she's that close, she needs to know *before* she expresses, or she might have a nervous breakdown." He picked up the handheld radio. "Tim," he called.

Tim, like just about everyone in the community, had one of those radios, so he answered immediately. "*You done, Jayce?*"

"Yeah, I've got the package and we're on the way back. I need you to do something for me."

"*What?*"

"Get on the CB and send out the word that Temika needs to come back," he told her.

"*Ah'll get right on it, sugah,*" Temika's voice called over her handheld, her tone amused. "*Ah just got back about ten minutes ago. What do you need?*"

"You. I'll explain when we get back."

"*You got it, sugah.*"

Jason and Symone drove the rest of the way in relative silence, as Jason worked through how he'd breach this subject with Temika. He thought of several different ways to do it, but he knew Temika, and knew that trying to dance around the subject wouldn't sit well with her. The best way would be to just *tell* her, and explain to her what needed to be done. She'd respect him more for that than for leading her on or not levelling with her.

Several scavengers ran out of sight as they crawled through Huntington, following a roundabout route that was the only unobstructed path from 5th Street Hill to the downtown bridge. He paused at the bridge and called over using the radio, and waited while Tim disengaged the trap on the bridge. He drove over and quickly made it back to his house, then pulled up in front of it as Tim, Doc Northwood, Steve, Temika, Clem, and Leamon stood up on his porch. He wasn't sure what they were doing, but it didn't really bother him that they were there. Tim and Symone lived in his house for right now, to keep Tim close to the two people who could contain him if he had an accident, or at least at that time. After a few weeks of training with Symone, Tim had learned how to completely close his mind so he didn't hear the thoughts of those around him, and he like Jason, he actively kept that up most of the time.

Jason had to *choose* to hear someone's thoughts, which prevented accidents.

"Wow, what's that?" Leamon asked as Jason and Symone got out of the Deuce.

"This is our latest goodie bag," Jason answered. "I'm broke now, but I got something that'll make things much easier."

"What?" he asked.

"A replicator," he answered.

"A replicator? That thing that can just *make* stuff?" Leamon asked.

Jason nodded as he whistled, which got Tim's attention. "Go get my annealer, would you please?" He looked to Leamon as Symone came around the truck. "It can make some things, yes, but it has limits," he explained. "It can only make *elements*, not finished products. This'll be handy to bang out all the copper wire we need, or iron, and stuff like that, but it won't do stuff like those things on *Star Trek* would."

"So what good will it do us?"

"Trust me, it's going to be *very* useful," he said seriously.

"Umm, Jason son, we don't have any forklifts," Clem told him. "How are we getting anything down from it?"

Jason screwed his face up, then looked to Symone. "Think you and me could lift a replicator with the armor?"

"Breaking it in early, aren't we?" she chuckled. "Sure, cutie, we could pick it up. We'll need everything but the helmet."

Jason and Symone went in, Symone carrying her armor in its box, then the suited up and came back out. The container was a featureless cube of unpainted titanium, without doors or markings of any kind outside of *this end up* and *fragile*. It had been annealed closed, and Jason had to use the annealer to get it open. He cut the entire back wall out of it, then pushed it over for Symone to catch. She did so easily, then drug it out of the way and laid it on the ground. The air inside, air from whatever planet that Kumi had been on when it was sealed, was fresh and oddly sweet, and inside was stowed boxes and boxes of equipment. Each box was made of an ultra-strong synthetic material much akin to plastic, with different colors and logos, with Faey words printed on them. They were manufacturer's boxes, and inside them was the equipment she had bought for him. Behind those boxes, looming large, was the replicator.

"Okay, fellas, let's move these boxes out," Symone ordered as she and Jason climbed inside.

With eight people working, they quickly got everything out and stacked neatly on his lawn. Jason and Symone sized up the replicator, then looked at each other from its ends. "Scoot it over then get out and set it down?" she suggested.

"I think that's best," he agreed with a nod, opening the command panel on the arm of his armor as she did the same. He engaged the strength augmentation system, which caused his entire suit of armor to suddenly make a sound much like a charging flash for an old camera. The backglass on his console flashed [ENGAGED] three times, then it turned green and went steady. The powered joints of the armor were now charged and ready, and they would respond to the flexing of his muscles and the pressure his body put on the inside of the armor when he moved. The armor was now doing all the moving, but it would move with him like it was his second skin. With the armor's powered system active, the two of them easily scooted the thousand pounds of replicator over to the edge.

"Alright boys, we need your help," Symone told them as they jumped down the five feet to the ground. "Me and Jayce are gonna pick it up, you guys get on the back side and keep it from wobbling as we bring it down. We can't let it fall over."

"Got it, Miss Symone," Clem said. "Come on, boys," he told the younger men, and he, Leamon, and Tim climbed up into the unit with the help of Jason. "Mind that arm, Tim son," he ordered. "Just put your shoulder on it. Me and Leamon'll be on each end."

"Ah can help, yah bunch'a chauvanists," Temika laughed as she pulled herself into the unit. She

got beside Tim and put her hands on the back of the replicator. “Ah’m ready.”

“Ready?” Jason asked Symone as he put his gauntleted hands under the bottom edge of the replicator, and she nodded. “Ready up there Clem?”

“We’re ready, Jason,” he answered.

“On three,” Symone said, then counted down. They picked it up, which made it wobble dangerously since they were so far under it, but the three men and woman behind it kept it stable. They lifted it out past the edge, then lowered it slowly and carefully to the ground.

“What is all this stuff, Jason?” Leamon asked.

“Well, most of what’s in the boxes is what I need to build more guns like the one I carry,” he answered as he and Symone picked it up again, then started carrying it towards his house. “Can someone go open the door and clear a path to the basement stairs?” he asked.

“I’ll get it,” Tim said, and rushed ahead.

“I got some extra flux cabling in case we need to build another generator, and there should be a new panel or two in there too, which is going to run the security system so I can have my panel back. I also got a sensor array to replace the one I had to take out of my skimmer. And of course, Symone’s armor,” he said, looking around the replicator at her.

“Ain’t I just gorgeous?” she laughed. “This is *real* combat armor, not that junk that I wore before.”

With Doc Northwood guiding them, Jason and Symone carefully carried the replicator through the house, then down the stairs and into his basement workshop. The others were carrying boxes behind them, as they got the replicator down into the basement, then set it down against the far back wall of his workshop, which he’d cleared out for the replicator that morning. He opened the replicator’s outer cover, which slid up into the top of the unit, displaying its control panel, dataport for external datalink, and the replication chamber, hidden behind an inner door. He powered the replicator up, and it went through its power-on diagnostics as Symone picked up the stick that held its service manual, which Kumi had tied to the handle of the replication chamber door.

“Jason, son, we’re not done moving things in,” Clem told him with a chuckle. “You can play with your new toy later.”

Jason laughed. “Point taken,” he said. “Let’s get the rest of that stuff down here.”

They moved the boxes down, then Jason unannealed the container from the back of the Deuce and he and Symone pushed it off. It hit the ground with a loud *bang*, but given that it was replicated laminated titanium, it didn’t so much as bend when it hit the ground. Jason cut up that titanium into strips, then the others helped him carry it down into his workshop, where it was stacked neatly in one of the smaller storage rooms. “Let’s find the panel Kumi said she got me,” Jason told them. “They’re in one of the boxes.”

“Kumi? That’s a strange name. Pretty though,” Clem noted.

“Kumi’s a strange and pretty young lady,” Jason said, but Symone started snickering evilly. “She probably *really* hates me right now, though.”

“Why is that?”

“I played a prank on her,” he answered as he opened a box and found flux cabling. “It was in revenge for a prank she played on me last week. Mine was just meaner.”

“Trelle’s garland, was it!” Symone said, erupting into laughter. “You should have seen the look on her face!”

“What did you do?” Doc Northwood asked.

He glanced at Symone, who just grinned evilly. “Let’s say that I exploited one of the baser aspects of a Faey noble’s personality,” he answered.

“And what is that?”

“Lust,” Symone said with a vicious smile. “Jason here is *very* handsome to a Faey, Doc. I don’t think handsome really describes it, though. Drop dead *gorgeous* is probably closer to the truth. Kumi has the hots for him, and he played on that to get her back for showing a picture of him naked to her

friends.”

“That’s too much information, Symone,” Jason said darkly as the others burst into laughter.

“They have to understand the history,” she said with an outrageous grin.

“How’d she get a naked picture of you, Jason?” Temika asked curiously, trying to get control of herself.

“She demanded it as part of the payment for the last shipment of goods she delivered to me,” he answered, giving Symone a scowl, but she just winked at him. “I really didn’t have much choice, so I let her take it. Kumi is...a bit eccentric.”

“Ah’d nevah guess,” she said, breaking down into laughter again.

“Here’s the panel,” Tim said, opening another box. “There’s two of them in here.”

“Don’t turn them on,” Jason cautioned. “Well guys, I have some work to do, so if you don’t mind,” he prompted.

“Sure, we’ll clear out,” Clem chuckled.

“Temika, stay a minute,” Jason told her. Tim looked about to say something, but Symone looked at him in a way that told Jason that she was sending to him privately. He glanced at Temika, then at Jason, then he nodded and followed Leamon up the stairs.

“Ah take it this is part of what you needed me for?” she asked. “What, you need a naked picture?” she asked with a sly smile. “Ah hate tah tell yah, sugah, but Ah’m much harder tah get out of mah clothes.”

“I’ve already seen you topless,” he said dryly, leaning back against the replicator and crossing his arms.

She laughed. “Ah reckon you have,” she said ruefully. “All it took fo’ you tah manage it was for me tah get shot, too,” she added with a sly smile. “Now, what did you want tah talk about, sugah?”

He blew out his breath and bowed his head, then looked back at her steadily. “There’s no easy way to tell you this, Temika. It’s going to shock you, and you’re probably not going to like hearing it.”

“Now you got me worried, sugah,” she told him seriously, the smile sliding from her face. “What, Ah’m being thrown out? Did Ah do somethin’ wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing quite as simple as that,” he said, then he stood back up. “Sit down.”

“What?”

“Sit down.”

“Shit, this must be *real* serious,” she grunted, sitting on a stack of boxes beside her.

“It’s serious all right,” he agreed. “First off, let me explain something to you. I didn’t come out here just because I wanted to get away from the Faey. I did, at least partially, but a really big part of the reason I’m here is because if the Imperium knew about me, I’d be shipped off to Draconis for brainwashing.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Because of what I am,” he replied evenly. “I’m a *telepath*, Temika. I’m a *human* telepath.”

“Yo’ shittin’ me,” she said with a gasp.

He shook his head. “I found out about it a few months ago. A Faey friend of mine named Jyslin found out about it, but she didn’t turn me in. She trained me instead, trained me how to control it an how to not get caught. She did it because she likes me, and she didn’t want to see me get my mind wiped by the Imperium if they discovered me. At that time, I thought I was the only one, a fluke.

“But I’m *not* the only one. Tim is here because *he’s* a telepath, but unlike me, he got caught, which is why Symone is here. She literally fought her way out of New Orleans with Tim, to get him away from the Imperium. Symone loves Tim with all her heart, and she decided she’d rather live a life as a hunted outlaw than lose him.”

“Yeah, we can all see that,” Temika said unevenly, obviously as her mind tried to wrap around the idea of Jason being telepathic. Jason was not listening to her thoughts, because he didn’t want to make her uncomfortable. “So, yo’ a telepath? Yo’ listening tah me think right now?”

He shook his head. "I don't do that unless I have a good reason. I don't invade the privacy of my friends like that, and besides, it's not polite."

She gave him a *very* long look. "Why you tellin' me this, Jason? If you've kept it secret fo' this long, why tell me now? What, you gonna tell everyone, an' you're just stahtin' with me?"

He shook his head again. "Telling everyone would be a mistake," he told her. "If one of them gets picked up in a Faey sweep, then I'm toast. They're looking for me, there's no doubt about that. But, there are lots of *Jasons* out here, but they'd come right after me if they picked up from a squatter that there was a human telepath running around out here."

"Then why tell me?"

He looked her right in the eye. "Because you're *also* a telepath," he said directly.

She didn't move a muscle for almost thirty seconds. "Ah'm whut?" she asked blankly.

"A telepath. Or you will be, I should say. It hasn't woke up yet, but it's there. That's why I told you about me. That's why I'm talking to you now."

"But Ah don't—how do you know?"

"The short of it is that Symone sensed it in you when she screened you," he answered. "She was afraid to say anything to you, because she said your reactions when she screened you hinted that you have some major issues with telepaths. She was trying to figure out a way to tell you without upsetting you. I told her I'd do it. I thought you might be more comfortable if I told you, instead of her." He leaned against the replicator again. "After all, I have no reason to lie."

"Ah can't believe this," she said with a quavering voice. "Ah'm, Ah'm a *telepath*?" Her eyes darted back and forth, and for a second he thought she was about to faint. He lunged forward to catch her, but she steadied herself quickly, then stood up. For some inexplicable reason, she was *grinning*. "You know what? Ah bet this means that no blueskin can ever stick her grubby little hands in mah head *ever again*," she said fiercely.

Jason raised an eyebrow. She was willing to embrace the idea of it that fast? Odd. He was sorely tempted to peek at her thoughts, but he wasn't about to, not and risk destroying the trust he seemed to have just built with her.

"With some training, probably not," he agreed in a slightly uncertain tone. "It depends on how strong you are, though, and how strong the Faey is. And who's better trained, of course. Skill can overwhelm raw power."

"Symone taught you?" she asked.

"No, someone else did, but Symone is teaching Tim. And when your power expresses, you'll be in there with him. But there are some things you have to understand, Temika."

"Whut?"

"After you express, you're grounded until Symone says it's safe for you to leave," he explained. "An untrained telepath is *dangerous*, and not just for the reasons you think. I think it'll take about a month for Symone to train you to the point where you can go back to ferrying stuff around, but you might not have the time for it. You'll be spending most of your time learning, and learning *fast*. My power's been awake for months, and I've barely learned half of what Jyslin wanted me to know. I can control my power so I don't hear others, and I can send, and Jyslin taught me the basics of using my power as a weapon, but that's about it. When you and Tim are up to where I am, I'm going to be in there with you while Symone teaches the advanced stuff to us."

"Oh, and obviously, *never tell anyone about this*," he said intensely. "Your *life* depends on nobody knowing about it. If the Faey knew about you, they'd tear this entire region apart trying to find you. And when they did, you'd be shipped off to their home planet. Once you get there, they'll brainwash you to be a faithful lapdog to the Empress. That's the fate that awaits us if the Faey find out about us, and you always have to remember that *anyone* who knows about us is as good as an open book for the first Faey who crosses his path. Do you understand that?"

She was quiet a long moment. "Yeah, yeah, Ah understand, sugah. An' yo' right, Ah can see

exactly what yo' talkin' about. When will it happen?"

He shrugged. "Maybe right now, maybe next year. There's no way to tell. When it's ready, when you're ready, it just happens. Have you been having sudden headaches? Dizzy spells? Unexplained nosebleeds?"

"Yeah," she said. "Ah thought the airbike had somethin' tah do with it."

"Then you're very close."

"What's it like? Bein' a telepath, Ah mean."

"Scary at first," he answered. "Very scary. You hear all these thoughts that aren't yours, and you can't make them go away. But you'll learn how to block it out very quickly, and after that, it's much more interesting. I happen to like being a telepath. I like to send more than I like to talk, because it's faster and more precise, and you can communicate more than just words. You can send images, sounds, even emotions, and that's much more effective than talking."

"Ah don't care about that," she said. "Ah just want tah make sure that no blueskin can *evah* get inside mah head, evah again," she said fiercely.

"Symone was right," he said quietly. "Someone *did* do something to you."

"You bettah believe someone did!" she shouted at him, almost hysterically. "Ah got my brain all but scrambled by one of those Faey *bitches*! You don't know what it's like havin' someone in yo' head, takin' anythin' she wants, an' there ain't nothin' you can do tah make her stop! You don't know what it's like tah feel that *helpless*!"

"I can understand how that would make you feel," he said, sitting on a box. "But *don't* take it out on Symone. Remember, she is *not* like that. Be as angry as you want at the Faey, but don't ever believe that Symone could do something like that."

She came up short, then sat down again. "Ah, Ah don't believe she could," she said honestly. "Ah never thought Ah'd see a Faey Ah wouldn't immediately hate, but Symone ain't like no Faey Ah've evah heard of. She's too much a sweetie tah be like *them*."

"Good, I'm glad you understand that," he said, standing back up. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get this armor off. Just do me a favor and go home and think about what I said, and try to relax. And remember that when it does happen, don't panic, just come to me or Symone straight away."

"How will Ah know?"

"Believe me, you'll know," he said seriously. "It could be tomorrow, it could be next week, it could be next month, so don't think that you're just going to go home and immediately express now that you know it's going to happen."

She blushed just slightly; obviously, that was *exactly* what she thought.

"Ah—thanky kindly, Jason," she said, standing up again.

"For what?"

"Fo' bein' honest, sugah," she answered. "An' for givin' me hope that Ah'll get back mah dignity."

Then he understood. The violation she had endured under that Faey trooper had done more than injure her mind, it had left her feeling weak and helpless, and those were feelings that Temika Daniels, the Queen of the Glass, the most ferocious center ever to play women's college basketball, was prepared to accept. If she too had talent, then she would feel confident that no Faey could ever violate her that way again, that she could protect herself, and that helped restore a modicum of the self-image that she had lost when that had happened. It was a start down the path of redemption in her own eyes, a way to get back what she had lost when that Faey had raked her claws through Temika's mind and destroyed the image of security she had possessed.

"Any time, Temika," he said gently. "Any time."

"Call me Mika, sugah. All mah friends do."

"Mika," he mirrored with a smile.

She came up to him, and though he could tell she flinched at the idea of it, she leaned in and kissed

him quickly on the cheek. Her phobia over being touched would take longer for her to overcome, because it had become ingrained in her very personality, but that too was a start.

He watched her go up the stairs and out of sight, and he took a minute to sigh and be relieved that it had went well.

He went back up to his room to take his armor off, pondering the idea of Temika learning how to control her talent, and the fact that she looked to be a very eager student. She had no fear of the idea that she had talent; in fact, she embraced the idea of it immediately and completely, because it represented to her a way to get back a feeling of control of her own life. That was probably a good thing, because she wasn't going to be afraid of her gift at all, and overcoming the fear of that unknown, strange, and frightening gift was the first step to mastering its power.

He went into his room and closed the door behind him, then turned to go to the chair to start taking off his armor, but he stopped short when he saw Symone laying on his bed. Naked. Laying on her side but with both shoulders on the mattress and her hands under her head, in a very sensual pose. *And you thought I forgot about you?* she sent winsomely, rolling fully onto her side and giving him a wicked little look. She patted the bed before her commandingly.

Symone, I told you, I'm not too comfortable with this, he repeated.

TIM! she sent with impressive power, mainly because Symone really wasn't that strong in the talent. That had to be about everything she had. *Tell him it's alright!*

It's alright! Tim sent immediately, though his form was poor and his words were a tad garbled.

Now, you can either come sit down, or you can threaten our friendship in my eyes, she sent with surprising vehemence.

He blew out his breath. He really had no other excuses, and their friendship was *definitely* at stake here, so he went over and sat down on the edge of the bed. She sat up behind him, and a glance down showed him a very long blue leg on either side of his black armored form. *Relax, Jason,* she sent with an audible laugh. *It's not like I'm going to pull your teeth out with eyebrow tweezers. You and me are going to have a little fun, have some good sex, then I'm going to go back to the man I love. If you think it's going to change our relationship, please, what is it you humans say? Oh yes, "get a clue." I love you as a best friend, Jason, and this is one way Faey show that friendship. When I get out of this bed, I won't think any differently of you than I did last week, or right now. And I know that you won't mistake it for love. Jyslin proved that to me,* she sent with a little giggle. *You were able to carry on two very different relationships with her at the same time. I won't be any different. So.*

So what?

So, it's time to find out if Jyslin was just bragging or if she was telling the truth, she sent with a naughty undertone, grabbing his left arm and deftly unlocking his gauntlet from his arm greave. *Every Marine in her squad has been dying to find out, and so have I.*

Bragging about what?

We're about to find out, she sent as she leaned against his back and licked his ear while pulling his gauntlet off.

He felt a shiver run up his spine. *Bragging about what?* he demanded.

You, she answered, unlocking the elbow joint. *Now get out of this armor. We don't have all night, you know.*

Chapter 9

Chiira, 8 Toraa, 4393, Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 9 September 2007, Native Regional Reckoning

Chesapeake, Ohio (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

Symone was driving him crazy.

She wouldn't tell him *what* Jyslin was supposedly bragging about. The only kind of response he could get out of her the next morning was that "Jyslin obviously didn't brag enough."

The worry that what happened between them would change their relationship, or upset Tim, had been misplaced. Tim took him aside and had a talk with him the next morning, and assured him that he *didn't* mind. The bond between Tim and Symone couldn't possibly be threatened by something that trivial. Tim knew that Symone was just acting in her nature, he knew it wouldn't change her love for him in the slightest, and in a way, Tim admitted that if he was going to find someone to fill the void left behind when he was separated from Jyslin, then he was glad it was going to be Symone. That didn't make much sense to him, but the fact that Tim was willing to allow Symone to do with Jason things that she should only be doing with Tim, because that's what she felt she needed to do to be Jason's friend, said much for his dark-haired friend.

The night with Symone had also taught him an important lesson about telepathy, sex, and the Faey mentality towards them. When he and Jyslin made love, they joined their minds, which made it *intense*. He and Symone had shared a night of admittedly intense physical pleasure, but did not join their minds. That was *not* something that friends did, that was something reserved for one's spouse or chosen partner, and that was the critical difference that made the two acts so completely different. What he and Symone had shared absolutely *paled* in comparison to what he and Jyslin shared in each other's arms. It was absolutely not the same. When he and Jyslin made love, they *made love*. What he and Symone had done could technically be called making love, but it was almost sterile in comparison. They'd done nothing more than have sex, purely for physical pleasure...or gratification. "Buddy sex," Symone had called it, sex just to relieve sexual tension.

And *that* was the great boundary, he discovered. That was why Faey were so casual about it. *Making love* and *having sex* were two completely different things to a Faey, and now he finally understood the difference. One was as intimate as intimate could be, while the other was just *physical*. Faey assigned the same importance and intimacy to the union of the minds as humans did the union of the bodies.

That day marked great celebration through the community the day after the delivery, for Steve got his cable service up and running. He had a little trouble getting the transceiver to send out the signal on the cable using channels, but once he got that figured out, anyone with a cable-ready TV could pick up 120 different stations. Steve picked the channels, and he did a good job picking ones that had everything most people would want to see. He made sure to include INN and CNN, the two major news channels for both Earth and the Imperium, as well as several Imperial channels that he thought would be useful to have on the lineup, such as an Imperial network dealing with technical subjects, like the old *Tech TV* channel. He found a home improvement channel for Earth, so they could learn how to build things so they wouldn't be such hindrances to Luke, who seemed able to build or fix most anything, or Zachary Brolin, the community's resident expert on construction and carpentry. Zach had been the second generation owner of a contracting business, and he knew his construction. Not only did everyone have lights at night, and refrigerators, and air conditioning (though that was becoming less an issue now, as the seasons marched into autumn), but now they could sit down after dinner at night and watch *television*.

They'd had three days to get used to that luxury, but things had been very busy, and besides, Jason

already *had* television. Doc Northwood had both settled into a house, and also commandeered one of the stores on Route 7 to be his new clinic. He had Jason ferry him back and forth between Chesapeake and his house near Beckley for nearly a full day, as he moved all his medical equipment and supplies to his new building. After they finished, he had Luke and Irwin take him to all three hospitals in Luke's Deuce, where he managed to scavenge some medical supplies that others had either missed or dismissed as having no use. He was still setting up his clinic, getting up early and going to bed late, sorting through boxes and boxes of material, and was going to open it in two days.

The city council had already worked out the procedure for that. Anyone was allowed to come to see Doc Northwood, but they had to surrender all their weapons, and Symone had to be on hand to scan their thoughts to ensure that was why they were really there.

Things were starting to look good. Temika had arranged a trade with the McPherson's in Fort Gay, trading three cows and some goats for several guns and a portable generator. She'd also organized a trade with the a group in Crown City, four hens and a rooster for several boxes of Clem's hand-pressed ammunition and two hunting rifles. Luke had gone out to get them yesterday with Symone riding shotgun in her new armor, so now they had some livestock. The cloth armor team had been working around the clock, and now everyone had at least one set of armored clothing, even Jenny. Jason had uploaded the railgun part specs into the replicator, and it had already manufactured the parts he needed for the first new unit. He'd even gotten about halfway through making it as well, finishing the flux cabling in the barrel, which was probably the hardest part. It had to be wrapped by hand, and it had to be *exact*, so much so that he had to get out a micrometer to check his work. He'd replicated the barrel so it had notches on the outside for the cabling, so that helped a great deal, but it still required steady hands and patience. The rest of it would just be like putting a model kit together. He'd also made a *bunch* of new magazines, so he didn't have to worry about losing them, and a few thousand rounds of ammunition. Tim and Symone found themselves coating the iron rounds with titanium for a couple of days as they did their telepathy lessons.

There were some things to worry about, though. He'd finally called Jyslin back, and to his relief, he found out that the Secret Police wasn't bothering her anymore, mainly because of her aunt Lorna. Lorna had had a meltdown when she found out that the Secret Police was harassing her niece, and a couple of calls to friends who had friends put a swift end to it. She also warned him that he'd been spotted. Her aunt Lorna had told her that he'd been picked up by an environmental research team's study of a bear they'd tagged with a beacon. They'd been using an optical image to observe the bear, and Jason had literally flown right over the animal. They quickly started tracking *him*, but they lost visual contact with him when he went under a cloud, and they found out very quickly that the airbike was actively shielded from passive sensors. It was too small for orbital sensors to pick it up with active sensors, so they lost contact with him. They knew that Jason had airbikes, since they'd been in his skimmer, and he still had his skimmer, but the fact that they were *shielded* had baffled the sensor officers to no end. They could not figure out how he'd gotten his hands on shielded airbikes, or if he'd somehow done the shielding himself. Lorna had told her that they thought he had taken his skimmer apart to scavenge parts and equipment he needed to hide himself, because the only PPG signatures they could detect were signatures that they'd already known about. Jason's group wasn't the only people out in the wildlands that had Faey technology. The Faey generally ignored that contraband equipment, so long as they didn't see someone stockpiling it. Every once in a while they sent out expeditions to capture the owners and inspect what they had and what they were doing with it, but that was usually only when someone was bored, or they thought that someone might have gotten his hands on a plasma weapon. Generally put, the Faey didn't give a damn what happened out in the nature preserve, so long as the squatters didn't start disrupting Faey-held territory, and they didn't start getting weapons that could hurt Faey soldiers.

Jyslin told him that they were fairly sure that Jason had plasma weapons, since it was now obvious to them that he had planned to run away, and that posed a special problem for them. That gave Jason a

viable means of fighting back if they found him and tried to capture him, and he was willing to shoot at them to prevent it. Lorna told him that they intended to find him first, then study him long enough to find a way to get at him safely, which meant getting a Marine close enough to attack him with telepathy. They didn't want open warfare, because they wanted him back in school. They were afraid that if they opened fire on him, it would make him so resistant that telepathic reprogramming would be required to permanently subdue him, and that was something they would prefer to avoid. Anytime that was done, there was a risk that his intellectual capability might be damaged, since they were in effect rewiring his brain, and the wiring of the brain was one of the contributing aspects of intelligence. They wanted his mind, and they didn't want to have to tamper with that mind. They wanted to reclaim him a *peacably* and as *gently* as possible, then get him back in school without having to tamper with him. They didn't want to earn his eternal hatred and be required to risk damaging his mind when making him more tractable.

But his cunning had already started getting on their nerves. They had done a sweep of everyone with a PPG, but they hadn't found *him*. They'd found out from those squatters about a woman riding an airbike, which they figured had to be connected to Jason, but they couldn't *find* her. That was when they realized that Jason had done something to the airbikes to hide them from sensors, and it was confirmed when he was spotted and evaded tracking. They *knew* he had left with his skimmer, they *knew* he had come prepared, and it was obvious to them that one of the things he had prepared for was hiding himself from their sensors. This drove them *nuts*. They could not figure out how he was defeating their sensors. Sensor officers were trying to recalibrate the sensors to detect smaller objects, and they'd sent some dropships over the preserve with sensor pods so they could get a more accurate reading off the active arrays, but so far they'd come up with *nothing*. That told Jason that his inverse phase emitter was working and working *perfectly*, killing their active sensor pulses and hiding anything that a passive sensor couldn't detect from the active arrays...and since the passive arrays couldn't detect anything either, his little organization was effectively invisible. They probably thought he had to be some kind of MacGyver to pull that off; little did they know that he had an outside contact that was supplying him with all kinds of equipment allowing him to do what he was doing.

That was a thought. How did Kumi get her dropship in and out the second time without anyone noticing? Or *did* they notice, and she'd just paid them to be quiet, or brought her noble clout about to hush it up? He'd have to ask her.

Jason also found out from Jyslin that politics was his friend. Lorna had told her that a representative of the Imperium, who had personally come from the Ministry to look at Jason's school record and some of the documented technical stunts he'd pulled, wanted more manpower and resources committed to finding Jason, but he found himself talking to a stone wall. The Duchess of Terra wasn't about to burn any more money and divert any more equipment and troops to hunting down a single runaway human, and to the Faey scientist's shock, the Imperium wasn't about to dispatch an additional units or give him any Marines to do it either. They'd looked for him, spent tens of thousands of credits in salary and maintenance costs trying to find him, and came up empty. The Duchess did have people looking for him, but she had mixed finding him into other operations, such as training missions, recon missions, and things like that. She wasn't going to waste money *just* on looking for him anymore. She was getting some additional benefit out of it. The word from the Imperium was that the Duchess of Terra already had people looking for him, so it was redundant to send any more.

He was glad that Jyslin was going to be alright, and the information she gave him was very eye-opening.

Symone...well, Symone was being Symone. She'd had almost a month to worm her way into the community, and now everyone loved her. Symone had a bubbly personality that made her impossible not to like, and despite the fact that she was Faey, she quickly got to where she all but owned everyone in the community. Jenny absolutely adored her, following her around almost all the time, often ignoring her own mother. What drove him crazy about that was that Symone was trying to line Jason

up a girlfriend. There were only five women in the community outside Symone; one was married, one was a child, and one was too old for him, so that left all of two women. Temika and Regina. Symone had been trying to steer both of them at him for a couple of days now, but he seriously doubted that she was going to have any luck. Regina already had a boyfriend—not even mentioning the fact that Jason didn't find Regina attractive at all—and Temika's phobia made it impossible for her to get close to anyone, even if she wanted to. And naturally, that was where Symone was concentrating her fire, on Temika. Temika did like Jason as a friend, maybe found him attractive, but Symone kept hitting the wall trying to convince her to ask him out on a date, because it kept coming back to her phobia. Even though she was very comfortable with Jason, and trusted him, Symone couldn't fathom why she wouldn't let him touch her. Symone didn't understand phobias, because that kind of mental condition didn't exist among the Faey. A phobia could be corrected with telepathic "surgery" by an expert telepath, correcting the mental state that caused it to exist. She couldn't understand why Temika had let him touch her before, when she was wounded, but wouldn't let him touch her now. Symone didn't understand that rationality had no bearing with a phobia, since a phobia was by its very nature an *irrational* fear to a certain situation. And since only Jyslin or someone of her calibre would have the telepathic power or skill to correct that, even if Temika allowed a Faey into her head, that meant it was nothing that would change any time soon.

Jason knew she meant well, but he wished she'd just drop it and leave well enough alone. He was quite content being single, and outside that one episode with Symone, which had been triggered by his trick on Kumi, he hadn't necessarily felt the need for female companionship. Jyslin probably had a lot to do with that, he figured. She'd totally *spoiled* him. His tryst with Symone was fun, but it wasn't as intense as it was with Jyslin.

Luckily, things were quiet right now. Jason was in his basement workshop, assembling his new railgun, and he'd been unbothered all morning. Now that he got the flux cabling on the barrel and locked it down with a liberal coating of clear sealant in one half of the barrel carapace, the rest of it was only going to take about six hours to finish. The hardest part after cabling would be assembling the chamber feed and installing the magazine lock and backglass display. Everything else was just cookie-cutter stuff, anneal component *A* to unit chassis location *B*, then run datalines and/or microconduit between component *A* and component *C*.

He had the equipment on hand to build 20 railguns, but he wasn't going to build them all at once. He'd decided that a railgun would be built for every person who had a set of armor, with two spares on hand in case of a breakdown. At the moment, they didn't need everyone to be carrying around that kind of firepower; the conventional firearms they had on hand right now was more than enough. It only gave them 7 external weapons that would work against the Faey if they attacked, but he wouldn't commit the people in his community to that kind of a fight. They would run from the Faey, but they would stand and fight against armed groups of roving bandits. That meant that he had to build three more railguns, and then he would move on to the next major problem.

The cloaking device.

He had absolutely no idea how he was going to do that. No *fucking* idea. But he had to come up with some way to get his skimmer back in the air, and do it without the Faey being able to detect it. Getting past the active sensors wasn't a problem now that he'd come up with the inverse phase emitter, now the problem was getting past the *passive* sensors. He could just install the inverse phase emitter in the skimmer if it came down to it, but now he had to find a way to hide the skimmer's energy signature, and its mass.

That little tidbit about scared his pants off. If he wanted to use the skimmer in space—which was an eventuality for which he had to plan—he had to find a way to hide mass. In space, away from the heavily distorting effect of the planetary gravometric well, Faey passive sensors would be able to detect the effect the skimmer's mass would have on space, as well as its gravometric engines. Faey had mastered the manipulation of space, even using it as a means of propulsion, and that included the

ability to *detect* the effect mass had on the curvature of space, detect spatial distortion. They could detect a stationary object, but they worked best when a mass was in motion, producing a dynamic alteration to the spacial volume...which he could understand. The human eye, after all, would detect an object in motion more effectively than they would an object at rest. A mass as small as the skimmer could be detected from the *moon* using Faey sensors, so long as the planetary gravity well of Earth didn't get in the way. He'd found that data just surfing around the tech boards, and had found someone who had posted up some classified information about some of the *secret* things Faey sensors did. That he *did not know*, and it was something he thanked God above he'd stumbled upon.

If he couldn't find a way around that, he'd have to stay within the atmosphere, inside the gravity well of the planet, where he was presented the same problem...finding some way to defeat both passive and active Faey sensors. Active, he had a system for, but he would prefer a single system to handle it all, because the power generation in his skimmer wasn't endless. Power consumption would be an issue for any system he put into the skimmer, because it only had so much power generation ability.

He was almost afraid to start it. That was going to be a massive headache, and the most complicated thing he had ever tried to invent. He was afraid to start it because he knew that once he did, he would relentlessly pursue his goal until he achieved it. That was something he thought to try over the winter, when the cold would limit his outdoor activity. The fact that he had no idea where to start probably factored in there somewhere too. With everything else, he had generally built on someone else's idea—well, maybe not so much with the inverse phase emitter—but this would come completely from him.

It had to be done, but the idea of it was very, very intimidating.

But that was three railguns away, so he had time to ponder how that was going to get started. He deftly installed the sight/rangefinder laser to the barrel of the weapon, just below the muzzle, then quickly annealed on the front sight before running the twisted pair of dataline fiber and microconduit back to the back of the weapon. The microprocessor for the weapon was just behind the loading chamber just under the display, and the PPG was only about six inches away from that, located in the base of the stock. Neither had been installed yet, though he planned to install both once he finished installing the laser. The processor had to be in first because the round feed system went in underneath it, and it was too tightly packed to try to install it after that was in place.

He installed the processor and hooked up the datalines from the laser and the barrel cabling, then started assembling the round feed system outside; it would be installed as a unit. The door upstairs opened, and footsteps started down, quickly. That didn't concern him, because Tim and Symone did live in his house, and besides, he left his doors unlocked. Anyone was welcome in his house at any time so long as he was home. Since he was the mayor, there were times when people wanted to talk to him about this or that, and he had an open door policy. He glanced up to see Regina coming down the stairs with someone else, almost running, a tall, willowy young man named James Harold. "Hey Reg, what's wrong?" he called in concern as he finished half of the loading frame, then reached for the plasma magnet that would draw the next round into the chamber.

"Jason, we have a problem," she told him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Well, Mayor Jason, I was hunting up on that ridge north of 52 about up to Ironton, and I saw a large group of people," James told him. "They were coming up the road there in trucks. They were all armed to the teeth, and moving this way. It's a road gang, Mayor. I think I've seen a couple of them before, they hit Huntington about four months ago. I had a dirt bike Luke got working for me up on the ridge, so I jumped on and rode like hell."

"Why didn't you call ahead on the radio?" he asked.

"My batteries musta died, Mayor. Sorry, I should've checked them."

Jason stood up. "Call everyone in right now," he ordered.

The call went out quickly after Regina and James left the basement, and Symone rushed into his

room just a minute after the word was spread that attackers were approaching. Jason was already working on getting his breastplate ready to put on, his emotions mixed. It had finally come. Jason now had to fight to protect himself, protect his freedom, and protect those who depended upon him for protection. He might have to kill someone today; actually, he was almost positive of it. That worried him some, but more for how it would make him feel *afterward* instead of how he felt now. He had already accepted the fact that taking this course of action would eventually require him to kill. Well, that day was here. "I saw Jimmy coming in, I lifted it off him," she said quickly as she started pulling off her clothes. She kept her armor in his room, mainly because she felt it safer to keep the expensive equipment in a central location and keep the people who came into his house away from the armor. His room was absolutely inviolate unless he was in it, and everyone knew it. *How we gonna play this?*

Not sure, depends on what they do, he answered as he threw her her codpiece after she got her shirt off. *They'll either come from the north on the bridge road, from the west off old 52, or they'll split into two groups and try to pincer us. We'll have to fight, there's no way around that. There are too many to try to take down with talent.*

Radio, she ordered, and Jason tossed her his handheld after she got her boots off. "Everyone make sure you're wearing your armored clothes!" she barked into it. "Temika, get your happy ass to Jason's house right now!"

"Ah'm almost tah the front door, sugah," she answered.

Me and you could just go meet them and take them out, you know, she told him.

No, I want them to come in, he said. *They won't be that much of a danger, and this is a good opportunity to see how well we can protect ourselves from an assault. Besides, if they're raiders, then that means they're either carrying everything they have with them, or at the very least, everything they've managed to steal from others. I'm not turning my back on the chance to capture that much stuff.*

Now you're thinking like a general, she grinned, working on getting her jeans off.

I wonder why we didn't hear about these guys coming in from the people up in Ironton, Jason fretted.

They might have slipped by, or they might have taken the Ironton group by surprise, Symone replied grimly, whisking off her panties and quickly stepping into her codpiece.

Let's hope not, they're good people up in Ironton.

Temika rushed into his room as Jason was attaching one of his thigh guards, and Symone was just getting her codpiece into position. "Ah always wondered how you got that on," she said.

"Right now, quickly," Symone said with uncharacteristic seriousness, reaching for the front section of her breastplate. "Hand me that piece right there, would you Mika?" she asked, pointing at the back.

"Sho', sugah," she said, picking it up and handing it to her. "What did you need me for?"

"Recon," Symone told her. "Go up and keep an eye on them and see what they do. Don't attack them, we want them to come in. Where we set up depends on what they do."

"Gonna take their stuff?" Temika asked, and Jason nodded. "Good, about time they got theirs," she chuckled.

Tim, get up here! Jason sent loudly. *You're gonna ride the panel and watch the sensors for us!*

Aww, I want to help you guys! he answered.

You've got a broken arm, you dipstick, Jason growled at him. *And you'll be much more help tracking them and manning the panel to activate traps more than you will out there gimping around with a broken arm. Now get up here.*

You'd better get your ass up here, baby, Symone sent with a very threatening undertone. *No way is my man fighting anything more than a chair-chafed butt with a broken arm.*

Alright, alright, I'm coming, he sighed.

"You tell him, sugah," Temika chuckled as she handed Symone the stomacher of her armor, then she looked at them with shock, blinking several times. "Wait a minute," she said.

Symone laughed. "I see it woke up," she grinned. "Welcome to the new world, Mika."

Jason chuckled, but Temika just gave an excited squeal, jumping up and down like a little girl. "Ah can't wait!" she said breathlessly. "What do Ah do now?"

"Right now you get your ass on your hoverbike and keep an eye on them," Jason told her. "Then, after it's all over, we'll explain what happens next. Just make sure you keep well clear of other people until all this is over. If you can't already hear them thinking, you'll start very quickly, and that's the part that's scary. And trust me, right now you do *not* want to be distracted. Just stay a couple thousand feet up until it's safe to come down."

"You got it, sugah," Temika said, her wild hair bouncing as she nodded vigorously, then she turned and ran from the room to perform her task.

She jiggles a lot when she gets excited, Symone sent slyly to Jason.

"Ah heard that!" Temika shouted from the stairs.

You were supposed to, Symone sent impishly. *Oh yeah, here's your "welcome to our world" present,* she added, then she sent an image, a memory, of Jason naked.

Woo! Go you sexy beast! Tim sent with an outrageous glint of amusement.

Jason flushed, then fixed Symone with a withering glare. *Hey, maybe that now she can see the merchandise, she might be interested in sampling it,* she told him with an unashamed grin, but she sent *openly*, which meant that both Tim and Temika had heard it.

You are on the list, Symone, Jason sent to her darkly. *And it's not the good one.*

Despite that good news, they still had a job to do. Jason and Symone came down into his yard, where the entire community was gathered, except for Jenny, Temika, Tim, Mary, and Doc Northwood. All of them but Temika were in Jason's house. Tim would be their remote operator, Jenny would stay in his house because it was safest, Mary had been excused from most violent action because Jenny needed her mother, and Northwood would remain there until his medical skills would be needed, when Mary would escort him to where he needed to go.

"Okay, Tim now has the ball," Jason called over the radio. That meant that they were all now under his direction, for he was the one that could see everyone and everything in the vicinity with the sensors.

"Okay people, I have all of you on sensors. Mika's just taking off—" Jason looked up and saw her rise up from her house on her airbike, angling out over the river so she could get altitude and observe the incoming raiders without them seeing her—*"and I just picked up a fast mover at the edge of sensor range. Looks like a scout on a dirt bike."*

"Here," Ruth said to Regina, who was loading a Tek-9 clip, handing out what looked like riot gear helmets, part of the equipment they'd absorbed from the east end gang. "Take this, honey. Here you go," she continued to say, taking helmets out of a large box that Luke was carrying behind her.

Luke gave one to Mary, who was standing beside him on the porch, and Jason got a look at it before she put it on. They'd sewn phase cloth into the inner lining, which draped down over the shoulders, protecting the neck. It even had buttons on it so it could be buttoned up under the chin, leaving only the face and hands exposed and vulnerable. The outer shell also had armor cloth taped to it, which was painted black to conceal the fact. The visors had also been covered in armored cloth, painted black, with only a wide strip over the eyes gone to give the wearer the ability to see. That setup would sacrifice a little peripheral vision of the wearer in exchange for more protection.

"Nice, Ruthie," Jason said in appreciation as Mary held it up to him when she saw him looking at it.

"We figured it might come to this hon, so we prepared."

"Clever girl. Irwin, take the other airbike," Jason called, pointing at the burly young man, then he put his helmet on. He tuned his internal radio to the same RF frequency that they were using, then had the armor's onboard processor emulate RF transmission. "Check one two three," he called, pressing his finger to the transmit button on the side of his helmet. He could set the armor to transmit anything he said, but the frequency he was using was a one-way deal, where nobody else could talk if he was

talking, so that wasn't smart. "Is this transmitting?"

"I got yah, sugah," Temika called.

"You're loud and clear," Tim answered.

"I hear you loud and clear," Leamon replied.

"Okay, everyone get your earpieces in and make sure that you're wearing your armored clothes. We don't want any gunshot wounds. Let's give Doc nothing to do today. And everyone thank Ruthie and the sewing club for those damn clever helmets after this is over."

"Amen," someone called over the radio.

"Right now we're waiting to see what they do. We're going to move and meet them at the roadblocks when we see which way they come. If they split up, we'll divide up accordingly and hold them at the blocks. Just everyone remember to that that armor you're wearing doesn't make you invincible. If you get hit, it *will* hurt. It might even break some bones, and if you get shot in the right place, it'll kill you armor or no armor. So just treat this like the guns those guys are carrying can kill you, because they *can*."

They waited outside his house for almost a half an hour, because the incoming column of raiders stopped. Their scout had gotten within about a half mile, then he pulled back. Temika, who had an eye on them from high above, reported over the radio that they seemed to be arguing about something. But then they all got their guns out, and a large contingent of men on dirt bikes were dispatched from the main host coming down old 52, while the caravan of trucks continued on new 52. They were going to split up and hit them from the west and north.

Tim, you find anything on the radio frequencies yet? Jason sent.

I'm still looking, he answered. *They've gotta be using radios to coordinate, they're moving too good. Wait a minute. Found it!* There was a pause. *They know we know they're coming, but they're attacking anyway,* he relayed. *They do not have our radio frequency. They do know about Symone—shit, they have a bazooka. They're going to try to hit Symone with a bazooka. Their leader just reminded them that knocking Symone out of the fight was the key, so they have to find her and single her out.*

Well, I'll have to make sure they can see me then, Symone sent with an amused tone.

"Okay, they're splitting up," Tim called aloud over the radio. *"We've got a group of dirt bikes coming in on old 52, and the main force just picked up speed along 52. Looks like they're going to try to hit us from both sides at the same time."*

"Symone, take Luke and four other people and hold the west roadblock," Jason ordered over the radio. "Everyone else with me to the north. Irwin, hang around just out of sight, then hit them when I call you in. Mika, drift down and be ready to support Symone if she needs you. Try not to blow up any vehicles people, we want to capture as much as we can. That means no plasma if you can help it," he barked.

"Ah got my Tek-9 and Ol' Betsy," Temika called assuredly.

"I need to come in for a gun," Irwin reported. *"All I have is the plasma rifle and a nine mil pistol."*

"Doc, grab something suitable out of the armory and pass it to Irwin when he comes in," Jason commanded as he ran towards the north roadblock with his group of defenders. "Tim, get the traps up when Doc gets back in. The traps will be hot people, so you know the danger zone."

"Shit! Jason, there's a Faey dropship about ten miles south of us!" Temika shouted over the radio. *"It ain't movin' this way though, it's just hanging in the air, way up there. Ah can jus' barely see it."*

Jason cursed. "There's nothing we can do about that, we have more pressing issues at the moment," he replied. "Tim, ETA?"

"Bikes will hit the west roadblock in about two minutes."

"They'll slow down, they'll want to hit both sides at the same time," Symone called.

"Don't count on it, the bikes might be a diversion to pull us off the north roadblock," Jason grunted

as he reached the roadblock. It consisted of a zig-zag of about 20 cars arrayed on the road in behind a bridge, that would allow vehicle through if it moved very slowly, but would stop any attempt to rush through quickly or try to ram through. The creek would force any vehicle to come through that roadblock, mainly because they had junk cars lined up along the creek's near bank, stretching all the way to the woods on either side of the road. It was an impenetrable barrier for any vehicle, no matter how off-road capable it was, and absolutely forced any vehicle to come through the roadblock. Jason rushed to the end of the roadblock and pulled a car with flat tires out to cover the entrance, forming a solid barrier, and the defenders all got behind the second row of cars. That put two layers of steel between them and the incoming opposition, very effective cover. The west end roadblock wasn't quite that effective, mainly just cars lined up in a similar manner between two buildings, but they had trashed cars and junk piled too high for a vehicle to get through along every street in or out of their enclave, forcing any vehicle to come that way. That was their wall, with its two gates open to ground approach. Luke had been very busy since they'd arrived.

"The bikes are speeding up. Looks like Jason wins the raffle," Tim called with a chuckle. *"Get ready Symone, they're about a half mile out."*

"I can hear them," she called.

Instead of rushing to the attack, however, the bikes quickly broke up and started rushing around the outer fringes of Chesapeake. Jason heard a few distant gunshots, probably taking a shot at the riders as they rode around and came into view. *"I think the bikes are doing a fast scout,"* Tim said as he studied them from Jason's house. *"They're looking for a way in."*

"Or testing the defenses, or both," Symone added.

For almost ten minutes, they all heard those dirt bikes rampaging around the area outside the perimeter of the enclave, then they all pulled back. *"Okay, I have ground movement now,"* Tim called. *"We got about fifty men milling around the vehicles, and about five trucks are moving forward."* They were all quiet while Tim watched, and Jason amplified the audio on his armor, to better hear the trucks as they approached. *"They just sent out a group of about twenty men on foot, moving due south from the main group. The bikers are with them. Looks like they're moving towards the west end of the wall. The rest are starting to form up around the ten trucks that advanced. Okay, they're leaving most of their trucks behind, they're leaving most of their trucks behind. They got men guarding them, but they're leaving them behind."*

"Irwin, Temika, there's what you're doing," Jason barked. "Take those trucks, but try not to blow anything up. Wait for them to engage with us, then hit them."

"You got it, sugah," Temika replied.

"Roger, I'll swing out way east and circle back so they don't see me coming," Irwin acknowledged.

"Irwin sugah, tune yo' bike radio tah local one, so we can set this up without clogging this channel."

"Local one, roger."

"Tim, can you get a count of who went where?" Jason called.

"I got twenty people on foot and ten dirt bikes coming through the woods. Five trucks are moving towards your position surrounded by, um, ten guys on foot. I can't count the people in the trucks."

Jason quickly added it up. "Clem, take six people and go reinforce Symone, she'll need more people than she's got."

"You'll be undermanned, son," Clem warned.

"We've got open space and they can't flank us. Symone's going to be dealing with people on bikes and on foot that have cover. She needs the manpower. Now get your asses over there before they get to her."

"I get it, son. You three, you, you, you, come on," Clem called, pointing quickly in succession.

They waited in tense silence for several moments, but Jason breathed a sigh of relief when Symone called that Clem had reached her, and she'd redeployed her people to deal with a dual threat. Symone

was the better choice for the west roadblock because she had actual battlefield experience, and would be better suited for handling a more complicated situation.

"The force moving towards the west side of town stopped. I think they're waiting for the trucks to get into position," Tim reported.

"I can hear their bikes," Symone said.

"Try to capture those bikes," Jason reminded her. "Remember, no plasma fire if you can help it. They'll blow up stuff we can use, and I don't feel like cleaning up the bodies with a wetvac."

"I got one of those archaic pistol thingies, Jason, and Luke showed me how to use it. I don't much plan on shooting anyway. I'm just gonna run out there and cause hell and let my unit do the shooting."

"Be careful woman," Jason ordered. "You get hit with that bazooka, and you're gonna feel it."

"Pfft," she snorted. *"In this armor? They'll be lucky if they make me stagger back."*

"No stupid stunts," Jason ordered flatly, then he heard the faint rumble of a large diesel engine.

"The trucks are closing in," Jason shouted to the people around and behind him, then went back to the radio. "Trucks are advancing," Jason called.

"There's a group of men breaking away from the trucks," Tim called. *"Ten of them, running into the woods."*

"They're going to try to flank us," Regina warned.

"Jesus, how many men do they have?" Jason growled, going to radio. "Tim, if that group passes us by and goes for the enclave, you're going to have company. We're out of people to deal with them—" he stopped, looking behind him. He had nine men and women behind him, more than enough to deal with that group of men. It just meant that he was going to have to hold the trucks himself. "Shit," he growled. "Reg, we can't let them into the enclave. Pull back to Route 7 and wait to see what they do."

"But you'll be *alone* here, Jason," she protested.

"I have this," he said, slapping his breastplate meaningfully. "And if it comes to it, I can blow up their trucks if I have to. I'll be alright. Trust me, nobody's getting past me."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, go ahead," he ordered, going hot with his railgun, then putting a hand to his helmet. "I'm sending Reg and the others at the north roadblock to head off those men, Tim," Jason called. "I can probably hold off the trucks myself."

"You can easily, Jayce," Symone told him assuredly. *"Just run out there and attack the trucks right now. They can't possibly hurt you, and you can scare the shit out of them,"* she added with a chuckle.

"No," Jason said, leaning down behind the car as the first truck started creeping around the distant curve. "I'll let them get much closer. Let's let them all commit before we start."

"Where am I goin', Tim?" Regina demanded over the radio.

"They're coming right towards Route 7, they just crossed the creek. They're going to come out right behind the old Sav-a-Lot if they don't turn."

Jason activated the strength augmentation system, felt the armor moving with him, moving *for* him, as he ducked down more behind the car and increased the magnification on his visor until the lead truck was clearly visible to him. It was a military Deuce, and it had a snowplow or some kind of bladed plow attached to the front. A roadblock buster, something a mobile raiding gang would need to assault fortified positions. Jason brought up his railgun and increased magnification again, until the driver was clearly visible to him through the cracked windshield. A blinking red arrow at the bottom of his field of vision warned him his weapon's targeting crosshair was below his field of vision, so he angled the railgun up until the red crosshair appeared in his visor, wobbling a great deal because of the distance of the target—nearly 420 *shakra*—and the magnification he was using on the visor.

"Here they come!" Tim shouted over the radio, and almost at the same time, the Deuce's engine roared loudly in Jason's ears, and it surged forward. *"Reg, the group you're on is turning to flank Jayce!"*

"We'll get 'em!" she called as distant gunfire reached his ears, augmented by his armor's microphones. There was the loud reports of hunting rifles mixed in with the staccato reports of automatic weapons firing, and it quickly got very steady. Symone's group had opened up on the men assaulting the west roadblock.

Jason lined up the driver in his sights, then he realized that if he missed and hit the truck, he'd cripple it, and they *needed* that truck. Symone had said that he'd be virtually untouchable in his armor...if that was the case, he could just rush the truck and stop it without doing it any damage. That might work. Jason shouldered his railgun and activated the antigrav system, and set it so he'd skim along the ground. That was "travel mode" for the armor, allowing him to hover just over the ground and move at a surprisingly fast speed...somewhere around 100 miles an hour if he remembered right. It was almost like roller skating, though his direction and speed were controlled by how he shifted his weight. He put his hands on the car in front of him and swung over it, then surged forward on a cushion of distorted space, quickly picking up some impressive speed. He was going almost 50 miles an hour before he cleared the bridge. The passenger in the Deuce swung out the window on his side and pointed an AK-47 at him. Jason almost flinched when he saw the flare from its muzzle, heard the sharp sound of it firing, but felt nothing but a slight *tink-tink-tink* as the rounds struck his armor and were thoroughly rebuffed. He silently blew out his breath and leaned fully forward, hurtling at the Deuce in a grotesque game of chicken, three tons of steel against him and his 260 pounds of flesh, bone, blood, weapon, and armor.

Well before he got in danger of being rammed, Jason jumped, soaring high into the air. He landed lightly on the hood of the Deuce, and found himself staring at two very shocked men, both wearing old army BDU uniforms. "Good morning," Jason said casually, sliding to the edge of the hood on the driver's side. The driver slammed on the brakes, but Jason just grabbed hold of the side of the doorframe. As the truck's brakes chattered, trying to bring the huge vehicle to a stop, Jason slid off the hood and onto the footrail of the truck. He reached into the cab and grabbed the driver by the shirt, then bodily yanked him out of the cab through the open window. The truck veered off the road, almost tipping over, at least until Jason grabbed hold of the wheel and righted it as the guy in the passenger side realized what happened. Instead of sliding over within reach of Jason, he fired his AK-47 directly at him. Jason felt them hit the armor, even saw a spark as a round ricocheted directly off the visor, but it was like he was being pelted with marshmallows for all the good it did the fellow to shoot at him. Jason opened the door and slid in just enough to jam his foot on the brake, which made the Deuce bounce to a halt just before the engine stalled, and brought the vehicle to a stop.

Men were boiling out of the other trucks, nearly twenty of them, after the trucks screeched to a halt. They realized what was going on when the man who had shot at him ran back towards them screaming, and screaming "Faey! Faey!" They thought he was Symone, probably because of the armor. Geeze, didn't the guy have eyes? How could he possibly mistake him for a *woman*? Sheesh. Jason slid off the truck and came around it, seeing them all shoot at him, but all their rounds simply bounced off his gleaming black armor like they were nothing. He charged right into the middle of them and simply started smacking them around, swatting any head, gun, or conveniently available body part that was within reach.

That was about when he understood the elegant simplicity of Symone's plan. With him right in the middle of them, sending men flying with swings of his strength-augmented arms, totally invulnerable to their weapons, he sent the attacking force into complete chaos and disarray. His targets were still the trucks, so he smacked enough people out of his way to reach the second one, which was now stopped, and it was clear to the driver that he meant to reach in and pull him out. The man reacted to that by piling out the passenger side door with his passenger...which served Jason's purpose just fine. It got them out of the truck and caused the vehicle to become a roadblock for the trucks behind it.

He smashed a man in the head, sending him reeling to the ground, then turned just in time to see someone running up from behind with a rocket launcher of some kind already on his shoulder. Jason

felt a moment of panic and dove behind the cover of the truck, unshouldering his railgun. He went hot and blew out his breath, then swung around with it already up to his shoulder. He didn't bother aiming, but pulled up short and dove back the other way when he saw that missile launcher fire. The rocket sizzled by the side of the truck, missing him and the truck, but it sailed over the bridge and impacted one of the cars in the roadblock on the far side. The explosion was violent and loud, sending flaming pieces of car flying all over the general vicinity and sending a boiling ball of fire and black smoke into the sky.

"You maniac!" Jason shouted in surprise as he glanced a look out, and saw that he had no more of those damned things. Totally forgetting about the railgun in his hand, Jason streaked out from behind the truck like a black blur, then impacted the man with the empty rocket tube with such force that he bounced off and went flying, sailing nearly 30 feet before he hit the ground behind the second truck. He slammed the barrel of the railgun into the face of the man that was beside the first one, then he screamed right towards the third truck to rip the driver out from behind the wheel. He raced out between the second and third trucks, and glanced to his left just in time to see *another* man with a rocket launcher. And he was already firing it!

He had no chance to dodge. It hit him in the side and detonated, washing angry fire over his visor and feeling the concussion rattle his bones a little. But the explosion and the heat could not penetrate his armor. It did, however, send him flying about ten feet, and he landed on his shoulders and back on the soft grass as smoke wafted up from his armor. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs, then climbed back to his feet as a critical malfunction error flashed on his visor display, coming from his railgun. The explosion had damaged it, and rendered it inoperable. The titanium casing had withstood the explosion, mainly because Jason's body had shielded most of the weapon from the blast. The blast did burn through the shoulder strap though, so he held the weapon like a club as he singled out the bastard who had had the nerve to hit him with a rocket at such close range. He wasn't the only one to take some of that, he saw. The second truck, a big Ford F-250, had some fire licking at its back left tire, and it was a bit scorched. The third truck, a Dodge Ram, had its driver's side headlight blown out and some shrapnel holes in the hood and left fender, as well as a shattered windshield that, to Jason's disgust, was smeared and spattered with blood. The explosion had killed the driver of the truck. There were also three men laying on the ground not far from the explosion, none of them moving...and since one of them was on fire, Jason assumed they were probably dead. That idiot had panicked and fired the rocket while Jason was in the middle of his own men, and killed them.

Jason roared forward as the man stared in stunned disbelief, then hit him dead in the face with the stock of his railgun. The blow sent teeth and blood flying, and the man almost did a backflip from the force of the blow before flopping to the ground on his stomach, where he did not move. He moved to club another man who ran out from the truck's passenger side, who was covered with the blood of the driver, but he spun and dropped as Jason heard the chatter of gunfire behind him. He glanced back to see Regina and the others back at the roadblock, running over the bridge towards him while firing at the people around the trucks. He saw a few still forms at the treeline, telling him that they'd met the enemy and had overwhelmed them.

The two trucks that still had drivers quickly swerved off the road and moved to turn around, as the men on foot turned and started to run away. Those men started dropping to the ground as they were hit from behind by the advancing defenders, but it wasn't necessary now. He jacked up the volume of his armor so it would make his voice boom, and he shouted out.

"DROP YOUR WEAPONS AND SURRENDER!" his voice thundered across the clearing, but the men did not obey. They continued to flee, some of them turning to fire back at the advancing defenders as the two remaining trucks were almost completely turned around. Well, if they didn't want to surrender, then that was their decision. It was senseless killing, but if they wanted to be stupid, so be it. Jason couldn't afford excessive mercy when the lives and security of his own people were at stake.

"That's the last bike!" Symone's voice called over the radio. *"The men on foot are runnin'!"*

Jason growled, then blew out his breath. "Nobody gets away, but try to get them to surrender," Jason ordered. "I don't think we need to slaughter them all unless they refuse to give up."

"Ain't nobody gettin' away from us, sugah!" Temika called. *"We've taken the trucks, and we got who's left on the ground dead in our sights! They already gave up!"*

Jason surged forward, and in mere seconds he was at the fourth truck and already had his hand inside the cab. The driver pulled out a pistol and shot him squarely in the visor, but the round ricocheted off and hit the driver in the outside of his shoulder. Blood spattered the seat of the cab as Jason grabbed the gearshift and yanked it into *Park*, which made the engine stall, then grabbed the now wounded driver by the arm and dragged him bodily out of the truck. Men continued to shoot at him as he quickly raced to the last truck, then got to the driver's side door. The driver, a woman wearing a camouflage cap, put her hands up and jammed the brakes. "I give up!" she said fearfully, raising her hands and putting them on the roof of her truck's cab. "I surrender!"

She wasn't the only one. Several combatants were stopping and throwing down their guns and then putting their hands up, but a few were still shooting at Jason and the other defenders. Jason told the girl to stay in her truck and don't move, then barked for the others to drop to the ground, if only to avoid getting shot while rounds sizzled through the air around them. Jason fearlessly zipped into the crossfire, bearing down on the closest man still shooting. He grabbed the man's AK-47 with one hand and elbowed him in the face with the other arm, then slid backwards with great speed until he was further behind everyone else. He levelled the assault rifle with one hand and his damaged railgun with the other on the running men (though they didn't know the railgun was broken), and again shouted in a thundering voice to surrender *right now* or be shot.

It finally seemed to sink in that they weren't going to get away. One by one, they slowed to a stop and dropped their guns, then raised their hands. The chatter of gunfire ceased quickly, returning the region to the quiet of relative calm. *"We got the north roadblock secure,"* Regina called over the radio as Jason kept the weapons trained on the men who now had their hands up. *"Had some stubborn assholes that refused to surrender, but Jason knocked the fight out of them."*

"West roadblock is secure," Symone reported.

"We got their trucks," Temika said with a wicked chuckle.

"I think that's all of them, I don't see any movement on the sensors that I can't account for," Tim informed them.

"Anyone injured?" Jason asked over the radio, dropping his railgun for the moment.

"Just a few bruises here," Symone answered. *"A couple of people got shot, but the armor took it pretty well."*

"I think Leamon has a few broken ribs, but that's about it outside of some nasty bruises," Regina added. *"This armor is the shit."*

"Me and Irwin are just fine, sugah," Temika added. *"We didn't get a scratch. Can't say the same for the other guys, though."*

"Okay, secure the prisoners. Mika, Symone, march yours to the north roadblock. Let's gather them up here where we have lots of open space to keep them out of trouble. Doc, report to the north roadblock, cause I know we've got some wounded here."

"I'm on the way, Jason," he replied quickly.

They were a sorry lot, Jason noted as they were marched in. Some were obviously wounded, but they had that shell-shocked look about them that often graced the faces of people who had just been steamrolled. Only now did some of them understand that their opponents were wearing body armor that stopped bullets, only now did they understand the utter act of futility their assault had been. Not only had they been crushed, but their opponents had not suffered a single major casualty. They were placed well distant from the trucks, where they sat on the ground, staring at each other woodenly after they were searched and relieved of all their weapons. The more seriously injured were laying on the road, where Doc Northwood was attending to them with brisk efficiency, with the help of Mary. Once

they were all searched and sat down, Jason regarded them. Out of the attacking force, 52 had survived, though 9 of them were seriously wounded. Others had blood on them here or there, but they didn't have life-threatening injuries. There were 47 dead, meaning that they had defeated a force five times larger than themselves.

After dispatching some people to put out the fires the rockets had caused, Jason took off his helmet and shook his hair free of the matting, then regarded them as they gawked at him. "That's right, I'm not a Faey," he grunted in their direction darkly. "And you just lost. Needless to say, I think you have a good idea what's going to happen now."

That same woman who had surrendered gave a stifled sob.

"Oh please, we're not ruthless," he growled. "But you *can* kiss all your possessions goodbye. They belong to us now. After the doc checks you out, you'll be given a week's worth of food and marched across the bridge into Huntington, and then you're on your own. You can do whatever you want, so long as you never bother us again."

We gonna screen these? Symone inquired curiously.

I was thinking about it, but I'm not sure how we can keep them under control. We had the bingo hall last time, and all of them tied up. I don't want to leave them unfettered like this for long, they may get bad ideas.

We just put them in the jail down in Chesapeake, she answered.

That's an idea, Jason agreed with a nod and slightly pursed lips. "Now, we're going to get you all up and march you into town, where you'll be put in the city jail until the doc can give you a once-over, and we can keep you out of trouble without tying up all our people to keep an eye on you."

"What about my wounded men?" one of them demanded in a strong voice.

"Doc'll take care of them," Jason answered. "When they're healthy, they'll be put out, but we won't leave them to die. That's just not right. Now then, everyone on your feet. We're going for a hike." He looked to Northwood. "You need any help, Doc?"

"You can take those men to the clinic," he replied, pointing to the men behind him. "A couple of these men aren't stable enough to move yet, so I'd like four men to stay with me so we can move them when they're ready."

"Luke," Jason called, and the burly young man nodded gravely.

They used a captured truck to transport the wounded, while the rest of the prisoners were marched to Chesapeake. They were put in the city jail, which was in the police headquarters that was just on the edge of the area claimed by the community, just inside the roadblocks. There were only eight cells in the jail, so each cell was crowded with six or seven men. Jason left Irwin, Regina, and Symone to guard them, then they took the injured men to the clinic and set guards on them while the rest of them collected up all the weapons, dirt bikes, and trucks that were now the spoils of war. It took them almost three hours to gather it all up, then drive it into the community and park it all along the block outside Jason's house. Jason set the others to sorting through the catch to separate it into categories, then he and the city council went back to the jail. While they were walking up that way, Jason explained what was going to happen. "Any possible candidates will be voted on," he assured them. "But Symone *is* going to screen them."

"That may be a hard sell, Jason," Regina said. "I don't think anyone's gonna be voted in that was shooting at us a while ago."

"Well, if you don't recall, most of the community is made up of people who shot at each other for years," he pointed out.

"Yeah, but that didn't happen the day we formed the community," she answered evenly.

"True," Jason acceded.

Clem chuckled. "Sometimes I wonder why you don't shoot at each other now," he said.

"Well, we were doing it to survive," Regina shrugged. "But we don't have to do it to survive anymore. It was never personal with me, Clem. It was just business."

"Yeah," Leamon agreed. "I didn't hate any person in the other gangs, just the gang as a whole, cause they were a threat to us. When the gangs got busted up by Jason, there wasn't nothing left to hate no more."

"I'd dare to say that the reason you're here is because Symone was careful only to pick people who shared that mindset," Jason chuckled.

"Most likely," Regina nodded. "I think she did a good job."

"A damn good job," Clem agreed. "Does Doc have any help over at the clinic?"

Jason nodded. "Mary and Ruth, and I'll bet he commandeered Luke, James, Pete, and Larry. I haven't seen them. They're the ones that stayed behind to carry the stretchers."

Regina raised her handheld radio to her mouth. "How's it going, Doc?" she called.

There was an extended silence. *"I'm sorry to say that one of the men has died,"* he answered.

"There just wasn't anything I could do for him but make him comfortable. The other eight I think are going to make it. The only problem I have is that I have to get the slugs out of them, but I'm still not set up for surgery of this magnitude yet."

He held his hand to Regina, who nodded and gave him the radio. "We'll figure something out, Doc, just do your best," Jason answered. "Do you need more help?"

"No son, I've got plenty of hands. I think I'm going to steal Mary, she seems to have a knack for the work. She'd make a good doctor."

"Well, that's between you and Luke, I guess," Jason told him. "After you get to a point where you can leave, Doc, could you please come over to the old jail? I'd like you to check the other prisoners."

"I can do that, son. I have these men stable for now. Let me get my bag and I'll be right over."

Still in his armor, Jason came down into the jail. Irwin and Symone, bearing Tek-9's, kept watch over the eight cells as the captured men and women remained very, very quiet. They had had quite the operation, and the sheer manpower to assault and conquer just about any enclave out in the hills. He doubted that they killed indiscriminately though...something just told him that. Their thoughts mirrored their subdued demeanors, shock and incredulity overwhelming their states of mind, as well as a healthy dose of fear at what was to come. Most of them honestly believed that they were going to be executed. Jason stepped into the hallway holding the eight cells, four to a side, and handed his damaged railgun and helmet to Symone. "Our town doctor's on his way over here," he called. "He's going to check those of you who have injuries and treat them. While he's got you, *she* is going to screen you," he said, pointing at Symone, who was walking with him. "This town isn't about revenge, it's about living and working together to better the community as a whole. She's going to screen you to see if you have the mentality to live here, and if we can trust you to live and work among us without trying to screw us later on. If you pass that screen, you'll be voted on by the town as a whole as to whether we invite you. If you get voted in, you'll be offered a place in our community. I wouldn't hold much hope for that, though," he said grimly. "You guys just tried to kill us. I'm not sure too many of the townsfolk will take very kindly to that. But we *will* give you that chance, and we will give them the option to vote on those of you who might have the temperament to live here. Those of you who either fail the screening or are voted down will be released across the bridge into Huntington. You'll have a week's worth of food, clothes, and most likely a knife and some other basic survival gear. Like I said, we're not about revenge. What you do after you cross that bridge is entirely up to you, so long as you never bother us again."

"What about my wounded men?" that same man called, coming up to the bars. Jason looked at him and saw that he was about thirty, with dark hair and a wide face that had a scar on left cheek. He was a burly fellow, wearing BDUs and a black Atlanta Falcons baseball cap. "How are they?"

"I'm sorry, but one of them died," Jason said with a somber frown. "Doc said there was just nothing he could do for him. But he did say that the other eight are stable, and they should make it. He's got his nurse keeping watch over them while he comes here to check the rest of you. Have you people eaten yet?"

"Just breakfast this morning."

He snorted. "Irwin," he called. "Arrange for some lunch for these people."

"Already did, Mayor," Irwin called. "Ruthie's already working on it."

"You guys are lucky," Jason chuckled. "Ruth's one hell of a cook."

The dark-haired man, obviously their leader, sighed, then he laughed ruefully. "Well, this certainly didn't go as planned. We had no idea you had a second suit of Faey armor. My scouts spotted you, so we brought our rockets to you without knowing that the Faey was actually somewhere else. We just assumed that the armor was the Faey. And we thought rockets would take you down."

"Maybe if I was wearing the armor that the Faey occupiers wear, but not this," he said, rapping his knuckles on his burn-stained armor. It was completely undamaged, just a bit dirty. "This is *real* Faey armor. What most Faey occupiers wear is ancient military surplus junk."

"I'm surprised you didn't use your plasma weapons. I fully expected to lose all five trucks."

"Blowing them up means *we* can't use them," Jason told him. "We planned from the beginning to capture as much of your equipment as we could."

"Smart," the man said, thinking it over. "And since you had two people in that armor, you could just rush right in the middle of us without fear. That explains why you went after the trucks instead of concentrating on my men."

"I don't much like killing if there's any possible way around it," Jason said bluntly.

"How did you capture my other trucks?"

"I have two airbikes," Jason told him. "They ambushed your trucks after you committed to the assault on the town."

"And how did you know we were coming?"

"One of our hunters spotted you up near Ironton. We had eyes in the sky watching you since you got to the far side of South Point. We saw you deploy, so we knew exactly where to place our defenses to stop you."

He chuckled grimly. "Damn clever," he said appreciatively. "You saw us coming like lambs to slaughter, didn't you?"

"That about sums it up," Jason agreed evenly, nodding his head.

"Well, we tried," he said with odd pride. "We came to try to capture your plasma weapons. We knew if there was a Faey here, then there had to be at least one plasma weapon, and that was worth attacking the town to get."

"Why be so crazy?"

"Because just one plasma gun would make us all but unstoppable," he said. "I've seen them in use. You can sit a half mile away and just systematically blow walls apart with one. It would have made raiding fortified compounds much easier, without risking the lives of my men."

"Too bad it wouldn't do much for the lives of the people on the other side of the wall," Jason said with an accusing glare at the man. "They're *men and women*, just like you. Did it ever occur to you to just go up and *trade* for what you needed?"

"This is reality, my friend," the man said with a scowl. "If they're not with us, they're against us. The survival of *my* people takes precedence over the survival of outsiders."

"Your philosophy just landed you on the other side of that fence," Jason told him. "How does it feel to be the guy looking down the barrel of a superior force, not sure if you're going to live to see tomorrow? Doesn't feel very good, does it? That's what you inflicted on other people. I hope you really understand it before we let you go. Maybe you'll learn something."

"Fine for you to say that, boy, with your armor and your weapons," the man sneered.

"That's right, I have the armor and the weapons. But so did *you*. Do you see me out there preying on the other squatters with my superior firepower?" he asked pointedly. "I decided to *build* something with my resources. You chose to go kill people, when you could have done exactly what I did. But you chose the *easy* way out, killing other people for what you need. Don't try to compare us, or try to

justify it in your own mind, because you had the same choices I did, and you chose to walk a different path.”

Angry, Jason stalked away from the man, then marched out into the cool September air and let it clear his head. Why couldn't these people understand that so long as they fought each other, they reduced *everyone's* chances of making it out here? When the raiders killed all the people who grew the food, then what? Slow starvation, feeding off each other until there was nothing left? If everyone would just remember what they *used* to be, how Americans had pulled together to overcome obstacles, they could make life better for *everyone*. They could build a little slice of civilization out here, work together, help everyone through collective effort and the American spirit. The Faey had abandoned these people, let them fight like starving dogs in the wildlands because they refused Faey society, but that didn't mean that they had to abandon their *humanity*.

Blowing out his breath, he turned around and went to go back in. Regardless of his personal feelings, his responsibilities as Mayor demanded he be there. And there were other things to do. The dead had to be buried, and his railgun was in need of repair. He was going to be busy for the rest of the day, that was for sure.

The town meeting that night was, to say the least, spirited.

Still giddy over their victory that morning, the community was boisterous and maybe a little silly. They were still going through the huge haul of goods and equipment that had been captured from the raiders, taking a break only to attend the meeting, which centered on the events of the day. They talked about what they'd taken from the raiders, from weapons to equipment to little niceties, and then they worked out how to divide it up. Since they didn't use money and there were things that everyone wanted, it was decided that a lottery system would be implemented where everyone drew numbers out of a hat, and the winner got to pick one item from the haul.

Certain things were excluded, naturally. All weapons were property of the community, which meant they went to Clem, the community weaponsmith. All medical supplies and equipment—quite a bit of it, which surprised Jason—went to Doc Northwood, and all tools and building supplies went to Luke and Zach's shop or Jason's shop, depending on what it was for. The food went to the community stores, after the seven day supply for each raider for their exile was excluded. Clothing was sorted by size, and was generally just handed out to whoever fitted into it. Everything else was up for grabs, and that was what they were sorting out. Jason didn't need anything, so he excluded himself from the lottery, but both Tim and Symone were in it.

Temika sat beside Symone, on the other side of Tim, and she was looking around with a kind of wild-eyed wonder. She was fully expressed now, and that meant that she could hear what everyone was thinking. Symone kept half a mind's eye on her newest student, keeping the noise to a level that didn't make Temika panic, but it didn't look like she was going to panic. She was too excited to panic.

After the lottery cycled through the community four times, Jason banged his gavel and got everyone to settle down. “I think we can just declare the rest of the goods open property,” he said. “Just take what you want from what's left, and the rest of it goes to storage. We can't be here all night handing out every toothbrush and comb, we have other matters on the floor.

“As some of you might know, Symone screened the raiders while the Doc was checking them out, and she found one person she'll vouch for. So, as per town rules, that person comes up for a vote.”

“Who is it?” someone called.

“Symone?” he asked.

“One of the women. Danielle Lewis,” she answered.

“So, this may seem like a bit of a rush, but we have to decide if she's in or out before we release the others, which will be tomorrow morning,” Jason told them.

“Just so you guys know, she didn't raise a finger against anyone,” Symone called quickly. “She was just driving one of the trucks. She didn't fight.”

That bit of info caused a quiet rumble to roll through the gathered townsfolk, and from the sound of their thoughts—his curiosity got the best of him—it did indeed make a difference to them. “Alright then, if nobody has any comments or questions, we can put it on the floor for a vote. Anyone?”

There were no questions, so the matter was put to the floor for a vote. And to Jason’s surprise, she was accepted by a large margin. It seemed to him that they took Symone’s endorsement of someone very seriously.

“Alright, motion passes, we’ll invite this woman to join the community. The rest will be put across the bridge in the morning, so nobody plan to sleep in. I’d like a show of force on the riverbank to remind them what they’ll be facing if they decide to ever try to bother us again. Any other business before we adjourn?”

Nobody had anything, so they adjourned the meeting and got back to the business of dividing up the captured goods. The winners took their prizes, and then they picked through the remainder for anything they found useful before the rest was boxed up and put in storage. The trucks, including a major capture, a Deuce, were parked over by Luke’s shop, and everything quickly got packed away.

The next morning, Jason arrived at the jail not long after daybreak, with Luke, Irwin, and Symone along with him. Most of them were awake, since it wasn’t easy to sleep in the cramped cells. “Everyone up,” Jason called loudly, banging a nightstick against the bars to get everyone’s attention. “After we feed you breakfast, you’ll be taken out of the cells in groups of five. You’ll be given a week’s worth of food and some basic supplies, and then you’re going to be put across the bridge. From then on, you’re on your own. All I can really tell you is good luck, and I hope you make it.”

Jason oversaw the operation without saying too much. After Ruth fed them a breakfast of homemade bread and hot oatmeal, they were removed from their cells in groups of five. The first group included the raiders’ leader, who fixed Jason with a steely, cold eye when he was marched out. The man fully expected to be shot just outside the jail. Jason tagged along just for the satisfaction of hearing his thoughts, seeing his surprise when they did exactly what Jason said they would do. Each man was given a bundle of food and basic supplies, enough to last him a week, and then they were marched to the bridge and told to walk. The man kept expecting a shot in the back at any minute, until the curve of the bridge hid them from the townsfolk and made shooting at them impossible. Then, he finally realized that Jason was telling the truth...and he also realized that he had to find a way to survive with a week’s worth of food and a pocket knife. But Jason figured they’d be alright, for their thoughts told him that they all intended to band back together just like before, but now their primary concern would be finding food and a safe place to survive the coming winter.

Jason intentionally set it up so the woman who would be given the chance to stay with them, Danielle, was last and alone. That worked out pretty well, since there were 46 people in the jail, and taking them out by fives left her alone. She was the same woman who had surrendered to him at the end of the fight, a surprisingly young woman, looking around 25, with dark hair tied back from her face by a black bandanna folded into a strip and tied around her forehead. She was pretty, if rail thin and a bit gaunt in the face, with nervous blue eyes, wearing an old set of Army BDUs that were about two sizes too big for her. Jason remained behind when the last five were removed from the cell, leaving her alone. He could see her fear without even having to listen to her thoughts. Jason closed the cell door, then took out a rusty folding chair and sat down backwards in it, putting his forearms on the back of the chair and regarding her. “So, you’re the last one,” he said evenly.

“What are you doing with us?” she asked fearfully, her thoughts convinced that they were just taking everyone out and killing them.

“Just what I said,” he answered calmly. “Right now, most of your group is waiting on the other side of the bridge, where we put them out of our community, waiting for the last to be freed. Then I guess they’re going to go off somewhere together. It won’t be easy for them, that’s for sure. No weapons, limited food, with only numbers and planning to get ready for winter. I’m sure you have a lot of work ahead of you, and the next few months won’t be pleasant at all.”

She gave him a nervous look.

"At least that's what's in store for *them*," he said pointedly. "Remember when I told all of you that the Faey was going to screen you?"

She nodded.

"Well congratulations, you passed," he told her. "Of your entire group, you were the *only* one that Symone has judged trustworthy. The community voted last night, and they've voted to offer you an invitation. If you want, you're welcome to join *us*."

"Wh-What? You're inviting *me* to join you?" she asked in disbelief.

He nodded. "Of all your group, you're the only one that Symone says can embrace what we've built here. What we do here, Danielle, isn't much different from what your group did, at least in basic terms. We work together towards a common goal, that goal being survival. But unlike your group, we don't try to conquer the world. We live in our town and we do the best we can. We work hard, and at the end of the day we come home and eat dinner, maybe watch a little TV, talk with friends, then go to bed and do it again tomorrow. We do have some luxuries, though. The lights, for one," he said, pointing at the fluorescent lights glowing over his head. "We have power here. Steve set up cable TV, so people can watch TV, but we're still working on the running water part. We do fairly well for ourselves. We're lucky in that we have some people here with some technical skill, we have a doctor, and we've managed to get our hands on some Faey gear that gives us a major edge when it comes to protecting ourselves.

"Now, you have a choice to make," he told her seriously. "If you accept our invitation, you'll get a house to live in, and we'll do what we can to get you everything you need to live. You will work, girl, don't doubt that. You'll work every day wherever you're needed, or where you do best at, but in return you'll have food, water, shelter, and protection. You'll also have power, some luxuries, and if we can ever get our act together, running water," he grunted. "I have no idea what the other group can offer you, but now you know exactly what each side has to offer. The choice is yours, but you have to make it quickly. If you don't want to join us, I don't want to have to put you out *after* your friends leave here. That would make it very hard on you."

"What about the wounded?"

"Well, they're staying here for now, but they'll be put out too, once Doc clears them. We'll probably hold them until all of them are healed, then let them go at once, so they can stay together. But we're wasting time. I'm sorry to make you rush this, but one way or the other, your well-being depends on you giving me your answer quickly. So think about it a little bit, then give me your answer."

He put his chin on his hands and waited in silence, as he listened to her debate his offer. Fear was her main problem, fear of him lying, fear of being made to be a slave worker, fear of being separated from people who had protected her for the year she'd been out in the wilderness. But, his offer tempted her, and tempted her greatly, for she *hated* how they were always fighting, hated living in a truck virtually all the time. She really didn't have many friends in the raiding gang, because she wasn't good for much more than cooking and driving a truck; she wasn't a very good fighter. Some thought she was dead weight. She thought about staying while the wounded healed, and if she didn't like it, she could leave with them...but then she realized that one of them was that guy that had tried to rape her once, she didn't want anything to do with him. She always stayed as far away from him as she could. He stopped listening about then, affording her privacy in his own mind if nothing else, watched as she paced back and forth in her cell, thinking things over.

She came up to the bars. "I'll do it. I mean, I'll stay. I accept, I mean," she said nervously.

"Good," Jason said, standing up. He motioned at Irwin who was down at the doorway leading out into the building, and the burly man threw him the key. "Welcome to Chesapeake. You need to come with me so we can catch up with the last of your friends, let them know you're not coming."

"I—do I have to?"

"It would be best to let them see you," he told her. "So they don't think I'm lying. You don't have to say anything to them if you don't want to." He looked to Irwin. "They at the bridge yet?"

Irwin shook his head. "Down by 3rd Street, getting' their supplies," he answered.

"Let's catch up to them," Jason said as he unlocked the cell door and tossed the key back to Irwin, who pocketed it. "That means you can come out, Danielle," he urged.

"Oh, stupid me," she said with a nervous laugh, scurrying out of the cell. "I'm sorry, I just don't know what to do."

"Don't worry, you'll have lots to do. It depends on what you're good at," he told her.

He gave her as much of a tour as he could given the path they were taking, and he explained the community rules to her along the way. "You mean each person doesn't have their own food?" she asked.

"Sure they do," he answered, "but we keep most of it in a community pool. People take what they need, mostly, but Ruth handles that. She's the town's food manager, after a fashion. She wasn't appointed or anything, it just kinda worked out that way. She keeps an eye on our food, makes sure people aren't being piggish, and she's the one that tells Temika what to try to trade for. Temika handles our trading with other squatter groups, also kinda an evolved position. We have a few of them, but we also have some official jobs. On top of handling food, Ruth is head of the 'sewing club,' four people good at sewing that keep tabs on our clothing supplies, and they also make our bulletproof armor. Clem is a gunsmith, so he's in charge of all our weapons. If you need a gun, he's the man you see. Luke is our head mechanic, and he's more or less responsible for all the cars and trucks we have. Zach's our town contractor, he handles things when we need something built, and me, Steve, and Tim are the guys that deal with the engineering and our Faey equipment, cause we're all trained in Faey technology. Regina, Clem, and Leamon are the town council, and I'm the mayor. Everyone else does whatever needs to be done. Some hunt, some work out on our farm, though there's not much more to do out there, some go out and try to scavenge stuff we can use, and some work on things around here."

"What do you do?"

Jason chuckled. "Too damn much," he answered. "Right now we're trying to get running water going to the town, but we've hit a wall on it. I also do a lot of work with Faey technology that we use to keep ourselves safe, and if it breaks down, it's me, Tim, or Steve that has to fix it. I'm also part of the security force we have, the people who are responsible for doing any fighting that's required. Unless we're heavily outnumbered, anyway. On top of all that, I'm also the town's mayor, though that really doesn't add much extra onto my plate. People here know what to do, so they do it. Thanks," Jason said as Symone passed by, handing him his railgun as she went. "I had to fix this, that explosion broke it," he grunted aloud. "Took me half the night. Where did your people get rocket launchers, for pete's sake?"

"I don't really remember," she shrugged. "Do you really have plasma guns?"

He nodded. "We didn't use them because we wanted to take as much equipment as we could, and keep the number of casualties to a minimum. Plasma weapons aren't really good for that. They tend to blow things up."

"Do they really? I've never seen one used before."

"Yeah, they do," he affirmed. "They're *really* nasty weapons."

They caught up with the last group to go over at the bridge, five men who looked very unsettled and uncertain. Luke and Leamon were on hand with Tek-9s, and the nodded and stepped back when Jason arrived. "Tell your leader that the wounded will be released later, when they're well enough," he told him. "I have no idea when that'll be, but we'll take good care of them. Oh yeah, this one is staying with us," he said, pointing at Danielle. "She passed the screen. She was the *only one* who passed the screen, and the community has voted to let her stay. She's accepted our invitation. Haven't you?"

She nodded, giving the five men fearful looks.

"So don't worry about her. Now, it's time for you to go. All I can really say is good luck."

"For what it's worth, thank you," one of the men said seriously.

"Don't thank me," he scoffed.

"You could have killed us," the man explained.

"You could have left us alone. Now go, time's wasting, and winter's on the way. You have no time to waste."

Without another word, the five men turned and marched up the bridge. Jason watched them go, then blew out his breath and looked down at Danielle. Well, at least they'd gotten something more out of this than just a lot of dead people and some additional goods.

"Luke, take her to Mary," Jason said, tapping Danielle on the shoulder.

"I'll take care of her, Mister Jason," Luke said with a nod as the five men disappeared from sight.

"You think they're gonna make it, Mayor?" Leamon asked.

Jason looked towards the bridge. "I think they will, Lacy," he replied. "It won't be easy, but something tells me that they're going to be alright. May God watch over them," he added.

"Amen," Luke said with a nod.

Kaira, 6 Miraa, 4393, Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 6 October 2007, Native Regional Reckoning

Chesapeake, Ohio (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

Sometimes, a good idea was an absolute *fucking curse*.

For three weeks, he had labored with the current project on his table, finding a way to get his skimmer back in the air without detection. That wasn't his problem, he felt he had a good solid start to the project. He had done extensive research on Civnet on several concepts and techniques that might be useful, from light refraction to masking technologies. The Faey already had a camouflage technique much like the trick he'd used against Jyslin, projecting a hologram to conceal what was behind it...or inside it, in this case. But that was just visibility, and it wasn't the top issue on his mind. Defeating both active and passive sensors was what mattered here, and also coming up with some way of concealing the skimmer's effect on space for when he wanted to move through space without detection. He had the basic groundwork for a couple of theories already, which he needed to research more to figure out if they were solid enough to actually attempt to try to develop.

The first idea was a kind of mirror concept. A field or shield or something that absolutely reflected everything away from what was inside, and reflected what was inside *back*. That would stop active sensors, and since the mirror field worked both ways, it would trap the energy signature that passive sensors picked up inside. He wasn't sure if it would work, and if it did, such things as being able to see through the field were issues. If it reflected *everything*, seeing through it with either eyes or sensors was a problem.

The next idea he had was a projected energy idea. His idea for this one was some kind of coating on the skimmer that absorbed energy on one side, then projected it outward from the other, following the energy's original path. The coating could also absorb some energy patterns from inside, which would mask the skimmer's energy signature from passive sensors. That hid the ship by causing what was behind it to be projected in front of it, and it would defeat both types of Faey sensors. The idea had some merits, such as the ability to see through it, but it would take one hell of a computer to detect energy forms colliding with the coating, or maybe a shield, calculate their trajectory and velocity, then project that signature from the proper point.

His third idea was similar to the second, but less dynamic. Some kind of shield or something that *bent* energy around it without absorbing and re-emitting. That seemed easiest to implement, but so far, it looked like it would do little to hide the signature of the skimmer itself, since it was coming from *inside*.

The last idea was a field, shield, or coating that absolutely absorbed *everything*, in either direction.

This approach would hide everything, that was for sure. This had some potential, but much like the mirror idea, he wasn't sure how they'd be able to see out of it. It also would leave a "hole" in a sensor image, since there would be *no* return from that area. Far enough away that wasn't an issue, because energy refraction and diffusion around the edges of his skimmer would bent the energy to close over the hole, but it would be noticable at close range.

None of these approaches did anything for the problem of hiding the skimmer's mass or the effects of its engines on space. That, he had realized quickly, would require a separate system, because nothing that dealt with energy was going to help in hiding the skimmer's *physical* presence.

He had some idea, but it was just so hard to get anything done right now. Winter was right around the corner, and with it had come an absolute *flood* of people coming down here and asking to join the community. Not just a few families here and there. *Hundreds* of people, entire enclaves of individuals, from all around the region. One group of six had driven their herd of cows from *Tennessee* to come to Chesapeake, to seek out acceptance into the community.

It had shocked him when they started coming. Just one here and there at first, but then more and more, until there were literally convoys of trucks, weighed down with everything that they owned, creeping along the pitted roads of Ohio and West Virginia and Kentucky, converging on Chesapeake. Clem wasn't all that surprised about it, though.

"It's comin' on winter, son," he'd said calmly as they stood on the top of the church steeple, by his emitter, watching a convoy of fifteen trucks rolling through Huntington. "Some of them probably wanted to come sooner, but they had crops out, and that means they couldn't leave. Then they had to can what they could and get everything ready to move. That, and I'm pretty sure that some of them wanted to make sure we could *really* protect ourselves against a road gang. After we beat Dani's old group, it told them we really could make it."

It made for some major headaches. Poor Symone was run ragged, because she had to screen *everyone* in *every* group. But unlike the dreadful cooperation in the old gangs, there wasn't a single person in those bands of squatters that was deemed too much of a risk to join the community, though many of the individual and very small groups of scavengers that had showed up, probably seeking to get in to steal what they could then run, had been turned away. But those established squatters who had brought everything they owned with them and had much to lose, none of them failed the screen, and none were turned away. They had come seeking exactly what the community offered: peace, security, the chance to live with some semblance of dignity out in the wilderness, and the added benefits of living within a large community of like-minded individuals. The town was having meetings almost every night to vote on the acceptance of this or that new group of squatters into the community.

The power grid was strained by this sudden influx of people, which required Jason, Tim, and Steve to build a new generator and revamp their small power grid. But, on the other hand, they got new people who had experience, including a man named Mike Langstrom, who had worked for a power company in Virginia and was an industrial electrical engineer, unlike Steve's concentration in refinery power systems. Dealing with power generation and delivery was his old job, and the Chesapeake Power Company, he lightly called it, became his responsibility.

They also had trouble finding houses for all these new people. They had to expand the boundaries of the community twice, and they also had to fence in a large area near the farms for the influx of livestock that these people brought with them. Food storage became a problem too, causing them to go on another round of freezer scrounging, and requiring them to move their cold storage to a large restaurant and the adjacent stores on either side of it on on Route 7, two blocks from Jason's house. The old pizza place had a walk-in freezer, which helped, but most of their perishables were still stored in freezers they scavenged and repaired.

The rest of their stuff also had to be moved, because there was just too much. It too was moved into old stores along Route 7, beside the food storage, because every squatter came with gear or spare equipment, and that stuff had to go somewhere.

Jason, faced with the large influx of people, was forced to give up his control of his block and block facing it. With that many people and the fact that they were moving their supplies and stored goods, there was no reason to keep the security zone around his house. That caused something of a row, because most everyone wanted to live in the houses around *him*, for some stupid reason. Well, maybe not so stupid. Since they still didn't have running water, that left everyone to access the huge tank that Jason, Luke, Tim, Zach, and Steve had built about a block from Jason's house, on an old empty lot. They'd never found a suitable tanker truck or trailer, so they just built their own. They installed a pipe to the river and Jason's spare water purification system into it, and that served as the community's source of clean water. The tank was *huge*, holding about twenty thousand gallons of water, and it hadn't even gone down to three quarters of its holding capacity since it filled up. Proximity to that tank meant that one didn't have to carry heavy buckets or containers of water as far, so the houses around it were sought-after prizes. He left them to settle how they were going to manage that, but he did put his foot down in one respect. He kept his claim on the houses to each side of him. One was given to Tim and Symone, and the other was given to Temika. That kept all the telepaths in a tight group, and besides, it was about time Tim and Symone got their own damn house.

Basicly, how they divided up the houses led to a little grumbling, but nothing that caused a rift in the community. It was decided that those with the most seniority would get first pick at the houses on the two opened blocks. Clem's group, who had the most seniority, was given first opportunity. Clem himself decided he liked his own house, but Mary and Luke, still living with their father and Ruth, decided they wanted a house of their own, so they moved in beside Tim and Symone...Jason suspected Jenny had something to do with that, wanting to be near Symone. Since the rest of the original community all came at the same time, they had a lottery to decide who had first pick, at least those who felt like they wanted to move.

People kept coming, and kept coming, and kept coming. They'd gone from a community of about 30 to a burgeoning, actual town of nearly 300 people in just a few weeks. Single scavengers that had passed the screen, couples, trios, families, even entire enclaves of squatters had come. There were 20 children in the community now, ranging in ages from two months to 17, which gave Jenny actual playmates. It also caused the creation of a school, much to the children's intense displeasure, run by a kindly older fellow named William Connor, from a squatter enclave in Gallipolis, who had been a teacher before the subjugation.

There were some growing pains, to be sure. A few short tempers had let to a couple of altercations, but nothing outrageous. They also had trouble getting everyone settled down, and it was taking the newcomers time to get used to the way they did things. Some of them also had some issues with taking orders from the town council, but they kept their indignation to themselves. They were used to doing things *their* way, and hadn't quite expected such a well-organized system to be in place when they arrived.

All the distractions made it hard for Jason to do anything. He'd managed to finish building his three extra railguns, and had corrected the problem that made his original get damaged by the explosion. That one hadn't had its flux cabling heavily secured inside the barrel, and the shock of the blast had dislodged it from its careful positioning, which had triggered a critical malfunction error. Now the cabling was secured with a clear synthetic coating that was as strong as steel, what he had used on his first new railgun, something that was not in the original. The three new railguns were tested and worked, and they too lacked the sonic-boom effect that had been present in his first weapon, at least at first. He *still* hadn't figured out why that had stopped, and since his *new* weapons lacked it as well, he figured that it had to have been some kind of flaw in the original weapon that he had corrected somehow. It still drove him a little batty sometimes, when he stopped to think about it, but he was too busy to dwell on that kind of trivial stuff for long. Not when he had so much to worry about that mattered.

There had been some changes made, to take the larger population into account. The city council

was now five instead of three, with two newcomers, Paul Meredith and Julianne Winfield, added to the council to represent the outlook and perspective of those who had just arrived. Both had been leaders of fairly large enclaves of their own, and had experience with dealing with people. The “sheriff’s office” had been expanded to include 12 people, which took the pressure of Irwin, Luke, and Symone. Now they had at least one “deputy” on active duty at all times and one person in the “control center”, which was one of Jason’s spare bedrooms, monitoring the sensors. The patroller rode around the community on a horse with one of the hunting plasma rifles in his hands or in the saddleskirt, just keeping an eye on things while the man or woman watching the sensors made sure nobody snuck up on the town from outside. They’d gotten an entire herd of horses with the Kinney family, when they came down from Athalia with their herd of 24 horses, most of which were broken for riding. To save their dwindling gas supplies, the policing patrols used horses to get around. They weren’t using the airbike because most of them had no idea how to ride it; Symone and Irwin were training them one by one on how to ride the airbike, and they were also taking lessons on how to read the sensors that were now being operated from one of the new panels from Tim. Tim had more or less earned the job of combat controller, given how good a job he did reading the sensors and directing forces against Danielle’s old road gang, but he was teaching others how to do it in case he wasn’t there to do the job. The command center was still in Jason’s house, because he wouldn’t allow that panel to leave his home. So his house still served in some ways in an official capacity, and he still had people coming in and out of it. Luke now had a large complement of mechanics to help him with the vehicles, and Zach had several fellow handymen to help with building projects and house repairs. They’d also gotten quite a few plumbers, welders, electricians, people from various trade skills whose training was going to have a positive impact on the community as a whole.

There was quite a bit going on outside the community too. Jyslin’s life had calmed down considerably, returning to the routine, though she had the feeling that the Secret Police was keeping a clandestine eye on her. She kept in touch with her Aunt Lorna in Washington, and had told him that she was already trying to get Lorna to get her unit transferred out of New Orleans. Not just her, but her entire unit. She admitted that getting an entire unit transferred wasn’t easy, but Royal Command *was* looking into realigning some of its Imperial forces, so she had hope that they’d get that transfer sometime soon. When Jason asked where she was going to go, she just gave him a mysterious smile and told him not to worry about that. He felt that she was going to try to get a transfer somewhere close to the preserve, which he actually *did not want*. If Jyslin was stationed close to the preserve, she might actually be called to fight against *him* if his community and the Faey ever came to blows. The further away Jyslin was, the lesser the chance that she might be on the other side of the battlefield. Kumi’s conscription was fast approaching, only three months now, and she was getting both more frenetic and more wild by the day. It was getting hard to catch her at home, because she was out living hard, partying, and squeezing every ounce of fun into life she could before she had to go do the required five years of military service. Her mother had already got her a cushy job as an “aide” to one of the house’s top military commanders, which was on her home planet. She’d have two months of mandatory basic training, then be right back home, working for this woman named Admiral Lenne. The only real difference would be that she’d have a job and be expected to *work*, and that was what horrified Kumi more than anything else.

The true secret of Chesapeake continued to remain a secret, though people had certainly noticed this mysterious little clique that consisted of Symone, Tim, Jason, and Temika. Temika and Tim were trained in telepathy for at least four hours a day by Symone, often with Jason sitting in when he could to see if he couldn’t learn a little more. Temika was a *very* strong telepath, not as strong as Jason but certainly stronger than Symone and Tim, and much to Symone’s surprise, she learned very fast. Temika was *very* happy to be a telepath, to have that power, so she threw herself into her lessons utterly. She’d learned rather quickly how to send, and had already learned the embarrassing lesson *never* to try to send privately around Symone. Symone’s unusual sensitivity to sending, allowing her to

hear *any* sending and not just public ones, was something that one had to keep in mind when she was around. Temika had sent privately to Tim about her suspicions that Jason and Symone were fooling around on the side, about how it was odd that she was so comfortable taking her clothes off around him and how she kept her armor in his room, which gave her an excuse to go in the one place that *nobody* was allowed to go except Jason and her. Temika got a rather embarrassing education about certain aspects of Faey personality about then, because Symone was neither demure nor evasive about her relationship with Jason. Temika really didn't understand Faey very well, which was easy enough for someone without much exposure to them. They *did* look almost exactly like humans, and there were a great number of similarities in behavior that often made people forget that Symone wasn't human. But she *wasn't* human, and her racial culture was very different from the human one. That episode made Temika blush furiously every time she looked at Symone for nearly three days, and even blush a little when she looked at Jason. It wasn't common knowledge that Jason and Symone had slept together once, and it certainly wouldn't be understood very well that it was done with Tim's blessing. That was something that all three of them felt was a private matter, completely between themselves, and had nothing to do with the rest of the town. Temika was wise enough never to repeat what Symone had told her, because if many of the men in town thought that being Symone's good friend meant having sex with her, they'd be lining up outside their house.

They weren't dead after all, and Symone was *gorgeous*, just like most Faey. It was only understandable that many men had certain fantasies about her, fantasies that Symone actually found quite flattering.

Despite that one social blunder, Temika got along very well with the others in their very small and unique group. She sincerely liked Symone and was an eager student, she got along rather well with Tim, and she already had a good friendship with Jason.

Symone did do her best to continue Jason's education, teaching him the more advanced techniques of attack and defense, though she wasn't as good at it as Jyslin, and she utilized different techniques. Symone wasn't half as strong in the talent as Jason was, so she relied on techniques that would differ from what he or Jyslin would use, who could bring more raw power to bear in the situation. But Jason didn't complain, mainly because knowledge was knowledge, and her lessons still offered the value of understanding how others would do things.

"Jason," Regina called over the radio.

Jason blew out his breath and leaned back in his chair down in his basement workshop. It was about ten in the morning, and he'd skipped the daily training session Symone was giving for Tim and Temika to squeeze more time in with his research, but it looked like he was going to get interrupted yet again. He reached over and picked up the radio. "What is it, Reg?" he asked.

"*You need to come out here. Now.*"

"Now what?" he asked irritably over the radio. "I'm trying to get some work done here, Reggie! Can't you handle it?"

"*Give me that! Is this how you use it? Good. JASON FOX, YOU GET YOUR ASS OUT HERE RIGHT NOW!!!!*" a voice screamed over the radio, in Faey.

Jason almost had a heart attack. He *did* fall backwards out of his chair. He knew that voice; it was Kumi! Kumi was almost on top of him! How in the hell did she get that close without whoever was riding the panel seeing it? How did she find him in the first place? He ran up the stairs and slammed the door open almost in Symone's face. She was out in the hall upstairs with Tim and Temika behind her, a shocked and frightened look on her face. "No sending. *Nothing*," he hissed under his breath, looking at all three as he totally closed his own mind, then he rushed through the living room and out onto his porch.

Kumi was there, with about twenty people around her, milling around her with a kind of wide-eyed wonder. She was sitting on an airbike, leaning her arms on the handle bars and talking with Regina, with five airbikes around her. Four of those people he recognized; Meya, Myra, Fure, and that really

strange looking little red-skinned man whose name Jason could not recall, riding a half-sized airbike obviously meant for a child or someone his size. The fifth was another alien, an eerie looking kind of furry humanoid creature, something he'd never imagined could exist. It—she, it was a she—had *purple* fur, with a short, boxy kind of muzzle on her face, sort of like a cat but not quite. She had oversized, round eyes that were the color of turquoise, and she had strange little whip-like things growing out of her head, in front of a pair of animalistic triangular ears that were poking through a thick poof of wild hair that was a slightly darker shade of purple than her fur. She also had small, diaphonous purple-tinted wings, chitinous wings like a dragonfly, though they looked too small to be anything other than decorative. That creature looked at him, and he had the weirdest sensation shiver up his spine.

"Kumi!" he gasped, staring at her from the porch. "What the *hell* are you doing here? Are you nuts?"

"Am I nuts?" she asked, looking over Regina. "Bull *shit* am I nuts."

"You coming here is *nuts*," he snapped. "You realize how much danger you just put us all in?"

"Oh *please*, give me some fuckin' credit, babe," she scoffed.

"I didn't know you spoke their language, Jayce," Regina said in surprise.

"Oh, he has lots of secrets," Kumi grated in perfect English.

He blew out his breath. "Why did you come here?" he demanded again.

"I was in the neighborhood," she replied flippantly.

"That's not an answer," Jason said darkly, coming down off the porch. "This was *stupid*, young lady. Thanks to you, now they're going to wonder what's so curious out here that you'd come drop by and visit. The best thing you can do right now is just ride off in the same direction you were going before you got here."

"They don't know I'm here, and even if they did, what the *fuck* are they going to say? You forget who I am, babe. I'm a *Countess*. My mom's a *Duchess*. I can do anything I damn well please, and there's nobody on this *planet* that can say a damn thing."

"Yeah, that's all fine and dandy for *you*, but after you're gone, who do you think's going to still be here? We *live* here, girl. You're not the one they're going to start looking at after you're gone, *we are*."

"Why are we arguing about this? I just came about a thousand light years to come see you, babe. Care to show me around?"

He clenched his fists to keep from losing his temper.

"Calm down, babe," she told him. "I've made sure that nobody's watching us. They have no idea where I am right now, just that I'm down in the preserve somewhere." She looked around. "Well, I can understand now why you got all that stuff. It wasn't just for *you*, was it? Now, show me around."

"The only place I'm going to show you is back to your dropship," he said in a dangerous tone, stalking right up to her and staring at her almost nose to nose.

Vonde sube nise kawa koke na? the purple-furred creature said in a winsome tone.

Sombe duse koroko saba de, Kumi answered with a sly smile. *Beya modkorokome de*.

"I'm going back into my house," Jason said in a cold tone, staring right in Kumi's eyes. "When I get there, I'm calling in the people with MPACs, and I'm getting *the gun*. If you're still here when I get back out on this porch, *they will be used*," he said in an intense, totally convincing tone. "You think this is some kind of *fuckin* game, but you're playing with *our lives*. You wanna see me? Get the hell out of our town, go back to your yacht, and *call me*. But don't you *ever* show up here uninvited again. I don't care if you're a friend or not. You being here puts the lives of everyone you see around you in jeopardy, and our friendship doesn't mean *shit* if you being here ends up getting some of them killed."

The fact that he didn't even bother guarding his thoughts, letting her see just how furious he was, probably more than anything else caused that disbelieving gape of dismay that graced her pretty little face. He'd just threatened to evict her by force, and *he meant every word*. He turned his back on her

pointedly, then started marching into the house. “Everyone scatter,” he ordered in a loud tone as he opened his mind enough to hear sending. “If they’re still here when I get back out, there’s going to be shooting. I don’t want anyone hit in the crossfire.”

I told you that this was not a good idea, Lady Eleri, Fure sent with sharp rebuke, as some of the townsfolk quickly and immediately fled the area. Others, those carrying weapons, did not run. Regina and several others moved to the porch of the house Jason had just went into, and pulled out their archaic, primitive weapons and readied them. It was apparent that they fully intended to aid Jason in forcing the Faey and her group out of the town, telepathy or no telepathy.

The human is dead serious. He’ll start shooting at us if we don’t back off, Meya sent to her employer urgently. *I must insist we withdraw to the dropship now, Miss Kumi. Your mother will kill us if we let anything happen to you.*

I don’t understand, Kumi sent in confusion. *He knows I have everything under control. He’s being ridiculous.*

Ridiculous or not, either we leave now or we start shooting, Myra sent grimly, looking at the resolute faces of the men and women on the porch. *You know he’s highly resistant to talent, and that nasty gun of his is going to go right through our armor. If we don’t back off, someone’s gonna die.*

He wouldn’t dare shoot at me! Kumi sent indignantly.

I think he would dare, Meya answered. *Don’t forget, we’re on his ground, and nobody is watching overhead. It’s obvious he doesn’t want to do it, but he will. That’s plain. I’m not asking this time, Miss Kumi, I’m ordering. We’re backing off.*

Don’t order me around, Meya, Kumi snapped at her immediately.

When it comes to your physical safety, I sure as hell am ordering you around. You can be pissed later, but you’re leaving now.

Jason was silently thankful for Meya at that point. Kumi’s presence here was a *huge* threat, and it was already going to cause some serious problems in his mind. The Faey were going to wonder why a noble was calling off ships and redirecting sensor satellites to prevent anyone from observing her activities. They were going to wonder why she was visiting the nature preserve, when there was nothing out there. They were going to start wondering if there *was* something out there, and they were going to start looking. That was going to bring Faey patrols, and now there were too many people in the community for them to easily hide their presence. She’d already done enough damage to their security. He went up to his room, and picked up his railgun off the rack on his dresser with deliberate eyes. He powered it up, made sure it was loaded, then he disengaged the safety.

They’re leaving, Symone sent to him tightly, so the Faey outside wouldn’t hear it. Jason went to his window, which faced south, and saw the five airbikes go over his house, then quickly disappear behind the house behind it. Jason blew out his breath in relief when they did so, and he carefully powered down the railgun and put it back in its place. God, that was close. He went back down to his porch, where several people stood with their weapons ready, as did Symone, Tim, and Temika. They all looked at him for a long moment, then Regina cleared her throat. “Was that Jyslin?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Another Faey friend. One that’s a bit more hard-headed than Jys,” he grunted.

“What were those *things* with her?” one of the newcomers asked. “The little red guy, and the purple thing?”

“The red fellow is a Makati,” Symone answered. “One of the seven races of the Imperium. I’ve never seen anything like that other one before, but she was speaking Kimdori, so she’s Kimdori.”

“What does that mean?” Regina asked.

“Kimdori are shapeshifters,” she answered. “They can look like anything they want, but they look like big dog-like animals in their natural form, so they favor those kinds of shapes. They feel closer to home, I’ve been told. They’re not part of the Imperium, but there’s plenty of them around. Just about every noble has at least one Kimdori on staff. For obvious reasons.”

“Spies?” someone asked.

Symone nodded. “Kimdori can sense their own, but they never give each other away. It’s all a grand game to them. Sometimes I wonder which side is playing which most of the time. Kimdori as a race know more about what’s really going on than any race in the galaxy, given they’re in the middle of just about everything.”

“I don’t remember reading anything about them on Civnet,” Jason mused.

“They’re a very secretive race,” Symone told him. “That noble girl is really lucky. That Kimdori with her isn’t her employee, it’s her *friend*.”

“What difference does that make?” Tim asked.

“Get lucky enough to have a Kimdori for a friend, and you get access to all kinds of information,” Symone told him. “The Kimdori are in the middle of most everything going on, and they *talk to each other*.”

“Oh. Ohhhhhhhhhh,” Tim said, his eyes widening.

“So that’s how Kumi seems to have her hands in so many things,” Jason grunted.

“Most likely. She asks that Kimdori to find out, and she finds out. Kimdori will do almost anything for a friend. They’re very loyal. Pack mentality.”

“What?” Temika asked.

“Pack mentality,” she repeated. “Kimdori are canines, and their society is based on family groups. Packs. Like your *wuff* animals.”

“Wolf,” Jason corrected.

“Whatever.”

“Where did you learn about Kimdori?” Jason asked.

“I went to school with one,” she answered. “The child of a Kimdori consulate on my home planet.”

Jason raised an eyebrow. “That must have been interesting.”

“Oh, he was a riot,” she laughed. “Once he took the shape of the school headmistress and got on the school’s vidlinks. That was hilarious,” she said with a laugh.

“Well, let me go sit by my panel to face the meltdown when she gets back to her dropship,” Jason grunted.

“Will it be that bad?” Temika asked.

“Kumi does *not* like being denied what she wants. She’s spoiled that way,” he said grimly.

He went back in and sat in his basement, in front of his panel, and he waited. He certainly didn’t have to wait long until the incoming message warning flashed on the display. He picked up the call immediately, and Kumi’s face appeared on his display, sitting in the cockpit of her dropship, behind the controls. “What the *hell* do you think you’re about, Jason?” she demanded. “I came to see you because I’m worried about you, you asshole! And this is how you treat me?”

“Next time, *call and ask*,” he snapped at her. “You forget, girl, they’re *looking for me*! What you just did was give the Faey a reason to poke around the preserve, to find out what’s so interesting over here that a noble would chase off all surveillance and land in the middle of a place that’s supposed to have *nothing in it*! You’ve just put me a very dangerous position, you idiot!”

“You did that yourself!” she shouted back. “Wanna know why I came? I’ll *show* you. I found this circulating in the underground of Civnet yesterday. Does it look familiar?” She glanced down, and then the screen split. She was on the left, and on the right was some video footage taken from an aerial position, looking down on an area he immediately recognized. It was Chesapeake. It was from the fight they’d had with the road gang! He clearly saw the image focus on a black-armored figure with a really big piece of construction steel, smashing riders off of dirtbikes, then panned over as an explosion lit up the corner of the screen. It focused on another armored figure just as it was struck by a rocket. That was *him*! He saw himself fall down, then get up and seemingly float along the ground as he raced up to the man who’d shot him, then nearly decapitate him by hitting him in the head with the stock of his railgun. He remembered that, but it looked much different from outside.

That *dropship*! The one that Regina had seen just before the battle! It had taken video of the fight!

"A merchant dropship caught video of a fight between two armed groups in the preserve, and the freighter captain gave it to someone who put it on Civnet," Kumi told him sharply. "I had this killed off Civnet, and I tracked down the people who made the video and got the originals. What you just saw is the last copy left, but I can't tell really how many people saw it before I found out. I came to warn you, *personally*, that you might see some increased Faey patrols if someone who cares managed to see it before I intervened. From the way it looks, two Imperial Marines were involved in a fight between outlaw groups in the nature preserve, and that might make someone wonder enough to come take a look. They won't know exactly *where* that is, so they won't know to come straight to you the way I did. And I wanted to make sure you got through it alright, if you needed something and you weren't asking for it because you don't have any more money to pay for it. I'd loan you that money, you silly man. Business may be business, but I do consider you a friend. I'd help you out if you needed it."

Jason sighed, rubbing his face. "I'm sorry if I scared you, but you should have called," he asserted. "I'd have come and met you somewhere. But you can't just come running in here like that, Kumi. It puts not just me at risk, but everyone you saw, and lots of people you *didn't* see. I appreciate the thought, but remember that people in hiding *do not* like surprises."

She looked harsh for a moment, then sighed. "Alright. I'm sorry, but I had to make sure. So, what can Kumi do for you today?" she asked grandly.

"Kumi can go home," Jason said sharply. "We're just fine, we don't need anything, and you'll make us safer by going back home."

"Why don't you pack a bag and come with me?" she asked.

"*What?*"

"Come along," she grinned. "I told you I wanted to show you my house. And there's lots to see here in Dracora."

"Dracora? You live on *Draconis*?" he said in shock.

"Twenty *shakra* from the Imperial Palace," she said proudly. "All the upper nobility have a residence here. Really, you dip, didn't you ever check to see the location code of the number you've been calling? Why is that a surprise?"

"You want me to come to Draconis? Kumi, you're not just crazy, you're *nuts*. I'm a wanted man!"

"And do you think they're going to even think to look for you on homeworld?" she asked chidingly, then she took a serious expression. "Actually, you need to come with me. There's something here you need to see."

"You can take a picture of it and send it to me."

"No, this is something you have to see for yourself," she said.

"Well, it's going to have to wait," he told her bluntly. "I'm not that crazy, girl."

"You don't trust me?"

"You, yes. Putting my life in the hands of unseen ship crewmen and your servants...no. There's also the fact that I won't go anywhere where I don't have complete control over my ability to get back. Sorry, Kumi, but that's life."

"You're making a *huge* mistake, babe."

"Life is full of regretful decisions," he said evenly.

"You'll *really* regret this one."

"Oh well. Now, if you won't mind, hon, I have a lot of work to do, and I need to get back to it."

"You're sure?"

"I'm absolutely positive. Call me when you get home, so I know you made it alright."

"Well, it sounds like I've been dismissed," she said sharply.

"You seem to have nothing more to say, and I'm not going to sit here and argue with you for the next twenty minutes," he explained coolly. "I'm not joking in that I have a lot of work to do. If you don't have anything important enough to keep me from it outside of vaguely insistent demands for me

to come with you, then I think this call is about over.”

Kumi frowned. Jason could tell that whatever she had to say, she thought it was important, but she also wasn't willing to say it over Civnet. “Would you come meet me in eight hours?” she asked. “In the regular spot?”

“Now that, I'd be happy to do,” he told her with a nod. “Hours or *standard* hours?”

“Standard, I don't know your local time,” she answered.

“Why not now?”

“Because if you won't come to Draconis, I have to move Draconis here,” she said cryptically.

“Will you meet me?”

“I'd be happy to,” he told her.

“I'll see you then,” she said, then she cut the connection.

Jason leaned back in his chair. He had no idea what any of that was about, but one thing was for sure...Kumi certainly had piqued his curiosity.

You done? Symone sent.

Yeah. I'm going to meet her in eight standard hours. She has something she wants to tell me, but wouldn't say it over Civnet.

Are you going?

Yup. So are you. So don't make any plans.

Eight standard hours put their meeting after dark, and Jason spent most of the early afternoon fretting over what Kumi had in mind. Around about four, though, Mike Lawson, who was riding the panel, started shouting in the radio about descending ships. Jason patched into the sensor feed with his own panel, for he'd been laboring on his project, and saw that he wasn't reading it wrong. Three dropships had descended from orbit, and were landing out at Beech Fork Lake. Two of them took off about half an hour later, but another landed a few minutes later.

Now he was curious. He put on his armor, jumped on an airbike, and headed out for Beech Fork.

He secured the bike well away from the swimming area where he always met Kumi, then crept in. That wouldn't be easy with Meya and Myra running around, for those two were *good*, but he drew on every trick that Clem and the other hunters had taught him, deciding to get on the far side of the lake spur and just creep up close enough to get an idea of what was going on. After about a half hour of creeping, he finally got close enough to look through a clearing made by Kumi and the twins the last time he was here, when they used his railgun to blast the hell out of this side of the lake spur.

What he saw startled him. There was a small army of Faey down there, setting up all kinds of things. Tables, chairs, a few tents, large swaths of some kind of outdoor carpeting on the ground, and all kinds of equipment. Two dropships were down as well, and on the far side of them, they were *cooking*. They were sending heavily out there, so often and so quickly that it became a jumble in Jason's mind. He wasn't experienced with handling so many sendings at once, and it made him a little dizzy. He had to shut himself off, close his mind completely so he couldn't hear them sending, then waited a moment for it to clear up.

Jason realized what he was seeing quickly after he saw them cooking, at least after he got his senses back. Kumi was throwing a *party*! That's what she meant when she said she had to bring Draconis here!

Jason backed up and laid down on the ground, thinking furiously, taking off his helmet and using it as a chinrest as he watched through the trees. She wanted him to come to a *party*? That's what all this was about? Now that was just weird, even for Kumi. No, there had to be something else to it, because she certainly wouldn't go to this trouble just for appearances, but on the other hand, he didn't see how she was going to get any guests to come out here. She'd certainly looked serious about getting him to come to Draconis, but he couldn't figure out how doing this satisfied whatever she needed him to go to Draconis for in the first place. There had to be some kind of ulterior motive here, but he was dipped if

he couldn't figure out what it was.

The heavy impact of something literally landing on his back made him flinch, accompanied by the grinding squeal of metal on metal, but it didn't crush him or do him any harm. He moved to scramble forward, at least until he heard the whine of an MPAC activating, and felt something press up against the back of his head. "Will you never learn that you can't sneak up on us, human?" Myra asked lightly. He glanced back and saw her in her armor but without her helmet, literally sitting on the small of his back, her MPAC levelled at his head.

"Hello Myra," he said evenly. "Want to get off me now?"

"In a minute," she said, "You know what's going on out there?"

"It looks like Kumi's throwing a party. I can't figure out *why* though."

"Yes, it's a party, and you're invited," she answered him. "But I don't think armor is proper party attire. You need to go home and change into something a little less intimidating. You'll scare Miss Kumi's guests."

"What guests?"

"What's a party without guests?" Myra retorted. "A large complement of her friends are en route as we speak. They thought the idea of an outdoor picnic party to be a clever idea, especially since it's going to be held in a dangerous area, so there's an element of excitement to it. Sometimes nobles are weird," she grunted.

"So, I'm supposed to be the entertainment?" Jason asked sharply.

"No, you're a guest," she answered, just as sharply. "Now go home and find something nice to wear and come back. You have to be here *before* the others start to arrive, or they'll know you didn't come in a dropship."

Jason had to admit to the logic of that statement. But, on the other hand, he had no intention of going to this party. "If Kumi doesn't like what I'm wearing, that's entirely too bad," he answered flatly. "If I meet with her down there, I'll be wearing exactly what I have on right now, and I won't be there long. She can accept it, or she can throw a tantrum that accomplishes absolutely nothing. It's her call."

Jason waited as Myra sent that along, but she didn't move off of him...though she did lower her weapon. "Miss Kumi's not too happy about it," she said. "She said if you won't put on decent clothes, you have to wait inside her dropship, so they can't see you. But she said you can leave any time after you're done, you just have to put on your helmet and pretend to be one of the guards."

"After I'm done?"

"Miss Kumi has some kind of business with you, and it involves a third party," Myra answered.

"When that person gets here, you can leave after you finish whatever business you have."

"Oh. I have no idea what that means, but I don't object to waiting in Kumi's dropship."

"Okay then, get your helmet and your weapon and follow me. You run out here?"

"Airbike," he answered as she got off him.

"Go bring it into the perimeter, so you can just get on it and ride off, like you're patrolling," she instructed. "There are some airbikes parked behind Miss Kumi's dropship. Just put it back there."

"Alright."

Jason pondered what Myra said as he retrieved his airbike. A third party? What third party would have anything to do with him? Kumi and Jyslin were the only people outside he knew, and he absolutely knew for a fact that Jyslin was in New Orleans right now. She was on duty tonight, she told him so yesterday when he called. So who was this mysterious third person?

Kumi was in her dropship cockpit when Myra escorted him in. She was wearing a weird flowing top of sorts with only one sleeve, made of some kind of sheer bluish silk-like material that almost exactly matched the hue of her skin. It was low-cut in the front and very form-fitting, giving the illusion that she was topless at certain angles. It shimmered in the light like there were tiny diamonds sewn into it, though, almost looking like she was topless and wearing glitter. She was also wearing a

very short black skirt, so black it all but swallowed the light, again with an uneven hem, almost to her left hip, but dropping down to the middle of her right thigh. She had on knee-length black boots that looked almost like velvet, with noticeable heels but not very high, the tops of them turned down and flared. Kumi never seemed to wear heavy jewelry, he noticed, usually only small earrings or a necklace. She was wearing a simple pair of diamond-looking studs in her ears and a plain silver or platinum or some other kind of silvery metal chain around her neck, without adornment.

“Nice,” he said honestly as he admired her outfit.

“You like?” she asked girlishly, standing up and turning around for him. “It’s a Moteena top with a Graneth skirt. The boots are Zupini.”

“I have no idea what any of that means.”

“She laughed. “They’re the current ‘in’ designers back home,” she told him. “The guests are about a half an hour or so from getting here. Just sit in here and wait, babe. There’s someone coming who wants to talk to you, that’s what all this is about. She paid me a *hell* of a lot of money to arrange this meeting. That’s why I was so insistent.”

“Really? Who would want to talk to *me*?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” she answered bluntly. “Read the dropship manual or something while I greet the guests. You can fly this thing, you know,” she winked. “It has the same basic controls as a skimmer. Your Class three covers dropships.”

“I know it does,” he answered. “There were dropship questions on the test.”

“Coolies. Just punch it up on the computer. Knock yourself out, babe, I gotta check on stuff.”

Jason did exactly that. He amused himself by reading over the controls on a dropship, and making note of which ones were different than a skimmer. He even brought up the dropship’s systems to practice, though he didn’t try to lift it off the ground. Kumi’s dropship had all kinds of bells and whistles; armor, weapons, a shield, sensors, ECM, anti-missile technology (even the Faey still made use of missiles, though they rarely bothered to bring them to Earth), a kick-ass communications system complete with crypto and source masking—those paranoid nobles, gotta love them—and of course, access to Civnet.

He was having so much fun playing with Kumi’s dropship that he lost track of time. He looked up and saw the outside filled with lots of Faey, all wearing expensive clothes, with lots of armored guards patrolling the perimeter. There was a band on a stage set up by the old parking lot, playing what he swore sounded like some kind of chaotic mixture of heavy metal and high-energy dance music. He’d listened to Faey music before, and never heard them play anything like *that* before. Their music was usually much more structured, fluent, subtle, a pretty blend of harmonies that was so much different from *that*.

He happened to be looking up when the hatch behind him opened, and he turned to look. Through that hatch stepped Kumi, then one of that same Kimdori—or at least one that looked exactly the same as the last one—and one other person. The figure wore a heavy black cloak or robe with a deep hood, then stepped in and sat down immediately in the chair closest to the hatch. Jason turned his chair to face this figure, but did not stand up. The figure pulled the hood away, and Jason found himself looking at a very lovely young Faey woman whose hair was the color of the ocean, a deep, dark, quite lovely shade of blue. Her eyes were violet in color, quite a striking combination.

“This is him,” Kumi announced to her.

“Well, it’s good to finally meet you, Jason Fox,” she said in a strong, surprisingly deep voice for a Faey. It was a rich alto. “My name is Dania.”

“I’m afraid you have me at a loss, madam,” he said courteously. “Why would you want to see me?”

She looked at Kumi expectantly. The young noble nodded, then she and the Kimdori went back out and closed the hatch, leaving them alone. “As you probably realize, I represent a certain individual who wishes to remain anonymous. This person has asked me to come here and make you two separate

offers. So, on to business.

“The first offer is employment. My employer wants to hire you.”

“Hire *me*? For what?”

“For your mind, and not to make weapons of war,” she answered, quickly putting up her hand to stay his objection. “My employer was impressed by your patent submissions, and thinks you could go far. You seem to have a knack for our technology. My employer likes to retain certain enlightened people as yourself to come up with new ideas, which have market value.”

“You work for a corporation?” Jason asked in surprise.

“I can’t tell you who I represent,” she said evenly. “Well, what do you say, Master Fox? I assure you, you will be *handsomely* compensated, on top of your patent and royalty payments you will still retain for your marketable inventions. You’ll work alongside people as gifted as yourself, and you’ll be both legally employed and out of trouble.”

“I think the Imperium might have something to say about that,” Jason said.

“My employer has the ear of the Empress herself,” she said confidently. “Your legal problems can be made to disappear.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that,” he said immediately. “I will not work for a system that I object to. I won’t further the cause of the race that conquered my planet and all but enslaved us.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, but I’m positive. I do appreciate the offer though, and I assure you, it’s not personal. I object to the *system*, not the *people*. I have several Faey friends, if you didn’t notice.”

“Very well,” she sighed, reaching into her cloak or robe or whatever it was. “On to the second offer.” She took out a small black key and held it out. “This is for you.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s a key,” she said patiently. “Take it.”

Curious, and a little wary, Jason stood up and advanced, then held out his gauntleted hand. She deposited the key in his gauntlet, then withdrew her hand calmly. He sat back down and looked at it. It was a crystal key with a black base, whose crystalline molecular structure held the encrypted data the lock would read to authorize the key and unlock whatever it unlocked. It was much like the key for his skimmer. “What is this for?”

“My employer has no desire to see you get killed,” she said calmly. “That key has three purposes. First, if you key it up into any panel, vidlink, or data port on Civnet, it sends a distress message to people contracted by my employer. Use it if you ever find yourself in trouble. They will come get you. Second, you will find that that key will unlock any skimmer, hovercar, airbike, loader, hovertruck, or dropship. Think of it as a master key. If you find yourself in trouble and you don’t want to call *us* for help, it will let you steal any transportation you need to get away. Its third function—well, that will be apparent later on. I’ll save that for a surprise,” she said with a slight smile.

“But what’s it for?” he repeated.

“This is a gift, to help you,” she said. “Our offer of employment is open, Master Fox. You can accept it at any time, and this key will help keep you alive until the day you accept my employer’s offer. They’re confident that you eventually will.”

“What about this second offer?”

“This *is* the second offer,” she said with a slight smile. “My employer is offering you this to help you, no conditions, no provisions. This key might help keep you alive and well, and that matters to my employer even more than the possibility that you’ll accept the job offer.”

Jason looked down at the key for a long time. “Alright,” he said, closing his gauntlet around it. “I’ll accept it. But I don’t promise anything.”

“We didn’t expect you to,” she said with a smile, standing up. “Our business is concluded, Master Fox,” she said with a nod, reaching back, then pulling her hood back up. “If you ever wish to call my employer, you’ll find the Civnet number.”

“Where?” he asked in confusion.

“You’ll know where,” she said, giving him a steady look before settling the hood, which concealed her face in shadow.”

Jason watched her leave without another word, then picked up his helmet and his railgun. He put on the helmet, and as soon as it got power, he got blasted in his ears with frantic shouting over the radio. “*Jason! Come in! Are you alright?*” Tim was shouting.

“Tone it down,” Jason said, touching the side of his helmet to transmit. “I’ve had my helmet off.”

“*You need to get back here!*” he said. “*A Faey dropship like I’ve never seen before is hovering over the town! Hold on, hold on, it’s doing something. It’s descending.*”

“What does it look like?”

“*It’s hard to describe. It looks like a big rectangle with a cockpit and a tail. It just landed out by the bridge. I’m up in the steeple—hold on, it’s taking off again. Shit, it left its middle behind on the ground! A big box!*”

“It’s a cargo dropship, a container carrier,” he realized, speaking aloud. “It left something behind?”

“*Yeah, a big container. You need to get back here!*”

She said he’d know where to find the number of her employer. Now it made perfect sense. It seemed that the key wasn’t the only help her boss was willing to render, and that they seemed quite serious about their offer to help keep him alive. He wasn’t too sure about the idea of this, but he’d reserve judgement until he got back to town and had a look at that box. He put the key in a belt container, then shouldered his rifle and started for his airbike. He had to go see what was going on, so he had to get back quickly.

“*Jason! Steve is opening it now with an annealer!*” Tim said excitedly over the radio.

“Dammit, tell him to stop!” Jason snapped over the radio as he raced to his airbike and literally vaulted onto it. “It might be trapped!”

“*He scanned it before—*” he began, then he gasped. “*It’s food!*” he said with an almost girlish squeal. “*Steve says it’s full of boxes and boxes of food! He said it’s packed to the rafters with it!*”

It took Jason all of three minutes to get back to town from Beech Fork, and he was off the airbike and running to the container, a massive silver rectangular cube sitting in the intersection of 7 and the access road to 52. There was a hole cut into the side, and Jason saw Steve and Leamon carrying out boxes with Faey writing on them, as Symone set another on the ground. “Are you people nuts?” Jason shouted as he tore his helmet off, throwing it to the ground absently. “There was no telling what was in that container!”

“I scanned it before I opened it,” Steve told him. “But the note on the side told us it wasn’t anything dangerous.”

“What note?”

Steve led him around to the side, the side he didn’t see when he landed. Emblazoned on the side in large Faey script were the words *this will help keep you alive until you accept our offer*. That was what that Faey woman had said to him. She said she had no desire to see him get killed...and that there was one more surprise waiting for him. Was this it? Were they supplying him with food so they would make it through the winter?

“Shit, Jayce, there’s enough food in here to feed us all for a year!” Symone said as Steve led him back to where he’d cut the hole. “Did you buy this?”

Jason looked into the hole with Symone. Inside, there wasn’t even room for a mouse, it was packed so tightly. The boxes were wrapped in clear plastic and bundled into pallets, each pallet floor an anti-grav cargo platform. Steve had torn through the plastic on the bottom pallet to get at the boxes he, Leamon, and Symone had carried out. “I didn’t buy it,” Jason said. “Let’s get this stuff into a warehouse. Give me that annealer Steve, I’ll cut out the whole wall so we can clear the top pallets first.”

He did so, using the antigrav pods in his armor, then quickly got to work bringing the pallets down

one by one. A single man could push and guide a pallet once it was off the stack, so they quickly started emptying out the container. They got about halfway through it when Jason realized that there was a massive enclosed container inside the container, like a box inside a box, with the food stacked all around it. It was nearly fifteen feet high and ten feet wide and ten feet deep, annealed to the floor of the container. They emptied out everything else, and while the townsfolk pushed the food to one of the storage warehouses along route 7, Jason, Tim, Leamon, Steve, Clem, Luke, and Symone stood in front of that huge box. Jason had the annealer in his hands, but he saw that that wasn't necessary. This box had an opening mechanism on it, a button on the side which would cause one side of it to unanneal and open. This was a reusable shipping container, not a replicated disposable one like the container in which this box had been shipped.

"Well, we won't know what's in it til we open it," Clem said sagely, answering that question that was on everyone's minds, but had not been voiced. He stepped up and looked at the button, then pushed it after Jason nodded.

The side to their right opened slowly, the wall gracefully sinking to the ground. They all went around, then stopped dead as soon as they looked inside.

Jason was stunned. There was no way to describe the shock and awe he felt looking into that shipping container.

For inside that container, supported by cables attached to the walls, was a fifteen foot tall bipedal machine. Jason recognized it immediately.

It was an *exomech*.

It was sleek and ominous looking, almost looking like a Faey inside a suit of armor more than it did a robotic device. Slender limbs were attached to a sleek torso, in which the pilot was placed, and atop that torso was a smallish, narrow head with two red crystals in the shape of eyes on its front, a front that had a vague, sharp face-like appearance. An external plasma cannon was mounted on its right shoulder, its long, squared barrel angled down so it was parallel to the floor to make it fit into the unit.

"Holy *shit*!" Symone gasped in Faey. "It's an *exomech*!"

"What is that thing?" Leamon asked in mute awe.

"It's an *exomech*!" Symone repeated in English. "A robotic fighting vehicle! And it's a top-line model! Trelle's Garland, it's an XME-400 model! Jason, who loves you enough to send you an *exomech*, cause there's no way in hell you could buy one! This thing had to cost over a million credits!"

An *exomech*? Was this the surprise that woman hinted at? Buy *why*, for pete's sake? Why give him an *exomech*? It made no sense! This was a *military* weapon! And not only that, he had no idea how to pilot it!

"There's a note on its leg," Tim said, pointing at its left foot.

Jason saw it, a piece of paper taped to its left shin. Jason approached it warily, stepping inside the box, then grabbed the piece of paper and opened it. They filed in behind him, and Symone looked over his shoulder as he read the Faey script, then translated.

"Use it wisely," he said, turning the paper over and looking at the other side. "That's all it says."

Jason looked up at the fearsome piece of hardware, his mind turning over and over. Why did they send this to him? What possible use would he have for it? Then again, how was he supposed to *use* it? Exomechs required special training to operate...they weren't easy to run. Even if he had the training to operate it, what possible good would it do him to have it? This was a *war machine*, and if the Faey ever saw it, they'd attack his little settlement immediately and with overwhelming firepower. All things considered, having this *exomech* in the community was ten times more of a risk and liability than it was an asset. The only real practical use he could see in it was taking it apart and learning how it worked, getting his hands on some classified Faey military technology. Other than that, it was just a big target for the Faey, and one they *would* attack if they knew it was there.

But, on the other hand...if he really could learn how to pilot it, then it would be a very formidable

force to help protect the town, should the Faey ever attack—god forbid that ever happened. That exomech could shock the Faey so bad it would give the people time to run away. It was too dangerous to keep, but its potential usefulness could not be ignored.

First he felt relief at having the food but now...now he had *this* thing to worry about. He blew out his breath, then bowed his head and shook it in disgust. “I can’t believe they gave us this thing,” he grunted, then he sighed. “Alright, then. Luke, have anything big enough to carry it? We need to hide it somewhere.”

“We can stick it in the auto garage down by the bridge. It should be big enough to hold it,” he answered.

“Are we keeping that thing?” Leamon asked.

“For now, yeah,” Jason answered. “But it’s a kind of damned if you do damned if you don’t situation. It’s way too dangerous to keep, but what else can we do with it? And also, if one of us could actually learn to pilot it, it would be our ace in the hole if the Faey ever do attack the town. It should be such a surprise that it would let everyone else get away. Either way though, it’s just going to be one big-assed headache for all of us until we decide what to do. And it’s definitely something that the town council should talk about before any decisions are made.”

“Amen,” Clem said with a nod.

“Let’s get it into the garage while it’s dark and cloudy,” he said briskly. “I want to get it out of the container and out of sight as fast as possible.”

Chapter 10

Chiira, 7 Miraa, 4393, Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 7 October 2007, Native Regional Reckoning

Chesapeake, Ohio (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

The council meeting was long, heated, and very, very nervous.

Jason was not the only one who saw the unbelievable danger that the exomech posed to the community. Clem and Paul Meredith saw what Jason saw, Death's scythe should the Faey somehow come to know that they had possession of it. But unlike Jason, who saw some other potential, Clem and Paul were absolutely against anything other than immediately getting rid of it, taking it out and dumping it into the Ohio River. Leamon and Julianne understood that danger, but they were at the other end of the spectrum from Clem and Paul. They saw the exomech as an overwhelming force that could serve as a last-ditch line of defense, something they'd only pull out when they had no other option available to them, like if a Faey expedition attacked the town. They saw it as a guardian angel, a nuclear weapon, something only used when all other options were exhausted, but something that could dramatically change the outcome of whatever emergency had led to its use. Regina was of Jason's mind on this, seeing the exomech as a vast danger, but also something that could save lives if it were used in the right way, at the right time.

The meeting went on for almost six hours, and many townsfolk were lurking out in front of Jason's house, trying to eavesdrop on what was going on. They knew about the exomech, and they knew that the council was debating the fate of that machine. They were wildly curious, for only a handful of people had seen them move it into the garage, a garage which was now locked, all the doors annealed, all the windows boarded up, and with two mounted deputies with *real* MPACs, not hunting rifles, standing guard outside it with orders to shoot anyone who tried to enter the garage. They couldn't hear much, since it was taking place down in the basement, but they did hear the occasional bouts of shouting that rose up...which told them how heated the council session was.

It came down to two people who were so absolutely convinced that they were right that they would not even listen to the other side. Jason was a bit surprised that Clem was being so stubbornly adamant, for usually the man was very wise and quite open to hearing the opposing point of view. But on this he had dug in his heels and he would not budge. Julianne was being just as stubborn, refusing to entertain any proposal that included getting rid of the exomech. She understood the danger, that was for sure, but she was completely confident that it would never be found by the Faey, and if it ever was used, well, they'd be abandoning Chesapeake in that kind of situation anyway, for nothing short of an attack by Faey forces would require its use. Paul was a bit more open to listening to debate, as was Leamon, but they backed their more militant fellow council members on their views, leaving Regina and Jason in the delicate position of trying to mediate between the two.

In the end, though, it came down to a vote that left neither side happy at all. After all the shouting and finger-wagging, it had been decided to keep the exomech *for now*. The matter would come up for a vote again in three weeks, during which time Jason, Tim, and Steve would be required to study their current security measures and attest without any doubt whatsoever that the exomech was undetectable. If any one of them was not absolutely sure about that, had even one doubt, then the vote would be cancelled and the exomech immediately destroyed. Clem and Paul wanted it destroyed *now*, and Leamon and Julianne didn't want it destroyed at *all*...but the measure had passed, so they had to live with it. The vote was 3-2, with Regina casting the deciding vote. Jason approved the measure, and it was put in the books.

He felt drained and exhausted when the meeting finally broke up, going up and sitting in the living room for a minute with his head in his hands. Symone, Tim, and Temika came in immediately after the

other council members left, as did Mary and Danielle. Mary and Danielle had become best friends since she'd arrived, and were rarely apart anymore. "What did they decide to do, Mister Jason?" Mary asked.

"We vote again in three weeks," he answered dully. "If the techs can't absolutely guarantee it won't be detected, we destroy it. If we vote to destroy it the next time it comes up, we destroy it."

"Why is it so important?" Mary asked. "I mean, we got lots of Faey stuff around."

"Because it's a *military* machine," he answered her. "If the Faey saw it, they'd send troops in here to capture it and us. They don't interfere in what goes out in here as long as *we are no threat to them*, Mary. Yeah, they know I have the airbikes, they know I have a couple of MPACs, they know I have the skimmer and some Faey tech, but none of it's really dangerous. What could I possibly do with a civilian skimmer and a handful of MPACs? Not much. But an exomech is an entirely different ball game, hon. It's a war machine, and if they knew we had it, they'd attack us immediately."

"But why? What could one exomech do to *them*?" she asked.

"It's not what it can do, hon, it's what it represents," Jason answered. "They wouldn't tolerate anyone out here with that kind of major firepower, because it's a threat to *them* if they come out here to raid us. And besides, they wouldn't want *anyone* out here that could manage to get their hands on one in the first place. If they see it, the first thing they'll ask after they get over the shock is *how many more do they have*? Then they'll come out here with a few *thousand* troops to find out."

"That about sums up what they'd do, alright," Symone agreed with a nod.

"If it's that dangerous, then why keep it at all?" Danielle asked.

"Because if they Faey ever do attack us, pulling that thing out would shock them so bad that it would give everyone time to get away," Jason replied. "That's what a couple of council members see using it for, as a last resort in case the Faey attack."

"But you just said that if they attack, they'll come with a huge army."

"That's if they knew it was there," Symone said, nodding in understanding. "They're talking about if the Faey ever raid the town, like I've heard from the others about how Faey patrols raid squatters to make sure they don't have any plasma weapons, or shit like that. If they came knowing it was here, it'd never get out of the garage. They'd just have a fighter hit it, or have a cruiser hit it from orbit. Hell, they could blow this entire city off the map from orbit without having to send a single soldier, but they wouldn't do that. They'd want to know how we got it."

"What do you think, Mister Jason?" Mary asked.

"I think I'm not going to sleep well knowing it's here," he answered. "I'd like to keep it for a while because I can learn a great deal from it, but it makes me *very* nervous knowing that it's here. As soon as I learn everything from it I want to learn, I'll vote to have it destroyed."

"I'd have thought you'd want to keep it," Symone said seriously.

"It's ten times more a liability than it is an asset," he told her. "The only possible practical use it has for us is as a learning tool. If we ever had to really *use* it, it would be the end of this community. The only way I could possibly see using it is if the Faey attacked the town and started killing people, or they intended to steal all our food and equipment, which would make it impossible for us to survive. Either way, if it ever gets used, everything we built here will be for nothing, but at least it would keep us alive long enough to gather up what we can and relocate to a new place."

"If we could," Tim added.

Jason nodded. "God, I'm hungry," he grunted. "I haven't eaten all day."

"I have some leftovers in the fridge, Mister Jason," Mary told him. "Spaghetti."

"Spaghetti? Where did you get the pasta?"

"One of the new people can make pasta from scratch," Mary said with a grin. "Sophia Frellini. She's been selling it. It's *wonderful*," she said dreamily.

"She's making a killing, too," Danielle added. "She gets flour from Ruth and uses it to make pasta."

“I’m not too sure I approve of her selling something she’s getting from the shared food bank,” Jason said with a frown.

“Clem knows she’s doing it, he said it was alright,” Mary said. “So long as she doesn’t gouge people.”

“Oh. Well, I guess it’s okay then, if Clem knows.”

“I’ll go get it for you, Mister Jason,” she said, then scurried out. Danielle, as always, was right behind her.

Anything else happen in there? Tim asked, his sending curious.

Just a lot of shouting, Jason answered, leaning back heavily in his chair. *For a few minutes, I thought Clem and Juli were going to start throwing punches. It got intense.*

I can imagine, Symone sent, nodding in agreement. *You might want to pull those guards with MPACs off the garage. Just in case they saw that cargo carrier land.*

That’s true, he agreed. *They might see them if they have their cameras pointed at us. Rather not give them any reason to start looking at us too closely.*

That turned out to be a moot point, he discovered later, watching TV as he ate the delicious spaghetti that Mary brought to him. It turned out that the drop *was* known to the Faey, because it made the “local” news—that being CNN, the last of the news networks since the subjugation, which had become the news network for Earth. CNN was the local version of INN, and was an affiliate of INN in the same way that local broadcast stations were affiliates of CNN back in the day. The drop was touted as a humanitarian mission by House Trillane to feed the squatters in the preserve, to help them through the winter. The drop here was only one of twenty, scattered through the preserve, and after a little CB chatting, they’d found that the other “drops” were one tenth the size of theirs, dropped in the middle of nowhere for whoever could reach the container first. Kumi even managed to get into the news, for it was organized by one Eleri Trillane. She’d gotten her fifteen seconds of fame on Earth.

That news story was curious to Jason, for a couple of reasons. His main concern was that it made Trillane admit that there were squatters out in the preserve, something that they had never done before. Oh, everyone knew that they were there, but Trillane had never *officially* admitted it before. Admitting that the squatters were there was tantamount to admitting that Trillane was failing the Imperial mandate of a smooth and fluent transition from the human ways to the Faey ways. Squatters in the preserve were a public display of the fact that not all humans were ready to embrace the Faey system, and that wasn’t the kind of image that Trillane wanted for the new jewel in their house crown. It was also sure to raise a few legal questions about the official status of the squatters. They were seen as citizens of the Imperium, and what they were doing was breaking the law by refusing to work. Sure, Trillane could have went in at any time and captured all the squatters, sent them to work on farms, but that would put a disruptive element into an area where the Trillanes needed dependable productivity. Letting the squatters stay out in the preserve removed the disruptive element. He had little doubt that the Imperial observers knew about the squatters, and turned a blind eye to them to keep them out of mischief and the food continuing to flow into the Imperium. As long as they were isolated in the preserve and kept suitably controlled, they were harmless.

Obviously, this “humanitarian mission” was nothing but whoever that mysterious woman worked for concealing the delivery of that food to Jason’s community. They’d enlisted Kumi’s aid—no doubt very expensive, knowing Kumi—and had explained it away by making token food drops in other locations.

And certainly, this story would never reach INN.

Locally, though, the story had several different impacts. Jason’s people got food, Trillane got a bit of a public-relations story out of looking caring and concerned about the squatters, and people with relatives or friends might feel a little better about it.

In any event, he wasn’t going to get too much sleep until that thing was either gone or so well hidden that there was no way the Faey would ever find it.

And he had a boatload of work ahead of him.

*Kaira, 18 Miraa, 4393, Orthodox Calendar
Sunday, 18 October 2007, Native Regional Reckoning
Chesapeake, Ohio (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector*

They were running out of time.

Jason sat in his basement workshop, alone, with drawings, external displays, panels, bits and pieces of equipment, and quite a few dirty plates scattered all over the shop. They'd been given three weeks to guarantee that the exomech would never be found, and as of right now, with only three days to go until that second council meeting, Jason could not make that guarantee.

Oh, it was safe enough where it was, that was for sure, as long as it wasn't turned on. The inverse phase emitter would prevent the Faey from detecting the exomech, but the instant it was activated, the passive arrays would pick it up, and that would be it. And since it was nothing but a huge paperweight without being able to turn it on, Jason wouldn't sign off on it. If he wanted to learn anything from it, he needed to turn it on. The most he could learn from it the way it was was maybe learn more about its systems, which wasn't very useful.

So, he wouldn't sign off on it until he could defeat passive sensors, and that was what he'd been working on feverishly since the day after the council meeting. He'd argued about ideas with Steve and Tim, he'd built prototypes based on different ideas—none of which worked—he'd researched and researched and researched on Civnet until he was on a first-name basis with most of the people who perused the technical boards. And still, nothing. Not that he really expected to have a breakthrough in three weeks; he knew it'd be a miracle to come up with something that fast.

It just kept coming back to a simple problem...nothing he could come up with could stop a plasma signature. He couldn't hide it, he couldn't mask it, and the passive nature of the sensors he was trying to beat wouldn't allow him to trick them the way he did the active sensors. There was no energy pattern he could put over the signature to conceal it, and the exomech was too large to shield its signature. Smaller plasma signatures could be masked with a special alloy of Neutronium and Yttrium, which dampened the plasma signature to the point where a class X PPG looked like a class II, and outright concealed signatures from a Class VII or smaller. But the power plant in the exomech wasn't just a PPG, it was a full-blown reactor engine, complete with plasma power capacitors and spatial engines and backup PPGs placed all over the exomech, that each would show up to passive sensors. He'd have to lay on so much shielding to mask that power plant and all those tertiary systems that it would overload the exomech, make it too heavy to move. Same for his skimmer...he'd have to put on so much shielding, *everywhere*, that it would be too heavy for its own engines.

So, it came right back to the same problem he'd struggled with for months. How did he hide a large, unshielded plasma signature from passive sensors?

He blew out his breath and put his head in his hands, thinking the problem through. Maybe he was making this more complicated than it needed to be. If he couldn't shield the power signature without overloading the unit, then he needed to find a shielding material that *wouldn't* overload the unit, because shielding the unit was the easiest approach, one that was proven to work.

But that was the problem...there was no shielding material he could use. The unique density of the Neutronium/Yttrium that closely matched a plasma signature let it absorb plasma energy—

--*Absorb!*

It was like a neuron in his brain suddenly exploded, the flash of insight hit him so quickly. If he couldn't shield a unit with the alloy, then he had to *actively* reinforce that alloy! And what absorbed energy? *Shields!*

Building energy matrixes inside solid objects was already a tried and true Faey technology, because that was *exactly* how plasma conduit operated. It created a magnetic "pipe" through which the plasma

flowed inside a flexible hollow rod of a carbon-silicon composite. The magnetic pipe was channeled through the molecular structure of the conduit to prevent the hyperphased power plasma from striking the sides of the conduit and creating a drag eddy, which interfered with plasma flow. Hyperphased plasma was safe at room temperature, which prevented it from exploding if a conduit ruptured...it was like liquid energy. One certainly didn't want to touch it with bare hands, but it wouldn't do any major damage if it was sprayed all over the internal systems of a piece of equipment, just scorch it. The magnetic pipe wasn't absolutely required for it to work, it just made it more efficient.

Quickly, Jason sketched out his idea. He needed to create a stable energy matrix inside a layer of either Neutronium or that alloy, a shield specifically designed to act against *plasma*. Unphased plasma like the kind of radiant signature generated by plasma technology was stopped by shields just like any other form of energy, and the energy emissions of a plasma device were unphased. He looked up Neutronium on Civnet, checking out its physical characteristics, and found, to his utter delight, that it would be compatible with what he wanted to do with it. The metal's molecular structure would support building an energy matrix within it. With that confirmed, he went over what he'd need to do, and how to do it.

The Neutronium would have to be isolated from everything else, but this wasn't going to be a problem. In fact, Faey armor was already *designed* this way, with the layers of Neutronium with the synthetic phase cloth in the middle. The inner layer and outer layer were separate, with all the moorings and mounts on the back of the internal layer, with the bonded phase barrier material between them. Jason looked up what kind of material they used in exomechs, which wasn't easy, because it was a military application. He did find what he was looking for after about an hour, on a shadowy board with that kind of sensitive information, and was *very* pleased. Exomechs used a metallic synthetic material for the phase barrier, which, after checking out its physical properties, he discovered would *not* conduct the energy matrix. It would serve as a perfect insulator. There were anchor moorings through that phase material attaching the outer layer to the inner layer, but those could be found and insulated.

Okay, he knew that it *could* be done. He quickly sketched out what he'd need to do this. He'd need some specialized shield emitters, which would be mounted into the outer layer of the exomech. These emitters would have to be tachyon-based, not the usual tetryon technology used by the Faey, because a tachyon shield would be capable of operating at the necessary composite harmonic shield frequency required to absorb plasma signatures. Tachyon shield technology was *old* by Faey standards, a century out of date, abandoned after tetryon shield technology was discovered. Tachyon shields were considered *soft*, lacking strong physical resistance present in tetryon shields, which were called *hard shields*, much more capable of dealing with physical force and kinetic energy. But Tachyon shields could be used in a *harmonic* manner, introducing more than one frequency into the shield without creating a feedback that would blow the shield matrix. Jason needed that ability to operate with harmonics.

The emitters would have to be mounted into every modular plate of the exomech, wherever a joint separated the plates, and into the joint plates themselves. One emitter per plate, with 97 separate plates and joints in the exomech's armor. Each emitter would be operating at a very low energy level, only just enough to absorb a passive energy signature, allowing the entire system to be powered by the spare power generated by the main power plant. The exact operating harmonic frequency wasn't that hard to work out, but then he redid it to add to the shield the ability to absorb the hyperthreaded pulses of active sensors as an emergency backup in case the inverse phase emitter he intended to mount onto the exomech failed. The absorption would cause the exomech to be a "hole" in a sensor return, more noticeable the closer the exomech was to the sensor, but it was better than nothing. That was *very* easy for him to do, since he'd done so much research on them, and had built the inverse phase emitter. He could even design the system to absorb light energy, which would cause the exomech to become utterly black, a two-dimensional shadow of utter darkness. Rather useless in the daytime, but that would be

quite handy for moving the exomech at night.

He'd need conduit and datalines, and he'd need to program the control system and introduce it into the exomech's operating system. He'd need to study the exomech's technical drawings to figure out where and how to install these emitters, then join their datalines and conduits to those already in the unit. After that, he'd have to write the operating program and get it to work with the exomech's main computer.

And if all that worked, he'd end up with a system that completely masked the exomech from Faey sensors, and make it all but invisible in the darkness of night. The exomech would only be visible to gravometric disturbance sensors, detecting the effect of its mass on space as it moved, but those couldn't detect something as small as the exomech while it was in the gravity well of the planet. He had a good theory, that was for sure, but he had to make that theory *work*.

Tim! Jason sent in a loud, urgent broadcast. *Tim, grab Steve and come to my shop! NOW!*

What's wrong? he asked in reply.

Shut up and move, dumbass! Before I lose my train of thought!

It didn't take the two of them long to get there. Jason explained his idea to them and showed them what technical data he had that backed up his theory, then sat back and let them think it over.

"Hmm," Steve hummed, tapping his forehead with a finger. "I think it just might work, Jayce. If the metal can support the matrix, it should work. It'll fail if the metal's damaged or if it's hit by an MPAC, all that plasma would overload the system. But then again, if they shoot holes in the armor, it's pretty obvious they know it's there already."

"What about magnetic fields?" Tim asked. "Isn't tachyon energy vulnerable to magnetic fields?"

"Yeah, it's highly polarized," Jason affirmed, "but there's not going to be a magnetic field we'll have to worry about, and it's going to be *inside* the Neutronium. We couldn't expose the matrix to contact with shields, and the magnetic envelope of an MPAC would overload the matrix and kill it. The magnetic field it creates will be strong, but it won't extend more than a micron outside the energy matrix itself, which will be *inside* the Neutronium. That's going to help insulate the matrix from magnetic disturbance. Neutronium's not magnetic, it'll act as an insulator for the matrix. Iron wouldn't even stick to the armor when it's running."

"But wouldn't their active sensors then pick up the Neutronium if there's going to be part of the hull not inside the field?" Steve asked.

"Ah, yes, it would," Jason said, holding up a finger, "*if* there wasn't an inverse phase emitter on the exomech designed to block anything that shouldn't be there, as well as the life signs of the pilot. I designed this system to also absorb sensor pulses as an emergency backup if the emitter fails. If that happens, the field will have to rise up to the surface of the Neutronium, which would be easy for us to design. The magnetic field will be exposed, but it shouldn't be an issue because the field will only extend a micron beyond the hull. Anything magnetic would stick to it if that was done, but if you have to switch to that, but only something magnetic that came into direct contact with the hull. But if you have that running, then you're not going to be hanging around. I also worked up a way to raise the field to the surface and also make it absorb light. In the darkness, it would be all but invisible."

"Clever," Steve nodded. "Now, since you have this great idea, how about we aim it at what we're supposed to do?"

"Huh?" Jason asked.

"The Council wants a way to *hide* the exomech, not a way to make it undetectable if it's not under cover. So, with that in mind, how do we adapt this idea to do what they want?"

Jason gave him a look, then laughed. "Yeah, you're right. A box?"

"That's what I was thinking," Steve said, drawing on a piece of paper before them. "We just build a box inside the garage, then hook the system up to it. We have Luke dig a trench kind of like you see in bays in places like Jiffy Lube, where we can get in and out. Then we can learn how it ticks, learn from something cutting edge."

“Something *military*,” Jason nodded in agreement. “We learn how the computer works, then we tear it apart and see how it’s built. We’ll just have to keep people with plasma rifles away from the garage, and we’ll have to make sure the pole transformer there by the garage is shielded. I don’t even want the PPGs near it, or *anything* capable of generating a magnetic field that might be strong enough to disrupt the matrix.”

“There’s an idea,” Tim chuckled. “MPACs are plasma inside a magnetic envelope to keep it from blowing up til it hits something, right? Just reverse the polarity of the matrix so it repels the magnetic envelope, which would make the plasma go with it. MPAC fire would just bounce off.”

“You couldn’t do that—holy *shit*,” Jason said, his eyes brightening. “We couldn’t do that with this, but that’s a *hell* of an idea, Tim! I think I could make something that could *do* that!”

“I think I could too,” Steve said with a laugh. “You couldn’t use an MPAC around it, but we could definitely build something that would bounce the magnetic envelope of an MPAC round.”

“I’m writing that one down,” Jason said quickly, typing furiously on his panel’s holographic keyboard. “That’s definitely our next project.”

“Okay, let’s start working out how we’re going to do this,” Steve said. “You still have the exomech’s schematics loaded into that hologram, Jayce?”

“You know I do.”

“Bring it up, let’s start working this through.”

It was worth a loss of a night’s sleep.

Jason, Tim, and Steve stood in the garage and looked up at the exomech’s “head,” all of them just taking a moment to revel in their success. After almost 29 continuous hours of research, study, and planning, of simulations and some old fashioned tinkering, they were done.

The idea would *work*.

All in all, they figured it would take them about six days to build the box, install the system, test it extensively, then declare it operational. The idea was sound, all it would take would be a five-layered wall, which was Steve’s design. The matrix-carrying Neutronium would be inside layers of simple nickel, and with a steel layer on the outside. Nickel was a metal that was not magnetically conductive, which would insulate the matrix from contact with the steel or magnetic fields, and the steel on the outside layer would conduct magnetic lines of force away from the interior, protecting it. The emitters would be installed into the Neutronium, one emitter for every five square feet of wall it had to defend, each emitter hooked up to a control computer that coordinated the entire matrix. One of their spare panels could do that easily.

Every simulation they ran told them that the idea would work. According to the simulations, the matrix would absorb 99.996482% of the ambient plasma signature. The power signature of the matrix itself would be stronger, and it would *not* have that high of a signature either. The metal roof of the garage would garble the signature of the matrix enough to make it invisible to passive sensors, mainly because the field generated within the Neutronium would be very, very low-power. After all, all it had to do was absorb an *ambient* plasma signature, and that required virtually no power.

First, the walls had to be built. That was Jason’s job, with a great deal of help from Luke and the other mechanics, who could work under his supervision. Steve’s job while they built the walls and installed the shield emitters would be to write a program to govern the matrix. Tim, whose casted arm would prevent excessive labor, was to watch Steve and learn more about TEL language.

After that was decided, they dedicated an hour or so to looking over Jason’s original idea, which was to install such a system into the exomech itself. They figured that doing that would take at least three months, as they meticulously removed the outer hull section by section, plate by plate, modified it, insulated the plate moorings from the inner hull, then reinstalled it. Then they would have to run all the dataline and mini-conduit to connect it to the exomech’s power and computer systems, and they would have to write a program that would allow the exomech’s computer to control the matrix.

If the simulations were accurate, the system was almost everything Jason could hope for. It would hide the unit from both active and passive sensors. Its ability to absorb light would allow it to move undetectable by optical scanners at night, with some sensible precautions like not putting a the exomech between the camera and a light source, and avoiding contact with magnetic materials. He still had no way to hide the unit's mass, meaning it had to stay well inside the planetary gravity well, but those were some limitations he could live with. The system would consume *very* little power, requiring no extra power at all, running purely off the excess power generated by the exomech's power system. There were some down sides to the system, they'd discovered. MPAC weaponry created a distortion in the system in the simulations they ran, so the exomech could not use its built-in MPAC weaponry while the matrix was engaged, such as the arm MPACs and the shoulder-mounted plasma cannon. The shield also interfered with the exomech's sensors in simulations, rendering them useless. The pilot would have to run the exomech with visual only while the cloak was engaged. Outside of that, though, the system had no other detrimental effects on the exomech's systems in the simulations they ran.

But, the most important part was that in the simulations, Faey sensors could *not* detect the exomech's signature.

They had the plan, even if one of them was far-reaching, now they needed the materials...and that meant Kumi. But this time, he decided he didn't want her to have *any* hint of what he was doing, like when he bought the materials for the railguns. She very well could puzzle out how to build a railgun just by going on what he bought, then falling back on good old trial and error. No, this time he wanted her to have no inkling of what he was doing.

He didn't need her for buying it, only for delivering it. Jason told Tim and Steve to go to bed, then he went back home, sat down in front of his panel, cracked his knuckles, and got down to some serious shopping. There were any number of places on Civnet that would sell what he needed, and all he needed to get it was an account to transfer money and an address for delivery. And he had both, after using a little address matching on Kumi. He knew her name, and now he knew she lived in Dracora, the capitol city of the Faey Imperium, so he knew where to look for her. In ten minutes, he had her address. In thirty minutes, he had everything he wanted bought from an industrial and military supply company based right there in Dracora, and ordered it assembled at an independent warehouse there so it could be picked up and delivered at a later date, using Kumi's address as a reference and a person of contact if the dealer had to talk to someone. After he got his order number and got confirmation that the order would be assembled within two hours, he went on to rent the warehouse space, and then went through the new list that the city council had given him of things that he could get that they could use. It took him a while to find some of those items, and a few of them, like the machining tools that Luke and Zach needed to help manufacture replacement parts for the appliances and equipment, stuff that couldn't be replicated, weren't very cheap. Other things were easier to get, however. He bought a large bulk of winter clothing to be held in reserve, as well as winter coats and jackets in various sizes. He bought a few snowsuits, and he remembered to go to a medical supply company and buy the things on the list that Doc Northwood had left for him. Those items he also had delivered to the warehouse, and then further ordered the warehouse to box up the entire order into a shipping container once all deliveries were received. After he was done, he looked at the state of his bank account and sighed...it was going to be at least a month before they could buy anything else. The armor for Irwin and Luke would have to wait. He completed the task by placing a call to Kumi.

She appeared on the display wearing a frilly little bra and holding a sleek, shiny shirt-like garment in both hands before her. "Eleri. Talk," she said brusquely, then she smiled when she recognized him. "Oh, hey babe. What's up?"

"Care to play delivery girl for me?" he asked immediately.

"Any time, babe. You got a list?"

"I have an order number and an address of a warehouse where it'll be waiting for you in about four hours. Just pick it up and bring it over."

"You don't like my shopping taste or something, babe?" she asked with a laugh.

"This wasn't so hard that I needed outside help," he answered dryly. "Just assorted stuff to help us get through the winter."

"Sure, I can do that for you," she told him with a nod. "Since I can't charge you a percentage of what I buy, we'll just have to go with a flat rate. A thousand credits is fair enough."

"Works for me," he shrugged. "You coming with it?"

"Of course," she told him with a nod. "Nobody delivers to you but me. *No one*. Same place?"

"Always," he said.

"Okay, I'll invite a few friends over for a picnic," she winked. "That gives me an excuse to go. I told everyone that I love that little place, so much so that I'm talking about buying that part of the preserve to make it a personal retreat. Sathiri just bought some waterskimmers, maybe I can convince her to bring them along so we can play with them," she mused aloud.

"They'd travel here just to play on a lake?" he asked in surprise.

"Babe, we're *nobles*," she said pointedly. "We have lots of money and lots of time. Lots of my friends loved the party I threw there last month because it was *new*. They'd never been to a party in wild territory before, they *loved* it. They're asking me if I'm going to throw another one, and I think I'm gonna. One more, a really big one, just before my conscription," she said, making a face.

"Oh yeah. How much longer?"

"Ugh, seventy-nine days," she frowned. "The first day of Demaa."

Jason looked at his watch, and realized that'd be around the first of the year. Right now the Faey's standard calendar and Earth's calendar were running almost in sync, because the Faey calendar had had 2 consecutive 30 day months just when their 36 day month ended at the same time as August did. The next month, Suraa, was a 36 day month.

"You have to do basic training, don't you?" he asked.

She gave him a face. "Nobles don't *do* commoner basic training," she said sharply. "We have our basic induction phase, but we don't have to do what commoners do, since nobles already know how to handle weapons and been trained to fight. That'll take 2 months, then I'll be at my job as an aide here on Draconis. *Boring*," she growled.

"Kumi will have to work. The world will end," Jason said dryly.

"Why don't you bite my ass, babe?" she said gratingly.

"Behave," he told her with a faint smile, then he yawned. "I'm going to have to cut this short, hon. I'm very tired. I worked all night."

"On what?"

"On getting us ready for winter," he said vaguely. "There's lots to do, and more and more people are coming every day, so that means we have even more work."

"Why are they coming?"

"Safety," he answered. "We've proved we can protect ourselves against raiders, so now everyone's flocking here. They're bringing all their things and all their food stocks, so we're really busy getting everything put away safely and storing it so it won't go bad over the winter. We're also starting to run out of places to put people. We're going to have to expand our walls again," he grunted. "For the fourth time."

"Raiders? What raiders?"

"Raiders, hon, remember that video you yanked off Civnet?" he asked sharply. "That was a band of raiders. People who go around and kill off other people to steal their goods."

"Oh. I never really thought about that too much. That's what they were doing?"

"Yes, that's what they were doing. What did you think they were doing? Stopping by for milk and cookies?" he asked testily.

"Geez, bite my head off will you," she grunted.

"Sorry. I'm tired, if you didn't notice," he said, passing his hand in front of his face. "Call me

before you head out. Oh, and give over on that waterskimmer idea,” he warned. “It’s gotten pretty cool here, and the trees have turned colors and have already started losing their leaves. Winter’s on the way.”

“What does that mean, lose their leaves?”

“You’ll see when you get here,” he told her. “Riding skimmers on the lake would be rather cold. Now, I’m going to bed.”

“Okay babe. Sleep well.”

Jason ended the call, then put his head in his hands over his panel and tried to clear the cobwebs for a moment. He was so tired...but he was also quite excited and very hopeful. This technology, he could easily adapt it to his skimmer, and he’d ordered the parts and materials he’d need for that. All he had to do was coat the exterior of the skimmer with a microscopic layer of an insulating agent, and on top of that, he only needed a two millimeter layer of Neutronium. That was all it took. It would add a grand total of 37 kilograms to the weight of the skimmer, which was less than an adult human.

And there were some other things to think about. The cloaking system would be nullified by an MPAC, so he couldn’t use MPAC weaponry. But he had access to something else, something *not* based on plasma, but was just as powerful. The railgun. He already had an idea, the beginnings of a concept for a weapon to use in conjunction with this cloaking system, a weapon based on his railgun technology, which *could* be fired without disabling the cloaking system.

That, and Tim’s idea was *so* promising. It was so simple, so elegant, attacking MPAC weaponry at a very basic level, by going after the magnetic envelope that encased the metaphased plasma, which kept the plasma coherent and in prevented it from detonating just from traveling through the air. All it took was some kind of magnetic shield, a solid layer of magnetic force that would cause the magnetic envelope of the MPAC charge to rebound off of it *without* disrupting. Solid magnetic field technology was, yet again, a tried and true Faey technology, because that’s how MPACs worked. The plasma was trapped in the envelope, it would rebound with the envelope, thereby rendering the shot harmless. And since all MPACs used the same basic technique for building a plasma charge and magnetic envelope, they could design one shield and not have to worry about magnetic polarity, since all MPAC envelopes had the same polarity. Damn clever. He had to admit to himself that he had *never* thought of that.

The only trick of it would be designing some method for the shield to reflect the magnetic envelope of the MPAC charge without rupturing it. It was a very fragile construct, and that was how it was designed, so the plasma inside could be released against the target. The plasma in the envelope had mass and momentum, and that was going to place considerable stress on its encasing envelope when it struck the shield. Maybe electrostatic charge on the surface, which would jolt the envelope and give it a sudden surge of power. That had potential, creating the shield so it actively strengthened the MPAC’s envelope so long as it was in physical contact with it—

—well holy Christ, he was being so *stupid*. That was *all* it needed to do! The momentum of the plasma would cause it to bounce off the shield on its *own*. Basic physics! It would be like throwing a rubber ball against a brick wall! So long as the magnetic envelope didn’t rupture, the kinetic energy of the plasma would cause the MPAC charge to bounce off the shield. All they had to do was figure out some way to *strengthen* that magnetic envelope when it impacted the shield. Those envelopes were solid magnetic force, and most importantly, they were non-polarized, interleaved magnetic lines of force that both attracted and repelled one another equally, causing them to remain stationary with respect to one another. It was like woven cloth, but using magnetic lines of force instead of threads. Electromagnetic principles were at work here, and the first law was that magnetism and electricity were directly related. If he wanted to strengthen a magnetic field, he only had to use electricity. And electricity was the flow of electrons...and of course, the flow of *positrons*, when using advanced Faey science.

It took him all of fifteen minutes to sketch out an initial design. It would be an *energy* shield, constructed of alternating concentric rings of electrostatic force, which would generate an interleaved

magnetic shield wall exactly like the envelope used by an MPAC. An *EM shield*, to coin a term. Magnetic lines of force could not cut one another, and the underlying electrostatic energy would energize the magnetic lines of force in the MPAC charge, preventing them from dissipating or breaking. Since the lines of force couldn't cut through one another, the envelope as a whole would be unable to pass through, and since it wouldn't break down and disrupt either, then the kinetic energy of the plasma inside would rule how the MPAC charge reacted to the shield. Being an object of *mass*, the plasma would simply *bounce off*.

It was a design almost artistic in its elegant simplicity, and Jason realized he could build one out of parts laying around the shop. Four telescoping arms extending from the center unit, which would house the PPG and the shield generator, with the arms serving as the emitters.

He blinked. Holy Lord above, this idea...in theory, it might work, if the magnetic envelopes that held MPAC rounds were basically static in magnetic alignment. And it was, in its own way, a much more potentially important discovery than their cloaking device. This, this was a direct way to defend themselves against the primary weapon that the Faey used. These shields, they'd only weigh about two pounds, and be so small they could be carried around in a backpack. Hell, he could build a glove and armband into the back of the shield's PPG housing so it could be worn just about all the time, situating the housing on the forearm, just like an old shield that soldiers used to use back in the Middle Ages.

If it would work. He'd have to research the exact physical mechanics of an MPAC round's magnetic envelope, and how it behaved in reality than rather in subjective pondering.

If they could defeat an MPAC...it made his mind wander back to that old idea of open rebellion. But that was still impossible, because of the telepathic advantage. If the Faey ever attacked Chesapeake, they'd almost certainly not do it with guns. They'd just march in and telepathically dominate every mind that came into range. They could overrun the entire town outnumbered 20 to 1 and never have to fire a single shot.

One thing was for sure, though. If this shield worked, and if it didn't jam the cloaking device, he wanted one on the exomech. Put a means to stop MPAC fire on that thing, and it would suddenly become a *very* dangerous piece of machinery if it were manned by a telepathic pilot, someone capable of defending himself against Faey telepathy.

That was a stupid thought. He had no intention of keeping that thing. It was a dire threat to the community, and thinking of ways to adapt things to it like that were relatively pointless given the fact that in a month, it was going to be in about fifty different pieces laying all over the floor of its storage site.

Just wishful thinking, he supposed. The pilot in him yearned for the chance to pilot the exomech, to take it out and see if he could make it work, see if he could learn to use it. It was a challenge, an almost childish dream, to drive around a big robot and play war.

His head dipped lower and lower as he dreamily mused about that very thing, of him learning how to operate the exomech without any expert training, then he dropped off into sleep before his head even hit the desk.

Kumi held good on her telling him that she would turn the delivery into yet another party of sorts. When he arrived at the lake, he found that there were already five dropships on the ground, and the place was crawling with Faey. The trees rustled in a cool, sharp wind, their fiery colors undulating in the breeze, almost making the forest look like it was on fire for a fleeting moment, but the brisk wind didn't seem to dissuade these Faey nobles from trying out odd vehicles that looked almost like old Jetskis, if not for the fact that they floated just above the water's surface. The riders were wearing sleek skin-tight suits that looked like wetsuits, but he saw that they were all perfectly dry, even though water was spraying all over them as they zoomed to and fro on the very narrow inlet. Jason couldn't feel that cool wind because he was in his armor, but he remembered how delightfully cool it felt that morning before he put the armor on.

He sat down well out of sight of them, on the top of the hill on the opposite side of the inlet, and simply waited. He watched as they had their fun with the waterskimmers, then had a lunch under a tent, then, after about two hours, got into their ships and ascended into the sky and out of sight. Only then, after the others were gone, did he come down from the hillside and skim across the inlet to Kumi's side of the lake. Meya and Myra didn't come and hunt him down this time, which he thought was a bit odd, because they were here. He'd heard their sendings before shutting himself off, closing his mind completely to prevent himself from accidentally acting on information he picked up from sending. That little red man waddled out of the dropship and nodded gravely to him as he approached, and Kumi, still wearing one of those sleek black wetsuit-things, sauntered out behind him. "Hey babe. Want to try a go on a waterskimmer?"

"I don't have time," he told her with a shake of his head, then he took off his helmet. "Thanks for getting it here so fast."

She pursed her lips, then gave him a sly smile. "I'm starting to wonder what you're doing out here, babe. I mean, the tools and clothes and shit yeah, I can see why you need those, but I don't understand what half of this military grade stuff is for, but I'm pretty sure it has nothing to do with you getting through the winter."

He gave her a dark look.

"Hey, it was on the *manifest*, dink," she said defensively, and the little red fellow held out a display window unit. She took it and showed it to him. "Shield emitters? Cabling? Phased armor? Neutronium blocks? I don't understand what you're doing."

"It's another experiment," he answered her carefully. "If it works, it'll help protect my people from injuries if any more raiders attack us."

She gave him a look, and he could see it turning over and over in her mind. What he got *was* military, but it was also obsolete by modern standards. Him saying that it was meant as an experiment to protect the people she'd seen against raiders with archaic powder weapons would definitely be logical to her. "Well, babe, you'd better be *really* careful. I know you *are* careful and you have your PPG's well shielded, but if you get too exotic, you're gonna attract space-based sensors. Some of this stuff's gonna draw some serious power, you know, more than enough for the passive arrays to pick it up."

"Well, I'll make sure not to use *all* of it at once," he said with a chuckle. He realized then that Kumi did *not* know about the exomech, that that mysterious woman had concealed that information from her.

"So, what's this experiment?"

"A shield, obviously," he said with a chuckle.

"No go, babe, that'll get picked up for sure," she told him.

"Trust me," he told her, looking at the two large crates. "The emitters aren't for making the kind of shield you're thinking about. I'm going to use them for something else." He had the Deuce parked not far, and it would easily fit in the bed. He grabbed the handles on the crate and tugged, and found it much too heavy. He then activated the strength augmentation system in the armor, and after trying again, he found he could pick it up. "I just don't want any more of my people hurt. Nobody was killed when the raiders attacked, but a few people did get some broken bones when bullets hit their cloth armor. I'd like to avoid that, and that's what this is for. It wouldn't stop an MPAC, but it'll stop a bullet for sure."

"*Personal* shields?" Kumi asked curiously.

"No comment," Jason chuckled as he put his helmet back on. "I have to keep my secrets a secret."

"You got me *real* curious now, babe," she said, coming over to him.

"Life is hard," he said. "I just realized. Where are Meya and Myra?" He knew that they were here, he'd heard their sendings, but he hadn't seen them. "And Fure?"

"They're outside," she answered. "Fure's up in the cockpit. You know he doesn't like you," she

winked. “Well, *not like* isn’t quite right. He thinks you’re too dangerous to associate with, I should say. He thinks he has you figured out,” she grinned.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, he thinks you have talent,” she said boldly. “He thinks that Marine trained you, and since she’s a Marine, that means you got trained *right*. He thinks that’s the reason why you bailed from school.”

“I think Fure needs to lay off the coffee,” Jason said mildly as he picked up the large crate, a crate that was bigger than he was, that weighed nearly half a ton. It caused his strength system to spike, its gauge to yellow out on his display, but it could handle it. “I need to get this to my truck.”

“Well, you know what?” she said.

“What?” he asked as he started down the ramp.

“I think he’s *right*,” she told him. She ran past and started walking backwards in front of him. “I’ll bet my left tit you *do* have talent, babe. And you know what? I don’t give a shit.”

“Well, that’s nice to know,” he said neutrally.

“Seriously. I don’t give a shit if you have talent or not, babe. If you do, hell, you did the right thing by bolting, and I wouldn’t turn you in even if you did. You’re my friend, and I take care of my friends. I just wanted you to know that. I’ll still be here for you when you need my help. For my usual fee, of course,” she winked.

“I’m so glad to hear that,” he said blandly.

“And I think you’d better give some thought to making some other kind of arrangement, babe,” she told him. “I got my conscription coming up in two months, and I won’t be able to do this anymore.”

“Yeah, now that I’ve thought about,” he said. “I figured I’d just stock up on what I need before your conscription. I do have to cut the umbilical cord sometime, Kumi. If we can’t be self-sufficient, there’s really no reason for us to be out here.”

“But still, you might have emergencies, so you need a system,” she said. “I had an idea, but it’s gonna require some risk. There’s no way to do this other than with risk, you know.”

“Okay, let’s hear it,” he said as they walked towards his truck.

“What you need to do is buy yourself some warehouse space in a town close to the border of the preserve,” she started. “I can find an old hovertruck and buy it for you, and you can use it to move your buys. Set up a dummy company and buy what you need through it, have it delivered to that warehouse, and then it’ll be a matter of finding a way to get across the border to come pick it up. It ain’t something you should do every day, but if you ever have a *real* emergency, it’ll be there for you.”

“I can’t set up a company,” he said as they came around a sharp bend in the road, where the Deuce was parked just beyond it. “Remember, I’m a *fugitive*.”

“No, but *I can*,” she said.

He stopped and looked at her, the huge crate balanced on his shoulder creaking ominously.

“Think about it, babe. I’ll set up the dummy front for you and find you a truck, and there’s a Faey farming town not far from here that has some warehouses in it. I’ll buy one of the smaller warehouses in the company’s name, and if you ever have an emergency and need something, you can buy it on Civnet and have it sent to that warehouse.”

“Someone would have to be there to accept it,” he said as they reached the truck. He set the crate in the bed, pushed it back to make room for the next one, and they started back for her dropship.

“Yeah, the people who are gonna bring it to you,” she told him. “They cross the border and meet the cargo dropship, then they just put it on the truck and sneak it back across the border. The warehouse won’t be nothing but an address and a valid reason to be accepting large cargo containers. It’s a *warehouse*, after all.”

Jason turned it over in his mind several times, as they reached the dropship and he picked up the other crate, which wasn’t as heavy. The first had to have the Neutronium blocks in it. He wondered why there were two crates when he’d ordered only one, but then he realized that the first had been the

military equipment he'd ordered, and the second was the other things. He'd ordered the warehouse to stick both in a shipping container...they must have bundled up all the civilian equipment and boxed it together, then put both boxes in a container. Kumi must have taken them out of the container, because a container would have looked mighty suspicious considering that she was coming out here to play on waterskimmers.

He thought about her idea as he picked up the second container and started back for his Deuce. It had merit. Done right, the company couldn't be traced back to him or his people, and as long as he paid the rent on the warehouse, he could use it to receive shipments of critical equipment and supplies. She was right in that it couldn't be something that they could use all the time, because it would require people to cross the border in a *truck*. That would be rather dangerous. But, on the other hand, they had someone in the community who had extensive experience in the art of crossing the border...and now that he thought of it, he never *had* collected his payment for that airbike. Temika still had not shown him how to cross the border. But, with her there, this idea was certainly something that would be worth the heavy investment in money...and it *would be* a heavy investment. He had no idea how much it would cost, but he had no doubt that it wasn't going to be cheap. Business licenses, charters for companies, renting commercial warehouse space...not cheap at all. "You know, Kumi, that's not a bad idea."

"No shit, babe," she taunted with a grin. "After all, I thought it up, didn't I?"

"Let's not get *too* arrogant before conscription," he teased, starting out again.

"Bite my ass, babe," she retorted. "So, that sound like a plan to you?"

"How much is it going to cost?" he asked.

"Well, it ain't gonna be cheap, that's for sure," she answered. "Well, the company side of it actually won't be that expensive. I can't set up the company as a noble company, so there's gonna be some taxes and license fees. There's also the cost of the warehouses, and the yearly property and business taxes. You can cover those yearly expenditures with your royalties, but the initial payments are gonna be kinda steep, at least from a noble's point of view. It's gonna twenty thousand at the minimum, where a noble could get a company set up for around five thousand. But the warehouse is where it's gonna get expensive. You'd be looking at ten thousand a month *minimum* if you rent, and around two hundred grand if you *buy* the warehouse. That's more expensive right up front, but it'll be cheaper in the long run, and maybe a little safer. If you *own* the warehouse, you never have to worry about others hanging around it when you're receiving a shipment and make people get curious."

"Yeah, well, I'm broke now," he told her.

"So am I," she admitted. "But you'll have the cash to set up the company with your next payment, and you'll have enough to cover the warehouse before I start conscription. Even if you don't, that's something I can set up any time, even in basic training. And you can always rent for now, then come back and buy the warehouse later. We can set up the company on paper, then wait to do the warehouse part later."

"Sounds like a plan," he told her. The truck came into view around the curve, and now Meya and Myra were there, one of them standing by the driver's side door and the other, MPAC in her hands, standing by the back, where the first crate he'd placed was sitting.

"See, there they are," Kumi said, then she giggled. "You'd better be glad you had your armor on," she told him.

"Why?"

"Cause I was gonna get you back for what you did to me," she told him.

"That's why I'm wearing the armor," he said dryly, which made her laugh.

"You ass. I was so horny I banged Fure all the way back home."

"I did not need to know that," he told her blandly.

"It's your fault," she accused.

"At least now you know better than to do things like show a naked picture of me to your friends,

don't you?"

She laughed. "You're an evil son of a bitch."

"Thank you. I try," he agreed evenly.

Myra helped him load the crate into the truck, and they both helped him tie it down. "Where's your gun?" She asked expectantly.

"Home," he answered, which made her take on a crestfallen look.

"You have *got* to make me one of those," she said.

"Why do you keep asking when you know I'm not going to do it?" he asked, a bit testily.

"Because that's how a woman gets something from a man," she winked. "Keep asking til he caves in. We have a saying, you know: only the persistent woman finds a husband."

"Well, I'm not a Faey," he told her. "When I say no, I *mean* no. I know that's a hard concept for you to understand, but you'll save yourself a hell of a lot of grief if you do."

"Well, there's no, and then there's *no*," Myra said with a wink.

"They've been getting entirely too annoying lately," Kumi grunted, looking at Myra. "They get to sit around and do nothing while I'm in basic training, and they can't wait for it."

"She can't take her personal guards to induction," Meya said as she came around the truck. "But we'll be back on duty when she takes up her post."

"Two months of vacation," Myra all but purred.

"Shut *up*," Kumi hissed.

"Two months of lounging around, reading magazines, watching the vidscreen—"

Kumi came around and smacked her on the back of the head. "Someone wants to have her paycheck get lost, doesn't she?" Kumi threatened, which made Myra laugh.

"Your mother pays me, not you," Myra retorted.

"I can fix that," she said in an ugly tone.

"Children," Jason said, squatting down on the edge of the truck bed. "I have a ways to go, and I don't want to leave knowing I might have to pull you two apart."

"They always fight, Jason," Meya said with a smile. "Pay them no mind."

"I'll take your advice, Meya."

"I don't see how you tell them apart," Kumi said. "Sometimes even *I* can't."

"Then you're blind," he told her, pointing. "This is Meya. She wears her hair just a bit longer, and she has a faint scar on the right side of her chin." He pointed to Myra. "Myra uses just a bit of mascara to make her lashes thicker, but it's the only makeup she wears. She also uses some kind of soap that leaves a flowery smell behind."

"Very good, Jason," Myra laughed. "You're much more observant than I thought."

"It's become a learned skill," he grunted.

"Well, it's been fun, but I have to go," Jason prompted.

"Not as much fun as it *could* have been," Kumi grated.

"Look at it as more time to plot the ultimate revenge," Jason said mildly, nodding to the twin sisters. "Ladies."

He climbed down and got into the truck, and started it. He waved out the window and drove away, opening up his mind just enough to pick up the sending he knew was flying between them.

--*with that*, Meya's mental voice drifted to him.

I'm not sure, but it sure makes you wonder, Kumi answered. *That shield shit he bought is a century obsolete. Odds are he really is going to do with it what he said. After all, what other use could it possibly have?*

If she only knew.

I hope he's careful. Playing with shield tech's gonna draw lots of power. I hope he knows what he's doing.

He seemed pretty confident, Meya answered. *I wonder.*

Wonder what?

I wonder if he really has talent. I kept close watch over his thoughts the whole time he was up on that ridge, and they seemed...normal.

He knew we were here, he'd be on guard, Kumi noted.

Sister, didn't you notice? They were too normal, Myra answered. He wasn't surprised at all when Miss Kumi told him what she thought. It was like he was expecting it.

Of course he was expecting it, Fure injected. I still have my bet on the table. Either of you care to pick it up?

We know better than to bet against you, Fure, Meya said, her sending saturated with amusement.

Too bad he wore his armor, Myra sent coyly.

We'll get him, trust me, Kumi promised in an adamant manner. He wants to play with me, well, he'll learn that I bite harder than he does. Fure!

Yes, Lady Eleri?

Get us ready to take off.

At once, my Lady. Should I put the video equipment away? he added with dry amusement.

Bite my ass, Fure, she growled.

As soon as you return to the dropship, I can carry out your orders, my Lady, he sent with that same tone.

Jason had never really thought Fure had a sense of humor.

One thing though...if Kumi's revenge involved video equipment...he didn't *want* to know what she had in mind.

Chiira, 24 Miraa, 4393, Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 24 October 2007, Native Regional Reckoning

Chesapeake, Ohio (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

It was *done*.

What was more, it was *perfect*.

The box had been constructed, which hadn't been as easy as any of them thought it would be. The thicknesses of the metals of the walls had to be rather precise, and since they had to apply those coats by hand, it caused quite a bit of extra work. It took almost three days to manufacture the walls in strips, then anneal them into plates, then anneal the plates together to form the box. They got it all together when they realized they were going to need a floor of Neutronium to help diffuse the signature as it bled into the ground beneath them, which would make it almost impossible for a passive sensor to detect the signature from a perpendicular position. That was very much a possibility given that most passive arrays were space-based, and the curvature of the earth would give them that sideways view. The floor wasn't going to have the matrix running through it, which was good, because he didn't have the parts to do it. Luke had held up his part by digging a trench of sorts in the floor of the garage and then using concrete to wall it, even putting in steps. To get into the box, one had to go under it, then come back up through a trapdoor set into the floor. Because of the enclosed nature of the box, they'd been forced to run power conduit into it to power any equipment, as well as ventilation and climate control. The exomech would generate a great deal of heat if it was turned on and left running in that closed space.

It had been decided *before* they built it that building it was wasn't going to be good enough, that having a big metal box in the garage was going to look a bit odd. So what they had done was built the box in a corner of the garage, beside where the office took up a part of the garage bay, in the nook beside it. The box wasn't a perfect fit, but fortunately, that was exactly what they wanted. The box was built in the nook, the ventilator pump and external PPG were placed in an office on the other side of the wall, and a shielding box that wasn't powered was built over them, just nice thick plates of

Neutronium to shield the PPG. Then a false wall was built to enclose the nook and hide the box, and the room that held the PPG and ventilator was modified. The door was removed and a wall was built in the void, and a door was made on the other side, opening into the space holding the box. Reaching that room required one to go down into the trench, then climbing up and out using a ladder.

The hole in the floor of the garage was the last problem, but Luke and Zach had come through. The problem was, they had to cover it in a way that would make it accessible, but yet the cover of which would not arouse any suspicion...whatever covered the hole would have to look like it *belonged* there, so a big metal plate just randomly sitting on the floor would not be a good choice. Luke had devised a cover, a steel base that was covered with about an inch of cement, that seated into the hole. Though it did have seams, they also pushed most of the garage's diagnostic equipment and the tire balancer up against that wall, a row of clutter that helped hide those seams. The cover plate had no handle, no visible means of getting it off, but that was handled by a remote-controlled piston that would push the plate up just enough for someone to grab it and pull it up, using the hinges that attached it to the wall of the trench. The edges of the plug and the surrounding cement were coated with a clear polymer that made them as strong as steel, that would prevent the concrete from being chipped and scratched...and just for insurance's sake, they coated the entire floor with it, so nobody would notice the polymer just covering what looked like an unused part of the garage and get suspicious. Luke *did* do quite a bit of work in that garage with the vehicles, and that coating would help keep him from tearing the floor up.

Clem and Paul had been against it from the onset, but after touring the box, they grudgingly had to sign off on the idea. Juli and Leamon liked what they saw, but they about had a meltdown when they heard Jason's plan for the exomech. They wanted to keep it as a viable machine, but Jason, Tim, and Steve weren't doing that. They were going to take it apart, piece by piece, system by system, to see how it was built, see in a way that couldn't be experienced with technical schematics and drawings. And when they were done, they were going to keep whatever they wanted and destroy the rest. After hours and hours of debate, after Juli and Leamon were flatly informed that Jason would *never* vote to keep the exomech in any kind of operational capacity, the council voted to allow them to give it the ultimate test. They would bring the exomech up. If the external sensors that were part of the sensor system that protected the town could not detect the exomech's plasma signature, then the space-based arrays most definitely would not.

All precautions were taken. Virtually everyone in the community was sent out onto one of the farms, ostensibly to help Ruthie finish up the last of the seeding of one of the newer fields with hay grass, but it was more to give them a head start if this failed and the exomech was detected, so they could get out of the area if the Faey sent a dropship to investigate. Once everyone was herded out, the tech team got ready. Steve and Jason were in the box, Luke was in the room holding the external PPG and ventilator, and Tim was in Jason's house, riding the sensors. "Alright, gentlemen, let's get this going," Jason said professionally into his radio microphone, clipping his handheld to his belt, then fidgeting with the earset and telescoping microphone connected to it. "And remember what I told you. Is everyone ready?"

"*I'm ready*," Tim called, being careful not to say anything too specific. They were using a CB channel to do this, so that meant that others might hear what they were saying.

"*I'm ready*," Luke responded.

"I'm ready over here," Steve called, sitting in front of the desk holding the panel that controlled the cloaking matrix system. Steve wasn't using a radio, so Jason relayed that he was ready to the others.

Jason looked up at the exomech. It stood there, sleek and black, with its torso cockpit open and waiting for someone to climb into it. He'd spent all last night reading over the technical specs of this machine, so he had a general idea of what to expect and what to do to power it up. The maintenance manuals contained within them exhaustive, step-by-step instructions for power up, power down, and maintenance modes. Jason climbed up the ladder beside the unit, then climbed down into the cockpit. The inside of the exomech was very tightly cramped, and he had to wiggle a bit to get his legs down

into the space reserved for them. He had to reach down with one hand for each leg to push the rubbery braces around to get them around his calves, then settled his sneakers down into the pedals. He threaded his hands through the cradle braces that would control the arms to get a feel for them, then pulled them back out. He set his radio on a flat space before him, but he'd have to move it before closing the cockpit, for the heads-up display and the external view monitor was connected to the section of cockpit that had lifted to give him access, and would lower and occupy that space if the cockpit were closed. He paused a moment, trying to get comfortable on the rather narrow bicycle seat, but that wouldn't be easy. The exomech was meant for the pilot to be wearing armor, so its seat had no padding. In fact, the exomech had a dataline that would connect to the helmet of the armor and feed heads-up data to the visor, so it would always be in view no matter where the pilot was looking.

Well, it was time to see if a month's worth of effort had been wasted or not.

"I'm ready. Alright, Luke. You first."

"*Gotcha*," he called, and there was a pause as he turned on the external PPG and the ventilator.

"*I'm done.*"

"*Nothing*," Tim informed them. That meant that the sensors didn't see them.

"Steve."

"Okay, Jayce. Booting up matrix control system." He reached over to the PPG that was going to power the matrix. "PPG is on. Oh, Tim, you might see a spike on your sensors as the matrix builds."

"Tim, you might see a flicker," Jason said, but he sent as well, being much more elaborate. *Steve said that you might see a spike on your sensors when he brings up the matrix field.*

"*Gotcha*," Tim called over the radio. *Okay, I'll be looking for it*, he sent back.

"Starting the matrix protocol. Okay, cross your fingers boys, here we go. Initializing matrix field."

Jason all but held his breath and watched Steve's fingers dance over the holographic keyboard from his position higher up. "Matrix field is *hot*. Tim see anything?"

"Tim?" Jason called over the radio.

I had a brief little blurb on the sensors, but I wouldn't have seen it if Steve hadn't told me to look for it, Tim sent. *But outside of that, the sensors don't see any plasma signatures. So, we know the matrix can hide itself so far.* Then he called over the radio. "*Nothing*," he chuckled.

"Alright, now it's my turn. This should take me about a minute or so, I'll call back when I'm done." Jason called as he unkeyed his radio, then he fished the datareader out of his pocket that had the checklist for exomech starting. He turned it on and set it on a little holder by the a display, obviously meant to hold one, and started by cracking his knuckles. He looked around at all the buttons and dark backglass displays, familiarizing himself with the layout and matching it up with the holograms and pictures that had been in the schematics and drawings. The one thing he knew was different with this than with other vehicles was that an exomech didn't require a key. It, like almost all military machines, was keyless, meaning that just about anyone could start one and fly one...if one could get past security, and if one knew how. One way to tell a military version of a vehicle from a civilian version was if it was keyed. There were some exceptions, however. Military airbikes were keyed, as were some smaller dropships, because those vehicles could reasonably be seen to be left alone and untended in potentially hostile territory, as a scout landed an airbike or a dropship to inspect something in person, for example, leaving the vehicle behind. Military hovercars were also keyed, because they often doubled as police vehicles, and having a car that anyone could drive wasn't a good idea when one was putting criminals into it. Just about everything else was unkeyed, allowing whoever got behind the controls to try to operate it. Well, he had the tech specs, manuals, and checklists for an exomech, so he could operate this exomech. Not well, but technically, he *could* operate it. Flying it...well, he doubted this machine would ever leave this box, at least in one piece.

He knew where everything was, it just took him a minute to merge that knowledge with what he was seeing in front of him. "Okay," he grunted aloud, "let's get down to business." He keyed up the microphone. "Alright, bringing up the power plant," he called to Steve, pressing the five buttons on his

right, flipping up a switchguard, and then pressing the button underneath it. That was the master power switch.

The reactor engine in the exomech gave off a sudden thrumming sound, then pitched up into a sound that he could feel through the exomech under him, and then lowered back down to that familiar hum of a PPG, just much deeper in tone.

“Power plant is up,” he called, then he keyed the radio. “Tim?”

“*Still waiting,*” he called.

The main reactor engine is running, you see it on your sensors? Jason sent.

Not a thing, he answered. *I thought you were just seeing if I was ready. So, I guess that means this works,* he sent with a mental chuckle.

We’re about to find out, he answered. “Okay,” he called to Steve, scrolling down the text on his checklist. “Starting main computer and then bringing all systems up.”

He pressed three buttons on his left, then again lifted a switchguard and pressed a button beneath, that was to turn on the main computer.

Nothing happened.

He tried again, making sure the three enable switches were on, then pressing the main switch once more.

Nothing happened.

He doublechecked his checklist, and found that he was most certainly doing what the tech specs said he should do. He did it one more time, pressing the three switches, then lifting the guard and hitting the master switch.

Again, nothing happened.

Confused, he looked at the data reader, and then he put his hands on the top of the armbraces and *laughed*.

“Jayce? Jayce, what’s wrong?” Steve called. “Are you starting the computer?”

He laughed again. “No, I’m not,” he answered. “Because I *can’t*.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it doesn’t work,” he said. “I bet *nothing* in this exomech works, Steve!”

“Huh?”

“Don’t you see? It’s not a gift, it’s a *test*!” he said with one more laugh. “She didn’t give it to me to use it, she gave it to me to see if I could make it run! She’s testing me!”

“She? She who?” Steve asked.

“I—nevermind,” he said, smacking his hands on the top of the metal, to either side of the handheld radio he set there. “Use it wisely, they said. They don’t want us to *use* it, Steve, they want us to *learn* from it. And what better way to learn than to give us something that’s broken, hand us a manual, and then let us try to *fix* it?”

“Well, isn’t that what we were going to do with it in the first place?” Steve asked, which made Jason laugh anew.

“Well, not quite, but yeah, that’s generally what we were going to do,” he agreed. “But now we have to put it back together before we can take it all apart. Or take it all apart, put it back together, then take it all apart again,” he said.

Steve laughed. “Don’t confuse me,” he said. “But that does beg the question, Jayce: who wants us to learn?”

“Someone who offered me a job,” he answered immediately. “That’s the *she* I was talking about. Somehow she found out where I am when nobody else can—she probably bought my location from Kumi, who *does* know where I live—and then she dropped this with the food as a test to see if we could fix it. It’s a challenge, Steve. They’re challenging us by sending us an exomech that doesn’t work, and now we have to decide whether or not we accept that challenge by trying to repair it. And if we decide not to take up the challenge, we just get rid of the exomech and go on about our business.”

“And what if do we get if we manage to fix it?” Steve asked.

“I have no idea,” he answered.

“Well, why don’t we find out?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Well, this isn’t a decision just you and me can make. We have to talk to the council. Clem and Paul are nervous enough about this thing, and now we have to tell them that it doesn’t work.” He chuckled. “They’ll have a cow.”

“I certainly don’t want your job right now, Mayor,” Steve laughed.

“Shut up,” Jason retorted playfully. “First things first, let’s go over things with Tim and Luke. They need to know what’s going on.”

“Yeah.”

“Jayce, are you done?” Tim called. *Did you bring the computer up? I don’t see anything on sensors*, he sent.

“We’re done, Tim. You and Luke come back to my shop and we’ll go over what happened,” he called over the radio. *Just do what I said, I’ll explain when you get there, and I want your reactions to be genuine, so no early warning.*

Okay, he sent. “On my way,” his voice called over the radio.

“I’ll be right there!” Luke shouted from outside the box, his voice threading up through the trench.

You two want something to eat? Symone asked.

No thanks, Symone, Jason answered.

I’m good, hon, thanks anyway, Tim replied.

Well, Ah’m hungry, Temika’s mental voice called. *Bring me somethin’.*

Get it yourself, Mika, Symone sent lightly.

Back in the shop in Jason’s basement, he explained what happened, and also voiced his suspicions. “The woman who came with Kumi and offered me a job is the one who sent the exomech. So, it’s no stretch that I think that the exomech is a *test*. She never intended for us to use it as a war machine, or even as a last-ditch defender of the community. She sent it here broken, and what she wants is to see if we can repair it. They want to see if we can make it work. It wasn’t a gift, gentlemen, it’s a *test*.”

“Well, what happens after we fix it?” Tim asked. “If we do,” he added quickly.

“I have no idea,” Jason admitted.

“Me either, but I was never one to refuse a game,” Steve said, his eyes bright. “I say we take up this woman’s challenge. I say we fix it, and see what we get for winning this game.”

“This is getting into uncertain territory,” Jason grunted. “We don’t know what’ll happen if we fix it, but we also don’t know what’ll happen if we *don’t*. This woman with her job offer might decide that she doesn’t appreciate sending that thing here and then we just chuck it in the river or some such. And that thing is *expensive*, so she may send someone back for it. And there’s one thing that bothers me more than anything else, now that my mind’s not filled with the exomech, now that I can sit down and think about it.”

“She knows where we are,” Luke said.

“She knows where we are,” Jason agreed with a nod. “So, I think I might suggest to the council that we move.”

“Move? We just got the electric going, and—“ Steve protested, but Jason held up his hand.

“I didn’t mean *now*,” he said. “But I think finding a better place to live in the spring might be a good idea. And there *are* some issues with this location, given the number of people we have,” he said. “We’re starting to run out of room, because we can’t defend more area without some major construction projects that’ll either take more time than we have or more men than we can spare. We can’t get the water going. The power grid’s having issues with all the freezers we’re running. We can start looking now, find a suitable place, then spend the winter preparing it for our arrival. This new matrix system *does work*, and I already bought what I need to put it in my skimmer. If I can get my skimmer in the air, that’s going to make this *much* easier. My skimmer isn’t that big, but we can use it

to scout out possible sites, and I can use it to move some equipment.”

“I think you have an idea there, Mister Jason,” Luke said. “All that food they dropped here added to what we already have will tide us over if we miss the spring planting.”

“But we’ve done so much around here,” Steve protested.

“Well, Steve, do you want to build a *fifth* wall?” Tim pointed out.

“Good point,” Steve chuckled.

The council session was, predictably, quite heated once again. After Jason told them about the exomech, they were literally flabbergasted. After he explained his suspicions about it, how it was sent here as something of a test to gauge the technical ability of the people in the community, and Jason in particular, they started to slowly understand.

It was Jason’s proposal to move the community that started the argument. Clem, Juli, and Paul, who understood the danger that Jason was trying to convey, agreed with his idea, at least in theory. Leamon, who had been living in this area since before the subjugation, vehemently resisted the idea of moving the community. He was almost irrational in his position.

“Listen, Leamon,” Jason barked, stopping a shouting match between the tall black man and the much shorter Julianne. “There’s more to this than *just* the exomech. There’s lots of space here, but we’re stretching our resources. We’ve expanded the walls three times now, and it looks like we’re going to have to expand them *again*.”

“And our farmland is sitting in a floodplain,” Clem added. “One flood, and we’re in trouble.”

Jason put his hand up to Clem to silence him. “We’ve had no luck getting water going here, and the electrical grid’s getting stretched thin. We do have viable reasons to move, to find a place with a better foundation to build on than this. But it comes down to one very simple thing, Leamon. Remember when they dropped that container?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“*Where* did they drop it?” he asked pointedly.

“Well, out in the field at the foot of the bridge,” he answered.

“That’s right. Now think about that. They dropped a container holding an exomech literally right beside our community. Whoever dropped that container *knows where we are*. And though whoever it was is friendly *now*, do you really want to take the chance that they’re going to be friendly forever? I don’t know about you, but I’m not going to sleep very well knowing that someone in the Imperium knows where my house is. We’ve all been so wrapped up in that exomech to think about other things, and I’m probably more guilty of it than anyone else. Now I’m thinking clearly though...and I don’t like what I’m seeing.

“I know it’s going to be a nightmare to uproot the community and move it, but I think it’s for the best. We can spend the winter finding a suitable site and getting it ready, then we move when the weather breaks. We’ll try to find a place where we *can* get the water working, and where we can secure a larger area with the resources that we have, and have access to more farmland that we can defend better than what we have here.”

“What about everything we’ve done here?” Leamon asked. “You’re asking us to abandon what we *have* and move to someplace where it’s not guaranteed we can do it again.”

“Actually, I *am* guaranteeing it,” Jason told him. “We can easily put up a new power grid in the new location. Well, not *easily*, but it can be done. We find a place with better geography than here, a place we can wall off and defend where we can enclose a larger area, and enclose our farmland. I don’t like the idea that our farms are hanging out of the perimeter like they are here, fences or no fences. Someplace very close to a river, where we can use it as a natural barrier.”

“They’ll just see us move,” Leamon told him. “Moving won’t accomplish anything but making us do a hell of a lot of work.”

“You’re right, they *will* see us set up in our new place. Hmm,” he said, sitting down and scratching

his chin in thought. "If we do move, we'll need something that fixes that. Something that will fool cameras, because we can defeat their other sensors. We—a *hologram*," he said, his eyes widening. "We need some holographic projection units, the kind they use for outdoor theaters, the *strong* ones," he said. "We station them in a staggered array with each one projecting a *piece* of the hologram, and just make sure their borders line up. They'd have to be *over* the area they're covering, though. Each projector would have to be shielded—hell, I need to go through this with Tim and Steve. But I think we can wrangle something that works."

"Why can't we do that here? Make them think we left?" Leamon asked.

"Because if we all vanished, the first thing they'd do is come down and see what happened," Juli reasoned.

Clem cleared his throat. "I'm sorry Leamon, but I'm putting this on the floor for a vote. I motion that we start making plans to move the community to a new site."

"I second," Paul.

"Alright, all in favor?"

Everyone but Leamon raised their hands.

"Opposed?"

Leamon glared at them, and defiantly raised his hand.

"What's with you, Leamon?" Juli flared. "We're talking about keeping everyone *safe*!"

"I think we'll be safer *here*, but I seem to be the only one. I lost the vote, and I don't like the decision, but I'll live with it. And do my part. I may think we're making a mistake, but we'll make it *together*. That's what this place is all about."

"That's good to hear, son," Clem said sagely. "Alright, we need to start making plans for packing up, and draw up a list of qualities we're looking for in a new place."

"What we need to do is put this on the floor for a vote by the *community*," Paul said. "They deserve to hear our reasoning for the vote, and then they deserve the right to make that same decision themselves. This has to be a decision made by all of us, not just the six of us."

"Yeah, you're right, Paul," Regina said, and everyone nodded in agreement. "Let's call a meeting. Right now."

The meeting went generally the way Jason expected it would.

What he expected was a vote to move, and that did in fact happen. After the council fully explained why it had brought this up for a vote, and explained the reasons, they had a long debate session. Quite a few people got up to give their opinions, both for and against the idea of moving, and the people asked quite a few very observant questions about the process of moving: what it would entail, what kind of qualifications they'd look for in a new site, the proposed timeframe for the move, and so on. But, in the end, it came down to Jason's simple statement that he *did not feel safe here anymore*, not with the Faey knowing where the community was located. Andy Wilson also summed it up quite nicely when he got up to speak.

"Well, from the way I see it, Mayor Jason is right," he called after standing up for his turn. "This is something that's been eating at me for quite a while, since we got the power going. At first, I thought it was fantastic. Real power, lights, air conditioning, even TV...but then I got to thinking about how the *blueskins* were gonna react when they looked down from their ships and saw electric lights running down here in the wildlands. Think about it. They know where we are, and I don't know about your communities, but ours got raided by the blueskins every few months because they knew exactly where we was. It was always the same group of blueskins, coming down to take anything they fancied. I know in my bones that they'll come with a raiding party soon, because we're a big group and they know exactly where we are. And with all our blueskin stuff, I feel it won't be pretty. When they come, they'll take everything that makes our power work, and they'll take Mayor Jason's airbikes and his guns, and then they'll our techs, cause they *built* it all. And then they'll see the mayor's skimmer

sitting under the bridge, and that's when it'll get really ugly.

It's a simple issue, folks. We gotta weigh the risk of moving to a new place against what we stand to lose if we stay here and just wait for the blueskins to come down and raid us. If the techs think they can hide our new place so it can't even be seen using blueskin tech, then hell, I'm all for it. I'd like a better house anyway," he chuckled nervously. "If they can't find us, then they can't raid us, and we never have to worry about losing our power and our blueskin equipment."

The community as a whole voted to move, by an overwhelming majority, which Jason expected.

What he didn't expect was their reaction to the news of the exomech. When they found out it was broken, that it had intentionally be sent down broken, the community reached a completely different conclusion. Lisa Wheeler summed up that conclusion when she got up and stated that the exomech was a *trick*, that the blueskins were trying to goad the community into fighting, and that Andy was right that a raiding party was coming, and it was coming *soon*. "They dropped that thing here as part of some kind of plan," she called. "They want to come down here and say 'oh look, we found squatters with an exomech, that means that someone's trying to start a revolution.' Then the house that runs Earth can crack down, cause all the ruler has to do is run to the Empress and show her the evidence, squatters hiding in the lawless areas with military weapons. That would let them do things that the Empress wouldn't otherwise permit."

Jason had to admit, he had never thought of it from that angle before, and Lisa had a very, very good point. Give a large band of squatters an exomech that doesn't work, then turn around and raid them. Recover the exomech, immediately run to the Empress with this evidence, and demand more troops or a relaxing of the laws, or maybe discredit some other noble house. For all he knew, the exomech would be traced back to some rival house, which Trillane would immediately accuse of trying to disrupt the farming operations of the very important Terran farming colony to hurt House Trillane. Given Terra's critical importance to the Imperium as a farming colony that supplied nearly 20% of the Imperium's food, the second largest farming colony in the Imperium, that would definitely invoke the wrath of the Empress on that framed house.

The opposing factor was Kumi. He doubted that she would willingly partake in that charade, and she was an informed enough young lady to know if that was indeed what it was. But, if that third party managed to slip it past her and get her to help, then.... Well, it was something he couldn't ignore.

After the meeting, Jason lounged in his kitchen at the table, with Symone, Danielle, and Mary sitting with him, and Paul Meredith and Luke standing by the stove. Jason had been a bit quiet since Lisa had made her observations, and it seemed that Paul was as well. "You really think that Lisa was right?" Mary asked.

"I'm not sure, but she had a point," Paul answered.

Jason nodded. "I don't think she's right, but she does raise some valid arguments that I can't refute," he agreed. "Her thoughts about why they dropped that thing on us aren't a far reach. But I think she's wrong. But since I can't *prove* that she's wrong, I'm going to respect her point of view, and keep it in the back of my mind. Kumi would never cooperate with someone that meant to drop that thing on us as bait in a trap, and she's got enough fingers spread through the Imperium to know if that's what it was for. But, since I can't completely depend on my faith in Kumi's ability, I have to respect the possibility that someone *did* dupe her."

"Well, one thing's for sure, then," Mary said. "We can't let that robot out of our sight now."

"Yeah," Danielle said. "We have to keep it, that or melt it down into something that couldn't even remotely have been an exomech."

"We'll keep it," Jason told them. "For parts if anything else. This holographic projection idea I have will demand some serious power, more than any PPG we have. Hell, more than every PPG we have all put together. It'll take a full-blown *power plant* to power it, and we only have two. One is in my skimmer, the other's in the exomech, and using it means we have to all but destroy the machine we take it out of. We might have to take the exomech apart and use its engine as a power source for the

hologram. We know for a fact that the engine in the exomech *does* work. It's the *only* thing that works," he said with a short, cynical chuckle.

"The skimmer's more useful than the exomech, once Jason's cloaking device is installed in it," Symone agreed. "Besides, the exomech's power plant will be bigger. It's *military*, the skimmer is *civilian*. It's designed to power an MPAC cannon, after all," she chuckled.

"That's our next project," Jason said, looking at Symone. "We want the skimmer up and in the air as fast as possible. Steve thinks we'll do it in three weeks. We're going to need it to find a good site to move to."

"You don't sound to convinced of that," Symone said.

He grunted. "Putting that cloaking system in the skimmer is going to be *way* harder," he admitted. "It won't be as easy as just installing components on a blank piece of metal. Just installing the emitters and preparing the hull won't even be half the work. We're going to have to splice in their dataline and conduit connections into the skimmer's systems, and me and Steve are going to have a chore ahead of us writing a TEL module to upload into the skimmer's computer to control the cloak."

"But it'll work, right?"

"Yeah, it'll work," he nodded. "I'll finally have my skimmer back in the air. I'm really looking forward to that."

I know a certain someone down in New Orleans that can't wait for that too, Symone sent with a mischievous tilt to her sending.

Hush.

"Well, it sounds like you're going to need lots of help, Mister Jason," Luke said. "I'm sure we can round up a couple dozen steady hands. They don't have to be techs, they just gotta be able to follow instructions."

"I'm counting on that, Luke," Jason nodded. "We'll have to all but gut the interior to get at the skimmer's internals, install the cloaking system, then put it all back together. It's going to be a major project."

"Then we need to get started," Luke said.

"We have to figure out how we're going to do it first," Jason laughed. "We can't just run down there and start ripping my skimmer up, Luke. We have to lay out where the emitters go, then take a long look at the schematics to see how we're going to tie them into the existing wiring."

"Oh, I thought you did that already."

"Not yet. That's going to take us a few days to figure out, at *least*." He held up three fingers. "Steve's hoping for three weeks, but I figure it's going to take over a month. Maybe even two. Steve's idea of three weeks is us working around the clock with a full crew of trained assistants. That's what he's used to, but we just don't have that here."

"Well, if you don't mind, I'd like to sit in when you make those plans," Luke said. "I've never worked on Faey stuff, but I'm a good mechanic. If I get a good look at its drawings, I can help when it comes to the taking apart and putting together."

"You're right, Luke. You're in," he agreed with a nod. "Be here tomorrow at six. That's when we're starting."

"I'll be here."

Jason, someone's calling on your panel, it's up here beeping, Tim sent.

"Jason, someone's calling your panel," Symone said aloud. "Tim just told me." To explain the sometimes miraculous passing of information among the *clique*, as it was called, Symone had spread the impression through the community that she had constant telepathic contact with Tim's mind. She used that communion as an excuse when Jason or Temika seemingly knew things that couldn't have been passed to them...she just explains that *she* told them, or she told Tim to tell them. It worked well enough, because not everyone knew about the exact way that telepathy really worked. The fact that she could "send" to humans, speak directly to their minds, was really all the proof they needed.

“Be right back guys,” he said, then he got up and went up to his room. Now that they had another panel for handling the security system, he had his back. It sat on the desk in his room when he wasn’t down in his shop in the basement. He flopped down in the chair and opened it, then checked to see who was calling. It was Jyslin.

He answered it, and a picture appeared. She was standing in front of a monitor that wasn’t in her room, it looked to be in some kind of locker room, for there were rows of lockers behind her with a bench running between the rows. She had her armor on, but a few Faey women passed behind her that didn’t. They were dripping wet and wearing towels, and Jason recognized them. They were Maya, Sheleese, and Yana, three women from Jyslin’s Marine squad. She was calling from the dressing room of her barracks? What got into her? “I hope you have audio only on your side,” he said quickly.

“Pft, we don’t need that here,” she said. “Hey guys, come say hello to Jason!” she called over her shoulder.

“Jason!” they all called quickly running over. They crowded Jyslin, waving to him and smiling.

“Are you crazy, woman?” Jason asked.

“Oh please, they *know* I talk to you,” she told him.

“It’s good to see you doing well, Jason,” Maya said seriously.

“No, you’re calling me from your *locker room*,” he said.

They all laughed. “Ain’t nothin’ here you haven’t already seen, baby!” Sheleese called with a grin, opening her towel and displaying herself to him. That was more or less true; Sheleese was one of the two Marines that had followed Jason around naked after he destroyed their armor, back when Jyslin was trying to force him to go out. She then gyrated against the towel against her back, doing a little twisting dance. The other two laughed, and Yana pushed her back behind Jyslin.

“So, what’s so important that you couldn’t wait to get home?” he asked.

“Orders, babe, orders!” she said excitedly. “Aunt Lorna came through! The unit’s being transferred! All of us!”

“Wow, where you going?” he asked carefully, silently praying she was going to say something like California.

“*Washington!*” she said happily, clapping her gauntlets together. “We’re gonna be right near my aunt! We’re being attached to the Fourth Special Division, the Marine battalion that does the police work in D.C. It’s all part of the realignment! We report to the Fort Lee Marine Barracks in Alexandria next *Chiira*, which is about eight *shakra* south of Washington. I’ll be just a few minutes away from the Pentagon.”

Next *Chiira*? That was ten days from now.

“It’s gonna be crazy. The whole company’s going. We got so *much* to move, but we’re used to it. We’re Marines, after all,” She chuckled.

“The whole company?” Jason asked. That was three hundred soldiers.

“Yeah, there’s a major realignment of Imperial forces coming down the pike. Lorna told me about it. The Empress ordered the number of Imperial troops halved, so now army units are gonna take over some of our jobs. Our unit’s one of the first to be moved. Having a general for an aunt has certain advantages,” she winked.

“We love you Lorna!” Sheleese called from the background. She became visible to Jyslin’s left again, without her towel, now with her back to the monitor as she shook her butt back and forth. Yana appeared again to keep her from disrupting Jyslin’s conversation, but Sheleese snatched hold of her towel and tore it off, then grabbed hold of Yana’s arm and pulled her against herself. “Let’s dance, Yana!” she called, yanking her smaller companion back and forth.

Jason looked at Jyslin. “What’s with Sheleese?”

“Her old boyfriend’s a weather scientist stationed in Richmond, which is just a half hour’s ride on a transit train,” she said. “So she gets to see someone too.”

“I haven’t seen Beran in a year!” Sheleese shouted, spinning Yana around, then pulling her back

against her and turned her to face the monitor. "Let's do a special dance for Jason, Yana, cause he ain't had nothing but human girls to look at, when he can get a look at all," she said, then she cupped Yana's breasts and jiggled them brazenly.

"Sheleese!" Yana barked.

"True, that ain't what a healthy guy like him would be interested in, is it?" she said, whipping a hand down to grab Yana by the crotch.

"Sheh-*leese*!" Yana gasped, tearing herself out of her squadmate's grip. "Get a grip, woman!"

"I had one," she taunted with a grin. She was about to say something else, but she yelped when Maya snapped her with a twisted up towel, striking her buttocks loud enough for Jason to hear it over the monitor.

"Dammit Maya, that *hurt*," she complained, rubbing her backside with both hands.

"Stop acting like an idiot and let Jyslin talk," she said soberly. "You know she doesn't get much time to talk to him, and you're using it all up by being stupid."

"Sorry," Sheleese apologized, though it wasn't all that sincere.

"I'm surprised that you'd call *me*," Jason told Jyslin pointedly.

"It's safe enough. This is my personal panel, I just have it hooked up to this wall monitor, in about the only place I can make a call that won't get picked up on the station's security system. That's why I'm calling you from the locker room, so no, it's not just so you can watch Sheleese dance around naked," she winked. "And I don't keep your number in it. When we're done, I'll delete this call out of it and purge the memory blocks that worked the process." He nodded in understanding, because he knew that that would indeed work. As long as the only place she kept his number was in her own head, it was safe. Jyslin jostled a bit as someone pushed her from behind, and Jason saw it was Yana, working on the seams of Jyslin's armor, helping her take it off. "Lorna got the mindbenders off me, so I don't really have to worry about that anymore. As long as nobody sees me talking to you that doesn't already know I talk to you, we're just fine. Hope you don't mind, hon, but I'm gonna talk while getting out of my armor."

"I don't mind, Jys," he answered.

"Good. I got in late cause I had to take my shift report to the watch commander. I always get to shower last," she chuckled ruefully.

"She just wants to let you see her naked, don't be fooled, Jason!" Sheleese called from out of his view.

"Shut up, Sheleese," Jyslin barked, looking towards her and shaking a fist. "Trelle's garland, she's been bouncing off the walls ever since we found out about our reassignment. I thought Ilia was going to anneal her into the squad car." Jason laughed, which made her smile. "You still have my panel number?" she asked after looking back to him.

"Yeah, I have it."

"Okay, use that for the next couple of weeks. They're renovating my house to get it ready for a new tenant, so I had to clear out of it early. They sent movers there today, after giving me all of two hours to pack a travel bag of stuff I wanna keep out," she growled. "My stuff's being packed right now, and then it'll be in transit to Fort Lee. I'm staying in the temp housing now, you know, Hotel Marine," she chuckled. "At least I have a room to myself. Sergeants and above don't have roommates."

"Lucky you."

"Yeah. We'll be packing gear and taking army regulars out on our patrols to train them for the next few days, then we leave next *Chiira*. Those army bitches can't wait til we're gone," she grunted. "I'm not sure why they're reducing the number of Marines. I hope they leave enough behind to keep an eye on these House troops. They're almost frothing at the mouth at the idea of having free rein. You know how House Trillane sees natives. Without us here to remind them about the Empress, they're gonna give the citizenry grief, I just know it."

"Yeah, I know too well," Jason said darkly. "You think it's gonna be okay?"

"Probably. There might be a few incidents, but the nobles know that if the soldiers harass the natives too much, it's gonna start impacting food production, and that the Empress will *not* tolerate."

"No doubt. You gonna have a house on Fort Lee?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't have any base housing," she answered. "The Marines are going to live in Imperial-contracted apartments not far from it, some place called *Van Dorn*. But I'm not going to be there. Aunt Lorna got me an apartment in a place called Crystal City, north of Alexandria, in a high-rise, just two blocks down from where *she* lives. Most of the Imperial brass lives in Crystal City, which I'm not too keen on. I don't like the idea of being a Sergeant living in an area full of Imperial officers."

"Lucky bitch!" Sheleese shouted.

"Bite me, Sheleese," Jyslin called back, looking to her right. "You can see the Pentagon and the, uh, *Washington monument* from it," she said, speaking the name of the monument in English.

"Sounds nice."

"Yeah, Lorna showed me a hologram of it earlier today. A two bedroom condo, meant for a mid-grade officer with a family, but she pulled a few strings and got it for me. Sometimes having a general for an aunt has, perks," she grinned.

"I hate you, asshole!" Sheleese shouted.

"Shut the fuck up, Sheleese, or so help me Trelle I'm gonna come over there and kick your ass!" Jyslin threatened.

"How high up is she?" Jason asked.

"Part of the command staff," she answered. "There's only two ranks above her, full General and the Imperial Marshall of the Corps. Aunt Lorna is a Lieutenant General, but it's custom to simply call her *General*. But there's only *one* Imperial Marshall, so really there's only one more rank for her to go. She'll get it, there's no doubt about that. When Empress Dahnai says publicly that you're one of her best officers, promotion is a *lock*."

"Even with what happened with me?"

"That had nothing to do with Aunt Lorna, and the Empress knows it," she answered. "It was just coincidence that her niece happened to know you."

"I always wondered. If your aunt's a general, why aren't you an officer?"

"We aren't allowed to carry officer rank during conscription," she said with a sour look. "I have to serve four of my five years before I can even apply to the officer's academy, and if you get in, the last four months of your conscription is spent in the academy. You graduate on your last day of conscription, then re-enlist as a Lieutenant. Nobles can't be true officers either, but only for the first two years, for the initial involuntary assignment. So, they have a different rank system for them, called Warrant Officers. That way they still outrank us enlisted, but aren't outranked by the other officers. Me getting a gold diamond would be more or less guaranteed because my aunt's a general. In fact, she's gonna see to it a couple of applications in my squad get through," she told him, her eyes glancing off camera.

"Why can't she get you into engineering then?"

"Cause it's a lot easier for her to wrangle me a spot in the officer's academy than it is for her to get me an engineering post on an Imperial starship," she answered. "Now if she was in the *Navy*, it might be easier for her. An Admiral can get a relative put about anywhere she wants."

"Ah. I see," he nodded.

"Too bad you can't come see me," she said. "I'd love to see you, Jason."

"You mean you'd love to fuck him!" Sheleese called from somewhere beside Jyslin, out of sight.

"That too," she admitted with a laugh.

"Well, say it with more than words, girl. Say it with tits!" Sheleese called as the back of Jyslin's armor came free. Jyslin caught the breastplate before it fell as Yana pulled the back piece off, but a

blue hand pulled it out of Jyslin's grip and off camera, then pushed her back far enough so that her breasts were visible on the monitor. "Woohoo, look at those nips! They're reachin' for ya, Jason baby!" Sheleese called, a hand appearing and cupping Jyslin's breast. She slapped the hand away, but it returned to pinch her purple nipple, rather roughly.

"Maya, drag Sheleese out back and shoot her!" Jyslin shouted to her right, slapping the hand away again.

"Right away, Sergeant!" Maya said with a laugh.

"How have things been on that side?"

"Well enough," he answered. "We're more or less done with getting ready for winter, so barring any kind of disaster, we're relatively well set. I'll just be puttering around til spring comes, doing a few minor projects and such."

"How are your new friends over there?"

"They're doing fine," he answered, but he could see in her eyes the warning not to say anything more.

"That's good. Any trouble I should know about? Anything I can help you with?"

"Nothing right now, hon, but if anything comes up, I'll let you know."

"Good. Well, I'd better go, I have to grab a shower and get going, and we can't talk for very long, you know. Aunt Lorna came down for the weekend, and I'm taking her to Copeland's. I just wanted to tell you the good news, and warn you that you have to call my panel til I move."

"Not a problem, hon. Congratulations on your new assignment."

"Thanks. I'll send you some pics of my new apartment when I go back up."

"I'd like to see it."

She put her fingertips on the monitor on her side. "I miss you, love," she said.

"I miss you too," he said, putting his fingertips over hers.

"Wimp! Show him you care, show him some pussy!" Sheleese called outrageously.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have an ass to kick, and I'm still wearing my boots," Jyslin said in an ominous manner, cracking her knuckles as she levelled a narrow-eyed glare to her right, off camera. She left the link open as she stalked off, showing nothing but the lockers and the bench, and Jason heard Sheleese clearly. "Now come on, Jys, you know I was just playing, right? Right? Jys? Sarge? *Ow!*"

Yana poked her head into view, gave Jason a bright, mischevious smile as Sheleese started howling, then waved to him. "See ya later Jason. We all love ya and we all care about ya, remember that. Come home soon now. Oh, sorry about the shower thing, this was the only place Jys could set up the call without them tracing it, but I don't think you minded the view all that much," she said to him with a wink, then she reached down and pressed the button to terminate the call.

Jason just had to laugh. He'd known Sheleese for a while, knew she was something of a prankster and a tad hyper, but he had to admit...that was *funny*. Crude, but funny.

But Jyslin had said something that caught his attention. The Imperial Marines were cutting their numbers by half, partially withdrawing and letting House Trillane take over more of their operations. In a way that was good, but in a way that was bad. It was good that they were dropping their numbers, for it meant there was a lesser chance that Jason or his community might be facing off against Marines. God help them if they fired on Imperial Marines...that would be *it*. But it was bad because that meant that there would be less Imperial oversight of House Trillane, who already had something of a very bad track record concerning how they treated the humans of Terra. At least the Imperium treated them as subjects...House Trillane treated them like *property*. For some reason, Jason foresaw a sudden jump in the number of involuntary reassignments of humans to farm jobs the day after the Marines finished their realignment and the troops reassigned off Terra left the planet. He also saw quite a few incidents of lawbreaking coming as well...and that worried him. Without Marines to oversee the House troops, there was going to be stealing, abuse, and maybe even some deaths as they ran roughshod over the

natives. The Faey didn't respect the human race, because they had complete power over them...and that lack of respect caused those abuses. And that was going to become very apparent, very soon.

Well, there was little he could do about it, because he had his own problems. They had a long, hard road ahead of them. They had to get the skimmer's cloak installed, then they had to find a new place to move the community, then they had to design and install their holographic camouflage, then came the nightmare of logistics that would entail packing up the entire community and then moving it...and doing it all before spring was over, so they could get some farms plowed and crops planted.

I take it you're done? Who was it? Symone sent.

Jyslin. He went over what she'd said, including the troop realignment.

Damn, she's gonna be pretty close. Think we might manage to go see her?

We can't do that, I'll bet money that they're watching her. If I showed up, they'd swoop down on us.

Yeah, probably. Still, I'm happy to hear that she's getting reassigned. What's so funny? Your sending's streaked with something you find funny.

Nothing, nothing, it was Sheleese. She was acting silly.

Sheleese? What was she doing there?

Jyslin was calling from the locker room of her barracks, he told her. I got to see her, Yana, and Maya. They were in the locker room. He shared a memory of Sheleese's antics, which made Symone laugh through her sending. That is funny, she agreed.

Omahgawd, she really did that? Temika asked, her sending a bit surprised, and tinged with embarrassment.

Yeah, she did, Jason answered. The look Yana gave her could have peeled the paint off the walls.

If she woulda grabbed me like that, they'd have been peeling her off the walls, Temika sent, her sending tinged with outrage at the very idea of it.

They're all friends, Mika, Jason told her. They're very close, a very tight-knit group. Two of them are even sisters. Yeah, that was a bit out of bounds, but Yana'll get over it. After all, she knows that Sheleese was only trying to make me blush. It goes back to when I first met her, I told you that story. She was one of the ones that ended up naked, because of the chemical I sprayed on her. Unfortunately for her, I've been around Faey too long to get embarrassed most of the time, he sent with an audible chuckle.

Ah don't see how you do it, sugah, Temika told him.

It's easy. Faey are the men of their culture, Mika. Think of a Faey as a man, and you've more or less got it pegged.

I beg your pardon! Symone sent with a mental laugh. She accompanied that sending with an image, a memory of her looking at herself in the mirror...naked.

That's not what I mean and you know it, woman, he retorted. What I'm saying is that personality wise, think of a Faey as a combination of man and woman, instead of just a woman. Remember, they're the dominant gender. But they are women. Lots of those traits you'd think of as feminine are still there, they just don't display them publicly. Think of Symone. She acts more feminine in private, but in public, she's much more masculine.

Yah, I noticed that, Temika agreed. And she certainly ain't embarrassed by nothin'.

She has her reputation to uphold, Jason sent, his sending sly.

That's right, cutie! Too bad the only reputation I care about is the one I have with Tim, she added.

And that's the core of the Faey personality, he sent grandly, open sending but aimed at Temika. The underlying genetic need to pair-bond is still the backbone of a Faey woman's personality, just like the genetic need to spread genes through as many mates as possible is at the heart of a Faey man's personality. But their roles are a bit reversed from human roles. Women chase, and they chase hard, while the men try to put them off as long as they can.

Wow, Ah nevah thought of it that way. How did you learn all this?

From my Advanced Plasma instructor, he answered with a mental laugh. He was the one I talked to when Jyslin started in with me. He was a physics professor, but he knew more about Faey behavior than the psychologists did, and he was able to explain it to me in terms I could understand. He taught me what to expect from Faey, both men and women.

Smart fella, Symone sent. I wonder if he's married.

Jason laughed aloud. *One husband per customer, Symone, he teased.*

Not for me, goof. When a married gal finds a good man, she tries to hook him up with a friend. I would look at Mika, but I don't think she'd be ready for a Faey man in her life, it'd be too much of a culture shock. Besides, til Mika gets over her hangup about being touched, no Faey man would even think about it. What kind of relationship can he have if she won't fuck him? She'd never get past the first date.

The silence was deafening. Jason had no idea where the others were, they were probably conducting the conversation from every corner of the community, but he had no doubt that Temika was blushing furiously.

I think Ailan's married, Jason mused.

Damn, all the good ones are always married.

That's why they're married, Jason told her.

True. You okay over there, Mika? You're looking a bit—you're blushing! Symone sent with vast humor.

Be nice, Symone, remember that she's not a Faey, Jason sent privately to her.

I won't push, she answered him privately. I should, though. I'm still trying to get her into your bed, cutie. You need a girl sexy enough to substitute for Jys, and I don't see how she even functions. Never in my life have I ever met a woman in more dire need of a good healthy fuck than Mika.

Just leave her alone, Symone. When she's ready for a relationship, she'll look for one herself.

As much as she needs me to, but I can still suggest, she told him.

What are we doing for dinner? Jason asked in an open sending, changing the subject.

You're cooking, so you decide, Symone sent.

Ah'll cook, Temika sent. Ah promised y'all some jambalaya, remembah? Ah don't have no shrimp, but Ah think Ah can work around that. Ah got everythin' else, even the rice.

How'd you get rice?

Tradin', she answered.

Oh yeah, that reminds me. Mika, do you still sneak across the border?

Sometimes, she answered. Not as much as Ah used to.

Well, I'm finally going to collect my side of our bargain, he warned. Sometime soon, you're going to show me and a few other people how to get across the border.

It ain't that hard, sugah, she said. They ain't all that serious about guardin' it, and they've let the fence go to pot. It's got so many holes and broken sensors that Ah could herd a pack of elephants through without them seein' it. And if the right guards are workin', all it takes to get across is a little tradin'. There's a few of them that'll just let you through for the right price.

Well, after I get the skimmer fixed, we're going to go have a look.

Any time, sugah, she assured him.

Kaira, 23 Demaa, 4393, Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 29 November 2007, Native Regional Reckoning

Chesapeake, Ohio (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

In some ways, Jason had found that their chaotic little group was capable of great things.

Operation Phoenix, as Steve has mirthfully called it, was just such an example of just what they

could do if they rolled up their sleeves and put their minds to it.

It had taken 36 days to complete, from the initial planning stage to the final step. 36 days. Five days of planning, four days of layout, and 27 days of actual construction. At its smallest, it was a project involving four people. At its greatest, it directly involved 31 people in some form. They had worked around the clock for over two weeks straight at one point, each of the techs taking a shift and supervising a work detail that was involved with the actual installation of the system into the skimmer.

It had been a thing of beauty...at least after everyone had been taught what they were doing, and got the hang of it. As one team all but gutted his precious skimmer's interior, another team began installing the emitters, as a third team covered the hull with the layers of material it would need in order to carry the matrix. They had Sam Watson, a painter by trade, handle the application of the insulating layer and the Neutronium, for it had to be applied with a molecular sprayer *by hand*, and its thicknesses had to be very close to spec, if not exact. Sam had a viable talent and a very steady hand, and he had managed the job quite admirably. Before Sam did his work, the emitter team did their job, who went by an exacting diagram Steve had made and put into a datareader with a holographic emitter, providing them with a three-dimensional diagram of the skimmer. Using that diagram, they cut the holes in the hull and install the emitters, then Sam came behind and applied the two layers. He used the emitters as his thickness guide, covering the insulating material to the edge of the emitter lenses, and then the rest covered with Neutronium until it couldn't be seen, until the hull was smooth. The emitters would be covered over by a millimeters-thick layer of Neutronium, and through that metal the matrix would be conducted. The Neutronium they used was standard metal, but they used a Faey trick of molecular alignment to cause the metal to look blue, to be the exact same color as the original paint. That hadn't been necessary, but it did make Jason feel better. It took Sam and his four helpers twelve days to "paint" on the insulating layer, inspect it, and correct thickness errors, and it took them ten more to apply the Neutronium, inspect it, and correct thickness errors. The emitters were placed in a staggered array all over the hull, each emitter responsible for five square feet of hull, but there were also sensors in the cabin door, the cargo doors, and the landing skid bay doors. Those doors were removed, their edges insulated from the hull, and emitters installed on their surfaces. Each door's outer surface was an independent matrix, separated from the main matrix because the break in the hull where the door was would create a distortion field that would feed back into the matrix and destabilize the entire structure. All "hard edges" had to be insulated so the energy didn't reflect back into the matrix once it reached a border.

While that was being done, the wiring teams were hard at work inside the skimmer. Every single emitter had to be tied into the skimmer's power and data networks, meaning that datalines and microconduit had to be run from the wiring bundles and to the devices. Once that was run, a tech had to come behind and perform the actual joining, using a panel to access the emitter's simplistic internal computer and assign the emitter an address, so the skimmer's computer could tell them apart and access them, then hook the emitter up to the skimmer's systems. Once all the emitters were installed, the interior of the skimmer had to be put back in, but they decided to do that last, after it was started up and tested. If there was a problem, they'd have to tear it all out again to get to the internals anyway.

The only real issue they had with the installation was with the windshield. The windshield was made out of metal, made of *transparent* vanadium, which, thank the Lord, was compatible with the shield matrix. They'd been forced to take out the windshield and insulate it from the rest of the hull at the mounts, then attach the emitters to the outside edges and reinstall it. The matrix in the windshield would be invisible, and would take just a little more power than the rest of the system, because of the properties of vanadium.

While most of that was being done, Jason and Steve split their time between the installation and the writing of the TEL module. It had been easy in one way, and hard in another. They used the TEL program that they used for the box as a base for the skimmer's program, but they had to make so many changes that they simply scrapped it and started over from scratch. When they did start over, however,

they already had enough familiarity with the system and with the requirements of the program that they were able to finish it in 16 days. The program did everything they needed it to do in simulations. It knew how to form the matrix and how to maintain it, and also how to shut it down safely, without the matrix doing any damage to the molecular structure of the metal that surrounded it. It was able to detect errors and phase shifts in the matrix and make corrections. It was able to recognize a fatal error or hardware malfunction, and enter an emergency state where it concentrated on maintaining as much of the matrix as possible while the pilot got the ship down and turned off the power. It was also able to detect an impact from an MPAC projectile and immediately shut the matrix down to prevent a cascade overload that would burn out the shield emitters. It was able to communicate with the skimmer's computer and other modules, relaying matrix status, power, emitter status, and preventing the use of MPACs and the shield while the matrix was operational. It made for plenty of sleepless nights for them, but they managed to complete it before the installation of the hardware was complete.

Jason was relieved beyond measure that Steve was there. Jason knew TEL language, but Steve was *much* better as a coder. Steve was the one most responsible for making that program work, and it would have taken Jason three months to write that program and make it work by himself.

Exactly 36 days after they began, it was done. The work had been cold at times as a cold snap had blown in from the north, and a week of it had been done as rain pounded down on the bridge over their heads, making for an unpleasant walk back and forth. The ship's cabin was laying out on the tarp-covered earth and concrete, all except the pilot and copilot's chairs. Everything else, seats, walls, floors, ceiling, all of it, was sitting under plastic on those tarps. Jason, Steve, and Tim stood there with Luke, Zach, Irwin, and all the people who had helped with this project, as well as the city council, just standing there and looking. In Jason's arm was his black panel, and in it was the final TEL module version, ready for download into the skimmer's computer. They'd gotten the backup PPG he'd been using to run a backup generator back into the skimmer, which would be what would power the computer without him having to bring up the engines and power plant. The last things to do were left to the techs, as they went in and disabled all automatic telemetry so the skimmer didn't transmit its position.

There was one slight alteration, though. Having seen the phoenix emblem on his and Symone's armors, Sam had used his painting skills to paint that same design on the nose of the skimmer, just under the windshield. At first he used standard paint, but after seeing it and being impressed by it, Jason told him that the matrix would eventually burn the paint off. So they went back and used the alignment trick to change the way the metal of the emblem absorbed light without disturbing the metal's molecular structure, causing it to appear black instead of blue. So, he had the phoenix emblem emblazoned on the bow of his ship in jet black, surrounded by the blue of the skimmer.

"Well," Steve said mildly, pushing his glasses back up on his nose. "Let's go see if it works."

"Remember, Clem," Jason warned. "If the matrix fails once I start the engines, I'm going to be taking it out of here, and *fast*. They'll pick it up very quickly. I want to be far enough away that they don't trace it back to the community before a sensor tech manages to lock onto it."

"Makes me wonder how you got it here, Mister Jason," Luke said.

"They weren't *looking* for it when I came here, Luke. They're looking for it now. And also remember, if you think for any reason that they're going to send a patrol down here to investigate if I fail, *run*. Just grab what you can and run away, then come back after they leave."

"We'll be careful," Clem assured him.

Jason nodded to him. "You got everything you need, Tim?" he asked.

"Yeah," he said, pointing at his equipment. Tim would be outside the ship as they did the test, taking sensor measurements and observing. "I'm ready."

"Let's do it," Jason said, then he and Steve climbed up into the skimmer.

They sat down and got to work. Steve tiptoed along a rail girder because there was no floor, balancing his way back to the back of the skimmer to start the backup PPG as Jason put his panel on

his lap and brought up the download program. “PPG is on!” Steve shouted, and Jason wasted no time. He quickly brought the computer online with a few deft switch presses, which caused a holographic keyboard to appear over the control stick. He prepared the skimmer computer to accept a new module just after he backed up the entire skimmer computer to a stick, just in case the module crashed the skimmer’s computer, then connected the panel to the skimmer with a dataline as Steve tiptoed his way back to the cockpit. He flopped into the copilot’s chair just as the panel began downloading the module. They watched in tense silence as the module was uploaded into the skimmer, and watched the display as the skimmer computer updated its system and then executed a soft restart, reinitializing its processes without shutting down and restarting.

“Looks like it’s working,” Steve chuckled.

“Let’s find out,” he said as he ordered the computer to perform a complete diagnostic. That took it almost five minutes, as it systematically went through its own files and hardware, then carefully checked the software and hardware for all other systems in the skimmer. They watched most keenly at the end, when it executed a diagnostic on the cloak matrix system, or CMS, as Steve had coined it. How that system responded depended *entirely* on how well Steve and Jason had written the program that made it function.

Much to their relief, it responded *exactly* as it was supposed to.

Jason flipped on the external speaker. “Okay, people we’re about to turn on the matrix. Clear all magnetic materials away from the skimmer, and *don’t touch it*. There’s going to be a few hundred thousand volts of static charge on the hull when the system starts up, and it can kill.”

“Remember, there’s going to be holes in the matrix because of the landing gear and the open doors,” Steve told him. “We have to close the door before we start the engine, or we’re going to have a hole big enough for a signature to bleed through. I don’t think the gear will be a problem, because they’re on the *bottom* of the ship. The earth will mask the signature that bleeds through.”

“Yeah, and the open areas will be a good test for our program. Let’s see if it really *can* determine that the doors are open and disable the emitters powering those sections. Ready?”

“Let’s rock,” Steve said, giving him a thumbs-up.

“Okay then, starting the CMS module,” he announced, his fingers dancing across the holographic keyboard. They watched carefully as the computer accessed the CMS module, and it came into the forefront, became the primary process with control over all others but the core computer process, propulsion, guidance, communications, and climate control. All other systems were now governed by the CMS module, allowing it to override them if their actions threatened the stability of the matrix. “CMS is up. Beginning matrix formation program.”

Steve watched his screen, to which was being dumped the debugging data as the CMS module performed its task. The module tried to access the primary power system, but found it down. It then shifted to backup power, found that operational, and then continued on. It surveyed all emitters and ordered them to report status, then waited for the replies. After all emitters returned a *ready* response, it then checked the internal sensors by accessing the ship status sensors. It found the pilot door and landing bay doors open, and removed those sections from the startup sequence...*exactly* as it had been programmed to do.

It had better, they spent nine hours with a simulator ironing that bug out of the program. It had been a *bitch* to code it.

Now it was ready. They could hear the PPG back in the cargo area suddenly give out a whine of protest as the CMS spiked it, drawing considerable power as it primed the emitters to fire. They watched a holographic display of the ship, projected over the dash in front of the windshield, as all emitters that were there were represented by green dots, which turned red as they reached priming potential and were ready to fire. The emitters that would not fire because of open doors were grayed out on the hologram. “Stand clear!” Jason barked into the microphone as the last of the green dots turned red.

The emitters fired. There was no sound, no indication that they had fired except for the hologram in front of them. It displayed the result as the emitters fired and energized the outer layer, as the field matrix formed within the Neutronium covering the hull. The hull of the ship, represented in gray, suddenly flared red, then that color stabilized as the matrix balanced itself under the careful control of the CMS module, as the emitters adjusted themselves and made the transition from initial firing to maintenance. Section by section, that red turned to green, indicating a stable field matrix and optimal operation within the program's designed parameters.

"Well, I'll be dipped in grease and renamed Bob," Steve laughed. "No programming errors!"

"After five days running it through a simulator, I hope not," Jason said seriously. "Alright, Symone. What ya got?" he asked, calling into the ship's radio.

Well cutie, we saw a sudden little blurb, but now we don't see shit! she sent, her sending literally joyous. What she had to say was *not* something they were about to put on over a radio. Everyone knew that Symone could send telepathic messages to non-telepathic people, so that's exactly what he told her to do with him, sending her response rather than calling it over the radio. *And the blurb wasn't much, it went by so fast I'd have missed it if I wasn't looking for it.*

"So, you don't see anything?"

I don't see anything, she answered.

"Okay then," he said, blowing out his breath. "Keep an eye on it, hon. Here comes step two."

With deliberate movements, Jason primed the reactor engine that powered the skimmer, then flipped the switchguard over the main switch and pressed the button. The familiar whine immediately flooded the chamber as the engines powered up using primer PPGs to power it, then the engine became self-sustaining and began to power up, which powered the generators that quickly took over primary power. The whine was much louder than usual because most of the interior was laying on the ground outside, starting as low thrum and ascending until it was that familiar high-pitched sound to which he was accustomed. Steve watched intensely as the debug data showed that the CMS module detected primary power within accepted tolerance levels, then executed its power protocol. It switched over to main power, and it did it quickly and smoothly, without even making the matrix field so much as fluctuate. If it detected that main power was failing, or main power fell to within ten percent of minimum threshold level, it would immediately revert back to the backup system, a backup PPG that was dedicated *only* to the CMS.

"Engines are on," Jason called to Steve, his voice noticeably nervous, then he picked up the microphone again. "Symone?"

Nothing, cutie! she sent happily. *I didn't even see the sensor display twitch!*

Jason resisted the urge to get up and jump up and down in the cockpit, because they had more to do. "Okay, let's see if the rest works," he said. "Watch carefully, Symone," he called over the radio, then he took hold of the controls. Steve hit the button to close the outer door to the cabin, and they watched the display hologram carefully. The door emitters went from gray to green as the program detected the closed door, then they turned red as the program primed the emitters to fire. Then the door flashed red as the matrix was activated in the door, then changed to stable green.

"Well, that worked," Steve said with barely contained glee.

"Taking her off the deck," he said, pulling back on the vertical position slider with a light touch. He picked the ship up just enough for the Weight on Skids sensor triggered, telling him the skids were completely off the ground. Once they were, he retracted the landing gear.

Again, they watched carefully as the matrix module went to work. It detected the closing of the landing gear doors, then primed and fired the emitters that provided the matrix into the doors. The doors turned red, then blinked to green.

The module performed exactly as intended.

"Symone?" he called over the radio.

Nothing, baby! Absolutely nothing!

“Symone doesn’t see anything,” Jason relayed.

“Let’s not get excited yet, we got more to test,” Steve said with cool professionalism.

And they did. First they tested the prevention protocols, as Jason tried to activate the skimmer’s shields and defensive MPAC weaponry. In both cases, the module intervened with a warning that *using* those systems would disrupt the field matrix. It didn’t outright stop them, because there might be an emergency that would demand instant activation without turning off the field matrix, but it did force them to acknowledge that warning before proceeding. After a few minutes, the hologram vanished from the dash, as it was programmed to do. It wouldn’t return unless a change in the field matrix caused a change in status, there was an emergency, or the operator told the computer to restore the hologram manually. Then they tested the automatic disabling protocols by extending the landing skids. As soon as he hit the switch, the TEL module detected the command and immediately shut down the field matrix to the landing gear doors. The hologram reappeared, the doors flashed red, then that red faded to gray as the field was turned off to those sections, and *then* the module permitted the doors to be opened and skids extended.

Exactly as intended.

Jason put the ship back on the deck and opened the main cabin door. Again, the module detected the door open command and deactivated the matrix on the door before allowing it to open. “Powering down,” he said in a voice barely containing his excitement as he began the power-down sequence, turning off the main engines, then the main computer. The matrix was on an independent, always-on, shielded PPG, so it remained in operation. The main computer was also on its own stand-alone PPG, but wasn’t shielded...yet. That was first on their list before they put the interior back into the ship.

“Shall we get the champagne?” Steve asked, then he laughed brightly.

Jason picked up the microphone. “Ladies. Gentlemen. Congratulations! It *works!*” he called over the loudspeaker. “Aaat, the field is still up, you dinks!” Jason shouted quickly as those outside started towards the skimmer. “Let us shut it down first! I don’t think the first thing we do after our test is scrape some overexcited yahoo’s charred remains off the hull of my ship. Hell, it’d ruin the paintjob!”

That made those outside laugh, as did Steve. “Shutting down the field matrix,” he told Jason with a grin. They watched the hologram as the module executed its shutdown protocols, as the entire display turned red and started flashing, and then faded to gray. The emitters were stepped into standdown mode, and then, after a poll by the main computer to assess operational condition, to make sure no emitter was damaged when it came down, it turned them off one by one, as they reported their condition. It then made a log of the status of those emitters, executed its self-shutdown procedure, and then turned itself off. The hologram vanished from the dashboard.

The test was complete. And it was better than any of them could have hoped it would be.

“Sending logs to a stick and shutting down,” Jason said happily as he had the main computer dump all logs into a stick, so they could go over them, then shut down. When the monitors winked off, he got up, turned to Steve, and shook his hand gravely. Steve laughed and gave Jason a rough hug, clapping him on the back.

“It *works!*” he declared in glee. “We actually did it, Jayce! A ragtag bunch of human rejects invented something that *works!*”

“We couldn’t have done it by ourselves,” Jason laughed. “Not one of us. This took all of us. You, me, Tim, Luke and Leamon, hell, even Kumi for getting us the supplies.”

“Amen, but see what we can accomplish when we work together?” Steve said. “It’s off, guys!” Steve screamed, making Jason’s ears ring. Steve could be *loud* when he wanted to be.

“Now we have to go over the logs and make sure there weren’t any bugs,” Steve said.

“But at least they can put the interior back into the skimmer while we do,” Jason chuckled, looking at the empty cabin, nothing but girders, bulkheads, and bundles tracks of dataline and conduit.

“Tonight we have to test the light absorbing system, and take the ship out and see if they pick it up when it’s on the move. But the biggest test is out of the way,” he sighed in relief. “The matrix *works*.”

Once we're sure this thing can fly without detection, we can start looking for a new site."

"Step one, *almost* complete," Steve chuckled.

"Almost. But we can see the end of the tunnel."

"We can indeed."

That night was the happiest that Jason had been in a long time.

Alone, in a cabin that was little more than the two pilot chairs, Jason took his precious ship out from under that bridge for the first time in months and *flew*.

It had taken a little work beforehand, though. They had to install an inverse phase emitter in the skimmer so it could cancel active sensors, but that was as easy as writing a program for it. All the equipment that he'd used for the emitter came out of the *skimmer* in the first place. That had taken about seven hours to write, test, debug, then intergrate with the skimmer's computer. It was so fast because they already had a working program, they just had to make it usable by the skimmer's computer. With that installed, the skimmer could defeat both active and passive sensors, and it was time for the ultimate test...to fly the ship and see if the Faey could detect it when it was on the move and out from under the bridge.

It was such a relief, such a *joy*. The feeling of freedom that Jason had always felt at having a plane, then a skimmer, was suddenly surging in him as he left Chesapeake behind and hurtled high into the sky. From the outside, the ship was nothing but a dark shadow, as the field matrix actively absorbed light energy as well as plasma signatures, and allowed light to pass in through the windshield but did *not* allow it to pass back out. It made the skimmer a piece of the night, as if the skimmer had wrapped the darkness around itself like a shroud. It was virtually invisible so long as there wasn't a direct light source behind the skimmer, but that wasn't an issue out here in the preserve, where there *were* no light sources except his own community and the occasional campfire dotting the horizon.

He had to maintain radio silence because he was beyond shortband range, but he didn't mind. He flew at high speeds first, close to the ground, then flew up a hundred thousand feet and went supersonic, always carefully watching his own sensor display to see if any dropships or fighters came to investigate, as he kept his radio tuned to Faey command frequencies to listen for any hint that they'd picked him up. The one flaw in his system was that he couldn't defeat the effect of his skimmer's mass on space, which *was* detectable, but the counter for that was to stay inside the planet's gravity well, where the effect of the planet's gravity masked the otherwise small effect his skimmer had. That, more than anything, was what he was out here to test, to see how far out he could go before he was picked up.

And he got quite bold. He took the ship all the way out of the atmosphere, in a low-angled orbit that kept him inside the gravity well but outside the atmosphere, so close that he could see one of the huge Faey cruisers above and ahead of him, and behind it the primary space station they had built that acted as the hub of all food transportation. Crops and goods were carried up to that station in dropships, and then loaded onto cargo ships and sent back to the Imperium. Beyond the orbit of the moon, he knew, was the stargate that the Faey had built that linked Earth with the rest of the Imperium, that allowed them instantaneous transport to and from the 72 other worlds of the Faey Imperium. He watched a cargo ship back away from the station, slowly turn around, then head off towards that gate. It passed another, smaller cargo ship that was approaching the station, which rather amusingly looked like a frisbee nailed to the top of a mop handle, with three rings attached at intervals down that length. Ships docked along the edge of that top saucer and the rings, depending on the ship's size and class. Smaller ships, like passenger ships, docked on the lowest ring. Smaller transports docked at the two middle rings, and the big cargo ships docked on the upper saucer. The station didn't rotate, reyling on artificial gravity.

All that hardware. That station and the cruiser hovering protectively nearby were the stark symbols that the Faey were here to stay. He lamented that, though a part of him couldn't deny that in a small

way, he was glad they'd come. After all, he'd never have met Tim, he'd never known Jyslin or Symone, and he'd never have known that he too was a telepath. A pity that the price for those good things had been the destruction of his people's entire culture and society and subjugation under the rule of their conquerors. If they'd only just come and *asked*. Odds were, the peoples of Earth would have joined the Imperium *willingly*. But their arrogance had caused them to come with demands, to treat the people of earth like slaves, even as cattle, as nothing but nameless numbers there for no other reason than to farm their food. Jyslin's attitude of humans as members and not slaves was all well and good, until one looked at reality. Humans weren't allowed off Earth unless they were heavily screened by Imperial security. The only people you would find on farms doing the real work were humans, with a couple of Faey agricultural engineers, and lots and lots of Faey guards to make sure their work force didn't disappear in the night. The numbers of humans being trained in Faey technology were paltry, maybe even miniscule, compared to the amount of equipment they had here. They were being trained as low-level workers who would be under the supervision and direction of a Faey. Humans were not in any manner or fashion allowed any kind of self-supervision. Even the human "mayors" and "councilmen" were nothing but mid-level managers answering to a Faey noble, a delusion that reinforced the false belief that humans had any say at all in their state of affairs.

And now the Imperium was reducing its numbers, giving House Trillane more responsibility, and a freer hand. He wondered how that was going to affect things. He had no idea...only time would tell.

He adjusted course to avoid an incoming dropship, brazenly setting his course so it would pass within a few hundred feet of him, close enough to overhear the sending of the Faey aboard the ship. He wanted to see just how good this cloak was, and this was the best way to do it. The dropship, a large cargo carrier, approached him from below and the left, and he turned his skimmer to keep the bow towards it as it passed, so he could get a look at it. He idly pondered following it, using its mass as a screen to see how far out he could go, at least until he realized that he'd have to get *back* to the gravity well without a ship on which to piggyback. But, the idea of it at least was a sound one.

When it got close enough, he started hearing sendings. Idle chatter of a Faey flight crew and several passengers, nothing really that caught his attention. But when it got closer, he started hearing other thoughts, thoughts that were *terrified*. They were jumbled, chaotic, a great concentration of fear and uncertainty. It took him a while to straighten things out, to separate single voices out of that cacophony of fear, which also required him to get closer to the dropship.

They were *human*. The dropship was full of humans, men and women, and all of them were afraid. The Faey in there with them were soldiers, and they were all shackled together and sitting on the floor.

Puzzled, Jason looked at the dropship's course. From its trajectory, it took off from England, but its course was taking it *out* of orbit. It wasn't returning to Earth, it wasn't using an orbital vector to reach a destination on the planet. It wasn't going to the space station either, its course was taking it out into space, towards a cargo ship he could barely make out on the edge of sensor range.

What the hell was this? Why were they taking people to a cargo ship, and not through the station?

A growing bout of horror rose up in him when he realized what was going on. He followed the ship for several minutes, taking pictures of it, getting pictures of the cargo ship, taking sensor readings, and listening *hard* at what he was hearing. In just a moment, the Faey themselves betrayed their activities with their sending.

I hope we get a bigger cut this time, one Faey sent. I can't believe that we only got five thousand credits for the last batch. That's almost not worth it, with all the fuckin' Marines crawling around. If they caught us, we'd get slogged on the spot.

Well, it'll be a hell of a lot easier once they cut back their numbers, came an eager response.

Yeah, and they'll take more out of our cut too.

No they won't, stupid. We're being paid per head, remember? With fewer eyes, we can round up a shitload of them and ship them off, as fast as the computer geeks can delete their ID numbers and make them disappear from the records. A hundred credits a head ain't much, but when we pack a ship with

a few thousand of them, it'll add up fast.

It's bullshit, Yenni. We get a hundred credits a head, but they're selling these sorry bastards for a thousand a pop on Wonashi, minimum. We should demand more money.

If you want to try to squeeze more money out of the zarina, be my guest Deri.

Hey! Quiet down or send privately, fuckheads! an angry sending raced through. *We're on the edges of the range of some of the Marines on that station! You wanna get us caught? Idiots!*

Jason felt his stomach go cold. They were kidnapping human beings and selling them into slavery!

He got physically dizzy as his mind spun around that awful revelation. He took a firm grip on the control stick with a trembling hand and closed his eyes, gritting his teeth. Those fucking *monsters*! And it was a *noble* doing it! A noble from Trillane was selling people for *money*! All that big talk about helping people, all that *bullshit* about humans being a part of the Imperium, it was all just a bunch of fucking *lies*! Trillane was selling the people of Earth to slavers for nothing more than pure *profit*. He would bet his left arm that some of the stories he'd heard of vanishing squatters wasn't just raiders, it was slaving parties raiding the wilderness for humans. He'd bet his other arm that the raiding parties that came in and didn't take people were either Imperial or controlled by nobles within Trillane that weren't in on the slaving ring, but that was no excuse. They should know that it was happening, and god damn it, they should have put a stop to it. But obviously the humans of Earth weren't important enough for that, or maybe it was the ruler of House Trillane itself who was profiting from the slaving, either directly or by bribes to turn a blind eye to it.

To *hell* with them. To hell with them *all*.

The urge to bring up his weapons and open fire on the dropship was so powerful that his fingers trembled over the weapons console. Trembling fingers yearned to do it, to open fire on the dropship and attract the attention of the station, but he knew that it would produce nothing. They would rescue the people inside, save a few hundred people, but he would be captured, and what was more, the person *behind* this operation would just write off those flunkies inside, wait for things to cool off, then go right back to it. The powerful urge to put a stop to it raged with his own sense of self-preservation, and the knowledge that nothing would be done, even if he stopped the dropship. Besides, Jyslin's aunt might be able to have the ship captured, so right now the only thing that mattered was getting in contact with her. *He* couldn't stop that ship without getting himself captured or killed, but he could get in contact with someone who *could* stop that ship. He zoomed in and took detailed picture logs of that cargo ship, named *Bresta's Pride*, then swore under his breath as he veered the ship around, turned the nose back towards the planet, then punched the engines into overdrive.

He counted the minutes, watching his rear display as he raced back to the planetary orbit as his mind swam and what could only be called *rage* burned inside him. He'd never been so angry, never in his life. He was so furious that it took everything in him to keep from turning around and attacking that cargo ship. But that would be a pointless, hollow gesture that would just get him killed and accomplish absolutely nothing. The only thing he could do now was turn to the only Faey that could help, and that was the Imperium. Jyslin and her aunt Lorna were the only ones that could save those people.

The instant he was in range of the comm satellites, he was pounding the keys of his holographic keyboard as the skimmer flew on autopilot. He first tried Jyslin's new phone number for her apartment in Washington, but she wasn't home. He tried her panel, and was redirected to her Marine Barracks headquarters. An armored Faey answered the call, a pretty young Marine with gray hair and amber-yellow eyes, wearing a headset. "Fort Lee Marine Barracks," she said in a pleasant manner.

"Patch me through to Sergeant Jyslin Shaddale *now*," he said with an intense look at her. "I don't care where she is or what she's doing. This is an emergency!"

"May I ask who's calling?" she asked, her face turning serious. "And what kind of emergency? Should I direct her to a hospital?"

"I don't have time for you!" he snapped at her. "Patch me through *now*! I don't care how you do it!"

"I can get you audio only," she said, looking down. "Hold on."

"*Sergeant Shaddale*," Jyslin's voice called over the picture, though the answering Marine's face did not disappear.

"Jyslin!" Jason barked.

"*Jason? Jason! What the hell are you doing calling me through barracks! Are you nuts!?*"

"Call your aunt Lorna *now!*" he snapped at her. "She's the only one who can stop them before they can get away!"

"*Stop who? What's wrong?*"

"House Trillane is selling people as *slaves!*" he literally shouted at the monitor.

"*What? Why do you think that?*"

"I saw it with my own eyes!" he raged at her. "There's a cargo ship parked beyond the supply station in orbit called *Bresta's Pride*. Have your aunt stop that ship, and you'll find humans on it!"

In his rearview monitor, he saw that cargo ship start turning. The dropship suddenly doubled its speed. "Shit! I'm on an open frequency, and they're receiving me! The ship's about to bug out, Jyslin! Have someone stop it!"

"*I—hold on,*" she said. "*I'm not sure I believe you, Jason, but I'll call Lorna and tell her what you said. Give me a second, she's within my sending range.*"

"You don't believe me? Why the hell wouldn't you believe me? You think I'd do something like call you over an open frequency and give myself away over something I wasn't absolutely sure about? *Think, woman!*"

"*Shut up a second!*" she barked, and Jason saw that the operator, still on the line and still looking at him, was now furiously typing under the view of the camera.

"That cargo ship's registered as an independent vessel," that operator told both of them. "Licensed under the Umrani Collective, currently under contract from Trillane to move food, replacing a cargo vessel that had an accident and is undergoing repairs. It—um, shit, it says here it has an onboard jump gate. All it has to do is get outside the planetary gravity well, and it can jump out without using the stargate."

"Well, they better hurry, because it's on the move as we speak," Jason growled.

"*I'm sorry, but Lorna says that she has no doubt that you believe what you say, but she can't order a ship stopped and searched on the word of a wanted fugitive,*" Jyslin told him, rather reluctantly.

"*She promises to have someone look into your allegations, though. If Trillane is secretly engaged in the slave trade, the Empress would blow a primary coil.*"

Jason gave the operator a murderous look, and the woman shrank back from the monitor on her side, visibly going pale. "I pass over a chance to stop that dropship myself, I risk my neck to call you, and all I get is *I'm sorry?*" he said in absolute outrage. "Is that what Lorna's going to tell the people in that ship, about to be sold like cattle? *I'm sorry?* Well that's not good enough!" he screamed, jerking the skimmer around so hard that it crushed him into his chair. "If you won't stop them, then god damn it, *I will!* Even if I have to ram that fucking ship!" He rocketed towards the cargo ship at maximum speed, which was now moving visibly, moving with deceptive slowness away from him, but that was only a trick of size and distance. He had no doubt that the ship was moving at maximum speed, but its size made it appear to move much slower than it actually was.

"*Jason! Jason, don't do anything stupid!*" Jyslin all but pleaded. "*I'm talking to Lorna right now! Just give me some time, please!*"

The ship before him grew slightly smaller, and then something happened. A strange reddish glow surrounded the vessel completely, like an aura of fire, and then the ship simply *vanished*.

"It's gone!" Jason gasped. "It was right in front of me!"

"*It must have jumped out,*" Jyslin told him.

Jason closed his eyes, bowing his head. Too late. He'd been too late. He'd had that dropship *in his fucking sights*, but had backed off to tell Jyslin, depended on the law that he knew of that made

slavery illegal, he had *put faith in the fucking system*, and it had done nothing more than let him watch that ship get away with innocent people on board, who were now going to be sold as slaves. He had them right there. All he had to do was open fire on that dropship, get the attention of the station, force them to come out and intervene. All he had to do was *not be fucking afraid*, and he could have saved those people, and maybe all the other people in that cargo ship. Him being captured or killed was more than an even trade for the lives that were on that dropship, lives that were now all but over. Lives he could have *saved*.

"Jason? Jason, are you there?"

"Goodbye, Jyslin," he said with no emotion at all. "Don't ever talk to me again."

And then he terminated the call.

It was an empty, cold flight back down.

Nobody understood what had happened, when he landed. Many of the people in the community were there waiting, despite the fact that it was nearly two in the morning. They cheered when he appeared in the doorway, but those cheers faded when they saw the look on his face. He walked right through them without looking at anyone, walked straight to his house, physically kicked Irwin out, who was riding the sensors, then locked his door.

He sat in his room all night. He did not eat, he did not sleep, he did not so much as get up from the chair by his bed. All he could hear was the terrified thoughts that had gripped those poor people. He had heard them, heard how afraid they were, and he had done *nothing*...and now he knew just how stupid he had been to think that he could have somehow convinced Lorna to stop that ship. After all, he was nothing but a fugitive from the law. Instead of doing what was right regardless of who was sending the warning, she had decided that his word that slaving was happening wasn't enough to justify any action...and those people were lost. Had she agreed to act, Jason wouldn't have turned to try to stop the ship, and it wouldn't have accelerated, and they might have had a chance. It may have still gotten away, but there was a chance, and at least there was the knowledge that Lorna had *tried*. But she had not, and he had depended on her. What he had done was just as good as sat there and let them get away, when he had had a chance to do something about it.

All those lives, and now they were gone.

It was then that, without emotion, he realized that nobody was going to do anything except *him*. His misplaced trust in Jyslin and the Imperium's dedication to the protection of its own citizens had cost hundreds of people their freedom, and possibly their lives. Trillane had proved that they were only here to rape Earth for anything they could get away with taking, and the human race would never be safe so long as the Trillane flag flew over the United Nations and the new capitol of Earth, New York City. The nobles of Trillane would keep selling away humanity one cargo ship at a time, and the Marines and the Empress weren't going to do anything about it.

Someone had to do something. And the only someone that would or could was *him*.

Just as the sun came up, Jason had made his decision. And that decision was that no matter what the odds, he would *fight*. He would not rest until Trillane was off of Earth, and either the Earth was free of the Imperium, or it had the right to look after itself.

There was a knock at the door. *Jason?* Symone sent from the other side. *Jason, can I come in?*

Assemble the community, he sent in reply. *Now. Wake them up.*

I'll see to it, she answered.

Everyone was tense and uncertain.

It had to be something *very* important if the mayor got everyone out of bed for a town meeting, and just about everyone knew what had happened the night before. They'd been curious and concerned at what had happened on Jason's test flight, and most of them knew that this meeting was probably going to explain that. But whatever it was, they all figured that it had to be major, if it couldn't wait until

everyone was awake.

When Jason came in, everyone went dead quiet. He was still wearing the clothes from the night before, and anyone who looked into his eyes could see something there, something that was just a little bit frightening. He stalked up the center aisle, then up onto the podium where the table holding the city council was located. He turned around and faced the crowd, and stared at them for a short moment.

“When the community is safely moved and I’m sure it’s safe, I’ll be leaving you,” he announced in a blunt tone.

That created a sudden storm of shouting and protest, and Jason had to hold up both of his hands to make everyone settle down.

“It has nothing to do with any of you,” he told them. “Last night—well, most of you know that something happened last night that upset me. You’re right. Last night, while testing the sensor cloak on my skimmer, I stumbled across a Trillane dropship that was smuggling human beings off Earth so they could be sold as slaves.”

That created immediate stunned silence, but they listened with rapt attention as Jason related what had happened the night before. “I tried to have it stopped by the Imperial Marines, but—“ he closed his eyes and looked away. “But they didn’t care. What I *should* have done was open fire on that dropship to force the space forces in orbit over the planet to send fighters to intervene. But I didn’t do that. I put faith in the Imperium, and it cost me the chance to save hundreds of people from being made slaves.

“Last night, I stayed up all night thinking about it, I’ve come to a decision. I was willing to live out here in peace because I was under the illusion that the Imperium was keeping order and upholding Imperial law on Earth, but it’s obvious that they’re not. House Trillane is selling us into slavery, and only God knows what else they’re doing behind their backs. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I just can’t live with myself knowing what they’re doing, and not doing anything about it. We are *human beings*, we are not *cattle*.

“So, about an hour ago, Jason Fox declared war on House Trillane and the Faey Imperium,” he said in a light, off-handed manner, which made a few people chuckle. “I know it’s utterly ridiculous. I know that I have virtually no chance of doing anything more than getting myself killed, but I simply cannot sit here and do nothing. Not anymore. What I’m going to do will get me killed, but at least I can go to my grave knowing that I *tried*. My conscious will be clear.

“Obviously, I can’t involve the community in this, so I’m going to be leaving you. I won’t bring any danger down on you. I’ll help you find a new place and set up what you need so you can’t be found by the Faey. I’ll leave most of my equipment with you, you’re going to need it. But when you’re settled in, I’ll be taking my skimmer and relocating to a new place. I won’t tell you where that is, mainly because even I don’t know where it is yet.”

“But, Mayor, they’ll just zap you with their telepathy!” someone called. “Nobody can fight them!” someone else cried out.

“Jason, son, there ain’t no way we’ll *let* you leave on a fool’s mission,” Clem said flatly. “There ain’t no way in hell anyone can beat them. They got the guns and the tech, and there’s no way around their telepathy.”

“I’ll *find* a way,” he stated flatly. “I don’t care what it takes. Either I find a way to beat them, or I *die trying*. Because at this point, it’s going to take the desperate acts of a crazy man to pull it off. You can call me a fool, you can call me a maniac, but it’s going to take something radical to get Trillane off of Earth, and damn it all, *someone* has to try. I just can’t sit here and do nothing when I know that Trillane is treating us like *assets* to be bought and sold instead of *people*.”

“And the first time you get within a hundred yards of them, it’s *over*,” Clem said with surprising intensity.

“Like I said, I’ll find a way to beat their telepathy,” he said with unruffled calm. “You’re not going to change my mind, Clem. No one is. Either we get Trillane off Earth, or I die, because I can’t live

with myself if I sat back and did *nothing*.” He looked back over the community. “I just wanted you to know now, so it’s not a surprise.”

“Don’t you understand, boy? It *can’t* be done!” Clem shouted.

“Actually, it can,” Symone said, standing up. “Clem, it’s easy to beat telepathy. You just fight fire with fire.”

“Symone,” Jason warned aloud, scowling at her.

“They should know, Jason,” she said simply. “They’ll find out anyway, and I know for a fact that quite a few already suspect it.”

“Suspect what?” Clem asked suspiciously.

“Jason is confident that he can beat their telepathy for a simple reason, Clem,” Symone said. “It’s because Jason is *also* a telepath. He’s a *human* telepath.”

All sound in the auditorium *stopped*.

“Why do you think he came out here? It wasn’t to escape from school, it wasn’t to get away from Jyslin. Well, not *completely*,” she said with a wink at him. “It’s because he’s a telepath. That’s why he’s not afraid of the Faey, because they can’t use their greatest weapon against him.”

“Is she telling the truth, son?” Clem asked, the look on his face seeming to Jason that he had just violated Clem’s darkest secret by shouting it from the church steeple.

“Oh, stop that, Clem,” Symone said testily. “You know him better than that. He’s the absolute soul of courtesy. Jyslin trained him well, and he never eavesdrops on the idle thoughts of those around him. He only listens when he believes he has a *duty* to listen to protect the community. Think, goof. You really think Jason goes around listening to what you’re thinking all the time? Take it from the one you *know* is a telepath, baby, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be. And Jason’s *human*, so he understands intimately how it feels for you to be violated by having someone listen to your thoughts. You really think he’d do that to you? puh-leeze. The only secret that’s ever been violated is *his*.”

What do you think you’re doing? Jason demanded, finally getting over his shock enough to protest.

Hush, cutie, and watch, she replied with an impish look at him.

“So, all of you just calm the fuck down,” she told them. “Jason *can* beat their telepathy, so he’ll be safe enough. Of course, that doesn’t solve the problem of how to stop it on a large scale, but at least he himself is going to be safe. So don’t refuse to let him go just because of that. He’s a grown man, after all, able to make rational decisions. I told you his secret so you can see for yourself that for him, this decision *is* rational. He *can* stop telepathy against himself.”

“How, how *do* other races stop telepathy, Symone?” someone called.

“Dozens of races have come up with a counter for our telepathy,” she said calmly, walking up onto the platform as Jason glared unholy murder at her. “The only way to beat a telepath is with *another* telepath. Nobody’s ever invented a machine that can interfere with telepathy, at least that I know of, but I’m just a grunt,” she chuckled. “From what I remember in my history classes and basic training, most of them threw all their resources into genetic engineering projects, artificially creating their own telepaths to deal with us. Every race out there we’re in contact with now has their own telepaths as a defense against us. We can’t go anywhere outside the Imperium without at least five of those fucking vultures shadowing our every step,” she said, making a face. “Okay, so, everyone understand now? Jason’s not being a maniac. His decision isn’t based on insanity. He didn’t want to tell you his secret because he was afraid it would put you in danger if the Faey ever raided the town. But, if the town’s going to move to a place where the Faey *can’t* find us, then why does it matter if you know or not? The only way they’d find us is with a low-level dropship scouting the area, getting close enough for the Faey in it to hear us all thinking...but they wouldn’t do that in a place where there’s nothing to attract their interest and bring them in the first place. I just didn’t want everyone thinking Jason was crazy. He’s *not* crazy.”

“I didn’t know humans could *be* telepaths,” Regina whispered.

“They sure can, Reggie,” Symone grinned. “But it seems to be really, really rare though. Only two

have been found by the Imperium so far. One of them was captured, one of them was killed while trying to escape. Me and Jason, we had a talk about that a long time ago. Both the telepaths they found, and Jason, all had one thing in common. They were on close terms with Faey, exposed to Faey for long periods every day. We think that exposure to telepathy over a period of time can make it come out in those rare few humans that have the ability. That's why it took so long for it to show up. There's very few humans with talent, and those telepaths have to be very close to a Faey for it to express, because it won't express by itself." She looked around. "You never know, there might be a telepath lurking down in the crowd, just needing enough exposure to me and my talent to wake it up. There's no way to tell, really," she told them with a slight smile, glancing at Tim and Temika. "Well, that's all I had to say."

"You, are going to die," Jason said under his breath at her.

"Just let me take my pants off before you spank me, Jayce," she said with an outrageous grin. "I need some welts, so Tim can kiss it and make it better." She kissed him on the cheek, then sauntered down off the stage.

"Well," Jason grunted. "I won't deny what Symone told you. I *am* a telepath. And yes, that's why I'm willing to do what I'm going to do."

"That's how you knew about the slaves," Leamon mused.

Jason nodded, looking back at him. "I could hear the terror in their thoughts. It was so strong that it bled through my usual defenses against overhearing thoughts, and made me investigate. I know that some of you think I betrayed you by never telling you, but think about it. Anything you know, a *Faey* will know if she gets close enough to you. Not telling you protected you as much as me.

"Anyway, that's all I really had to say. We need to start searching for a new place to settle in, but I didn't sleep all night, so we're going to start the airborne surveying tomorrow. What I'd like to do today is for those of us who have the most experience with the local terrain to get together and start discussing possible places to look. I know Temika for one's been just about all over, and quite a few of you are well traveled in this area. All of you need to get together and start throwing out spots. Tim and Steve can tell you generally what kind of terrain we're gonna need to hide the place, so they should sit in on it as well. Right now, I'm gonna go strangle Symone, then I'm going to bed."

That produced a few nervous chuckles.

"You. My house. *Now*," he said, pointing directly at Symone.

The meeting broke up at that point. They all stared at him, stared at him as if they'd only just seen him for the first time. Tim and Temika were staring at each other uncertainly, the sendings flying between them, but Jason wasn't really listening. He had no idea what kind of wild idea Symone had by telling them the truth, but the truth was out, the damage was done, and there was nothing that he could do about it. Right now all he could do was try to assess the damage, chastise Symone for blabbing, and focus on the tasks at hand.

First, he had to find a new place for the community.

Then, they had to move to that new place.

While they were doing that, he had to find a place for himself, someplace large, someplace where he could hold a great amount of equipment without the Faey detecting it.

Then, he had to figure out just how he was going to go about successfully driving House Trillane off Earth without getting himself killed.

It certainly wasn't going to be easy...but nothing worthwhile ever was.

He'd just have to wait and see.

Chapter 11

*Kaira, 33 Demaa, 4393, Orthodox Calendar
Sunday, 8 December 2007, Native Regional Reckoning
Chesapeake, Ohio (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector*

Luck had been with them.

It only took them four days to find a new location for the settlement, and that was what was once the capitol of West Virginia, Charleston. It was only about 50 miles east of Huntington, and the downtown area of the city was almost exactly what they needed. It was a deep valley with suitably steep hills on either side, a narrow valley compared to the wide valley in which Huntington sat, but wide enough for them to live in and set up farmland. The valley was long, and it had two outlets that could easily be defended. The sides of the valley were just steep enough to make moving large vehicles over them extremely difficult. There was a narrow plateau to the southeast of that main valley where the horses could be kept and more farmland could be set, though hiding that area wasn't going to be as easy as the valley.

The work helped Jason keep his mind off other things. He was utterly serious about leaving, and though every single person in the community tried to talk him out of it, except for Symone, he would not budge. None of them understood the crushing responsibility he felt for the lives of those poor people who had been taken, because he had been in a position to do something about them, but had decided to put his trust in the Imperium instead of depending on himself.

Not anymore.

Well, he supposed he should eventually call Jyslin and apologize. After all, she was just the messenger, and it was wrong to shoot the messenger over the message she conveyed. But he had been rightfully angry, and Jyslin's attitude, worrying more about him than the people on that ship, it rubbed him a bit raw.

The other thing was the revelation that Symone had dropped on everyone. They all knew now that he was a telepath, and after a few days for it to sink in, he'd seen the way it changed everyone's view of him. He had no idea what they were thinking, mainly because he wouldn't eavesdrop, but some of the community seemed nervous around him now. A few actively avoided him, a few only gave perfunctory greetings and then hurried off on imagined tasks, but most simply didn't engage him in conversation the way they used to. That hurt, more than he thought it would, but at least those who knew him longest and best seemed to not care about his secret. Clem, Leamon, Luke and Steve, Mary, most of the original community members, they'd been together too long for that to matter as much as others thought it should. They knew how devoted he was to the community and to his friends, and were willing to forgive him for his secrecy and accept him for what he was. He felt a little alienated now...but maybe that was for the best. He'd be leaving them soon. He needed to find a place to set up his base of operation, but that would have to wait.

He had other matters, more important at the moment.

After an extensive, 16 hour survey of the terrain and taking lots and lots of pictures, Jason, Tim, and Steve sat down and worked out how they were going to hide it. They realized that just one inverse phase emitter wasn't going to hide the area they intended to secure, so they would have to build two, one on either side of the planned settlement. Those had to go in first, because they were going to hide the hologram system they had in mind. Once the emitters were installed, then they had to build the holographic screen.

A day's research on Civnet produced a list of needs. They were going to need 24 separate projectors, each one separated by 550 yards, as well as six projectors arrayed in a roughly circular configuration to cover the plateau outside the valley. Those projectors were not cheap. They were

C6,750 each, and that was a grand total of C162,000...*just* for the projectors. They were going to need a computer to control the system, as well as cabling, mounts, shielding, and some cable housing. They also needed the components for a second emitter. Add all that in, and the hologram system was going to cost them C194,574. It would take about two weeks to install, as long as they had a team doing it. It wouldn't be hard at all, the money was the only issue.

Money. He swivelled in his chair and brought up Civnet, then visited the First Bank of Moridon. In his special, untraceable, completely anonymous account, he had C216,984.233. There had been three royalty payments since the last time he'd bought the cloaking equipment, payments received for the Imperium using his technological ideas for communicators on a water planet and to help control the population of a dangerous insect on another. *That*, he didn't mind seeing. He'd never hand over his railgun to the Imperium, but if they wanted to use his hypersonic ideas for things that helped people, he had no objections whatsoever.

Given the state of his bank account, right now he could just *barely* afford to buy what was needed, after he paid Kumi her cut for transport and delivery...which would be her last. Her conscription was coming up, and besides, she was a Trillane. Even if she didn't know what was going on with the slavery, he would soon become a direct enemy to her house, and he knew that after that happened she would not help him anymore. In fact, he would bet that she would seek to cut off his royalty payments using those shadowy connections she had, the same ones that had arranged to channel his payments into the account he held now. He was more or less planning for that. After Kumi went to start her conscription, he would be alone, and would be forced to find other, more creative ways to fund his rebellion.

He already had a few ideas. Gold was a precious metal, even for the Faey, and there was quite a bit of it laying around, if one was patient enough to comb houses for jewelry that had been left behind. It was useless to the squatters, and as such was not taken when squatters pillaged houses for useful things. Another option was the direct, black-market sale of certain things over Civnet, like food, or certain "collectibles" of Terran curiosities that collectors would be interested in. It turned out that the "archaic mass driver weaponry" that humans had used before the subjugation were collector's pieces among gun collectors. A single pistol could go for upwards of C2,500 over the Civnet underground, depending on make, model, and rarity, and the military weapons, like assault weapons, could go for as much as C15,000. By selling off his guns, Jason could raise cash to buy the materials to make railguns. This would be tricky, because Jason had always just thrown everything he owned in with the collective community property. Even his house served an official community role, being the seat of the sensor system and a meeting place, as well as somewhere anyone could come to and voice a concern to Jason, who would pass that on to the council during meetings. Selling off his guns would force him to separate his possessions from community property.

But that time was coming, and coming soon. When he left, he had to take enough with him to support both himself and his mission, and that meant that there was going to have to be some sorting. Certain things, though, were going to stay with the community, no matter how useful they'd be to him. The replicator would stay, for example. They were going to need it, and besides, Jason would be securing assets in less legal ways once he got started. He fully intended to fully equip his "rebel base" at the expense of Trillane, by stealing what he needed from them. He had his panel, and if a certain idea worked out the way he hoped, he'd have complete and unfettered access to their entire system. Communications, troop movements, orders, logistical layouts, material placement...everything would be open and unlocked for him.

And the magic key that would open the bounty of the assets of Trillane laid within the small, supple, and dangerous hands of Eleri Trillane.

He remembered when she had put him into the Trillane encryption protocol. Eleri was a Countess, a very, very high ranking member of the house, and her mother was a *Duchess*. She answered *only* to the head of the house, the Grand Duchess. Eleri knew any number of Trillane's secrets, and what was

more important, *she had access to the highest levels of Trillane's computer network.*

That was a target worth the rather dangerous idea he had cooking in the back of his mind. Well, Kumi had been after him for quite a while to go to Dracora before her conscription. He was just going to have to cave in. He would go to Dracora, get into her house, and do whatever it took to secure access to Trillane's internal network and get access to their encryption protocols, which would let him decrypt their communications. But he had to do it without her knowing what he was up to, and he'd be doing it under the watchful, almost accusing eyes of Fure. He'd have to get past Fure, dupe Meya and Myra, and then steal what he needed from her without her knowledge.

If he had access to the Trillane network, he'd know when and where their forces were going to be, and that would let him strike for maximum damage with minimum risk. What to strike...that was the delicate issue.

There was much more going on here than just the Trillanes. Earth was the second largest food producing planet in the Imperium, and the flow of that food to the rest of the Imperium was something that was both the key to getting rid of Trillane and also the sword that could chop off his head. The objective here was not kicking the Faey off Earth. That wasn't going to happen, not now. The Imperium *depended* on the food they produced on Earth, without it, people would literally starve. That food had to be disrupted *just enough* to force the Empress to pull Trillane off Earth, but not so much that he brought her wrath down upon the planet.

That was the very tricky balancing act.

Jason leaned back and pondered just what they would have to do. The entire philosophy of any kind of resistance movement would be to bury themselves so deeply that not even Faey telepathy was going to find them. From that secure location, they would have to sally out and engage in stealth warfare, *guerilla* warfare, striking at targets with speed and haste, then fading away before Trillane could organize an armed response. Because of the vulnerability of the strike team, it had to be limited only to those numbers that Jason could defend using talent...maybe four or five. And those other people couldn't be very far away from him. Casualties in these strikes had to be kept to a minimum, controlled attacks with specific objectives. Humans may be working for the Trillanes, but they were not the enemy. For that matter, the Faey weren't entirely the enemy either. He had no real malice towards the soldiers of Trillane, his enmity was placed more or less on the nobles themselves. Killing Trillane soldiers would bring him no pleasure, because he could be killing Faey like Symone. Not that he'd really get any pleasure out of killing nobles either. His vengeance was more or less focused on those who had been actively trading humans as slaves.

What they would need to do is *harass* Trillane, not engage in *war* with Trillane. But, he couldn't escalate his attacks to such a point that it caused the Empress to directly intervene.

He looked at his list of written objectives. The first objective was to gain access to the Trillane system, and that meant dealing with Kumi. After that access was achieved, the objective was to use that access to locate cargo transports, then to use that access to disable sensors that would allow armed groups to intercept them, capture them, and take the cargo without Trillane organizing a response. Any food on those dropships would then be offered directly to the Empress herself, *free*. Trillane was *paid* for the food they produced. Jason hoped that by surrendering that food to the Empress, it would keep her out of what was entirely an internal matter for House Trillane, and assure her that the resistance wasn't trying to break away from the Imperium, it was only engaging in violent protest against the house that ruled its planet.

Jason would love to do just that, to break away from the Imperium, but that was one stark reality that was not going to change. The Imperium now depended on the food from Earth, and they would fight tooth and nail to keep possession of it. What he wanted to do was improve the standing of humanity *within* the Imperium. If he could find a way to force Trillane off Earth, humanity would be in a position to bargain hard with the Empress over just who came to replace them, and wring some concessions out of her.

Not that it really mattered, he supposed. At most, he would be a minor irritation, he'd stir up some trouble, maybe do some damage, then he'd be captured. That was probably the reality of what was coming, but at least he could look back on it and say he *tried*. To him, that mattered.

The door opened, and Symone sidled into his room. *Hey cutie, she sent lightly. When are you going to get out from behind that thing and come downstairs? Mika is cooking us some gumbo.*

When I find everything I'm looking for, he answered. *Buying the parts for the projector system is going to bankrupt me. Right now I'm exploring some other ways to make money.*

How so?

He explained the two ideas he'd had so far. *There's plenty of old jewelry laying around, so that's an option. But the community is going to need the guns, so I'm not too keen on that idea.*

There's an easier way, you know.

Oh? And just what that might be? he asked, turning to look at her.

You'd make a killing in the porn industry.

She laughed when he threw his empty water bottle at her. *Actually, the jewelry idea's a good start, but you should look at other stuff. Lots of the girls in my unit were into old furniture and shit like that. There's lots of stuff laying around out here...you might be able to start up some kind of antiques trade. You might even be able to sell the jewelry as jewelry instead of gold.*

Hmm, that's actually a decent idea. I didn't look into that. Of course, moving it out of here would be a problem, but right now everything's just speculation.

Why the worry about money?

What Kumi set up, she can take down. After I start making a nuisance of myself, she'll probably sabotage my income. How are they doing down there?

They've made two railguns, she answered. They haven't tested them yet. Steve and Tim had to rewrap the coils around the ones that Luke and Leamon made, so that slowed them down.

I showed them how to do it.

Yeah, and you're dealing with tolerances in the fractions of ketha, she answered. *Given it's the first time they've ever done it, I'm surprised that Luke and Leamon managed it. They're mechanics, not technicians. Jason.*

Yeah?

When you go, me and Tim are going with you, she told him.

You know what's going to happen.

Yeah, and it's something that might eventually happen anyway, she told him. *Face it, hon. I'm a Faey, living in the human settlement. This is borrowed time for me. Eventually, they're gonna catch me, and then it's either prison or looking down the barrel of an MPAC. The only chance me and Tim have of living any kind of normal life is with you. I'd rather die fighting for a chance at that life than never have that chance at all.*

There was little he could say to that, so he simply nodded and held out his hand to her. She took it, and that contact allowed him to see the grim understanding of what was coming, but also the hope that they just might succeed. She sat down on his lap and looked at his panel screen. *What's this shit?*

He reached over her and tapped a few keys on the holographic keyboard, showing her *Kumida*, Civnet's version of the old internet Ebay. Civnet spanned 72 star systems, so *Kumida*, which meant *The shopping mall* in English, was only one of the many trading sites. *Kumida* was one of the larger ones, as well as one of the ones where less than legal goods could be found for sale, if one had the patience to look for them. *I was looking to see if I could pick up used models of the projectors we need, but they're hard to find. It seems that theatres snap them up whenever one's being sold. I'll probably have to buy new ones.*

You know, you could use Kumida to sell stuff, she reasoned. *We just need to find a way to get it out.*

Actually, Kumi already thought that up for me, he told her.

Oh yeah, the business idea. Think it'll work?

I think it will...I'm just worried about how Kumi will interfere with that setup when I stop being friendly. How well do you know Faey business?

She laughed brightly. Cutie, I know shit about business. I'm a soldier. I'll probably be a soldier all my life, because I haven't been rated for any job that pays anything worth anything. Even if I was back outside, I'd be looking at a life as a factory worker or farmer if I left the service. At least in the service, I get free food and board, and more pay than I'd get stamping circuit boards in some factory on some uninhabitable planet that uses biodomes to sustain the populace.

Jason snorted. Well, it was worth a shot. I want to ask your opinion on something.

Shoot.

He used sending to convey his idea for stealing Trillane's protocols from Kumi. What do you think?

I think it's not very feasible, she answered. You have no idea where it is, and odds are, she's got security around what you're looking for. Last time I saw, you build things, you're not a highly trained computer expert. Hell, even you admit that Steve is better at the computer shit than you are. I don't think you could get what you're after by yourself without getting caught.

I was hoping for a better assessment than that.

You're about to move up into the big leagues, cutie. In the big leagues, you're just a newbie. But there might be a way to get what you're after.

How?

Just do it the way the pros do it, hon. When a noble wants something stolen, she hires a Kimdori. When a noble wants someone followed or information gathered, she hires a Kimdori. If you want the way to access Trillane's security network from Kumi, you need to hire a Kimdori.

I hadn't thought of that.

Well, good thing I'm here then, she sent grandly. And I just happen to be on very friendly terms with a Kimdori. I'll give Thraama a call and hint that I might be interested in locating and hiring one of the more highly trained members of his clan. Thraama's a diplomat now, he would know how to do what we need, but he wouldn't do it himself. But, he would give us a name of someone who will.

And just how much would it cost me?

I really couldn't tell you. Kimdori are weird. Sometimes they charge a million credits for a job, then turn around and charge someone else one credit to do the same job. With Kimdori, a lot of it depends on if she likes you or not. The only thing I can tell you for certain is that whoever Thraama suggests would demand a face to face meeting. No Kimdori will work for anyone unless they meet in person first. They call it the interview. That's when they set the price.

So we'd have to go to New Columbus.

We'd definitely have to leave the frontier. One thing you should contact Kumi about now, before we burn that bridge, is having one of her shady friends set you up some fake IDs, so you can move around outside. Yeah, your face is well known, but if you whip out an ID that says your name is Ralph Mason from Oregrown—

Oregon.

Whatever. Anyway, if you show that ID with a different name and your projected thoughts match that ID, they'd let you go by.

That's a good idea. It's just gonna cost money, and money's what I'm in short supply of at the moment.

You should at least call Kumi and see if she can get you a general price range. Once you have that ID, you can sneak across the border and visit that business thing you were talking about, or meet with the Kimdori. It could even let you get the projectors and shit without having to go through Kumi. That's something I don't think we'd want her to know about.

You're right. So, the fake ID is the first order of business. Then the projectors, then the business.

Then, if I have the money, we contact your Kimdori friend. Exactly what does Thraama do, anyway? Just out of curiosity.

He's a diplomat.

He works for the Kimdori government?

The Kimdori don't have what you'd call a central government, cutie. They're a collection of clans, each its own independent entity. He represents his clan, not his government. But I haven't talked to him in months, there's really no telling what he's doing now, she sent with an audible chuckle.

Sounds a bit wild.

Yeah, he's a little wild, she agreed. But that's what made him fun.

Alright then, let's get this done. I'll call Kumi and find out how much fake IDs will cost me, then I'll go down and see how they're doing with the railguns. Me and Steve have to talk about the exomech too.

What you're going to do with it?

Actually, if we're going to pull the power plant to use to power the projector system, he answered. Right now, the exomech's more or less guaranteed to be dismantled. It's too big to put in my skimmer, so we have to take it apart and move it in sections.

You're keeping it?

He nodded. If I can't use it as an exomech, I can use its parts. Did you ever log any time in an exomech?

Afraid not, cutie. I've never so much as sat in the cockpit of one

Well, it was an idea. Go on downstairs, let me call Kumi.

Sure. See ya in a bit.

Jason blew out his breath and immediately got right to it. He wanted to get this done, both so he could go get some of Temika's excellent cooking, and so he could check and see how Tim, Steve, Luke, and Leamon were doing assembling the railguns. He'd replicated the cases and demonstrated to Steve how one was built, who was now overseeing the other three when Jason wasn't down there. Jason had built two more in training Steve in the procedure, bringing their total up to four, but he hoped to get at least one built a day. They really weren't that hard to build, only wrapping the barrel required any precision. Those four could build one railgun a day in just a matter of hours. As the wrapper did that delicate task, the other three could assemble the other parts of the gun, then simply put it all together when the wrapper was done. Jason only had the materials on hand to build 30 railguns, and he wanted to build 28, leaving spare parts on hand for repairs.

He dialed Kumi's personal number after checking to see what time it was on Draconis, inwardly wondering how it was going to feel to talk to someone that he intended to betray. Well, not betray personally, anyway. Kumi was a good friend, but she *was* a Trilllane, and very soon now he would be directly opposing that noble house. He wondered again if she knew anything about the slaving, even as the window holding the video link on his panel flickered. Kumi appeared on the other side, wearing a frilly bra. Jason pondered idly that every time he called her, she was either wearing her workout halter or a bra. Didn't this girl ever stay dressed in her own room? "Eleri. Talk," she said, not even bothering to look at the monitor after answering, standing up and turning her back to the monitor, preparing to put on a white shirt of some kind. She had on a short white skirt of some sort...it looked eerily like a tennis outfit, but they didn't play tennis on Draconis. But the skirt was short and looked kind of sporty, giving it the illusion that it was. That, or he was just assigning his human customs to what he was seeing...there was no telling where she was about to go or what she was about to do.

"I was just wondering if you ever bothered to stay dressed in your room," Jason noted.

She looked back over her shoulder, then laughed. "Why do you say that?"

"Every time I call, you're either wearing your workout halter, or you're in your bra and panties. I think this is the first time in a while I've called when you're about to become dressed."

"Well, far be it for me to break tradition," she said with a smirk, tossing her shirt aside. She

reached up and grabbed the clasp of her bra, where it connected at the base, between her breasts. "Want me to ditch this too? We gotta make sure you feel comfortable," she added with a wink.

"But that's not tradition," he countered. "Tradition is bra on."

"You're no fun," she said, sitting down at her desk. "Now, what's on your mind? Need something?"

"Sort of. Actually, it's more of an inquiry," he answered. "I'm seeing if you *can* get me something. Something that's not entirely easy to get."

She looked at his face, then looked down and started typing on the keyboard under his field of view. Quickly, the call entered that secure, encrypted mode that made their communication private. "Sounds like it's the kind of thing we'll need this for," she told him. "What were you thinking about?"

"I was wondering how hard it would be for you to find someone to make fake identification that would fool most people," he asked.

She snorted. "Shit, babe, that's way easy, but it's not gonna fool anyone you meet face to face," she told him. "I've thought about that since the day we met, but it ain't gonna let you leave your preserve. The first time you flash that fake ID at a soldier, you're busted. Even a perfect ID ain't gonna get you past the first Faey you try to use it on."

"But you can do it," he prompted. "How much would it cost?"

"Two thousand's the going rate for a fake ID. Now, if you want an entire fake *persona*, complete with fake birth certificates, records, shit like that, that runs about ten thousand. You're a human though, so it'd probably be double that, since that means that they'll have to hack a non-central system to plant the fake data. That's more security to go through, so the price goes up. I'll have to ask around a bit. I know any number of people that can do it. I'll see how much they think it'd cost to pull it off. I'll shop for the best deal, as it were."

"I don't need anything that fancy, Kumi. I just need something that'll get me past anyone who stops me on the street, but it also has to be good enough to let me use that fake ID over Civnet."

"Well, that's not gonna work, babe," she warned. "The name on that card's not gonna match your thoughts. No ID is going to fool a Faey soldier." Her eyes widened. "Unless you *are*," she said, then she licked her lips. "Well, if you *are*, then I guess it'd work. Are you?"

"Let me worry about how I'm going to use it," he said carefully.

"I knew it! You *are*!" she said happily, clapping her hands together.

"Kumi."

"What?"

"Can you get the ID?"

"In an hour," she told him dismissively.

"Good. Do it."

She looked at him. "What hair got up your ass today, babe? You're usually not this cranky. What's wrong?"

He looked her right in the eye. "When you get the ID, I'm going to have you drop it off, just leave it at our meeting point and get back home fast."

"What?"

"You don't want to be here right now. I won't let you stay."

"What? Why the fuck not?"

"You should know," he scoffed. "I'm surprised that wasn't the first thing you started talking about."

"What are you talking about, babe?"

He pursed his lips. "They must have covered it up," he reasoned. They *had* to have, if even Kumi didn't know...and she had very long ears. That answered one of his questions about calling Kumi. Maybe she didn't know about the slaving.

"Covered what up?" she asked.

"The fact that Trillane has been kidnapping humans and selling them into slavery," he told her, rather coldly.

"*What?*" she gasped. "Neme's garland! You've gotta be kidding!"

"I'm dead serious," he stated flatly. "I saw it personally."

She sat back heavily in her chair. "Shit...well, shit. Shit," she droned, looking at nothing in particular. "Holy fuck, if the Imperials find out about it, we're screwed. Slaving is *way* illegal. Our house could lose its charter if it's true."

"They already know," Jason answered. "The first thing I did was get in touch with my Marine friend. But, they wouldn't believe me," he said, a bit spitefully.

"But someone still ordered mouths closed, or I'd have heard about it," Kumi reasoned, leaning forward on her elbows and looking into the monitor at him. "Did they attack *you*? The slavers? Are all your people alright?"

"We're all fine, and thanks for asking," he said with sincere gratitude. "But because of this, I'm moving the community. Too many people know it's here, and it's nothing but a big target. We've already got our new site selected and we're gathering up the materials we need to hide ourselves."

"Yeah, that's not a bad idea," she agreed. "But they wouldn't target your community because you're there. Nobody knows you live in it but me, and I haven't told anyone."

"Really? If nobody knows I'm here, how did that food shipment get dropped fifty *shakra* from our outer wall?"

She was about to say something, but her jaw clicked shut, and she furrowed her brow.

"That's right. Whoever that was that hired you to bring you to me knows *exactly* where I am."

"But she'd never—" she said, then she blinked.

"And just who is *she*?" Jason asked pointedly.

"I, I can't say," she said.

"Kumi."

"I *really* can't tell you, babe," she said seriously.

"Kumi, you're one step from being whipped."

She laughed nervously. "All right, all right, but if you ever tell anyone I said, I'll beat you. She was an agent from the Imperial Bureau of Science. The Bureau contacted me directly and told me that they knew I was helping you, and they wanted to meet you. They paid me a lot of money, but also hinted that me *not* helping wouldn't be very healthy...and you don't take those kinds of innuendos lightly, not when they come from Imperial agents. That's why she could make your criminal record disappear. All she had to do was send a call to the Bureau of Justice, and your criminal record would just vanish like smoke."

"She was *Imperial*?" Jason said in surprise.

"Yeah, she was Imperial," Kumi nodded. "So, this means that Imperial Intelligence knows where you are, but they're not telling anyone. Not even the Marines looking for you," she mused. "And I'll bet my panties that they're actively interfering with Trillane and the Marines looking for you. They don't *want* you to be found."

"Okay, that explains a hell of a lot," Jason grunted. So *that* was where that exomech came from! No wonder they didn't mind dropping a million credit piece of military equipment into his community...they could definitely afford it! And the test was to see if Jason could puzzle out military technology!

And that certainly presented a new set of problems. If the Imperium knew where he was and was protecting him from capture, he had to vanish from *them* before he could start working in earnest to kick Trillane off Earth...or would he? Would the Imperium interfere in what would be a purely local matter? After all, his entire plan hinged on getting rid of Trillane *without* drawing the wrath of the Empress. If, as it looked, the Imperium wasn't going to interfere...well, that left open some interesting possibilities. But that was only speculation. The fact of the matter was that the Imperium was actively

courting him, and one of those things they were doing to court him was to actively disrupt the attempts of others within the Imperium to find him. It looked to him like there were factions within the Imperium, each with its own agenda. And there were ways to exploit that fractious organization.

The biggest question he had to find the answer to was, what would the Imperium do when they found out he was engaged in warfare against Trillane? Would they intercede to protect him, or spearhead the operation to capture him? Or would they simply stay out of it?

For that, he had no answer but to wait and see.

"Babe, I'm going to nose around a little," she told him. "If someone in Trillane is involved in illegal slaving, I want to know who. I'm not above breaking the occasional law, but I don't pull shit that can get our house's charter yanked. You don't *do* that. You just don't do that," she said grimly.

"You be careful," he warned. "They buried this in a hole, and if you start digging, they may shoot you and bury you with it."

"Miaari will help. Remember the purple winged thing that was with me that one time I visited?"

"The Kimdori?"

She grinned. "Oh yeah, I forgot you got a Faey there. Yeah, she's a Kimdori. She's also my best friend, and Kimdori have ways of finding things out. I'll ask her to look into it, and she'll find out what I want to know. It'll never be traced back to me. When I find out who's gambling with our entire noble house, I think I might start taking some steps," she said in an ominous manner.

"Be careful, young lady," Jason said sternly, though privately, he was thrilled at what he just heard. Kumi wasn't part of the slaving, and what was more, she was outraged at it...but not for the reason he may have hoped. She wasn't outraged at the enslaving of humankind, she was outraged that a renegade member of her house was jeopardizing its standing in the Imperium. But he'd take that outrage, if for no other reason than that it meant that he could trust her in this matter.

"I will. I'll have that ID set up and shipped out as fast as I can. I think I'll just have it dropped, I won't come visit. Just have someone at our usual place watching for it."

"Can do. Call me when you have news, okay?"

"You bet, babe. I'll call back in two hours, my time, and give you the info about the ID."

"I'll be here."

"Good. Later."

"Be careful, Kumi."

"Always," she winked, then she cut the connection.

Jason leaned back in his chair, then leaned forward with his chin on his laced fingers before him. Kumi wasn't going to like what he had planned for Trillane, but he was relieved that she wasn't a part of it. He believed her reaction to his news, and the fact that Trillane covered it up helped reinforce his faith that she wasn't involved. He wasn't quite sure why it was being hushed up on the Imperial side, but they had to have a reason. Maybe they wanted it kept quiet to find those involved, or they were watching a suspect...or who knows, maybe whoever was behind it had paid off certain people in the Imperial government to forget it happened. Given the corruption prevalent in the Faey system, both at Imperial and house level, that was certainly possible. In the Faey system, much as the old American system just before the subjugation, money could indeed buy just about anything.

He sighed and got up, then went downstairs to where the others were working. They were building railguns, and though they'd already built two, but from the sound of it, they weren't doing all that well. When he came down, he saw Leamon and Luke watching as Steve wrapped a barrel, as he explained to them that the coils had to be *exact*, that their precise placement along the barrel was what created the weapon's power. Just one coil wrapped incorrectly would render the gun unusable, if it didn't blow up in the user's hands first. Introducing a wobble into a projectile travelling faster than 10,000 miles an hour was not good. "Hey guys," Jason called as he came off the last step. "Just checking in. How's it going?"

"Slow but sure," Steve replied, pointing behind him. "We're ready to test those two. I'm just

showing Lacy and Luke how to wrap the barrels.”

“Good. Want me to test those?”

“Up to you,” Steve shrugged. Jason picked one up and activated it, but the backglass remained black. He flipped it over and saw that it had no PPG installed. He picked up one from the work table and inserted it with quick, practiced hands, then tried to turn the weapon on again. The backglass lit up, and it started the diagnostic test that Jason had written, so Jason was intimately familiar with every character that scrolled across that tiny screen. The weapon reported all functions normal, then went into its normal operating mode, that being in safety mode. Jason loaded a magazine into the weapon and disengaged both safeties, which caused the weapon to make a high-pitched whine as the coils charged, and the backglass display to turn red, warning him that the weapon was hot and capable of firing.

“Everything’s working the way it should,” he noted.

“Yeah, we did all that, we just haven’t *fired* it,” Tim told him. “We kinda wanted either you or Symone to do that.”

“Why us?”

“Armor,” he said, which caused the other three to nod meaningfully. “If we fucked it up and it blows up, we want someone with armor on to be the one holding it.”

Jason laughed. “I’d be offended if that wasn’t a reasonable precaution,” he said with a grin. “Let me go put it on, then we’ll test them.”

It didn’t take Jason to put his armor on, because he’d had enough practice at it. He was back down in the basement in fifteen minutes, holding his helmet in one hand as the other held the handrail as he came down the steps. “Okay, I’m ready,” he called, coming down to where he could see them. “Come on outside, we’ll go down to the river. That’s the safest place to test it.” He pointed to a cabinet by the replicator. “Bring a bunch of full magazines. Testing it doesn’t mean we shoot it once. We’ll stress test it while we’re at it.”

“Man, that armor is so fuckin’ sweet,” Leamon chuckled. “I’d love a suit of it.”

“Yeah, I like it myself,” he said, touching the phoenix enamelled on the chest of his armor. “It cost me enough, though. I’d originally planned on buying a suit of it for everyone who worked security, but now I won’t have the money. Buying the projectors to hide the new settlement is going to bankrupt me.”

“Were we going to pull the power plant out of the exomech for that?” Steve asked.

“Well, that’s something we need to talk about,” he said as Luke filled a small backpack with magazines, and Steve picked up the two railguns that they were going to test. Jason continued to talk as they all started up the stairs. “If we can’t get it to power up, it’s best if we just pull the plant and disassemble it. As it is, it’s too large to move, and when we leave, we can’t leave it behind. So it has to go, either under its own power or in pieces.”

“Even if we can get it to power up, we can’t take it out of the box,” Steve reminded him. “It’s not shielded.”

“I know. We’d either have to invest a month into converting it to stealth or take it apart, but even that lends its own problems. Taking something like that apart isn’t going to be easy, and transporting it is going to take up valuable cargo space. But we can’t just leave it behind either,” he grunted as they stepped out into a refreshingly brisk early winter afternoon. The sun was shining, and the air was cold...that was probably Jason’s favorite weather. “That glorified paperweight is a pain in our asses no matter what we do.”

“Even if we could get it going, nobody can run it,” Leamon said.

“Oh, I can *run* it,” Jason said. “But I couldn’t pilot it in combat. Just driving it isn’t all that hard, from the looks of the manuals. It’s rather simple, actually. It’s when you get into all its other systems that it gets complicated.”

“So it’s not like a plane, where you have all that training?” Luke asked.

Jason shook his head. “No, just making it walk is pretty simple, it’s done with the foot pedals if you’re using the arms, or a control stick if you’re not. The machine walks itself, you just tell it what direction to go in and how fast to go. Just like my armor, it has an antigrav system that lets it travel at high speed. It kinda skates over the ground on a cushion of antigravity, but the manual I read doesn’t recommend using the antigrav during combat, because of weapon recoil turning the machine.”

“You think you could learn how to fight using it?” Steve asked.

“With *lots* of practice, maybe,” he answered with a chuckle. “And I wouldn’t be very good at it. Faey exomech pilots train for a year before they’re even allowed to use one in combat.”

They stopped near the riverbank, and Jason immediately took the railgun he’d loaded earlier from Tim and disengaged the safety. “Okay guys, now’s the test,” he said as he set the railgun on the butt of its stock and leaned it against his leg, then put his helmet on. The new railguns included smartgun links in them, because that was a part of the weapon’s design, and Steve followed that design faithfully. The smartgun link came active when he took up the weapon and grabbed hold of the grip, causing the pads in the weapon and in his gauntlet to link up and start communicating with each other. All the familiar data he was used to with the smartgun came up on his visor, complete with the crosshair that appeared whenever he was looking in the general direction of where the weapon was pointing, when the weapon’s aim was within his field of vision. “The smartgun’s working,” he noted as he shouldered the weapon, bringing it into a firing position. “I suggest you guys back up a little,” he warned as he took aim at the water near the opposite shore. “If it blows up, you don’t want to be right beside me.”

They all quickly backed off, moving nearly fifteen feet back, and Jason wasted no time giving the weapon a real test. He pulled the trigger.

There was the familiar *BEE-yah!* sound of the weapon, and the blue corkscrew of smoke that emanated from the barrel and traveled in a straight line over the river announced to the four behind him that the weapon did indeed work as intended. This weapon, just like his own, did not create a sonic boom...and he’d be damned if he *still* didn’t know what had caused that.

“Well, looks good,” Jason said as the four behind gave out whoops and gave each other high-fives. Jason held down the trigger, which caused the weapon to fire automatically, as fast as it could chamber the next round. The reloading system in the weapon wasn’t fast, set to coincide with the charging of the coils, which produced a shot about every half second. He systematically emptied the clip, firing until it was empty, both to test the weapon’s reload system and to test the ammo counter.

“I thought it fired faster than that,” Luke noted.

“Nope,” Jason told him as he lowered the weapon and changed clips with practiced ease. “The weapon can only fire as fast as it can charge the coils, and this is as fast as it gets.”

“Could you make it faster?” Luke asked.

Jason paused before shouldering the weapon again, glancing back at them. “Yeah, I guess I could,” he answered. “If I used higher-grade coil and a stronger power system, yeah, I could cut down the recharge time. But that kinda stuff gets expensive, and this thing started as something of a science experiment. I built it out of cheap, easy-to-get materials. It would also make the gun bigger and heavier,” he added.

“Well, actually, Jayce, I was looking at your design, and I think you could make it faster just by tweaking its operating system,” Steven ventured as Jason began firing again, quickly emptying another clip. “The way you have it set now, it totally lets the flux cabling discharge before starting a charging cycle. All you really would have to do is rewrite your charging sequence to have it begin charging the capacitors in *sequence* instead of charging them all at once after a shot, after so many milliseconds of discharge, and you could send a charging pulse to the caps while the weapon’s still firing. The charging units would recharge in cascade, in the same order the caps fire when they pulse the coils and create the magnetic catapult. Not only would it be faster, it also wouldn’t create a power drain on the PPG during a charging sequence. You’d have to update the reloading system,” he said quickly. “It’s designed to operate at the same speed as the charging sequence, but you can make that faster too just be

rewriting your code. The hardware you have in there and your design for reloading can actually operate *much* faster than it's currently designed to operate."

Jason looked back at him. "Damn, Steve, I never really thought of that," he said. "Then again, I've never really looked at these things since I built the first one. After I got it to work, I figured it was good enough. I never really meant to *do* anything with them," he said. "But hell, if you think you can make it faster, go for it. You're better at coding than me."

Steve immediately held up a stick. "I kinda already did," he said slyly. "I just wanted your permission before loading it into a gun. It's *your* design."

Jason laughed. "How much faster you think it is?"

"My simulation showed it firing four rounds a second," he answered. "That's double its original speed. It's not as fast as a machine gun, more like an old Browning Automatic Rifle from World War II, but faster is better when it comes to guns."

"Well, give me the stick, let's test it," he said, holding out his hand.

Steve gave him the memory stick, and Jason quickly inserted it into the weapon in his hands and caused it to load the operating system from it. The weapon's processor rebooted using the new control system, and Jason saw absolutely nothing different except an operating system version of 1.1 instead of 1.0. Steve hadn't changed anything else that he could see. Jason loaded a new magazine into the weapon and shouldered it as the weapon charged the firing capacitors and went hot, and pulled the trigger.

The weapon operated perfectly, and Steve had indeed doubled its firing rate, *only* by reworking how the weapon handled recharging for another shot. The weapon's reloading system worked flawlessly at the higher speed, causing the weapon to fire a round every .25 seconds. The weapon's report melded together with multiple shots, giving it a *BEE-BEE-BEE* sound when it fired multiple shots.

"Nice. Now update the other gun, so we can test that one," Jason said.

Jason tested both weapons extensively and found them to work as designed, then, after a talk with Steve and Tim that got nowhere concerning the exomech, he went back inside, took off his helmet, and sat down at his desk in his room, in front of his panel. Kumi should call back any time about the ID, and he wanted to be close to the panel. He sat a while and pondered the exomech. He'd love to be able to use it in his future plans for resisting Trillane, but the simple fact of the matter was that there was no way he could think to do it. It would take them at least a month of intense work to refit the unit for stealth, and they needed that month to prepare for the move. Even if he could take it out of the box, all he could do is drive it around. It was useless to him as a battlefield weapon, because nobody knew how to *pilot* it. The best he could do would be to move it from one place to another.

But knowing where it came from now introduced an entirely new dimension into the equation. The *Imperium* had given him that exomech. It wasn't a corporation, it wasn't some rich noble, it was the Imperium. They'd given it to him broken to see if he could fix it, a test to see if he was worth their time.

And that was the other mystery. Why an *exomech*? They could have easily given him some other piece of technology to repair, something not quite so big or dangerous as an exomech. Why that? Why a piece of military hardware, that was fully armed?

Jason put his chin in his armored hand and looked at his panel's screen, pondering it. *Use it wisely*, the note had said. Why would he use an exomech out here? And why would they *want* him to use one? If he did, the sensors would pick it up, and they'd be all over him so fast it wouldn't be funny... and with more than just a dropship. They'd see that exomech on their sensors, and they'd send a heavy force down here to capture it, capture the entire community, and then start tearing into everyone's mind to find out how they'd gotten their hands on it. Use it wisely? There *was* no way to use it, outside of spare parts for other projects. And even that wasn't much of a help, given that he had no idea if any of its systems outside of the power plant even *worked*. They'd given it to him broken.

Use it wisely...yeah, right. The only way he could use it would be as spare parts.

His panel beeped at an incoming call, and he answered it immediately. "Hey," he said, as Kumi's picture appeared.

"Hey babe. It's all done. I got it on the way. No charge," she said with a wink.

"Good. When and where?"

"It's going to be delivered in about half an hour, at the spot. One of the twins is bringing it."

"She gonna get in without being seen?"

"Please," Kumi snorted. "She's coming in a Dragonfly." A Dragonfly was a Faey fighter, which was small, highly maneuverable, and extremely fast. "She should be through the stargate by now and on the way there. You should start out for the spot." She looked him up and down. "Why the armor, babe?"

"I was testing something that could have blown up," he said, rapping his knuckles on the breastplate of his armor. "This was a precaution."

"Smart."

"Thanks. I didn't know the twins could fly."

"Of course they can," Kumi said with a hint of edge to her voice. "It's part of the job. Now get moving, I don't want her to have to wait."

"I'll start out now," he said with a nod.

"Coolies. Catch you later, babe."

"Good luck, Kumi," he said.

She nodded, winked, then cut the connection.

Jason decided that going in his armor wasn't what he wanted to do, so he started changing out of it. He probably should have thought to lock the door, because Temika barged in on him just as he'd taken off the last of it. She stood in the doorway and gawked at him, her dark face darkening even further as a furious blush flushed through her skin. He gave her a steady look, not moving for a moment, then turned his back to her calmly. "In or out," he said mildly. She was embarrassed, he could tell that without telepathy, and though he was a bit embarrassed himself, he figured that not showing it would make her feel just a little more comfortable. He also wasn't going to make it worse by diving behind some piece of furniture like a teenager. "Pick a direction."

"Ah'm *so* sorry, Jayce," she said aloud, still standing in the doorway.

He stepped into his underwear and pulled them up. "If you were sorry, you'd have closed the door," he said pointedly.

"Wha'? Oh, shit, sorry," she said, quickly closing the door behind her. *Ah didn't mean tah—Ah didn't think you'd be naked, Jayce*, she quickly explained through sending.

It's alright. Just do me a favor and knock, or send, if my door's closed. I usually only close it for a reason. What did you want?

Well, just to see what y'all wanted for dinner, she answered. And find out when you wanted tah go over the border. You still wanna do that, right?

We'll have to do that next week sometime, he told her as he continued to dress. *We won't need it for a while. We might not need it at all. When I leave, I'd rather prefer that the community is self-sufficient. They shouldn't depend on me.*

Oh, yeah. About that. Jayce, Ah, Ah honestly dunno what Ah want tah do. Ah'd love to pay those blueskin bitches back fo' what they did tah me, but Ah'm not sho' if Ah should leave the community. They need my tradin', and Ah can't trade no mo' if Ah go with you. But, on the othah hand, Ah know fo' a fact that y'all are gonna need telepaths, an' Ah'm like one of the only foah you got.

It's up to you, he told her, understanding how hard it was for her to say that. Whenever Temika was under stress, or angry, she reverted to a heavy Southern dialect. Sometimes, Jason had a hard time understanding what she was saying or sending. *Yes, I could use you, but so can the community. But I will say that you shouldn't come with me unless you fully appreciate the fact that it's more or less*

suicidal. I don't hold much hope of us accomplishing anything more than pissing Trillane off and getting captured or killed, but damn it all, I can't sit here and do nothing. Even if it's hopeless, I have to try. Do you understand, Mika?

Yeah, Ah understand, Jayce, she sent seriously. Ah'll think about it. Ah don't suppose theah's much hurry fo' me tah make a decision yet.

Nope. Take your time. I won't be leaving for a while, so you have plenty of time to think it over. Now, I have to go meet someone, he told her as he sat down to put on his shoes. I'll be gone about an hour or so.

Who?

One of Kumi's bodyguards. She's bringing me a fake ID I can use when I leave the preserve.

Oh, okay then. Want me to come?

No, I should be alright. If it's who I think it is, I'll be perfectly safe. Kumi would only send Meya or Myra, and either of them are alright. They like me.

They the twins you were talking about?

He nodded. Do me a favor and go to Regina and ask her to start organizing an exploration team. We have to go to Charleston and start surveying, find the power plant and substations, take a look at getting the water going, that kind of thing. It needs to be a good-sized group, and heavily armed, because odds are good that the place is inhabited by squatters. Tell her that Symone has to go. They might need her and her armor.

Ah can do that. You going?

If they'll let me, he sent, then he grunted aloud. Some people may not want to go if I go.

Yeah, Ah noticed. Some folks are afraid of you now, cause they know.

I guess it was unavoidable, he sent with an audible sigh. I'm just glad Symone didn't go nuts and expose you and Tim. At least you can keep going on like before.

Ah dunno if Ah like seein' how they treat us, she sent, crossing her arms beneath her breasts and looking towards the window. That's one thing Ah have to think about if Ah stay. If they find out Ah'm a telepath, they might not want me to stay. Ah don't understand why they don't act like that around Symone.

Because Symone is Symone, and because they knew that Symone has talent. Them finding out that I do is like a personal betrayal, a secret that I've been hiding. No doubt whenever they're around Symone, they're careful about what they think or at least are actively aware that she can hear their thoughts, but around me they were completely unguarded. The fact that I never listened unless I thought it was very important doesn't mean anything to them...as far as they're concerned, I've been listening to their every thought all these months, and now they think I know all of their darkest secrets.

Yeah. Ah'll go talk to Reggy.

Good. Is my airbike in the garage?

Yeah.

Alright then, I'll be back in an hour.

Make sure y'all are careful, she told him, coming over and taking his railgun from its mount on the wall, then handing it to him. Real careful. No matter how much you like her, remember, she is a blueskin.

"I will," he said aloud, taking it.

Jason sat on his airbike on the edge of the clearing that was the overgrown parking lot that had abutted a swimming area in Beech Fork Lake, leaning over the handle bars and watching as a sleek craft descended gracefully towards the ground. It was a Dragonfly, one of the four fighter model types that the Faey used. The Dragonfly was the smallest of the four fighters, but it was also the most agile and the fastest. It relied less on armor and more on agility, making it a fast, evasive target to try to hit. Its design was tailored to that philosophy, for the fighter didn't have much of a profile. It had a slightly

long nose before a sleek fuselage that was barely wider than the nose of the craft, with four backswept wings that were stubby and tipped with weaponry. Two wings were jutting out perfectly horizontal, while the second set of wings were extending out from a downward angle from mounts just under the upper set of wings. This fighter was painted dark blue, and its engines made a thrumming sound as it descended gently into the clearing. The landing skids extended when it was about twenty feet off the ground, and they touched lightly down on the grass-choked sand, settling as the weight of the ship came down upon them.

Jason got off his airbike and started out into the clearing as the canopy opened. It didn't raise like an old American fighter's canopy would, instead it lifted just a bit and slid forward, sliding on tracks. An armored Faey stood up from the cockpit of the fighter, and it was armor that Jason recognized as belonging to the twins. When the figure took off the helmet, he saw that it was Meya. That was only smart, Jason figured, because Meya was more level-headed than Myra. They may look alike, but they had very different personalities. She reached down and picked up a small case, jumped down from the cockpit, landing lightly in front of him, then started walking towards him. "Mistress Kumi will be upset," she called out.

"Why is that?"

"You're not wearing your armor," she said with a slight smile. "I suggest that you never show up at a meeting with her without it. She has, plans, for you."

"Yeah, I know," Jason chuckled.

"Yours," she said as he reached her, offering the small case to him.

"Thanks, Meya," he said, taking it from her. "Tell Kumi that I appreciate it. I'm not sure why she didn't charge me for this, though, that's not like her."

"Oh, she was paid," Meya smiled.

"I paid her," a voice called out from behind.

Jason whirled to look, hand going for the railgun slung over his shoulder, but something soft and silky brushed over his arm. He turned again just in time to see charcoal colored fur, then tried to turn to keep up with it as that silky fur slithered along his side and stomach. Hands gripped him by the shoulder, and he found himself staring face to face with a curious dog-like creature, just a shade shorter than him, with features perfectly blended between canine and humanoid to give the face character. That face was decidedly feminine. The figure wore no clothing, but her entire form was concealed in fur.

"Miaari?" Jason blurted in surprise.

"Yes, I am Miaari," she said, starting to walk around him again. He felt fur slither against his leg, and he realized she was pushing her tail up against him. Jason was amazed that she could get that close to him without him sensing it. He was usually much more alert than that. He turned to keep looking at her, but she moved faster than he could keep up, so he turned to look at Meya while the Kimdori circled him. "I paid her the money to get the IDs, because I wanted to meet you. Meya brought me."

"I never saw you get out of the plane," he blurted nervously.

She gave a tittering giggle. "Silly human, if you had, I wouldn't be very good, would I?" she told him. He felt her press a soft hand up against the side of his neck. That touch sent shivers through his spine, much like the ones he'd felt the day he'd first seen her. "Strong."

"Mistress Miaari?" Meya asked curiously.

"Nothing, nothing," she said lightly. She came back into his view, sliding her hand along his neck, which caused his skin to tingle. She then circled away, trailing her hand against his neck and her luxuriously thick-furred tail against his legs. "I see what they see in you. All the traits that a Faey woman admires, even those they don't admit to admiring, they lurk within you. But they lack your spirit. Faey have no faith, Jason Fox, and it is their weakness. Your faith is strong, and it gives your spirit strength. They chose well."

"Chose? What do you mean?" he asked as she came back into view, looking into his eyes, and he

found her stare slightly disconcerting. Her yellow eyes were penetrating, and he felt as if they were looking into his soul.

"Those who made the choice," she said cryptically, trailing out of view again. "Events whirl and revolve as plans upset plans, Jason Fox, and you stand in the middle of it. If you walk the path you have set for yourself, you must be strong of spirit. Faith is a weapon, human, one of the most powerful there is. It is not something you can measure, it is not something you can capture, but it *is* something that you can give."

"I don't understand."

"Understand?" she asked as she came back into view, putting her other hand on the other side of his neck, then sliding them down to his shoulders. He found himself staring into a pair of lucid amber eyes. "You think too much with your mind and not enough with your heart, human. You understand. You just won't open your eyes."

He stared at her in confusion, still feeling that strange tingle, that strange sensation. "You know!" he said without thinking.

She gave him a toothy grin.

"Uh," he said uncertainly, but she put a hand over his mouth.

"What Kimdori know stay with Kimdori. We are a race of secrets," she told him.

"B-But—" he stammered, looking at Meya.

"We are a race of secrets," she repeated. "Meya also knows. She has known a while."

"Know what? That he has talent? Of course I know," she snorted. "No mind that can do what his does can do it without talent."

"Meya will do nothing," the Kimdori told him. "She will do nothing because I tell her to do nothing."

"Uh," he stammered, his mind swimming.

"You have what the Faey lack, Jason Fox," she said in a whisper, leaning in and breathing into his ear. "But their gifts are yours. Have you ever wondered *why*?"

"Of—of course I have," he told her, his voice confused.

"No, you haven't," she breathed in his ear. "Always for you, it is the *what*, the *how*. The *why* is what matters here, Jason Fox. *Why* do you have the gifts of the Faey? The Faey have made the same mistake. They have answered the *how*, but they do not understand the *why*."

"I don't understand. Why do you talk in riddles, Miaari?"

"She *always* talks like that," Meya snorted. "They all do. Damn Kimdori."

"Y—You mean that they Faey have figured out why humans have talent?"

"It's genetic," Meya told him. "But anyone could have told you that."

"Genetic," Jason hummed. "We figured the same thing."

"Near as what anyone's been able to figure, it's just evolution," Meya told him. "A handful of humans have evolved with the genetic footprint that allows talent. All the geneticists have to do is isolate the parts of human DNA that handle that, and they can test all the humans to find those with the genetic disposition for talent."

"But what is the *why*, Jason Fox? That is the question that matters," Miaari whispered in his ear.

"You know, but you won't tell me," Jason said, pushing her back far enough to look into her eyes. She just looked into his eyes with a lilting smile.

"She never tells anyone," Meya said sourly. "Sometimes I think Kimdori keep secrets just for the sake of keeping secrets."

"Or they're trying to tell us something when they're not supposed to," Jason said impulsively. "Miaari knows something that someone told her, but she can't just *say* it. Kimdori are a race of secrets," he said, looking into her eyes.

She smiled knowingly. "I know many things, Jason Fox. Kumi would kill you."

He gave her a sudden stare.

“And what you believe is both right and wrong. You set a dangerous path, but it’s a path others are helping to carve from the wilderness. You’ll find your sister behind you, wielding your sword, helping you find your way.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“You understand, Jason Fox,” she said with sudden seriousness. “You seek a Kimdori. I will send you one. I think my sister Kiaari would enjoy the task you have in mind. She always did like to play the game with me.”

He felt that strange shiver in his spine, that strange electric feeling on the skin under her hands, and he gaped at her. “You—”

She came close again, bringing her maw inches from his ear. “What you know, I know,” she whispered in his ear, lower than Meya could hear. “I’m not what you think. When we touch, we share. What is yours and mine become ours, but I’m practiced enough to hide what I bring to the joining, so all you see is your own offereing. Don’t you feel the tingles?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Few can sense my gift, and it is that aspect of you that will lead you to your sister. Don’t mistake the sword in her hands as being held against you. She will not strike you down with it.”

He felt a sudden surge of fear. If what she said was right, then the instant she touched him, she gained complete access to his mind, in a way that made it impossible for talent to prevent. It was a merging from *within*, not an invasion from *without*. . .her touch must have created some kind of juncture between them which allowed her to access his thoughts and memories at a direct level, maybe through his own nervous system. That meant that she knew *everything*.

“We are a race of secrets, Jason Fox,” she told him with sober eyes, but a disarming smile.

“I, I understand,” he said weakly. She wouldn’t reveal what she knew about what he had planned. . .at least not *directly*. But it was still frightening to think that Miaari knew his every thought, memory, flaw, and desire, just in the lightest touch.

Good lord, what power. No wonder the Kimdori had the reputation for being who they were. They could, with a touch, find out *anything*. Add that to the fact that they were natural shapeshifters, and they were the most effective spies that God could have ever designed.

“And now you will be a keeper of secrets, Jason Fox,” Miaari told him lightly, but there was a *very* serious look in her eyes. And Jason got the distinct feeling that his life would hinge on his answer to that. What he had learned, he could never reveal. To *anyone*. *Ever*.

“I already am,” he told her.

She nodded to him, sliding her hands up his neck and against his cheeks. Those hands were warm and dry, felt like they had pads on them, and they were *strong*. “Me ya?”

“Yes, Miaari?”

“Do you like Jason Fox?”

“Very much so,” she answered immediately.

“I’m glad to hear that. Give him your armor.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Give him your armor. He will need it.”

“It doesn’t fit him!” she protested. “It won’t fit anyone but me!”

“Trust me. He needs it more than you. Give it to him.”

“Miaari! This is my favorite armor!”

“It’s something you can easily replace,” she said dismissively. “I’ll pay for your new armor. I’ll even let you get all the toys for it that will make Myra scream out of jealousy.”

“I—hey, now that I can live with. Deal,” she said quickly.

“Why do I need Me ya’s armor?” he whispered. “It won’t fit anyone but her.”

“Because you’re going to give it to someone that can make it fit,” she winked.

“Kiaari?”

She nodded. "She can be of great use to you, Jason Fox. I will send her here tomorrow to interview you. But that's merely a formality. She will come because I tell her to come, and she will help because I tell her to help. I am older than her. Among my people, age is authority."

"I, I thought you just meant she was going to...you know."

"She can do that. But she can do much more, and her use to you as a friend and ally will be invaluable."

"You're sending her here to *stay*?" he asked in surprise.

"Would you deny her help?"

"Hell no!" he said quickly. "But, but *why*? You know what's probably going to happen."

"There's more going on here than you can see, Jason Fox, and the Kimdori have a vested interest in that outcome," she said with complete honesty.

"I don't understand."

"You will," she promised. "Kiaari will be here tomorrow. You will like her, she's...energetic," she told him. "Meya?"

"I'm working on it," she called. "I'm not going to like flying home naked. You know how cold the seat gets?"

"Well, I'm sure that Jason could give you his own in exchange," she said, giving him a look. "I think your armor for his pants and shirt is a fair exchange."

"You're cruel, Miaari," Jason complained. "It's cold out here."

"And it's not for Meya?" she said with a wicked smile.

"She's not riding an airbike home," he said. "But she shouldn't go home naked. Hold on, Meya," he called, as she removed her second vambrace, and prepared to work on separating her breastplate. "I'll go home and get you some clothes, and bring them to you. That way you don't have to fly home naked."

"Fine with me, Jason," she answered.

"I will go with you," Miaari stated. "I want to see something in your town."

"Umm...fine," he said. It wasn't that it would matter, since she already knew *everything*. "You don't mind riding with me? It might get cold."

"I have this fur for more than beauty," she chuckled. "Besides, if it bothered me, I could make myself much smaller. I'd ride in your lap, out of the wind."

"Won't you be heavy?" he asked impulsively as she removed her hands from his face.

"No, I'll weigh as little as you please."

"You can change *mass*?" he said in surprise.

"Easily. I won't explain how we do it, it's complicated. Here, let me show you."

It may be complicated to explain, but it wasn't exactly pleasant to watch. Jason got his first view of a Kimdori changing shape...and it wasn't nice. He'd expected something, well...quick. Miaari's transformation was not quick. It wasn't silent, either. Bones cracked audibly as her body compressed, as her form dwindled, as her features changed, as she changed into a vulpar. The process took her about a minute, during which Jason watched with a morbid fascination. There was a strange, heavy smell about her as she underwent the process, smelling like wet dog fur. At one point, all of her fur was gone, as was much of her skin, showing an exposed musculature in flux, as a two-legged form became a four-legged form. It seemed that for her to shed mass, she literally had to expunge parts of her body, which left the remainder of that body visible to the naked eye. It was almost like looking at a cadaver with its skin and some musculature surgically removed...and it wasn't pleasant. The worst part had to be the line of pinkish ribs exposed to his eyes. But that grisly sight lasted only a few seconds, as gray fur vanished and was replaced with dark reddish fur, and her tail split into two and poofed out with new fur. After it was over, a medium-sized vulpar stood where Miaari had been just a moment before.

"Wow," Jason said in a low tone.

"Ugly, ain't it?" Meya said. "But it works."

"No, that wasn't very pretty," he agreed. "It's a good thing I have a strong stomach."

"Where is your airbike?" Miaari asked in a voice that sounded much different, and was much higher pitched.

He gaped at her. "You can talk like that?" he asked breathlessly.

"Speech is a function of vocal chords and mouth shape," she said absently. "I control those. I only *look* like a vulpar, Jason Fox. I am *not* a vulpar."

"You certainly do look like a vulpar," he agreed. "May I pick you up? If that doesn't offend you."

"You may," she answered with a nod. "Weighing me?" she asked with mischievous eyes.

"Yeah," he admitted, reaching down and picking her up, making sure to be both careful and gentle. She only weighed about fifteen pounds. "How do you *do* that?" he asked in amazement.

"What did you smell, when I changed form?"

"You expelled mass through the air!" he exclaimed. "And you take it in when you want to increase mass you just reverse the process?"

She nodded in his arms. "We can metabolise ambient organic matter and convert it into flesh and blood. In effect, I suck up all organic matter around me and use it to build a body. As you can imagine, gaining mass can take longer than shedding mass. It depends on how rich my surroundings are with organic matter."

"That's not complicated," he accused.

"It is when I explain the exact dynamics of the process. Would you like to know?"

He shuddered. "I think that would make my brain explode. I'll pass."

She gave a barking sound that had to be laughter. "It could take me a *long* time to metabolize enough mass to regain my natural form, depending on where I am. I'll have to absorb sixty *kram* of matter to regain my original mass. If this was a poor environment, it could take me hours, but lucky for me this is a rich environment. I can just absorb part of a tree to recover my mass in a matter of minutes. In effect, eat the tree for its mass," she told him. "Because of the problems with changing mass, most Kimdori prefer to simply change form without changing mass. It's much easier."

"Interesting," Jason said sincerely.

"I'm going to change back now. If it bothers you, you may turn away, it doesn't offend me."

"No, now I'm curious," he said.

Her transformation back wasn't any prettier, but it was more interesting. For one, every plant within ten yards of her when she began her began to *vanish*. They didn't die, they didn't burn up, they didn't wilt away, they simply...*melted*. She consumed all organic matter around her while she transformed back into her prior form. He didn't see how she consumed it, but he suspected she had probably drawn it up through the ground. Her change back into that gray-furred, vaguely wolf-like form wasn't any prettier, but it seemed slower. At least there wasn't the sound of breaking bones when she changed back. The melting away of the plants around her seemed to pace her change back.

She held her arms out and turned in place for him, letting him look at her. "And here I am," she told him.

"Wow," he breathed in amazement.

"Thank you," she said demurely. "Shall we go?"

He brought her to his airbike, and with practiced ease, got it started and ready to go as she mounted the bike and put her arms around his waist. "We shouldn't be long," he called to Meya. "Just wait here. And don't wander."

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't be wise," he told her, giving her a steady look. "And put your vambraces back on."

"You been having trouble, Jason?" she asked.

"No, but you might," he told her. "Just do it."

"Do as he says. He knows of this area better than you," Miaari ordered.

“Yes, Miaari,” she said obediently.

Jason lifted the airbike off the ground and flew at over the hills and valleys to the north, over skeletal trees awaiting the warmth of spring before bursting forth with new leaves. He’d hoped to have been here to watch that rite of spring, but now he knew he would be somewhere else. He didn’t know where, but he knew it would be far from here. “Are you sure Meya won’t say anything?” he asked her as he adjusted his course to fly over route 152.

“She will obey me,” Miaari answered, putting her muzzle over his shoulder and leaning against him. “I would be doing nothing more than asking her to keep a secret she wishes to keep, Jason Fox. Meya likes you, and she will not cause you trouble.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. What did you want to talk to me about? Away from Meya, I mean.”

“Nothing. There is nothing more I need to say to you, Jason Fox. I have told you everything that I can. I just wish to see your town, and nothing more.”

“Oh. Well, you won’t see much of it, Miaari. Right now my community is upset, as I’m sure you know. Most of them won’t even talk to me now, because they know.”

“Symone was foolish to reveal that,” she said professionally.

“Symone sometimes acts foolishly, but we love her anyway,” he answered.

“Loyalty is a trait we much admire, Jason Fox,” she told him. “I won’t need to walk around. To see it as we pass over should be enough. I want to make sure you’ve taken all the necessary precautions, that’s all.”

“Oh. Fine.”

He did just that for her, did a wide circle of Chesapeake so she could look down, then he descended and parked the airbike in the garage. She got off first, then followed him into the house. Mary and Symone gaped when she came in behind him, watching as she strolled with him as he went up the stairs and to his room. She sat on the bed calmly as he went to his closet and started rooting through it, bouncing on it slightly with her furry hands on the mattress to each side of her hips. “Meya’s about my size, so she’ll fit in my clothes. She might need a belt though,” he reasoned aloud.

“Jason! Jason, you brought a *Kimdori* home with you?” Symone gasped from the doorway, with Mary hiding behind her, looking past Symone’s side to stare at Miaari in astonishment.

Miaari fixed Symone with a steady look. “I am Miaari,” she said in a stately tone, but it was heavy with thinly veiled threat. “And you are Symone.”

“I meant no insult, Miaari, I’m just questioning Jason’s sanity,” she answered immediately.

“Bringing you here was very dangerous, both for you and for us.”

“I wished to see your town. Its defenses need work,” she said professionally.

“We never really intend to fight if it comes to that,” Jason reminded her from the closet.

“Everything I have set up just delays an assault, it doesn’t stop it. That gives the people time to run.” He held up a pair of torn jeans, and an old tee shirt. “These should do,” he said. “She won’t be winning any fashion contests, but these are clothes I can afford to lose. We’ll get some rope she can use for a belt.”

“What do you need clothes for?”

“I brought Jason a gift. Unfortunately, Meya is wearing it. Jason was kind enough to come here to get her clothes to wear on the way home.”

“Meya’s giving me her armor,” Jason explained. “I need it. I don’t want her to have to go home naked, so I’m giving her these.”

“What use is her armor gonna be?” Symone asked. “Unless you think you can resize it?”

Jason looked at Miaari, who shook her head imperceptibly. She probably didn’t want to reveal that Miaari was coming to interview him in front of the others. “I’ll explain later. Well, we’d better get back to Meya, before she gets in trouble,” Jason said, looking at Miaari.

“Yes, that would be best,” she said, standing up.

Jason, you have got to tell me what in Trelle’s garland is going on, Symone sent tightly. Even at

that range, Symone was being cautious of sending with Meya not far away...which was a wise precaution. No doubt Symone had ordered Tim and Temika to cut their sending chatter as long as Meya was near.

Later. After I get Miaari here back to Meya and safely on her way home.

Jason escorted Miaari out of his room, but the Kimdori stopped when Symone moved to let her go by, looking at Symone and Mary. She gave Symone a long, curious look, then reached out her furry gray hand towards the woman. Symone turned her head meaningfully and exposed the side of her neck, and allowed her to trace her fingertips along the graceful line of Symone's blue-skinned neck.

"You know our customs, Faey," Miaari said with surprise that Jason knew had to be feigned. She'd touched him, so she knew everything that Jason knew about Symone, including the fact that she knew a Kimdori.

"I went to school with a Kimdori," she answered modestly.

"Did you like him?"

"Yes, he was smart and very funny," she answered. "He was one of my friends. I still keep in touch with him."

"Who?"

"Thraama of Rixke," she answered.

"Rixke? A fine clan," Miaari said with a nod. "Oh, *Thraama*? I know him!" she said with a laugh. "He works for a consulate in Dracora! I live there! I will tell him I have met you, and that you are well."

"I'd be grateful if you did," she said. "I haven't talked to Thraama since I came out here. He probably thinks I forgot about him by now."

"I will tell him that you still think of him," she said with a nod.

"I'd appreciate that."

Miaari nodded and removed her hand from Symone's neck, then followed Jason back down to the garage. After pausing to get a length of rope for Meya to use as a belt, they were back on the airbike and riding towards the lake. "Your walls need reinforcing in the northeast, and you need to move your tactical command out of your house. An attacker could destroy your entire chain of command with one strike. That's not good."

"We won't be here long, Miaari."

"You will be there long enough," she retorted. "You have made enemies within Trillane, Jason. If they find out where you are, they *will* try to kill you. Others are trying to stop them from finding you, but they might get lucky. So be wise and prepare your people for an attack. Use that infamous clever bent to come up with something that could repel an assault. You plan to go to war, Jason Fox. Start preparing for it."

"Part of what you told me about earlier?"

"Yes," she said, shifting her grip around his waist and putting her muzzle closer to his ear. "I told you, there's much going on that you can't see."

"I don't see why they can't find me," he said, thinking a moment. "Just about everyone in the preserve knows about me, and where I live."

"Yes, you *would* be very easy to find...if there weren't people interfering," she said pointedly.

"I guess I wasn't as clever as I thought," he grunted. "I thought they couldn't find me because of the things I've done to hide us."

"No, Jason Fox, those *did* help, *immensely*," she told him. "Your tricks prevent them from finding you with their technology. They must rely on *intelligence*, and so long as they must rely on intelligence, they will find their efforts thwarted."

"Because the Kimdori have a vested interest in me," he reasoned, paraphrasing her earlier words.

"For that very reason," she stated. "Continue as you have done, Jason Fox. Continue to prepare your people to move, but make sure that your new home is as protected from sensors as this one. But

also prepare for disaster. Should one of your enemies get lucky and find out where you are, they *will* attack your community.”

“Do you have any suggestions, Miaari? I’ve never done anything, well, *military*.”

“Move your tactical command post in with the exomech,” she said immediately. “That is a hardened facility, capable of withstanding attack. Scatter caches of food and weapons throughout the area, away from your town, so your people have access to the supplies they would need to survive the winter if Trillane attacks your town before you’re ready to move. Continue to keep yourself hidden during the daylight hours, because now there are cameras searching the preserve for you. If you do go out, *please*, alter your appearance. Wear a hat and sunglasses, start wearing a windbreaker, anything that changes that signature blond hair and blue overshirt. I suggest a fedora or cowboy hat, a hat with a wide brim that goes all the way around. That will do much to hide you from space-based video systems.”

“What about the airbikes? They’d see them on those systems and immediately connect them with me.”

“Not entirely,” she chuckled. “There are quite a few airbikes roaming around the preserve, Jason Fox. A cargo dropship containing a shipment of airbikes suffered a pod locking failure and lost its cargo pod. That pod crashed in what you would call southeastern Pennsylvania about two of your weeks ago. A group of squatters found it, salvaged many of the bikes, and have been trading them. Trillane plans an expedition early next month to round up all the salvaged airbikes, but until then, they will see your airbikes and think that they come from the lost shipment.”

Jason laughed. “I take it that wasn’t an accident?”

“Silly boy,” she chided. “So long as you make no mistakes, you should be able to move your people. But once they move, ensure that they do *not* give away their position. The Imperium knows about your community, that it is unusual in that it has some technical skill given you’ve restored power, but they don’t know that you lead it, because certain people don’t want that information to be public. There has been active misdirection in the office of Imperial Intelligence. That’s why Trillane hasn’t found you, because much of their own intelligence is based on their spies in Imperial Intelligence.”

“My God,” he breathed. “Just *who* is trying to keep me a secret, who can monkey with Imperial Intelligence?”

“You would be surprised,” she hummed in his ear.

“Lorna? Is it Lorna?”

“She has a hand in it, yes,” she told him. “The power of a Marine General is far-reaching. You would be surprised how much influence she has within the Imperium. Jyslin is family, and Faey are firmly grounded in the tenets of family. She’ll do what she can to help her niece.” She hugged him firmly. “You should think about Jyslin, Jason Fox.”

“I do, all the time.”

“No, you should *think* about her. She loves you. And I know you love her.”

“I know...but it’s hard, with me out here and her where she is. It’s going to be a long time before we can see each other...if we ever *do* get to see each other again. And after that, I don’t know. If things were different, if we’d met in some other time, in some other place, I think I could spend the rest of my life with her. We’re a good match.”

“Then you should tell her.”

“And make it harder than it already is, Miaari?” he said, a bit spitefully. “She’s part of a government I object to. To marry her and live with her in the Faey system violates everything I hold dear. No amount of happiness I’d have being married to Jyslin could ever cover over the hate I’d carry against myself for betraying my beliefs and betraying the memory of what I once was. *You* should know that.”

He felt her put her hand against his neck, and again there was that strange, chilling tingle that ran up and down his spine. “You don’t fear me,” she purred in his ear. “You trust me, and have faith in

my word. You are uncomfortable with the knowledge that I know all of you, but you trust that what I know will never leave me. That touches me, Jason Fox,” she said to him fondly. “But don’t fret... when we touch, we share. But we can’t remember *all* of you in that touch. We only remember what we need to remember. To try to remember all of you is quite beyond us. But we digress. Yes, we can see it. The very qualities which attract her to us also drive us apart.”

“Us?”

“Are we not sharing? What is yours is ours, just as what is mine is ours. When we share, there is no you or me, there is only *we*.”

“I don’t feel any *we*.”

“I’m not free to give to you in return,” she said with sincere regret, removing her hand from his neck. “We are a race of secrets, Jason Fox. I can’t give away those secrets. Not here, not now. Maybe in time, but not now. But you should know that I would not hesitate to share with you.”

“I appreciate that, Miaari.”

“I’m glad that you do.”

They landed beside the fighter, where Meya was leaning her back against the landing gear, playing with a stick she’d picked up off the ground. She tossed it aside as Miaari dismounted, and Jason tossed her the clothes from where he sat. “They’re not the perfect fit, and they’re torn up, but they’ll get you home,” he told her.

“That’s all that matters,” Meya told him.

Jason stayed on the airbike as Meya began removing her armor again, looking at Miaari. She had said so much...it would take him a while to sort it all out. It was times like that he wished he carried a tape recorder with him. From the sound of things, she knew something about his talent, but she couldn’t tell him, because it was a secret. So she hinted that he needed to do some research, find out *why* he had talent. Not find out *how* he had talent, but *why*. That didn’t make much sense to him, but there was something important there, so he had to think about it.

He also knew that there was something going on, something that reached all the way into the upper levels of the Imperial government, and it somehow involved *him*. He’d always wondered why they hadn’t found him, given how sloppy he’d been, how amateurish...well, now he knew. He was still on the loose because there were people in Imperial Intelligence actively preventing him from being found. They were probably falsifying documents, altering recordings, and misdirecting agents to keep them from stumbling across him. But, he also knew that his counter-surveillance systems *did* work, because they were preventing them from finding him using sensors. Someone with *major* clout was pushing Imperial Intelligence to keep him concealed, and Miaari hinted that Lorna was only *one* of them.

His first impulse to say it was the Bureau of Science. They’d given him that broken exomech, after all, so they probably wanted to keep him free, give him time to warm to the idea of working for the Imperium. They wanted to treat him with kid gloves. It fit that they would be in the background, quietly manipulating Imperial Intelligence to keep Jason out of custody.

And there was someone that was willing to help him, someone already helping him. The sister with the sword, that sounded like Lorna. She certainly had power within the Imperium, which could be a “sword” used in his aid, and she was already helping him. But how was she going to help him find his goal, which was the ejection of Trillane from Earth for their crime of practicing human slavery?

He watched as Meya separated her backplate from her breastplate, then turned her back to him as she shrugged them off, exposing to him a shapely, graceful, blue-skinned back. She certainly didn’t turn out of modesty, that was for sure...Faey women had little concept of physical modesty. Their modesty was behavioral, not physical. But from what he saw of her Meya was much like most Faey military women...thin, athletic, and very, very shapely. That slender back concealed impressive physical power, of that he had little doubt. He’d tasted the grip in Meya’s bare hands, and it was powerful. Symone herself was deceptively strong. She looked over her shoulder after stacking her breastplate neatly with the other pieces of armor, then gave him a puzzled smile. “What are you

looking at?” she asked, not confrontationally, but out of sincere interest. “Do I have something on my back or something?”

“Just admiring,” he told her honestly. “If there is one thing I can say for the Faey, it’s that they are very lovely. You are a very beautiful woman, Meya, in both face and body.”

“Well, what a nice thing to say,” she said with a girlish bob of her head and a purplish blush of her cheeks. “Now I don’t feel bad about giving you my armor,” she added with a wink, then she turned around. “Make yourself useful, Jason, and come get this armor.”

“Yes ma’am,” he chuckled as Miaari sat back down on the edge of the airbike’s saddle, leaning back on it and watching him as he walked over. He knelt down and turned over her breastplate, then stacked the other pieces of armor into it. She leaned over and removed her greaves, then stepped out of her boots, and he added those to the pile as she handed them to him. She squirmed out of the codpiece, then placed it atop the pile herself just before he covered it over with the backplate, sandwiching all the armor together, and stood up with it in his arms.

“Wait,” she said, putting her hand on his neck. “I have to know. I just *have* to.”

“Know what?”

“Do you have talent, Jason?”

“Me ya, I will *never* admit that. Not to you, not to Kumi, not to anyone,” he said, quite seriously.

“I’d never tell anyone,” she all but pleaded. “I’m certain that you do, but I want to hear you say it. I want to hear you send. You do know how to send, right? If not, I can teach you.”

“What is it with women and needing to hear something they already know?” he sighed. “It’s like a woman’s need to hear her husband say he loves her, when she *knows* he loves her. I guess gender even crosses racial boundaries.”

She looked at him, then she laughed delightedly. “I *knew* it! But you never admitted it,” she said quickly, with a straight face. Then she laughed again.

“I never said a word about that, Me ya,” he told her evenly. “Not one.”

“Not a one,” she said, eyes dancing with suppressed mirth. Then she pulled him with sudden strength by her grip on his neck, leaned over, and kissed him on the lips. Her kiss was short, and certainly wasn’t chaste. She pulled back looked at him a moment, her eyes meaningful.

“Whatever it is you just tried to say, I didn’t hear it,” he told her with a slight smile. “I don’t have any talent, remember?”

She gave him a puzzled look, then laughed. “*Suuuuure*,” she hummed. “Your Jyslin trained you well, didn’t she?”

“Believe whatever you want,” he said flippantly. “Now get dressed so you can get home.”

“That lucky bitch,” Me ya grunted in a quiet tone as she dropped the jeans on the ground. “Why can’t I find a good man?”

“I should introduce you to Steve,” Jason chuckled. “He’s a nice guy. Smart fella, you’d like him.”

“He’s not *you*,” she growled as she held the shirt out, then pulled it up and over her head.

“I’m taken,” he told her.

“Faey men have lots of girlfriends,” she scoffed. “I don’t know any married man who doesn’t.”

“I don’t think Vell has any girlfriends. Maya would kill him,” Jason chuckled.

“Who are they?” she asked as she stepped into a leg of the jeans.

“Faey I knew back in New Orleans,” he told her. “Maya is Vell’s wife, and she doesn’t share.”

“You mean Vell is Maya’s husband, and I feel sorry for him,” she said primly, pulling the pants up, then buttoning them.

“Semantics,” he said dismissively, taking her armor over to his airbike, and placing it in the cargo compartment. “Me ya.”

“What?”

“Thanks,” he said honestly.

“Hey, I’m getting new armor out of it,” she said with a wave of her hand. “And if it helps you, then

it's worth losing it."

"It will help him," Miaari said from the back of the airbike. She looked into Jason's eyes, then smiled gently. "It will help him greatly. Now, prepare the ship for takeoff, Meya. I wish to say something to Jason that is for his ears alone."

"Yeah yeah, just punt me out," Meya complained, making a jerking motion with her arm as she turned and went to the fighter. She jumped up and grabbed a lip on the nose, then pulled herself up and into the cockpit by main strength. That little demonstration reinforced how deceptively strong Meya really was.

"She'll get over it," Miaari chuckled, rolling her eyes. "Kiaari will be here tomorrow, Jason Fox. To make things easier, I'll have her come to you in the form of a human. If the satellites above saw a Kimdori roaming the preserve, they would come quickly."

"What about you?"

"The eyes above are blind at the moment," she winked. "I will have her come with a gift for you that she'll share that you can use."

"What?"

"She'll bring you an understanding of how to use what you keep in your box," she said intently.

She was talking about the exomech! She was saying that she would have Kiaari teach him how to operate it...but that couldn't be done! Sure, she could share with him knowledge of switches and controls and what they did, but without practice, he'd flounder around with it. Knowing how it worked was knowledge, but actually piloting it was a *skill*, and *skills* could not be telepathically trained.

"But that's impossible," Jason protested. "Skills can't be taught."

"Not *their* way," she smiled knowingly. "She will *share* it with you, not *teach* it to you. You will have to practice, of course. She is different from you, so it will take you time to adjust. But she can share with you what you need in order to make it work. It will save you many months of aggravation. That will be her gift. I wish to give you one of my own."

"You've done more than enough, Miaari," he objected mildly.

"Silly human, I give what I give out of friendship, not for any other reason." She reached out and touched him, and he felt that same chilling tingle race through his spine. But this time, there was more in that touch. There was...*something* there, an alien intelligence, but it seemed both alien and familiar. It touched him, bonded with him, *shared* with him, bringing something into him that had not been there before. It was something given freely, given out of friendship and concern, something given with happiness, not a sense of duty.

She removed her hand from his neck, but the sense of that sharing didn't fade. It lingered in his mind, until it felt as if it had been there since the day he was born. He skimmed through it quickly, and was amazed at what he found there.

She has imparted to him a knowledge of her native language. He now spoke Kimdori, and unlike the forced telepathic implantation Jyslin had done to him, there was no confusion, no garbled thought, no mixing up what was old memory with what was new memory. His mind had seamlessly assimilated this new information without any complications, and had filed it away quite efficiently within his memory.

"I have taken, and I regretted having nothing to give you in return," she whispered in her native language, which he understood perfectly. "Now I have given. We have shared, Jason Fox. You have given something to me, and now I have given something to you. I hope my gift brings you pleasure."

"Yes, I'm pleased, Miaari. At that trust you've shown in me if anything else."

"We are a race of secrets," she told him with a sly smile. "And revealing to you one of our greatest secrets was necessary. In time, you'll understand why I did it. Until then, prove that humans too can be a race of secrets."

"I will," he promised as the Dragonfly's engines came to life. Miaari stood up, then put her hands on Jason's face, leaned forward, and put her forehead against his in some kind of ritual farewell. There

were no tingles in his spine with her touch; he realized that she could touch him *without* sharing, if she chose to do so. Without her having to share, he knew he had to reciprocate, so he raised his arms and put his hands on either side of her muzzle, cupping her head gently.

“Good luck, Jason Fox.”

“Goodbye. Be sure to tell Kumi I came without armor.”

She laughed. “Evil to the core. That’s why I like you.”

“One does one’s best,” he said modestly. “That young lady still has a lot to answer for with her showing that picture of me to her friends. I’m nowhere near done with her yet.”

“When one has something beautiful, one doesn’t keep it to herself,” Miaari winked, removing her hands. “I thought it was an excellent picture. It captured your beauty quite well.”

“Not you too,” he accused, removing his own.

“I was the first one she showed it to,” she winked. “I’m her best friend.”

“You’re on the list, Miaari,” he warned.

She laughed. “You are welcome to try,” she told him. “I’m not quite so easy to get as Kumi is.”

“I enjoy a good challenge,” he said confidently.

“You’ll have one.” Miaari went over to the Dragonfly, then vaulted up onto the nose with one easy leap, displaying superhuman strength. She then began to transform, as a sudden haze of dark air surrounded a rapidly compressing body, as she expelled mass by converting it to a gaseous form. A vulpar emerged from that pall, which jumped into the cockpit of the Dragonfly. Meya waved to him as it closed, then the fighter raised up from the ground and rapidly ascended up and out of sight.

Jason watched it go, and after it was out of sight, he sighed and mounted the airbike. He felt he had made a new friend today in Miaari, but she had brought more questions than answers.

Well, he’d have time to puzzle out her words, but for now, the community’s needs took precedence. Miaari herself had told him that. He had to get them moved safely, and do it fast. Even now, she’d said, the members of Trillane involved in the slaving were hunting for him, so they could kill him. They didn’t want him around to either ferret out their operations, or testify in court as to what he saw. Either way, right now the move of the community was top priority. That meant that he had to get in touch with Kumi again to arrange to get the projectors, and finalize the plans to install them and the reverse phase emitters at the new site as soon as possible.

But right now, he wanted to get home and get some lunch. Any time Temika cooked, his stomach always kept his brain from losing track of time.

Jason brooded over all the information that Miaari had given to him all day, all evening, and most of the night. He lost half a night’s sleep as he went over and over what she said to him, trying to make some headway into the tasks she’d dropped on him, as well as try to understand why she had said what she did. The one thing, the only thing, he’d managed to be certain of was that she had revealed the secret of her race because she had had no choice. He’d figured that out faster than she may have thought, and he did understand why it had been necessary for her. If he contacted a Kimdori and had an interview, then it would come out. She revealed it in a controlled situation, and established a foothold of trust with him, as well as securing his promise not to reveal that secret.

The reason for it was simple; he could *sense* the Kimdori ability to share. That was why he felt the tingles when Miaari touched him, and perhaps that was why he’d felt that strange sensation the first time he’d met the eyes of a Kimdori, the first time he had locked eyes with Miaari. He could *detect* Kimdori. And since it was Miaari, who had met him once before, she had somehow noticed this, and had come back. He hadn’t sensed her yesterday because maybe he had been actively suppressing his talent, or maybe she could somehow hide it from him. He wasn’t sure how he’d not sensed her yesterday, but that wasn’t as important as the fact that somehow, he had the ability to sense Kimdori and their unique and powerful ability.

That was why she had revealed it. That was the main reason why she had come, he was sure of it.

And he was also sure that he wasn't the only one who could do that. He'd bet that it had something to do with his talent, and that meant that some telepaths had the ability to sense Kimdori, to see through their shapeshifting by sensing their ability to share. It was probably rare, and he'd bet that there were any number of corpses of telepaths lining shallow graves scattered throughout the galaxy, the graves of those telepaths who had the ability to sense Kimdori, but whom the Kimdori did not trust.

They had little to fear from him, though. Jason Fox knew how to keep a secret, and he rather liked Miaari.

And maybe that's why Miaari was so willing to help him, why the Kimdori seemed to be quietly putting their hands into his situation.

No, there was more going on than that. Miaari had said so, in an indirect way. What had she said? Oh yes, plans whirl around him. He was a central figure in some kind of plot, but she was honor bound not to reveal it. It could be a convoluted Trillane plot to secure more power over Earth, or the machinations of some other house to weaken Trillane. The Imperials also had a stake in this, which was why the Bureau of Science was shielding him from capture.

Of course, that all seemed very odd, given that he really shouldn't be that important. That was the part that didn't make very much sense. Something else was going on here, but he didn't know what.

Not that it really should make any difference to him. What the Faey did amongst themselves was really their own business. He had only two concerns; moving his people to a safe place, and then kicking Trillane off Earth. In that order. If he could use the scheming of others to advance his own cause, then so much the better, but he couldn't get too involved in what *they* were doing and lose sight of what *he* was doing.

And that was exactly what he was attending to at that moment. Yawning, he authorized the purchase of the projectors he was going to need, and then ordered them shipped to a temporary warehouse where he had rented space. It bankrupted him, but it was necessary. He'd have to wait for another royalty payment before buying anything else, because he had exactly C3,758.25 in the bank. He wasn't sure how he was going to get them here, because they would take a cargo ship to move, but he'd have to work with Kumi on that one. Those projectors were *big*, and he had 27 of them.

That was just one of several things that had been done. He had taken Miaari's advice and ordered the distribution of some of the dry rations out of the community, creating caches of food, clothing, and some useful items that his people could use if they were forced out of town. They had made five caches, and there were plans on the table for six more. All those items and the food would be collected up just before the move, and plans would be made to create similar caches around their new home.

That new home would be visited today by a large team of surveyors. They were going to break up into elements, each of which would have a separate task. Jason would lead the team that would investigate sites for the projectors. Tim would lead a team to survey the electrical grid of the downtown area and begin making plans to restore it. Steve would lead a team that would survey the outlying areas and begin drawing up plans for defensive fortifications. Luke would lead a team that would investigate the water system of downtown and assess whether they could do in Charleston what they had failed to do in Chesapeake, and that was establish running water. Leamon would lead a team to search for possible squatter settlements within the city, and draw up plans to either eject them or invite them to join the community after Symone screened them.

He scrubbed his face in his hands, then turned and looked out the window. It was just past dawn, and he was tired. He'd only have a few hours of sleep, but his mind was whirling too much for him to sleep. He hadn't told anyone that Kiaari was coming yet, mainly because he wanted to talk to her first. Miaari had said that she was coming under the guise of a human, so he wanted to see how she was going to play it before making any introductions. He *did* have a long talk with Symone about much of what Miaari had said, and she hadn't been much help. He had to be careful about what he said so as not to violate Miaari's secret, so there were some holes in his explanations that irritated Symone.

Somone knocked on his door. He cleared his monitor of the displays, then closed the top. "What is

it?” he called.

The door opened, and into his room came a tall, athletic woman with fair, flawless skin, a beautiful face, and long, luxuriously thick blond hair. She wore a skin-tight black jumpsuit of some kind that seemed to merge with her skin, leaving not a wrinkle anywhere, like the most form-fitting spandex ever created. It was sleeveless, but its legs ended just below her knees. She wore no shoes.

It was just a borrowed form, however. Meeting her green eyes, he felt a strange shiver run up his spine, and that betrayed this woman as a Kimdori.

“Jason,” she called.

“Kiaari?” he asked.

She just gave him a long look as she closed the door. “I’m here to interview you.” She started walking towards him, and he stood up as she approached. She reached out a single hand, and placed it against the side of his neck. He felt that tingling sensation rush up and down his spine, and saw her green eyes seem to shine with an inner light for a moment. “Yes, I can work for you,” she stated calmly. “You wished to hire me. I accept.”

“I won’t ask how you got in here without being seen,” he chuckled as she removed her hand, then went over to where he had his armor and Symone’s armor sitting on their racks. Meya’s armor was stacked neatly at the foot of it. She picked up the breastplate and held it against her chest, checking its fit.

“I want to make sure I got the dimensions right,” she said.

Jason looked at her, and realized that she was the exact same height, weight, and body type as Meya.

“Yes, I think it’s going to fit,” she said in a humming tone.

Jason sat back down in his chair as Kiaari sat on the bed facing him. “Miaari shared with me,” she said immediately, using her native language. “So, where do you want to start?”

“Hold on,” he called. “Did Miaari explain everything to you?”

“She shared with me what you’re doing, and what I need to know,” she nodded. “You need me to help you penetrate Trillane so you can gain access to their communications, and do it in a way that you’re not detected and they don’t *know* that you’ve breached their security. This I can do for you, Jason Fox. Easily. I’m also supposed to be here to help you in other ways, with other missions. Our mission for now is to successfully transplant your group to a secure location without them being detected. After that, we must find a way to force Trillane to relinquish control of Earth by any means necessary, short of invoking the wrath of the Empress.”

“Right. The main thing here is that no one can know you’re *not* human, Kiaari.”

“I know. I traveled to your town in an animal form, then changed into this after I got inside your town walls, so I wouldn’t frighten anyone,” she smiled. “Your sentries are half asleep, so I managed to get here without being detected. I’m not in a fully human form yet because it’s cold out there, and I don’t have any clothes,” she chuckled, motioning at herself. “This is *me*. Miaari shared that humans don’t commonly go without clothing because of social custom, so I altered myself to make it *look* like I’m clothed. What you think is a jumpsuit is just my skin, altered so it *looks* like clothes. Now that I’m here, I can do a full change, I just didn’t want to trudge through the frost out there on feet that could feel the cold, and I didn’t want to offend your people’s custom.”

“Why didn’t you bring any clothes?”

“It was best if I didn’t come with any additional gear or clothing,” she said. “I can’t pretend to be a human squatter if I’m wearing clothes made on Draconis, can I? I can’t arouse any suspicion, even from your own people.”

“Good point,” he agreed after thinking about it a moment.

“Once I complete the change, I’ll be indistinguishable from any other human here,” she told him.

“Good. Miaari made it clear that we can’t do anything right now that makes us stand out, or it’ll invite an attack from those nobles that were doing the slaving. So you have to look like you belong

here.”

“Understood,” she nodded. Her skin seemed to shiver, then shudder, and then the darkness drained away from it. Jason watched as her “jumpsuit” vanished, leaving behind what looked like perfectly normal skin. “There, now I’m completely human,” she announced, getting up on her knees on the bed and looking down at herself critically, making sure she had managed a flawless transformation. She looked like a carbon copy of Meya’s sleek form, just with pale skin instead of blue skin, and longer hair, and a different facial structure. In effect, she *was* a carbon copy of Meya, a body custom built to fit into Meya’s armor, just built as a *human* instead of as a *Faey*.

“And you’re violating one of those human customs,” he told her pointedly.

“I’m just making sure it looks right before I have to fool humans. Besides, the rules between you and me will be different,” she told him professionally. “We’re going to become romantically involved.”

“What?”

“Just a game,” she told him quickly. “The only way that us spending extended periods of time behind closed doors won’t arouse suspicion is if your townsfolk believe that we’re in a relationship. It gives you a perfect excuse to move me into your house, and of course, your girlfriend is going to go with you when you split from the community after the move.”

He turned that over in his mind. “Well, that does make a kind of sense,” he agreed.

“And be assured, I can separate business from reality,” she smiled. “We’ll sleep in the same bed, but aside from sharing warmth, that’s as far as it goes. So, our first step is me getting into your community. I’ll be impressed by you, and I’ll flirt with you, and you’ll take an interest in me. After a couple of your weeks after I gain citizenship, I move in with you. Then we become a couple, and that will let us do our planning without arousing suspicion.”

“That *is* a good idea,” he admitted. “I’m not sure I like the idea of pretending to be your boyfriend, but it does give all the convenient excuses.”

“You’ll do fine. You’re a reserved person, it won’t look too much out of character for you not to exhibit much affection in a public setting. Now, from our sharing, I saw that you’re going to Charleston today to survey the area. That’s where your people will find me, naked and injured. I’ll concoct a story that I won’t tell you so you can react to it with some sincerity, and we’ll work from there. That sound good to you?”

“Yeah, that should work.”

“Kiaari’s not a common name here. From this point forward, my name is Kate. That’s a common female name, isn’t it?”

“Common enough.”

“How many in your town speak *French*?” she asked, using the English word for the language.

He gave her a look. “Two or three,” he answered. “There may be more, but I’m not absolutely positive.”

“Good. You speak it, and I picked it up from sharing with you. We can use *French* if you want to say something sensitive to me in a public setting. We can’t speak Kimdori again once we leave this room.”

She *was* good. She had a quick mind, and she’d already started working everything out. Something told him that her coming here was going to be a great benefit to him. “Okay.”

“You’ll have to tell the other telepaths about me. Symone and the two humans. They’ll realize I’m not what I look like the first time they try to probe me.”

“They won’t do that, well, the humans won’t,” he told her. “They have explicit instructions about things like that. In fact, nobody knows they’re telepaths *except* the telepaths.”

“Ah yes, I remember now. I’ll keep them secret.”

“Good. Judging from what I’m hearing from you, you’ve been trained to fool telepaths.”

“Of course. I know how to present a false front, and with training, we can use our own gift to

defend ourselves from telepathy. I've already prepared my telepathic screen as part of the disguise I'll assume while I'm here."

"Okay. I *will* tell Symone about you, though. She'll have to probe you as a condition of gaining citizenship, so she'll find you out one way or another."

"Alright, so we let Symone know, but we keep me a secret from the other two. Right?"

"Right. At least for now, anyway."

"Now, when do you want me to go after Trillane's communications?"

"Later. Right now, the move is top priority," he answered. "I'm not sure how much you can help with that, but that matters more right now than anything else."

"I can pick up a box as well as the next person," she chuckled. "I can also help with the placement of counter-surveillance equipment and security. I've been trained in those kinds of things. You can't breach it if you don't understand how to lay it out."

He chuckled. "I guess not."

"Good. Well, I'd say we're about done here. I'll get started for Charleston so I can beat your group there and get myself prepared."

"Well, okay, I guess. Do you need anything?"

"No, I'll be fine. Shikki's tail, it's gonna be weird staying in this form for a while," she said, slapping her bare hips with both hands, then she ran her hands up her slender belly meaningfully. She then patted her lower ribs. "Not that there's anything wrong with humans, Jason Fox. It's just that all your internal organs are in the wrong places. I feel like a puzzle put together the wrong way."

Jason laughed in spite of himself. "You'll adjust, or at least I hope you will."

"I'll be alright. I once spent nearly a month as a Gambrian rock lizard. Now *that* was unpleasant."

"Why?"

"If you ever saw one, you'd understand," she said with a shiver. That shiver seemed to travel through her, setting into her skin, skin that began to darken again to conceal her nudity behind a veil of misdirection, as she changed her skin to hide the fact that she was unclothed. Her nipples and pubic hair and genitals vanished, transformed to support the illusion that they were covered over instead of completely removed. It was so complete that she even removed the separating cleft between her buttocks, making it look like she was wearing pants. Skin-tight pants, but pants nonetheless. "I'll make sure I'm found. Just don't forget to come," she smiled.

"We'll be there," he promised. "We're supposed to leave in about three hours. Is that enough time for you to get there?"

"More than enough," she nodded. "I'll fly."

"You can fly?" he asked in surprise.

"I can when I take the form of a bird," she told him with a smile. "I'm going to like working with you, Jason Fox. Oh, I almost forgot. I have something to share with you."

"The exomech?"

She nodded, tapping her temple. "I received what you need to know last night, sharing with my brother. I'll share it with you later. We'll be able to pilot it. Not well," she said quickly. "Sharing can teach a manual skill, but it can only go so far. Still, it's a solid foundation. Practice can fix that...at least it could, if we could take it out of its box." She laughed. "My brother wanted to come instead of me. He's something of a dabbler in engineering, and he really wanted to meet you and see some of your inventions. Actually, he should have. He's older than me, with more experience."

"Why didn't he then?"

"Because we already decided that whoever came would pretend to be your girlfriend," she told him. "It's the perfect cover. And no matter how good an actor my brother is, he couldn't really pretend to be your girlfriend very well. He can take a female shape, but he doesn't have a female mind. And I don't think you'd much like the idea of playing that game, knowing you were pretending with a male."

Jason shuddered a little at the thought of that. "No, I really wouldn't like that," he agreed.

"We didn't think so," she grinned. "I'll get started. After I walk out, it's as if we never met, remember that. I'll look the same, but remember, I'm Kate."

"I can manage," he assured her.

"Oh, and don't worry. Your people will find me injured, and though the wounds will *look* real, they're *not*. I'll shape them, just like I shaped this body. They won't hurt, but I'll act like they do. It'll just be part of the game."

"Thanks for telling me that," he said with a grateful expression. "I'd have felt awful if I thought you went out and intentionally injured yourself."

"You're welcome. See you soon, Jason Fox," she said, opening the door.

"Just Jason," he said.

"Jason," she mirrored with a nod.

"Good luck."

She closed the door, and he turned and opened his panel again, then put his elbows on the desk and leaned his chin on his interlaced fingers. Kiaari was an impressive woman. She was professional, seemed quite smart, and seemed sincere in her desire to help. From the way it felt to him, this *wasn't* just a job to her. She seemed genuinely interested in what he was doing here, and it felt to him like her help was more than just a command from her older sister. She *wanted* to be here, she *wanted* to help. He didn't have a good idea of her personality yet, but something told him that he'd get along with her quite well.

Her presence here was certainly going to change things, and more than just locally. She'd have an impact on the community, that was for sure...but it was the fact that she was *here* that would change things. There was now an agent in the preserve, a spy whose eyes and ears would carry what went on here beyond just Earth. With Kiaari here, Trillane couldn't run roughshod over humanity and get away with it. Even if they killed him, Kiaari could escape and report what was going on here to someone that could do something about it, maybe even the Empress. She was a symbol that Miaari was right, that what was going on here wasn't just local, that there was something going on that involved other parts of the Imperium.

Of course there was. Trillane was selling humans into slavery. That was *highly* illegal in the Imperium. But now Jason knew, and he was going to fight Trillane to get them off his world, force the Empress to take Earth away from them. And Jason had told Jyslin, who had told Lorna, which would bring the Imperium into this. Now the Imperium *knew* that nobles within Trillane had been engaged in slavery. Those nobles knew who had discovered their illegal activities, and now they were going to try to kill Jason, either out of revenge or in an attempt to keep him from giving away anything else he might know, give away something that would trace the illegal operation back to *names*.

At least Kumi wasn't part of it. He was *so* glad of that. He liked Kumi, and he'd have been crushed if she'd been involved. She was petty, immature, and maybe a little spoiled, but she was a good friend, and one of the few people he knew he could turn to when he needed help. She might blackmail him a little with her prices, but he didn't mind that all that much. She deserved to get something for her trouble, and he didn't mind at all paying her for the dangerous things she did for him. She could get into *huge* trouble if they found out she was helping him, now more than ever. If the slavers found out that she was helping him, they'd come after *her*. That was why she had to be extremely careful in what she was doing. Her life could be at risk. But at least she appreciated that fact, he knew she did. She'd be careful. He had faith in her.

His door opened, and Symone stalked in. She was wearing a heavy bathrobe and fuzzy slippers, insulation against the cold as she scurried over from her own house. *Jason, who was that that just ran out of here?* she asked.

I hope you didn't try to stop her, he sent in reply.

No, but I've never seen her before. Who is she?

That was a Kimdori, he told her steadily.

A Kimdori? Symone sent in surprise, but with an audible gasp. *How did she get here? Why is she here?*

Miaari sent her, he answered. *She's going to be working for me.*

How much is it costing you?

Nothing, he answered.

What? Jason, the Kimdori never work for free! They always charge something, even if it's one credit!

Well, Kiaari didn't quote any price at all. She said the interview was over, and said she would work for me. I think Miaari is paying for it, or maybe Kumi. Either way, it's not me.

Weird. That's just weird, she sent fretfully. *That's not how they do things at all. It's just bizarre.*

Well, I'm glad you're here, Symone, he sent, motioning for her to sit. She did so, sitting on the bed. *Kiaari is going to join the community undercover. She's going to pose as a human squatter and get into the community. Since you have to screen her before she can get in, I have to let you know about her. But she's going to be a secret from everyone else, including Tim and Temika. She's already assured me that she can fool both of them.*

Yeah, she can. Kimdori are trained to fool telepaths, because of us, she sent with an audible giggle.

Kiaari's kinda under contract with me to do whatever I need her to do, he continued. *She told me as much when she was here. Miaari told her to do what I need her to do. Right now she's just gonna help us move, but afterwards, after I leave the community, she's gonna go after Trillane and get us access to their communications, and whatever else we need. She's going to be our spy. With Kiaari helping us, we actually have more than a snowball's chance in hell. Shit, we might even have a chance to win.*

True enough, Symone agreed. *Kimdori are good. If she's going to be around for the duration, we have a much better chance at getting Trillane off Earth.*

We never talked about dates, but the way it sounded to me, she's here to stay.

When is she gonna try to get into the community?

Today, he answered. *She's on her way to Charleston now. She's gonna be found by our survey team. She's already prepared a story and picked a fake identity. We're going to call her Kate. And part of the ruse is that she's going to pretend to be my girlfriend. That way we can spend long periods of time behind closed doors without attracting attention.*

Damn, that's pretty clever, Symone sent with a hum. *It wouldn't attract attention, would it?*

It also gives her the perfect excuse to leave the community and stay with me after I go, he nodded. *Smart.*

Miaari's idea, he told her. *But a damn good one.*

Symone laughed. *I've spent weeks trying to get Temika into your bed, and now I have to drop it so she doesn't interfere with the plan. I'll have to come up with a viable reason to stop, or she'll get suspicious.*

Push her towards Mike Colbert, he told her. *Mike's the kind of guy she'd be attracted to, and Mike's smitten with her. That's all the reason you need to stop pushing her at me.*

Really? I haven't noticed it.

Trust me. If she pushes you, just tell her that Mike told you he was really interested in her, but was too shy to ask her directly, and he wanted advice from you on how to approach you since you're her friend. That'll get her going in the right direction.

Why would she like Mike? He's all muscle. Faey women like muscle on a man, but not that much. I think it looks ugly.

That's what Temika likes, he shrugged. *She likes ripped guys.*

Yeah, I think that'd probably work on the Temika angle. I suggest you don't take what Kate does seriously, Jason. It's just going to be a game to her, nothing personal.

Yeah, I know, she already warned me. I'm not sure I can pull off pretending to be in love with her,

but she said I should do alright. I hope so.

You'll do fine, she assured him. I just can't figure out why they're breaking the rules, she fretted. Kiaari should have bargained her price with you immediately after agreeing to work for you. No one should have paid for her work, because that implies that she was going to work before she ever showed up. Kimdori don't do that.

Well, I'm not sure of the specifics, but I was given the distinct feeling that there's something else going on, something bigger than what we can see, and the Kimdori are involved in it, he told her, dancing carefully around the whole truth to tell her what he could without violating Miaari's confidence in him. For us, it's just gonna be about kicking Trillane off Earth, but there's another layer to this higher up than Earth that involves us somehow. What happens here is going to affect what goes on up there, and Miaari flat out told me that the Kimdori have a vested interest in what happens. That's why Kiaari is here. She's here to make sure that whatever interest the Kimdori have in Earth is protected. I'm not sure what that interest is, and how it involves me and what I plan to do, but I'll take Kiaari's help even if I don't understand what's going on. Even if I don't see the big picture, what I can say is that I trust Miaari. She's not going to sell us out, I'm positive of that.

You trust her?

Completely, he sent with conviction, his emotion reinforcing his thought. You weren't there when we were talking, Symone. I can't tell you what she told me because I'd be betraying a promise to keep it secret, but believe me when I say that I trust Miaari with my life.

I can respect that, Jason, she sent seriously in reply. And you forget, I'm friends with a Kimdori, so I understand what you're saying about secrets, and about trust. If you trust Miaari, then I trust Miaari. It's that simple. We don't have to understand what they're doing, mainly because I doubt we ever could. Kimdori are way smarter than most people realize. Odds are, their plan is just way beyond us. All we can do is our best, and hope that it's enough.

Thanks, Symone, he sent gratefully, his sending tinged with honest gratitude. I was afraid that you wouldn't understand.

I understand. There's just one problem that I can see.

What?

I hope Kiaari isn't the jealous type, she sent with a wink. She has to share you with another girl. Right now, it looks like it's gonna be me.

He laughed. And what makes you think that?

"Pft," she hissed aloud. She's just gonna be pretend, and I doubt she'll satisfy your needs the way I can. You're going to be living with a woman you can't touch, and that means that you need a woman you can touch available when you need it.

Symone, you haven't done any satisfying since the first and only time we slept together, he sent with amusement.

Hey, that's your fault, she replied with an accusing tone, pointing to herself. It's right here whenever you need to get off, cutie. I haven't been pushing it very much because I hoped you'd get horny and I could get you between Temika's legs, but if I'm going to be pushing her towards Mike, then that means that it's my duty as your friend to make sure you don't go without.

You know I'm not comfortable with that, he reminded her. You're my best friend's girlfriend. Even if he does approve, to me, it's just not right.

Yeah, that's why I've been working Temika, she answered. She's still the most needful woman on this entire planet in the most dire need of a good fuck. She desperately needs a good fuck, you need a woman who won't think it's a permanent relationship, and you wouldn't have the same hang-up about banging her as you do about me. It was a good match.

So that's why you've trailed off on the propositioning, Symone, he sent with a sly smile.

Yup, she sent with a grin. But now I'm back on the job. Any time I think you need some pussy, you're getting mine. I won't take no for an answer, so just deal with it, she warned. You're my friend,

and I won't let you go around without. I don't care if you have an issue with buddy sex because I'm with Tim. That's just a hang-up I have to break you of, that's all. And you'll be easy to break of sexual hang-ups, she sent tauntingly. I know how to get you excited, cutie. I learned that our first time. Actually, I learned that from Jyslin, she laughed. She shared with me all the lurid details of her sex life.

She didn't!

Of course she did, Symone answered. I told her all about Tim, too. Me and her are best friends, Jason. We both knew that if one of us was busy, that it was the other's job to satisfy our men. If it was Tim and Jyslin here, she'd be doing the exact same thing, and I'm glad she would. Don't think of us as two couples, cutie. Think of us as a quartet. A Faey will send her best friend into her husband's bed if he needs attention and she's too busy to give it. She'd also send her husband to her best friend if she needed sex, but her husband wasn't available. I wouldn't hesitate to send Tim to Jyslin if we were still in New Orleans. I never did, but I almost did, right before we left. She was starting to get bitchy, and I was about two steps from sending Tim to pop her spring.

Jason was a little surprised. He didn't know Jyslin did that. He almost felt betrayed, but in a way, it wasn't betrayal. What she said certainly fit into the Faey mentality. Symone and Jyslin were best friends. Given Faey behavior, it certainly fit that Jyslin would do what she did. After all, she was just taking steps to make sure that Jason was kept happy, at least in her own eyes.

I've been working on Tim in the same area, she told him. I've got him to where he understands you and me, but he's still having a bit of an issue with the idea of him and Jyslin. He's a bit self-conscious about the fact that one of the first things I'll do after we reunite with Jyslin is have her fuck him. I guess I should work with you too about that, so you don't take it personally, she reasoned in her sending, looking him in the eye.

Yeah, that does seem a bit personal to me, he sent honestly.

See? I knew I should have started sooner, she sent with an audible sigh. Think, cutie. I'm just doing what a Faey girl thinks is right. Jyslin's not any different. She'll do the same for me that I do for her, and that's take care of my man, the same way I try to take care of you. She will because we're friends, Jason. She's just doing me a favor, and besides, she told me that she thinks Tim is sexy, so it wouldn't be a chore for her. Friends don't let friends go without, and friends don't let a friend's husband stay frustrated. It's one of the marks of a close friendship when Faey share their spouses with each other when it's needed. We're not gonna be having daily orgies in the bedroom, she sent with amusement. Though I admit, I wouldn't say no to the idea of the four of us getting it on in the same bed, since I think you're hot and Jyslin's my best friend. It's just an aspect of us you already know and understand applied in a slightly different manner, that's all. I hope you can understand it.

I think I can, he sent after a moment of contemplation. It creeps me out a little bit, but I think I can. It also surprises me, I'll admit. I mean, I know you thought of me as friend enough to be willing to have sex, but I never really considered Jyslin the same way. I always thought of her as, well, as just being interested in me. It's a shock to realize that she really would have sex with Tim the same way that you would with me, because he is her friend.

Just so, because he's her friend, Jason, she sent, quite seriously. She's still all about you, but she wouldn't turn her back to a male friend in need, especially a man who's your best friend. She'd take that as even more reason to be there for him whenever he needs pussy. And it's just sex. That's something you told me you finally understood.

Yeah, but it's strange to think of applying it to Jyslin.

Well, then this wasn't a bad conversation then. Just don't think any differently about Jyslin, Jason, just as you don't think any differently about me.

I don't think I will, I just have to get used to the idea.

Good. Now, need some, cutie? I'm right here, we have some time, I'm naked under this robe, and talking about all this sex has me in the mood. Care to feed the pussy?

Why don't you go see if Tim wants to play? he asked mildly.

You're right here, and I fucked him last night, she told him, getting up and coming over to him. She sat on his lap and untied the belt of her robe, then opened it enough to let him see that she wasn't lying about having nothing on under it.

No thanks, Symone, he sent sternly. *I'm not in the mood, and I have a lot on my mind.*

You're not in the mood because you do have a lot on your mind. Every once in a while you have to just put it all on the top shelf and spend a little time on you

I'll have time for that when the community is safely moved and we're in our new place, he told her.

There was a knock on the door, and it opened quickly. Temika and Tim were outside, and they looked in with some surprise. Tim just grinned, but Temika gasped and put her hand over her mouth. "Ohmahgawd," she blurted. "What are you doin'?"

"What's it look like, Mika?" Symone asked archly, dropping the robe off her shoulders to advertise her nudity openly to Temika. "I kept trying to get you to come over here and get involved with Jason, but you wanted to be stuck up about it, so I'm taking care of it myself. Jason's a *man*, and he needs pussy from time to time. It could have been *your* pussy, but I'm tired of trying to get you in here. I've neglected Jason for weeks because I was trying to get him interested in you, and you interested in him. Well, honey, you have *officially* missed your chance. From now until he finds a girlfriend, when Jason needs pussy, he'll get the one between *my* legs, not the one between *your* legs. Now shut the door. I'm not gonna let you watch when it could have been *you* sitting on his cock."

Temika blushed so furiously her entire face turned almost black, and she fumbled for the doorknob for a moment before finding it, then slammed the door closed after she and Tim backed out. Jason gave Symone a surprised look, but her face screwed up into a silly grin, then she put both hands over her mouth so stifle the sound of her laughter. *Think that justifies me not pushing her towards you anymore?* she sent privately to him.

That was a front? Jason sent in surprise. *It sounded real to me!*

Well, I think it worked, then, she winked. *I'll go apologize later, and start pointing out Mike to her. That should get Temika out of the picture and give Kate an open door. Besides, maybe thinking about the fact that she could had you will start making her think of finding a man to be part of her life, and we can get her fixed up with Mike and happy with herself again.*

She's gonna be pissed once she gets over her embarrassment.

I can handle it, she winked again.

Jason stifled a laugh. *Symone, you are an evil, evil woman.*

But you love me anyway, she sent grandly.

God help me, I guess I do, he admitted. *Now put your robe back on.*

Hell no, she sent with a lascivious leer, her sendings tinged heavily with sexual desire. She got off his lap and immediately grabbed his belt buckle, starting to undo it. *They think we're fucking, I'm stuck in here to maintain that illusion, I'm horny, and I can't get to Tim right now. So, if you're really my friend, Jason, fix it.*

Oh my God, that will be such a chore, he sent dryly.

Shut up, she sent shortly, but she was grinning.

Chapter 12

Vesta, 36 Demaa, 4393, Orthodox Calendar
Sunday, 22 December 2007, Native Regional Reckoning
Chillicothe, Ohio (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

Kiaari—Kate, well, Kate was...interesting.

That was about all he could say about that. His initial impression of her was that of a no-nonsense woman who knew what had to be done and set about it with diligence and determination. She impressed him with her intelligence and her training, and he'd been quite uplifted about the idea of having her help for what he wanted to do.

Kate, however, was *not* Kiaari. Kate projected herself as a timid, unassuming woman who seemed to want to melt into the background when immediately presented with more than one person with whom to converse. Doc Northwood was the first to notice this trait in her, mentioning to Jyslin that it was as if she was struck mute the instant she could see two people at the same time. She presented herself as being incredibly shy...which wasn't a very good thing, given that the face that Kate possessed was similar to Meya's, just heavier in features due to the lack of Faey light-boned structure, and that made her beautiful. People wanted to look at her, to talk to her, but she was too timid to reply, to take any initiative.

The meeting of Kate with the community was suitably dramatic. Leamon had been the one to find her, and as he told it, she was naked, battered, suffering from multiple ragged lacerations, and laying in a pool of her own blood. Jason had gotten a good look at an "unconscious" Kate when Leamon raced her back to his skimmer early in the afternoon, when thick clouds overhead concealed the skimmer from orbital observation, and if he hadn't known that she'd faked those wounds, he'd have been horrified. The worst was the large gash over her right temple, which exposed her skull. She was covered in blood, and had parallel lines of ragged tears in her flesh all over her body, some three across, some four across, and a couple five across. The shape and size of the injuries caused Doc Northwood to immediately declare her the victim of a bear attack. This was reinforced by the fact that a bear was killed not four blocks from where Kate was discovered, when it came out of a building and startled Irwin, who killed it out of reflex. The way Irwin described it, the bear raced at him like a flesh-hungry demon, but Jason has a private suspicion that the fact that Irwin had known about Kate's wounds before he saw the bear caused him to recall that encounter much differently than it actually happened.

Jason was there when Doc Northwood sutured her wounds, giving her somewhere in the vicinity of 170 stitches in various places, and he was the first person she saw when she woke up the next day. He remembered to play the game out, telling her where she was and how they'd found her, and he even remembered to ask her her name before blurting it out. She told him her name was Kate, and then she blushed and immediately stopped talking when Northwood came into the room. It took Doc a while to coax her into talking to him, because all she did was stare at Jason, who was sitting against a counter across the room. It took him even longer to get her to open up to him, to chat with him and not just answer his questions, but she still kept glancing at Jason, as if her eyes were drawn to him against her own will.

She started planting the seeds of her cover immediately, Jason realized...clever girl.

People visited her, and everyone had the same impression. She was a nice girl, but very, very shy. Once they did get her to open up a little, they found her to be a sweet-natured, gentle, likable young woman, but she immediately fell silent if more than one person was in the room, and it took considerable cajoling to get her to speak when in company. But people *did* like her. They just realized that her shyness meant that it would take her time to be more open with the community.

Her story was right in line with that personality. Kate wasn't a squatter by choice. From what she told everyone, she was a Canadian native, originally from Toronto, who had been going to law school before the subjugation, and had just been trying to get along under the new Imperium. But there was no place for lawyers in the new Imperial system, and she had little skill with technical things, so she ended up on a farm. She also ended up coming under the eye of a sadistic guard assigned to the camp, who found the shy young woman to be an irresistible target to abuse. She ran away from it to get away from that guard's persecution, but the motor scooter she'd been riding got a flat tire, and then she had to abandon it and all her things when armed squatters attacked her when she was trying to get the tire patched. She told them she'd wandered the forest for days with no supplies, living off creek water and desperately trying to find something to eat in houses that had been picked clean years ago, until she reached Charleston. She was searching for food in the abandoned city, and then she couldn't remember anything else until she woke up.

Doc Northwood told everyone that that was quite normal, that quite often people couldn't remember a traumatic event, and even some time before and after that event.

Jason realized that Kate's story and her personality were the perfect ingredients for making everyone feel *protective* over her. She was playing the likable, pitiable, helpless innocent, exploiting the compassion of the community, and her ploy was swallowed by the community hook, line, and sinker. The community as a whole basically demanded that Jyslin screen the girl before she was even allowed out of bed, because nobody wanted to send the shy girl out on her own...she'd never make it. She was a city-raised young lady thrown out into the wilderness with no supplies, no tools, no training, not even any clothes anymore. If they didn't take her in, she'd die within days of being sent over the bridge, and people liked her too much to let that happen.

Damn, she was *good*.

Thanks to Doc Northwood's skill and his access to some Faey medical supplies, Kate was out of bed and moving around two days after bringing her back, with all most of her superficial and light injuries "healed," thanks to the healing-accelerant supplies they had on hand. Most of her wounds were only flesh deep, and though she was stiff and sore and bandaged more than clothed, she wanted out of bed and to move about in the crisp December air. And like a moth to a flame, she immediately sought out Jason Fox. She never *initiated* conversation, she never *asked*...she simply put herself in a position where Jason might notice her, where he might talk to her. This Jason saw for what it was, and he picked up on his side of the requirements for her cover and took an active interest in her. The very first thing he did was admit to her with others around that he was telepathic, but Kate simply blew that off as if it didn't matter in the slightest. After he got that out of the way, he could be found by others sitting with her on the porch in his overshirt when everyone else except himself and Kate were wearing jackets, enjoying the brisk air like true cold-climate denizens, or maybe walking along the streets, and just talking. Jason was impressed with how detailed Kiaari's cover story was. He'd *been* to Toronto before the subjugation, and he was familiar with the city...and Kate's description of it and her non-existent life there was frighteningly accurate. She'd manufactured an entire fake life, complete with family, friends, memories of things and places and people, and she could recite those memories without error if asked to repeat them. Jason was stunned at how completely immersed Kiaari was in the persona of Kate...but then again, he realized that a trained spy like her had to be both a good actor and have a very good memory. She even spoke with a Quebec accent. They spoke in English at first, but after Kate discovered that Jason spoke French, they could be heard chattering away at each other in French. Everyone could see that though she was shy with everyone else, she was not nearly as shy when she was with Jason, but they could also see that she was battling her shyness to talk to him, to try to keep his attention on her, attention she seemed to both want and fear.

She was so good, several times during those first days of knowing her, he caught himself *believing* that she was Kate.

It was very easy for her to snap his head back to reality. Kate and Jason would talk, then they

would touch by accident, and she would share any pertinent information she needed to with him, or warn him he was going far afield, or just convey her amusement that he was starting to forget himself. That touch, and that sharing, reminded him starkly that this was *not* Kate from Toronto, this was *Kiaari*.

Kate kept Jason's head in the game, and helped guide him along what she considered to be a nominal sequence of events that gets her into Jason's house in the shortest time without arousing suspicion.

Other things were afoot as well. He'd heard from Kumi yesterday, when she rather giddily informed him that since the admiral she was going to serve had an accident and got injured, her compulsory conscription, which was to start *today*, Kumi's 25th birthday, was now postponed. If she wasn't a Countess, she'd have been reassigned, but the clout of her Duchess mother and the guarantee of her gaining that assignment meant that she wouldn't be sent anywhere else. Admiral Duri would be on medical leave for two months, and since her induction phase would only last one month, she had a one month push-back in her conscription. Kumi, that clever little minx, got her mother to fix it so the month delay in conscription *counted* towards her mandatory service time, since it wasn't *her* fault that her conscription was delayed. So, now Kumi's conscription would officially begin on 36 Keda, instead of 36 Demaa.

Kumi had been busy before going off to conscription. She'd set up the shell company that would allow him to operate without her, and had everything set up so that there was a complicated series of shell companies that only existed on paper that made it extremely difficult for anyone to directly trace the company back to either him or her. Jason suspected the Miaari might have more to do with that than Kumi, though.

That had brought up a thought...did Kumi know what Miaari was doing? Did Kumi know about Kiaari?

Well, he bloody well couldn't ask Kumi, so he instead asked Kiaari. She told him that she knew Miaari had taken a personal interest in Jason, but she didn't know about Kiaari...and that was to protect Kiaari's cover. The only people who knew about Kiaari were Miaari, Kiaari, Jason, Meya, and Symone...and *no one* else. The silence of everyone but Meya Jason could see immediately, but Kiaari seemed untroubled by Meya's knowledge. She simply told him that Miaari had interviewed Meya before coming to meet him at the lake, and she trusted her with that information...and that was that. No other reason was given, and as far as Kiaari was concerned, no other reason was even necessary.

Pack mentality. Kiaari trusted Miaari, completely, literally *blindly*, because they were sisters.

That company might be needed sooner than later, which was why he and Temika were on the outskirts of Chillicothe, ten yards from the border of official Faey territory at five in the morning, sitting in a truck and waiting. He'd hit a snag with the projectors...their *size*. They were *big*, and he could only fit one at a time in his skimmer. This wasn't a huge issue when it came to getting them to Charleston, but it *was* an issue when it came him getting them to *Chesapeake*. He had to do this without a Kumi delivery because he didn't want her to have any idea at all of where he was moving the community or how he was going to conceal it. He'd already had the projectors bought and bundled, and they were sitting in a warehouse on Draconis waiting for shipment.

So what he had to do was get them all onto Earth, and then sneak them into the preserve one at a time. And for that, he was going to need some warehouse space.

That was what this trip was about. He'd just gotten another royalty payment and could now afford to rent a warehouse, but before he could do that, he had to make sure he could get out of the preserve safely, and that he could get past the Faey.

It was going to feel odd walking around in Faey territory. They were going to New Myrthan, Ohio, a mid-sized town near a large tract of farmland. New Myrthan was carefully chosen for this because of three things: it was a good-sized town, it was a large hub for cargo and commercial traffic, and it was located only four miles from the border. Food and farm equipment were ferried in and out of New

Myrthan en route to either Draconis or the farms, so there was always commercial traffic. That meant that the town had warehouse space, and since there were no food shipments right now, it also meant that some of that warehouse space was empty and available. The town had a population of about 65,000, so Jason had lots of people around to help hide him, and it wouldn't look very odd to the Faey for them to see him and Temika rumbling around in an old truck; there were lots of old trucks around, many of them used on the farms. Two more farmhands in an old truck weren't going to attract attention, even at this time of year. Planting season was over, but the farms were still hotbeds of activity preparing for the spring planting, building expansions and new buildings, and basically engaging the farm workers not shipped to the southern hemisphere in busy work to keep them from getting idle, bored, and therefore unruly.

Jason leaned back in his seat and looked at his ID cards one more time, going through everything in his mind. The IDs stated that his name was Kevin Smith, a nice unassuming name. Miaari had included eight separate IDs in her little case, in two sets of four IDs in different names. This set was Kevin Smith, but there was another set that gave his name as Jack Brewer. The IDs had a resettable photo element, allowing him to download a holo of himself into the picture area, which projected a three dimensional image of his head into the air over the ID when activated, and displayed a two dimensional photo of him when not activated.

Right now, that photo was of a young man with green eyes and short coal black hair.

It still felt weird, his hair being so short, but Symone laughed at him for him cutting off all his hair, laughing at his vanity. His shirt and hair had been his only true vanities...besides, his shoulder-length hair helped keep his neck warm. But it was mandatory that he change his appearance, so he had done so.

Two of the IDs were duplicates of the main ID that everyone had, the Native Identification Card, though some people used an ID stick instead of a card, such as students, people who might have to slot a stick to use a piece of equipment. The other two cards in those sets were work IDs, both the same occupation. Both Kevin Smith's and Jack Brewer's cards identified him as a contractor, with a special annotation on the IDs that also marked him as owning his own business. Some humans still did own their own businesses, if it was a business that fulfilled a need that Faey technology or manpower didn't provide. A contractor was still a viable occupation in the Faey-dominated modern society, because people's houses needed to be fixed, and Faey construction specialists wouldn't demean themselves to the point of working on something as primitive as a house built before the subjugation. They let the humans fix the human things, and that would give a contractor a niche in society that would protect his business from takeover by Trillane and protect him from involuntary reassignment to a farm.

Clever, clever Miaari. Tagging him as a business owner would make him looking for warehouse space not be unusual enough to attract attention, especially for a contractor, who needed space to store materials and equipment.

"Does it have to be so damn cold?" Temika complained, pulling her hood up over her head more tightly. "Can't we turn on the heater?"

"This isn't cold."

"Ah'm from *Alabama*, sugah," she said in a bristling tone. "Trust me, this is *cold*."

"Don't ever move to Maine," he hummed.

"Ah ain't plannin' on it, sugah." She shivered and burrowed into her coat more. "We shouldn't have got heah so fast. Shit, even mah *teeth* are cold. Can't we send?"

"This close to the border? Think, woman," he answered mildly. "You want this to be over before we even try to get through that hole in the fence? Now stop complaining and keep timing the guards."

"They been going by every four minutes on the dot, sugah, for over an hour," she told him. "You got the creds out?"

Jason held up four bright red bills, 100 credits of hard currency in four 25 credit notes, money made of a soft, flexible plastic that was pliable as paper yet much more durable, and nearly impossible to

counterfeit. Jason wasn't used to seeing hard currency, for his ID had also worked as a credit card, allowing him to use his money. Temika had told him a while ago that getting over the border wasn't that hard, because in some places the fence and sensors were broken, and all up and down the frontier there were certain guards that would allow people to cross it...for a price. This was one of those places. There was a pair of guards that patrolled this area of the fence that were going to just let them drive through and on to New Myrthan for 100 credits. They would wait until the patrol was visible, advance to the hole and creep through as they reached it. Jason would roll down the window and give them the money, and then both them and the guards would go on their merry way. That particular patrol passed by where they were every four minutes, walking back and forth along the fence on a well-worn footpath. Just beyond that footpath was a grassy strip about twenty feet wide, and beyond that was fallow farmland, all of which sat in a low and wide valley with a medium-sized stream running through the middle. The terrain around New Myrthan was still considered hilly, but the hills were low and gentle, and the earth flattened out considerably only about 20 miles from New Myrthan, the edge of the great plain that sat between the Appalachians and the Rockies.

The hole in the fence was just an example of Faey laxity concerning the security of the Frontier. It was a huge, gaping hole, big enough for Luke to drive his deuce through, and blatantly visible...but *only* if one was standing at the edge of the grassy strip and looked down. From the farmland, the hole wasn't visible, and he'd bet that no farm worker was allowed to get close enough to the fence to see it. The fence was at the edge of the forest, and the unique positioning of the hole in the bottom of a shallow gulley made it very hard to see from the air, because of the overhanging trees and a heavy growth of brown vines entwining the top of the fence, which dangled down into the hole. The location of the hole was ideal for it remaining secret, and he'd bet that the guards that knew about the hole wanted it kept that way, because they were making some money out of this. The only thing that could possibly reveal the hole would be vehicle tire tracks, but the edge of the fence was lined with gravel. When Jason got the truck through the hole, he was supposed to immediately turn left and follow the fenceline for about 50 yards or so and get on U.S. 35, and simply drive right on up the road to New Myrthan.

Jason and Temika weren't the only people waiting to use the hole. There was another truck behind them, about fifty yards back, sitting up on old Route 23, that had arrived about ten minutes ago. They started advancing at first, but when their headlights hit the back of Jason's truck, they immediately stopped and backed up, then one of their number got out of the truck and advanced with a rifle in his hands. Temika was the one to get out and go meet him, and when she came back she simply said it was another group of squatters waiting for curfew to end so they could sneak into New Myrthan.

This hole was relatively well known on the squatter side, so much so that their fees for allowing people to cross the border were known by most in the region. It was 25 credits a head for anyone on foot or on a bicycle, or 100 credits for a vehicle, for anyone crossing the border. All the guards who worked this part of the fence were in on the scam as well, so no matter who was guarding the fence, it was someone that was going to let one through.

"What time is it?" Temika asked.

"It's five minutes since the last time you asked," he answered her.

She groaned. "Can we *please* turn on the heat?"

"Just deal with it, sheesh," he grunted, putting the credits back on the seat between them. "It won't be much longer. Ten more minutes for curfew to be up, and we have to save gas. It has to get us home."

"Ah know, but Ah hate bein' cold when Ah got a heat right heah in front of me," she grumbled. "Jason."

"Yeah?"

"What you gonna do about Kate? Ah mean, any woman with eyes can see that Kate likes you, and she's trying tah get over bein' shy and all, but Symone might get jealous or somethin'."

Jason chuckled. “You really don’t understand Symone, do you?” he asked, looking over at her. “Symone would be overjoyed if I got into a relationship with Kate, at least as long as I didn’t think it was permanent. And Symone says that you’ve been avoiding her.”

She blushed slightly, obviously remembering walking in on them a few days ago, when Symone laid down the law on her. “Yeah, well, Ah knew that you and her fooled around behind Tim’s back, but Ah nevah—”

“No, we don’t,” he interrupted. “Faey are very different from us, Mika. Jyslin is Symone’s best friend, and Jyslin isn’t here. Since Jyslin isn’t here, Symone thinks it’s her duty to watch out for me, and keep me happy since I’m not with Jyslin. That means that she’ll prevent me from getting into any relationship that might jeopardize my commitment to Jyslin, but it also means that she’ll be there to take Jyslin’s place in, certain aspects of my relationship with Jyslin. As a telepath, Mika, I’m sure you understand why the Faey completely separate the concept of making love from the concept of having sex.”

“Actually, no, Ah don’t understand it.”

“Okay, that explains a lot of it right there,” he told her. “Faey consider making love to be joining the minds in telepathic union during sex. Having sex is just the *physical* aspect of it, Mika. I’ve experienced both sides of it, making love with Jyslin and having sex with Symone, and trust me, there is a *huge huge* difference between the two. That’s why Faey are so casual about the idea of sex. Sex without telepathic union is just physical, just for physical pleasure. Yeah, I’ve enjoyed it the *two times* I’ve had sex with Symone, I won’t deny that, but she knows I never feel comfortable about it. That’s why she’s been looking for another woman to replace her, someone that’s *not* my best friend’s girl. She’ll push Kate on me until she thinks Kate is a threat to my relationship with Jyslin, then she’ll try to separate us.”

“Ah know, but Ah just can’t get over it,” she grunted.

“She was trying to push *you* on me,” he said deliberately. “She thought you’d be the perfect woman for it, since neither of us would think a relationship would be permanent, and she thinks it’s something of a scandal that you don’t have a boyfriend.”

“She needs tah keep her nose out of mah business,” Temika grunted.

“Dream on,” Jason chuckled. “Symone’s a born busybody. She’ll nag at you til you give in, cause she thinks you’ll be happier. She told me that she has a new guy in mind for you.”

“Mike, Ah’ll bet,” she snorted. “She’s already mentioned his name like ten times. Mike’s cute and all, and he’s got a hot bod, but Ah just ain’t ready for thinking about a man right yet.” She looked at him. “Ah thought that was some kinda ploy tah make me get with *you*.”

“Nope,” he told her. “She meant what she said, Mika. You really pissed her off, I think you should know that.”

“*Ah* pissed *her* off?” she said with sudden heat. “What the fuck did *Ah* do?”

“Nothing, and that’s what pissed her off,” Jason chuckled. “She was really working hard to get you interested in me, because she hated seeing you alone, and she thought that you finding a boyfriend would help you deal with your thing about being touched. She thought you were being stubborn on purpose, but now I think she knows it’s just because I’m not your type.”

“Well, Ah have tah say, I *do* think you’re cute, sugah, and you’re sexy,” she admitted with a blush. “But you’re mah *friend*. Ah never really thought it a good idea tah think of you that way, cause Ah was afraid it might ruin what we already got if we got together and got into a fight or some shit like that.”

“Symone will not understand that at all,” Jason chuckled. “In her eyes, the fact that we’re friends would make it that much more logical for us to sleep together. It’s all about point of view, I suppose. She sees sex about the same way you’d see giving someone a backrub. It’s something you don’t do for a stranger, but wouldn’t mind at all doing for a friend.”

“And you have the same problem as me,” she reasoned. “That’s why you don’t feel all that

comfortable screwin' Symone. She's a *friend*."

"Actually, my issue isn't Symone, it's Tim," he answered honestly. "Tim knows about what Symone does, because she *tells* him. He told me he's alright with it, hell, he understands Symone way better than we do, but regardless of that, it just doesn't sit completely right with me. Symone's trying to break me of that," he told her. "She told me she wants me so I'm totally at ease with having sex with her, and I'd *better* be at ease about the idea of Tim having sex with Jyslin."

"Ohmahgawd!" Temika gasped. "She said *that*?"

He nodded. "Now maybe you'll understand her point of view a little better, Mika. Symone has no qualms about having sex with her best friend's boyfriend, just as much as she doesn't have qualms about letting *her* boyfriend have sex with *her* best friend. To Symone, it's *just sex*. It's no big deal, it's just two friends having fun together. But, on the other side of that, it's not something that she'd do just on a whim. She only wants to have sex with me because Jyslin isn't here, that I'm cut off from the physical pleasure that my relationship with Jyslin provided. If Jyslin were here, she wouldn't be propositioning me, because she'd have no reason to. And if it was Jyslin here instead of me, she'd *expect* Tim to be offering the same comfort that Symone offers me. In fact, she'd *demand* it. Jyslin and Symone are best friends, and in Faey society, there's a certain amount of sharing that goes on between best friends. Including boyfriends, but only when there's a *reason* to share."

Temika was quiet a moment. "Ah guess Ah really didn't understand all that well," she said. "Ah thought Symone was just bein' a slut, bangin' you behind Tim's back, but Ah see she wasn't."

"Not at all," Jason nodded. "She's just trying to be a friend in the only way she knows how. That's why she was trying to hook us up, and why she's now trying to get you interested in Mike. She loves you as a friend, Mika, and she wants you to be happy. And she's not going to stop until you *are* happy, even if you think you're *already* happy. To Symone, happiness is someone special in your life. So just give in," he chuckled. "Find a guy you like, and see where it takes you. You really have nothing to lose. Do you like Mike?"

"Well, yeah," she said uncertainly. "He's handsome, and he's funny, and he's kinda shy around me, which Ah think Ah like, and Ah think he's attracted tah me. But Ah think about touchin' him, and Ah get all weak in mah knees."

"Things are different now, Mika," he told her. "*You're* the one in control now. You don't have to be afraid of anyone in the community, not even Symone. You know she'd never hurt you. She loves you."

She stared at him.

"That's all it is, Mika. When the Faey probed you, you developed a phobia about being touched because of it. You're afraid of being touched because you're afraid that it'll happen again, cause the mindbender put her hands on you. But it *won't* happen again. You're a telepath now too, you can fight back now. Don't deny yourself *everything* because of *one* thing."

"How do you know that?"

"Back when I first met you, the first time we touched, it just *screamed* at me, so strong I couldn't block it out," he answered her honestly. "Symone knows too, but Tim doesn't, because you've made a hell of a lot of progress since then."

"Ah, Ah don't know what tah say."

"Don't say anything. Just *think* about it for a while. It's not something you can just shed immediately, it's going to take you time. But if you understand *why* you're afraid, maybe it'll help you beat it."

"Ah...Ah will. Ah promise."

Temika fell silent as she evidently began thinking about what he said, and time inexorably passed. Jason kept checking his watch ever few seconds, and after ten minutes had passed and curfew was officially lifted, Jason started the truck and crawled forward, as the truck some distance behind them began to advance slowly as well. "Remember your training," Jason said quietly to Temika. "False

front. These guards won't be Symone, and they *will* try to listen to us. Got your false front ready?"

"Yeah."

"Then do it, and block yourself completely so you don't hear them send," he told her as he erected his own deceiving array of random, completely innocuous thoughts, the thoughts of a human with no talent.

"Ah hate the idea of not hearin' what they sayin'."

"Me too, but we can't react to any sendings, or we're hosed."

They waited about a minute, and the two guards came into view on the driver's side of the truck, trudging up on the rise. They diverted down into the shallow gulley when they saw the truck, and Jason rolled down his window as they approached, one on either side of the truck. Temika gave him a nervous look, but he simply stared at her calmly a moment before turning to look at the armored, helmeted guard.

"Show me some red," she demanded in accented English, a voice sounding a bit tinny from behind her helmet.

Jason held up the credits for her to see. She pulled them out of his hand and counted them quickly, then nodded to her companion on the other side.

"I ain't never seen you before, so listen up. No lights til you get up to the first curve, that's where the first farm's driveway is," she told him. "There's lots of old vehicles crawling the streets that're used on farms, so nobody'll pull you over for not having license on your truck. There ain't no old-style fuel stations in town, so you'd better not run out, and I suggest you just park that thing and walk or take a tram or cab anywhere you want to go before someone notices the exhaust. Park only at blue curbs, and if you get caught, you won't live to be sent to Columbus. Understand?"

"Perfectly," Jason said in a steady tone. "When is evening curfew?"

"Nine," she answered.

"That's all I needed to know. Thank you."

"Just remember what I said, and for Trelle's sake, keep your head down," the guard told him. "As long as you don't do anything to draw attention to yourself, you can get in and out without trouble."

"I'll remember," he said as he quite deliberately began rolling up his window.

The guard put the money in a small case on her belt as Jason crawled the truck ahead, then turned sharply left and slowly followed the gravel path up to the road.

"That was nervous," Temika said with an explosive sigh as Jason pulled back up onto the road.

"That wasn't bad at all," he said. "Neither of them even *tried* to probe us, they probably just eavesdropped."

"How do you stay so fuckin' *calm*?" Temika asked.

"I learned how to cope with fear in my martial arts training. Trust me, I found that just as nervous as you did, but I've been taught how to not let it *show*."

"Teach me, sugah!" she laughed.

New Myrthan was a new town, built about ten miles north of Chillicothe, built out where the hills were very low and gentle, where the ground was much flatter and fertile enough to make it prime farmland. That farmland was now lying dormant, waiting for spring, but the town was still bustling with activity. Dropships and smaller cargo vessels were crowded in the skies overhead as they delivered or picked up equipment, personnel, and supplies. People scurried about in town, most of them humans wearing worn but functional clothing, and more than enough armored Faey guards to keep those farmers from getting any ideas. There was at least a pair of guards literally on every street corner, wearing the camouflaged armor that marked them as soldiers of House Trillane. They had MPAC rifles slung over their shoulders, and most of them weren't wearing their helmets but had them with them, slinging them over their rifles instead. The town had wide streets and buildings built by the Faey, not by humans, buildings that were made of a plastic-concrete polymer that was very thin, but

also very strong and surprisingly flexible. Most of the buildings of New Myrthan were devoted to the farming trade, being storehouses, barns, warehouses, and shops and businesses that dealt with farming and farming equipment. Interspersed among those larger commercial buildings were modest houses, houses inhabited by Faey more than by humans. Faey soldiers patrolled the streets, and quite a few Faey wearing both utility clothing and stylish apparel made their way along clean streets and well-maintained sidewalks in the town.

It was apparent very quickly to Jason and Temika that this was a *Faey* city, not a *human* city. Most of the businesses were owned by Faey and dealt with Trillane, supplying materials or supplies, and that put many more Faey on the streets here than in New Orleans, the only reference Jason had to compare. The humans here looked nervous and afraid, rushing about their business, no doubt feeling quite uncomfortable being surrounded by Faey. From what Jason had seen, the population was almost equally split between human and Faey.

But they weren't the *only* races here. Not long after sunrise, after Jason and Temika had parked their truck in a lot at the edge of town and walked in they had come around a corner and found themselves staring face to face with a creature that was most certainly *alien*. At least the Faey were almost completely human-like in appearance, with only their ears and blue skin marking them as not human...but this, this was *not humanoid*. It looked like a six foot tall preying mantis with a mottled brown carapace, and two sets of legs supporting that body. Two sets of arms were on a lengthened chest section, the upper arms ending in wicked natural blades, almost like scythe blades fused to the bases of its wrists, the lower set ending in three-fingered hands. The head was most definitely insectoid, with compound eyes and sharp, dangerous-looking mandibles. It had large wings folded onto its back, and there was a small machine of some sort strapped to its chest. There were two more that looked just like it just behind the first, but they were half a foot bigger and had no wings.

Jason almost walked into it, because he was looking at a hovercar going by as he came around the corner. Temika's scream of alarm was his only warning as he looked ahead, then came to an instant stop and took a step back in surprise. He felt an aura of heat emanate from the creature, and he realized that that was what the machine on its chest was doing, generating heat.

It was a *kizzik*, one of the seven races of the Imperium. Jason remembered reading about them. They were insectoid, and though the vast majority of the race was stupid, the nobles, almost their own sub-species within the species, were quite intelligent. He remembered reading that they rarely left their homeworld, which was a desert planet; in fact, the *drones*, those dumb kizzik, were actively not allowed to leave their homeworld unless accompanied by a noble who could control them. He did recall that these creatures had no sense of hearing whatsoever, they could only detect vibrations through hairs on their legs and bristles on their forearms, but it wasn't nearly sensitive enough for them to discern complicated sound patterns like speech. It was used more for detecting vibrations in the ground. They relied on a sign language to communicate with those outside their species; they used *scents* to communicate within their own species, a pheromone language that was supposedly as complex as any spoken language.

The one directly in front of him, that one was a noble...only nobles had wings. The two behind it, those were drones, nothing but workers or soldiers, stupid as rocks but completely under the noble's control.

"She begs pardon," a voice called from behind her. A male Faey wearing black trousers of some sleek, shiny material and a thigh-length red coat with his hood pulled up to hide his hair, said as he came around the three insectoids. "She didn't mean to frighten you."

"Uh, that's okay, really," Jason said unsteadily, looking into the creature's eyes. "It was my fault, I wasn't looking where I was going."

Jason stared into those compound eyes for a moment, then shuffled a wide berth around the three creatures and went quickly on his way.

"Did you see that thang?" Temika breathed quietly as they scurried away, past two bored-looking

Faey guards on a corner. They paused to make sure they had the light, then crossed the street.

"It's a kizzik," Jason told her. "The one in front was a noble. The other two were just drones."

"What does that mean?"

Jason explained it to her as they stopped at a small coffee shop, filled almost entirely with Faey, outside of the two human clerks behind the counter. Jason took note at the offended looks when he motioned for Temika to sit at a table near the door, then bought them both a cup of coffee. "I remember reading about them," he told her. "The nobles are smart, and the drones are dumb. They rarely leave their home planet."

Temika looked around. "This a good idea?" she asked quietly in French.

Jason blinked. He'd completely forgotten that Temika could speak French, and her talking about it flooded back to him as he heard those words. She was a bayou girl, and they spoke French down in the swamps and bayous of Louisiana and Alabama, either active parts or remnants of the old Cajun culture. Much as he had learned French from his mother, Temika had learned it from her mother and grandmother. Jason silently reminded himself to warn Kiaari about that. "We paid our money, we have as much right to sit here as anyone else," he shrugged, replying in French.

"Yeah, but that's pushing it, Jayce," she told him. "We aren't supposed to be making a fuss."

"I know, but what else are we going to do?" he asked. "It's not even six yet, and nothing's open. I don't want to walk the streets waiting for the bank to open."

"You have that list that Clem gave you?"

He nodded, patting his jacket pocket. "I don't think we're going to find all of it here, but we'll see."

"Excuse me, what language is that?" a voice asked in accented English. Jason looked up and saw a male Faey, tall and willowy, holding his heavy coat over his arm. He had thick blue hair, like the sky, which was almost the same color as his skin. His light skin was a sign that he rarely saw much sun, most Faey were much darker.

"French, sugah," Temika answered, putting a light smile on her face.

"It's a beautiful language," he told them. "Almost musical."

"Ah think so too," she told him. "Ain't many around these parts that speak it."

"Yes, that's why I've never heard it before. Are you from, uh, *French*?"

"France, sugah, and no, Ah ain't," she answered. "We speak French and English where Ah come from, but not much of French no more."

"It's certainly not here, you have the most darling accent on your English," he smiled. "Where is it from?"

"South, sugah. *Way* south."

"Ah. Well, thank you for the information. Good morning." The Faey male wandered to another table and sat down, and began chatting with two women.

"Nicely done," Jason said in French with a slight smile.

"Boy, that was nervous," she said with a slight titter.

"But you handled it well. Congratulations, you're gonna do just fine."

They lingered in the coffee shop, eating breakfast and listening to the Faey chatter...which actually wasn't much, given they were sending as well, and both Jason and Temika had themselves blocked out so they couldn't hear. After about two hours, they left the coffee shop and got down to business, that being completing the shopping and looking over warehouses to find something suitable. The first thing they did, though, was go to the bank. There was really only one bank on Earth, the Bank of Trillane, the house bank that was controlled by Trillane. Earth institutions still existed, but they were all controlled by the house bank, so though there was still Columbus Regent Bank and First Federal and Chilocothe Savings, they were all just different names for the same institution. According to the note that had been in the case with the IDs, both identities had bank accounts with Trillane's bank, which could be accessed through any bank on Earth. Usually, Jason could just transfer funds to these

accounts using his panel, but what he had was hard currency, and that required him to deposit it in person.

The process was quicker and easier than he'd expected. He simply walked in, waited in line for 5 minutes until it was his turn at the teller window, said he had hard currency to deposit into his account, and handed it over. They deposited it, and that was that, no signatures, no ID scans for veracity... because they didn't care who put money *into* an account, only who took it *out*.

He deposited 700 credits into that identity's account, if only to give them some spending money that they could use without raising eyebrows using hard currency. After that, they roamed through town, checking out warehouse space for about four hours. They found two warehouses that would suit their needs; both were on the outskirts of town, both were fairly large, and both were owned by private companies that weren't directly part of the Trillane merchant empire. The smaller of the two was owned by a Makati mom-and-pop company, and run by a Makati named Thryngis Zul'Krood. Jason knew it was a family company because Thryngis told him so; he was the nephew of the company owner, Groodem. Their company specialized in warehouse space, and owned 34 warehouses in twelve star systems. Thryngis managed five warehouses located through midwest North America, the main concentration of farming effort on the continent. The other warehouse was owned by a Faey commoner couple, privately held and privately operated, who were actually came from a star system controlled by a different noble house. They were Shian and Mari Vemale, and they were from Regulus VI, which was controlled by a minor house called Zendale. Regulus VI was a sun-blasted desert world with two suns, and they'd sold their small business there dealing with water reclamation equipment and come to Earth after the subjugation, seeking a better life on a planet less hellish. They owned just that one warehouse, having been lucky enough to win a lottery to have rights to buy land in the planned New Myrthan, and they were making enough money to pay their mortgage and have a decent life.

These two warehouses each had advantages and disadvantages. The Makati warehouse had a concealed back doorway surrounded by a fence where the cloaked skimmer could land to load a projector, but the Makati had an extensive security system in place, complete with cameras that might catch sight of the stored equipment or the people who would come in the middle of the night to move it out. The warehouse owned by the Faey was truly mom-and-pop. It had no security to speak of outside of the Faey themselves. They lived in the warehouse itself, in an apartment over the office. The warehouse's main door wasn't concealed, but the warehouse was on the edge of New Myrthan. Jason debated these two sites as they sat in a Burger King and had lunch, looking at a very professional brochure given to him by Thryngis and a hand-written page of rates and fees given to him by Mari Vemale.

"Whatcha think, sugah?" Temika asked around a mouthful of french fries.

"I think neither of them is perfect," he answered in French. "But all things considered, going with the *Faey* couple should be best," he said, resorting to the classic word for their race...there was no exclusive French word for *Faey*. "If they're typical *Faey*, they won't have any loyalty to the ruling house here, they belong to a different house. That means that we can get them to do what we need to do."

"Yah, I noticed the same feel," she answered. "You think we can buy their cooperation?"

He nodded.

"I did kinda like them though," she admitted. "They were nice."

"Let's hope they're like most others of their race."

"How do you mean?"

"Loyal only to themselves," he answered bluntly. "Remember, the commoners hate the system, and those two are commoners. We can use that to our advantage."

"I never really noticed that. Symone doesn't act like that."

"She does," he told her honestly. "Her only interest is herself and Tim. Everything she does, the very reason she's with us, goes no further than that. She's in love, and that's her only motivation. I

can guarantee you that if Tim wasn't like you and me, *that way*, they'd still be back in New Orleans. *That* is why they're out here."

Jason bowed his head a moment, remembering what Miaari had said. Faey had *no faith*, and that was their weakness. Could that be what she meant? Was the average Faey's lack of loyalty to race and government be the lack of faith Miaari told him about? After all, the only thing that held the whole system together was the raw might that the Empress could bring to bear. About the only loyalty that most Faey had dealt with protecting their positions. Jyslin's aunt Lorna was a good example of that. She was an Imperial Marine, a member of the command staff, in direct service to the Imperium, and she displayed a genuine reluctance to go against the edicts of the Empress...because it threatened her own position of power and importance. Noble houses had, in the past, tried to break away from the Imperium, to create their own power, but had failed. And the lack of trust that other races for the telepathic Faey really gave them no reason to fly apart. Fear from other galactic races squeezed them together under a governmental system most of them despised, but could not overturn because of the power of those who were in control.

With luck, Mari and Shian Vemale would be loyal to the money he paid them...and nothing more.

They returned to the Faey-owned warehouse after lunch, and entered the office in the corner of the building. It was a small, orderly affair, nothing but a room with a counter separating the door from the two desks in the back of the room, one of them neat and orderly and with a panel sitting atop it, the other piled with memory sticks, charts, knick-knacks, and a panel sitting on a small stand on the corner of the desk. The walls were covered in wooden panelling, and a large window in the back showed an empty warehouse beyond.

"Well, welcome back, Mister Smith," willowy Mari Vemale said. She was very tall, even for a Faey, a few inches taller than him, with long, gangly limbs and a flatter chest than what was normal for a pattern Faey. She was still quite pretty, with auburn hair not far from Jyslin's red, just darker, and large eyes that were a dark blue. Shian Vemale was *very* tall, a bit taller than his wife, almost four inches taller than Jason, and unlike any Faey male he had ever seen in either pictures or live, Shian Vemale was *built*. He had muscle rippling in his forearms as he moved them, and he filled out the loose, flowing blue shirt he was wearing. Shian was an anathema among Faey men, who preferred to be sleek and slender and tone, *not* powerfully built and actively seeking to increase body mass. "Did you decide to rent some warehouse space?"

Jason set his hands on the counter. "I want to rent your warehouse," he told them. "*All* of it."

Mari's eyes brightened visibly. "Well, I'm sure we can arrange that," she told him enthusiastically, coming to the counter and flipping the folding top up so he and Temika could come through. Jason nodded to Temika and they came through, then sat at the desk behind which Shian was sitting. Mari pulled a chair to the side of the desk and sat down in it backwards, putting her arms against the backrest before her. "Now, we have ten thousand square *shakra* of warehouse space," she said. "At our current rate of two credits per square *shakra* per month, that would bring the total up to twenty thousand credits. Er, you *can* pay for this?" she asked uncertainly. "No offense, but not many humans have that kind of money."

"I'm a businessman, ma'am," he told her. "I can afford it."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a contractor," he answered.

"Ah. So, you need space for some supplies?"

"I need it for some incoming large equipment," he told her. "Once we have a contract, you're going to take delivery of quite a few large crates. They'll be here until they're moved out, which will probably take about a month. You might receive more shipments, and those too will just be held until I need them, and then they'll be moved. I'm going to be a burden on you, I'm afraid, ma'am," he told her calmly. "I'm going to be coming for that equipment at odd hours, and without warning. You might even wake up one morning and find a couple of crates missing, and a note from me on the desk that I

was here. I also don't want my competitors to know what I'm doing, so I need a warehouse manager who can be...discreet. If you can agree to make no issue or note of what time I come for my equipment, and you keep my comings and goings to yourself, I'll compensate you for your trouble."

"It sounds to me like these visits to retrieve equipment are going to be at *very* odd times," Shian noted in a surprisingly deep voice for a Faey. "Like, after curfew maybe?"

"Sometimes, yes, after curfew. I have a curfew exemption," he said smoothly. "I travel long distances and I can't always get to my destination by curfew. I can show you my exemption if you'd like."

"No, no, I'm sure you do," Mari said quickly, putting a hand on Shian's shoulder. "Well, just how much compensation were you looking to offer for our support of your, ah, unique needs?"

"I'll pay you double your going rate for the warehouse space," he offered. "Of course, the doubled payment doesn't *have* to be in the contract," he suggested lightly.

"Oh dear me no, why would we want to burden the Imperial Bureau of Taxation with extra work?" Mari smiled.

Shian, however, gave Jason a penetrating look. "If you can promise that there's nothing *illegal* in those crates, you'll have my support," he said.

"Nothing illegal at all," he said honestly. "Just equipment. I'm just a person who doesn't like people rooting around in my business, that's all. I'll pay extra to those that help me keep my business to myself."

Jason had no doubt that Shian, and maybe Mari too, were running their fingers through his surface thoughts, but they wouldn't find anything there that betrayed his story. Mari and Shian looked at each other, no doubt sending their discussion, then they looked at him. "You have a deal," Mari announced.

"Works for me," Jason nodded.

After Shian drew up the contract (rental of the entire warehouse for a period of at least one month, with an open-ended clause to renew every month, but only at a month to month rate for either the entire warehouse or whatever square *shakrabe* was taken up at renewal day), Jason borrowed their panel to secure their payment. It was perfectly safe to access a bank from their panel, cause he had no doubt that *all* their clients either brought their own panels or accessed a bank through theirs. He paid them their initial twenty thousand credits for warehouse, then transferred another twenty thousand directly into their private account.

Just after he handed the panel back to Shian, two Faey entered the office. They were dressed in the blue uniforms of the Naval service, and their insignia marked them as members of Trillane's personal navy, not Imperial. There wasn't a word spoken, and Jason didn't dare open himself up enough to listen, but given the dark look on Shian's face, she wasn't very happy about what was going on. They stayed only a moment, then left without a sound.

"Well," Shian said darkly. "I'm afraid this is going to be a short term contract."

"How do you mean?"

"*They* just enacted Faey military law," she growled, nodding in the direction of the door. "They're commandeering my warehouse space at the end of next month. You're more than welcome to use the warehouse, but I can't extend our contract another month. They're taking it at the end of next month. That gives you a month to arrange other warehouse space."

"What would the Navy need with warehouse space?" Jason asked.

"How did you know they were Naval?" Shian asked.

"In my business, I deal with all kinds, Shian," he said smoothly. "I've made it a point to learn who wears what uniform, and what the insignia mean."

"They said something about an upcoming operation," she told him. "They need extra warehouse space for it. I can't imagine for the life of me what they'd need warehouse space *here* for, though. There's nothing here but the Frontier."

Jason frowned, realizing quickly that Mari was more than right...there *was* nothing out here, except

for the Frontier. Trillane's navy would have no reason to start organizing storage space *here*, when it wasn't growing season and there was nothing else out here.

Miaari's information clicked seamlessly with this tidbit, and it made Jason's heart skip a beat. Miaari warned him that the Faey were going to sweep the Frontier to collect the hoverbikes...but that wouldn't require warehouse space. No, this was something bigger. Something that was going to involve Trillane's naval forces.

He understood then.

They were coming into the Frontier. They were there to recover the hoverbikes, they were there to sweep the Frontier for Faey technology, and what was most important, they were specifically coming into the Frontier after *him*. And they were coming *in force*.

"I'm sure I can have everything done and moved out before my contract expires," he told the Vemales in a distracted tone, giving Temika a sober glance, one that made her immediately frown. "I'm on a deadline anyway. This is just extra incentive to come in under it." He stood up. "Now if you'll excuse us, we need to get back. We have a lot of work to do."

"Here," Mari said, reaching over her husband and into the desk drawer. She produced a small brass colored key, and offered it to him. "This key opens the warehouse doors on both sides. This way you don't have to wake us up to pick up or deliver."

"Thanks," he said, taking the key. "I'll be back fairly soon. I'll see you then."

"We'll be here, Mister Smith," Shian told him.

Outside, Temika gave him a long look before she said anything. "They comin', right?" she asked in French. "You think they're coming into the forest."

"They are," he said grimly. "In large numbers. They wouldn't need warehouse space unless it was a major operation. And the *military* wouldn't be invoking Faey confiscation laws unless it was *for* a military operation. They're coming into the forest after us, Mika. And that means we don't have much time."

"A month and a half."

"No, more like three weeks," he replied. "We have to have everything in place and tested before they begin."

"Three weeks? Jayce, ain't no way we're gonna get everything done in three weeks."

"Woman, we'd better *find* a way," he told her intensely. "Because if we don't, then they're going to find us, and everyone in our community will either be sent to a farm, or they'll just vanish. We have three weeks to set up the new community, Mika. That's it."

Temika was silent. "I hope you're wrong."

"I wish to God I was," he sighed. "Let's get back to the truck. We have to get back home as fast as possible."

Jason wasted absolutely no time, in any aspect of what he had to do. He drove home at a hair-raising speed, making Temika keep a vice-like grip on the handle over the passenger's side door and the dashboard the entire time, as the truck bounced and slammed over the pits and crevices in the road that had eroded it away in the three years since it ceased being repaired. During that long trip, Jason went over everything that had to be done, arranging it in his mind for when he told the community about what was coming, and how to most efficiently go about effecting the move, even as he sought to break both axles in the truck before he got them home.

"Jesus, Jayce, y'all can slow down a little!" Temika said in fear after they threaded a needle between a fallen tree and a guardrail just outside of Ironton, as Jason raced to get back before dark... but it wasn't clean. The truck shivered and the loud sound of squealing metal announced that the truck was grinding against the guardrail.

"We have to get back before dark," he told her. "So we have all day tomorrow."

"Ah think we'll make it by now, sugah!" she told him.

“Wasn’t that the tree—“

“Hush,” she cut him off. Jason looked back in the rearview mirror and realized it *was* the tree she’d clipped back when he’d first met her, that put her in his care and had probably cemented their friendship.

They were just inside CB range, so he picked up the mike. “Irwin,” he called. After a moment of silence, he growled and keyed the mike again. “Irwin, put down the bowl and get your nose out of the TV and pick up,” he demanded.

“*Sorry Jayce. Wait, weren’t you supposed to be back tomorrow?*”

“Change of plans,” he answered. “Listen carefully. Gather the council and have them meet me at my house in a half an hour. It’s important.”

“*Will do. See you soon.*”

“What are we gonna tell ‘em exactly?” Temika asked.

“What we know,” he answered. “And what we’ll have to do.”

“Think we can move in time?”

“Yeah, but it’s gonna be close,” he answered. “I can have the projectors up and running in two weeks no problem, it’s the idea of how we’re going to move everything from here to Charleston that’s gonna be dicey. And then there’s the exomech problem.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that thang.”

It didn’t take long for them to get back, and Jason wasted no time. He went straight from the truck to the house without stopping to greet anyone, and everyone that saw him saw the look on his face and saw that he was very unsettled. He charged straight into his house and into the living room where they were waiting with Tim, Symone, and Kate, and he started taking off his coat as Temika and Irwin came in behind him. “Guys, we have a serious problem,” he announced without so much as a hello.

“We figured something important had to be going on for you to come back so fast,” Regina said seriously. “You weren’t supposed to be back until tomorrow morning.”

He nodded. “It’s not good. Thanks, Irwin,” he said as the portly man took his coat, and then Temika’s. They sat down on the couch that was open, and Jason went over what he’d overheard in the warehouse office, and what it meant. “There’s only one reason that they’d be gearing up for a major operation,” he surmised once he was done.

“They’re setting up for a major raid into the frontier,” Clem said with a shake of his head, a sign of his dismay.

“And that means we *can’t* be here when they start,” Jason stated. “Near as I can figure, we have about a month and a half *our time* to get the community moved. Now, we can do it, but it’s going to be close, and we have some serious decisions to make.”

“Can you get the projectors ready in that time?” Paul asked.

Jason waved his hand negligently. “That’ll take two weeks,” he answered. “That’s not the real issue. The real issue is, how do we pick up and take everything that’s here that we need and move it without being seen?”

“We move at night,” Regina said.

“And we do it in small pieces,” Leamon added. “A truck here, a truck there.”

“No, son, that won’t work very well,” Clem said. “It may not be easy to see, but it’ll make it very hard on the community. It’d work better if we move in stages. Nonessential junk first, then equipment, then food, then people. And we can’t keep running back and forth, or we’ll attract attention.”

“Not quite,” Tim said. “Remember what Jayce said, they have cameras that can look down, and they already know we’re here. They know we’re here, and with this invasion being planned, they’re going to be watching us. When we move, it has to be *all at once*,” he stressed, “and they can’t see us either preparing for it or conducting the move. We literally have to disappear overnight. It’s the only way we can be sure.”

“If we just vanish, won’t it attract just as much attention?” Juli asked. “I mean, they’ll see that

we're gone, and they might come looking for us early."

Clem looked to Jason. "Well, son? What should we do?"

"We should break up and move out," he said simply. "Let them see us preparing to do it. Let them see us leave the community in small groups over time, scattering in every direction. Then, after dark, *then* the groups turn and come straight to Charleston," he said. "From the way it'll look to them, the community is breaking apart and splitting up, and going in all directions. Since they *know* they have trouble finding small cells of squatters, it'll make it rational as to why they can't find any of us. They don't have to know *why* the community looks to be breaking up, and it won't matter. They'll invent a reason as to why we've broken up that seems to fit in with what they see us doing. The only things that are important are that they see us leave Chesapeake, they don't see us all leaving at once so they don't think we know they're coming, and they see us seem to scatter instead of moving as a group."

"And we assign priorities to the things we're moving and fix it so those go out with the first groups to leave," Clem said with a nod.

"Just so," Jason agreed. "And the first group to leave will be the build team, the techs, and their families, so they'll be there to set up the rest of Charleston for the others. The only major issues we're going to have is getting the livestock to Charleston overnight so they're not seen moved and the heavy equipment. And then there's the exomech," he added grimly. "It presents a rather tricky problem. We can't leave it here, but we can't take it out of its box either with those cameras overhead. They'll take one look at that thing and immediately come after us. Odds are, we're going to have to take it apart and move it in pieces to Charleston, then either put it back together or destroy it when we get it there. But it can't stay here."

Kate sat down on the couch beside him and her hand brushed lightly against his wrist. In that touch was a stern, almost adamant declaration to him, shared through her touch, that under *no* circumstances could he destroy the exomech, that he needed it if he was going to do what he intended to do.

"Well, that sounds like a pretty solid idea," Paul said. "We'll need to set up a timetable for people leaving, and go through our supplies and draw up a schedule for what moves to Charleston and when."

"Wait, if the blueskins see us leaving, won't they come down and find out what's going on?" Julianne asked.

"If we made a big stink about packing *everything* and then scattering all at once, probably," Jason told her. "I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about them seeing just a small group leave, then another a while later, then another, making it just look like people are leaving the community. Now, when it comes time for the rest of the community to leave, *that's* when we do it secretly," he said. "When we take apart the power grid and pack up the big equipment we depend on, yeah, that's when we just vanish."

"No, that'd look suspicious," Paul said. "What if we gave them a reason for them to see us leave when we get to that point?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, they'll see people here, and lights, and then—" he snapped his fingers—"poof, they vanish. That's going to attract attention. Instead, let's give them a reason as to *why* everyone vanished. After all, it'd be pretty obvious why everyone's gone if, say, the town burns to the ground."

Jason's eyes lit up. "Paul, that's *devious*!" Jason said in appreciation. "Hell, that'd work! When we're ready to move the rest of the community in the final push, we pack everything up and send them on, then we burn the town. It'll also hide any evidence that we missed to help conceal where we went."

"And our walls and the security perimeter will keep the fire from spreading to the woods," Regina noted.

"I think Paul has a good idea," Clem nodded. "A fire would explain to the blueskins everything they'd need to know to keep them from swarming us, and it's a perfect excuse for them not to find anyone here when they invade the frontier."

They continued to hash things out, even over dinner as Ruth and Mary cooked dinner for everyone

and served it to them in the living room. The circle of debaters increased as Luke and Steve were brought in to help go over what would be needed to both install the security measures in Charleston and to move the equipment from Chesapeake, and then about what would have to be done to bring the electric grid down and moved out before the fire that would burn the town down and cover their tracks. Paul's idea was both simple and effective. By setting fire to the town, it did indeed provide the Faey with reasonable justification as to why the residents left, and also helped conceal what they really did. They'd be able to relocate everyone without as much worry that the Faey would find their disappearing to be overly suspicious and come down to investigate prematurely.

After some debate, a plan was reached. The build team and the techs would leave first in small groups during the day, then turn and go to Charleston after dark. There, they would labor to build the projector platforms and the security system. Jason would remain in Chesapeake, helping prepare the town for moving during the day while he ferried equipment from the warehouse at night, in his skimmer. Once the projectors were installed and operational, the rest of the community would then initiate Paul's plan. In the mid-afternoon, a fire would begin in the building that housed the generators for the power grid, and then an explosion would spread that fire through the town quickly. From there, as some presumably sought to fight the fire for the benefit of the cameras overhead, everyone else left would seemingly grab whatever they could and flee as the fire burned out of control and began to spread. Those people fleeing would be fleeing in vehicles that would be pre-packed with all their supplies. The Faey that might look down would see the vehicles scattering in all directions, but once the sun went down, they would *not* see them all turn and head for Charleston.

Jason looked to Kate briefly, and she touched the back of his hand and imparted to him her agreement that the plan had merit.

"Okay, that's what we're going to do then?" Jason asked. When everyone agreed, he slapped his hands on his knees. "Alright then, we have a lot to do and not much time. I'll have the projectors and the supplies we'll need for it moved to the warehouse tonight, and the techs will start getting ready to move. We have to hold a town meeting tomorrow to warn everyone of what's going on. Clem, I think we all agree that you're best suited for being our quartermaster for this move," he announced. "You know more about what we have in the community, so I think it's best to put you in charge of organizing it and handling moving it." The others agreed. "Luke."

"Yessir?"

"We need everything you can get moving that you can manage in two weeks."

"Yes sir, I've already got a list in mind," he nodded. "I can have quite a few trucks and cars up and going by the time we'll need them. I'll let the other mechanics take care of it, because I think you'll need me in Charleston."

"Good. Mary, how many trips will it take to move all the stored food?"

"I'm not sure, Jason," she answered. "We have quite a bit, what with them dropping that food shipment and all. I'd have to look at the inventory book."

"That's good, just let Clem, Luke, and me know sometime tomorrow, okay?"

"I'll have it by tomorrow morning hon, I promise."

"Just sometime tomorrow should work, Mary. No reason to lose sleep over it."

"Honey, we're all gonna be losing a *lot* of sleep," she told him."

"True, so get your sleep tonight. All of you," he told them. "Now then, I have some things to arrange, so if you'll excuse me. Clem, you take over. I have to get those projectors shipped and buy the other things we'll need for it."

"Need any help?" Steve asked.

He shook his head. "It's nothing but issuing orders on Civnet."

They broke up and went about their assignments, and Jason retreated to his room and his panel. He spent hours poring through Civnet for the supplies he'd need for the projectors after issuing the order to move the projectors to the warehouse, and paying extra to have them shipped within 4 hours of sending

the order. He ordered the materials he'd need for the projector system, the emitter system to defeat sensors, and all the extra materials that would be needed for it. He opted for shortrange hyperthreaded transmitters for the control system rather than hard cabling, finding some effective tightbeam directional units at a major distributor's sale site. They used the same technology as his untraceable panel, a tightbeam link between units that could only be detected if a sensor array literally got between them. He bought some old fashioned camo netting to hide the platforms once they were built, and he also decided to err on the side of caution...with the threat of an attack, it was finally time to bow to necessity and get his hands on some real weapons.

By the time he was done, he only had C238.755 in his account, but he had all the materials he'd need for the projectors, and he also had 10 CM-104 MPAC rifles. The rifles were old models, almost obsolete and ineffective against modern Faey armor...but they wouldn't be used against *modern* Faey armor if they ever had to be used. Those rifles would still be effective against the obsolete armor that they were using here on Earth. He found them for sale as a bundle from Dewinne Arms, the manufacturer of the rifles for almost a tenth of what they might have sold for were they new, buying them for C250 each. Between those rifles, the three railguns that were operational, and the hunting rifles he'd brought, the community would at least have *some* means of fighting back should they be attacked.

After ordering the rifles sent to the warehouse, he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his temples, still going over it all in his mind. God, this was going to be ugly. Moving the community wasn't going to be easy, and he had some long, long days ahead of him as he and the build team labored to construct the platforms for the projectors and then get them installed. He figured they could build two platforms and install two projectors a day, if they worked 18 hours a day. But before a single platform could be built, the inverse phase emitter system had to be installed in Charleston to mask the equipment they'd be using from sensors. That would take four hours of work to set up, and they already had a site picked out for it...the tarnished dome of what used to be the West Virginia Capitol building. In fact, that's where most of their community systems were going to be installed, reviving the building in its old role as a center of government and activity. Once that was done, they'd use the replicators to fabricate some titanium platforms—he needed to get someone to draw up some plans for that so they knew what to have the replicator make—and strive to make it as easy to build as possible. They also needed to erect the platforms without disturbing the forest around them until the system was online, clearing out only those branches and trees that would cover the projector lenses at a distance of six *shakra*, or about eight feet. The projectors would have no trouble projecting around obstacles that got into the field beam so long as they were no closer than eight feet from the lens. Once the projectors were up and running, then they could go back and clear out all the trees around the platforms to prevent a falling tree from landing on a projector and disrupting the entire system. He also needed to make sure to have Steve write a program for the control system that would link the holographic system with a camera that would take pictures of the area under the hologram, but filter out everything that was changed, for when spring came and the trees got their leaves. It would look awfully strange for there to be a large swath of bare trees standing in the middle of a blanket of green.

And once he had more money, he'd buy another complete projector system and install it beside the current one as an emergency backup in case a projector went down or had to be taken down for maintenance. What they were putting up now was a bare-bone, seat-of-the-pants emergency measure so they could move everyone to safety before the Faey invaded the Frontier.

Once he got the last order sent and got confirmation that the order would be shipped to the warehouse in New Myrthan, he had Luke pick someone to draw up the blueprint for the platforms so they could start replicating the pieces. He grabbed something to eat, then after debating sleep, he instead went down into the basement and looked at where they'd gotten in assembling railguns. He saw ten of them in various stages of assembly, and feeling the need to do something, he sat down and started working on the one closest to completion. Steve had had them building the weapons in modular

pieces, then it was just a matter of assembling those completed pieces. Kate came down the stairs and gave him a serious look, something she wouldn't do if they were in company, then sat down in the chair by the desk. "You should sleep," she told him in French.

"I can't," he sighed, answering in French, sliding a wrapped barrel into place in the side of a completed weapon housing, and expertly connecting the datalines and power lines to it. "I just got finished getting everything we need shipped to the warehouse. It should be there by morning. I can start bringing it in tomorrow night."

"I'm going to be going with you on those flights," she told him. "I *do* know how to fly a skimmer. I can fly while you take a nap."

"It's a fifteen minute flight to Charleston from New Myrthan, Kate."

"I know, but you're gonna need some rest somewhere, Jayce. You can't stay awake for the next five weeks."

He chuckled ruefully. "I'll bet that a skimmer isn't the only thing you can fly," he noted.

She grinned. "If it moves, I know how to make it go," she announced confidently. "All part of my training. I have to be able to fly or drive nearly anything." She waved her hand absently. "Most Faey equipment is all the same anyway. If you can fly a skimmer, you could fly a fighter, no problem. It has the same controls. But you wouldn't be able to fly a hovertank or an exomech. Faey have an odd lack of imagination when it comes to some things. When they find something that works, they won't change it, even if it's not entirely practical anymore. I find it strange that one of the most technologically advanced races in the galaxy can't think up a better cockpit layout for a Dragonfly, given they've used the same layout for like three hundred years."

"That doesn't sound like a lack of creativity, it sounds like continuity," he told her. "Improve the machine, but make the machine feel the same."

"Yeah, but when the new technology makes the design inefficient, wouldn't it make sense to upgrade?"

He chuckled.

"I'm serious. The Dragonfly has way more controls than a Falcon, but it has the same cockpit layout. Instead of redesigning the cockpit configuration, they just made the existing configuration smaller with smaller buttons and screens and stuck the new controls and instruments in mish-mash in the open spaces," she told him. "Gods help them when they roll the new Raptor fighter out next year. It's even *more* complex than a Dragonfly."

"That is a bit silly," he said. "I take it the same manufacturer makes both the Falcon and the Dragonfly?"

She nodded. "Merrane Macrotechnology, but everyone just calls it 'Two M'," she told him. "It's the leading arms corp."

"Merrane? Isn't that—"

"The Imperial house? Yeah," she answered. "It isn't a stretch to think that the Imperial house makes sure its own arms corporation is the front runner, Jayce. Empress Dahnai always makes sure that her own house arms corp wins the contracts for things that come out of R&D and Black Ops. There's some competition for sure, mainly from specialty corps, like Dewinne Arms. Dewinne focuses on small arms, and Zargax Protection Systems specializes in personal armor."

"I've bought from them," Jason realized. "Symone's armor was made by them. I think my own armor was too."

She nodded. "It's not a surprise. ZPS is the leader when it comes to personal armor technology. Odds are, Kumi would only get the best, and that means ZPS. They even keep a large stock of pre-made armor systems that they can size quickly to a buyer. They can send out a suit of sized armor in six hours."

"That's exactly what they did for me and Symone," Jason nodded, turning the unit in his lap and installing the PPG with practiced efficiency.

“So, that’s the inside of a railgun,” Kate said, looking down at it. “Nice design.”

“Thank you,” he said, connecting the datalines from the control module to the PPG. “I didn’t realize that Steve and the others had gotten so much done down here. But then again, they’re not very complicated units, it just takes time to wrap the barrels properly and assemble the barrel charging unit, since it has so many components that have to be put on a board. Once you get that done, it takes two hours to put the rest of it together, it’s all nothing but pre-made pieces. Nothing outside of the barrel is unique inside, it’s all just off-the-shelf stuff.” He pointed down into the unit. “This is the control module here behind the backglass, and here’s the PPG. The clip fits here, and feeds up into the barrel unit here,” he pointed. “This is the barrel charging unit here under the barrel, and this empty area here is where the smartgun system will go when I get it in the housing. This open space right here in the stock is where the recoil suppression system goes. Without that, this thing would rip your arm off if you tried to shoot it.”

“That doesn’t seem like enough suppression.”

“Sure it is. It uses a spatial compression system to absorb the recoil. The unit disperses the recoil energy into an area of stretched space, something like how a PPG encloses a fusion cell. They’re stock recoil absorbers they use in construction equipment and vehicles, right off the shelf, Kate. They’re nothing special.”

“Clever way to utilize them, though. What does it use for ammo?”

“Laminated titanium coated rounds of iron,” he answered. “We can use the replicator for that. I thought you already knew that from, you know.” He held his hand out towards her meaningfully.

“We can’t remember *everything*,” she reminded him.

“Oh yeah, Mi—er, *she* told me. Anyway, the drawback to this system is having to carry around ammo, since it’s not an energy weapon, but from all the simulations we’ve done, this weapon will penetrate the armor Faey use here on Earth. I’m not sure how it would fare against modern armor, but the old surplus junk they use here is no defense against *this*.” He patted the weapon in his lap.

“How fast is the projectile speed?” she asked.

“Around 14,000 miles an hour,” he answered. “I could probably make it faster by redesigning the barrel array, but I really don’t have the time to mess with it right now.”

“Wow, nice,” she chuckled. “With that much kinetic energy, I think even Neutronium personal body armor would be hard pressed to hold up against it for long. It would depend on how thick the Neutronium armor is where the round hits as to whether it penetrates or not.”

“You think so? From what we did on the simulators, the slug would punch through Neutronium too.”

She nodded. “There’s a difference between *industrial* Neutronium and *military grade* Neutronium. And I promise you that you won’t find the specs for military Neutronium anywhere on Civnet. I’m sure you ran those sims using the specs on Neutronium that you could find on Civnet?”

He nodded.

“Then there ya go,” she hummed, holding up a completed barrel array she picked up from the table. “I’m sure it’d put a hell of a dent in the armor, and knock the wearer down for sure, but it’d only punch through if you hit them in an area of thin plating, like in a joint. Not even top-grade armor would be ready to absorb that much kinetic energy without it doing something. The inertial dampers and the stabilization systems in the armor couldn’t totally absorb that much energy.”

“Well, that might be enough, you never know,” he said. “I don’t really much like the idea of using these things to kill people.”

“I know, but you better think about it,” she told him seriously. “In what you plan to do, you *will* be shooting at people, because they’ll be shooting at you. You’re not going to push Trillane off Earth with words, Jayce.”

“I know,” he sighed. “But I won’t like having to do it.”

“Just don’t lose that feeling, Jason,” she told him seriously. “Oh, I guess I should tell you about

what I came down here to tell you.”

“What?”

“I think I found a good place to set up after we leave,” she told him. She motioned for him to follow, and he put down the railgun in his lap and went with her back to his room. She sat down in front of his panel and expertly brought up a series of images on the screen. “This place,” she said, pointing to a large, nondescript mountain, its top covered in snow. “It was called *NORAD* I think, I’m still a bit rusty reading English.”

“Cheyenne Mountain?” Jason said in surprise, looking at the picture, an old file photo from Associated Press, according to the little text tag in the bottom right corner of the photo. The photo was taken before the subjugation.

“Yeah, that’s one of the names,” she nodded. “According to this old archive, it was a hardened military facility used by your people before the Faey took over. Well, the Faey don’t use it. They have all their military operations based in Washington, and they don’t *need* a fortress like this. And look at it, Jayce. It’s exactly what we’re going to need. It’s an underground facility surrounded by fortifications and shielding, and according to some of the pictures I saw, it has some openings big enough to get the skimmer through. It’s located on the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountain Conservatory, another nature preserve like this one, so it’s out away from organized Faey holdings.”

“But the Faey must know about it.”

“Jason, sweetie, just because they know it’s there, that doesn’t mean that they know *we’re in it*,” she told him pointedly. “As long as we never give them reason to look there, they’ll never think to check it. Not when there are so many places for us to hide, and you’ve already demonstrated an ability to hide literally in plain sight. They won’t be able to leave any stone unturned. In this respect, that reputation of yours will really work in our favor. Even though this mountain is a logical place to look for a small resistance cell, your reputation for ingenuity won’t let them just assume that you’re where they’d think to look for you.”

“But they *could* find us there.”

“They could find us anywhere,” she replied evenly. “But if we take some precautions, they won’t look very hard when they look here,” she said, pointing at the picture. “According to this, the mountain’s hollowed out somewhat. It has room inside, and it has so much mass that it’ll mask our PPGs and matter signatures naturally, with only a little bit of extra work. This opening here is big enough to fit your skimmer,” she said after changing to another picture, showing one of its entrances. “It has enough protection so we can set up, but I’m not all that sure about water and other living resources. I’m sure we could work something up for that, though.”

“Well, it does look good, but it still worries me that the Faey know it’s there.”

“It’s up to you, Jayce,” she told him. “But there’s not going to be *any* absolutely safe place for us. I can just show you this and suggest, that’s all. But if you want my *professional* opinion,” she said, using the Kimdori word for *professional*, “then this is one of the best options for us. It’s an underground facility that’s virtually pre-ordered and waiting for us to move in, and it has a large enough opening to hold your skimmer, and whatever other vehicles we pick up. It was hardened to make it survive an old-style nuclear explosion, and though that means nothing against Faey weaponry, that hardening will help shield our energy signatures and help mask our activities. It’s located in a nature preserve, so we don’t have to worry about proximity.” She brushed her blond hair from her face absently, then looked back at the screen. “I might find something better later, but for now, this is the best I’ve found. Something for you to think about in the coming days when you’re working your ass off.”

He scowled at her mischievous look. “You’re gonna be working right along with me.”

“My people don’t sleep because we *have* to, Jason,” she grinned. “I can sleep if I want, but I can go without. Remember, I just *look* like this. Everything else is still the same,” she told him, tapping her temple meaningfully. “I sleep at night just to keep from being bored. In reality, I only need about a

half an hour's sleep a day."

"Woman, in about a week, I am going to *despise* you," he told her.

"I'll make sure to be crushed," she said impishly, then she laughed when he sat down, took off his shoe, and threw it at her.

"Bad dog," he chided.

She broke into gales of laughter. "Just don't roll up the newspaper!" she cried in mock fear, putting her hands out defensively in front of her.

"I'll save that for when you pee on the carpet."

She took one look at his sober, serious expression, then literally fell out of her chair in helpless peals of laughter.

*Kaista, 21 Kedaa, 4393 Orthodox Calendar
Sunday, 11 January 2008, Native Regional Reckoning
Charleston, West Virginia (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector*

Two things had become apparent in the three weeks since they started getting ready to move.

First, they knew now that they had been right in calling for this move. Faey activity had increased all over the Frontier, mainly in the shape of dropships equipped with sensor pods which had been roaming over the forest. Outside the preserve, however, it was very apparent in New Myrthan and other border towns that the military was preparing itself for an operation. Jason saw it the last night he had dared travel to the warehouse to pick up the last of the equipment that had been sent there some two weeks ago. In just the one week between him renting the warehouse and his final visit, Trillane house troops had been deployed to New Myrthan and, what was most disconcerting to him, a containment area had been built on the northwestern edge of town, taking over farmland to do so. It was an enclosed encampment with five large buildings, and it was obvious that it was meant to hold *people*, not equipment. Jason had rather grimly concluded that Trillane was going to capture every person they could find in the Frontier in that sweep, bring them out under the premise of questioning them, and then he had no doubt that those undocumented, *untraceable* people were going to disappear. Officially, returned to the preserve to continue their lives as squatters, but secretly spirited off the planet and sold into slavery.

The second thing that had become apparent was that Jason's expectation to have the projection system up and running in two weeks had been unrealistic. The plan to build two platforms a day had been realistic, but the snarls came in the operation and control of the projectors. They had had all 28 projectors installed in 16 days after taking a two day break because of heavy snow, but they had serious problems getting the projectors to seamlessly line up their sectors of the overall image. The problem was a combination of software and physics, requiring Steve's TEL programming expertise and a little old fashioned calculus.

But now, three weeks after starting, the projectors were up, they were running, and they were operating as intended. The nature of the hologram was that it was one-directional; it could only be seen from *above*. From the ground, the hologram itself was invisible, but there was a distinct shimmering of the air overhead that was caused by the holographic projectors exciting the air molecules upon which the hologram was built. The problem had been both the projectors not syncing with each other, which was what Steve had corrected, and a few holes in the image, which had been errors in installation that Jason had had to fix. It had required him to recheck his trigonometry and calculus, which he had used to mathematically work out just where the projectors should be and at what angle they should be projecting its image. His calculations had had a very slight margin of error in them, and it turned out that the margin was too large for two of the projectors, which had been installed on very steep hillsides. But, after moving the platforms about ten inches each, the borders were meeting and the program that

Steve wrote was making sure that there was no overlap.

The other aspects of the plan were actually ahead of schedule. About sixty people from the community were now in Charleston, and more supplies and equipment than projected were now up in the city. Clem and Mary had a detailed inventory of everything, right down to the smallest candle, and they had been moving it up steadily and carefully. Luke had managed to get two semis up and running, and it had been a simple matter to get trailers for them and use them to ferry cargo to Charleston. Both had once been owned by Southern Shipping, and after they found one sitting in Charleston only three blocks from the Capitol building, Clem, Paul, and Juli came up with a very clever idea; paint the trucks the same as the one sitting in Charleston and park it in the same place, so it looked like it was supposed to be there. From the way it looked from space, the trucks never moved, never looked out of place, because in a way, they never were. When a shipment moved to Charleston, the truck parked in the exact spot where the old one was, and they took great pains to make both trucks exactly resemble the one they selected to replace. It was only done at night once every four or five days; a truck went up as the one parked in that spot was driven back down to Chesapeake, was parked in the same place, and then unloaded into a nearby warehouse. Between those shipments and what Jason brought up in the skimmer, Clem was on a pace to completely evacuate Chesapeake of its supplies within two weeks on the current schedule, leaving only those things that had to remain until the last minute. It could be done in two days if they abandoned stealth; one day to take everything apart and pack it, one day to move it.

Move day was already on the schedule, since they'd gotten the projectors operational five days ago. Now that the hologram was masking ground activity, they could move around in the open instead of staying off the street and out of sight during daylight hours, and moving around using night vision goggles during the night. Jason had only had a few pairs of them, part of the parcels of supplies he'd gotten from Kumi, but a royalty payment and an express ship to the warehouse had provided one hundred pairs of them, more than enough for the build team to do their work at night and with no light sources.

God, that had been cold and unpleasant work. Those night vision goggles were very effective, but they tended to give everyone headaches when worn for extended periods of time, and they produced a slightly grainy image that made working in minute detail very straining on the eyes. They did it all without light and without heat, and it was a very uncomfortable work environment, even from a cold-climate downeaster like him. He was glad that it was over, that they could now work with external lights and with portable heaters on site as they had finished up the installation by going back and clearing all trees and potential obstacles from around the platforms.

They'd moved on to other projects. The techs had hijacked Luke and some of the other members of the build team to work on the power cables, isolating the section of the city where they intended to live and getting it ready. It really wasn't that hard to do since the power system was divided into grids with only one line connecting them back to the power generators, so it was a simple matter of cutting that one line, then going through and inspecting the existing cables to make sure they were still functional while a repair team fixed those sections of line that were bad. The airbike worked wonders for that, with Tim and Steve taking turns using it to inspect lines as someone back in the capitol building marked their progress on a map of the power grid. The power would be ready to be turned on in just a couple of days, at least the grid that held the capitol building, but that included about nine city blocks, more than enough temporary housing for the community until they got power on in the grid to the west, where all the residential housing was, and where they were planning to settle everyone.

Jason, like the other techs and builders, had permanently moved out of Chesapeake. Everything he owned was now in what used to be the Governor's Mansion back before the subjugation, which was actually just across the street from the capitol building. Just like the White House used to be, the mansion once served the governor of the state as both residence and office, where state business was conducted in offices on the ground floor while the governor's family lived on the second and third floors. Everyone that worked in Charleston now lived here, as well as their families.

And Kiaari certainly hadn't been idle. The first thing Kate did was manipulate her way into being included in the build team as a laborer, then she convinced Tim to teach her how to run the computer so he could be freed up to do other things, and then she finally overcame her shyness concerning Jason and kissed him, on the lips, in public, three days ago. She looked about ready to die of mortification when she realized someone had seen her, and it made Jason work *very* hard to try not to laugh and spoil her little moment of moving along the gossip and supposition that Jason and Kate were becoming an item. It all culminated yesterday, when Kate visited Jason on the third floor of the mansion, which was basically considered his private residence...and she didn't come back down until the next morning. She tried to hide the fact, most certainly, but in a community as small as theirs such things were always noticed.

And by yesterday evening, Kate's two suitcases and four boxes of personal possessions were stacked neatly in the living room of Jason's apartment.

In the scope of things, actually Kiaari was just tired of using skullduggery to catch private time with him to talk about things. She didn't want to deviate from her schedule of seeming seduction to take up residence in his house, but she'd found out the hard way that catching Jason alone was *not* easy. So, instead of continuing to wait until she had a chance to talk to him alone, she decided to step up her plan and have Kate take more direct action. Kate was *officially* Jason's girlfriend, even living with him, so now she had ample time to talk about anything important.

The first night sleeping with Kiaari had been surprisingly easy. She made him as comfortable as possible, and since he did like her quite a bit, it was like having a roommate...just one sleeping in his bed. At first he thought he might have trouble sleeping with someone else in the bed with him, but he found the sound of her breathing to be quite mellowing and relaxing, and the few fleeting worries he had had over either of them possibly taking it the wrong way had been completely unfounded. After she climbed into bed wearing flannel pajamas, she put a hand on his neck, and that touch and the communication it allowed settled any reservations about it. Neither of them had a single of those kinds of thoughts, period, and the touch had conveyed that fact between them. After that, it was just like having a roommate outside of the fact that they shared a bed, something like when he was back at the University of Michigan in his first year, rooming with the strong safety, Darrel Washington.

There were a few differences, however. For one, Darrel hadn't been a girl, and walking in while Darrel was dressing wasn't quite the same as it was when Jason walked in on Kate after taking a shower. But despite seeing her naked, there still was nothing there. Sure, she was a very, very attractive woman, built on Meya's body frame, and Meya was *built*. But aside from that moment of appreciation for the perfection of her curves, there was just nothing else there. In an odd way, he felt he was looking at *Meya* naked, not Kiaari. After all, it *was* Meya's body he was looking at.

That had been the first decent night's sleep Jason had had since starting the projector project. It had been absolutely vital to get that done so they could get the city ready for the move, and now that that was done, there wasn't that same feeling of dreadful urgency and that sense of vulnerability. They were still working very hard to get services up and running, but it didn't have that same strange feeling that the Faey could swoop in and attack them at any moment that he'd felt when they were installing the projectors.

While the others worked on the power, Jason had been installing sensors and cameras through the city, working on the security plan that Miaari had drawn up. He'd finished that and then moved on to working with Tom Jackson on the water problem. Tom had been a civil engineer in the Army Corps of Engineers, and he had experience digging up and replacing water pipes and reading engineering layouts and plans. He and Tom had been working out how to isolate the water system and sewer system in the living areas from the rest of the city and get them working again. He and Tom were sitting in what was once the office of the Speaker of the House for the state congress, an office that had been usurped by the build team and had become the headquarters for the rebuilding effort, where they kept all their records and where they had gathered all their maps, notes, manuals, and other necessary materials to

find, repair, maintain, and document the restoration and maintenance of utilities. Power, water, and the cable television systems would have detailed logs of maintenance and installation so they always knew what had and had not been done, and allow them to lock in on problem areas that failed repeatedly.

"No, look here," Tom said, pointing at an area on the map that detailed the location of water and sewage in the area. "We need to check this main right here, and block off this one, this one, and these two. That should isolate the area here around the capitol. I looked through the sewers, and aside from a hell of a lot of rats and one hibernating bear down near the main outlet, it's in good shape."

"That must have been unpleasant."

"It's why I earn the big bucks," he said dryly, which made Jason laugh. "These are the shutoff valves for the mains at these junctions," he said with two fast stabs on the pipe map. "We can shut those off, then we need to inspect the main. Usually they'd just turn on the water and look for leaks, but right before the subjugation they were starting to use crawlers, little remote vehicles with cameras on 'em, to check the pipes for blockage or cracks before turning on the water. They also had crawlers that would clean the pipes. I doubt there'd be any damage, but after years with no water in 'em, there's a good chance there's blockage. So I think we'd best check the pipes first."

"I could probably rig up an RC car with a minicam on it," Jason mused.

"Yah, but we're pressed for time here. I suggest we just flood the main with water, but not under pressure. If we get flow from the other end, the pipe's not blocked. If we don't, we just find where the block is and clear it."

"Sounds reasonable," Jason agreed. "As long as it's not under pressure, we won't get any geysers."

"Yah, don't think we wanna see one of those," Tom chuckled. "We can do the same for the sewers to pinpoint blocks, and we're gonna find some of those. The big pipes won't be too bad, but the smaller ones have had two years to develop new life forms. Some of them are gonna be bad."

"Well, we could flush the pipes with something to dissolve away anything that's not what the pipes are made of. Kinda like industrial strength Liquid Plumber or something."

"Masonry mainly," he said. "Ceramic, cement for the bigger ones. You'd be talking about a ton of Liquid Plumber, Jayce," he chuckled. "We'd be better just rooting them out. There's a Roto Rooter place down on MacCorkle. We can raid it for their rooting equipment and just clear them out, but we need the water going before we can clear the sewer pipes." He looked up at Jason a moment. "Can I ask a question that might be a little personal?"

"Sure."

"What's it like? Being, you know."

Jason chuckled. "It's very different," he answered. "All things considered, I'm glad that I have talent."

"Must be weird, listening to everyone think."

"Well, I don't do that," he told Tom as they moved the map a little. "Right now I'm keeping it muted. I know what it's like to have my privacy invaded, so I don't do that to other people."

"Well, what's so good about it if you never use it?"

"Oh, I use it, but really just to jabber at Symone," he chuckled. "That's one of the things I like about it. I can talk to Symone just about any time I want. She and I are very close friends."

"They say she's cheating on Tim with you."

"It's not precisely cheating," he said seriously. "You have to understand Faey society. Yes, we've done that a few times, but Tim knows about it. Tim understands Faey society, so he's not offended or jealous. I'm not all that comfortable with it myself, but I understand Faey too. If I *don't*, I'll seriously insult Symone, and that's something I do *not* want to do."

"What makes that okay to the Faey?"

"Jyslin is Symone's best friend," he answered. "Among the Faey, a best friend will, ah, keep her friend's boyfriend happy if she can't be there. Faey are very casual about the idea of sex, Tom, it goes back to their telepathy. They don't consider the physical act of sex to be a big deal. To Faey, sex is in

the mind, not the body. Symone has this idea that I need a girl in my life, that if I get sexually frustrated it'll like make me go wonky or something, so she was kinda pushing herself on me. That'll stop now that Kate—well, you know.”

Tom was silent a moment. “So, Symone’s doing it because Jas-Jys-Jyslin isn’t here.”

“Just so. I couldn’t quite convince Symone that I don’t need that kind of comforting. But she’ll stop now that Kate’s moved in with me,” he added.

“Ah. What does Symone think about Kate taking Jyslin’s place?”

“She was all for it. She doesn’t see me and Kate lasting for long, because she thinks Kate just wants to feel safe, so she’s reaching out to me. I’m not sure about that, but I do like Kate a lot. Besides, in Faey society, it’s quite common for a man to have casual girlfriends outside his primary relationship, so Symone doesn’t see it as anything unusual.”

“Well, what about when you leave? I don’t think Kate’s quite up to being a guerilla. She’s not the fighting type.”

Jason chuckled. “Yeah, that’s true enough. I don’t know what she’ll do when I go.”

“About that, Jayce. What exactly do you intend to do out there?”

“That’s something I haven’t entirely decided yet. But whatever I do, it has to be very, very delicate. I can’t piss off the Imperium and get them involved. As long as I don’t cross the line, they won’t interfere in what will be a purely *internal* matter for House Trillane.”

“What would cross the line?”

“Doing so much damage that it threatens global food production,” he answered immediately. “The Imperium depends on the food it gets from Earth, Tom. Without it, millions will literally starve.”

“But how can you get Trillane off Earth if you can’t go after their food operation?”

“That’s the balancing act that I’m facing, Tom,” he grunted. “Though I think it’ll also behoove me to go after Trillane’s illegal slaving operation. If I can get proof that they’re doing it, I can take it directly to the Empress and demand that Trillane be booted from Earth. We’ll never get rid of the Imperium, Tom. That’d take a war, and we’d never win a war against the Imperium. Hell, just one of their battle cruisers could wipe out all life on Earth from orbit, without sending down a single soldier. I’m just trying to get better custodians in here, ones that will treat us like *people*, and not *assets*.”

“Sounds good to me,” Tom said with a nod. “But that doesn’t sound like it’s going to be easy, you know, with—“

Tom stopped when the table began to vibrate under their hands in a strange manner. Jason felt it under his feet, and then the room began to rattle in an ominous manner.”

“What the fuck?” Tom growled, looking around in confusion. “What’s going on?”

Jason raised his head. *Symone!* he sent with all the power he could muster.

I have no idea! she sent back immediately. *Tim! Tim, what’s going on? Are you at the sensor panel?*

No, I’m over at the power station! he replied.

Jason immediately picked up the radio, but someone else beat him to it. “*Oh my GOD!*” Leamon’s voice came over the radio. “*Jason, everyone, get out and look to the west! There’s a strange light in the sky over there!*”

Jason and Tom rushed out of the office through the halls of the capitol building, running towards the nearest door outside. They burst out into the chilly air and immediately looked west, as did several other people who had rushed out of the building that was across the street. And Leamon was right, there was an eerie reddish glow low on the horizon, almost looking like a sunset...but it was only ten in the morning.

“What the hell is that?” Tom asked.

“I have no idea,” Jason said, fear fluttering through him. “A forest fire, maybe?”

The light began to fade, and the rumbling in the ground became more pronounced, a low-pitched throbbing under the earth that made things fall off counters and shelves and caused the lightpoles on

the streets to sway slightly, and then it too began to fade.

"Maybe one of the Faey's ships crashed over that hill," Tom speculated. "If it was big enough, it'd shake the ground."

"Well, that's a possibility," Jason grunted, then he brought up the radio. "I'll go to my apartment and switch on CNN on my panel and see if they have anything about what happened. Tom thinks a ship might have crashed. Everyone else, let's gather back at the office and try to figure out what's going on."

As he and Tom ran across the street and towards the governor's mansion, Jason knew that any number of things could have caused that light and earthquake, and Tom's thought that it was a ship crash was entirely possible. It explained the rumbling ground as a shockwave, and the waning light, visible in his rearview mirror and now almost gone, was the fireball of the crash, the main part of it hidden behind the hills. Given the light and the rumbling, the ship couldn't have crashed very far away, and that meant that Faey were going to be crawling all over this area as they recovered the wreckage. All the work they'd done was now in jeopardy, because their hologram wouldn't protect them from Faey on the ground, or dropships flying so low that they penetrated the hologram itself. All the work they had done could be undone by one Faey airbike or dropship that wandered too far from the crash site.

Jason rushed into the mansion and ran up the stairs two and three at a time, then charged into his apartment and slid to a stop in front of the desk that held his panel. He brought up his media program that let him tap into satellite TV stations and changed to CNN.

"Jason, Murph over in Hurricane can't raise Clem on the CB," Leamon reported. "He also said that whatever happened was west of him, and it was so big that it blew all the windows out of the buildings around town."

Jason heard that even as he saw a picture on CNN, taken from a dropship high above the forested expanse of the Frontier.

It showed *hell*.

There was a massive mushroom cloud standing over a hellstorm below, as fires raged over a blasted wasteland. The explosion had eradicated everything within a shallow, wide valley, leaving a scarred, burning debris field in its wake. Tom ran in and looked at it, and he heard the man gasp. The shot panned out as the reporter talked in a hurried, concerned tone. "These shots are coming in from a cargo dropship and show what looks to be a massive explosion somewhere in the Orala nature preserve," the reporter's voice called over the image. "The explosion was strong enough to register on seismic sensors in Missouri, and what you are seeing is the aftereffect. No one knows yet what could have caused this explosion."

"Do we have the Minister now?" another reporter asked.

"This is Minister Mayin," a female voice called, obviously over the phone, as the aerial view of the devastation slowly rotated as the dropship circled the explosion site.

"On the phone with us is Assistant Deputy Minister Mayin Demare of the Imperial Ministry of Science," the reporter called. "Madame Minister, could you give us some insight as to what might have happened here? Can you see the live feed?"

"I can," she answered. "From the look of it, it appears to be a fusion explosion. It looks to me like a plasma power generator suffered a critical failure and released its fusion matter into unstretched space without ejecting the core, which created an explosion. Judging from the power of it, it was probably created by a large power plant, like in a dropship or an airskimmer. Are there any reports of any vehicles currently missing or having gone down?"

"We have no reports as yet on that, Madame Minister," the reporter answered. "But answer me this, isn't it supposed to be impossible for a PPG to explode like this?"

"My dear, nothing is *impossible*," she answered honestly. "And a standard PPG could not explode with this much force. This would be from a much larger power system, like the power plant of a

vehicle. If the power plant was damaged the right way, it could explode like a bomb. It would be highly *improbable*, given the six separate redundant safety systems in a power plant of the scale of one that would be in a vehicle, but it is theoretically *possible*. It would literally be a one in a billion chance, but from what I see before me, this is that one in a billion. And the size and scope of this explosion means that the plasma system must have been both large and powerful, from a large airskimmer or a dropship.”

“Holy *shit*!” Tom gasped, pointing over Jason’s shoulder at the screen. “That’s the Ohio river! Jayce, that’s *Chesapeake*! Oh my gawd, Chesapeake blew up! God, oh God, there’s still people there!”

Jason looked more closely, and he realized that Tom was right. He recognized the hills around the valley, a valley now filled with a fiery, charred landscape of debris and flames. It *was* Chesapeake. Jason saw the water of the Ohio, which had been vaporized by the blast and knocked back by the shockwave, rush in to fill the riverbed, and then expanded in a cloud of steam to start filling the crater itself, forming a new small lake. And it was nothing but a smoking crater now. Everything was gone. Absolutely everything. There was nothing left even remotely identifiable. Everything within the shallow, wide valley had been destroyed.

Oh, God.

Jason leaned back in his chair, then leaned forward and put his head in his hands. It was gone. All of it. The entire town had been blasted into dust, and there was a huge crater where the center of town had been, a crater filling with water from the river.

All of it, all their work...gone.

He had no idea what to do. He was stunned, in shock. He was only dimly aware that Tom had run from the room, leaving him alone. He swam in a sea of confusion until a light hand pressed against the back of his neck, and he felt himself *expand* in a curious manner. There was another consciousness in his head, taking up calm residence, sifting through his memory to understand what was causing his mental state. That other side of the new self was shocked and mournful when the truth came to light, but was filled with a sense of resolve to not get lost in the moment.

It was Kiaari. He felt her hand slide away, and that resolve was still in him. Yes, something terrible had happened, but he couldn’t get lost in the moment of it. He had to find out what happened, and what had happened to the people who had still been in Chesapeake.

“Thanks,” he told her sincerely, looking up at her.

She gave him a wan smile, then took his hand and pulled him out of the chair. She gave him a gentle, comforting hug, then pushed him out enough to look at him with her arms still on his shoulders. “From the look of it, the explosion was centered near your house,” she told him. “And it was very large. It would take something big to create that much force.”

“What do you think did it?”

“I don’t know,” she told him. “But right now, we need to find out what happened to the others, but we can’t leave Charleston. There’s going to be a swarm of Faey down here now to investigate the explosion, so we have to stay hidden. We can’t do anything to attract attention and make them come up here.”

He nodded. “Let’s go tell everyone.”

Things were grim.

It was well after dark, and those in Charleston were sitting in rooms, watching the few televisions that they had gotten working and powered using a portable power system Jason had installed in the governor’s mansion. The mansion and the capitol were the only buildings in town with power, the capitol to power their security systems and the offices they were using, and the mansion because it was housing the refrigerators holding their perishable food, as well as being where most of them were living right now, bedding in sleeping bags and scavenged mattresses in the rooms on the first two floors.

There was power but no heat, and the governor's mansion had fireplaces to keep them warm, something the capitol lacked.

It was still all over the news. The explosion had even reached INN as a headline story, because it was still a total mystery. No one knew how it had happened, or what had caused it, but it had been confirmed that it was a fusion explosion, the ultra-rare explosive failure of a large-scale plasma power unit. It was major news because it hadn't happened for over sixty years, and the circumstances of this explosion made it a mystery.

There were no dropships missing. There had not been any maydays or warnings from any private airskimmers that they were in trouble. From the Faey viewpoint, a dropship or skimmer that did not exist had suffered an almost unheard of catastrophic failure of its plasma power plant, and had exploded in a place it was not supposed to be and devastated an unpopulated forest preserve, where Faey firefighters still worked feverishly to contain the fires that raged through the area, an effort caught on live video and broadcasted throughout the Imperium.

And for them, it was still a mystery, but not as much of one. There were a few power plants in the town that could have detonated with enough force to destroy the town, but the main question for them was *what happened*, and had it been sudden and killed everyone, or had the residents had enough warning to run. There had been no word from anyone that was still at Chesapeake, and what was worse to Jason, Temika and Steve were also missing. They were not in Charleston. Jason was dreadfully worried that the two of them had gone back to Chesapeake and had been killed in the explosion.

And so they waited, and watched, and worried. Jason sat on a couch with Kate on one side and Symone on the other, holding both their hands as Tim sat on the other side of Symone and held her other, watching a large television they had scavenged from the media center downstairs and had hung on the wall. They were all connected to his panel, as it served as a video feed for all the TVs in the house, all of them merely displaying the feed the panel was supplying. The news just went over and over and over what was already known, showed new footage of the fires, and had even showed a space-based view of the explosion as a brilliant orange flare in the carpet of green.

But there was no word. The CB network was alive with chatter of the event, but had no news of those who had been in Chesapeake. They were all afraid now, because there would be a large Faey presence in the forest and would hamper their activities as they hid from them.

All they could do was wait.

He squeezed Kate's hand, and she leaned her head against his shoulder as Symone kept a tight grip on his hand as she kept close to Tim, and they watched in desperate worry.

A call over the radio almost shocked all four of them off the couch. "*Jayce! Jayce, Temika is coming in on her Harley!*" Leamon Lacy called in wild elation. "*Holy shit, she's burned! She's— She's got Doc Northwood with her!*"

They all jumped up and charged downstairs and then out the side entrance, where the airbike was landing on the lawn in an erratic manner. Temika and Doc were on board, and both of them were obviously burned. Some of Temika's wild hair had been burned away on her left side, and she was cradling a charred left arm. Doc Northwood's back was bare in the frigid night air, and the skin was blackened and seemed to glisten in the light of the outdoor lamps.

Ten people charged the motorcycle even before it came to a stop, and strong hands pulled the two from the back of the machine, carrying them quickly towards the house as Symone shouted for someone to bring the first aid kit. Temika's face was twisted with pain, and Northwood was unconscious. The bike itself was scorched and badly damaged, smoke pouring from its engine housing and the back wheel flat and partially melted. That Temika had got that thing here was a *miracle* as far as Jason was concerned.

"Mika!" Symone cried out fearfully. "Mika honey, what happened!"

Temika opened her eyes as they carried her into the mansion. "It was the Faey," she said weakly.

“They surprised us, Jayce, just after me and Steve got back to town. They wasn’t trying to capture nobody, Jayce, they charged in with guns blazin’. They was killin’ everyone. Steve got shot and lost his arm, and Ah tried to run to him as he crawled towards the garage, he told me to get away. Jayce, Jayce, I saw it in his thoughts, what he was gonna do, so Ah ran like hell. Ah grabbed up Doc and got on mah bike, and me and Doc almost didn’t get away, we caught the tail end of the blast. He blew up Chesapeake. He blew up the exomech’s power plant. He killed *everyone* to keep them from finding Charleston. Our people, the soldiers, everyone.”

Jason’s hands trembled. Steve *would* know how to circumvent the safety protocols in the exomech’s power system, which would turn it into a bomb. And the exomech’s power plant *worked*, that was established.

“Jason, Ah saw a soldier shoot Mary in the back, and her whole body just blew apart in front of me,” she said with a sob. “And they was even shootin’ at the *children*!”

“Hush now,” Symone told her in a calming voice. “It’s over, and you’re safe, and we’ll take care of you. Get her to a bed, and where’s that first aid kit!” Symone barked harshly.

They carried the two of them to the nearest bedroom and laid them down gently as Symone took over getting them out of their charred clothing and tend to their bad burns, and Jason could only stand there and watch and feel the terrible weight of it crash over him. Everyone that had been in Chesapeake was dead. Clem, Ruthie, Mary, Irwin and Paul, Juli, Reggie...they were all dead. Luke would be devastated. He was the only one here, the rest of his family had stayed behind to get everything ready, including his daughter.

One hundred and fifty nine. That was how many were in Chesapeake. One hundred and fifty nine people, people he knew, people he had sworn to help protect...they were all dead.

“Oh, God,” Leamon said in a low, shocked voice.

“Amen,” Tom Jackson agreed.

Chapter 13

Kaista, 4 Kiraa, 4393 Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 31 January 2008, Native Regional Reckoning

Charleston, West Virginia (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

Burying his father hadn't even been this hard.

Jason stood silently over a mound of freshly lain earth, a hand barely holding onto the umbrella keeping the rain off of him as he looked blankly down at the simple headstone marking the 160th victim of the Chesapeake disaster.

Arthur Jebediah Northwood, M.D.

1953 – 2008

For twenty days he clung to life, in terrible pain, drifting in and out of consciousness as Symone, Jason, and everyone else did everything they could to get him better. For a few days, he did begin to improve, but his severe burns became infected, and after that he faded rapidly. His last days were spent in a drug-induced haze, the only thing anyone could think of to help ease the horrific pain he was under from his burns, burns that seared off skin and flesh, and burned down to expose several of the vertebrae in his back. The dreadful severity of those burns, the lack of true medical facilities, and the fact that Northwood was the only person with any kind of medical training still alive, had been a lethal combination for him.

They had done all they could, but it hadn't been enough.

Temika, on the other hand, was on her way to recovery. Her burns were severe, but they hadn't been in the same places as they'd been on Doc; in a way, Doc had saved Temika's life because he'd been riding behind her. Doc's body shielded Temika from the brunt of the shockwave and flame of the explosion. She wouldn't have use of her left arm for a couple of months, if she ever did again, but she was up and about now, her arm lashed to her side with a sling, her hair regrowing and her savage burns slowly mending as they applied the last of the Faey compounds that induced flesh to regrow and stimulated the body's regeneration.

But being up and about was not the same as recovering.

Nobody really felt recovered. The destruction of Chesapeake and the loss of so many of their friends and family had put them all in a state of shock. Luke had not spoken a word to anyone since he'd discovered that his entire family had been killed, he simply sat on a bench in the garage across from the capitol building with a wrench in his hands, turning it over and over and over. Tom Jackson refused to leave the room where Jason had a TV set up, watching CNN every waking moment...why, Jason had no idea. But he was utterly obsessed, waiting for some news or picture or, something. Until then, he just stared at the TV with this strange, scary expression on his face. Quite a few people cried all the time, others wouldn't stop talking about it. Some buried themselves in work, others slept virtually all the time, some withdrew from others, some talked endlessly with anyone around, afraid to be alone and in silence for even a second. Each person was trying to find his or her own way of coping with the grief. But Jason could only feel anger. Terrible anger.

Anger, and crushing weight. It had been his responsibility as town mayor to keep everyone safe, and he had failed. People had died on his watch, people that didn't have to die. He'd known about the dangers, he'd started this plan to move everyone to safety, but he didn't take it seriously enough to demand a faster timetable. Because of his arrogance in believing they wouldn't find him, one hundred and sixty of his friends were now dead.

It was his responsibility.

But now there was a new responsibility. He was still mayor, and he had a duty to the people remaining to get them set up and safe, get Charleston up and running, and then he would leave here and go after the bitches that had done this. He had a duty now to ensure that their deaths would not be in vain, and that they would never be forgotten.

They wouldn't forget it on the other side of the Frontier either. The cause of the explosion, according to CNN, now had an official cause, but Kiaari had gone out to collect information days after the explosion, to try to find out what had happened, and had returned six days ago with quite a different story than what was showing on CNN. That bit of news had been terrifying to Jason, because it directly concerned him.

The attack on Chesapeake wasn't a raid on the town for slaves, or an attack on squatters...it was a direct attempt to kill *him*. Though Kiaari hadn't gotten the complete story, what she did manage to piece together was that the decision to kill him was because he was a telepath, not because of his runaway status or anything like that. This Kiaari deemed as *very* important, and Jason had to agree. They suddenly feared him, a human telepath, feared him so much that they'd sent a military unit out on a secret mission to do nothing less than murder him and everyone around him, to totally destroy any evidence that he had ever been there. They had gone in there with orders to kill everyone, recover any technological equipment or information they could find, then hide the evidence of the massacre by burning down the town...ironically, the same idea Jason had had to hide the fact that the town was abandoned. But they were specifically there to kill him, and they were supposed to come back with ironclad proof of his death, in the form of his dead body. They'd deduced—correctly—that the town populated with technically savvy people also included Jason Fox, and they'd come down to assassinate him *before* the town completed its apparent dismantling and scattering. Jason's plan to move the town had incited the attack before they had reliable confirmation that he was really there.

The explosion was thought to be his airskimmer, for his skimmer had a power plant in it of sufficient size to produce an explosion of that magnitude. Their speculation was that he had trapped the skimmer, soldiers had entered it and set it off, and that had caused the explosion that had vaporized all of Huntington and Chesapeake, wiped out the town, killed the inhabitants, and also caused the deaths of 74 Trillane soldiers and destroyed four hoverbikes, two armored hovercars, and two dropships.

The aftermath of the explosion was still in the process of fallout, according to Kiaari. The noble that had ordered the attack had been sacked, at least in the manner of Trillane nobility. The Zarina had been packed off back to the Trillane home planet of Arctus III, basically sent to a minor land holding where she would be kept under a watchful eye, out of trouble, and forever out of the workings of the politics of House Trillane. Heads rolled within the Trillane Army ranks as well, as those who planned the attack were demoted and reassigned. They weren't punished for the attack, they were punished because the attack caused a large section of the Orala preserve to turn into a mushroom cloud, which was a disaster in that it brought glaring, Imperium-wide attention to Earth and to that tiny town that was supposed to silently burn down without anyone ever knowing what had happened there. Had Steve not blown up the exomech and killed everyone, they'd probably have been given cash bonuses and medals. Instead, they were given the boot.

There was no way that such a thing could be kept secret forever, so Trillane had leaked selectively to CNN about Jason Fox and his renegade status, and the fact that he had fled with an airskimmer. CNN, naturally, picked it up, did a little research, and villified him once they had just enough information to back their hasty conclusions. The story about him had been predictably unflattering, as they painted him as a nefarious villain who had stolen from his school, used an elaborate network of criminal activities to raise the money to buy the airskimmer, ran away using it, then monkeyed with it in ways he shouldn't have and proceeded to blow himself up. Officially, the Orala Explosion, as it was now called, had been his airskimmer, and the explosion was being blamed on him. The Imperium now

believed him to be dead, and while Trillane highly suspected it, they still wouldn't be convinced of it until they had possession of his dead body. Jason had squeezed out of tight spots before, and they were giving him that much respect so as to believe that he might have survived the explosion somehow.

Being listed as dead was good in that the Imperium now would stop looking for him.

It was bad in that with him now being officially dead and not simply missing, the royalty payments being sent to his secret bank accounts had been terminated, cutting him off from the primary source of funding for the town and for his plans for rebellion. His patents were now public domain, and that meant that they fell to the ownership of the Ministry of Technology.

That was only a minor setback, though. He already had a plan for getting around that.

The anger had been useful for that, at least. While waiting for Kiaari to come back with news, Jason had sat down and drawn up some elaborate plans for the future. In that time had had worked out exactly how he was going to set up the rebellion, what it would do, how it would operate, how it would fund itself, and what it would have to do in order to secure its stated objective of kicking Trillane off Earth and petitioning the Empress for a new noble house to seated, one more attentive to the needs of the natives. Unlike before, when he hadn't really known what he was going to do or how he was going to go about it, now he had a detailed plan of action, with great attention to detail and marked milestones that would govern how their activities operated and expanded.

And it would all begin in Colorado.

Kiaari's suggestion of Cheyenne Mountain was, naturally, a solid one. After researching it, he found that she'd been correct in that it was everything they needed...and with him now being dead, he wasn't as worried about them looking for him. Once the last of the Faey presence in the Frontier faded, he would be leaving for Cheyenne Mountain, where he would begin preparing it to become the new secret base of operations for the resistance movement. Once he was done, then it would be time to start attacking Trillane.

Jason sighed. That would be a ways in the future. He didn't see himself leaving Charleston until he was sure that everyone would be alright, and they were ready to work without him. He'd probably be there until spring, at least. There was Tim and Temika to worry about, and not just physically. Her frenzied report of what happened in Chesapeake had revealed to everyone that she was also a telepath, and like Jason, had kept it a secret from everyone. They'd taken Jason's telepathy at least moderately well, but now there was a hint of paranoia among the survivors, even in their grief, as they wondered just who else had telepathic ability. Because of the fear, Symone had convinced Tim to reveal himself as well...so now everyone knew that the tight little group of Jason, Tim, Temika, and Symone wasn't just because they were friends, it was because they were all telepathic.

But at least there were no torches and pitchforks. Right now, the fact that the four of them were telepaths wasn't exactly high on the list of priorities for the survivors. They still had to come to grips with the awful calamity that had befallen their tight-knit community, the loss of over two thirds of the population of the town in a single terrible event.

"I'm sorry, Doc," Jason said in a muted tone, with nothing but the sound of the rain pattering around him reaching his ears. "I did what I thought was best, but I guess it wasn't good enough."

At least with his father, he'd been ready for it. He'd gotten worse and worse over time, and when that time finally came and he passed away, Jason had been prepared. In a way, he almost felt relieved, relieved that his father wouldn't suffer with the terrible pain anymore. But this had been so sudden, even with the understanding that it *could* happen...but that was no consolation, no help when it *did* happen. He knew that the time before moving to Colorado would be for him as much as the others, to give him time to come to grips with the extent of the disaster, and let him properly grieve both for so many friends lost and for his own part in what had happened.

But now, at least, he had *time* for it. The increased Imperial activity would drive Trillane's slaving operations underground, and since they all thought he was dead, he didn't have to worry about them chasing him anymore.

Jyslin. She probably thought he was dead too. He'd turned off his panel completely since the explosion, afraid that Jyslin would call and that the Faey crawling all over the region would intercept the tightbeam on the panel somehow and use it to find them. For twenty days, she had probably been going crazy trying to find out what was going on, what happened, if he was alive or dead. It pained him to think she was upset. And right now, more than any other time in his entire life, he desperately wanted to be near her, wanted to feel her arms around him and help him make sense of it all with her calm confidence and her gentle love, wanted to feel that radiant presence in his mind that told him she was just a thought away.

He thought about it the rest of the day, sitting in a chair by his bed as he listened to the rain, cradling one of his railguns, endlessly loading the magazine and then removing it, loading then removing, loading then removing. The part of him that knew it was stupid to give away the fact that he wasn't dead warred with the part of him that loved Jyslin and hurt deeply at the thought that she thought he might be dead or wounded. He struggled with himself all day, ignoring calls to come eat, ignoring knocks at his apartment door, even Symone's insistent sending to come out. His mind raced with ideas and plans of how to safely tell Jyslin that he was alright without anyone else finding out. Several times he had to resist the powerful urge to just turn on his panel and call her.

That was absolutely out of the question, because too many knew he had that panel...but he did need to get word to her that he was alive. He had every confidence that she'd never tell a soul that he was alive. He just had to make sure that he did it in such a way that he was certain that *only* Jyslin received that message.

Well, there was no reason for him to be overly stupid. He knew exactly how to tell her that he was alive, without calling or contacting her in any way. He just had to get *close* to her. If he was within five miles of her, maybe even ten given Jyslin's power, she'd sense him. She knew his mind intimately, and his proximity would be like an alarm bell going off in her head. That's all it would take.

And that was *easy*. Besides, he needed to make sure his airskimmer was undetectable at close proximity to Faey military sensors. If it wasn't, then he had more work to do.

As the sun dipped towards the western horizon, Jason stood up, put his rail gun down in his chair, then pulled on his overshirt. He pulled his jacket down from the hook by the door and opened it, and found himself staring right into Symone's eyes, her fist up and preparing to knock on the door. She flinched and stepped back, then gave a rueful chuckle. *About time. You gonna answer me now?*

No, he replied dryly, stepping past her.

"Well, you need to listen," she told him. "We just ran out of accellerant for Mika. We need to send a team out to New Myrthan to buy more. It's sold in any drugstore. We could have just gone and done it, but nobody wanted to do it without your permission. You know, given with what's going on and all."

"I'll take care of it," he answered aloud, matching her. "I'm going to go out anyway."

Really? What do you intend to do?

I'm going to fly over Washington D.C. at low altitude, he answered.

Jyslin?

He nodded.

She'd sense you from fifty kathra away. You wouldn't have to get anywhere near the city.

A *kathra* was a unit of measurement the Faey used that was roughly half a mile, a bit smaller than a kilometer.

That's the plan. We'll land somewhere and pick up the accelerant on the way back.

Why don't you land somewhere near Jyslin so you can see her? I think it would do you some good.

No, it's too dangerous, he answered. *They think I'm dead, Symone. They even cancelled my royalty payments. I can't waste this opportunity by letting them find out I'm not. They came down into the main conference room, which was empty. I'm not even leaving the airskimmer. You are.*

Me, eh? I guess that could work.

I need you along anyway.

Why?

I'm going to teach you how to fly.

Really? And why do I need to know how to fly?

Because we're not going to have one flying unit forever, he answered. *That's going to be one aspect of the training anyone who goes with me is going to receive. Everyone will have to be able to fly. I'm going to teach everyone everything they'd need to get a class three license.*

Ah, so they'll know Faey traffic protocols, clever, Symone agreed with a nod. *Sounds like you've done some thinking.*

I've done a lot of thinking, he answered soberly, picking up the CB handheld on a stand by the door. "I'm going to go pick up some medical supplies for Temika," he called over the radio. "If anyone needs anything that we can buy from a drugstore, come to my airskimmer in the next five minutes so we can put it on the list." *Tim, come to the airskimmer, I need you.*

I'm on the way.

Several people answered that they had items they needed, and Jason put the radio back as Symone grabbed a coat from the coatrack by the door and pulled it on. They stepped out into the icy sunset and padded across the lawn of the estate to where Jason's airskimmer was parked, on the old helipad behind the building. It was safe now to park it out in the open, because the hologram above hid it from cameras, and the Faey that had been crawling all over the place had all left. There was only a single Faey unit in the area now, a research team that was here to study the aftereffects of the explosion, its impact on the geography, the earth, and the environment. It was a scientific expedition, not a military one. They only had four soldiers with the ten scientists to serve as guards, and they were fifty miles away. They had no vehicles other than a single dropship and a flying platform for moving equipment around. Jason reached his skimmer as several people rushed towards it, and he went in as Symone intercepted them at the steps. "Alright alright, someone give me some paper so we can make a list," she called to them.

"Mister Jason?" Luke called, pushing past Symone and into the skimmer. "Mister Jason?"

"Luke?" Jason asked in surprise. "It's good to see you, man. What do you need?"

The burly man stumped up the aisle and to the cockpit seats, then sat down in the copilot's chair. "I just wanted to ask you something."

"Sure, go ahead."

"When do you plan to leave?"

"I haven't set a solid date yet, Luke," he answered. "When I'm pretty sure that everyone's going to be alright, and I'm sure the defenses we have here are going to work, I'll be ready to go. I just can't leave right now, not after—" he broke off. "Not yet. Not until I know everyone is going to be okay."

"Well, Mister Jason, when you go, I want to go with you, if you'll have me," he said resolutely.

"They killed my family, Mister Jason. I thought I'd be torn up with hatred, but, but it ain't like that. I just wanna get them off my planet so they don't do it to nobody else, that's all."

"The plan isn't to kick *all* of them off the planet," he warned in a gentle voice. "The plan is to force the Empress to remove Trillane and replace them with people we can trust. People we can work with, who'll treat us like people and not like property."

"I understand that and all, sir. I just don't want nobody who did what they did to us to be here. Not all Faey are bad. Miss Symone could never be that way, and if she can't be that way, then there gotta be other Faey like her. If you'll have me, I want to help you kick the ones that did this off our planet and find someone like Miss Symone to come in and replace them."

Jason saw the look of sober adurance in Luke's large eyes, and nodded silently. "Welcome aboard, Luke," he said, holding out his hand. Luke took it and shook it firmly, and gave him a wan smile. "Sit there," he said, pointing at the co-pilot's chair. "If you're gonna be with me, we may as

well get started.”

“Started with what?”

“Your training,” he answered. “Anyone who joins the rebellion has to be able to fly a hovercar, airskimmer, or dropship. So, welcome to your first training flight.”

“I’m here Jayce,” Tim called from the back of the airskimmer. “What did you need?”

“You,” he answered. “Take a seat.”

“Alright,” he said, filing in and sitting down behind Jason’s chair. “You don’t have this thing started yet?”

“Not yet,” he answered. “Symone!”

“Just a sec,” she called from the back, where people were either telling her what they needed or were handing her pieces of paper. She finished up, then closed the hatch and came in and sat down behind Luke.

“Alright, the three of you have told me you’re going with me, so welcome to your first official act as rebels,” he told them, which made Symone chuckle.

The hatch opened again, and Kate rushed in. She closed it behind her and scurried forward.

“We’re just going to get some supplies, Kate,” Jason told her.

“I just want to get out of Charleston for a while,” she answered, sitting down behind Tim.

Jason gave her a curious look, and she returned it with a serious one that told him she had a reason to be here.

“Next time we do this, you’re all bringing notebooks,” he told them. “I’ll get my study manual and let you borrow it too. Now, let’s start with the basics, like turning it on, and work from there.”

“Do what?” Tim asked.

“Teaching you to fly this thing, Tim,” Jason answered. “Anyone going with me when I leave has to be able to fly. It’s going to be mandatory.”

“Ohhh, okay. Teach on, then.”

Jason walked them through the entire procedure of startup, then explained how the controls worked in great detail before they lifted off. Once they did, he started going over the basics of the Faey traffic control system as they started off to the east-northeast. “Begging your pardon, Mister Jason, but why do we need to know about Faey traffic control?”

“Because, Luke, you may not always be flying a shielded skimmer. I intend to steal more skimmers, and even dropships, and whoever’s behind the controls had *better* know Faey protocols, or you won’t get the ship off the ground. The idea behind stealing one isn’t to charge in, jump into the cockpit, and fly off like a police chase. It’s going to be about quietly getting into the ship and acting like you’re supposed to be there, then dealing with traffic control like you’re any other pilot. Then you just take off and fly away.”

“Ah, yeah, that makes sense.”

“When I’m done, any of you would be able to walk into any Faey air facility and pass the Class 3 license exam,” he told them, glancing back. When he did so, he saw Kiaari’s approving nod, and he gave her a slight smile. “Tomorrow morning, I want all of you in the conference room at eight sharp. You’re going to be taking classes on flying. And expect to be getting quizzes,” he warned. “I’ll quiz you every day on the rules and regulations. Nobody’s getting behind the controls until you know the rules backwards and forwards.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Tim said. “Where are we going? We’re not going to New Myrthan?”

“No, I’m going to check something before we find a place to set down and get supplies,” he said. “And there’s someone I need to let know I’m alright.”

“Jyslin?” Tim asked.

He nodded. “I’m not going to land. I’m just going to fly close enough to Washington so she can sense me, and know I’m alive. She’ll never tell a soul I’m alive, but I don’t want her to worry anymore.”

“Yeah, she must be going crazy,” Tim said, then he sighed.

Jason kept a sharp eye on the sensors as they flew closer and closer to Washington, and he also opened up his senses and reached out in a passive way, looking for that one mind out there which he knew better than any other, a mind that knew him just as intimately.

And there it was. He looked down at his positioning system and saw that he was about twenty miles west of Washington, coming up on a city called Manassas, when he felt that familiar mind at the very edges of his consciousness.

Jyslin!

His heart leaped into his throat, and a confusing tidal wave of emotions rushed over him, causing his hands to shake. He felt her, felt that glorious presence, and then he sensed the texture of that presence shift radically, and suddenly strengthen. True to her title as one of the strongest telepaths on Earth, she had sensed him without looking for him at a distance almost as great as his ability to find her when looking for her. Jason veered the skimmer sharply to the north, running parallel to that sense of feeling in front of him, a move she would certainly sense because he would stop moving towards her.

Jason?

He gasped audibly. She could send to him from *twenty miles away*? God, what *power*!

JASON! her mental voice struck him, with incredible power given how far away she was. *Thank Trelle! I thought you were dead! Jason, answer! Can you hear me? Can you reach me? Oh Jason, just send to me, tell me you're alright, please!* She was silent, obviously straining to hear. She knew that he was not as strong as she was. *Move towards me if you can hear me, love, that will let me know you can hear me! I just need to know, I just need to know you're alright and you can hear me!*

“What is it?” Kate asked. “Are you alright?”

“It’s Jyslin,” he answered, turning the skimmer towards her in response to her plaintive plea. “She’s *sending* to me.”

“Where is she?”

“*Way* outside of my own range to respond,” he answered, not entirely truthfully. Though it was a knife in him, he was not going to answer. He was not going to acknowledge her directly. Her own sending could be taken as a desperate woman casting into the darkness, but if he answered it was tangible evidence that he was alive, that some mindbender down there might intercept. He probably could answer her, spanning the distance with his intimate familiarity with her mind, but he wouldn’t risk it. Symone could pick up private sendings, her own personal little trick...there had to be other Faey who could do that.

“I knew Jyslin was strong, but Trelle’s garland,” Symone said, putting a finger to her temple and closing her eyes. “That she can reach you from that far away, hell, I can’t even sense her, and I know her mind very well.”

“What does that mean?” Luke asked.

“Luke, Jyslin is one of the most powerful telepaths on this planet,” Symone told him as Jason moved towards Jyslin. “What she’s doing right now is proving that she deserves that title. She’s doing something that no other telepath on Earth could probably do. She’s sending to Jason from a distance that would make any other Faey faint to even attempt.”

YES! I knew you could hear me, my love, she sent to him over that vast distance, but Jason turned away from her, leaving the area. *I, I understand, love. You just wanted me to know you were alright. And that’s enough for me. I’ll wait for you, until you think it’s safe to contact me. Until then, be careful and be well, and I love you.*

Jason closed his eyes and gunned the throttle, racing away from the area, racing out of Jyslin’s sending range, racing out of his ability to sense her. Touching her mind had opened old wounds he thought long healed, and the ache inside him to be with her erupted in him once more.

God help him, he loved that woman like he had never loved before. She may be the forbidden fruit, but he loved her all the same.

The next morning, after a sleepless night filled with memories and images of Jyslin, Jason went down to teach his first class on flight procedures, and received quite a surprise.

Instead of three students, there were sixteen people sitting in the conference room waiting for him, all of them with notebooks.

“What’s this about?” Jason asked.

“Well, Tim told us that anyone who’s going with you had to come to this class,” Cindy Barker answered. She was a petite little woman with red hair, but though she was small and wiry, she was deceptively strong, her little body toned and fit. She was a welder, and one of the best welders Jason had ever seen. Her welding skill had put her on the build team, and that had saved her life. “You can guess why I’m here.”

“So, all of you want to go with me? Despite the fact that you know how hard what I’m doing is going to be? There’s a very good chance none of us will survive it.”

“Honey, after what happened in Chesapeake, we’re never gonna be safe anywhere unless we do something,” she told him, which made everyone else nod. “I’ll take my chances doing something about it than just sit here and hide under a rock and wait for it to happen.”

“Well said,” Taylor Mason, a burly black man who was quite a good carpenter, one of Luke’s original builders, agreed aloud.

“I think more would be here, but some people have jobs to do and couldn’t make it,” Tom Jackson said to him. “We’re just the ones who had the time to be here this morning. I’m sure they’re gonna come talk to you today about it.”

“So, all of you are stating here and now that you intend to go with me and start a rebellion?”

They all rumbled in agreement.

“You fully understand that it’s going to be very dangerous, and odds are we’re all going to die?”

“That doesn’t matter anymore,” someone called.

“If we don’t fight, then who will?” someone else said.

Jason couldn’t suppress a relieved smile. “Alright then, let’s get started. It’s gonna be a stretch getting all of you time behind the controls of my skimmer, but we’ll work out a schedule. Not that that’s going to happen any time soon. Nobody’s gonna sit in the pilot’s chair until you pass the written exam for a Class 3 license.”

And so he began. He spent almost all day going over the rules and procedures of piloting a skimmer, both procedures in the cockpit and protocols for dealing with traffic control. And Tom’s words turned out to be true, for new faces showed up in the conference room as others vanished to go get some work done. The attack on Chesapeake had dealt them a huge blow physically and psychologically, but it also had seemed to instill in the survivors a burning desire to do something about it.

Much to his shock, by the end of the day, he had been approached by *every single resident*. All of them, even Temika. Every single one. The entire build team wanted to join the rebellion, wanted to strike back at Trillane for what they had done to their friends, what they had done to Chesapeake.

He talked about it with Kiaari that night, after he finished teaching, while the two of them enjoyed a quiet dinner in his apartment. He had copied the manuals and regulations into extra panels and into handheld readers, little tablets that held data that were small enough to put in a pocket, and the entire town was quietly studying about how to become a pilot.

“The attack really affected everyone, Jayce,” she told him as she passed him the salt. “Some of them want revenge. Some of them were frightened into action. Some of them have seen what Trillane is capable of, and want to put a stop to it. And some, like poor Luke, they just want to find a reason to live, something to put into their lives that give them purpose and direction. For all of them, it seems that joining you and fighting against Trillane seems the best way to go about it.”

“I guess. I just hope they all fully appreciate how serious it’s going to get.”

"I'm sure they do. But this is going to change a few things."

"How so?"

"Well, first off, you were building this town to give those *not* going with you a safe place to live. Well, if everyone's going with you, then what reason does this town have?"

He blinked. That had *never* occurred to him. "This place will serve as a good temporary base until we're ready to move," he answered after a moment's thought. "And we can let all the other squatters know about this place so they can move in after we're gone, so they always have a safe place to be."

"You should start collecting them now," she said. "Get a government in place and get things set up so you don't have to be here."

"Yeah, that'd probably be best. I'll have Mark start working the shortwave tomorrow to find out who's coming."

"It'd be better if you sent someone out."

"I know, but with Temika injured, I don't think anyone else has her savvy or her knowledge of the region," he replied. "Mika was a real gem for that, since she's smart enough to stay out of trouble and well known enough to be able to go almost anywhere without being shot at. She's the best diplomat we have."

"How's her arm going?"

"Well, we think it's going to heal," he answered. "She says she has feeling in her fingers again, and I think that's a good sign."

"I'll do something about that," she said. "I'm going out tonight. I'll go find a doctor, lift some knowledge from him, then come back and see what I can do."

"I'd appreciate that," he said gratefully.

"I should have done it earlier," she grunted. "I'll have to tell her about me to do it, though. But I think she's trustworthy."

"I agree with that."

"But I had to make sure of things. But, since it looks like we're going to be relatively safe for a while, I can take the time to fix it. That reminds me."

"What?"

"Since everyone here is going with us, I think I'm going to reveal myself. Not as a Kimdori, but I think it's good that they know that you have a professional spy on hand to help gather information."

"That might cause more trouble than it fixes," he said after a moment. "They find out Mika's a telepath, then Tim comes out of the closet. If you admit you're not the shy little Kate they all know and love, it might not go over very well."

"Whatever you think best," she shrugged. "But with the smaller numbers, now it's a little harder for me to disappear days at a time. You're probably running out of diseases I'm coming down with."

He chuckled. "It is getting a bit hard to explain, especially recently. After Chesapeake, everyone wants to make sure everyone else is alright."

"I'm just saying it might be easier to break it to them that I'm not who they think I am. I'm sure they'd understand the need for the secrecy, and them knowing at least some of the truth of me shows you trust them."

"I'm not sure," he hedged.

"It's up to you, Jason," she told him. "I can just suggest."

"I've come to find out your suggestions usually end up being the best course of action," he admitted.

She smiled. "That's what I'm here for, Jayce. You need me to bring anything back?"

"I can't think of anything. What are you after this time?"

"Well, we now know who ordered the attack, and what happened. Right now I'm trying to gather information on what Trillane is doing in the wake of the scandal."

"Scandal?"

"It's quite the scandal," she nodded. "Oh, not about the attack, the scandal is about the catastrophic failure of the attack. Dozens of soldiers dead, equipment lost, all the press covering the explosion, the need to leak classified information to throw off the investigation, questions questions questions about an operation that was supposed to be totally secret. I told you about the Zarina and the generals. Well, the dust hasn't settled yet. I'm just keeping track of it, and I'm still digging for some hard proof about the slaving. But, I must admit, they've done a good job keeping that buried. Nobody knows about it, and I can't find any information on it anywhere. It's probably being held in hard storage, and those involved are being kept isolated from everyone else."

"Hard storage?"

"Computers not connected to Civnet, or being held in physical records, you know, paper and ink. Hard storage, where you have to physically be there to access it," she explained. "It's the safest way to store dangerous information, because not only do you have to know where they're keeping it, you have to penetrate their defenses to reach it."

"Ah. I doubt they'd hold any information like that on Earth."

"On the contrary, this is the *perfect* place to keep it," she countered. "It's a planet on the very edge of the Imperium, it has only one stargate that can only link to a stargate at Draconis, there's nothing here but farms, and it's almost entirely under Trillane's control. They have more control here than they do on Arctus, if only because there's not members of other houses running around. Spies have no reason to come here, unless they want to steal information about how much food the planet's producing. Spies would have trouble sneaking in, since there's only one stargate, and virtually all the traffic through it is nothing but military vessels and cargo ships. This planet's Faey population is almost entirely made up of commoners living under Trillane, and that means they have total control. If you had records and data that could get your Duchess executed and your noble house's charter revoked, where would *you* keep it?"

"Good point," he acquiesced.

"You've dug quite a hole for yourself."

"How so?"

"Training sixty pilots? You're going to be frazzled," she winked.

"Tell me when I'm *not* frazzled," he sighed. "But it needs to be done. Any of them might be called on to pilot a skimmer or dropship at any time. They have to be ready."

"I certainly agree with you," she nodded. "You're training guerillas, Jayce, and guerillas have to be resourceful and self sufficient. I think you've done the right thing in deciding that *all* of them need to be able to fly a dropship."

"Or a skimmer."

"Specifically a dropship," she grinned, putting her chin on her laced fingers and looking at him.

"Okay, okay, a dropship," he admitted.

"Let's not be secretive with each other now, Jayce. We've shared those plans in our touch. I know what you have planned."

"And?"

"I think you've done very well," she answered. "You've targeted your objectives precisely, and you certainly have a keen understanding of the problems and limitations you're going to be working with. Your idea of going after cargo dropships moving from farms to spaceports is a good idea. They're hard to defend since there's so many of them, and you can hit one and disappear before fighters can be scrambled and sent in. You can capture one with just a couple of people, meaning that you can spread out and attack multiple targets at once, so long as you always have one telepath in the unit. And though they'll just seem like nuisance attacks at first, when you start really cutting into the dropship fleet, Trillane's going to start feeling the pinch. Sure, they have a few thousand of them, and they're not going to be too concerned when they lose two or three. But after they've lost a couple *hundred* of them, they're going to be feeling the fangs you've been sinking into their ankles. A small-

scale battle plan that will eventually cause huge supply disruptions, and will be very hard to counter. I think it's brilliant."

"Thanks. I'm not very good at this battle planning shit. I'm no general."

"I think you could be a good one, with a little training and some experience," she said earnestly. "You certainly have an, inventive, mindset when it comes to business."

"Well, it made sense," he shrugged.

"It does indeed. Now that you're not getting money from the Ministry anymore, we need another source of income."

"Kumi spent all that time setting up those shell companies for me. It was all right there waiting to be used."

Jason's idea for money was both simple and rather ingenious. It was a two-pronged strategy involving scavenging and marketing. Jason was, quite literally, about to become an *honest* businessman, using the shell companies that Kumi set up and the fake identity that she had had set up for him, and it was something that they were already in the act of starting. The first phase of the plan involved selling Terran objects over Civnet, utilizing Civnet auction sites and barter houses, where people could buy and sell just about anything in private transactions. Things that Faey liked to buy that came from Earth were jewelry and guns, which were considered collector's items because of their primitive technology. This would provide moderate amounts of income, but there was a *ton* of scrap metal laying around out in the wilderness, and much of it had material worth. There was enough gold laying around out here to make them *huge* amounts of money, if they were just patient enough to gather it all up. Silver, iron, tungsten, and lead also had market worth.

The second prong of the plan involved honest business, and not what they could scavenge or steal. Jason had two ideas for that, both of which were relatively simple, would take almost no time, yet would have the potential to earn money.

The first idea was cookbooks.

There was this sudden influx of Terran food into the Faey system, but thus far, Jason had found very little information on how to prepare the new foods outside of safety precautions and attempts to adapt Terran food to Faey recipes that used similar materials. There was no definitive cookbook out in the Imperium that dealt specifically with Terran food, or more to the point, adapting Terran foods to Faey dishes. Jason felt that releasing a cookbook that dealt with Terran foods would be well received, especially if he made it very cheap. A five credit cookbook that covered all the Terran foods available in the Imperium had potential to make money. For that, he'd need the help of Maya and Vell, because they were both quite good cooks, and Vell had already done some work in experimenting with using Terran foods in Faey recipes. Jason didn't expect the cookbooks to make a large amount of money, but all they had to do was make a modest amount.

The second prong had to deal with issues that might involve his rebellion, so it had to be a business venture that would require the use of a large warehouse that could be used to funnel supplies and equipment to the rebellion. And so, as soon as he had access to his panel again, VulTech would be born. It would be a technology company, dealing in virtually any kind of technical equipment, but it would also sell some of Jason's inventions that he felt comfortable releasing into the Imperium.

VulTech would start its business by patenting a modified version of his liquefaction inducer that would work on Faey plascrete, their basic building material, which had been a modification that had taken him all of six hours to work out, and another five hours to redesign the unit so it was encased in a single chassis. This little device had some impressive potential as a moneymaker because it would allow builders and others to utilize the liquefaction effect to implant into or soften sections of plascrete, letting them make significant changes to it without having to tear it up. It couldn't be used on a wall without endangering the entire structure, but it was more than usable on a floor, sidewalk, free-standing object, or ceiling. Jason had already drawn up the blueprints for building this new model, a stand-alone device about a meter tall and with leads that would be placed around the area to be affected. The user

would just turn on the device, do what they needed to do, then turn it off. When they were done, the plascrete would again be hard and stable.

Jason already had the plans ready to send off to the Ministry of Technology to be patented...but this time they would be patented in the name of the *company*, not in the name of an *individual*. By doing that, he could legally defend his invention without having to reveal the fact that he wasn't dead.

The inducers weren't going to be produced by VulTech. What Jason was going to do was put the design out there, let companies see it, and then let them buy rights to produce the unit. Just as had been done with the subsonic devices Jason had invented—just without his input on that one—he would negotiate an initial payment and royalties, for initial capital and a steady source of income.

And that was how VulTech was going to work. Jason would patent ideas through Vultech, stick them out on Civnet and offer to sell the rights, then wait for an offer. This way, VulTech could generate income without having to actually *produce* anything. And once they had a sufficient amount of working capital, Jason would start buying and selling technological devices to make it *look* like VulTech was a technology company, when actually all it would be doing would be buying supplies for the rebellion, buying extra junk, then reselling it on the open market to give the illusion that it was a viable business.

And the income from the cookbooks, filtered into the company under phony sales, would hide the losses of buying supplies and handing it off to the rebellion, thus shielding the company from scrutiny once the Faey figured out that the rebellion had to be getting money from *somewhere*, and started looking for that source. And that was what the cookbooks were for. A radically different product sold by another company whose profits were written off as personal income of the cookbook writer, funneled into VulTech to hide the money loss from equipment and supplies channeled to the rebellion.

He had little doubt that he'd come up with several viable ideas that would make money, because he'd be forced to come up with things in the future on the fly to deal with the Faey, and then he'd find a way to adapt it to a use that would make him money. It was an ironic little circle, once he thought about it. The Faey would invest in ideas owned by VulTech, unwittingly funding a rebellion against one of their noble houses, even while that noble house pushed Jason and caused him to come up with new ideas...that would end up at VulTech.

"Yeah, we need to give her a big kiss next time we see her," Kiaari chuckled.

"I doubt that's ever going to happen," he answered. "Kumi's in her conscription now, working on Draconis. She can't really help me anymore, and even if she could, she might not. I'm not entirely sure how much I can trust her once I start cutting into her noble house's profit margins."

"You can trust Kumi."

"You're sure about that?"

"Of course. Miaari told me so."

And for Kiaari, Jason had noticed, that was that. Her trust in the word of her sister was absolute. It was almost blind. "Sometimes I wonder why you trust Miaari so much."

"Jason, she is my older sister," she said, as if that was all that needed to be said. "If I can't trust my family, who can I trust?"

"Well, I didn't say you couldn't trust her. It's just that, that—"

"You'd understand if you were Kimdori," she said with an enigmatic smile.

"I guess so. Humans aren't that trusting."

"I've noticed. Just one of your many shortcomings," she winked.

"Well thanks," he said dryly.

"Hate to say it, but it's about time for me to go, if I want to get back at a decent hour."

"Alright. You be careful out there," he warned.

"Ever the worrier," she chuckled. She wiped her mouth with her napkin and pushed away from the table, then patted him on the shoulder as she filed past towards the bedroom. There, he knew, she would remove her clothes and shapeshift into a bird, then fly off to do her work. Watching her

shapeshift was something he didn't particularly want to witness while he was eating, so she made sure to close the door.

Jason sighed and put his elbows on the table, looking out the window, lost in thought. He didn't think about the rebellion, or the city, or the work that had to be done, or even Doc Northwood. All his thoughts were instead fixed on Jyslin. He wondered if she was alright. He hoped that getting close enough so she could sense him had helped ease any worries she had. He longed to be near her, with her, to touch her, to—

Well, pining over her wasn't going to fix anything...but he just couldn't help it. Being close enough to hear her sending, to feel the touch of her mind, it had reopened old wounds he thought long healed. He had left her to come out here because it was what he felt he had to do, but it certainly didn't make it any easier. He was out here, she was there, and that was just the way of things. And with what he intended to do, he would either end up dead or in some Trillane prison somewhere. But maybe, just maybe, if everything happened just right, there was a *chance* that they would be together again.

And that chance, no matter how remote, was what he could cling to right now.

The days blurred by after that, because Jason was almost eternally busy. His days were filled with the efforts of training his neophyte resistance movement in the art of flying, by starting with the worst part of it...the regulations. He taught people in shifts, as they had time to come in and learn when not busy with other tasks, and those tasks had multiplied in number. Some of them picked up the regulations quickly, others struggled, but to his surprise, Luke had managed to memorize virtually the entire manual in just a few days, and had started his practical training behind the controls. But in a way, Jason shouldn't have been surprised. He had lost everything in the attack, and now the rebellion and the work to be done around the city was all he had left. He spent every waking moment working or studying.

In addition to the efforts to establish power, water, and communications, Jason now had the people of the build team out scavenging the city and surrounding area. They were to bring back guns, jewelry, silver, gold, and any large-scale construction equipment they could find. Those things were inspected, cleaned, cataloged, and stored, as they prepared to sell it off or use it. Jason helped as much as he could, but his schedule was totally packed, between teaching the rules during the day and giving Luke his practical training at night, and squeezing in time to help fix power lines and clean out water pipes in between.

He was exhausted most of the time, so much so that he barely noticed the days fly by, but he never got too busy to keep tabs on Temika's recovery. Kiaari had lifted enough medical knowledge from some doctor somewhere to be able to monitor her healing and apply medicine to best effect, so her progress had rapidly increased. She regained sensation in her entire arm and regained limited movement, but still had it in a sling. Kiaari had put her on rehabilitation exercises to strengthen her arm, and that was the only time it was out of the sling. The Faey medical compounds they'd brought back had gone far in mending the skin of her arm, but she would always have faint burn scars from the tricep to the wrist.

Temika had taken the truth of Kiaari rather well, but there had been one issue that had been... messy. Like she had to Symone, Kiaari had revealed the truth of herself to her, and Temika had made the mistake of asking to see her change shape. Jason had never believed Temika capable of fainting.

The busy schedule kept his mind busy, and kept him from brooding too much about the deaths of his friends and being separated from Jyslin, but every day, in quiet moments when he had a moment, he managed to somberly reflect on those he'd lost in Chesapeake, and lament his separation from the woman he loved.

After some number of days that Jason couldn't remember, the lights finally came on in Charleston. There was the predictable celebration once they got the power grid working for fifteen city blocks, but there was still much more to do, and there was still the issue of water. But at least now they had power

to more than the governor's mansion, and Jason could pull the PPGs that were powering the building out and use them elsewhere.

And just like in Chesapeake, once the lights came on, people started to show up. Murphy from Hurricane was the first squatter to show up, in a badly misfiring one ton truck hauling a trailer with all his worldly possessions. When he got there, he was taken immediately to see Jason, who was in between stints as teacher and was elbows deep in the motor of a rooter that he and Tom Jackson were using to clear a water pipe on State Street. Jason explained what would be the rules of living in Charleston, which Murphy agreed to immediately. Devin Jones was going to escort him off to find him a place to settle in, but Murphy instead rolled up his sleeves and helped Tom and Jason fix the rooter motor. This endeared him to quite a few people right off the bat. Murphy hadn't moved to Chesapeake because he was quite content in Hurricane as the lord of his little domain. He was well known in the region because he was an ex-Marine with a large arsenal of weaponry, a steady hand, and nerves of steel. He did not intimidate, and if you even tried, he'd shoot you from a mile away with his sniper rifle if you survived getting that far away from him. He had a reputation for being a mean cuss, but Temika had always liked him. She called him a "roughie," someone who was more reputation than reality, but some of that reputation was indeed well deserved. But, after the explosion in Chesapeake, now Murphy didn't feel quite so secure in Hurricane, and was more than willing to move to a place where he was promised that the Faey would have serious trouble finding him. Murphy was much like Luke, a rather handy fellow with skill in fixing many different things, from diesel engines to televisions, and he made a name for himself quickly as a no-nonsense fellow who could fix almost anything put in front of him.

Murphy was the first of several, and they started drifting in to Charleston not long after the power was restored. Many of them had been preparing to move to Chesapeake, but had been delayed or had to travel a long way. Others were like Murphy, people who had been secure in their fortified homes, but had been rattled by the explosion and the Faey presence, and also by the warnings about raids that Jason's people had circulated. But some, knowing what happened in Chesapeake, were afraid to congregate, afraid that the Faey would discover them and attack. And for that, Jason could not blame them. It had happened once, and it could happen again. Jason could offer no guarantees, he could only explain that this town had better protection, hidden using Faey technology, and the chances of the Faey finding it were more remote. Some 38 people had moved into Charleston, ten singles and seven families, and Jason had reconstituted a city council and mayor, though no one in the build team was a member of either. They had already warned them that they were all leaving, though they didn't tell them where or why. It was decided earlier that nobody that was part of the rebellion should know about the rebellion.

It seemed that he had just blinked and it was already February. It felt like yesterday they were working on power lines, and today they had power going to fifteen blocks. It seemed that yesterday the streets were deserted, but now there was a person here and there, and not just members of the build team. There were even children playing in the streets, but it was almost too painful to watch when Luke saw them, saw that haunted look drift over his features, to which Jason could do nothing but put his hand on the big man's shoulder and reassure him that there were still people that cared about him.

There was progress on other fronts as well. After a few weeks, Jason finally dared to turn his panel back on, and he got to business on the other side of things. Through the magic of email, Jason had renamed one of the shell companies Kumi had set up VulTech, and then submitted his liquefaction inducer to the Ministry of Technology for a patent. They got back to him quickly, approving the patent, and naming VulTech Enterprises as the patent holder. Once that was done, he simply placed the design on VulTech's Civnet site and offered it for sale to the highest bidder.

It did not take long at all.

Merrane Macrotechnology had been the first to show interest, which surprised Jason quite a bit. He'd had no idea that the arms company had a construction equipment division, but it did. The

executives he dealt with seemed a bit unsettled that the mysterious owner of VulTech flatly refused any visual communication, and when he communicated over Civnet, he clearly was using a voice masker to hide his true voice. But he had all the proper documents to prove ownership of VulTech, and that meant that he did in fact have the power to sell the patent.

Sixteen days after getting the patent for the liquefaction inducer, he sold it to Merrane Macrotechnology for C10,500,000 and a .7% royalty on every unit produced. For Merrane, it was an absolute steal. At first they thought they had duped some small-time inventor with just enough sense to start his own little company with a sum that would seem large to him but was basically chicken scratch to them, but then realized they were dealing with someone who had a pretty good understanding of what it was about. Jason had taken the very small initial payment for two reasons: firstly because he didn't want VulTech to get too much money too fast, which would alert people; and secondly, it was the royalties that were *much* more important than the initial payment. But on the royalties, Jason wouldn't budge from a relatively large .7% per unit, no matter how large their initial payment offer was. He, just like 2M, was banking on the success of the device and selling it in quantity, and what was more important, he needed a moderate income that was steady, not a large initial windfall followed up by small income afterwards.

All in all, it was a good deal for both sides. Merrane Macrotechnology got a good piece of construction equipment to produce and sell, and Jason got a steady income to fund his rebellion.

That initial windfall was spent almost as fast as it was made. That C10,500,000 was used to buy the one thing that everything else would absolutely depend upon, and that was a *warehouse*. This time he did not rent or lease, he bought it. The warehouse he settled upon was on the outskirts of Lincoln, Nebraska, in an industrial park about ten miles south of the city. It had once been a small convenient store chain's distribution center, and it was absolutely *perfect*. The warehouse was literally out all by itself, far away from any population centers. It had a fenced in perimeter, lots of interior storage space, and what was most important, the warehouse itself was a renovated airplane hangar, and the doors in the back *worked*. Those doors were wide enough to allow his skimmer to fly into the building, and were even large enough to accommodate a large cargo dropship. If that wasn't good enough, the doors were motorized, and it took all of two hours to rig a remote so the doors could be opened from the skimmer, or even using his panel. He could open the warehouse doors from literally anywhere.

His only visit to the warehouse had been to look it over and make some modifications, and in some kind of need to establish the place, he'd painted VulTech's logo over the door. He guessed it was his only conceit to put his name in the company, but naming it FoxTech would have been a glaring klaxon going off all over the place that this small company was owned by someone other than a Faey. The closest thing to a fox in the Imperium was a vulpar, so he had named the company VulTech. The black silhouette of a seated vulpar, its two tails sweeping out two the right, now graced the wall over the door of the office of the warehouse, with [VulTech] written on the door in both Faey and English.

The warehouse was an absolutely critical part of the overall plan, and much to his relief, that was no longer an issue. The warehouse was totally paid for, no mortgage, and it had only cost him C7,750,000. That left C2,750,000, all but C5000 of which was immediately deposited into his private numbered account and wrote off in VulTech's records he was keeping for tax purposes as a business investment. What that money would be used for, he did not want traced back to VulTech.

That money already had been partially earmarked for one thing that everyone was going to need... armor. *Real* armor, not that century old surplus junk the Faey used. Armor like his, that could take punishment, and with the antigrav in it. That, more than anything else, was Jason's primary need for his people, the ability to survive.

That, naturally, would require basically a running account with ZPS, because he had 59 suits of armor to buy. Vehicles and equipment he could steal, but armor, that had to be custom fit to each person. That was not something he could scavenge or steal, not if it was going to work the way it was supposed to work.

Not everything else they needed could be stolen, though, at least not yet. Jason had to buy a new replicator, for their old one had been destroyed in Chesapeake. He also needed the materials to make more railguns, at least 100 of them, and he also knew that it would only be wise to have some MPAC rifles on hand. Railguns were cheap to produce, but MPACs had their uses, for they had explosive rounds where rail slugs were penetrating rounds. Besides, an armored figure carrying an MPAC would look like a Faey from a distance, where railguns had a radically different appearance. They were going to need more basic supplies to build what they needed, and they were going to need more for when they started work on Cheyenne Mountain. He wanted everything ready for that, not having to keep running to Lincoln to pick up shipments he had to have brought in because they didn't have what they needed.

One thing he certainly wanted on hand was everything they'd need to refit skimmers, dropships, hovercars, and airbikes the same way his skimmer was outfitted, to be invisible to sensors. Just one skimmer was a liability, and they were going to need at *least* two dropships in order to complete the move to Cheyenne Mountain. Trying to ferry everything in his skimmer would be impossible, and unlike the move to Charleston from Chesapeake, it would be absolutely impossible to move things overland. That refit would be done in the warehouse in Lincoln.

And thanks to VulTech, he could buy it all without any eyebrows being raised. And with a war chest of C2,845,392, he could buy a large portion of what was required.

The armor was going to be expensive, as were the dropships. The armor was going to go at C60,000 per suit, on the average, and with 59 suits to buy, that meant that he was looking at a price tag of C3,540,000, which was considerably more than he had on hand. He wouldn't be able to buy the armor quite yet, at least not all of it. The best course of action with that would be to only buy armor for those who passed pilot training, which would restrict the armor costs and still get armor on those people that would need it.

Dropships came in all shapes and sizes, but what Jason needed was fairly specific. He needed the largest dropship he could find that would still fit through the doors of the warehouse, whose dimensions he already had written down. He would have liked to have found a dropship capable of fitting in the tunnel at Cheyenne Mountain, but it was just too narrow. It would just barely fit his airskimmer, and the wingtips might scrape against the walls of the tunnel at that. The only real option he could see in that regard would be to build a shelter to hide the dropships, or keep them in Lincoln. A little Civnet research showed him which dropships fit his requirements. He winnowed through the candidates, until he came up with three models that fulfilled his requirements. The JS-290 Cargo Dropship, made by Folenne Transport, was listed at a starting price of C450,000. The V-10 General Purpose Dropship, built by a Makati-owned corporation named Advanced Vehicle Solutions, was listed at a starting price of C390,000. And finally there was the ARL Space-Ground Transport, an old and reliable design built by the ancient warhorse of Faey vehicle producers, the venerable Thrynne Corporation, which was listed at a starting price of C500,000. All three were within the required physical dimensions, at least once its wings were folded in the case of the JS-290.

After a short period of researching maintenance histories and message boards, it became clear that the Thrynne dropship was the best. It had a proven track record of solid dependability, replacement parts were abundant, it was easy to maintain, and was well known for being able to take a beating and operate even when maintenance was neglected. It was more expensive than its competitors, but it would be cheaper in the long run. Jason would gladly pay for that kind of dependability, because his dropships might not be able to receive regular maintenance. The newcomer V-10 was lauded on some message boards for its toughness and ease of repair, but its replacement parts were more expensive than the ARL.

He was also going to need piggyback dropships, dropships that picked up and carried standard shipping containers, which was what the Faey used to ship food from farms to cargo transports in orbit. Those, he would need for the operations against Trillane as container hijackers, where the cargo dropships would be used to carry equipment or personnel. He'd need at least eight of those, but those

he could *steal*, so he didn't need to buy all of them at once. He had the idea to start with two, and then steal the rest. The plan was to refit the two he bought, and then steal new ones, one at a time, refit them, and then put them out and into service. When one was done with its refit, another would be stolen, and the refit process would start again. He wanted the refit team to be constantly busy in an endless rotation of refitting vehicles, and what was thankful to God to Jason, the core of the refit team that had refitted his skimmer had survived. That had been a major project, and the men and women in Charleston were his technical people, so naturally they had been involved in the refit.

There was only *one* piggyback dropship that anyone ever cared to buy, and that was the Wynne DCU. Usually referred to as the Stick, a reference to its long, narrow shape, it was *the* dominant piggyback dropship. It was powerful and could carry tremendous loads, it was exceptionally sturdy and durable, and it had a service life measured in decades, not years. There were Sticks still in service that had been built a century ago. The entire Faey merchant marine system was designed around launching and capturing Sticks. Their cargo bays were designed around them, the spaceports were designed around them, *everything* dealing with container transport was designed around them. There were different models of the Stick, smaller ones and larger ones, but they all had the same basic shape, they were almost all exactly the same length, and they had the same design. Only their width, height, and hauling capacity varied, though there were a few speciality models designed for carrying things other than containers, but those fell outside the accepted Stick genre. The DCU-19 was the largest of the Sticks, a double-decker piggyback, designed to carry containers both underneath and on top at the same time by connecting them together like Lego blocks and then picking them up, and having another Stick load the containers on top. A single DCU-19 had carried 36 containers at once, but it had done so without entering an atmosphere, where all those containers would interfere with wind resistance. Most Sticks carried one or two containers at once in an stacked-under configuration, since it was the *weight* of the load that mattered, not the *size*. If a Stick could carry two containers and stay under its load rating, it would do so.

Sticks were as plentiful as grains of sand, and were the backbone of any transport system. They were the tractor trailers of the Faey, all over the place and hauling goods from point to point, and they were going to be the focus of his attacks. Sticks were plentiful, but they were not cheap. The average Stick went for C75,000. After Jason started taking out Sticks, and those numbers started to mount, that bill was going to start piling up on Trillane as they were forced to replace them...and that was because civilian Sticks were *not* designed to withstand combat. Certainly there were military models of Sticks that were heavily armored, and even armed, but the average Stick you'd see flying over a spaceport was literally nothing but a flying engine, stripped down to maximize carrying capacity. Yes, they were heavily reinforced, but that reinforcement was *internal*, designed to deal with the stress of carrying a heavy load, not enduring strikes from MPACs, and their systems were not shielded to protect them from the ion storm generated by ion cannons. In layman's terms, he'd have trouble breaking a bone on a Stick, but he could certainly take off big chunks of flesh, or give it a heart attack without leaving a mark. They were the achilles heel of the Faey system, and that was the weak spot that he was going to exploit. A single rebel could inflict real damage on Trillane with nothing but a high-powered sniper rifle and a good vantage point to shoot at Sticks. Run up some hill, fire off a couple of shots, bring down a Stick, then run away before anyone could get there, just like how the Minutemen used to do it back in the Revolutionary War.

The two Sticks he intended to buy *would* be up to handling combat situations, for he was going to buy military models. Those were five times the cost, but they would be armed and armored. Those Sticks would be called upon to descend into a warzone and pick up containers, then fly away with them while taking fire, so they had to be up to it. The rest of the Sticks he'd steal wouldn't be doing that, they would instead be engaging in "night swipes," descending on a farm or supply depot with its stealth system engaged, picking up containers, and then flying away with them, stealing them.

He figured he was going to need about C4,500,000 more in order to purchase all the equipment and

materials he needed before even starting operations against Trillane, but they had time. From what Kiaari had managed to discover in her forays out into Faey territory, the slaving operation had been buried, and buried *deep*, and Kiaari suspected that the slaving ring operations had been put on hold until the explosion fiasco fallout faded, and things settled down. She suspected that it was Jason's warning to Jyslin, and subsequently the Marines, that had stifled it more than anything else. Even if they didn't believe him, now it was *out there*, it was something that maybe someone wouldn't think was unbelievable as it seemed if they saw something suspicious.

The days continued to march by, as February faded into March, and the days began to get noticeably warmer. The population of Charleston remained low, but in a way, Jason preferred it that way. He didn't want to see another Chesapeake. It was on a blustery, mild day in March when they finally got the water going, using a rather ingenious system that Tom Jackson and Mike Colbert had managed to jerry-rig. It was a *gravity* fed system, not a pump-driven system, where water was purified on side of the hill above the city and stored in a special tank built *underground*, constructed using the construction equipment Luke had been collecting and restoring by digging out a big hole, then lining it with a steel liner, then covering it over. It was an impressively large tank, nearly 50,000 gallons in capacity, which had been hooked into the water system. The only pumps involved were the pumps that connected the purifying plant to the Kanawha River, the source of the water. With a gravity-fed distribution system, they had good water pressure and didn't have to worry about maintaining any complex machinery. The purifying plant itself was also rather ingenious, for it used nothing more than three networks of open-topped pipes with specially designed units above them, and three PPG-powered heater units. Unable to purify water by normal standards, Tom and Mike's system was nothing more than three large boilers that boiled water into steam, collected the steam, then condensed it back into water. That distilled water was pure and drinkable. The moving water in the open-topped pipes didn't *completely* boil away, and it went down a different pipe and right back to the river after going through a cyclonic pressure-based cooling unit to lower the temperature of the water, so it didn't go back into the Kanawha at a near-boiling point.

Jason was *impressed*. The cyclical nature of the water drawing system meant that there were no filters to clean, *ever*. Dirty water was pumped up, and dirty water flowed right back down, just with some of the water removed. Using distillation to produce clean water was both ingenious and efficient, without the need for chemicals or filters or complicated purification systems. The entire purification system fit in one building, and it only required six PPGs and the use of equipment that was plentiful and didn't need much customization. Jason had only been called upon to build the coolant system control unit and the interface between the PPG and the pump.

The only drawback of the system was that it had a very slow water replacement cycle. The water was only partially boiled to take a portion, then the steam had to be collected, condensed back into water, and then cooled. It used simple gravity and ambient air temperature for collection and cooling, but the system could only produce 300 gallons of water an hour. But, that was what the huge water tank was for, Jason realized. It would become drained during the day, then refill at night, and have a huge reserve for emergencies, such as putting out a fire.

That wasn't the only thing getting done, though. The barrels Jason had set out quickly filled up with scrap gold, jewelry, silver, and lead, until he had some impressive piles gathered up in one of the unused rooms on the first floor of the mansion. Wanda Watkins had minored in geology in college, and she had been going through the jewelry people brought in, weeding the fakes out and assessing each piece for what she would consider to be a fair price to ask for it. Jason had went out with Mike Colbert between sessions teaching to address the cable issue. That had been Steve's baby, but with him dead, now it had to be finished. But Jason didn't have the time to check all those miles of cable and set up a little miniature relay station the way Steve had in Chesapeake. Instead of doing that, Jason opted instead to exploit all the satellite dishes laying around. He set up a downward-pointing transmitter up on the hill next to the water station and hooked up a comm panel receiver to it, so it would then pick up

all the TV stations. He then programmed it to organize the stations it received into a new channel format, and then broadcast them out via the transmitting dish. He just told everyone to get a dish, point it at the dish on the hill, and hook it up to their TVs. And it worked. Jason's solution was faster and easier than Steve's had been, but the TV pictures did get a little fuzzy when it rained. To Jason, that was a fair tradeoff for spending weeks climbing up and down telephone poles, fixing repeaters, isolating sections of the network, and running miles of cable. He just didn't have time for it.

It was before Jason went with the dish solution that he found out that Temika was actually making headway with her phobia. Mike Colbert was probably about the only man that had been in Chesapeake that Temika had shown any interest in at all. He was a tall fellow, but he was almost as wide across the shoulders as Wanda was tall. He was awesomely built, a career Air Force electronics technician before the subjugation that also competed in bodybuilding tournaments. "Can I ask a personal question, Mister Jason?" he asked, right out of the blue, as they had been surveying cable runs on telephone poles on Virginia Avenue.

"Well, I guess so," he answered.

"Do you think a regular guy like me could ever have a decent relationship with, uh, one of you?"

"One of us? Us who?"

"Uh, you know, a telepath."

Jason had glanced at him, and had made the connection quite quickly. "Well, I think that would depend on you," he said. "You'd be entering into a relationship with a woman who had an ability that makes her quite different from you. You'd have to be willing to accept those differences, and be willing to enter into a relationship with all kinds of special conditions and issues that you wouldn't find in a normal relationship."

"Yeah, I've thought about it a lot," he'd answered honestly. "Nothing would be like I think it would be. I could never have an argument with her, she'd just zap me."

"I think you underestimate Temika's tact, Mike," he'd chided him. "She'd never do anything like that. We taught her better. All I can really say is that you'd have to give her a lot of support, and some leeway. She's a strong woman, but what the Faey did to her means she needs a gentle touch and a man willing to be patient enough to help her work through her problems without pushing her."

"What did they do to her?"

"Her phobia about being touched stems from a time when a Faey used telepathy to interrogate her," he answered immediately and honestly. "It was very traumatic to her, probably more so because she has talent."

"I didn't know that."

"Now you do. Just don't let on that you know, or she'll skin me."

"Wouldn't she just..."

"Mike, she won't do that," he sighed. "I told you, we taught her better. If I caught her prying into the minds of the others, I'd skin *her*, and she knows it. That's the cardinal sin among the four telepaths here, Mike. We *never* invade the privacy of those around us, not unless we have explicit permission to do so, or it's a life or death emergency."

"Well, that's good to know. But if I wanted a relationship with her, I'd think she'd want to invade that privacy."

"You're right there," he agreed. "That's what telepaths do when they're in a relationship. She'd want to know your mind, and you'd need to be willing to share it with her. That's one of those special conditions I mentioned. You'd have a rough road ahead of you, Mike I won't lie about that. You'd have to be willing to give more than a man usually gives in a relationship with a girl, and be willing to deal with a woman who has a power that you don't. But I think you have that kind of strength. And besides, Mika is worth it. She's one hell of a woman, and you'd be an idiot for letting her slip through your fingers."

"What's it like to be a telepath?"

“Not all that much different than not being one,” Jason had answered. “With the restrictions we place on ourselves, it’s really nothing more than a cell phone in my head I use to jabber at Mika, Tim, and Symone.”

Mike had laughed at that, and then the matter was quietly dropped as Mike pondered on what he’d learned about Temika, and Jason had silently watched the burly black man with a slight smile on his face, knowing that Mike would indeed consider Temika to be worth that kind of an effort. Women like Temika didn’t come around very often.

Mike hadn’t made any overt moves yet, but that was probably because Temika was still healing. She was out of the sling now, her arm bandaged from shoulder to fingertips, and Kiaari had ordered her to wear an oven mitt over her hand so the medicated moisturizing lotion that she had to rub into her skin didn’t wear off. It had been a horrid burn, but Faey medical technology was going to allow her to make a full recovery, with full range of motion and only a few very faint scars, where she’d have been *much* worse off without it. If they hadn’t have had that Faey medical equipment and supplies, odds were that Temika would have never regained use of her arm, and probably would have never regained feeling in it either. Most of the pain was gone now, only a dull ache where the worst of the burns had been, but Jason could tell that it still hurt when he watched her do her rehabilitation exercises. Her hair had started growing back as well, and that was where the permanent mark of her injury would be with her, for a streak of hair starting just over her left ear and extending back to the base of her hairline on the left edge of the back of her head was growing back bone white, a striking contrast to her thick, coarse black hair. Jason wasn’t all that surprised to see that, since he had a small patch of hair on his right shin that was white, hair that grew out of an old burn scar. She was very self-conscious about that new streak of white hair, though, and was waspish and defensive if anyone made any comments about it. Jason thought it looked nice on her, but Temika had this notion that there was no way the hair could be anything but ugly.

If there was one real star in the people taking flying lessons, it was Luke. He passed the written exam in a matter of days after starting into it, devoting every waking moment to the task before him that wasn’t taken up with other work. He passed that written exam by acing it, not missing a single question, and it meant that Jason had his first practical training pupil. At night, after the sun went down and it was safe to take the skimmer out, Jason took Luke up for training flights, teaching him the controls and letting him put the skills he learned on paper to use in a working environment. Studying about what to do was one thing, but applying it was something that took practice. Luke was a fast learner, which surprised Jason. He knew that the big man was good with his hands and was a skilled mechanic, and would be a good engineer, but Luke showed him that he was as smart as he was handy with a wrench. He picked up the basics of flight and cockpit controls quickly, and now Jason was just letting him log hours behind the controls to get proficient. The only problem Luke really had was the pinpoint landing drills that Jason put him through, forcing him to take off and land from awkward sites, a skill that Jason figured that they’d all better have with what was coming. He’d come along well enough to start him on instrument flying, using nothing but his gauges and instruments to fly, which also included the basics of navigation by using maps. The skimmer could use the GPS system that was still in use around the planet, a holdover from before the subjugation, but Jason felt that a true pilot had to be able to navigate the old fashioned way, with a clock, a compass, a speed gauge, and a map.

Luke was at the controls, with a map in his lap as he labored to calculate their position, while Jason sat in the co-pilot’s chair with this feet up on the dash and a reader in his lap, reading over some messages that Kiaari had emailed to him. She was out again, and had been gone for two days, collecting more intelligence about a variety of subjects. She’d sent him a message so long he dumped it to a reader and brought it with him, some twenty odd pages of text. He was almost through it, and saw that Kiaari had been a very busy little girl. She’d been all over North America in the last couple of days, chasing down leads that might direct her to the information she was seeking, but she’d regretted to admit that she’d come up empty. She even noted in the message that Miaari was going to have her

ears for her inability to perform her job. Trillane had virtually dropped the slaving operation in a hole in the middle of nowhere and buried it. Kiaari couldn't find anyone who knew anything about it, and her light infiltrations into Trillane's house computer network as well had come up empty. But Kiaari also made mention of the fact that odds were, nobody involved in the slaving ring was probably on Earth, and the data about it was being held in hard storage, which would take her time to track down.

She'd also made her first visit to Cheyenne Mountain, and her report about that area was...not good. The place was in shambles, an absolute disaster, and it wasn't the Faey or scavengers that had done it, it was the U.S. military. They had destroyed Cheyenne Mountain from the inside, literally using explosives to destroy entire sections of the secret base, probably some kind of last-ditch act of defiance to deny the Faey access to some military secrets or something stupid like that. Jason couldn't fathom why they did it, but they had. They would have *months* of rebuilding ahead of them when they moved in, clearing out debris, rebuilding tunnels and chambers, shoring them up, and installing basic services. Kiaari did report that there was a series of huge storage chambers inside the mountain that could house dropships, but there was no way to get them in there unless they dug a new tunnel. But that was something that Kiaari noted in her report that was entirely possible. One of the storage caverns was relatively close to the outside of the mountain, some 300 *shakra*, and that was a distance that would make cutting a tunnel a viable option. She wrote that they could build doors to place over the tunnel that appeared to look like the mountainside, and could conceal that construction under a hologram. Jason had to admit that it was possible, but there were only 61 of them, and cutting a tunnel that would need to be 40 feet wide and 60 feet tall, high enough for a Stick to fly in carrying two stacked containers, would take them a *long* time, even if they used the most advanced Faey mining equipment. The standard shipping container was roughly twenty feet high, fifteen feet wide, and thirty feet long. Two containers carried by a Stick would be about 55 feet high. Sure, cutting the hole would be easy, there were any number of mining tools that could shear into solid rock very fast. If he got some good equipment, he figured it would only take a week to cut through to the outside, but the real time investment was going to be in the reinforcement of that tunnel. If they didn't shore it up, it was going to collapse. That would require someone versed in *real* structural engineering, and considerable time to build the supports and install them. That was a project that would take a couple of months to complete.

Jason figured it was about time to smack that girl down with a healthy dose of reality.

There were some other issues, as Kiaari had thoroughly surveyed the site and included it all in her report. She estimated what it would take to repair the damage the military had done to the place, install what they needed, set up basic utilities and services, organize storage, set up training areas, and whatnot. Not counting the idea of the tunnel, Kiaari estimated that they were looking at a whole summer of work on Cheyenne Mountain, maybe even into the winter a little bit. She still held firm to her recommendation that it was the best place for them to set up, however, despite the unexpected bad condition of the facility. It would let them do some large-scale work and remain hidden, and the surprising find of the massive caverns within the mountain, something not on any of the maps they'd found of the place, was an added bonus.

Jason did have to admit, those caverns made Cheyenne Mountain look more appealing as a base. It would take a hell of a lot of work, but if they buckled down, they just *might* be able to figure something out. They may not be able to cut a new tunnel for the the dropships, but they could work out some way to get containers in and out using the existing tunnel, which *was* large enough for a container to go through it.

One thing was for sure, they couldn't stay in Charleston. The place was too open, and it was too close to Cheseapeake, and the ghosts that that place raised in most of the survivors. They needed a fresh start in a place far away from that place.

"Mister Jason," Luke called.

"You don't have to call me that, Luke," Jason sighed. "Just Jason will do, or Jayce."

“Sorry. I’m picking something up on this scanner here,” he said, pointing to one of the scopes in the center between the two chairs, a proximity radar with a range of only about forty miles.

“There shouldn’t be any traffic in this area,” he said to himself, sitting up and buckling on his restraints. When Luke saw him do that, he buckled his seat belt and shoulder harness as well. “Says here it’s a dropship,” he said, bringing up a scanner readout on the main window. “Transponder is Imperial military. Looks like it’s a sensor dropship, scanning the area. Where are we now?”

“Umm,” he said, looking at the map in his lap.

“This is serious, Luke, bring up GPS.”

“Sorry,” he said, throwing the map aside and then bringing up global positioning. According to GPS, they were south of the abandoned city of Beckley, in an area of rugged mountains. “We’re just south of Beckley,” he reported. “The dropship is moving at 10 *kathra* an hour to the northwest.”

“Ten? That’s it? It must be doing a sensor sweep,” Jason said. “Give me the controls, Luke. I don’t think you’re ready for this.”

“Switching over,” he called, flipping the main switch that transferred master command to the co-pilot’s chair. The master command was a system that caused one set of controls to be dominant. Jason could use the controls on his side at any time, but if commands were input from the pilot’s controls, they would override his own. That Jason had been letting Luke fly with master command was a testament to his progress. “What are we going to do?”

“Go take a look,” he answered. “Who do we know around here?”

“I think The Wilsons have a place near here,” he answered.

“Alright, let’s make sure they’re not hunting for anyone. If they are, we’ll jump on the CB and warn people.”

Jason drifted his skimmer to within a mile of the sensor dropship, which was oblivious to their presence since it was incapable of detecting the craft.

“Look there!” Luke called sharply, pointing to the left.

Jason did so, and to his surprise, there was wreckage strewn out on an overgrown field that looked to have once been a livestock pasture. The craft had hit hard, and from the blackened area around the debris field, there had been a fire. But the grass was starting to regrow in that blackened area, so the wreck itself had to have been a while ago, at least a week. From the look of the debris, it was a dropship, and it had crashed *hard*. Jason brought up his own sensor pod and trained it on the wreckage, then brought up a visual image of the scanner’s findings.

It was a dropship alright, a passenger dropship, one of the smaller ones. It had the Imperial crest on what was left of the nose, which meant that it was a dropship owned by the Marines. Odds were it was a passenger dropship that ferried officers from the planet’s surface to ships in orbit above. Skimmers could also do that, but the military vessels exclusively used dropships for it, since they were more heavily armored. Jason used the touch screen to survey the wreckage, and couldn’t see any clear-cut evidence that it had either crashed or been shot down. It had burst into flames when it crashed, but Jason couldn’t really see how, unless drive plasma conduit in the engine systems ruptured, which would spray metaphased plasma all over the place until the PPG and the dropship’s power plant finally went offline. Metaphased plasma was safe at room temperatures, but *safe* was a relative concept, since it could easily set fire to grass or wood if it was exposed to a ruptured conduit.

“I wonder what happened to it,” Luke said.

“I’m not sure, but it doesn’t add up,” Jason replied. “I can’t tell if it crashed or shot down, but why haven’t they come to collect the wreckage yet? It’s an Imperial dropship, they wouldn’t just leave it here. And it’s been here for a while. The grass around the debris is starting to grow back, see? But why would they have only *one* sensor dropship here surveying the area? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Maybe they’re getting ready to come get the debris, and they sent the sensor ship out to look around first,” Luke speculated.

“That’s possible, but why did they wait so long? That’s the part that doesn’t make sense. That wreck’s a week old, maybe more, but they left it out here.”

“Maybe they were seeing who might come to look at it,” Luke grunted. “Left it as bait.”

“It’s not good bait if they have a pod ship sitting over it,” Jason said.

“Yeah, but it’s dark out, and they don’t make much sound. You’d have trouble seeing it from the ground.”

“I don’t know, maybe. It doesn’t make much sense though. You can hear them if they’re close enough, someone on the ground would—“

He reacted violently, which caused the entire skimmer to lurch to port, when the faint sense of a familiar mind reached him.

It was *Jyslin!*

He knew exactly where she was, but it confused him. She was out here! She was about twenty miles due east of him, and she was in pain and afraid.

What had happened? Why was she out here? It didn’t make any sense? Was *she* the one in that dropship that was wrecked out here?

“Jason? You okay? What’s wrong?” Luke asked in surprise, his hand darting towards the master control, but pulling back when Jason righted the skimmer.

“Quiet!” Jason snapped as he centered himself. “Take over!”

Luke hastily grabbed the controls as Jason let go of them, putting his fingers to his temples and focused his attention inward. With that dropship in the area, that put other telepaths out in the region, so he had to be careful. “Take us that way,” he ordered, pointing to the east. “Now!”

Jyslin! he sent, putting both tremendous power behind his mental call, and also tight focus, a laserbeam of a sending that would only go in one direction, and that was towards Jyslin. *Jyslin! JYSLIN!*

Jason? came a weak reply. *Oh, thank the Trinity. I’m hurt, I need you to find me.*

What happened?

I couldn’t live without you, came a frenzied yet utterly sincere response. *I couldn’t be apart from you anymore.*

Jason couldn’t say anything to that. *Are you alright? I’m in my skimmer, we’re coming to you, but there’s a sensor dropship nearby. Can we pick you up? Can I land near you?*

I, I think so, I’m in a small cave. You’ll have to come get me, love, I can’t walk very well. I think I broke my ankle.

What happened?

Remind me to let you do the flying from now on, she sent back ruefully.

“What is it, Jason?”

“It’s *Jyslin*,” he answered intensely. “She was in that dropship.”

“Jyslin? Here?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” he answered. “We’re getting close, slow down a little.”

Luke brought the skimmer over a sharp hill with a meadow on the south side, which was directly over where he could sense Jyslin. “Where’s that dropship?” he asked, looking at the scope.

“Looks like it’s about fifteen miles northwest of us,” Luke said. “Want me to set her down?”

“Yeah, right there. Jys says she can’t walk, we have to go get her.”

“Got it, lowering landing skids.”

Jason was out of the skimmer before it even fully settled on the ground, using his sense of Jyslin to lead him straight to her. His mind swam with both elation and confusion. Why would she risk coming out here? She didn’t even know where he was! Why do it now, when she could have come earlier? And what hell would her family and Lorna have to pay for her desertion?

He saw her, and his heart soared. She was standing with one foot raised at the mouth of a narrow, jagged cave entrance about ten feet up a jagged rock face, leaning against the side of her tiny cave.

How she had gotten up there with a broken ankle was a mystery, but she had. She was dressed in a white jumpsuit of some kind that was absolutely filthy and had some burn marks on it, with the left shoulder torn and exposing the blue skin of her upper arm. Her face looked gaunt and pale, and she had streaks of dirt on her forehead and cheeks. Her auburn hair was dirty, stained, and matted. She looked a fright and was dirtier than he'd ever seen her, but at that moment, she had never looked more beautiful to him. He scrambled up the rocks and embraced her without a sound, as she clung to him, her arms trembling, as her mind opened to him and shared the entirety of the last few weeks with him in a fleeting instant, an act that drained what little strength she had and left her weak as a kitten, forcing her to grab onto him and hold on just to keep from falling over.

It was his visit that had triggered it. She had been crushed when she thought he was dead, heavily depressed, but then she found out he was alive, and that information made her realize that she would rather live with him as an outlaw than continue to live apart from him. So, after long days of worrying and stressing and furious debate with herself, she had deserted from the Marines. It was that simple. She wanted to be with him, and she wanted to be with him so desperately that she was willing to throw her entire future away...in her mind, a future without him was no future at all. She set out in her car at first, but she was picked up outside of Lynchburg about six days ago. They held her in the brig overnight, but then, when they were taking her back to Washington, she escaped and stole the dropship in which they were going to transport her. Unlike Jason, she was not a pilot, and managed to get that far before she crashed, which was five days ago. She broke her ankle in the crash, and she considered it a miracle that that was the only injury she sustained. She used a cargo loader like a skateboard, riding the flat antigrav unit used to load heavy loads to get far away from the crash site, but it had broken down not far from her cave. She carried it with her while she hunted for a cave, where the earth overhead would help hide her from sensors, using it as a crutch until she found the cave where he found her. She had been hiding since then, waiting for her ankle to heal so she could continue on foot. She really had no idea where he was, but she had this idea that if she found squatters near Chesapeake, they might know where he'd gone.

"You little fool," Jason whispered in her ear, running his fingers through her glorious auburn hair.

I just couldn't go on without you, she told him. You told me before that you were willing to risk your life for something you believe in, my love. Jason, I believe in you, and I'll stand right beside you and take the same risks. As long as we're together, I don't care where we are or what we're doing. You mean everything to me. I'm just sorry it took so long and took me thinking you were dead to finally understand that. She pushed away enough to look up into his eyes. *You told me before that until I left the Marines, you wouldn't accept me. Well, I've given them my resignation,* she sent with weary impishness. *Is there still a place for me with you?*

It's the only place I've wanted you to be, he sent in reply, then he leaned down and kissed her, a kiss he'd waited months to deliver.

"Jayce, we'd better get going," Luke called from below.

Jason opened his eyes and gave his pupil a truly ugly look, one that was hidden by the darkness. "He's right, there's a sensor pod dropship cruising the area," he told Jyslin aloud.

"It's been looking for me for two days," she answered as she looped her arm around his shoulder. "I think they spotted me on a surveillance camera when I crashed and left the wreck, and then the dropship showed up. I think they know I can't walk. It's passed over my cave three times in the last two days. Its sensors can't penetrate down into this cave, and they'll never find me with talent, so they've just been biding their time, waiting me out."

"Well, they can just keep on looking," Jason said as he beckoned to Luke. The big man came up to the edge of the rock face, and then Jason physically lowered Jyslin down to him, kneeling down and letting her slide down the rock as she kept hold of him with the arm around his shoulder. He grabbed her by her leg, then hauled her in gently as Jason lowered her by her hand, until he was holding her cradled before him.

"Hi," Jyslin said to him with a light smile. "I'm Jyslin."

"Begging your pardon for not putting you down, ma'am, but you shouldn't be putting any weight on that leg," he told her. "My name's Luke. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"Oh, he talks about me, does he?" she asked, giving Jason a loving look as he scrambled down the rocks.

"Only about every day," he answered.

"Well, it's good to know a girl isn't being forgotten," she laughed as Jason got back down, then collected her up from Luke.

"Never that," he told her, looking into her eyes. "Let's get her back to Charleston, Luke."

"Yeah. I just hope it's not that bad."

"It's bad enough," she sighed as Jason rushed her back to his skimmer. She looked at it curiously as they approached the stairs. "Did you paint it? I've never seen a black paint that...black. It's like it swallows the light."

"That's exactly what it does, what you're looking at is the visible effect of the cloaking screen," he answered as he rushed her up the stairs and into the cabin. "Luke, get us the hell out of here," he ordered as he set her down in the chair behind the pilot's seat. Luke squeezed past in the narrow cabin and sat down, then closed the hatch, raised the stairs, and pulled the ship into the air. Instead of sitting in the copilot's chair, he sat instead in the seat beside hers, and kept hold of her hand. They remained seated until Luke had them at a level altitude, flying back towards Charleston on a northwestern course after circling *very* wide of the patrolling dropship. Once they were level, Jason unbuckled himself and knelt by Jyslin's chair, and immediately started working on getting her boot off.

"How did you get out here, Miss Jyslin?" Luke asked.

"It's a long story," she answered. She put her hand on Jason's neck, letting her touch on him amplify her telepathic connection to him and allow her to send despite her exhausted state. In a brief moment, Jason and Jyslin traded vast amounts of information. Jyslin relayed to him much of what her life had been like since moving to Washington, which she didn't think really mattered to anyone but him, and she picked up from him what he'd been doing since he left her, which surprised her. "You've been busy, I see," she chuckled.

"Pardon?" Luke asked, glancing back at them.

"I was talking to Jason," she told him. "We're catching up."

"Oh," Luke said with a nod as he looked quite deliberately at the bare hand on Jason's neck, then turned back to his task, as Jyslin completed hers.

"They know about Tim too?" she asked in surprise.

He nodded. "He felt it best that everyone know, after what happened in Chesapeake. We didn't want any secrets, with everyone so tense."

"I'm sorry that happened, love," she told him sincerely.

"Thank you," he said with a sigh, as she hissed in pain when he pulled her boot off. Her ankle was badly swollen and had some bruising on the inside. She winced repeatedly as his fingers tested the swollen area. "I don't think it's broken, but you did something pretty serious to it," he told her. "It shouldn't still be swollen after this long."

"Well, the swelling had been going down, but I twisted it again yesterday, when I climbed back up to the cave after looking for food. Speaking of food, you wouldn't happen to have anything in the skimmer, would you? I'm starving."

"I'm sorry, hon, but no," he answered. "I don't even have any water. I think I should put an emergency pack in here, though, in case *we* crash some day. At least then we'd have some food and water."

"Well, I think I can last until we get to where we're going," she assured him.

"Begging your pardon, but you don't have to talk just to make me feel comfortable, Miss Jyslin," Luke told her. "I won't be offended if you want to talk to him the other way."

Jyslin laughed. "I'm not talking for your benefit, Luke," she told him. "I'm exhausted, and using talent is more effort than talking. Right now, it's easier to talk."

"But you were, uh," he said, then trailed off as he tried to find words.

"Yes, but it wore me out," she said, giving Jason a glorious smile. "After I eat and get some sleep, you won't hear my voice very much when I'm with him. We don't speak aloud very often."

"Ah. Well, we'll be landing in about ten minutes, ma'am. We'll have you sitting in a bed with a tray of food in front of you in fifteen."

"I hope there's a bath in there somewhere," she said. "Five days in this prison suit doesn't do very much for the way I smell."

"We can manage that," Jason told her, sitting down again and taking her hand.

She was too tired to send anymore, but the smile on her dirty face was all the communication he needed.

Symone was the first one to sense it. As Luke dropped the skimmer under the hologram, her tentative sendings reached them. *Jason? Is that Jyslin? Trelle's garland, did you go get Jyslin?*

She decided to come get us, Jason replied. *She's injured, Symone. Can you get some food together and get a bath going? She needs both.*

Hurt? What happened?

She hurt her ankle.

Then why isn't she sending?

Because she's exhausted, Jyslin answered wryly.

Jyslin! It's great to hear from you! I'll get started on that food right now! Tim sent.

It's good to hear you, Tim, Jyslin responded.

Don't push her, Jason chided sharply. *We're about to land. You can come talk to her, but stop sending, you're just tempting her.*

She gave him an amused look.

"Mister Jason, have you thought about what you're going to tell Kate?"

Jason laughed. "Luke, that's not going to be a problem at all. Kate's not *really* my girlfriend."

"But she lives with you."

"Yeah, but not for the reason we let everyone believe," he answered honestly. "I'll explain it later."

Luke landed the skimmer lightly, then they both carried her out into the spring night. Symone and Tim were there to greet them. Symone gave her a strong hug, Tim took her hand in greeting, then they walked her into the mansion and took straight up to Jason's apartment. Luke opened the door for Jason, who carried her in quickly. "Where's Kate?"

"She's not here," he answered. "She's been gone for the last three days. All those times I've said she wasn't feeling well, or was sick, she's actually been gone."

"Gone? What's she doing?"

"Something very important," he answered. "We'll go into that later, Luke."

"Yes, I'm dying to hear about this," Jyslin said, giving him a smile, but it was somewhat disingenuous given that she already knew all about Kiaari.

Luke left them when he realized they were going to take off Jyslin's filthy jumpsuit, which was handled with quick efficiency. "When will Kate get back?" Jyslin asked as she started ravenously eating the bowl of venison stew that Tim had brought from the kitchen. Jason was kneeling at the foot of the chair they had her in, inspecting her ankle once again. It was easier to see now that he had better light and they weren't in something that moved.

"Soon, I hope," Jason answered. "She's the one that'll be able to do something about your ankle. Until she gets back, all we can really do is bandage it up and make sure you stay off of it."

"Food never tasted so good," she sighed, spooning it into her mouth in rapid strokes. *How does it look?*

The same as it did the last time I looked at it, Jason told her tersely.

Then why are you looking at it again? she asked with a sly smile.

Tim laughed aloud, and Symone had to suppress a snicker.

“Because I didn’t get a chance to inspect it as well as I wanted,” he answered audibly. “I can’t tell if anything’s broken or not.”

“We can use the scanner down in the shop like an x-ray,” Tim offered.

“That’s a good idea,” Jason agreed.

“I’ll go get it,” Tim offered. “Want me to bring anything else?”

“Three more bowls of this would be nice,” Jyslin told him, holding the bowl out where he could see it. “I haven’t eaten for three days.”

“I’ll bring a tray,” he said as he scurried from the room.

Make it a big one! she sent after him.

Tim’s idea to use a scanner as an x-ray was effective. The two of them inspected Jyslin’s ankle using it while she ate, and found no bone damage in her ankle. Thankfully, she had no broken bones or torn ligaments, but her ankle had obviously been severely sprained. *It happened during the crash,* she sent as she ate from a tray of assorted bread, vegetables, and venison. *My foot got trapped between those pedals on the floor when I hit the ground. So, my foot stayed while the rest of me went flying.*

I think you’ll recover well enough, Jason sent. *I don’t see any breaks or tears. A couple of weeks wearing a bandage without putting any weight on it should do the trick.*

Good. Now, you’ve checked my foot, and I’ve eaten as much as I can without getting sick, so carry me to the nearest bathtub.

While Jyslin bathed, Tim and Symone sat in the living room, and Jason sat on a stool right by her bathtub, unwilling to leave her side. Jyslin’s sending became noticeably stronger and stronger as she bathed, as the energy of the food got into her system, and she spent that time telling Tim and Symone all that had happened to her since they’d last seen each other. She finished up her story about the same time she finished her bath, telling them about Jason’s brief approach close enough for her to know he was alive, and her ultimate decision to abandon her life as a Marine and come join them. *All this time, I secretly hoped that he’d come back,* she sent honestly. *But then Chesapeake exploded, and I thought he was dead. When he came to let me know he was alive, I just couldn’t stand it anymore. We belong together, and if he’s serious enough about what he’s doing, then I’ll be the one to bend to the situation. I left the squad a note, and then I left. They tracked me down outside Lynchburg though. I spent a night in the brig, then I escaped when they tried to load me into a dropship to take me back to the base. Jason love, you need to teach me how to fly a dropship,* she sent impishly. *I’m afraid I didn’t learn very well all that time I watched you fly.*

There was a knock on the door out in the living room, and then he heard Luke and Temika’s voices. Temika hadn’t sent a word since Jyslin arrived, and Jason suspected that she was probably a little afraid to do so. She didn’t know Jyslin, and she had been told in the past that she had to keep her talent a secret from the Faey. Jason couldn’t fault her for being cautious, it was the smart thing to do.

Mika, it’s okay to send, Jason sent openly. *Jyslin knows you’re a telepath. She won’t tell anyone.*

Too right, Jyslin sent with amusement. *Who could I tell that didn’t already know?*

Well, Ah didn’t want to take a chance, Temika sent tentatively. *It’s good to finally meet you,* Jyslin.

Well, we’ve never been formally introduced. I’m Jyslin, Temika. I’m Jason’s fiancée.

She’s not wasting any time, Tim sent casually.

No, not at all, Symone answered lightly.

Jason looked into Jyslin’s eyes, and he took her hand. *Fiancée sounds just right to me,* he sent openly.

Those out in the living room heard Jyslin’s excited squeal quite clearly. Jyslin hugged him fiercely, getting his shirt soaking wet, then kissed him deeply. Jyslin’s kiss had never once failed to curl his

toes; she *really* knew how to kiss. “Is Miss Jyslin alright?” Luke asked in concern. “Maybe she fell.”

“She’s fine, Luke,” Symone laughed. “Jason’s in there with her. They just got engaged.”

“Oh, that’s nice. But could someone explain why Kate won’t mind?”

You can tell him some of it, Jason sent.

“Kate’s not really his girlfriend, Luke,” Symone told him. “She’s an agent.”

“An agent? Of what?”

“Think of her as that Jamie Bond guy.”

“James,” Tim corrected.

“Whatever. Jason hired her to do those spy agent things to gather information. She pretends to be his girlfriend so she can live here and they can do all their secret planning without having to explain too much why they’re always together talking. It’s also how she hides how she’s gone all the time. Jason just tells everyone she’s not feeling well. If she didn’t live with someone that knew her secret, people would go looking for her if she vanished for a couple of days, and then her secret would be out.”

Luke seemed to digest that for a moment, then he slowly nodded. “I don’t see the need for them to be all secretive about it, but I can understand why they do it.”

“Trust me, Luke,” Jason said as he carried Jyslin out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, “it’s necessary. I can’t explain why, so you’ll have to trust me.”

“That’s all I need to hear, Mister Jason. If you say to trust you, then I’ll trust you.”

“I appreciate that, Luke,” he said with a nod.

“It’d be nice if you could’ve told *me* some of that,” Tim said, a bit testily.

“We’re telling you now,” Jason told him. “Kate asked me not to tell anyone. I had to tell Symone because Symone had to screen her, and then after Mika got hurt, I had to tell her so Kate could treat her burn. Kate has...some medical training that she wouldn’t have been able to explain away, so it became necessary to tell Mika. But Kate gave me permission to tell people about her when it was needful, and this is one of those needful situations.”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense, I guess.”

“As soon as Kate gets back, she can look at Jyslin’s ankle then?” Luke asked.

“Yeah, so I’m hoping she comes back soon,” Jason nodded as he set Jyslin on the couch, then knelt down and picked up her injured leg. “You got that ace bandage Tim?”

“I put it—hold on, I set it on the endtable,” he said, rushing over the the little table by the door to Jason’s apartment.

Jason bandaged up Jyslin’s ankle, falling back on mimicking how the trainers used to do it back when he played football in college, then patted her calf. “All done,” he told her.

“Thank you, love. I wish I could say it already feels better, but not yet.”

“Just give it time,” he told her. “It’s going to hurt for a few days, then you’ll be walking around before you know it.”

Jason’s panel began to beep. Symone picked it up and carried it over to him, and he pulled it out of sleep mode and saw that there was an incoming call from an unknown number. The panel stopped beeping, then began again. “It’s Kate,” he realized when the panel stopped again quickly, then started once more. She was hanging up and calling back in a specific sequence of timed rings, something she had worked out with him before she left to start gathering information. He set the panel on the coffee table and accepted the call. Her face winked into the main window, and he saw that she was in a phone booth on a busy street, one of the new phone booths that had video. “Jason, I—oh, is that Jyslin?” she asked.

Jason nodded. “She deserted.”

“Well, it’s nice to finally meet you. I guess I’ll have to move out of Jason’s bedroom now,” she grinned.

“I think you’re right about that,” Jyslin said. “So, you’re the mysterious Kate I’ve heard so much about. It’s good to meet you too.”

“Just doing my job,” she said easily. “Jason, I had to call, something important has happened.”
“What is it?”

“My *sister* needs your help,” she said, stressing her word to make him understand that she was talking about Miaari. “She’s going to meet you exactly halfway between where you are now and where you came from, at the bridge they call Speed Trap Overpass.”

“Why does she need my help?”

“That’s something that my sister will have to explain to you,” she answered. “She’s already there, Jason. You need to go there. Now. And you need to do what you’ve always done when you meet my sister. Do you understand?”

“I understand. I’ll start out right now.”

“Thank you, Jason. I’m on my way home now. I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

“We’ll keep breakfast warm for you.”

“Thanks, I’m going to need it. Goodbye.”

She hung up immediately, the screen went blank, and then his panel returned to idle mode now that its task was completed. “What was that about?” Jyslin asked.

“Something serious must have happened,” he said, standing up. “Miaari wouldn’t need to see me in person unless it was *very* serious.”

“Who is Miaari?” Tim asked.

Jason silently kicked himself for slipping and saying Miaari’s name, but the damage had been done. “The woman Kate was talking about,” he answered. “She’s also in Kate’s particular profession, that’s why she called her her sister. If you guys will excuse me, I need to get my armor on.”

“Armor? Why do you need armor?”

“Because Kate told me to wear it,” he answered. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to get ready. Luke, could you go down and get the skimmer ready to go?”

“I’ll get her warmed up for you, Jayce,” Luke nodded, then he rushed off.

Jayce, what’s going on? Tim sent as Jason went into his bedroom and started undressing.

I don’t know, but if Kate had to call me, then it’s very serious, he answered.

Why do you have to wear armor? Tim pressed.

I’m not sure, but Kate told me to wear it, and I trust her judgment.

Jason was completely mystified by why Miaari would need to see him, but he would go see her. He trusted her explicitly, as much as he trusted Jyslin or Symone, and he was sure that this wasn’t a trap. He just couldn’t fathom why she would need to speak with him in person. He stewed over it in vain as he armored up, then came out of his bedroom in his black armor and holding his helmet. “I’ll have to go alone,” he told them. “I always have before. I’m not sure what Miaari needs, so I’m not sure when I’ll be back.”

You be very careful, Jason, Temika sent urgently.

I’ll be safe enough, he sent in reply. *Miaari would never hurt me. I trust her.*

They may have bought her off.

Miaari? Never, he scoffed mentally. *Trust me. Miaari could never be bribed.*

Jason cut off Temika’s impending sending with a wave of his hand, and then leaned down and kissed Jyslin on the cheek. “I’m sorry to run off like this, hon,” he told her. “We just got back together, and here I am running off before we even have a chance to catch up.”

It’s alright, love. I know that this is important. Just get it done and come home, okay?

I’ll do my best, he assured her, kissing her again.

Jason was over the abandoned city of Hurricane in five minutes after getting into the skimmer, and still his mind raced as he tried to comprehend what Miaari would possibly need to see him for, but he knew that the only way to find out was to go down and talk to her. The bridge that Kiaari had mentioned was an overpass over the old Interstate, a bridge that, back before the subjugation, was rather notorious for being one of the biggest speed traps in all of West Virginia. It was so notorious

that even the squatters that moved in after the subjugation knew about the reputation of this place, from the people who had remained behind when everyone was moved out. That was how he knew exactly where to go, and he saw a small dropship sitting under that bridge, the vehicle in which Miaari had come to see him. Jason descended in his skimmer and then inched it under the bridge beside the dropship, and saw that there was no activity, only an open hatch.

An invitation.

Jason swept the area with his talent, seeking out the presence of minds. Much to his surprise, Miaari was not only there, but she was not alone. Meya, Myra, Kumi, Fure, and three minds he did not know were in that dropship, and that confused him even more. Why was Kumi here with her entourage? She was in her conscription, working as an aide for some general or admiral or beaucrocat or something like that. Was she the one that needed to see him? If so, why the subterfuge, when she could have just called him? She knew his number. It was very dangerous for her to come here, and that made her act even less sensical.

They were not sending. There was dead silence in that dropship, at least from a telepathic point of view, and that too seemed odd.

Jason opened the hatch, and extended the arm guns on his armor, just in case. There was something not right about this situation, and he didn't want to walk into that dropship without being ready.

He stepped up to the hatch, and saw Miaari standing in the hatch of the dropship across from him, in her natural shape. She looked over at him with her luminous eyes, and only nodded and beckoned him to come to her with a hand.

Jason stepped down the steps of his skimmer, walked the fifteen feet between the two ships, and then started up the stairs of the dropship. Miaari continued to stand where she was, watching him, her expression neutral, but her eyes did notice the extended MPACs on his forearms. "Remain quiet, and do not send," she told him in a low whisper. "Enter."

Jason did so, stepping into the dropship. He entered a passenger dropship, its rear area converted into a somewhat lavish living space, the conveyance of a rich noble who wanted to travel from space to ground in comfort. It was decorated with blue carpet, white cloth couches facing one another over a glass coffee table, and with intricate designs painted onto the walls. Meya and Myra stood behind one of those couches, wearing nothing but simple white wraps, almost like robes, and Fure stood to one side, wearing a black jumpsuit of some kind. Three Faey were seated with their backs to him, two females and a male, and Kumi was laying on the couch facing him.

She was injured.

Her middle was wrapped in Faey bio-reactive bandaging, treated to accelerate healing, and she had a venting tube affixed to her nose and an IV tube in her arm, feeding some kind of cloudy bluish fluid into her bloodstream. She was laying on the couch, eyes closed, and her breathing was shallow but steady.

"Kumi!" Jason gasped, but Miaari put a finger to her muzzle, a reminder for him to remain quiet. "Miaari, what happened?"

"She got too close to the truth someone wanted to remain secret," she answered. "Someone tried to assassinate her. She was shot by an MPAC, shot from behind just outside the office where she works."

"My God," Jason breathed.

"It goes beyond that. Twice, assassins tried to enter her hospital room and finish what was started. Then, after she was moved to Arcturi manner, another assassin managed to evade the manor's security and breach the compound. I caught him just outside Kumi's room. They were well prepared. The assassins all had no knowledge of who hired them, only a target, and they were armed with all the information they needed to bypass the security of every facility where Kumi was being kept. The one I caught had the passcodes to the manor, something no one outside of Trillane would have.

"Jason, someone in House Trillane wants Kumi dead," Miaari said grimly. "Whoever this is, she has major resources at her disposal, so much so that she can hire professional, high-priced assassins.

Simply put, there is no safe place for her, except here, with you. I am asking you as a personal favor to take her in and watch over her.”

“Kumi found the slavers,” Jason whispered. “And they found out she was looking for them.”

“She did not find them, but clearly she asked the wrong question to the wrong person,” Miaari told him. “Word got back to them, and now they are trying to kill her.”

“Poor Kumi,” Jason sighed. “Is she going to be alright?”

“With rest and time, she will recover,” one of the Faey Jason did not know whispered in reply, turning around in her seat. She was a petite little Faey with a heart-shaped face and short, blue-white hair that was curly and somewhat wild.

Jason looked at Miaari. “I, Miaari, our doctor was killed in the explosion in Chesapeake,” he told her. “We don’t have anyone—“

“Don’t worry about that, sir,” the same woman answered. “Me and my two companions here are doctors. We’ll be going with you to tend to our patient, and whatever other injuries you or your people may have.”

Jason looked to Miaari, and then he quite deliberately reached up and removed his helmet. She reached over and put her hand on his neck, and in that touch she conveyed to him both her towering concern for Kumi, who was her best friend, and her assurance that anyone who went with him was absolutely trustworthy, and would not in any way endanger him or his people. She also communicated to him that through Kiaari, she was fully aware of what he was doing, and that she would personally vouch that no Faey in that dropship would threaten his plans in any way.

It really wasn’t a hard choice to make. Miaari knew everything about him, and it was then that he understood Kiaari’s blind trust in her sister. Jason would trust Miaari because he had no reason *not* to trust Miaari. Besides, Jason owed Kumi such a huge debt, it would have been a sin not to give her aid in her time of need when she had done so much for him.

“Kumi is my friend,” he whispered. “Of course I won’t turn her away, Miaari. As long as someone’s there who can help her recover, she’s welcome to stay with us.”

“All before you save me will be going with you,” Miaari told him. “As I am sure they will tell you, now their lives are in just as much danger. The noble within Trillane trying to kill Kumi will try to kill them as well, just in case she passed along any information to them. Meya, Myra, and Fure will continue their tasks in her household as before. The three Faey you do not know are doctors, Jason. Yohne, Songa, and Rann will serve both Kumi and you as physicians. Songa and Rann have agreed to remain behind after the others leave to serve your people as doctors for your people.”

“What happened to that little Makati?”

“He is dead,” she answered in hushed tones. “The assassin that invaded Arcturi Manor was not there *only* to kill Kumi. He killed four of Kumi’s personal servants before reaching her door. That is why the others are here. If they return to Draconis, they will be targeted for assassination.”

Meya and Myra both nodded vigorously, their expressions grim and a little nervous and worried. Whatever had happened on Draconis, it had scared the twins badly.

“Well, this is going to be interesting,” Jason said quietly. “Miaari, earlier tonight, I picked up Jyslin not far from where I live. She deserted. And now I’m taking in Kumi and more Faey. I think my people are going to think I’m a maniac.”

“With luck, Jason, they will not be burdening you for long,” she told him. “Whoever tried to kill Kumi has riled me, and now I’m going to find who did it and deal with her. If all goes well, Kumi will be returning home after she recovers from her injury, and the others will be leaving with her, except for Songa and Rann. They’ll be staying with you for as long as you have need of them.”

“Is that entirely wise?”

“They have my confidence,” she said simply. “They will not threaten your security or your plans. They will help you in any way they can. And with what is coming, Jason, you will *need* a doctor. Songa and Rann will be those doctors.”

“Well, if you trust them, then I guess it’s alright.”

“Very well, now that that’s all settled, let’s get to work,” Miaari said. “There are supplies and equipment we need to load into your skimmer, Jason, then we must get Kumi aboard and on her way.”

“Before we do that,” Jason said, looking at the Faey before him, “there’s something you need to know about me, and some of the people you’re going to meet. And it’s something that you must *never* reveal, to anyone, *ever*.”

“We already know you have talent, Jason,” Meya told him with a strained, nervous smile. “And we already know that that boy from your school that we know has talent is with you. Miaari has already sworn us to silence on the matter.”

The three doctors all nodded in agreement.

“They will never reveal any secrets they may learn while with your people, Jason,” Miaari told him. “On that, you have my word.”

“Alright. If you know the truth, then understand this, which is the one rule you will *not* break. You will not probe, scan, or even eavesdrop on *anyone* in Charleston, and I mean *no one*. The people there trust us as much as they do because they know that we respect their privacy. If you have a problem with this, then just totally close your mind, because if I even *suspect* that one of you is using your talent to listen to the thoughts of the people in the community, I won’t even bother to call Miaari to come pick you up. I’ll just toss you out. Is that understood?”

They all nodded, though they looked a bit unsettled with his adamant proclamation.

“Good. The other part of that is you will *not* press or push on the other human telepaths. We are *not* Faey, and the others aren’t as well trained or as comfortable in their talent as you are. Tim and Temika aren’t going to be too thrilled with you being there, and Temika especially is going to be very wary around you. Unless they send privately to you, do *not* send privately to them. Open sendings are fine, that’s just public chatter, but don’t try to send to them privately. Is this understood?”

They nodded once again.

“Then that’s good enough for me,” Jason whispered with a nod. “Alright, let’s get going.”

With the help of the Faey, Jason loaded a large amount of medical supplies and equipment into the cargo hold of his skimmer. They brought everything they needed to treat Kumi, even the supplies they’d need for surgery if it was necessary, and some additional equipment that Miaari told him Songa had demanded to have if she was to serve as Charleston’s primary doctor. The twins’ armor and weapons were in those supplies, as well as armor that looked to belong to Kumi, and one more suit that Miaari told him was made for Songa and Rann. Given that Jason might soon be at war with Trillane, sending them to his people with their own armor was only wise. There was so much equipment that Jason ran out of room in the hold, and was forced to stack it in seats in the cabin...and there was still too much. He told the Faey that they were going to be either sitting on or holding boxes of supplies on the trip back to Charleston.

Then came the issue of Kumi. She was unconscious, being held in a medically-induced coma so she would heal faster and not move around...and that was absolutely necessary. The MPAC blast to her back had almost torn her in half at the waist, and it had taken a tremendous amount of work by a large team of doctors and surgeons to save her life. Given the drastic amount of reconstructive surgery they had been forced to do on her, she had to remain absolutely motionless to give those reconstructed areas a chance to heal. Moving her wasn’t going to be a problem, but the problem came from the fact that there was no place to lay her flat in his skimmer. Fure and Jason both came up with the idea of slinging a board over two seats in the cabin at the same time, which meant that with all the equipment in the cabin and Kumi taking up two of the eight seats, the only people who were really going to be sitting in the cockpit were Jason and whoever sat in the copilot’s chair. Everyone else would have to stand in the center aisle.

It was done with gentle care. She was laying atop a stretcher on the couch, so Jason and Miaari picked up that stretcher and slowly, carefully, and methodically navigated the dropship cabin and

moved her out and into his skimmer. She was laid across the seats behind the cockpit chairs, and Jason literally slid under her stretcher to get to the controls. Miaari leaned over Kumi and looked at him as he got the skimmer ready to take off. "I'm sorry to impose on you like this, my friend," she told him, "but I truly could not think of anywhere safer to bring her."

"It's alright, Miaari," he told her. "I'll do everything I can to keep her safe. Are you going to be alright? Whoever did this must know that you're going to come looking for her. It's going to be dangerous."

"Yes, it seems that whoever it is has already taken certain steps, because it's well known that I am Kumi's friend, and they know what it means when a Kimdori calls you *friend*. But that's not going to save them. I *will* find out who did this, and then the wrath of the Kimdori will be visited upon them all."

"All I can say is good luck, and be careful, Miaari," he told her in a sober whisper.

"If you need anything, my sister can pass the word. We keep in regular contact."

"I think we'll be alright."

Miaari leaned well down and nuzzled the side of his neck with her muzzle. Her nose was decidedly cold. "I knew I could depend on you, friend Jason."

"I'll always be here for you when you need me, Miaari. I owe you too much to do anything else."

"Remember that those coming with you know that they are to obey you. You are in command."

"It's good you made that point."

"I was abundantly clear on the matter."

"Miaari, thanks."

"For what?"

"For calling me *friend*."

She licked the side of his neck. "A Kimdori knows who is worthy of that title," she whispered in his ear. "Now you must go. I must get the dropship back into space before the sensors again cover this area."

"Alright. Good luck, Miaari, and good hunting."

"Take good care of Kumi."

"We will."

Miaari quickly said her goodbyes to the others, put a single, gentle hand on Kumi's shoulder as she looked down on the young Faey with concern, then quickly and silently left the skimmer. Jason closed the hatch and looked back at the Faey crowded in behind the stretcher. God, this was going to be a mess, but he really couldn't see any other way around it. Kumi was in desperate need of him, and he would not deny her. And he liked Meya and Myra too much to deny them sanctuary with him. Fure, well, he was neutral on the idea of Fure, but given that he was bringing the others, he had no reason to say no to bringing Fure so long as Miaari vouched for him. And since Kumi was in such bad condition, she needed the doctors that Miaari had sent with them, doctors that would ensure she recovered, and doctors that absolutely had to be there if she was going to survive.

In one night, Jason had been reunited with Jyslin, and now he was taking in a fugitive Kumi and her entourage.

What a mess.

Jyslin, the community could comprehend. After all, she had been his girlfriend, and after what happened in Chesapeake, they could understand her powerful motivation to seek him out, so her coming into Charleston made sense. But Kumi was much more abstract, much less clear, and her arrival with a *pack* of untrustworthy Faey had put many within the community on edge.

In just one night, Jason's entire life was turned upside down. He was overjoyed and ecstatic that Jyslin had come to Charleston, that they were finally together again. But before he could even properly welcome her, to have the chance to spend quiet, private time with her and renew the bonds that held

them together, now there were *more* Faey in Charleston, Faey that were much more problematic than Jyslin.

And it wasn't that they were out in the city causing mischief, either. All of them had been restricted to the mansion by personal command from Jason, told not to leave the building for any reason. Jason had had Kumi put in a bedroom on the second floor, where the doctors set up all their medical equipment, put Kumi in a special bed they assembled from parts they brought with them, and began a constant vigil at her bedside. There would be one doctor in Kumi's room at all times, monitoring her condition, rotating in shifts. Meya, Myra, and Fure would also attend Kumi in shifts, one in her room at all times, providing a familiar, comforting presence that would help their noble employer in more esoteric ways than simple medicine.

It was impossible to hide the arrival of these strange Faey, because people were still awake at two in the morning, when Jason returned, because of the news and the gossip of the arrival of Jyslin. Jason's departure in his skimmer *again* was noticed by everyone in town, and so everyone saw it when he returned to the city with unknown Faey, one of which who had to be removed from his skimmer on a stretcher. Luke was the one who disseminated the basics about the newcomers. He told them that the wounded Faey was *the* Kumi, the one who had basically sold Jason all the Faey equipment they now enjoyed, and that she'd been brought here to hide her from the same enemies that Jason was determined to stop, who were engaging in human slavery.

It was that unfamiliarity, Jason knew. Jyslin, they didn't know, but stories of her gave the people in the community at least an abstract sense of familiarity with her. They'd heard him talk about Jyslin, they knew the history, so there was something there they could base opinions upon. They knew that Jyslin's loyalty to Jason would not be in question. And in a way, Kumi too wasn't much of an issue, since Kumi too was a Faey of which Jason had spoken in the past, a woman that had some modicum of familiarity to the people of Charleston due to her history with their leader. It was the others that was the problem. They were totally unknown, mysterious, and they were *Faey*. They were the very people that most of them had fled into the wildlands to avoid, and now they were out here, with them, holed up in the governor's mansion, literally within spitting distance of Jason. There wasn't any overt acts of aggression, but Jason didn't need to use talent on them to see that they were nervous and a little afraid.

Jason knew that there was work to be done to get things settled down, but it was going to have to wait, because he had something much more important to do...and that was sleep with his future wife.

It certainly had been neither tentative nor strange. It had almost felt as if there had been no time since the last time they had made love, and the act of joining mind and body both had smoothed away long months of yearning and regret. It was intimate, romantic, and everything that Jason had remembered, despite having to be careful not to injure Jyslin's ankle further.

Jyslin certainly seemed to take the sudden arrival of Kumi rather well. She understood Kumi's desperate plight, and given everything that Kumi had done for Jason, she considered it only proper that Jason return the favor. They talked about it the next morning, after they woke up, but before they got out of bed, simply enjoying the state of being together, enjoying the simple pleasure of lingering in bed after waking.

I think I'm gonna have to do quite a bit of defusing today, Jason told her, utilizing the fact that they were touching to send so only she could hear. The doctors had already warned him that there couldn't be any unnecessary or excessive sending in Kumi's proximity, that the mental activity of receiving sending might stir her from her induced coma. Jason had warned Tim, Temika, and Symone, and so the house had become a no-sending zone. *It's too much too fast, I think. Some people are already nervous.*

I'll say it was too fast. Before we could even spend a single moment of time alone together, you bring back more Faey, one of which might be a competitor for you.

As if, he sent with scathing overtones, which made her laugh aloud. *I spent too much time waiting for you to even think of looking at another woman.*

You're such a sweetheart, she said, her glowing love and contentment flowing through their communion. You think she'll be alright?

Kumi? She'll be alright, she has three doctors watching her. From what Meya and Myra told me, she took a hard hit, but the blast hit her squarely in the spine.

Ouch.

Yeah, ouch, but that actually saved her life. The plasma charge hit bone, so there wasn't as much flash-boiling and the explosive decompression that comes with it. One of those doctors told me that if it had hit her just a hair to the right or left, it would have blown her in half and she'd have been dead. The MPAC took a huge piece out of her back and sent bone shrapnel flying all over her insides, but she survived. I'm more worried about how the others are going to take them being here, though. Some of them are alright with Symone because she's Symone, but don't really trust Faey. I'll have to do some work getting them to accept you and the others. It's already a shock right after Chesapeake, and then finding out about the human telepaths. I'm not sure how they're going to take you and the others.

I'm sure they'll be alright, love. At least with me, they'll know they have someone who's put her hand in with them, to the end. This is where I belong. This is where I've belonged all along, I was just too blind to see it.

I don't blame you, Jys. I never did. You had a life, family, friends, and it wasn't my place to ask you to give it up over a suicide mission.

Without you, I had no life, she sent with total honesty. I would rather have six hours with you than have a lifetime without you.

I hope to give you more than that, Jyslin, he replied. The odds are stacked against us, but someone has to try. I wish it wasn't me, but here we are. I have to do my best. Odds are, we won't live to see next year.

Then it will be the happiest year of my life, she told him, caressing his face and looking down into his eyes. There's just one thing I want from you, Jason.

What is that?

That if we have any chance at all, that we have a Faey ceremony as well as a human one. It's going to be hard finding a Templar on Earth, though.

I'm not comfortable with the idea of being married in a religion I don't follow, Jyslin, he sent honestly. I'm not all that religious, but I am a methodist, and being married by a priest of another faith is kinda blasphemous. It's putting another god before the one I believe in, and that's a major sin.

It has nothing to do with the Trinity, Jason, she told him. The Templar can conduct a secular ceremony, because Templars have that legal power. Just because a Templar conducts a non-religious ceremony doesn't make any less legally binding.

Jyslin. We're fugitives, and you're talking about the legality of a ceremony? he sent with an audible laugh.

It's for me, not for the law, she sent primly. That way, in my own mind, I'll always know that I was married by a Templar, and I'll feel like we're married.

Well, I guess when you say it like that, it makes sense, he acquiesced. And I don't see anything wrong with it, if the Templar's just gonna act like a justice of the peace. I'm not sure if we'll ever have a chance to find a Templar, but if we can, then we can have a Faey ceremony.

That's fine, love, I know it won't be easy. Just your approval is enough to make me happy, she assured him, snuggling down with him. Trelle's garland, I've missed this.

Me too.

So, what's going to be first?

First, you go down to see one of those doctors, he answered. I already told them about your ankle, and they brought a whole bloody Faey hospital's worth of supplies and equipment along with them. There was so much of it nobody had anywhere to sit down in the skimmer except me. I was told to bring you down as soon as you're up.

Well, let's go take care of that, then, she told him.

And they did. After dressing, Jason carried Jyslin down to the second floor, which had been pretty much well taken over by Kumi's people. Kumi was there, and the other Faey had taken empty bedrooms on the floor, and one of the large conference rooms had been filled with the extra supplies. From there, though, they were sent down to the first floor, where they found two of the doctors, the blue-haired woman and the male, Luke, and a few townsfolk busily setting up assorted medical equipment. An examination table had already been built and set near one corner.

"Ah, our first patient," the woman, Songa, said in Faey with a light smile. "Take her over there, if you would, one of us will be with you as soon as we get this thing going."

"Pardon?" Luke asked.

"Oh, excuse me," she said in fluent, perfect English. "I was telling Jason to carry our patient to the examination table."

Jason set Jyslin down on the table, and kept hold of her hand as they watched the two Faey doctors, but what was more important, watched the humans helping them. They all seemed a bit unsettled with being around the two Faey, but the two doctors seemed to understand that, and were treating them with the utmost respect, always careful to ask for help and not to demand it, and being personable without being overly chatty. The two doctors knew what they were doing, Jason saw, and not just from a medical standpoint. Both of them knew how to set up and use their equipment, the male especially, who seemed to be assembling units with a practiced efficiency that hinted that he knew his way around equipment.

Once they were done, the male approached them and did something Jason had never seen before; the male *bowed*. "I'm Doctor Rann. If you're ready, we can examine that ankle now," he said in Faey.

"Surely," Jyslin said, scooting a bit on the padded table and raising her leg as he knelt by the table.

The male unwrapped the bandage Jason had put on her leg, and then commenced with the examination. Much to Jason's surprise, the male inspected her leg first the way Northwood would have done, with his fingers and his eyes. After probing here and there with his long, delicate fingers, he took up a small little device and swept it back and forth over Jyslin's ankle slowly. "There's no cruciate damage," he announced. "Just a case of stressed ligaments. A bad sprain," he said with a surprisingly disarming smile. "I can help with that somewhat, but it's just going to take a few days of rest to heal this up."

"That's a relief," Jyslin sighed.

"Let me get what I need, and we'll have you out of here in just a bit," he told them.

Jason watched curiously as Rann, and then Songa, tended to Jyslin. To his surprise, part of their treatment involved injecting some kind of medical compound *directly into the strained ligaments*, using long, evil-looking needles. They did deaden her sensation in her ankle using a topical anesthetic first. After that, Songa lathered her hands up in a clear liquid, looking like oil, and started massaging Jyslin's ankle with expert strokes.

"Exactly what does that do?" Jason asked.

"It's the second part of the treatment," she answered. "The injection is a bio-accelerant that's working in her ankle to tighten and repair her damaged ligaments. That's what those needles were for, to inject the medicine exactly where it was needed. This is a topical accelerant that's working into her skin, and will work to repair the soft tissue damaged when she twisted her ankle. A strain like this is a combination of pulled ligaments and stressed supporting soft tissue. Rann."

"Yes, love?"

"Could you bring some biomolding?"

"Certainly."

"Love?" Jason asked.

"Rann is my husband," she said in English, with a smile. "We met in medical school. After I finished my conscription, we married. We have a small private practice just outside Dracora."

"If you don't mind my asking, how did you two end up here? Why did Miaari bring you?"

"Miaari needed a doctor she could trust," she shrugged. "My family owes her a huge debt. She helped us find a cousin of mine who was kidnapped. Yohne is Eleri's personal physician, so it's only logical that she be here with her patient."

"Why do you want to stay behind? It's going to get very ugly around here, very soon."

"A doctor doesn't shy away from danger when someone needs her. Your people need a doctor, and now you have two. Miaari explained to me that you're about to start action against Trillane because they're mistreating your people. I see nothing wrong with that, especially since she said you don't want to break away from the Imperium, *only* from Trillane. I'm not threatening the Imperium in any way by helping you, and I'm fulfilling my oaths as a doctor to lend all aid I can to whoever is in need of it."

"We understand the danger, sir," Rann said as he handed Songa a jar of what looked like petroleum jelly. "But there's a need for us here, and a doctor must fill that need, even if it's dangerous."

"But this isn't your fight."

"Every fight is a doctor's fight," Rann countered. "You are citizens of the Imperium, and it is our sacred duty to render all aid and care we can to any citizen in need. What side you happen to be on doesn't matter, the only thing that matters is that you need us. And since you need us, here we are."

"You're not going to win this fight, Jason," Songa smiled at him as she started applying that greasy substance to Jyslin's ankle. "One thing you'll find out about Faey doctors is that we're even more stubborn than Grand Duchesses. You need us, so here we are, and you're not going to change it."

"We've been studying human physiology, so we're ready for our task," Rann added. "Not that it's really that different from ours. Aside from a few cosmetic differences, our races are almost genetically identical. Bone structure, cardio-vascular, lymphatic systems, they're identical to ours. Some human blood types are even identical to ours."

"I've heard," Jason said.

"We're genetically compatible, too," Songa told him. "Maybe, you and your husband might be the first to bless us with the first child of a Faey and human?" Songa asked, looking at Jyslin with a smile.

"He's not my husband yet," she said, looking up at him. "But we're working on it."

"Well, I guess that leaves me out in the cold," a voice called from across the room. Kiaari was there in the guise of Kate, leaning against the doorway on the far side. She was wearing a black tee shirt and a pair of blue jeans. "It's good to see that you're alright, Jyslin. When I got word that you defected, I started trying to track you down, but then got called off it. I see Jason found you before I did."

"It was pure luck," she answered. "It's nice to finally meet you. I've heard much about you."

Kiaari laughed. "The good or the bad?"

"Both," she answered.

"Miaari filled me in on some of what happened," she said as she came across to where the doctors were applying that clear compound to Jyslin's ankle, smearing it on thickly. "How's Kumi?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Jason answered. Kiaari put her hand on his neck, and he felt that expansion that told him that she was accessing his mind in her own special way. "I had to tell some people about you, with Jyslin being here and all. We'll have to tell everyone else."

"That was the best idea," she told him, nodding to him. "It might make them feel a little better about what we're going to be doing if they know I'm out there gathering intelligence, so we never walk into anything blindly."

"Miss Eleri is going to be alright," Rann answered her earlier question. "She was seriously injured, but it looks like she'll make a recovery. She won't be moving around for a while, though."

"Well, that's good to hear," Kiaari said. "Jason, may I talk to you for a few minutes?"

He glanced down to Jyslin, who just nodded and shooed him away. He followed Kiaari outside into the crisp morning air, walking with her as they moved towards the capitol building where most of

the records were kept. "I hope they won't be too much of a burden on you," she began. "Miaari really didn't have anywhere safe to put them. She thought this would be the one place where Trillane's assassins couldn't reach her."

"It's alright," Jason answered. "Kumi's a good friend, and I couldn't turn her aside when she needs me. I think we do need to talk about something, though."

"What?"

"Those doctors," he answered. "Kate, is Miaari stacking the deck?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, she sent those two here to *stay*. She told me before she was helping because your people had an interest in what was going on here, but I never really thought about it until this morning. Are your people trying to kick Trillane off Earth?"

"What's going on has nothing to do about Trillane," she answered after a moment. "I can't explain it to you without violating a secret, and as you know, we *never* do that."

"I know, and I respect that."

"All I can really tell you is that Miaari wants to help as much as she can without violating her word. No, the Kimdori aren't trying to overthrow Trillane. We are helping for a different reason, one that I can't explain without breaking my word. If you're trying to work around to asking me if we're going to send you troops, well, the answer is no. What you're doing is your own affair. Yes, we have an interest in the outcome, but we can't directly interfere. What you do, and how you do it, is up to you. We'll do what we can to help, but it won't be anything large scale, and it will always be from the shadows."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"It's very hard to explain," she told him honestly. "There are several vows and oaths involved that prevent me from telling you enough for you to understand. All I can really say is that we *do* care about you, and we'll do what we can...it just can't be anything so big that it becomes obvious. Rann and Songa have volunteered to stay because you're going to need them. You can't be without medicine out here, it'd be a death sentence. It wasn't entirely planned to get them there quite this way, but getting you a doctor *was* something that Miaari was trying to organize. She'd been looking for a good candidate when Kumi was injured, and then Rann and Songa kind of fell in her lap. Luck is like that sometimes. Anyway, it's something she could have done because it's something small that she can do, but something that will help you. But she's not going to send, say, a few thousand Faey mercenaries. What you do here, you need to do on your own, without it appearing that you were backed by some rival noble house. That would threaten any ground you gain. It's not a big stretch to think that you might have a handful of Faey with you, because you're a charismatic fellow, and those Faey have a *damn* good reason to be here," she told him with a quick grin. "But a few platoons of mercenaries all piloting exomechs would just scream that some other noble house was engaging in a covert war to dislodge Trillane from Earth and take it over for themselves. There can't even be a *hint* that you're getting that kind of support, or it taints everything."

"I think I can understand that. I just don't know what to expect."

"Expect us to help in any way that can't be traced back to us," she answered honestly. "I know this might sound a bit heartless, but it's important that what happens out here happens with your people controlling their own destiny, and making their own choices and decisions. That's why I never *say* what you should do, Jason. I can only suggest. Whether or not you listen to my suggestions is your own affair."

"It sounds complicated."

"It's *very* complicated. I hope some day we can sit down and explain what's going on, and why we've done what we're doing. Until then, all I can say, from the bottom of my heart, Jason, is *trust us*. We're not playing with you or using you. We want you to succeed, but we have to let you succeed on your own, with only a little help here and there, with as little help we can give you as possible while

helping you succeed...because if you have no help at all, you're going to fail, but if you have too much help, it's going to cause you to lose everything you worked so hard to gain."

"I see."

"There's a very fine line at work here, a line we can't cross. We'll get as close as we can to that line, Jason, that's a promise, but we can't cross it."

"When you say it like that, it *does* make a little more sense," he said after a moment's thought. "If the Empress thinks that we were backed by some other house, she'd just give Earth back to Trillane, even if we pushed them off."

"Exactly," she nodded. "But if it's clear that a telepathic human trained in Faey technology with a track record of resourcefulness, who has documented access to Civnet and has done business with certain black marketeers in the past, starts a war with Trillane using human soldiers armed in equipment he bought, stole, or built from scratch, it's not going to raise the same alarm flag."

"I think I understand."

"We'll do what we can to make sure you have as much advantage as we can possibly give you, Jason," she assured him. "But we can't go too far. You have to win this war on your own. Just think of us as your aunts who can send you a little extra money from time to time when you're in a hole and the rent's coming due."

Jason laughed. "I'll be asking for money soon, then."

"If we can sneak it to you without anyone noticing, then we will," she said with a nod. "The doctors are something small, and they were something of a windfall anyway, at least for you. After Kumi was injured, Rann and Songa volunteered to remain behind when they found out that your people have no doctor. Those two are throwbacks to the era of the *saishain*."

"Who?"

She looked at him. "The *saishain* are actually the distant ancestors of the entire Faey medical profession," she told him. "They were a cloistered monastic order who worshipped Aris, the goddess of war and mercy, back when the Faey used swords and spears."

"That seems hypocritical," he mused. "How can a god represent both war and mercy?"

"That paradox is the fundamental nature of Aris' worship," Kiaari chuckled. "The faith had two major sects, the warmongers and the peacebrokers. The *saishain* were an order that devoted itself to the arts of medicine. They were legendary both for their ability as healers and their fearlessness. They would show up on a battlefield and march right into it, even as it was being fought sometimes, and start tending the wounded. And they never took sides. They tended the wounded on both sides of a battle, often putting them in beds next to each other. It was an unwritten rule that there were no enemies within a *saishain* enclave, only the needy. They never turned away anyone in need, no matter who it was or how bad off they were. The order became so prevalent that special rules of war were introduced back in that age that made harming a *saishain* an offense that carried the death penalty, and rules that they were never to be interfered with or harassed, even if they were rendering aid to the enemy. The order was devoted to medicine and the dispensation of that medicine to all who were in need of it, and from them sprouted the foundations of the entire Faey medical system. The oaths of a doctor still have roots in the *saishain* oaths, to do no harm, to never deny healing to the needy, and to never let politics interfere with the dispensation of medicine. Even today, the medical branch is its own entity. The doctors in the Faey military aren't part of the other armed services. The Military Medical Service is its *own* service, with its own ranks and its own leadership. They're just lent out to military units in other branches, that's all. A doctor's insignia is still the symbol of the *saishain*, a red triangle on white circular background."

"Wow. I never knew that."

"Just one of the little things about the Faey I've found interesting. Their entire society is deeply entrenched in traditions and customs, and the modern Faey have no idea where most of them came from. It's really quite interesting. Anyway, Rann and Songa are definitely throwbacks to the *saishain*."

All they care about is the fact that your people need doctors, and so here they are. They don't care about what you're about to do, they only care that there's a need for them here, and so here is where they should be."

"I hope so."

"Miaari screened them. They won't give you away or give up any secrets about you. They are devoted to medicine, and here, they see a place where it's needed. That's all they care about."

"Well, that's something I'll just have to trust you over." He was quiet a moment. "There's one thing that you can do for me."

"What is that?"

"Jyslin wants to be married by a Templar," he told her. "I've already told her that I object to a religious ceremony conducted by someone outside my own faith, but she said that a secular ceremony conducted by a Templar is good enough for her. It would mean a lot to her. I don't expect you to bring a Templar here, but could you find a Templar we could go to, that wouldn't object to a secretive ceremony done in the middle of the night?"

"Jason, I'd be honored to arrange that for you," she said sincerely. "Just find out when Jyslin wants to have the ceremony, and I'll find a Templar to perform it for you. I promise. Congratulations, by the way. I know how much you love her."

"I just hope she made the right choice."

"The only choice she could make was to follow her heart," she answered. "Is that so wrong?"

"Well, when it's *my* future wife, yeah, it can be wrong," he grunted. "I don't want her in any danger because of me."

"Jason, hon, I see some exciting times in your future," she laughed. "What is Jyslin?"

"She's a Faey."

"Jason, she's a *Marine*," she stressed. "She's been trained to fight, and what's more, she knows Faey tactics backwards and forwards. And when you start fighting, she'll demand to be right there. She won't let you go alone, and to be honest, you'd be stupid to try to make her stay. She's a good fighter or she wouldn't be a Marine, she's a squad leader, which means she has experience leading small units, and if she's a Marine, that means she's in the upper ten percentile of telepaths in the entire *Imperium*. Marines don't get the black armor because of connections, they get the black armor because of ability and talent. She's an asset that you can't ignore, and she'll be the perfect partner for you out in the field. She has too much invested in this to let you do something stupid and get yourself killed."

Jason was quiet as they walked along the grass outside the capitol building. Kiaari was right about that, but part of him *violently* objected to the idea of taking his wife into combat. He didn't want to put her in any risk. He loved her, and the idea of her putting her life on the line over something that was really not her fight sat wrong with him. He wanted to protect her as much as possible. But...he also couldn't deny the fact that she was a Faey, and in her society, *she* was the one that would violently object to *him* fighting. And in the fight to come, having just one more telepath would have a tremendous impact on the chances that they would succeed. With Jyslin, that was four or five more people they could put into a forward unit, and what was more important, the one telepath among them that had extensive training in telepathic combat.

He'd have to think about it, but there was no doubt that even if Jyslin didn't fight, just her presence was going to be a major boost. She was a first-order telepath, far more skilled and better trained than Symone, and would be able to train the human telepaths much better.

"I think I'll leave you to figure that out," she chuckled. "I'll go make the rounds and tell everyone that it's really alright that Jyslin's here. I think if it comes from me, it's all but undeniable."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

Jason returned to the little clinic that the two doctors had set up in the mansion just in time to see them finish up with Jyslin. The compound they had lathered onto her ankle had set to become a flexible cast of sorts, which would support her ankle while still allowing it to move. "Ah, Jason," Rann

said. "We needed to talk to you."

"Is everything okay?"

"Jyslin is fine," Songa assured him as she held her hand out to Jyslin. She took it, and the doctor helped her off the table and to her feet. Jyslin tested the bandage around her bare foot by walking gingerly around.

"It doesn't hurt at all," she announced, turning around to face Jason.

"Just don't push it, and I want you back down here tomorrow morning so I can see how you're progressing," Songa told her, then she looked back to Jason. "And I want *you* here tomorrow morning as well."

"Me? What for?"

"We want to give everyone here an examination," she answered. "We need to make sure everyone is healthy and there's no hidden illnesses. With your permission, we'd like to draw up a schedule to get everyone in town examined within the next few days. And since we've heard that you're always quite busy, we wanted to get you first."

"I'm not sure how well that's going to go over," Jason grunted. "I haven't even explained what's going on to everyone yet. I was going to do that today, with a town meeting. I guess you can tell people that yourself during the meeting, when you introduce yourself. We'll see what kind of reaction you get."

"That's fine," Rann said.

Meya appeared in the doorway across the room. "Rann, Songa, Yohne is ready for one of you to relieve her," she announced.

"I'll go, love," Songa said. "You need to finish setting up the equipment. You're so much better at it than I am."

"I noticed that earlier," Jason said.

"I minored in plasmonics repair," he said modestly. "I thought it might save me some money on maintenance when I opened my practice if I could maintain my own equipment."

"Smart."

"It has proved to be handy," he agreed. "Songa minored in medieval literature."

"Oh, rub it in some more, why don't you," she said to her husband with a teasing smile, then she scurried from the room.

Jason chuckled, as Meya came over to them. "So, you're Jyslin," Meya said, looking at her. "It's nice to finally meet the legend in person."

Jyslin laughed. "Why do I get the feeling that Jason was ripping on me while we were separated?"

"Nah," she snorted.

"Did you want to see me, Jayce?" Luke asked as he rushed into the room behind Meya. He stopped dead and looked at her in surprise, then took a step to the side, but he kept glancing at her. "Begging your pardon," he said. "Am I interrupting something?"

"You're good, Luke," Jason said. "I want you to call everyone for a meeting, let's make it in two hours. Obviously, we have *lots* to talk about," he said, glancing at Meya. "I need you to make sure everyone knows about it."

"Where are we holding it?"

"The old house chamber in the capitol," he answered.

"I'll take care of it, Jayce," Luke told him, then he left.

"That's one handsome man," Meya remarked after he went, and she made sure to watch his every step.

"I wouldn't go there right now, Meya," Jason told her. "Luke's had some pretty bad things happen lately. Give him some time and some space, so he can work through it."

"A pity," she sighed.

The assemblage in the house chamber two hours later was nervous and wary, with everyone chattering at everyone else while they waited. They all kept looking at the Faey that had appeared since last night, giving hard looks at Jyslin, Meya, and Rann, and rumors of what was going on had been flying since last night. Jason knew that he had to put things out as quickly as he could after hearing about some of what was going on, and besides, he knew that this was going to need some explanation anyway. He climbed up the dais and into the series of desks and platforms where the old speaker of the state house and the secretaries had sat, picked up the old, dusty gavel, and banged it loudly on the desk before him to get everyone's attention.

"Everyone settle down," he called, and waited for it to quiet down. "Now, I think it's fairly obvious why we're here. Last night, we picked up a few, guests."

"They're Faey, not guests!" someone shouted in the back.

"Not all Faey are the enemy," Jason shot back. "Is that how you think of Symone? As the enemy?" He took a breath, and continued. "One of them, I'm sure, most of you have heard of. Her name is Jyslin, and she was my girlfriend back in the world, before I came here. To make things short and sweet, she decided to leave her life on the outside and join me here. That makes her an outlaw to the Faey, so I don't think anyone here can say that she's not here for the long haul. She's just like Symone, guys, she has nowhere else to go now. I'm also pretty sure that Kate's come around to most of you by now to explain a few things. In case you missed her, let me explain it. Kate is *not* my girlfriend. She's someone who's here to help us push Trillane off Earth. Think of her as an agent, or an spy. She's been living in my house and we've been using the live-in excuse so we can do some planning and such without anyone wondering why me and her are alone all the time, and so I can cover for her when she's not here. I'm sure most of you have noticed that she's not been around much the last couple of months. All those times I was telling you she was sick, or asleep, or off doing something, she's actually been out in the world gathering intelligence for us for when we start hitting Trillane, so we know when, where, and how to hit them without putting ourselves in too much danger.

"If you don't believe me, then just talk to Kate after this meeting, and she'll tell you so," he called bluntly. "As some of you might have pieced together, I'm very serious about this," he said. "I went out and got us a spy. She's already been invaluable to us in bringing in some information, and it's thanks to her that we now know where we're going to set up our permanent base. *She* found it for us.

"But I'm getting off topic here," he admitted. "Just so you all know, me and Jyslin are now engaged. I just wanted to explain to everyone here why Jyslin is suddenly living with me, and assure you I'm not two-timing Kate."

There was a low rumble through the people as they whispered to each other about it, but Jason banged the gavel again. "The other Faey are only here temporarily," he called. "One of them, the girl most of you have heard me call Kumi, was nearly killed by the same people we're going to be fighting against. Kumi is a Trillane noble, but don't hold that against her. She's a good friend, and she's been there for us when we needed help. She was injured because she was helping us," he stated bluntly, and paused to let that sink in. "She was looking into things from inside Trillane for me, trying to find out who was doing the human slaving. Believe me, she was majorly pissed when she heard about it, and she was trying to find out who it was and put a stop to it. We're not exactly sure what happened, but she must have got too close, and they tried to kill her. I brought her here because we wouldn't *be* here if it wasn't for Kumi. She's the one that helped us buy the projectors, the supplies, almost everything we have. If not for Kumi, we *all* would have died in Chesapeake," he called commandingly, boring that point home. "We owe her, and we owe her a *lot*. And I won't ever turn my back on someone who has helped us as much as she has when she's the one that needs help. Right now she's a hunted woman, and the assassins that whoever tried to kill her hired are still trying to find her. This is about the only place in the Imperium where those assassins can't reach her and finish the job, and that's why she's here. She needed a place to hide while she recovers from her wounds, and my door is always open to her.

“Just so everyone knows, I’ve already laid down the law to the Faey concerning their telepathy. They’re going to obey the same rules that we do, and the biggest one is they are *never* allowed to eavesdrop on the thoughts of anyone else here. If you think one of them has been invading your privacy, you come straight to me and tell me, and we’ll get to the bottom of it. I’ve already told them that if they break that rule, even once, I’ll throw them out without even giving the one who brought them here a chance to come pick them up. Does everyone understand that?”

There was a general rumble of acknowledgment from the group.

“Now, on to the final matter. When Kumi is fully recovered, she’ll be taking the servants and guards that came here with her and leaving, *except* for two of them. Two of the doctors that came with her heard that Doc Northwood passed, God rest his soul, and they’ve volunteered to stay with us to serve as doctors. I know some of you aren’t too comfortable with this idea. I’m not really much comfortable with it either. To tell the truth, I had to be sold on it. After all, this isn’t their fight, and they’re Faey. But I’ve come to discover that these two doctors are pretty stubborn,” he said, looking right at Rann, who flushed and chuckled nervously. “And I had to face a certain ugly truth. With what’s coming, we’re going to *need* a competent doctor, and since Faey medical technology is way better than ours, it will just help that much more that we have Faey doctors who were trained in Faey medical technology.

“I know that it seems odd that I’d take in two strangers, and two Faey at that, but they’ll have to pass the same tests that everyone else did,” he told them honestly. “Later today, Symone’s going to take them out and screen them, just like she did everyone else. If she says they’re okay, then I’m going to let them stay. If she doesn’t say they’re okay, they’ll stay only as long as Kumi’s here, then they’ll go.”

“But that’s not how we do things!” someone shouted.

“You’re right, this isn’t how we did things in Chesapeake,” Jason said calmly. “But this isn’t Chesapeake. We’re not a community of squatters anymore, we’re a band of *resistance fighters*. Remember that. Almost everyone in this room joined my rebellion. Did you think it was going to be the same as Chesapeake, with us voting on what we were doing by majority? I’m sorry to break it to you, but no. The rebellion is going to be a military operation, and that means that we’re going to have to *be* a military. We’re going to be out there *fighting*, people, and we can’t conduct a war by vote. And since it’s my rebellion, that more or less makes me the commanding officer. Does anyone have a problem with that?” he called in a strong voice.

There was silence.

“Good. Things are going to be somewhat different now. Since you’ve joined the resistance, that means that now you’re going to have to trust me to make some decisions without a group consensus, make decisions that I think are for the best, and the doctors are going to be one of those decisions. We’re going to need them, and if I’m satisfied we can trust them, then they’re in. It’s that simple.” Rann motioned to him. “Oh yeah, Doctor Rann, the male Faey right there,” he said, pointing, “is one of the two doctors that’s going to stay. He’s come here with his wife, the other doctor, Songa. That’s right, they’re husband and wife,” he called pointedly. “So, think about that if you’re wondering if we can trust them. They’ve both come here to set up a practice.

“Anyway, Doctors Rann and Songa have asked me to set up a schedule so they can examine everyone in town,” he called. “They want to make sure we’re all in good health, you know, just a general checkup kind of...shit,” he grunted, which elicited a few chuckles. “I’m not going to *make* anyone show up for these checkups. If you have issues with the docs, then don’t show up. But I am *asking* that everyone try to get a checkup. These two have put their necks on the line to come out here and serve us as doctors, so we may as well make use of the services they’re offering.

“Alright then, does anyone have any issues or questions that doesn’t involve bashing the Faey that are here?” Jason asked.

“Are you sure we can trust them?” someone called.

"Kumi, I trust with my life," Jason answered. "I trust the Faey that came with her because someone I trust even more than Kumi gave me her solemn word that none of the Faey that leave here will *ever* reveal who we are, where we are, or what we're going to do. I can't offer any hard proof or anything, guys. All I can say is *trust me*. After all, it's my neck I'm putting on the line just as much as yours, and I wouldn't be risking that neck unless I was pretty sure of it. Anything else?"

"If we're going to be a military, who's gonna be giving orders? The Faey?"

"I'll decide who's going to be in charge of what after we're all better trained, and I can see who's best at doing the leading," he said. "Just so you know now, Jyslin *will* be training us in some things," he told them. "She was a Marine, and she has experience with combat training. She's going to be teaching us some of what she knows so we don't look like the Three Stooges when we go on our first raid," he remarked, which caused a few laughs. "We haven't talked about her fighting out there with us yet, cause I'm sure that's going to be a fight," he said, looking at her. "I'm not too thrilled with the idea of having my wife out there being shot at, but Jys isn't the kind of woman to just sit at home base. I'm pretty sure we're going to have a spectacular fight about it," he said, looking at her.

"You're right about that, love," she answered loudly, which caused a great deal of chuckling.

"Anyway, any other questions?"

"How long are they gonna be here? The ones that are gonna leave?"

"We're not sure yet," Rann called in perfect English before Jason could reply. "Lady Kumi's injuries were severe. The Lady was nearly blown in half by the MPAC round that struck her in the back, and it was a miracle she survived the attack. It took us nearly two days in surgery to put her back together," he said grimly, then he took a deep breath and exhaled. "She'll be here for quite a few days, that's for sure, but as of yet we have no definite idea of how long that will be."

"Are we going to expand the power grid any further?"

Jason was a bit taken aback someone would ask a question that didn't involve the Faey, so he had to think about that a second. "Right now, not really," he said. "When the resistance fighters leave, there's only gonna be, what, like twenty people left here? The grid we're leaving behind should be more than enough for you."

"You're not gonna just abandon us when you go, are you?" someone called.

"Hell no," Jason stated immediately. "We'll make sure you guys are gonna be okay, and we'll drop in from time to time to make sure you're doing alright. Besides, we might have to make use of some of this town for storage and whatnot, so we're never gonna completely withdraw. We'll do our best to keep our war out of your hair, but since you already know what we're gonna be into before we start it, then everyone who stays here after we leave has to accept that. You're going to be living in a town that the rebellion might use as a storage cache from time to time, and you're going to have ties to the resistance. If any of you have any problems with that, well, you know where the town line is. I'm sorry to sound so heartless about it, but that's the way it is."

"How are things gonna work for those of us who stay?"

"The mayor and a city council you've already elected are going to run things," he answered. "Once we leave, you'll be looking after your own affairs, but we'll be there to lend a hand if you need it. We won't let the services we put in here break, and we won't let you go hungry. But we'll also do our best to keep our distance so we don't interfere too much. Anything else?"

It was relatively quiet.

"Alright then. We're basically done here. Thanks for coming, and everyone have a good day."

Everyone began to file out, talking with one another over what they'd learned, and what was now the first real impact on them that they were about to go to war. Jason had basically enacted what was to them to be martial law, usurping the old rules of Chesapeake, but from the sound of their chatter, it seemed to Jason that they were neither totally surprised nor overly worried. There was some nervous talk about the Faey, but Jason was pretty sure that that would blow over once they got to know Jyslin and the doctors. They accepted Symone because they knew Symone was one of them, and he felt that

they'd feel the same way about the three new Faey once they realized that they were serious about being here.

"I think that went fairly well," Meya remarked as Jason came down to where she, Jyslin, and Rann were standing.

"I hope so," Jason said. "I hate doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Getting up there and bossing people around," he said with a slight grimace.

Tom Jackson approached them quietly. "I just wanted to introduce myself, ma'am," he said to Jyslin. "I'm Tom Jackson."

"Well, it's nice to meet you," Jyslin said, shaking his offered hand.

"Tom's our resident expert on civil engineering," Jason told her. "He worked in the Army Corps of Engineers before the subjugation."

"I'm no expert," he scoffed. "Is your ankle going to be alright, ma'am?"

"According to the doctors, it's going to be fine," she said with a disarming smile.

Tom wandered off, but he started something of a trend. More and more people came up and introduced themselves to Jyslin, and she accepted their greetings with her usual light manner, shaking hands, remarking on her foot, even chatting a little with a few people about Jason. But others, he noticed, had stood up and walked straight out after the meeting ended.

He'd been right. There was going to be some friction.

But that was something he was fairly sure would work itself out. After people got to know Jyslin and the doctors, they'd lose much of their hostility. It was the fact that they were unknown and they were Faey that was the issue, and that was something that could be fixed with time. Jyslin and the doctors would be on good behavior during that time, he was pretty sure...or at least the doctors would be. One of the townsfolk might get educated as to how willful Jyslin could be if he approached her the wrong way.

But, in a way, Jason felt like they were getting close to the beginning now. Soon they would be starting the renovation of Cheyenne Mountain, Jason would have a dropship or two for the build team to convert for stealth, and the basic framework of his future army was starting to take shape. Much as he hated to admit it, the addition of Rann and Songa filled a huge hole, and the unexpected arrival of Jyslin did give them someone who had experience in Faey tactics, and also someone who could train the human telepaths *much* better than Symone could.

And then there was the ideas. In the last few days, Jason had had a few ideas for how to go about attacking Trillane's cargo transport capability, ideas that were stock in trade for Jason; ideas that were rather simple in approach, utilized a minimum in supplies, yet operated in unorthodox ways. Their main disadvantage was size, that there would be so few of them. Well, Jason had had a few ideas about how his handful of people could maximize the damage they could do.

After all, they didn't have to actually *be there* to deal out damage. They could, say, just leave something behind that would do the damage for them.

Mines.

One rebel with a gun could bring down one Stick. One rebel seeding an area with a high density of overhead traffic with mines could close down a shipping route. And the mines that Jason had in mind weren't mines in the conventional sense. He already knew how he could design them so they would lay dormant until activated by the passing of a vehicle using gravimetric propulsion, and then it would activate, attach itself to that engine-carrying device, and then detonate. It, like some of his other inventions, had already been thought of first by someone in the Imperium, but the idea had either fallen into disuse or was deemed technologically obsolete. His rail gun was based on a design he'd found in the Ministry of Technology, for example, just modified in a way that no one had ever bothered to try.

The mine didn't have to explode, though. A variant of that idea was to create "hacker mines," mines that would attach to Sticks, connect to its onboard computer, and then try to take it over. Once it

gained control, it could crash the Stick by hijacking its controls. TEL programming wasn't really Jason's forte, however. Steve had been much better at it than him, so he wasn't sure how well he could write a program that would try to do that.

And if he didn't feel like killing the crew of the Stick, he could fall back on something he'd already used, outfitting a mine with a hypersonic device that would virtually incapacitate the Stick's crew, using the Stick's fuselage as a speaker to conduct the sound.

The Pigeon was his other idea. Just as the mines would attack from below, the Pigeon would attack from above. It would be a very small device, basically a flying gun, that would be lurking at extreme altitudes. It would be armed with a weapon that the Faey considered to be obsolete, something he could buy in bulk on Civnet...ion cannons.

Ion cannons weren't used anymore because Neutronium armor made them basically useless as damaging weapons, but ion cannons had a unique aspect that made them dangerous to the Faey's plasma-based technology...the ion burst the cannons used as a projectile could interfere with plasma magnets and plasma conduits that weren't properly shielded. "Properly shielded" basically covered any and all military-application vehicle and equipment, part and parcel with their armor scheme, but Sticks were *not* shielded in the manner necessary to defend them against the ionization effect of an ion cannon. A single blast from an ion cannon wouldn't so much as scorch the fuselage of a Stick, but the ion storm would disrupt plasma flow in its power systems, which included its engines...and make it basically drop like a rock. He could buy ion cannons cheaply, fit them with cheap drive units that would basically just make them hold their altitude, and then program to fire at anything with a gravometric signature beneath them. He figured it'd take the Faey about half an hour to find the cannon and destroy it once it started shooting, but in that time it could easily bring down five or six Sticks. And him replacing a C500 gun was a lot cheaper and easier than them replacing a C75,000 Stick.

That idea would also work for the mines, if he could find a way to make a device about the size of his generate enough of an ion storm to affect a Stick's power system.

The ion cannons were Jason's first choice for those people who would be out there killing Sticks, since they didn't have to dish out enough damage to force it down if they used an ion cannon. All they had to do was hit the Stick, and the ion storm would do the work for them.

They weren't the best of ideas, but he was sure that with a little time, he'd find a way to make either one of those ideas or some idea that hadn't come to him yet work. One thing was for sure, though; in this war, he was going to have to be very, very creative if he wanted even a snowball's chance in hell of pulling it off. He was going to have to think outside the box, think in ways the Faey either didn't, wouldn't, or couldn't, pull out the really weird shit and hit them with things they'd never seen before, keep them constantly off guard. If he could stay one step ahead of Trillane as they scrambled to defend their Stick fleet, then he had a good chance of pulling it off.

Damaging Trillane's ability to move food was his best hope of winning, but he couldn't go overboard and cripple the export ability of Earth, or the Empress would intervene. So, to counter that, he figured that it would be best to limit his actions to one continent, North America. If they could take an entire continent out of the production cycle (which was admittedly a nearly impossible goal to attain), then the food would still be getting to the Imperium, but Trillane would be losing money hand over fist as they struggled to replace the equipment and foodstocks that Jason's rebellion either captured or destroyed, so much money that the farming industry on the other continents wouldn't recoup the losses. Those tactics, coupled with selective raids and strikes on military or strategic facilities to further damage Trillane, would give him an effective bargaining chip to use when it came time to bring the Empress into the equation and demand Trillane's ejection from Earth.

But that was in the future. For right now, he had some peace to hammer out among some of his people because of the arrival of the Faey in Charleston. That wasn't going to be all that hard, but it was going to bite into his already crammed schedule. He didn't have the time to babysit people right now, not when he had all these people to train in piloting, and they had more work to do around Charleston

before they could go, and all the plans he had to make concerning Cheyenne Mountain and their upcoming war.

He just needed a few more hours in a day, he supposed. Like, maybe, twenty.

Chapter 14

Kaista, 28 Romaa, 4394 Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 1 April 2008, Native Regional Reckoning

Charleston, West Virginia (Native designation), Orala Nature Preserve, American Sector

Slowly, hazily, Jason opened his eyes. The scene that greeted him was the black armored plates of Jyslin's boots, not ten inches from his nose. Those boots slid on the grass, turning the toes outward, and then the base of her knees came into the edge of his vision as she squatted down, putting a black gauntleted hand on the ground between those feet. Jason could barely fathom why he was looking at her from that angle, for his mind swam in a sea of cloudy confusion, and it pounded in pain in rhythm with the beating of his heart.

"Sloppy," she said aloud. "I'd send, but that would just make that headache I'm sure you're feeling feel like it would make your head explode."

Jason clawed some manner of comprehension back into his brain, and remembered what had happened, what was going on. Quite simply put, he had been thoroughly spanked.

He sat up, putting a hand to his head, then groaned aloud. "I never thought it could be that bad."

"I could have put you into psychotropic shock," she told him bluntly. "Just remember, you asked for it."

"I did at that," he said with a nod, then winced.

There was no way she was going to be able to train him in telepathic combat if she went easy on him, and he knew it. The Faey that would oppose them certainly wouldn't be holding anything back, and so he had to be ready to take them on at their fullest, to engage Faey who had years of experience and training in their telepathic gifts and defend himself from any telepathic assault. Granted, Jyslin would not be his normal kind of opponent. She was young by Faey standards, but she was exceptionally powerful in her talent, and had many years of experience reinforcing that raw ability. But if he could learn to at least protect himself from Jyslin, then handling a run-of-the-mill Trillane soldier would be child's play.

At least she looked *stunning* in her new armor. It was a ZPS special, just like his, the same model and with the same phoenix design emblazoned on the chest. That design was now the unofficial symbol of the resistance. It had just come in yesterday, and she'd been breaking it in today. She had everything on but the helmet, letting her long, long red hair undulate in the gentle, cool breeze of the West Virginia spring. If his head wasn't about to melt, he'd find her to be quite lovely that way.

Telepathic combat was something he had never quite expected. He'd been taught the barest of the basics before and had had a general understanding of it, but that was in no way any kind of suitable preparation for crossing mental swords with Jyslin. The fight between them had only lasted a couple of seconds, but in the mindscape, those couple of seconds were an eternity of her basically beating him around the interior of his own skull at her whim. She had ripped through his defenses like they were nothing, and in a kind of grim lesson, had seized utter control of every aspect of his mind, turning him into nothing more than a puppet. Had he not been so comfortable with her and loved her, he'd have been infuriated with what she did, for she had laid bare the darkest, most secret parts of himself, put her fingers into every recessed nook of his mind just to show him what an enemy *could* do. It was a terrifying experience, and showed him that telepathic combat was *not* for the weak.

She handed him a small piece of rag, and he looked at it blankly. "Your nose is bleeding," she told him tersely. He put two fingers to his lip and felt the warm stickiness, then took the rag with a nod and wiped it away.

"Is that common?"

"Yes," she said. "So is bleeding from the ears. But you don't seem to be doing that right now," she

said, looking to the side of his head. “In extreme cases, you’ll suffer from *sangei*,” she said, using a word that he couldn’t immediately comprehend. He had to think about it a moment, and then drugged up one of those words buried deep in a Faey dictionary, a word that Jyslin would know, but not many other Faey would, given her extreme vocabulary. *Sangei* was a condition where one would literally sweat blood from ruptured capillaries in the pores, caused by the ruptured vessels that tended to happen during telepathic combat. Though it was telepathic in nature, mental combat placed extreme stresses on the cardiovascular systems of the engaged opponents. To fight with the mind, the body had to be fit.

“Your nose isn’t bleeding,” he noted.

“I didn’t lose either,” she answered.

He chuckled ruefully. “Point,” he said, feeling the pounding in his head ease somewhat. “Alright, teacher, what did I do wrong?”

“Just about everything,” she answered, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You panicked, love. You did alright up until then, you did what I taught you to do, but once you panicked, it was over.”

“It—I was just overwhelmed,” he said in a quiet tone. “I couldn’t hold you back, and it was like the fear just locked me.”

“Well, we can work on that,” she told him reassuringly. “You were nervous about this, and that basically doomed you from the start.”

“I was definitely nervous. I never dreamed you could, that you were capable—” he said, looking away from her. “I didn’t—”

“It’s alright, love, you can say it,” she told him gently, kneeling down and putting her hands on his shoulders, then putting her forehead against his. That contact caused the walls between their minds to weaken, and he knew she could feel his anger at himself, his humiliation at being so thoroughly beaten, and a measure of his indignation at her raking her claws through his mind and touching on places that no one had any business touching. “You had no idea I could do something like that to you, or that I *would* do something like that to you.”

He flushed guiltily.

“Love, I took no pleasure in it,” she told him with utter seriousness, pulling away so she could look at him. “But you had to see it, face it at its worst. That was about the worst I’m willing to do to you. I could have done something even worse than that, but that could cause permanent damage, or cause you to never forgive me. Trust me, love, there are ways to violate someone with talent that would make you never speak to me again. We won’t go quite that far here, because I love you, and I’d never do that to you.”

“I’m sorry, about, you know.”

“You had every right to be angry,” she told him dismissively. “I just hope you’ll forgive me.”

“Forgive you for doing what I asked you to do? Please.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” she snorted.

You know me better than that, Jason sent, feeling the last of the pain fade.

Feeling better, I see. Good, she sent in reply. This was the norm for them. Ever since she had come, they spoke less and less, until they simply stopped speaking altogether. Unless they were in mixed company or wished to include others in their conversation, they did not speak aloud to each other. They always sent, either openly or privately. He had jokingly told her that he was starting to forget the sound of her voice just yesterday. *I didn’t want to send until you got over the headache.*

I’ve still got a bit of it, but not enough to stop me, he answered. *I think I can stand up now.*

Alright. We’re done for today.

But—

Hush, she cut him off. *Love, you’re in no condition to train any more. We can pick this up again tomorrow, after you have some time to recover. Talent’s not like other things, love. If you push it too far, it can cause permanent harm.*

Alright, he acquiesced.

They returned to the mansion, passing several people. Some waved or greeted them, some did not. Not everyone was quite happy about Jyslin's arrival, or the other Faey, but at least no one had left the city. Jason's speech about asking for trust had at least kept people from deserting, though there were some rumors that a few people might leave. If they left, then so be it, as far as he was concerned. But it was Kate more than anything else that had people unnerved. They felt a little betrayed by the fact that Symone had seemingly lied to them to make them vote her in, that and the fact that Kiaari wasn't assuming Kate's demure personality anymore. She was acting like a different person now, and that was a bit much for most people to handle.

Kumi's presence didn't bother most of them as much as Jason would have thought, at least not after they got an idea of just how dreadfully injured she'd been...which was all thanks to the doctors who showed them holopics of her wounds. It made quite a few people physically sick, and made Jason's stomach heave. A hole had been blown in her back big enough to put a volleyball into without any of it sticking out. It was only because of highly advanced Faey medical techniques and equipment that Kumi had survived that injury, and the fact that there was a medical facility literally one building over from where she'd been shot. According to Doc Songa, if she'd have gone just two or three more minutes without emergency treatment, she would have died. They'd put her back together using bio-accelerated cloned replacement tissue and bone, transplant tissue and materials created from her own body, and then used to fill the holes. Just as they had regrown Symone's arm, lost in a past injury, they regrew what Kumi had lost.

The prognosis for Kumi was good, which was a relief to Jason. She was out of her medically induced coma now, taken out of it four days ago, and was strong enough to send...just not very far, her sendings unable to extend past the mansion in which she was kept. With the accelerated healing treatments they were using on her, she would be well enough to leave in about three weeks. Since she woke up, she was surprisingly quiet and thoughtful. She didn't even joke that much when Jason went to see her. That wasn't too much of a surprise to Jason, since she'd nearly been killed by her own noble house. She had some serious issues to sort out.

The trouble was coming not from Kumi, or the doctors, or even Fure, but from Meya and Myra. The twins were everywhere and getting into everything, and Jason had to keep a constant eye on them to keep them from stealing one of his railguns. And Lord above, did they *try*. It was almost a kind of twisted game to them, seeing if they could manage to filch one of those much-sought after prizes to add to their collection of weapons. When they weren't doing that, they were talking to everyone, looking around, and learning *entirely* too much about what they were planning to do than Jason felt comfortable with, assurances from Miaari notwithstanding. He knew they'd never talk, and if they were ever interrogated in a way that would give up that information it would already be too late anyway, but it still worried him.

So, how's your first day in the armor? Jason asked as they entered the mansion.

It feels wonderful, she gushed girlishly. *I've never had armor this good, even when I was assigned to other posts. Imperial-issue armor isn't quite this fancy. Once I break in the gel, it'll be perfect.*

It's going to be protecting the most important thing in this world, he sent seriously. *It's the best I could get, and it's still not good enough.*

She gave him a sincerely adoring look, putting her gaunteled hand on his shoulder. *I love you too.*

Typical, Kumi's acerbic sending, weak but understandable, touched them. *Sometimes you two make me sick.*

Be nice, Jason chided.

She's being jealous, Meya sent, her thoughts tinged with amusement.

That certainly sounded like jealousy to me, Tim agreed.

Aww, keep out of it, Tim, Kumi huffed. *There's no reason for me to be jealous.*

That was probably one of the bigger surprises. The Faey visiting them seemed to be quite at a loss as to what to do about Jason, Temika, and Tim. The fact that there were three human telepaths was a

shock to them, because just *knowing* they had talent wasn't the same as *experiencing* it. They seemed quite comfortable with the idea that humans might have talent...until those humans started sending around them. They were even more unsettled when they found out that Jason and Temika were *stronger* talents than all of them but Jyslin. Jason's strength wasn't much of a surprise to Kumi and the ones who knew him, but Temika was a surprise to them. Jason they could write off as a fluke concerning the strength of his talent, but Temika was the proof that humans could be just as strong as Faey, or even stronger, when it came to telepathy. It was as if the humans had intruded themselves into a realm that was meant for the Faey alone, and all of them, to one degree or another, seemed uncomfortable with the idea of humans hearing open sending. The only ones that seemed more amenable were Kumi and Meya, but even they occasionally seemed reticent, and it bled through in their sendings. Kumi seemed to be the most active in trying to engage the human telepaths, but Jason felt that it was boredom more than anything else. She was confined to her bed, and she was willing to do almost anything to pass the time.

Of course, the humans too were a bit uncomfortable with the idea of eight unknown Faey suddenly being privy to what had always been a nice quiet private little clique of Jason, Temika, Tim, and Symone. Just as the Faey seemed taken aback that humans had invaded their private world, the three humans were discomfited by the idea of strangers hearing what, to them, was a very personal realm of comfortable familiarity. Even now, some ten days after they had all arrived, Jason still felt a bit... weird, sending and knowing that Faey he didn't know very well could hear it. Of the three of them, Tim was the only one actively trying to engage the Faey telepathically. Temika barely sent at all anymore, and even then it was usually privately, or showing off her training by sending so that only those in the same room could hear her, something Jason could do as well, but did not because he was trying to force himself into getting used to the idea of being a "public" telepath.

Symone had taught her students well, but her days as teacher were now over, because Jyslin was there. Tim and Temika seemed reluctant to take lessons from Jyslin on that first day, but she smacked that right out of them almost immediately. After they got a taste of the kind of power Jyslin had, and what was more, her extensive training, they became *very* willing students. She could teach them things that Symone could not, and since Temika was such a strong telepath, Jyslin could teach her how to use her powers in ways Symone could not, because they were techniques she either never learned, or was incapable of using.

No reason at all, Fure's sending reached them, almost dripping with sarcasm.

Fure! Don't make me cut your pay!

As I recall, Mistress Eleri, we're currently not being paid, he sent dryly. So be my guest and cut my pay. Half of nothing is still nothing.

I hate you, she sent growlingly.

Obviously, Kumi still has designs on getting her revenge, Symone sent, her thoughts bubbling with vast amusement.

You bet your ass, woman, she seethed. You just wait til I get out of this bed, babe, and it'll be time for the video equipment. And I have a little something special planned for you too, Symone. You had a hand in that.

Well, I had a hand on it. I didn't get a chance to put a hand in it. There wasn't enough time.

Jason blushed furiously, which made Jyslin laugh aloud.

"Stop!" a voice cracked from the door behind them. Jason winced and then did so, then turned around just enough to look at Doc Songa. *I've told you four times to come down here, she sent commandingly. You're not going to dodge us forever, Jason.*

I haven't been dodging you, Doc, he protested.

Maybe not, but you sure as hell make sure you're always busy when I come looking for you, she retorted. You're not busy right now, so inside! She pointed imperiously past herself, into the clinic she and Rann ran on the first floor.

This was something he had, in fact, been avoiding. After succumbing to the physical the doctors wanted, she'd been after him for some follow-up tests. Since he was a human telepath, she'd been wanting to run a few tests she didn't perform the first time around, both to make sure he was healthy and to investigate his condition as a telepath. Like most Faey that knew some humans had talent, she was wildly curious as to why Jason and other humans had talent, but unlike most other Faey, Songa had the training and determination to actually try to find out. This wasn't something to which Jason objected, because Kiaari had told him that understanding *why* humans had talent would help him greatly in what was coming, but he just wasn't looking forward to the idea of being a guinea pig. He needed to find the why of it, but he wasn't too thrilled with the idea of being the test subject that would help solve that mystery.

That woman can certainly lay down the law, Myra giggled.

I've never met a doctor that couldn't, Fure sent sagely.

Jason looked to Jyslin, almost hoping she would extricate him, but she put her hand on his back and pushed him towards Songa. *You'd better treat him right,* she warned. *That's my fiancée, and I want him in one piece when we marry.*

I won't hurt him at all, Songa protested demurely. *The worst he'll get is a couple of needle sticks, I promise. Rann, come to the clinic please. We can't let him get away this time.*

I'll be right there, Rann responded.

I'd like to attend as well, if that's alright, Yohne asked. *With Lady Eleri's permission, of course.*

I don't need a doctor in here to babysit me now, Yohne, Kumi told her. *Go on ahead, I'm fine. If I need you, I can just send.*

We could always use an extra pair of eyes, Songa sent pleasantly, getting behind Jason and pushing him bodily towards the door with a hand on each shoulderblade.

I'll go take off my armor and come down, Jyslin sent openly, directing it at Jason. *That way I can hold your hand while the evil doctors stick needles in you.*

From upstairs in the kitchen, Jason clearly heard Temika break out into loud peals of laughter.

Woman, after that line, you'd better leave it on, Jason sent ominously.

Children, play nice, Songa commanded as she herded Jason into the clinic.

And how the needles came. Jason endured the indignity of being a human pin cushion for nearly an hour, as they gave him a thorough physical exam, then ran several tests that he knew had nothing to do with his physical health. Rann and Yohne took several vials of blood, and they worked on a small console connected to one of the devices they'd brought along with them while Songa had him wear a featureless black helmet that reminded Jason of the helmets from that old cult classic movie *Spaceballs*.

"Why do I feel like Dark Helmet," Jason growled as Jyslin came back down, wearing a ragged pair of jeans and a scavenged tee shirt that had the logo of the band Nine Inch Nails, one of Tim's favorites.

"It's an alpha wave monitor," Songa told him aloud. "There's no machine or technology that can pick up telepathic activity, but this one's the closest thing we have. The baseline alpha patterns of a telepath are slightly different than they are on a non-telepath. Now just relax for a minute, and no sending."

"But we're different races," Jason said. "Our brains are different."

Actually, they're not, Rann sent, his sending absent, distracted, because his focus was on his work. *Humans and Faey are physiologically identical. There's a slight difference in our DNA patterns, but that's about it. I'd almost say that we're the same species, or we're two sub-species descended from a common ancestor, but that would be nearly impossible.*

"It's Gora's Law," Yohne said aloud. "And no sending, Rann."

"Sorry."

"Who?" Jason asked.

"Gora Karinne, one of the greatest biomedical scientists of all time," Yohne answered. "he lived about a thousand years ago, and he posed a theory that planets with similar conditions would produce

living creatures with similar evolutionary traits. The more the two different planets were similar, the more similar the life upon them. Well, Draconis is amazingly similar to Earth. It has the same climate, very close to the same atmospheric makeup, and so on and so on. If you ever went there, Jason, you'd wonder if you left Earth for a few minutes, until you saw that our trees and plants and animals look different than yours. Well, since our two planets are so similar, it's no stretch to think that evolution would produce very similar creatures on each planet."

"But you said that Draconis has different plants and animals, so that means that this Gora's law was wrong."

"Gora's Law isn't absolute," she told him. "But it does hold up under some circumstances. For example, humans and Faey look almost identical, and their DNA is similar enough for cross-combinations."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that humans and Faey are genetically compatible, that we can have children," she answered. "Well, we have creatures on Draconis called vulpars. Well, they're almost exactly similar to a species of animal on Terra called a *fox*. We have truki, you have *horses*. We have feyalla, you have *chimpanzees*. We have siksuni, you have *whales*," she told him, using the English words for the names of the animals from Earth. "Animals with similar appearances—mostly—and similar DNA patterns, that hold the same position in the planetary ecology. A vulpar and a *fox* could crossbreed, as could a feyalla and a *chimp*, or a siksuni and a *whale*. And if we brought a vulpar here and released it in the wild in the same habitation range of a *fox*, it would probably survive, maybe even thrive. That's the basic gist of Gora's Law."

"Oh, so this Gora woman—"

"Man. Gora Karinne was a man."

"Odd. Most short names that end in an *A* like that seem to be women's names, like Maya, Meya, and Myra. I didn't think a man would have a woman's name."

Yohne chuckled. "Well, Gora was a Faey ahead of his time. A brilliant doctor, scientist, and he was almost executed for heresy on more than one occasion. He went to prison rather than retract his theories."

"Shame what happened to him," Songa mused.

"I take it they executed him?" Jason asked.

"No, dear, he died on Sigma Proximus," she answered. "He was killed by one of the animals he was studying. I think our understanding of medicine would be five hundred years ahead of where we are now if he'd have lived. He was only thirty when he died."

"That young?"

"He was brilliant, ahead of his time," she nodded.

"A savant," Yohne agreed.

"Like Einstein," Jyslin told him as she reached them, sitting on the edge of the examination table across from him. "You look silly."

He gave her a face, which made her laugh.

"Well, he wouldn't have lived much longer," Yohne said, a bit sadly. "If I remember my history right, all the Karinnes were killed in the Third Civil War. The entire house was destroyed. That was about ten years after Gora died."

"Them and seven other houses," Songa said. "There was a great deal of literature about that era, and that was my minor in medical school. The Karinnes, the Odarres, the Shuvennes, the Poyalles, the Sendarres, the Makati house of Ovi, the Brannes, and the Wurennes were all destroyed in that war."

"Sounds like it was pretty nasty."

"It was our version of your second world war," Songa told him. "It shaped our modern history, because that was the war that brought the Empress' noble house into power."

"Sounds ugly."

"It was the most destructive and costliest war in our history," she answered. "It lasted fifteen years and killed nearly a *billion* Faey and Makati. It also permanently damaged four planets and made them unable to support life."

"Damn," Jason grunted.

"Yeah, damn," she nodded. "Well, Jason, your alpha patterns are almost textbook with a Faey's," she announced. "And different from non-telepathic humans. That's more or less what I expected, because that's mainstream among telepaths of nearly any species. It just proves that you're not really different from other telepaths."

"Well, if you want something unexpected, come over here," Rann told her.

"What is it?" *Oh, you can take that off now*, Songa said, then sent to him pointedly. "What?"

Okay, here's Jason's DNA, Rann sent, pointing. *Let me bring up Tim and Temika's. Alright, look here. Here, here, and here.*

"What's wrong? Jason asked aloud, taking the helmet off. *Am I a mutant or something?*

Songa laughed aloud, then gave him a grin. *No, Jason, but there's something interesting in your DNA. The sequenced pairs that deal with your talent are different from Tim and Temika's. We expected yours to look like theirs. That was actually surprising.*

Tim and Temika share a common ancestor, Rann added. *Their DNA is descended from a common line.*

What? They're relatives?

Rann nodded. *It must have been a very, very long time ago, but they definitely share a common ancestor. We thought that you might as well, you know, explain why some humans have talent, but from the looks of it, you don't. But there is something very, curious, about your base pairs. Tim and Temika's DNA in the areas that involve talent are amazingly similar to Faey DNA. It's almost a 90% match, and that's very strange.*

It's Gora's Law, Rann, *I'm telling you*, Yohne pressed. *Human telepaths developed talent just like we did, and since human and Faey are so genetically similar, it should be identical when it comes to talent.*

Be that as it may, what's interesting about you, Jason, is that the parts of your DNA that would deal with telepathic ability are different from Tim and Temika, and from us, for that matter. Tim and Temika are 90% identical to Faey in that segment of their DNA, but you are only 82% identical to Faey, and only 88% identical to Tim and Temika. Parts of your sequence are similar to Tim and Temika's, parts are similar to ours, and some parts of your sequence aren't similar to either us or them, it's unique. And that blows Gora's Law off the lawn, he sent with a smirk at Yohne.

I don't understand. What does that mean? Jason sent, his thoughts tinged with concern.

It means, my dear fearless leader, Songa sent with a sly grin, *that you may have talent, but the way you developed it is different from how the other humans did. We really need to find other human telepaths and compare. If more have Jason's DNA sequence, maybe it will show that two different genetic groups of humans developed talent through evolution at the same time, but using a different genetic footprint. It would be very provocative research to publish. It would certainly shake up the genetics field.*

I don't understand.

Well, look at it this way, Songa sent, looking at him. *You and Tim are white, but Temika is black. You three are different genetic sub-types of the same species, but all three of you are still human. Alright, now, you three are telepaths, while other humans are not. That too is a slight genetic variation, just enough to classify you as a sub-species within your species. Like breeds of vulpar. They're all vulpar, but they have very slight genetic variations, shared through each breed. Similar to each other, but different from everyone else. That's how you three are compared to other humans. You're all human, but you're a different breed of human within the race. The genetic commonality you share is what gives you your talent, something that other humans lack. Well, you are slightly different*

from Tim and Temika. You are also a slightly different genetic sub-type within the species compared to others. So, you're a different breed of telepath compared to the other two.

It's really nothing to worry over, Jason, Rann assured him. It really would only interest a doctor or geneticist. It's not a disease or condition, it's just a curious little thing that really doesn't matter at all.

In actuality, Jason found it to be very interesting, because of the Kimdori. Jason could sense them, could detect their unique power, and this difference in his own DNA could very well be the reason. If he was just a tiny bit different from other telepaths, well, that would explain why he was sensitive to some things that other telepaths were not. It was entirely possible.

But there was one thing that he could see from this examination, and from how they were talking, and that was the doctors would not be able to answer the question of *why* some humans had talent. The task Miaari had set upon him was still on his mind. They too had discovered the what, the how, but it still didn't answer why.

Humans had talent, and they had it because they had the genetic footprint for it. Fine, that was a given.

But *why*? Why did they have it?

It was a frustrating question.

Okay, okay...telepathy was a genetic ability, like a person with blue eyes. That was the how. Now, why would a human spontaneously develop telepathic power? Or, more to the point, why would a certain block of humanity start showing this ability after telepathic aliens conquered and occupied the planet?

Heredity, clearly. Rann had said that Tim and Temika were related, that they had a common ancestor. So, logically, everyone in the genetic tree of their family would carry the genes for telepathic potential. That would be the segment of DNA that the Faey would be testing humans to find, so they could weed out the potential telepaths and either isolate them or eliminate them. But that also didn't completely explain Jason, since they told him that his own telepathic ability was slightly different, that he was outside of their genetic tree. What was it Songa said? Some of his DNA was similar to Tim and Temika's, some of it was similar to a Faey's, and some of it was—

Hold it.

"Rann," he said aloud, coming over to them. "You said that Tim and Temika were what, 90% identical to a Faey in that part of their DNA that governed talent, right?"

That's right.

"Okay then. Here's the question. If we developed telepathic ability spontaneously, *why* would it be so identical to a Faey? I mean, we might be genetically similar, but our environments are different. And if my own telepathic genes are different, then why would Tim and Temika be so similar to a Faey?"

Gora's Law, Rann sent, giving Yohne a look, who returned an overly smug one. *Since we're so genetically identical, virtually branches of the same race, it's not only feasible, but entirely expected that humans who possess the genetic footprint for telepathy would be closely identical to ours. We have the same brain structure and evolved in similar environments. Since our brains are identical, it's no stretch to see that we'd develop the same genetic process for expressing telepathy.*

"Okay, that's a reasonable argument, at least until you look at *me*," he said forcefully. "If it's so expected for humans to develop the same genetic footprint for talent, then *why* am I different?"

Rann looked to respond, even raising a hand to gesture, but no sending ensued. He opened his mouth, and then closed it, and then furrowed his brow. He looked at Yohne, who shrugged, then he looked to Songa, who returned his puzzled look. *A mutation maybe?* Rann finally proposed. *Or a case of parallel development?*

I think Jason is making a point. His footprint should be identical to Tim and Temika's, but it's not. So, what would cause it? Songa sent thoughtfully.

"It's not the *what*, it's the *why*," Jason said to himself, leaning over Rann and looking at the helix of his DNA, though he didn't understand what it meant. "*Why* does a human have talent? That's a question that someone asked me, and it's a question that I need to find an answer for."

Why? Genetics, Yohne sent.

"No, that's *how*. The question is *why*."

I don't think he's asking a scientific question, Jyslin interjected. *It sounds more like philosophy to me.*

Why would any species develop telepathic power? Maybe there was a need for it. Faey have always been telepathic, it's been hypothesized that we developed telepathy as a defense mechanism, or maybe to give us an advantage over different sub-species of Faey that existed on Draconis millions of years ago. The telepathic branch became dominant, was able to out-hunt the other strains and survived when they died out.

I think you're going a bit too deep here Yohne, Rann chided. *It's a matter of evolution. Humans are simply taking the next step. That's why humans are developing talent.*

No, that's too general, Songa sent. *It's simple logic, guys. Why do humans have talent? Because they have the genes for it. Why do they have the genes for it? Because their parents did. Tim and Temika are related, so their genetic footprint for telepathy is the same, with some minor variations between them because their genetic lines diverged somewhat. But Jason's not in their family tree, and that means that his powers are a little different, because his genes are different. His family line might have had a similar footprint to them, but the introduction of other DNA into his line caused his family's genetic footprint to change over time. Somewhere back through their family trees, there has to be an alpha ancestor that was the first to develop the telepathic footprint. And that alpha ancestor passed it down to everyone beneath her in the tree. Tim and Temika's alpha ancestor is the same one, but Jason may have had a different alpha ancestor, one that also developed telepathic ability. And just like Tim and Temika's ancestor, Jason's ancestor passed this trait down through her line. Or maybe he too shares that same alpha ancestor, but his footprint was altered much more significantly through the introduction of genetic traits that weren't introduced into Tim and Temika's genetic lines.*

And *that* was the *why*! Jason almost felt his brain light up, it hit him so hard. It was so simple! No wonder the Faey couldn't answer the question! They were no doubt throwing all their science at it, all their technology, trying to find an explanation that was staring them in the face!

Humans had talent *because they had the genetic footprint for it.*

Why? Because they were part of a block of humans that shared common ancestry!

And the biggest question of all...why did humans have talent? Because somewhere, some time in the past, some "alpha ancestor" developed the genetic footprint for talent, then passed it down to his or her descendents. It wasn't the complete answer, but Jason just *knew* that the answer he was looking for was going to be found somewhere back through the development of his genetic line. It wasn't a matter of environment or genetic evolution, it was a matter of *geneology*! It wasn't science, it was *history*! That was where the answer would be!

And again, it came back to *why*. Why did humans have talent?

Because somewhere in history, it became part of their genetic line. And that piece of history was the answer to the puzzle.

That was an answer that no amount of Faey science was going to discover. That was why the Faey could not answer the question. They could discover the *how*, and the *what*, but without access to the history of Earth, it was a mystery that would forever be unsolved.

They had to find Tim and Temika's common ancestor. That was the answer. If they could find that common ancestor between Tim and Temika, then Miaari's enigmatic question would be answered, and she had told him that he had to answer that question if he had any hope of succeeding in his difficult task.

He was sure of it.

So...now that he knew where to look, it came down to figuring out how to find out. Since it wasn't going to be a matter of science, but of history, then the first place to start would be to try to find out where and when Tim and Temika's different family trees converged. They'd need to try to trace their geneology and try to find that common ancestor, and that common ancestor was the first signpost on the road that would lead to the answer to *why*.

Jason? Jason? Jyslin sent in concern, prodding him with her fingers.

What? Oh, sorry, he answered. *I was thinking about something.*

You know, with these genetic codes mapped, we could easily test everyone here to see if they have this genetic footprint, Rann mused mentally. *It would take all of ten seconds.*

I'm not sure everyone would like you sticking them with needles.

Oh, I wouldn't need a needle. I could rig up a device that would scan the DNA of the skin. Just touch it to them, and it would only take about ten seconds for it to return a response.

What a brilliant idea! *Rann, you just became my new best friend,* Jason sent to him earnestly. *Build it. Build it so it's small, portable, and easy to hide.*

Why does it—ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, he sent, his thoughts enlightened. *You want to use it to find other human telepaths out in the world!*

We're going to need more, Jason affirmed. *If we can find other people with the potential before the Faey do, we can get to them first. I'm sure that after they see their options, at least some of them would side with us rather than become lapdogs and spies for the Imperium's secret police. How fast can you build something like that?*

It would take a few days, he answered. *I could cannibalize some of the equipment we have here to build it. I could build it to look for some critical sequence pairs, since there's some genetic variations between you and Tim and Temika for example, that means that there's going to be some genetic variation from telepath to telepath. There's some common patterns in all three of you, so I could build the device to look for those. They don't show up in non-telepaths, and should be broad enough to catch a large range of humans with the footprint.*

Do it, Jason ordered. *Outside of caring for Kumi, it's your primary responsibility.*

I'll get right on it, he answered. *I knew taking all those technical repair and plasmonic systems courses would come in handy,* he sent, giving Songa an amused look.

Oh, stuff it, she retorted archly.

Just because he knew where to look, it didn't help all that much, because he honestly had no idea where to start.

He sat in his room, feet propped up on the desk, panel in his lap as he searched through a bunch of old records that had once been in the American system, but had been absorbed into Civnet after the subjugation. Just because he knew that Tim and Temika had a common ancestor, that didn't in any way make it easy to find that ancestor. For one, all the records on Tim McGee were *gone*. After he and Symone escaped, and they thought them dead, Imperial Intelligence had gone through Earth's entire datanet and stripped every single record of Tim out of *everything*. It was as if he had never existed. There wasn't even any record of him attending school in New Orleans. He didn't even have a birth certificate. They had been amazingly thorough.

Temika had almost no paper trail. He found her birth records and used the names on her birth certificate to search back through about a century of her family, but then her family dropped off the face of the world. The last record he could find was for Joseph Daniels, who was born in 1901 to Sam and Delilah Daniels, in Bayou La Batrie, Alabama. But there was no record of either Sam or Delilah before that. He did remember her talking about her grandmother, who had to be Delilah, and he did recall her saying something about her grandmother being the daughter of one of the slaves freed after the Civil War. So, odds were, there was almost no paper trail on her grandmother's side. And since Sam Daniels was also most likely the child or grandchild of a formal slave, there was little hope to find

anything useful on that side either. Any record of them or their parents had most likely been destroyed in the Civil War.

So, after that revelation, he found himself almost immediately stuck. He finally had an idea of where to look to answer that question...*why*.

Or at least he was stuck concerning Tim and Temika.

He knew quite a bit of his own family tree. His father was born to first generation Americans, and his great-grandparents on both his grandmother and grandfather's sides had come from Great Britain. His grandfather's parents were English, and his grandmother's parents had been from Scotland. His mother's family had immigrated from Quebec before she was born, and before that, her side of the family had immigrated to Canada from France *way* back in the early 1700's. Her ancestors had fought in the French and Indian Wars. Her geneology was almost exclusively of French descent except for one American Indian great-great grandmother.

Before that, it got a little fuzzy. The only thing he really knew for sure was that his grandmother's ancestors had been minor nobility in the lowlands of Scotland, and that one of his grandfather's ancestors had been a servant in Queen Elizabeth I's court. Outside of one ancestor, the entirety of his family tree came from England, Scotland, and France...as far as he knew.

So, if the docs were right and there was some kind of commonality in the family trees of telepaths, then they'd have to be of English, Scottish, or French ancestry. Well, at least for his own family. If they were right and Jason wasn't related to Tim and Temika at all, then that meant that telepathic ability had sprung up in two places or more, and that Tim and Temika's "alpha ancestor" could have been from anywhere. It could be some white ancestor in Temika's line, or some black ancestor in Tim's, either or. One thing was for sure, given the fact that they were two different races, one of them had to have an ancestor outside his or her race of appearance.

All things considered, he'd bet it was Temika. Her facial structure wasn't quite what one would consider entirely African in appearance. The first time he'd seen her, he'd taken notice of the shape of her eyes, nose, mouth, and cheeks, and had even then thought that she had to be of mixed ancestry. That certainly wasn't to say that Tim didn't have a black ancestor somewhere in his family tree, but going just on appearances, if he was going to lay odds on which of the two had a race-crossing ancestor, he'd put his money on Temika's family.

This might be a job for Miaari. It was going to take quite a bit of digging to find hard to get information like this, and that was a job for a professional seeker of information. It was something to which he couldn't devote an inordinate amount of time, because he had other, equally important things to do.

One of those other things was sitting on his panel's email queue, waiting for his attention. He switched over to mail, and saw that his dropship was ready for delivery. It had cost him a serious chunk of credit, but it was absolutely necessary. It was brand new, right off the assembly line, a shiny new ARL-3 Space Ground Transport. It had cost him C577,583 after taxes and after he had it equipped with shields and mid-grade MPAC cannons, a considerable amount of money. But it was a self-contained cargo dropship, the largest dropship he could get that would fit through the doors of the Lincoln warehouse, a ship that would be carrying a C117,300 high-capacity industrial replicator inside it. That too was part of the invoice, for he'd bought the replicator and requested to have it loaded on the dropship once it was complete and ready for shipment.

Interesting. They wanted face to face confirmation of the shipping arrangements. Well, that wasn't all that difficult. *Jyslin*, he sent strongly, so he would be heard basically anywhere in town. *Come home for a minute, I need your help.*

I'm in the kitchen, I'll be right up, came her open reply.

Jason found the number to call in the email, and queued it up in his panel's comm program as he wrote down some information on a piece of paper. *Jyslin* opened the door carrying a sandwich of some kind, complete with bread. *Bread?*

Yohne made it from scratch, she sent. She may be a doctor, but she's also one hell of a cook. She's teaching Temika how to do it right now.

Well, that's probably the one and only thing that could make Temika interact with a Faey, Jason grunted. Mika loves to cook, and being able to make homemade bread from scratch is something she'd probably love to know.

What did you need?

You get to be my secretary, he told her.

She gave him a quirky smile. Oh, a secretary? Is this going to end up with me being hiked over the desk? she asked, her sending complete with this image of her as the secretary succumbing to the ardor of the boss.

Put your game face on, woman, he sent. This is serious. Thrynn wants face to face confirmation of the shipping arrangements for the dropship. I need a Faey for that.

Not a problem, love, she sent assuringly, pulling her long red hair back from her face and starting to twist it into a pony tail. No secretary would go around with her hair unbound. Find me a rubber band or pin or something, will you?

Once Jason helped her tie her hair back into a pony tail, she sat down in front of the panel and looked over the information he had written for her on the pad. He stood behind the panel, out of view of the video, and Jyslin placed the call. After navigating through an automated menu, she looked at him meaningfully when the audio picked up. *"Shipping, this is Yeris. How may I help you?"* a male Faey voice called over the audio.

"Yes, I'm calling to schedule an appointment to have a dropship shipped," she answered.

"I can help you with that, madam, can you give me your customer ID number please?" Jyslin read off the number Jason had written down. *"VulTech Technologies Corporation, madam?"*

"That's us," she said with a disarming smile.

"Alright, madam, your dropship is ready for shipment right now. It's been loaded with a piece of cargo delivered from Kodiken Shipping, as per your instructions. I've been given your delivery confirmation code for that, let me send it to you."

"Good, I was just about to ask if that was there," Jyslin said with a nod.

"Yes, madam, it's arrived and has already been loaded and secured. Now, would you like to send a team to pick up the unit, or would you prefer to have it delivered? Please keep in mind that if you come to pick up the unit, the cost of shipping that was already added to the price of the unit will be refunded to you."

"We'd like to have it delivered, please."

"Alright. Before we arrange a shipping date, please allow me to explain our shipping procedures."

"Go right ahead."

"Thank you. Your dropship will be delivered to any destination which is convenient, but falls within certain safety guidelines. The destination must have sufficient space to safely land the dropship and a skimmer, and must be at a spaceport or company facility capable of handling the unit. It will be flown to its destination by a Thrynne pilot and a staff of three maintenance personnel, fully licensed and insured," he said quickly, "who will be responsible for signing off on the delivery acceptance inspection. A skimmer will escort the dropship to its destination, both to inspect the unit in flight and also to return the pilot and inspectors home after delivery is complete. The cost of shipping has already been added to the price of the unit, so you will incur no additional charges."

Jyslin looked to Jason, who nodded. *"That sounds completely reasonable," she told him pleasantly.*

"Once the delivery inspection is complete and both parties are satisfied that the unit was delivered in working order and without damage, the final contract will be signed that will transfer ownership over to your corporation. You must have an executive on site with the authority to sign this contract or we cannot leave the unit with you."

Jason frowned. That wasn't going to make it easy, because he didn't want anyone to know that a human owned VulTech, but he could figure something out. He nodded to Jyslin a bit reluctantly. *That's gonna be tricky, but we have no choice. We'll figure something out.*

"That won't be a problem," she told him.

"Very good then, madam. What location would you like to take delivery?"

"The VulTech headquarters, 1 Quickmart Drive, Lincoln, Jurea Province, American Sector, Terra. The global location code for this facility is NA23-4658-7836."

"One moment. Alright, I have the location now. Confirming, global location code NA23-4658-7836."

"That's right. Yes, that's the location." *Did you know that someone already took a picture of the warehouse? Global positioning has a picture of it with the VulTech logo on it.*

Well, I had to supply a picture of the building in with the tax paperwork when I bought it for VulTech, and I took the picture after I painted it. They probably used the same picture.

Probably.

"Delivery to this location can be done in six hours at the earliest. Any receiving appointment past that works for us, madam."

Tomorrow?

Yeah, I already did the math, just use what I have written down.

"We'd like to take delivery at 06:30 Imperial Standard Time tomorrow," she told the clerk, looking at the panel monitor.

"06:30 Imperial Standard Time, 29 Romaa. Correct?"

"That's right."

"Alright, madam, the delivery time, date, and location have been confirmed. We'll see you tomorrow morning at 06:30 at the delivery site."

"We'll be here," she told him with a smile.

"Very good. Now that delivery is confirmed, let me take a moment to describe our warranty and maintenance policies." Jason listened as the male Faey on the other end of that call went over those policies, which sounded quite advantageous to the customer. The dropship had an unconditional three year warranty; if *anything* broke, for *any* reason outside of combat or sabotage, Thrynne would repair it for free. They also would sell parts directly to VulTech basically at cost for seven years after the warranty expired, would send a maintenance team to the unit and perform maintenance on site at rates that were highly competitive with other maintenance shops, and offered in-house insurance for the unit that was very cheap. Thrynne took quality *very* seriously, and they were so certain about the quality and durability of their dropship, they were literally willing to put their money where their mouths were. Jason knew that none of that would apply to him, since he was going to basically void the warranty by putting the ship through extensive customization...but the ability to buy cheap replacement parts directly from the company would be useful.

Now Jason saw why a Thrynne dropship was more expensive than other companies; you weren't buying a dropship, you were buying a commitment from the corporation that built that dropship.

"Is there anything else that I can help you with, madam?" the clerk asked after completing his recitation of Thrynne policies.

"No, I think that about covers it. Thank you very much."

"You're welcome, madam. And thank you for choosing Thrynne for your dropship needs."

Jyslin ended the call, and she looked at him. *You know, those people at Thrynne really know how to train their customer service.*

They make a quality product, and aren't afraid to put their money behind it. Jason centered himself, sitting down on the bed and putting his fingers to his temples, and then performed a trick that Jyslin had taught him since she had arrived, one of the first things she thought he'd need to be able to do.

Send to non-telepathic humans.

There was a certain way you pushed it out. A subtle alteration of the *timbre* of the sending, kind of like speaking at a certain pitch. That was the trick of it. A non-telepathic mind could receive sending if the telepath was careful to do it this way. This was the first time he'd attempted to use it this way, but he'd had enough practice doing this by practicing with Luke, who was willing to be his partner. As Jason taught Luke about flying, Luke had allowed him to practice sending to him. It certainly took a *lot* more effort and energy, kind of like stirring molasses with a wooden spoon. You had to really push, but you also had to be very careful or you'd spill it, slosh it out of the bowl. That was what this was like. He had to put a lot of effort behind it, but it had to be *gentle* or it'd cause pain to the non-telepaths that received it.

Now hear this, Jason sent, giving his sending enough power to reach the edges of the city, but not sending with such force that those in the same building with him were overwhelmed by the power of it. *This is Jason. Jyslin has taught me how to send messages like this one so everyone in the community can hear them. So everyone calm down and relax. You're not going crazy, you're not hearing voices, you're hearing me broadcasting a telepathic message that everyone can hear and understand. And I can't hear you, this is a one-way communication, so don't try to answer.*

I need everyone who helped do the refit on my skimmer to report to the governor's mansion conference room immediately. I also need Symone, Temika, Doc Rann, and Doc Songa to report to the conference room as well. The dropship refit project is now on the table, ladies and gentlemen, we just arranged delivery of it a few minutes ago. So, we need to meet and go over what's going to happen in the next few days.

Jyslin gave him a startled look, then laughed. *You should have warned them about that.*

If they want to be resistance fighters, they'd better get used to the idea of handing surprises, Jason sent seriously. *I didn't warn them on purpose. I want to see how they react.*

This should be interesting.

The reaction was one of shock. No one in the community had expected something like that, and it was evident almost immediately, when a multitude of people radioed in asking what the hell was going on, that most of them thought it was some kind of trick perpetrated by the newcomers. It *did*, however, get everyone's attention, and cause everyone he wanted to come to the conference room.

Once he got them all there, he assured them it *was* him, and then changed the subject to the dropship. He used his panel to project a hologram of the dropship in schematic form. "Here it is, ladies and gentlemen, our next project. We can't start working on getting Cheyenne Mountain ready to move in until we refit the dropship, because it's going to be carrying everything. Now, this ship is about thirty times bigger than my skimmer, so it's going to take quite a while to get it ready. Tomorrow, just after noon, the dropship is going to be delivered to the warehouse in Lincoln, and we're *all* going to be there to receive it. I don't want the people from Thrynne thinking that VulTech is anything other than a legitimate business, so they're going to see lots of human and Faey workers at the warehouse. Now, since there are about forty of us and only one skimmer that can only carry ten at a time, that means it's going to take a few trips to get everyone there. So I want everyone to draw numbers out of a hat so we can figure out who goes when. And before anyone whines about not getting much sleep tonight, keep in mind I have to fly every leg of it," he told them.

"This means that it's going to be your first real test," he told them. "You're going to be exposed to unknown Faey that might try to listen in on your surface thoughts. This is when you're going to prove that you can control your stray thoughts. If those Faey come and go and never think the wiser, then you're ready."

You sure they're ready for that? Jyslin sent.

Jason glanced at her. *Ready or not, it's necessary*, he answered. *If those Thrynne people come and find an empty warehouse with no workers there, it might raise a red flag. They have to see what they expect to see.*

Point.

“Symone has taught you how to keep a handle on your surface thoughts,” Jason told them. “It’s not going to be much different from the exercises, only this time you have a reason not to mess up. Rann, Songa, Symone, you’re going to be there too, as employees,” he told the two. “They need to see more Faey than just Jyslin. The people from Thrynne need to see nothing more than what they expect to see, a new Terran business that just bought its first dropship, with Faey executives and human employees. All of us will be the actors on the stage.

“Yes, it’s going to be dangerous, and it’s unexpected, but that’s what it’s all about. We’ll never get off the ground if we can’t deal with stress and be able to roll with unexpected surprises. This is a test of all of us, to see how well we can handle an unknown situation. I could have told you all about this, but then you’d have time to think about it and be ready. What will happen tomorrow won’t be much different than what we might be doing later. So, tomorrow we find out how ready we are to deal with the unexpected. And tomorrow, we get the first big piece of what we’re going to need to do what we’re going to do.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, Jayce?” someone called.

“Not really, but we have to find out if we can do it, and it’s not something we can really prepare for. Symone taught all of you, you know what you need to know, so let’s find out tomorrow if it’s going to work. We need to find out *now*, when it won’t matter as much, than later, when it can get us all killed.”

“Well, that makes some sense,” someone called.

“By the way, this does *not* mean we’re not having evening training,” Jyslin called sternly. “Everyone on the evening rotation had better show up.”

Since two days after she arrived, Jyslin had been training everyone in basic military skills. She had two training sessions, and had split the community in half; half of them had training in the morning, the other half had training in the evening. She’d wanted to train for more than four hours a day, but everyone had other duties, so she had to make due with the time she had. Jason himself did not get out of this training, he was part of the morning session. They didn’t yet have enough railguns to go around, but Jason had had a shipment of 30 Mark VI Panther MPAC rifles shipped to the warehouse. Everyone in the training session had a weapon with which to train. Jason didn’t like shelling out the C72,500 for them, but he’d already planned on buying at least some MPAC rifles. They would use them both as weapons and also as misdirection, to complete the illusion that armored figures were Faey soldiers and not guerillas.

Jyslin was quite a drill sergeant. She didn’t take any lip off anyone, she was harsh, she was demanding, and she was quick to criticize. But she was also quick to complement, and though everyone hated her when she was on that field, nobody said she was unfair. In just eight days, just about everyone had been trained in the use of an MPAC, and they had started learning basic small unit tactics, things like covering partners, moving without getting killed, looking over the terrain to find the safest and fastest way to move from one place to another, things that a seasoned combat veteran like Jyslin knew.

Yesterday, they’d had their first unit against unit training session. Like any MPAC, these Panther models had a setting that basically fired a magnetic envelope holding pressurized air, air that was drawn in through the venting system. When the magnetic envelope ruptured, the air decompressed rapidly, delivering some impressive force. It was something akin to a “stun” setting because the round struck with some force, but it was non-lethal. It carried enough kinetic energy to really sting when it impacted, like being hit with a paintball, and could probably give someone a mild concussion if it hit them in the head. Yesterday at lunch, between the two training sessions, they’d held a “capture the flag” game between the morning and afternoon teams. It was a practical exercise using what Jyslin had taught them so far, and it had been very...*exciting*. Jason had literally had fun, even though they were training for real combat, training for the day when they’d be killing people. But at that moment, there was

something very exciting and fun about trying to maneuver around the ten defending guards protecting the morning crew's flag and capturing it.

God, was that a shock. After eliminating seven of them, losing five of his own team, and getting to the stand, he found *Meya* standing beside it, holding an MPAC. He was so surprised that she shot him and eliminated him from the game.

After that round was over, he found out that *Myra* had been standing under their own flag, and that *Jyslin* had put them there on purpose as a lesson, a lesson to *never be surprised*. And was he ever surprised to come around that corner and find himself looking right down the barrel of *Meya's* MPAC.

That just added to the score he was going to settle with the twins. Ever since the day he'd first met them, they'd always got the best of him, always been one step ahead of him, always managed to surprise him. Just as *Kumi* couldn't quite get the best of *Jason*, he'd been continually upstaged by *Kumi's* cunning twin guards. He really wanted to even that score, so he invited them to play along in the next exercise, one on each team, both to put them out where he could at least shoot at one of them, and also to give everyone a little experience in working with a *Faey* in a real combat situation. When they were out there, they'd be working with either *Symone* or *Jyslin*, so they had to get used to the idea of it. *Meya* and *Myra* were professional soldiers, career women, and he was sure they'd learn a few things from them during the exercise.

"Luke, I need you to come with me right now," *Jason* told him. "We're going to start ferrying supplies to the warehouse and get it ready, so people have blankets and food and stuff, and we have all our tools there. I want everyone else to gather up everything we used on the last refit and store it out by the landing pad," he ordered. "I'd like to have the first load on the skimmer and ready to go once it gets dark. We get the critical supplies over first, then we'll take people, then we take as much gear as we can before sunrise." He looked around. "Alright, any questions?"

There was silence.

"Alright, let's get going."

They broke up after that and got to work. *Jason* could tell that everyone was nervous about this, that the surprise he'd dropped on them about having to fool *Faey* using the concentration tricks that *Symone* had taught most of them had unsettled them, but that's what all of this was going to be about. These people had to be able to take surprises like that and deal with them. Being a guerilla was all about adapting to the environment as it was presented, not trying to control the situation.

But, *Jason* had a good feeling about it. He was confident that they could do it, or he wouldn't have arranged the test.

By sunset, a large pile of supplies, tools, equipment, and personal effects were stacked in neat piles by the skimmer, and the first load, food, blankets, and some sleeping bags and mattresses, were already loaded onto the skimmer, taking up the entirety of the skimmer's small cargo bay and half of the passenger cabin. *Jason* and *Luke* had to squeeze around boxes and totes to get to the control seats, and *Jason* sat down, rather pointedly, in the co-pilot's seat. "Alright *Luke*, start the checklist," *Jason* told him.

"Yes sir," he answered, taking the pilot's chair.

Hold on! Don't close the hatch! *Meya* sent. *Jason* looked up and saw her running towards the skimmer, with *Myra* and *Rann* behind her. *Jason* gave them a strange look, and was about to send in reply to ask why, but he heard *Meya* literally vault up the steps and into the cabin. *Thanks, I didn't know if we were going to make it*, she told him as *Myra* piled in behind her, then they helped *Rann* up and into the cabin.

A bit cramped, *Rann* noted.

You can sit on my lap, Doc, *Meya* sent with a naughty tilt to her thoughts.

"What are you doing?" *Jason* asked.

"We're going with you, of course," *Myra* said with a grin over a stack of boxes. "Push off, *Meya*, there are some seats up front that aren't filled."

“Oh, no,” Jason said sternly. “You two have no business going to Lincoln. You put your noses in entirely too many things here as it is.”

Oh, give us a break, Myra sent with a mental scoff. We’re bored, you need our help, and you know we’ll never say anything. Truth be told, me and Meya have been kicking around the idea of staying behind.

What? Kumi needs you, Jason sent hotly. And this isn’t your fight.

It became our fight when they tried to kill us, Meya sent seriously. Don’t forget, honey, the same people you’re fighting tried to kill us. Don’t you think that makes this our fight? We’re on the same side, and as long as we’re here with you, we’ll do what we can to help.

You can try to make us leave, babe, but I don’t think you have it in you, Myra sent with a wicked little smirk. We’re not afraid of you like everyone else is.

Jason gave them both a dark scowl, but, he had to admit...she had a point. They *did* try to kill Kumi and everyone else, and if it helped get back at those individuals, then Meya and Myra would help. And he did feel that he could trust them in that regard. They were already in this.

Jason grunted audibly, then sighed. “Find a seat. And no molesting the Doc,” he ordered, which made all three of them laugh. They pushed their way up front, but there were only two seats. Myra claimed one, Meya the other, and she quite deliberately grabbed hold of Rann and pulled him into her lap before her sister could get hold of him.

“They coming?” Luke asked, in a low tone.

“Yeah, they want to help us set up over on the other side.”

“Me and Meya are pilots too, in case you get tired,” Myra added aloud. “That way you two can get some sleep.”

He wasn’t sure about giving the skimmer to those two without supervision, but he could split them up so one of them could fly with Luke. That way they could at least sit out one run and get a quick nap in.

“Retracting the stairs and closing the hatch,” Luke reported. “I’m done with the engine start checklist, Jayce. Starting the engines.” From behind them came that familiar high-pitched whine rev up, getting higher and louder, then it levelled off. “It shows green for bringing up stealth.” He flipped on the external speaker. “Stand clear!” he barked, and a few people outside scurried away. Luke’s finger punched the buttons to bring up the stealth screen section by section, then activated it. “Stealth matrix is up and running, showing green,” he reported.

Why have people stand clear? Meya asked.

There’s an ambient static charge on the hull, Jason answered. It’s part of the system we invented that hides us from sensors.

It’s in the hull? Meya asked in surprise. Most stealth systems are an external shield that’s projected out from the ship. A stealth screen that scatters sensor energy and reflects internal energy signatures back towards the ship, containing them. They can’t hide the physical appearance of the ship though, that’s why Faey use visual systems to look for ships too. That’s why there are so many cameras. They’re looking for ships that the sensors can’t pick up.

I thought about trying to do it that way, but I wouldn’t have been able to come up with it alone in the time I had, he answered. The one we built works, and it does hide the ship visibly. The matrix absorbs light energy. From outside, right now, the ship looks like nothing but a black shadow with no depth. A silhouette.

Ah, no wonder they can’t find the ship, and why you only fly it at night, Myra sent, her sending tinged with admiration. Damn clever, Jason. There are some new stealth shields that just started coming out that reflect and scatter light along with sensor energy, but it always leaves a telltale visible shimmer that cameras can pick up, so it’s really not useful on anything bigger than a fighter, and only as long as the fighter isn’t close to the camera. Your idea works as long as there’s no light behind you backlighting the ship’s silhouette.

Exactly, he affirmed with a nod.

The ship lifted up from the ground, and Luke retracted the landing skids. “Gear doors are green,” he relayed as he pointed the ship down the valley. Because of the charge on the hull, the skimmer couldn’t fly through the hologram or it would disrupt it. So, the ship flew down the valley to the edge of the hologram, then flew out from under it before gaining any altitude. They could fly the skimmer through the holographic image if they didn’t have the stealth matrix running...but that’s something that they weren’t going to be doing. Luke tuned in to the air traffic channel and listened for anything out of the ordinary as he punched the ship into a nice arcing course that would bring them right down into Lincoln.

How long is it going to take to get there? Rann sent.

“Oh, a bit over an hour, maybe,” Jason answered absently. “We can’t break the sound barrier, or our wake’ll be picked up by sensors.”

“Why do I feel like an American walking the streets of Tokyo,” Luke chuckled.

“Oh, I apologize, Luke,” Rann said with a sheepish smile. “I’m afraid it’s become quite the habit already for me to send to Jason. I’m surprised at myself how quickly I came to accept the idea of humans with talent.”

“Well, that’s alright,” he said with a glance back. “It’s been kind of interesting to see for myself what the few people in town have said about the Faey. Most of us had never seen a Faey before til Miss Symone came here.”

“So, what do you think about us?” Rann asked curiously.

“Well, seems to me that you’re just *people*,” he answered. “You can do something we can’t, but outside of that, you don’t seem all that different. You act a lot like us, your government is just as screwed up as ours was, you know, there are good Faey and bad Faey just like there are good people and bad people, stuff like that. Some folks call you *aliens*, well, I can’t right likely see why. Miss Symone didn’t ever seem like an *alien*, to me she was just Symone. I thought that I might think differently about that when Miss Jyslin and you folks came, but so far I ain’t seen nothing that made me change my mind.” He glanced back again. “Not everyone thinks as kindly of you as I do though. Some people don’t like you just because you’re Faey.”

“Well, I’m sure there are Faey who don’t like humans just because they’re human,” Rann noted.

“Just my point, Doc Rann. Faey ain’t all that much different from us. You just have bigger toys and can do the telepathy thing. Take those away, and we’re kinda similar.”

“I’m sure if Yohne was here she’d be screaming Gora’s Law,” Rann laughed. “But I think you’re right, Luke. I’ve noticed that humans are very, very similar to us. We’re not just genetically similar, we’re psychologically similar. We can really relate well to humans because they’re so much *like us*. If it wasn’t for our talent, I think we’d have a much better relationship with humanity, but so many humans are afraid of us because of our talent, they never give us a chance.”

“Well, it’s a mighty big club you’re holding over a fella, Doc Rann,” Luke told him. “If I didn’t trust Mister Jason, I’d be afraid of him. And if I didn’t trust that you all would keep your word, I’d probably be afraid of you too.”

“Well, might I ask why you came out here, Luke?” Rann asked.

“Wasn’t nothing but the lottery, Doc,” he shrugged. “My wife got assigned to a farm in the lottery, and they were going to split us up. Neither of us wanted that, so we packed a truck and headed for the hills.”

“What? They weren’t going to let you stay together?” he asked with surprising heat.

“No sir,” he said with a shake of his head. “I’m a mechanic, Doc Rann, and they wouldn’t let me leave my work assignment, they said they had enough mechanics on the farms, they didn’t need any more. They wouldn’t even let me volunteer to move to farming, cause mechanics are a critical need skill. We tried everything we could think of to stay together, but the Employment Bureau wouldn’t keep us together. So we ran away.”

"I do not blame you at all," Rann said vehemently. "I'd *never* let them separate me and Songa." He looked at Jason. "I have a much better understanding of why you're out here now, Jason," he said. "Your people are being treated *most* unfairly. You have every right to fight for the rights that they'd afford a Faey. You're not being treated as Imperial citizens!" he said with surprising outrage.

"Well, that's good to hear, Doc," Jason told him.

"Separating a family! They'd *never* do that if you were Faey!"

"I think that's the whole point of why we're here, Doc Rann," Luke told him.

"Why doesn't the Imperium step in and put a stop to this?" he demanded.

"Because as long as the food gets delivered at the set quotas, they probably don't care," Jason said simply. "They'll start caring when we start cutting into that quota, though."

"That they will," Rann agreed with an enthusiastic nod.

They arrived at the warehouse about an hour later. Jason opened the doors via remote and allowed Luke to maneuver the skimmer into the empty warehouse, letting him get some experience with a pinpoint drill. It was good practice for him. He landed the skimmer with a light touch, then started the shutdown sequence so the cloaking matrix was the last major system still running, being powered by the backup PPG after the main engines and power plant were taken offline, then he shut that down.

"Aren't the sensors going to detect the ship with the matrix off?" Meya asked.

"Why would it matter if there's a dropship or a skimmer here, Meya?" Jason answered. "This is a warehouse in Faey territory. It wouldn't look out of place at all for there to be a dropship here, or for us to be using PPGs. The only thing that might tip someone off is if they actually saw the dropship *appear* on the sensors, but this building is made of steel. That partially disperses the dropship signature and makes that much less likely. Alright, let's get this thing unloaded."

They unloaded everything, and Rann took charge of organizing the gear, having some of it stored and having the sleeping bags and mattresses laid out so they'd be ready for people. Jason moved to get back on the skimmer, ordering Luke to sit this flight out and take a break cause he'd be flying the next three. He took the pilot's chair and brought the computer back up, starting the preflight, when he heard footsteps on the stairs. He looked back to see Meya step through the hatch and move towards the front. *Show me, she sent. We have three pilots here, Jason. You don't have to run every leg. Hell, Luke did so well, I wouldn't bat an eye at sending him up solo.*

I was planning on doing that, he sent with a nod, motioning at the copilot's chair. *The only thing different on my skimmer is the stealth matrix,* he told her. *It's controlled using the keyboard. It's the CMS module on the display.* He activated the holographic display over the dash between the two seats and pointed to it.

CMS?

Cloaking Matrix System. We put in a few shortcut keys for it so it'll activate and deactivate with just a couple of keystrokes. It runs off the backup PPG.

It doesn't take much power at all, eh? she mused. *Most shield cloaks require the main engines to come up.*

This one is very low-power, Jason answered. *I'm sure those cloak shields you talked about are very advanced and very hard to penetrate, but ours works well enough, and it was something that we could do ourselves.*

How does it work?

Jason felt hesitant about divulging that kind of information, but then again, this was Meya. Miaari had vouched for her, and if he couldn't trust Miaari, then he couldn't trust anyone. *It builds an energy matrix in a layer of Neutronium we put on the outer hull, a matrix that absorbs active sensor energy and also absorbs the ambient plasma power signature of the systems inside it. If we adjust the matrix a little, it can even absorb light, making the skimmer almost impossible to see when it's dark. Of course, it's useless in the daytime, but at least at night the skimmer can move without being seen or detected.*

That's what all those shield emitters were for! she realized, then she laughed. *Jason, you have any*

idea how nuts Miss Kumi went trying to figure out what you were going to do with them?

I can imagine, she's too curious for her own good, Jason agreed mildly. Now, I'm going to bring up the CMS, so watch.

Meya observed as he brought up the cloaking matrix, then started the engines once the matrix was up and running. *We'll be back in about two hours, Jason sent.*

We'll do what we can to get everything ready, Myra sent in reply.

Spending an hour alone with Meya wasn't as awkward as she thought it would be. Meya and Myra were twins, but they were actually quite different personality wise. Myra was more fun-loving and impulsive, and Meya more serious. But Meya had a dry sense of humor, a subtle wit that made her a pleasure to be around. Much to his surprise, they didn't spend the trip talking about the rebellion or his skimper, Meya spent the entire time describing Dracora to him, from the buildings that reached thousands of feet into the air to the grassy parks and gardens between them. It was a huge city, five times larger than New York, but did not have a single road or street, only sidewalks and paths for skipboards and small one-seat hoverpods. There was mass transit and plenty of vehicles, but the vehicles were all hovercars and other flying transports, as well as an underground mass transit system. It was a city of over 100 million Faey, and it was the seat of the Empress, who ruled from a compound at the center of the city, on a high hill that caused the Imperial Palace's spires to reach higher than all other buildings. Arcturi Manor, the personal estate of Kumi's mother, sat on a bluff overlooking the center of the city, giving the mansion an amazing view of the Imperial Palace. She shared her knowledge of Dracora not just with words, but with images, memories, sending to him the *experience* of Dracora, not just a *description*. Thanks to her sending, he *saw* the three spires of the Imperial Palace, rising over all other buildings in the wide, shallow valley by the azure sea known as the *Trellei Sumaderi*, or Trelle's Beauty in English. He saw the numerous manors and estates on the bluff around Arcturi Manor, he saw the magnificent Meydaja Building, which was over a mile in height and took up twenty city block at its base, so high that its pinnacle was only a hair's breadth under the spires of the Imperial Palace, so huge that its shadow covered a huge swath of the city in the morning and afternoon. That was the tallest structure in the Imperium. He saw the two moons of Draconis hanging in the air on a lazy summer night, and the Paladin, a space station so massive that it affected the tides and was easily visible from the ground with the naked eye, the main hub of all material transport to and from Draconis. Paladin had been a military installation at first, but it had been converted to a supply and industrial station when the Imperium grew and Draconis became further from the edges of the Imperium's territory and less likely to be attacked by enemies. Not only did it handle cargo, it also had a small shipyard for building three types of small and medium freighters, as well as the new Meara class cargo transports. The shipyard was originally military, but it was now owned by Thrynne, and it was where they built some of their larger ships. About half of the food that left Earth on transports went to Paladin, and from there it was redistributed throughout the Imperium. There were four other stations similar to Paladin, but they weren't as large. Two were orbital space stations, and the other two were on one of Draconis' moons. When Jason wondered why everything wasn't done from Paladin, Meya responded with a memory of an attack on Paladin by a separatist movement about a century ago that left much of it crippled, and which summarily caused chaos in the Imperium's supply networks. To run virtually everything through only one chokepoint was a weakness, and if there was one thing Jason could say about the Faey, it was that they weren't stupid, and they learned from their mistakes. They wouldn't make that mistake again.

It surprised him that Draconis was so beautiful, given that the Faey were a heavily industrialized society. *I wouldn't mind seeing it with my own eyes, Jason mused as they approached Charleston.*

Well, that dropship you bought is registered to a corporation, Jason. You could take it though the stargate, without stealth, without it attracting too much attention. Dropships and personal transports do go through the gate. Talk to Miaari about having one of those fake identities set up with a class three, and employ that identity at VulTech. That way a legal pilot operating a legal dropship is all any

controller is ever going to see.

I'm sure they scan ships that go through the gate, and I'll be doing too much customizing to the dropship for it to escape notice.

Maybe. But if that bothers you, well, you also said you were going to buy another dropship. Just buy one and don't modify it. That way you have a legal way to move back and forth. Get a used one, they're cheaper. Why did you buy a brand new one anyway?

I wanted to make sure it was in perfect condition, because that dropship might enter combat, he answered immediately. I didn't want to take a chance on a used dropship that might have problems I overlooked. But I have to admit, that's a good idea. I can get a cheaper used one for that, that's for sure. I could even use it to pick up certain sensitive things I wouldn't want to have shipped. Hmm, he pondered, scratching his chin. I definitely should talk to Miaari about that. But the question is, how much attention would I attract walking down a sidewalk on Draconis?

Oh, I'm sure you'd attract attention, most Faey have never seen a human before. But as long as your thoughts match the name and occupation on your ID, what can they say? A class three gives you the legal right to fly a dropship through the gate. Nobody could really say anything.

Then I should get a new ID that says I'm a pilot by trade.

That works. So, while we're loading people up, you can call Kate and relay that to Miaari.

I would, but my panel's back in Nebraska, he sent with a smile at her. But I'll take care of that as soon as we get back.

It took them about fifteen minutes to load up ten people and more gear, and then they took off and returned to Nebraska. Jason slipped the skimmer into the hangar with practiced ease, and he came down and immediately went for his panel. He called a contact number that he had for Kiaari, which basically was just a beeper warning her that Jason wanted to talk to her. Now all he had to do was wait for her to call back.

That took about ten seconds. His panel beeped before he could even get up, and he answered it immediately. A Faey face appeared on his monitor, which almost made him hang up quickly. *"It's me, it's me,"* she called in Kate's voice. *"I didn't change clothes, that's all. What did you need?"*

"I need to see you," he said.

"I'm kinda busy at the moment, hon. Give me fifteen minutes and I'll call you back," she told him. *"And we can talk about when we're going to go out."*

"Alright then."

He terminated the call and went back to help them unload some of the gear they were going to need, then looked at Luke. *"Luke, you're up,"* he said. *"Myra, go with him, but he's flying."*

"Sure, Jayce," Luke said with a nod. *"You ready, Miss Myra?"*

"Let's go, cutie," she told him.

"Luke, show Myra how to operate the CMS," Jason added, calling after them.

"I'll teach her," Luke said, waving a hand to him without turning around.

"And behave, woman!" Jason shouted after Myra.

"Killjoy!" she shouted in reply as they entered the skimmer.

I hope she listens, he sent absently to Meya.

About as much as I do.

God help Luke then.

MeYa laughed. *I think they'll be alright. Myra plays too much, but she knows when to separate it from business.*

Kiaari called back right on schedule, and when Jason picked up the call, he noticed that his panel shifted into an encrypted mode that he had never seen before. It was something similar to the protocols that Kumi used to use, but it was not the same. *"Don't speak yet,"* Kiaari said in Kimdori as her image appeared again on the monitor, this time in her natural shape. *"Jason, it's important that you only speak Kimdori right now, or I won't hear what you say. Do you understand?"*

"I understand. What is this?"

"I can't answer that, I'm sure you understand. Let's just say that it's necessary for me to use this. What did you need? You can talk freely, no one is going to pick this up."

"I need you to get in touch with Miaari," he told her. He told her about the conversation he had with Meya. "I think it's a good idea."

"Of course it's a good idea. That's why you'll find a set of ID cards for Max Sterling in the desk in the office."

"What? You already did it?"

"Hon, you're not working with amateurs," she told him with a toothy grin. "When I told Miaari that you were getting ready to start leaving the preserve, she had an identity set up that has a class three license. Remember that key that the Ministry woman gave you? Do you have it?"

"I carry it with me at all times."

"Make sure you always do. Anyway, that key will let you start any dropship or hovercar, but if you use it on a skimmer or dropship, you'd still get picked up on traffic control because you'd be flying without broadcasting a pilot ID over your transponder. Miaari set up that identity so you can have a legal license ID going on any ship you do steal, which wouldn't cause traffic control to try to remote override your ship, or call in interceptors to bring you down for illegal flight operations. She set it up as an emergency option in case you ever had to ditch your skimmer in Faey territory and needed to steal a way to get back to the preserve, one that will work now because the Imperium thinks that you're dead. We didn't exactly intend it in the way you described, but it will work that way. Actually, it will work rather well, because the Imperium now thinks that Jason Fox is dead, and wouldn't be immediately suspicious of a human with a license. They'll never jump to the next rock and make the connection between Jason Fox and Max Sterling. Just update the photo and employ Max Sterling at VulTech, and he can fly company dropships without the system taking notice of it. Oh, and get used to answering to the name Max. If Jason Fox is dead, then you need to be ready to be Max Sterling when you're out among the Faey."

"That's an odd name."

"Blame Miaari. It came from some ancient television show on Terra. He was some kind of pilot."

Jason had to admit, he saw the wisdom in Miaari's action. By giving him an alternate identity that had a class three, he *could* use it in conjunction with the master key in order to steal a skimmer or dropship and not set off alarms in traffic control. That Jason had the idea to use it to legally fly a dropship within the Faey traffic system was simply a lucky coincidence. He'd just have to be careful, because quite a few controllers knew his voice. They'd recognize Jason Fox, no matter what name their consoles told them was behind the controls of a dropship. And she was also right about telling him to get used to using a different name. To the Imperium, Jason Fox was dead. There would be times later on when he might have to go out into Faey territory, like when he and Temika had gone to New Myrthan...and they were going to need food while converting the dropship.

"I was going to tell you about it the next time I came in."

"When will that be?"

"A couple of days. They've been changing the codes on the Trillane communication system every three days. Right now I'm trying to gain access to the update schedule and encryption master algorithms. Once I have that information, we can crack their encryption and gain access to their systems. They're using a dedicated encryption protocol for Terra, or I'd just have sister use her connections on Dracora to get the data we need."

"Alright. I wasn't sure if you were working on that or helping Miaari track down the people who hurt Kumi."

"I've been doing a little bit of both, as well as trying to ferret out some of the nobles behind the human slaving. No luck yet though. When you stumbled over their freighter, they buried the program. We suspect that the nobles probably had anyone with any knowledge of it killed. Slave agents,

workers, guards, hackers changing files, pilots, random civilians that might have seen any humans offworld, probably also any kidnapped human they could possibly reach. Kumi told you that the Empress could revoke Trillane's charter if it comes out they've been engaged in illegal activity like this. Well, odds are, the people doing it are making damn sure that there's nobody left alive that has any knowledge of it."

"That's a depressing thought. Those poor people," he sighed.

"I know, but there's little that we can do to help them. We're got some kin trying to find where some of the humans were sent, but so far there's no information I can give you. I hate to cut it short, but I need to go. I'm working right now."

"Oh. Alright. Thanks, Kate, and thank Miaari for me."

"I'll tell her when I see her again. I'll see you in a few days, okay?"

"Be careful out there."

"Always. Bye."

"Bye." Jason cut the connection, and watched as his panel purged its active memory by itself, did a thirty second scan of its permanent memory crystals, then *shut down and restarted itself*. Jason had to admit, that Kimdori encryption protocol was pretty damn thorough.

In the small, cramped office that opened to both the outside and to the main warehouse, there was no furniture except a bare light bulb on the ceiling, a metal filing cabinet in one corner, a small corner table in the opposite corner, and a simple sheet metal desk with a plywood top. Jason leaned over the desk—there was no chair for it—and opened the top drawer, and sure enough, there was a small white envelope made of a soft, pliable kind of plastic that the Faey often used as heavy duty paper, an envelope holding small objects. He poured the contents of the envelope onto the desk, and found himself looking at three standard issue Faey ID cards. The first was a native ID, something every *legal* human on Earth possessed, that had room for a picture, name, address, and Native Control Number. The picture field of the ID were blank, able to be dynamically updated by hooking it up to a panel and downloading that data into it, but the name on the idea read [Maximilian Quincy Sterling], and it showed his date of birth as being identical to Jason's own. The listed occupation on the ID was blank, but that field he could add in with his picture. The listed home address on the ID was the address of the warehouse itself. The second card was a class three license, which was absolutely complete and correct. It wasn't a fake license, though it was certainly attained by less than honest means. It too was in his name, with the hangar being his home address, and it had a pilot's registration number. The third ID was a duplicate of the native ID, a spare in case he lost one.

"Clever girl," Jason mused aloud, turning the class three over in his hand and looking at the back. Miaari certainly did think ahead, and much to his delight, her forward thinking was going to help them a great deal. "Maximilian Quincy Sterling," he said aloud, getting used to the sound of it.

It certainly had possibilities. More and more possibilities, and the more he thought about it, the more possibilities he saw. Jason Fox was dead, but the world was open to Max Sterling. Jason Fox was a fugitive, a wanted man, but Max Sterling was a cog in the Imperial machine, a working stiff that could move silently through the Faey world, a quiet fellow who flew a cargo dropship for a Terran-based company and go where he was sent, picking up and dropping off, and *learning*. In his own way, he could be just as effective a gatherer of intelligence as Kiaari, if he just kept his mouth shut and his ears open.

Jason Fox was dead. He would remain dead until the resistance struck its first blow and announced itself to the Imperium. But until that day, there would be Max Sterling.

"Who's that?" Tom Jackson's voice called from the door.

"Well, I guess it's going to be me," Jason told him, collecting the three cards and putting them in his pocket. "Kate left me some fake IDs I can use while we're here in Lincoln," he explained. "Since everyone thinks that we're dead, the fake IDs will let us move around without anyone the wiser. The name on this ID is Max Sterling."

“Oh. I’m still getting used to the idea that she’s not who we thought we were.”

“I know. Sometimes even I don’t.”

“Where did you find her?”

“Actually, she found me,” he chuckled. “She’s very good at what she does, Tom. She’s going to be a great help to us.”

“I don’t doubt that, but it’s still weird. Anyway, we need your help out here, and Jyslin was looking for you.”

“Alright. Let’s see what needs doing.”

It took all night to get everyone to Lincoln, including one unplanned run back to Charleston to pick up some equipment that they’d forgotten, as well as pick up a few unplanned passengers; Temika, Jyslin, and to his surprise, Fure. They flew in pairs for the most part, except for the final planned run, which Jason had Luke do solo. The look of appreciation on Luke’s face showed how proud he was that Jason would trust him with his precious skimmer, and he took almost five minutes getting it out of the hangar, he was so afraid of so much as scratching it. That amused Jason quite a little bit, watching him creep the skimmer out the hangar doors at about an inch a second. Jason managed to grab a quick nap between flights, sleeping on a bedroll near the hangar door so the sound of it opening would wake him up. Everyone else was bunked in on the far side of the warehouse, on top of a narrow platform of sorts created by a very small open second floor, basically just a platform erected on the far wall to provide a little extra storage space. It did put all the sleepers out from underfoot on the ground floor, and the covered area under the platform was a good place to store gear and equipment.

Everyone was nervous, and they got more and more nervous as the appointed time, eleven local time, approached. Jason and the other Faey had to calm everyone down more than once, and they also had to correct some people who were losing their false fronts of thought, as they all roamed the warehouse actively listening to those structured trains of thought, structured to throw off Faey, doing what Symone and Jyslin trained them to do. Strangely enough, the one that made everyone most nervous wasn’t the twins or the docs, it was Fure. Then again, Fure had this cold demeanor and creepy aire that made people who looked at him uneasy, and Jason was silently glad the male Faey had come along to help. Fure’s unsettling presence was the perfect test for the humans; if they could keep their composure around Fure, they’d have no trouble anywhere else.

With his new IDs updated with his picture, Jason took up a position next to Jyslin as the dropship and the skimmer made a slow approach to the large paved tarmac behind the warehouse. It was a beauty of a dropship, painted slate gray, and looking both widely spacious and graceful at the same time. She was wide through the beam, with no tapering at all from bow to stern, a flying cargo bay of sorts with short, stubby wings, barely more than fins to aid with aerodynamic stability when flying through atmospheres. The cockpit was separated from the rest of the ship, and as such there was no hull space under it, though it had the same width as the rest of the ship. It almost looked as if the trapezoidal cockpit compartment was welded on to the rest of the dropship. Heavy landing skids extended, and then the ship made a light contact with the cracked asphalt. The skimmer landed just behind it, and both ships extended their stairs and opened their hatches. Jason muted his own talent so that he could not hear them sending, so as not to tip them off, and settled himself into the thought processes of an ordinary man named Max Sterling, who did happen to have an unusual occupation for a human.

Four Faey, three males and a female, exited the two craft and approached. Jason and Jyslin approached them, then the lead Faey, the female, stepped up and extended her hand. She didn’t speak, so Jason assumed that she was sending in her initial greeting. She had deep brown hair, almost black, cut almost militantly short, except for a pair of long, curved locks that grew over her eyes and reached all the way to her chin. She wore a simple gray suit of sorts with a golden medallion hanging from a chain around her shirt collar, under her double breasted jacket, and a thigh-length skirt that seemed to

hug her legs, but stretched and contracted as she walked to maintain that tight fit. She wore soft gray boots that rose to her mid-calf, which had little silver buckles running all the way from the arch of her foot to the top of the boot. Like many Faey clothes, one sleeve was much too long and too wide, extending well past her hand, while the other ended at mid bicep. It was that short-sleeved right arm that was extended towards Jyslin. The three males all wore matching jumpsuit uniforms of a fashion emblazoned with the Thrynne logo on the left breast. She looked at Jason meaningfully, then glanced back to the three males behind her. "I'm Pola Thrynne," she said aloud, in a rich contralto voice.

"Thrynne?" Jyslin asked in surprise.

"Yes, the younger members of the family who have just started working are often sent out to work the field before we can take up positions in the main office," she said with a slight grimace, a condition it seemed with which she was not too happy. "So yes, I'm one of the Thrynnes. You are Maya Orinne?"

"That's me," she said with a nod. "May I present Max Sterling, our pilot."

"A human pilot?" Pola said with surprise.

"I have a class three," Jason said with quiet adamance, in deliberately broken Faey.

"I can tell you, he was willing to work for much less than a Faey pilot," Jyslin said with a glance at him. "Now then, I'm sure that no one here is in much of a mood to drag this out, so let's get the maintenance inspection under way."

"Certainly."

Jason was very careful to maintain his front as the three males conducted the inspection as Jason and Jyslin followed along behind them, observing as Pola Thrynne went down a checklist on a reader in her hands. They went over about every system on the dropship, inspecting it for damage and ensuring it was working up to spec. The inspection took about two hours, and it seemed that in that time, there was no signs that any of them were in any way suspicious. He was sure they were all wildly curious about a human being a pilot, but his false front of thought covered that curiosity. He included quite a few fake "memories" of a friendship with a Faey dropship pilot struck up at a civilian spaceport in Atlanta, Georgia where he worked as a systems technician, just one of the many humans trained in Faey technology working at a disembarkation point for Faey civilian spacecraft, mainly tours and vacationers. It was that pilot who taught him to fly, and after he got a class three, VulTech hired him as both a dropship pilot and a maintenance technician. A startup company often had need of multitasking individuals to fill many roles when they were trying to establish themselves, and the money was tight.

It obviously satisfied their curiosity, for none of them asked how he came to get a class three license.

Once the inspection was complete, Pola Thrynne signed off on the last of it, then handed the reader to Jyslin. "I need a corporate executive to sign this now," she said.

"Certainly. Max, take this and have it signed, if you would," she told him in English.

"Yes ma'am," he said, taking it from her. Jason went into the warehouse, took it to the office, then signed it himself using the false identity that was used to set up the company, Jack Brewer. He lingered for a few minutes, then took it back out to the tarmac and handed it to Jyslin. "Here," he told her.

Pola accepted it from Jyslin and inspected it, then signed it herself and pressed the screen in several places with her finger. "Alright then, it seems that our business is concluded. The final ownership form has just been registered, and VulTech is now the legal owner of this dropship. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Jyslin said with a nod.

"Might I trouble you for the use of your restroom? I can freshen up while the techs go over anything that your pilot might want explained to him."

Jason certainly didn't miss the veiled pomposity in *that* statement...clearly she thought he was some kind of trained monkey, unable to so much as start the dropship without someone there to hold his hand.

“Yes, please come with me,” Jyslin told him. “If there was anything you wanted to ask, now’s the time,” she told Jason in English.

“Please follow me so we can change over the pilot data,” one of the three techs said, whose name Jason did not know, for none of them had volunteered them. Jason followed the white-haired male into the dropship, through the large cargo bay, and up the short ladder and into the cockpit. “The control codes are on this reader,” he said, taking a reader off of the pilot’s chair and handing it to Jason. “The key is already in the keyslot. Do you have your license with you sir?”

“Right here,” he said, taking it out of his pocket.

The Faey nodded and sat in the co-pilot’s chair, then motioned for him to take his seat in the pilot’s seat. Jason did so as the other two technicians stood behind them. “Alright, go ahead and put in your license number, please,” he prompted as a holographic keyboard wavered into being in front of him, above the flight stick. Jason looked over the controls and indicators on the dash before him, and noted that it was a very logical and efficient layout. The main controls were identical to his skimmer, but since this was a larger ship with more systems, it had a few more controls. But the flight controls were identical, and he would have no trouble at all flying it. He brought up the main computer with deft movements, then immediately started uploading his pilot number into the computer to identify him as the pilot of record, which would be what would go out on the dropship’s telemetry.

“Nice setup, much better than the skimmers I’ve been flying,” Jason noted aloud. “I will definitely enjoy flying this better.”

“Oh? What have you been flying?” he asked curiously.

“ASV’s mainly, but I’ve also put some time in a Derenne. Ugh,” he grunted.

The male laughed. “Amen to that. Those things are terrible. Bad layout, bad engines, bad controls, bad everything. I think it was designed by engineers who’d been drinking too much. How did you like the ASV?”

“They’re very nice. Good engines, a nice smooth ride.”

“Yeah, they’re a bit pricy though. Thrynne skimmers are cheaper, and built much better.”

“You’ll have to pitch that to the people I was flying, not me. I’m just the pilot. I don’t think I’ll ever have the money to have a ship of my own,” he said, with a bit of a sigh.

“I find it interesting that a human would get a pilot’s license so quickly,” one of the Faey behind him noted.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been flying since before I could walk,” he said without looking back. “I grew up in an airplane. Both my parents were pilots, and I was born with the same itch they had. It didn’t take me much to get used to flying a skimmer instead of an airplane. I already knew most of what I needed to know, and me being in school for plasma systems filled in most of the gaps. When I saw a posting for a pilot for VulTech, I jumped all over it, cause I really missed flying. I’ve been a pilot all my life, and I felt like someone cut off one of my legs when I was put in a maintenance shop.”

“I could see that,” the third male agreed. “You speak Faey very well.”

“You can say it. I speak like a five year old.”

The male laughed. “I didn’t want to be rude.”

“Yeah, well, I’m rusty. I was implanted with it in school, but I didn’t speak it for nearly six months. The Faey that worked at Fulton Spaceport all spoke English, so I didn’t get to practice. I’m just getting back into the habit.”

“Implanted languages never last unless they’re used,” the male in the copilot’s chair said sagely.

“I can understand what I hear, I just have trouble saying what I want to say.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty normal when it comes to using an implanted language,” one of the ones behind him noted.

“I’m finished,” Jason announced, as the holographic keyboard vanished.

“Alright then, Master Sterling, it seems that we’re all done here. Did you have any questions about the unit while you have our undivided attention?”

Jason did have a few technical questions, and they went over some of the dropship's systems as they sat in the cockpit, then continued their discussion as they came out and onto the tarmac. "I've always had the best luck using a 40-20 tool," the tech was telling him as the executive and Jyslin came back out. "You have to use a light touch that most of the newer techs haven't developed yet, but it gets the best results."

"You don't have any issue with ambient gauss?"

"No, just remember the right hand rule," he answered. "As long as you withdraw the tool rotating it in the right hand direction relative to plasma flow through to the conduit, you don't polarize the conduit at all."

"I'll have to remember that," Jason said earnestly. "I've always used a Parmon tool to realign conduit."

"Those work, but it takes more muscle than finesse," he added. "The 40-20 can't do any physical damage, where a Parmon can."

"True enough," Jason agreed. "Have you tried out using Tetryon striations in your main plasma conduit?"

The male gave him quite the look. "You certainly keep up on your journals," he said. "We haven't tested Tetryon striations yet, but I think it's something we're going to be adopting. On a reader, it looks quite promising, but you know how gravometric engines are. They can be quite finicky. We'll have to see if the Thrynne design can use Tetryon striated conduit without any loss of efficiency. I think it will, personally."

"Well, when you're in school, they *make* you keep up with the journals."

The technician laughed. "That they do. I wish I could make some of our technical staff keep current with the journals." He gave his companions a sidelong look, and both looked distinctly uncomfortable for a moment.

"Have you had your questions answered, Master Sterling?" the executive asked pleasantly.

"I have," he answered. "I can just use your message board if I have any other questions."

"Very well then." She glanced at the techs, and then nodded. "It would seem that we're done here, Mistress Orinne."

The Thrynne people all said their formal farewells, piled into the skimmer, and then it took off and ascended into the sky and out of sight. Jason and Jyslin watched it go for about a minute, then they looked at each other. *Any trouble?*

She never suspected a thing, Jyslin sent smugly. Everyone did great! How about the ones with you?

I have no idea, I had myself completely closed off, but they didn't seem suspicious at all. I think they bought it. He realigned his thinking so that he could send to the non-telepaths in the warehouse behind him. *They're gone everyone, you did great! They never suspected a thing!*

There was an audible cheer that rose up behind them, and Jason and Jyslin looked at the dropship. *Well, now that that's done, it's time to get to work.*

How long do you think it's going to take?

About two weeks to draw up the plans, and about two months to do the work, he answered. *Since we have access to some technology this time, it should help cut down on the time it'll take, but the dropship is much bigger than my skimmer, so there goes all the time we'll save automating. But there's one thing that has to be done.*

What?

We have to go shopping.

*Brista, 35 Romaa, 4394 Orthodox Calendar
Wednesday, 8 April 2008, Native Regional Reckoning
Lincoln, Nebraska (Native designation). Zurei Province, American Sector*

This...was...*nuts*.

To say that Jason was scared out of his mind was an understatement, but on the other hand, this test had to be done.

Jason, one of the most wanted criminals to House Trillane, was going to Draconis, the heart of the Imperium.

The mission was simple. Go to Draconis, to a shipping company in the city of Aryxa, on the southern continent of Merum. There he would pick up a shipment of materials and goods, and then return to Earth. The shipment was already bought, bundled, and ready for pick up. It was already affirmed that the shipping pallets would fit in the dropship coming to retrieve them. All in all, Jason would never leave the dropship, but that wasn't what this test was about. This test was about seeing if Jason could fly the dropship through Imperial traffic control without incident.

He was looking forward to this, in one way. He would get a chance to go through the Stargate, to *see* the planet Draconis, and to get his chance to look upon another world, the world of his fiancée, and if only once, to stand on an alien world and know that he had walked on the soil of a planet that was not Earth. To be one of those first humans to set foot off of Earth, though he certainly wouldn't be the first. The former leaders of the nations of Earth had been to Draconis, and certain human governors and other humans in the Terran political system visited both Draconis and Arctus, the seat of Trillane, to meet with house nobles and personally deliver reports and missives. He was terrified of the idea of putting himself out in the open like that, but a part of him wanted to see Draconis.

To say that he was nervous was an understatement, but this is something he needed to make sure of. If there was an emergency, he wanted to make sure that the dropship could fly through the Imperial network without any challenges, and this was really the only way to do it. The name and pilot number of Max Sterling were just that, names and pilot numbers. Anyone could fly the ship using that identity, so long as they kept communication audio only. That was something that couldn't be done more than once or twice, or someone would notice, but it could be used in an emergency.

The reason for this trip was so they could begin the refit of the dropship. Jason, Tim, and Luke had pulled up the refit plans for his skimmer and started modifying them to be used for the dropship, but they weren't alone for long. Jyslin went from being an observer to getting involved herself, and it was then that Jason got a good idea just how much engineering she'd had. She quickly adapted to the ideas behind the system, and her knowledge of Faey engineering was a benefit to them. With Jyslin's help, they quickly worked up a refit plan that included knowing how much material they'd need, how many men per shift, and how long it would take. It would be a seven week operation. Jason bristled a bit at the time it was going to take, but they really had no choice. They could not do anything else on a large scale until the dropship was refitted for stealth...but they could get some things going. Kiaari had organized an advanced survey and inspection team of thirty men and women that would go to Cheyenne Mountain and conduct a complete survey, and also draw up some plans for the cleaning out and reconstruction of the facility. It basically turned out that whoever wasn't going to be working on the refit was going to be at Cheyenne Mountain, which removed the resistance from Charleston completely. The inspection team was going to be led by Tom Jackson, since he was their resident expert on civil engineering. He would be the best man for the job.

Jason's hands trembled slightly on the controls as he finished the preflight, and his hands weren't the only ones that weren't calm. He had two passengers with him, and neither of them were very happy about this either. Luke sat at the copilot's station, nervously gnawing on the corner of a clipboard, and Doc Songa sat at the engineer's station, trying to figure out where to put her hands without hitting any controls. Songa was their emergency out in this scenario. She was one of the three doctors, and as such was one of the three Faey in the community that could still actively return to the Imperium legally. If they had any trouble or if the Faey boarded the vessel, Songa would try to talk them out of it. Jason wasn't sure what she could possibly say to pull that off, but the doctors had

insisted that one of them go, and Songa had won the draw for it.

“Preflight done,” Jason said aloud. “Remember your protocols for space transport, Luke?”

“Yeah, wether I remember them or not is the question,” he grumbled. “After Jyslin baked my noodle last night, I’m surprised I remember my own name.”

Jason chuckled. Last night, Jyslin had implanted the Faey language into Luke, Tom, and six other humans in the community, those who had either completed flight training, like Luke, or would be finishing it very soon, like Tom and the others. It was something that Symone couldn’t do, and something that Jyslin planned to do to everyone in the community. The rebels absolutely *had* to be able to speak and read Faey, and besides, Luke would need that knowledge to fly this dropship. Unlike his skimmer, all the controls, labels, and readouts were in Faey, *not* in English. Jason had converted his skimmer to English, but did not intend on changing the dropship. To fly it, the pilot had to be fluent in Faey.

“Ready, Songa?” Jason asked, trying to clear the quiver out of his voice.

“I’m ready, Jason,” she answered.

“Alright then, let’s get this overwith.” He put on his headset, and clicked the mic. “Lincoln Control, Dropship Vultech-1.”

“Dropship Vultech-1, this is Lincoln Control,” a female Faey responded.

“Vultech-1 requesting permission to disembark from Vultech Enterprises warehouse. Destination is the Stargate.”

“One moment, I’m not sure where that is.” There was a moment of tense silence, while Luke seemed ready to arm the ship’s weapons. *“Alright, I have the location. Hold for local traffic, stay on comm.”*

“Understood,” Jason answered, killing the mic.

“I hope this works,” Songa said under her breath.

“It better, or we’re hosed,” Jason grunted. “Since I’ve already called traffic control.”

“Dropship Vultech-1, you’re clear for takeoff. Follow the northeast 60 ascent vector and be aware you will be in traffic. Limit speed to 750.”

“Northeast 60 ascent, speed 750,” he repeated.

“Handoff is to Orbital One once you clear the atmosphere.”

“Orbital One, understood,” he acknowledged. “Vultech-1 out.”

“Control out.”

With a light touch on the controls, Jason picked the dropship up off the deck, navigated it through the warehouse doors, then immediately picked up the nose and aimed her at the morning sky. “Lock that chair facing the nose, Songa!” Jason barked over his shoulder when he heard and saw her chair suddenly swivel.

“Sorry, I thought it was!” she answered, swinging the chair to face the front, then locking it in.

The ascent was steep and slow, but that was what he was told to do. Besides, the scanners told him that there was a small freighter just ahead of him and a Stick behind, all of them following a 60 degree ascent vector out of Lincoln. Luke’s fear and trepidation faded as they cleared the atmosphere and found themselves looking out into the starry expanse of space, with a large orbital station to the left and the moon visible just out of the right side of the windshield. “Orbital One, Dropship Vultech-1,” Jason called over the radio, breaking the silence in the cockpit and startling Luke back into paying attention.

“Vultech-1, Orbital One,” came a male Faey’s voice in reply. *“Destination is the Stargate?”*

“Affirmative,” he answered.

“Take heading 213 at 342, speed is restricted to one quarter.”

“Understood, 213, mark, 342, one quarter.”

“Take note that there are large movers along the flight path. Contact Stargate Control at 20,000.”

“Understood. Vultech-1 out.”

“Orbital One out.”

"What does large movers mean?" Songa asked.

"It means that there are large freighters or warships that might block our vector," Jason answered. "Large ships always have the right of way. If one comes into the lane, we have to go around it, and we're allowed to do so without calling control for permission to leave the lane."

"Ah, I see. I guess it's easier for a small ship to move than a big one."

"Basicly yes," he nodded.

"I guess I should learn what all this flying vocabulary means," she laughed. "I didn't understand any of that."

"Well, ma'am, I guess I can teach you if you'd like, if you answer me one question."

"Sure, Luke," she told him as the dropship turned into the assigned lane. Four large ships hung in the distance ahead of them, a freighter and three military warships, three destroyers that were part of the Trillane house Navy.

"Well, I've been meaning to ask something about telepathy."

"You could have asked Jason, you know," she laughed.

"Well ma'am, he's admitted that he's still being taught. Since you were born with it and all, I figured you might know the answer."

"Well, it sounds like a very involved question," she told him, then she gasped as the ship's new orientation and settle into a constant speed caused it to lose gravity. "This ship has no artificial gravity?" she asked quickly.

"Nope," Jason answered. "So just hang onto your stomach."

"Oh my," she said, putting a hand to her mouth.

"I hope I get used to this," Luke said. "It's like a roller coaster."

"Just you never reach the bottom of the hill," Jason chuckled. "You do get used to it."

"Anyway, what I meant to ask, ma'am," Luke said.

"Please, Luke, call me Songa," she told him with a slightly queasy smile.

"Songa. Well, Miss Songa, I was curious about how Miss Temika handles things with the rest of you. I know she doesn't speak Faey."

"You mean telepathy?" she asked, then she laughed as he nodded. "Luke, dear, language isn't a barrier with talent."

"You mean you use telepathy in English for her?"

"No dear. Let me explain," she said, leaning forward a little. "Telepathy is the exchange of thought, not words. Yes, we frame that thought in a language, but it's the *thought* that Temika hears, not the *words*. Her brain picks up the thought, and frames that thoughts in words that *she* can understand. I usually send framing my sending in Faey, but she *hears* my sending in *English*, because she processes the thought, the *meaning*, of my sending, not the words."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Telepathy is the exchange of thought, not words," Jason told him. "Two telepaths don't have to speak each other's languages to be able to understand one another, but it *does* restrict what they can say to each other if they don't. When Jyslin sends to me, she sends in Faey, because that's her native language. It's how she thinks, and that's how she structures her sending. When I hear her sending, I'm not hearing her sending Faey words, I'm hearing the *meaning* of her sending. And since my native language is English, my brain processes those meanings in English, so I hear her sending as English. But, since I *do* speak Faey, the more complex thoughts she sends, which depend more on language and words, I can also understand, because I understand the *words* as well as the *meaning*. Temika doesn't speak Faey, so those very complicated thoughts are something she can't comprehend. Her brain can't work out the meaning, because that meaning is dependent on the words, and those words tend to be abstract when one deals with complex subjects. Without the ability to understand those abstract words and the thought they represent, her brain can't process the meaning of the thought behind them."

"Just so," Songa agreed with a nod. "Temika wouldn't understand everything I send, because she

doesn't speak Faey, and those thoughts that are very complicated or are very dependent on understanding the words are beyond her. But for normal communication and basic chitchat, she would have no trouble understanding me. But since I *do* speak English, I can specifically frame my sending in English, structuring that thought in a way she *can* understand, which lets her understand me perfectly. Because we know Temika doesn't speak our language, most of us go out of our way to frame our sendings in English for her benefit. She's very suspicious of us, and we don't want her thinking that we're holding anything back or anything."

"So language does make a difference."

"Up to a point, yes," she agreed. "But, if she didn't speak Faey, and I didn't speak English, we could still effectively communicate with each other by using the similarities of our thoughts as a base to build on. And we're *very* similar that way," she chuckled. "I could communicate with Temika on a high school level if we didn't share a common language, because humans and Faey are very, very similar. Gora's Law," she giggled.

"What is that?"

"It's an old theory that the more similar the development of two different planets are, the more similar the life on those planets will be to each other. Humans and Faey are genetically compatible, Luke. That's almost *exactly* identical. Yohne believes it's because our planets are almost exactly identical. Draconis has the same nitrogen oxygen atmosphere as Terra at the same proportions, the same air pressure, the same proportion of water to land, the same basic climate, and both of our planets are approximately the same age. Draconis is a little larger than Terra, our year is a little shorter, we have two moons instead of one, and we have slightly more helium in our atmosphere than Terra, but those are about the only differences. You'll see it very soon," she told them.

"I hope we don't see it long," Jason grunted.

"Amen," Luke nodded in agreement.

A Faey battle cruiser drifted into the lane, which forced the smaller ships to go around it. Luke gaped at the herculean vessel as they flew over its midsection, a ship that was about an eighth of a mile long. Jason remembered reading about them on Civnet. It was a standard Faey destroyer, armed to the teeth, with a ship's crew of 140. A ship that size didn't use MPACs as primary weapons, but used something similar to one. Its primary weapon was plasma torpedos, which were massive scale versions of an MPAC, huge charges of metaphased plasma, crushed under tremendous pressure, that would penetrate shields and then detonate on impact. That ship was also armed with plasma cannons, weapons that fired a stream of metaphased plasma instead of a compact bubble of it. It was also armed with heavy ion cannons, weapons designed not to damage ships, but to damage and disrupt power systems and equipment. From what he remembered reading, those ion cannons were obsolete, but they were very effective against the Skaa, and quite amusingly, could also damage a Faey vessel's systems as well if the ion charge penetrated the shielding protecting plasma conduits and PPGs.

"My god, that thing is big," Luke breathed.

"That's a destroyer, Luke. It's *small* compared to most other Faey starships," Jason told him. "If you recall, you could see that big battleship they first brought here from orbit without a telescope."

"And to think we're gonna be fighting people who can build shit like that," he breathed soberly.

"I never said it was gonna be easy," Jason sighed. "And besides, Luke, one point of what we're going to be doing is making *sure* those never get involved."

Being limited to one quarter of maximum engine power, it took almost an hour to pass the orbiting starships and reach the moon's orbital track. Both Jason and Luke took a moment to stare at the moon as they passed within 50,000 miles of it, and then the lights of the Stargate became visible ahead.

It was like a gigantic window in space. The Stargate was a rectangular, hollow construction, a frame that was empty in the middle, just like a window...but this window was nearly 10 miles wide and 15 miles long. It was so huge that four of the Faey's largest battleships could go through it, side by side, at the same time. The area inside that massive frame didn't look unusual at first, but as Jason

looked closer at it, and they got nearer to it, he could see a dark shimmering, as if the area inside were distorted, warping the view of the stars behind it. It was like it was filled with water, or a soap film, a surface that didn't remain still, and reflected back distorted images.

Once they were within 20,000 *shakra*, Jason motioned for Luke to remain silent and activated his comm. "Stargate Control, Vultech-1."

"*Vultech-1, Stargate Control,*" came a female Faey response, a Faey that was most likely in that flared cubical pod at what Jason would consider the top center of the gate's frame. That frame was hollow, filled with equipment that made the Stargate operate, and from what he remembered reading, that piece of technology out there had nearly 5,000 Faey workers and engineers in it. "*Stabilize course and speed, keep at least 10,000 shakra from forward traffic. Rig dropship for gate passage once course and speed is stabilized, contact Stargate Control once through.*"

Jason checked his controls and saw that the ship's course and speed were stable, no minor fluctuations that would cause it to drift off course while it approached the gate. "Gate passage mode," Jason said, reaching up over his head and flipping a series of switches on the overhead panel, which caused the engines to shut down and most systems in the ship to disengage, plunging them into red-hued dim murkiness from the crimson emergency lights. The PPGs and power plants were placed in shielded mode to protect them and their systems from the spatial distortion of the Stargate, and the gravometric engines were offline. The ship would coast on its own forward momentum, "Gate pass mode enabled. Handoff is to Draconis Stargate Control, acknowledged."

"*Stargate Control out.*"

"Vultech-1 out."

"So, now we coast through under our own momentum," Luke said, reciting what he'd learned when Jason taught him about class three operations as Jason shut down the communication system. "And all our plasma systems have to be offline, especially the engines."

"Or our engines disrupt the gate, and we get tossed into a random stretch of space," Jason finished. "If we don't get ripped apart in the spatial flux."

"Let's not have that happen please," Songa said in a slightly weak voice.

Jason felt a little anxious as they saw the small freighter ahead of them vanish into the gate. He'd never been through the gate, so he had no idea what to expect. Luke kept looking at him, then looked back to Songa. "Miss Songa, is it gonna make me sick?"

She laughed. "You never feel a thing, Luke," she told him. "I've never seen a gate pass through the front windshield before, so I can't tell you what it looks like, but you never feel anything. Not even a vibration."

"Oh, that's good then," he said with a relieved sigh.

Songa was right about that part. As the dark shimmering surface enveloped them, there wasn't even a vibration in the ship, not even a sense that they moved, changed speed, or anything. It was surprisingly calm. The view, however, wasn't quite so calm. The shimmering before them suddenly stretched like a rubber band, as if space itself was pulled back, and then it snapped forward with such sudden speed that both Jason and Luke flinched. And once the stretching snapped back to what Jason would consider a normal appearance, it parted like a curtain, and Jason found himself staring at a large blue planet some distance ahead, so far ahead it looked like a beach ball from that distance.

"We're through," Jason announced, then he reached up and started resetting the switches to take them out of gate mode. As soon as he reactivated the communications, he keyed the mic. "Stargate Control, Vultech-1," Jason called as he continued to flip the row of switches.

"*Vultech-1, Stargate Control,*" the male Faey on the other end called. "*Destination?*"

"Aryxa, Merum continent," he answered.

"*One moment. Maintain course and speed, stay on comm.*"

"Understood."

Luke gaped at the planet before them as Jason finished restoring the ship's systems, half-light and

half-dark from the angle at which they viewed it, a beautiful blue, white, and green jewel floating in the heavens. "It does look like Earth," he whispered, so as not to be picked up on Jason's mic.

"Told you," Songa chuckled.

"Vultech-1, Stargate Control."

"Stargate Control, Vultech-1," Jason returned.

"Come to heading 178 by 4, the lane is loose. Speed is restricted to one half, there are no traffic restrictions. Hand off is Pegasus-4 once you pass the inner marker."

"178, mark, 4, one half, handoff to Pegasus-4 at the inner marker, acknowledged," he replied.

Jason had no idea where that marker was, so he accessed navigational charts for Draconis and quickly located it. It would take them nearly a half hour to get to the boundary set by the marker.

Jason and Luke spent that half hour making sure they were ready for the approach. They went over maps of Draconis, projected as a hologram over the center console, then doublechecked their navigation systems. The one thing Jason did notice, though, was the large amount of traffic. There were ships *everywhere*, dropships, personal craft, small cargo ships, and even larger freighters that had their own jump engines, and there were Sticks by the ton moving containers from freighters parked at large distances from the planet and vice versa. When the controller said the lane was loose, Jason didn't pay much attention until he saw how much traffic there was. There were ships of every size and shape, both ones he'd seen either live or in pictures and ships that were *clearly* not from the Imperium, and that surprised him a little bit. He'd never considered the idea that species and governments from outside the Imperium would come here, but obviously they did. Traffic became thick, so much so that Jason had to abandon his other activities and concentrate on piloting the craft, since he was weaving in and out among slower moving craft, faster moving craft, larger ships and smaller ships. Jason flipped on the gravband local channel in addition to control, so he could hear local transmissions between ships. He was surprised at the amount of chatter being flung back and forth on gravband local, a frequency that only had a range of about five miles. It almost sounded like a group of angry commuters for a minute, as pilots barked at one another, but there was also quite a bit of inane conversation as pilots who obviously knew each other were conversing over open shortrange gravband. He was sure that there was quite a bit of sending as well, but Jason had his talent blocked and was putting up a false front of a nervous pilot on his first trip to Draconis...which is actually what he really was. Songa was actively shielding Luke and herself, which was her job on this venture, preventing other Faey pilots from picking up his thoughts, which might give them away. To a Faey out in another ship, the dropship he was in only had one occupant, for they could only sense one mind within it, and a rather nervous mind at that. That nervousness in his public thoughts caused a slightly larger cushion of space around him than there was around other ships, as the Faey pilots, sensing his unease, gave his ship a wide berth.

Once they passed the inner marker, they were set on a narrow windowed vector approach to the planet, which now totally dominated the windshield. Jason had to circle around to the daytime side of the planet, and then he began his slow descent into the atmosphere, staying on his assigned entry vector. The ship shuddered and rocked as they descended through resistant air, as the featureless blue and green below began to take on more and more form, more detail. Aryxa was a coastal city on the northeast side of the small southern continent, and Jason descended out over the open ocean, intending to hook around and approach. "Bring up where this place is, Luke," Jason ordered as he slowed their descent even more, dropping down out of a cloud to look upon a beautiful blue sea. "The universal location code."

"I already have the ULC," he answered. "Punching it into the nav system."

"Good."

Using the Universal Location Code, the navigational system brought a cursor up on the cockpit windshield showing him exactly where he needed to go. After getting clearance for approach from Aryxa control, he contacted the warehouse and got landing instructions. They approach the city, and

Jason had to take a moment and gawk at the lovely glass towers rising along the coast, as well as the smaller buildings that surrounded that downtown display of Faey engineering, with its elegantly sloped towers and love of tapered buildings. The Faey didn't like to build anything straight up and down, nearly all of their large buildings tapered as they ascended, either in delicate angles or in steps, like the stepped pyramids in Central America. The location of the warehouse was near the coast and to the left of that metropolplex, a small shipping warehouse called Mezour, a Makati shipping company. Most of the reason why Jason chose Mezour was because it *was* a Makati company.

The Mezour compound was a series of nine warehouses enclosed by a common fence, and like Jyslin and Meya had described, the space between those buildings was dominated by green. Grass, trees, shrubs, flowers, all neatly tended, almost looking like a garden, making the place look less like an industrial compound and more like some kind of park with buildings built within it. A triangular logo was made of colored flowers between the two largest warehouses, just beside a large landing pad which held two Sticks and another dropship, which was also where he was instructed to land. As they circled to get over the landing pad, Jason darkened the windscreen so nobody could see inside, turning the windscreen black and impenetrable from the outside, and dark on the inside, the windscreen mode for when the ship was bow-first to a star. He extended the skids as he saw several red-skinned Makati in blue uniforms waddling around, interspersed with several Faey, also in blue. Jason extended the landing skids and set her down with a light touch.

"Welcome to Draconis," Songa said.

"Welcome to Draconis," Jason grunted, taking off his headset. "You two stay up here and keep quiet. Now let's see how well I can pretend." He picked up a datapad, opened the hatch separating the cockpit from the cargo compartment, went down the four step ladder to the cargo bay, took a deep, cleansing breath, then opened the forward hatch.

Sweet smelling air blew into his face, air that was warm and pleasant, air that was the air of an alien world. The air pressure outside was only slightly higher than the air inside, causing a brief influx of air into the cargo bay, and then Jason stepped out onto the steps and down, under a yellow sun, as three uniformed beings, two Makati and a Faey, moved towards him. Jason hid both his trepidation and his wonder and looking at an alien world, as he looked at the tall brown-barked trees between two warehouses in front of him and the narrow-leafed shrubs ringing its trunk at the base, and then the bell-shaped, drooping flowers that were grown around those shrubs. The logo was made of small daisy-looking flowers of many different colors, which created the ringed starburst within the triangle.

"Good afternoon," the Makati on the left said in flawless Faey. "You're from Vultech?"

"Yes sir," he answered. Jason noticed that he had tiny horns poking out of his short white hair. "I'm supposed to pick up, uh," he grunted, looking at the pad in his hand, "nine containers and five pallets."

"We have it ready," the Makati answered. "Can you turn your ship so your cargo door faces that building over there?" he asked, pointing to the warehouse his dropship was facing. "It'll make loading a little easier."

"Sure, no problem," he said.

Jason turned the ship around, then came out and supervised the loading of the containers by a crew of Faey and Makati using hovering loading equipment, hovering forklifts and floating platforms that picked up the containers from above and carried them slung underneath. Jason and a Makati stood side by side, the Makati on a small hovering platform, as they checked the manifest of each container against a shipping order to make sure that nothing was missed or left out. "Lots of stuff in these. Your company a reseller or do they use it?"

"I think they use some and resell the rest," he answered. "They do their thing, though, and I do mine. I try not to get involved, most of them don't really like me all that much."

"Why is that?"

"Cause they took a huge chance hiring a Terran pilot, I suppose," he answered. "As far as I know,

I'm the only one."

"The controllers around Terra must be surprised to see your face," he laughed.

"I keep it audio only, just because of that," he answered. "I have to admit, I'm surprised by how this planet looks."

"Your first time here?" the Makati asked, and Jason nodded. "Does it look a lot like your planet, or nothing like it?"

"Almost exactly like it," he answered. "That tree over there almost looks like a *maple*, and those shrubs wouldn't look out of place in a garden back home. Those little drooping flowers are like nothing I've ever seen, but those ones making up your logo look like *daisies*," he said, using English for the names of the Earth-specific flora. "What does your planet look like?"

"Much different from yours or Draconis," he answered. "We have much less water, and the planet looks like a big tan ball from orbit. Most of the planet is covered in a plant that you'd think was much like grass. The Makati are builders, but we're also subterranean by nature. We like to build large cities *under* the surface, not on top of it. We have cities as big as Dracora, in vast underground chambers that we burrow out of the earth and rock. We like to leave the surface as untouched as possible."

"Why is that?"

"Because that's the way it's always been," he shrugged.

"Huh. Learn something new every day, I suppose."

"You gonna stay and look around a bit? Do some sightseeing before you leave?"

"I wish I could, but I'm on a schedule," he answered. "This planet is beautiful, and I feel really... weird, being here. My people never left our own planet really, and standing on another planet's like something that most of my people never really thought possible five years ago."

"You were behind Faey technology eh? Well, when the Faey first met us, them and us were about the same in technology."

"Really? Did your people fight them?"

"Oh yes, there was a big war, but in the end, we ended up allying ourselves against the Gormin, and that alliance just held. The Makati became part of the Imperium. We've basically been part of the Imperium since it they started calling it the Imperium."

"Why did the Makati join?"

"I can't really tell you the specifics, but I can say that it's mutually beneficial. We don't like to fight, we like to build. We let the Faey do the fighting, they're more suited for it. While they fight, we build. Most of Draconis was built by Makati engineering firms, you know."

"I didn't know that."

"We did," he said proudly. "Of course the outer appearances are their preference, but the Makati do the engineering and oversee the construction. They tell us what they want it to look like, and we make it happen. Faey can make good battleships, but they're not very good civil engineers," he said with a grin and a wink. "Anyway, the Faey do the fighting and they protect Makan, and the Makati build the infrastructure of the Imperium."

"Makes me wonder why there aren't many Makati on Earth then."

"Where?"

"Terra," he said, correcting himself. "To the Imperium, Earth was called *Terra*."

"Well, have they done much reconstruction there, or are they just using the original cities?"

"They're using the cities that are there."

"That's why. When they start building new things there, then you'll start seeing us showing up, so we can survey sites and oversee construction. And I'd bet that there are *some* Makati there already, if they want to install modern public transportation and such."

"Ah, well, I don't live in a town big enough for that," he shrugged.

"There ya go again. But eventually, you'll start seeing us. When the Imperium wants things rebuilt or revamped or upgraded, they'll call in a Makati firm to do the engineering, and the Makati will most

likely hire and train Terran workers to do the actual construction. Why send an army of Makati to do the work when we can hire locally and train your people up, so they can learn to build it themselves?"

"Ah, so the Makati train most Faey engineers?"

"For civil engineering, you bet," he affirmed. "For plasma systems and such, you'll see as many Faey as you do Makati engineers. But the Faey just don't have the soul of the Master Builder, so they leave us to do what we're good at. That's why our being part of the Imperium is mutually beneficial. We get to do what we're good at doing, and they protect us, since fighting is what *they* are good at. Alright, this pallet's good," he said, waving a pallet on that was stopped for inspection. The Faey female, a very young one with *pink* hair, winked at Jason from her seat on on the platform and started it into the dropship. "Where's my next container!" the Makati shouted. "Let's get organized, people!"

Jason rather liked this diminutive Makati. Their conversation continued drifting into non-work related subjects as they inspected the containers, as the Makati asked him about being a pilot, and how it felt to be one of the rare Terrans that moved outside boundaries of his home planet. "Well, it's nervewracking in one way," he said, looking at two Faey that were looking at him as they passed by. "Back home, we used to stare at every Faey that went by, since we never saw them all that much. Here, everyone stares at *me*. It makes me feel like I'm in a glass bottle."

The Makati laughed. "I imagine it does."

"Now that I know how the Faey feel, maybe I won't stare at them so—" he started, but then a familiar shiver up his spine made him quickly look around. He looked in the direction of that feeling, and then saw him. It was a Kimdori, coming out of a door to a warehouse, a male Kimdori with black fur and wearing no clothing, carrying a datapad. The Kimdori looked right at him with eerie yellow eyes, then gave him the slightest of nods, as if acknowledging the fact that he knew he was there, and knew he could sense him.

"That's a Kimdori," the Makati told him. "I'm not all that fond of 'em. They always give me the creeps."

"He's staring at me," Jason told the Makati, covering the fact that he was the one that stared first.

"Just look away or he'll come over here," he said. "They do this thing where they grab you under your jaw, and they never ask to do it, they just do it. It's some kind of custom, but I don't like people touching me like that without asking first."

Jason looked down, and held his pad up near the Makati's so they could synchronize their lists as the last pallet was brought in for inspection, its contents on a reader affixed to the side of the titanium box. "Last pallet," the Makati noted. "Alright, we have here three molecular sprayers, two portable metallurgical analyzers, two BZ-14 probes, five Class V PPGs, two—" he cut himself off when a shadow blocked the sun, and both of them looked up to see the Kimdori. He was a hulking brute, a head taller than Jason, with coal black fur, wickedly long yellow claws, and peering amber eyes that stared down at them. Before Jason could react, he reached out and put his large clawed hand on Jason's neck. Unlike the times when Jason was touched by Miaari and Kiaari, this time he *felt* the other side of that contact, of that communion. He felt this Kimdori, felt the creature's *mind* through that touch, that communion. In that moment, the combined memories, thoughts, experiences, dreams, hopes, and fears of two separate entities were joined into a single communal being, a single mind, a single *soul*, made up of two parts. Thoughts and memories flowed freely between them. This Kimdori was named Grahl, and he was of the Mekh clan. He was a young Kimdori, only five years free of his mother's den, currently on what Jason learned was the *sojourn*, a period in a Kimdori's life when he or she was to roam the vastness of the galaxy for ten years and learn, observe, interact with other cultures and expand his knowledge. Once his sojourn was complete, he would return to his clan to be educated and trained. He was at Mezour because he was working for a Faey shipping company as a pilot, earning money that would help him move on when he was ready to explore another part of the galaxy, once he felt he was ready to leave Draconis.

And he *knew* about Jason. They all did, every single Kimdori. Grahl knew of him, and when he

was aware that Jason was feeling the other side of that communion, touching on the part of them that was Grahl, he gave Jason a toothy grin and let go. Jason felt a little disoriented for a second, and then realized that everything he'd seen in their commune was removed...and what was more, he didn't think to look at anything, so surprised he'd been by the feel of it. He remembered Grahl's name, however, and he realized that if he'd thought to look into it, he could have remembered more. That's was when he finally understood what Kiaari and Miaari meant about remembering what they saw. He would have had to make a conscious attempt at retaining anything that came from the other side of that communion. He'd taken special note of Grahl's name and his clan, and recalled that he was on his sojourn, because that had kind of jumped out at him when the bond was firm. But he hadn't looked at anything else, and such, he couldn't remember any of it.

The large Kimdori let his big hand linger on the side of Jason's neck, then he simply turned and walked away without a word.

"See, what did I tell you?" the Makati growled under his breath to Jason.

Jason put his own hand to his neck and looked at the Kimdori as he ambled away. Something very...significant had happened there. He wasn't quite sure what it was, but he knew that something had.

"Uh, I meant to ask, why did I see so many ships that aren't Imperial when I approached Draconis?" he asked, trying to not sound rattled.

"Well, Draconis is a major hub," he answered. "Most other races don't like coming here cause of Faey telepathy, but they *are* major players in the galactic scene. The Imperium isn't the biggest civilization out there, but we're one of the most well armed, and we're competitive when it comes to technology. And then there's telepathy," he chuckled. "Those species that can handle it come here to do business, some actually come here just to come on holiday since Draconis is such a pretty planet, and there's always diplomats. Just about all the diplomats that come here are telepathic themselves, though. Nobody likes sending someone here who's at that much of a disadvantage."

"What do you think about working with them?"

"I've been around Faey all my life," he shrugged. "I'm used to knowing that they might be hearing what I'm thinking, and they know not to take random thoughts seriously. Trust me, you get used to it."

"I hope so. I didn't see more than like five Faey before I got this job, now I'm around them every day. It makes me a little nervous."

"That'll pass. Just be yourself, friend. They'll get used to you, and you'll get used to them."

"That's so easy to say," he grunted.

The Makati chuckled. "You'll see. Alright, this one's good, and that's basicly it. I need you to sign this invoice right here," he said, holding up the datapad and pointing. "And I need your signature to acknowledge receipt here. And I'll need you to come with me and inspect the loading. Once you're satisfied it was loaded correctly, I'll need your signature one more time."

"Okay," he nodded.

After signing for the shipment, inspecting the loading to make sure it was balanced and everything was secure, Jason initialled off on that, said his goodbyes to the friendly Makati, and then buttoned up the dropship. He returned to the cockpit and sat down in the pilot's chair, and gave Luke and Songa a steady look. "Well, that went smoothly. Any trouble, Songa?"

"None at all," she replied. "I may be a doctor, but I'm a good telepath, dear. We've been perfectly hidden."

"Good. Now let's go home."

"Home sounds good to me," Luke agreed with a nod.

The trip to Draconis had been to buy the supplies needed to refit the dropship for stealth, and it had been thorough. Now that they had everything that they needed, they started the same day.

They already had a plan, and they already had experience doing a refit, so the beginning was very

orderly. Everyone already knew what to do, and they'd already worked up a schedule and design plans to go by. They started almost as soon as the dropship was unloaded, and Tom Jackson started his task as soon as it got dark so Luke could take him back to Charleston, where he would assemble his team, gather up supplies, and then fly to Cheyenne Mountain. Jason thought it was a good idea, which would let them get as much done in Cheyenne Mountain as they could while they were refitting the dropship. Tom's team turned into a thirty man regiment, including one of the doctors, Rann. Songa stayed at the warehouse, and Yohnne remained in Charleston to keep watch over Kumi, who no longer needed around the clock attention, but did need a doctor to remain with her.

The refit began by sectioning off the warehouse. They hung a curtain from the ceiling rafters that hid the front half of the warehouse from the back doors, covered over the window on the door from the office into the warehouse, and then installed some fans and ventilation. Hiding the dropship was critical because they knew that they would be receiving shipments, and anyone bringing those shipments might see the dropship. They didn't want anyone to have any suspicion about what was going on. The refit team had already passed the biggest test, the ability to control themselves in the presence of hostile Faey, but that was a skill that they wouldn't have to exercise very often. Lincoln only had about two hundred Faey total in it, and they had no reason to come out here, since the warehouse was way, way off the beaten path.

Some contact was necessary, though. Through Civnet, Jason bought a truck and a car to be used, and it was using that truck that Songa went on her food runs. Jason set her up so she could use the corporate account, and she went out every day to buy sundries and perishables for the refit team. She didn't go to the same store twice, and they were still getting the majority of their food from Charleston in shipments that Luke or Jason collected every three days. Some of it was dropped off at the warehouse, the rest was sent on to Cheyenne Mountain.

It was an exhausting time for Jason. When he wasn't working in Lincoln, he was flying the skimmer back and forth between Lincoln, Charleston, and Cheyenne Mountain, which he never really got to see more than the entry tunnel. His visits there entailed him landing with his tail to the entry tunnel, opening the cargo hatch, and helping them unload while the ship was still under power...and that was always *nervous*. The ship's hull was charged, and it required them to wear special rubber rain suits to unload the skimmer, so nobody got electrocuted. When he was at Lincoln, he was always busy. He worked on the dropship. He continued to try to search out the link between Temika and Tim, who had been rather surprised to learn that they were distant relatives, and had jokingly started calling each other brother and sister. He still continued to train people in piloting, and he rather shamefully admitted that his current focus was to get Jyslin up to class three level as quickly as possible. It had nothing to do with any need of the community or the resistance, he just wanted her to be able to pilot a dropship or skimmer so she always had that option if the worst happened and she had to run. The protection of his fiancée mattered more to him than anything else. He kept in frequent contact with Tom in Colorado, and also with Yohnne and Kumi back in Charleston, trying to stay up to date on all the matters and issues of the three positions, and also to ride others to do their parts. He contacted Rann every day to make sure he was continuing work on his DNA pattern scanner, which he had plenty of time to work on given that he was only in Colorado in case someone got injured. If he wasn't seeing a patient, he was working on that device.

But, things were progressing well. The refit was ahead of schedule and got further and further ahead of schedule every day, since everyone knew exactly what to do and did it well. The dropship had a much larger surface area than his skimmer, but this time, instead of applying the external layers by hand, they were using a machine, an automated molecular sprayer that coated the dropship in the exact thickness, right down to the *molecule*. That device was literally saving them *weeks* of time. It looked like a three foot tall spider with six legs, and that was the name it had been given, the spider. They simply programmed it with desired thickness, loaded it with the material to spray, and let it go. It crawled over the ship on its own laying down a layer, it knew where it had already gone, and it avoided

those areas it was programmed not to spray. It also checked its own work repeatedly, scanning the surface with an on-board metallurgical scanner to ensure proper purity and thickness. While the spider applied the outer coatings, teams installed the shield emitters, while other teams ran the cabling from the emitters to the ship's existing power and data networks. The software was Jason and Jyslin's job, for Jyslin was good at TEL, but not as good as Steve had been...but any help at all was greatly appreciated, for TEL wasn't Jason's strong suit. They already had a working CMS program module for the skimmer, so Jason and Jyslin put their head together and bent themselves about the task of porting it over to the dropship. The core of the program would remain unchanged, they'd just have to make some alterations based on the dropship's differing construction. There would be more emitters and more doors, as well as the rather tricky three-door layout of the back cargo doors, with the two vertical upper doors and the horizontal lower door, that lowered to become a ramp.

Days blurred into weeks, and weeks blurred into a month, as it got warmer and warmer outside as April faded into May, and the outside of the dropship took on its final appearance as the spider finished its final layer of Neutronium, which had been molecularly aligned so the dropship appeared gray, with the Vultech logo in blue on the nose, just under the windscreen, a logo that could be erased in about ten seconds with an annealer. Two weeks ahead of schedule, the outer coatings had been applied and the shield emitters had been installed and inspected to ensure that the emitters were touching the right layers of the outer shell. There was much more work to be done, but that work was now inside, as they finished running the cabling and testing their work, one emitter at a time, one section of dataline or plasma conduit at a time. The software side was progressing nicely, for Jason and Jyslin often worked at the same time, and they stayed in telepathic contact at all times so they knew what the other was doing to the program. Jason bought a panel just for her, and they would sit at a table in the office, facing each other, each of them tapping away at the holographic keyboards of their panels, both panels and minds linked with the other as they kept track of what was going on.

Jason had been quite satisfied with the work on the dropship, for they'd hit no major snags whatsoever. The only real issue they'd had had been figuring out how to set up and program the spider, but once they had that figured out and working, it had been smooth and efficient.

Work on other fronts was progressively quite satisfactorily as well. Rann was nearly finished with his DNA sequence tester, and had showed it to him the last time Jason had gone to Cheyenne Mountain. It was smaller than a datapad, a tiny rectangular device that Jason could put in his pocket, which had attached leads that ran down to the fingers. Rann had installed those sensors in a glove, that would basically allow the user to touch someone's bare skin with the glove and have a reading in about two seconds, which would be fed into an earphone that connected to the unit. It was a solid and sound little device, small, portable, easy to use, and very, very well engineered. Rann could have made one hell of an engineer.

Rann was so damn *smart*. Because he knew that it would be terribly inefficient to have someone go around and test people handshake by handshake, he had devised a cunning, cunning little plan for a similar unit that would be used *remotely*. His idea was to install the sensors on something that a vast number of people would touch, hook it up to an analyzer, and also have a button camera somewhere nearby that would take the picture of everyone who touched whatever the sensor was on, but then save a picture of anyone who produced a positive match. Adding in a small communications device that would have the unit *call* Jason's panel and upload the data of a positive match meant that they could be set and then left alone. Add in a few anti-intrusion devices that would cause them to burn out if tampered with, scatter them through the world, and then wait for matches.

This had such *potential*. The best place to put these devices would be on door handles, ATMs, and on the card readers on public transportation systems in large cities, on things that would require people to press buttons that had the sensors attached to them. Rann could make a sensor that was so small that it would be almost invisible, so it would just be a matter of setting something up that wouldn't be easily detected, or something that wouldn't break quickly from heavy use.

Jason put Rann to work on the idea immediately, though Rann had expected that and was already halfway done with his design. Jason made a special run to bring Rann some extra materials and supplies he'd need to build the prototype of his idea, and Jason went back to Lincoln with the schematics that Rann had drawn up for the device.

Though he would have loved to have tinkered with Rann's design, getting the dropship's CMS module ready was the priority. He dedicated himself to that as the installation crew finished its testing and started reassembling the interior of the ship, working for three straight days with Jyslin to finish the module, and then to test it with simulations to ensure it passed muster. They finished the installation of the CMS system in the ship before they were done, however, and Jason allowed them to rest, sending Songa out for beer, wine, chips, and the fixings for a barbecue while Jason and Jyslin finished their part.

From what he heard, it had been quite a party. Jason and Jyslin didn't attend, because they were busy, but everyone else in Lincoln did, enjoying a mild late spring afternoon with a grill Songa bought from Home Depot, hot dogs, hamburgers, chicken, shrimp, Faey *meru*, which was a meat from a lizard that tasted like buttered lobster, and more beer than they could drink. Songa got drunk, got full, decided that she was too pale, then went to take a nap while sunning herself on the tarmac...which she did naked. To say that she had quite a crowd of spectators was an understatement. Jason had idly wondered what that must have looked like after he heard about it, and Temika wasted no time sharing an image of memory with him of Songa laying nude on the tarmac, blanket under her, with lots of men looking on eagerly, and not a few of the women also looking on, but more scandalized than appreciative. When Jason publicly mused that her hair wasn't the same shade of blue all over, Songa immediately replied that she didn't get many chances to let her pubic hair bleach in the sun like the hair on her head, then decided that Temika's image wasn't quite flattering enough, so she came down and showed Jason that darker hair, in person...with Jyslin in the room.

Ah, Faey. He just had to admire the utter lack of modesty they had. If anything, it always gave him such wonderful things to look at. There was just something undeniably sexy about a woman with her pants and panties around her knees, proudly showing off a neatly trimmed triangle of pubic hair while talking aloud about how she needed to sunbathe nude more often, without even batting an eye.

But, it was also an important step, Jason understood. Songa was losing her sense of distance from the group, starting to interact, to make friends, and since she was feeling so much more comfortable, she was starting to revert to her more Faey mentality, and that included a lack of human-based modesty. There were no standards of dress in Faey society. In the summer, and on hotter planets, it wasn't illegal, and truly wasn't very uncommon, to see both men and women going topless, or even completely nude, in public. To the Faey, the nude body was an object of beauty, nearly a living work of art to be admired, not an object of shame to be covered and hidden. And the more beautiful the Faey, the more apt he or she was to go without clothes. This was also a human tendency, where the ones with the better bodies showed more of it off, but the main difference was that there was that line of what was considered *indecent* that didn't exist in Faey society.

Jyslin certainly didn't miss the fact that Songa had turned him on, and made sure to remind him that night just who had the hotter body.

It was that morning, as they lounged in the small bed in the tiny cubicle off the main office that was their private bedroom, that Jyslin broached a subject Jason had forgotten about. *I just wanted you to know, Symone had a talk with me yesterday.*

Oh? What about?

Tim.

What about Tim?

She wants me to fuck him, she answered immediately. She felt it's only fair, since she's had sex with you.

But it's not like she's not here.

True, but she also feels that it's necessary, and so do I, she answered soberly, which caused him to look over at her.

Why is it necessary?

Think of it as a demonstration of friendship, she answered. *For me and Symone to feel we're on the same level as friends, and since she's had you, she has to reciprocate by letting me have Tim.*

You sound, eager, he accused.

You bet your ass I'm eager, she replied immediately. *Tim is very sexy, and he has a nice dick. I've been wanting to sample that equipment since I got a good look at it in the bathroom back in Hawaii.*

You never told me.

Why should I? I'm sure you've had thoughts here and there about other women, and I caught that little fantasy about you bending Songa over and sticking your cock in her when she dropped her pants and showed you her pussy. I assure you, lover, women have the same daydreams about men.

Jason blushed furiously, and felt both embarrassed and humiliated.

I never said I was mad, Jyslin told him with a giggle. *It's only healthy for men to have fantasies about women, even total strangers. It's natural. And women have the same fantasies about men. I'm just lucky that the man I've had fantasies about is Symone's husband. Since she took care of you while I was gone, now I get to see if Tim's dick feels as good as it looks.*

I'm not sure I know how to feel about it.

Well, how did you feel about fucking Symone?

Very unsettled, he answered. *I felt like I was violating my friendship with Tim.*

How did Tim feel?

He didn't care at all. I mean he really didn't care. He even seemed to encourage it.

Well, that's the kind of attitude you need to foster, love. I can absolutely assure you, the only thing I'm interested about with Tim is his dick. I just want to fuck him, and you know Faey custom, love. It's just sex. I'm not going to join minds with him, it's not going to be anything more than buddy sex. I'm curious about him, Symone owes me, and I mean to satisfy that curiosity. And when I'm done, it won't change how I feel about us at all. I want to have sex with Tim, but I want to make love with you. Those are two very different things. You know that.

Yeah, I know that, but I've always had an issue about it. I think it bothers me more that this is about Tim than it would if it was a total stranger.

It's not going to change how I feel about you, or about Tim, at all, love. Well, not completely. Afterwards, I can always tell you how good he is in bed, and I'll certainly be a little more intimate with him in some ways. But to me, that's a good thing. Symone is my best friend, and I want to be more intimate with her and more intimate with her husband. I want to be able to talk about sex with Tim to her, since we talk sex about you all the time, she told him with a naughty little grin.

Jason flushed a little. *I'm not sure I want to know about what you two say to each other.*

It's just standard sex talk, love, she grinned. *Size, stamina, favorite positions, and how good you are at them. I want to be able to compare with Symone about Tim the way we compare about you.*

Well, I'm so glad that both of you weren't disappointed, he sent ruefully.

Symone really wants more sex with you, Jyslin sent honestly. *It's not that she's not satisfied with Tim, but good sex is good sex, and variety is good in sex or you get bored and stagnant. She likes you, she likes your body, and she likes the way you fuck her. There's an idea. While I'm matting pubic hair with Tim, why don't you take Symone somewhere and fuck her?*

I'm not sure I could do that.

It's easy, silly. Take her clothes off, spread her legs, get it up, then stick it in her. Slide it out, push it back in, then repeat as necessary.

Jason couldn't help but laugh at that, which made her grin impishly. *Thank you oh so much for that lesson,* he sent to her dryly.

Actually, I think I'm going to insist, she sent to him, quite seriously. *I thought you were over this*

hang-up, but I see that you're not, so we need to address it. When I go to collect on what Symone owes me with Tim, I'm going to send her back here and have her give you some remedial education on some of the customs between two very close Faey friends.

You really don't have to do that.

Yes, love, I do, she told him, her eyes serious. You felt uncomfortable having sex with Symone when I wasn't here. Well, now I am here, and now I'm sending her to our bed with my blessing, and at the same time I'm going to be going to Symone's bed and experiencing her husband. When two Faey are as close as me and Symone, this isn't just normal, it's expected. Your heart belongs to me, but I'm more than happy to lend out your dick to my best friend, and she's more than happy to lend out her husband's dick to me. Symone agrees with it, I agree with it, and Tim agrees with it. How can you still feel uncomfortable with it when your only real issue with it is how you think it affects Tim?

You're following your Faey customs, love, and I don't fault or grudge you for it. And I don't think any different about you or Symone because of it. But I'm also following my own customs with Tim. In human society, having sex with your best friend's wife isn't acceptable.

Yes, but Tim has no problem with it. Let's look at it this way, Jason. Do you trust me?

With my life, he answered immediately.

Good. Now, tell me honestly, how do you think me having sex with Tim will change our relationship?

It won't change it at all, he answered, again, immediately. It was the simple truth.

Alright then. You've had sex with Symone. Has it changed your relationship with her?

Not really. She got a lot, well, closer afterwards, like having sex with her allowed her to get more intimate with me. I think it really kinda got better afterwards.

Okay, good, so your relationship with Symone actually got better after you had sex with her. Now, how did having sex with Symone change your relationship with Tim?

It didn't, not really, he said. Tim knew I was self-conscious about it, and he really tried to make me feel comfortable. He told me he understood what Symone was doing and why she was doing it, and it didn't bother him, but I guess I never really believed him. I still think that he doesn't approve of it on some level, and because of that, it just doesn't make me feel right.

But that's not true, and that's what you need to understand, she told him. Love, Tim understands Symone and the Faey much better than you do. It really, truly, and honestly does not bother him. In fact, he approves of it. I've talked with him about it when I got back, because I wanted to know where he stood on the matter. Tim told me that if Symone was going to be having sex with anyone else, he wanted it to be with you. Do you know why?

No.

Because he's your best friend, and he loves you like a brother. He knows that Symone really likes you, even loves you as a friend, and he also knows that this is one way she shows that affection. But the main reason, is because he knows that you will treat Symone with respect and kindness, and he knows that Symone will be just as good to you. And he knows all this just as much as he knows that no matter what, Symone loves him with all her heart, and he never has to worry about where she stands with him. Have you ever sat down and had a long talk with Tim about this?

Well...

I thought not. I want you to get up, right now, and go talk to Tim. And I don't mean hedging, hewing, and hawing. Talk about this, and come to understand how he feels by asking him. And talk to him about how he feels about what's coming. Tell him that today, I get him. Now that the ring's going to be on the other post, that he's going to be having sex with his best friend's wife, talk to him and understand how he feels, and tell him how you feel about it. He might be as nervous about it as you were, now that he's the one about to be handed off like a zer ball.

That's true. I know I was nervous enough when Symone—well, you get the idea.

She grinned. Jason. You can talk sex about Symone with me. Trelle knows, I talk enough sex

about you with her. It'd be interesting to see if you think she's as hot as she thinks you are.

Yes, but then we start getting into those "questions with no answers" questions where you ask me to compare her with you, and no matter what I say, it's the wrong answer.

She laughed. Point. So get up and go talk to Tim.

I can't.

Why not?

You're on top of me.

She slapped him on the shoulder, but did roll off of his chest and give him room to move. Now, go talk to Tim.

I guess I will.

That conversation was both enlightening and somewhat surprising, because Tim was indeed nervous about the idea of sharing a bed with Jyslin. Outside of that, though, Jason found that Jyslin had been dead-on about Tim. He truly did understand, even better so than Jason, about the intricacies of a Faey relationship and his comfort within it. After sitting down over coffee and donuts and talking with Tim for most of the morning, putting off work and duties to do so, Jason felt that he had misunderstood both Tim and his own outlook about their rather unusual situation.

"Yeah, at first it bothered me a little," Tim admitted. "I mean, my wife was gonna go sleep with another man. But then I remembered just who my wife is, and what we've shared. I've look into her soul, Jason. I mean all the way into her soul," he said in a distracted manner, his eyes distant. "After that, I just can't find any jealousy in me. None at all. She could sleep with every guy in the warehouse, and it still wouldn't change how I feel about her, or how I know she feels about me. Isn't that the way you feel about Jyslin?"

"Exactly the way, but I just wasn't sure how you'd feel about it," he said. "I wasn't sure just where you and her stood like that. I've never asked, and I wasn't gonna. It's just too personal. That's why I've never really come to talk to you like this before. Not like *this*. It just seemed something I shouldn't be talking about, even to you."

"Well, now you know that it's alright. I'm not mad, I'm not jealous, and I really didn't mind. Actually, I'm rather grateful. You made Symone happy, you showed her real friendship by doing what you did, and you made her feel both special and responsible. So, I should really thank you for putting aside how you felt to make sure she felt good about herself. So, does that help some?"

"Yeah, it does, actually," he admitted. "It's not like I'm gonna be pulling Symone's pants down whenever you're not looking, but it makes me feel better about the past."

"Hell, if you want to, go for it," Tim shrugged. "Symone sure as hell won't say no. She thinks you're the second best lay on Earth, and she's told me straight out that she'd really like more time in bed with you. Just don't wear her out to where she's not up to it when *I* want some."

Jason gave Tim a wild look, then both of them burst out laughing. "I'm not sure if you were serious or not," Jason said.

"Oh, I was serious enough," he said honestly. "And now I guess it's my turn to feel like a slab of meat."

Jason laughed delightedly. "That's exactly how it made me feel, but I can tell you that it's not going to be out of duty. Remember back in Hawaii, when Jyslin walked in on you in the bathroom?"

"Yeah."

"Well, she told me that ever since then, she's entertained the idea of a night with you," he repeated what Jyslin had told him. "She thought you had some good equipment."

Tim laughed. "I *knew* she was staring at my johnson," he said.

"She was. She told me this morning she's looking forward to getting back from Symone what Symone got from her."

"Well, that makes me less nervous. I mean, if Jyslin wants to ride the pony, then it won't feel like

it's being forced, that we're doing it because we have to."

"Well, just be nice," Jason told her. "Nothing she doesn't want to do, stuff like that. I know it doesn't matter here or there, but you have my blessing. Because, like you said, I know where Jyslin will be tonight, and that's enough for me."

"Well, can we have fun?"

Jason laughed. "Well, I *guess* so," he drawled. "Just don't have too much fun, or I'll never see her again."

Tim gave him a look, then burst out laughing. "Oh yeah, I remember that," he said. "For days after Symone's first time with you, that's all I heard about. Jason this, Jason that. She went over every minute of it. It was almost embarrassing. She even compared the sizes of our dicks."

"She *didn't*!" Jason gasped.

"Oh yes she did," he answered. "But then I think she realized she was getting close to stepping on egos, and declared that we were the same size."

"I'm starting to feel a little, abused here," he grunted with a rueful chuckle. "Symone talks about it with you, and she talks about it with Jyslin, but doesn't talk about it with me."

"This is why you should look up from your panel from time to time," he teased.

"I think I'd better start," Jason grunted.

"And about not talking about it, well, she wasn't because she knew it made you feel a little uncomfortable. I mean talking about it the way she did with us. She was trying to work you up to that point."

"Yeah, Jyslin said more or less the same thing."

"At least now I know why it was. You should have come to me about this earlier."

"I know, but I didn't want to jeopardize our friendship, Tim."

"I don't think much of anything can do that, Jayce. We've been best buds for a long time. It'd take way more than that to push us apart."

"That makes me very relieved to hear that, Tim," Jason said.

Tim reached out his hand, and Jason clasped it, which brought a familiar tickle to Jason's mind. Jason and Tim touched each other with Talent, and in that brief moment, all of Jason's reservations and fears about driving a wedge between himself and Tim vanished with a simple, heartfelt assurance that Tim truly, honestly, and sincerely understood, and not only didn't mind, but actively approved of Symone's actions and behavior.

"Now, I hate to talk and run, but I need to run a few more simulations. We're trying to fix a bug in the CMS module, and I'd like to get the module done by Friday. I suggest that you don't get involved in anything until afterward."

Tim laughed. "I'll make sure to keep myself available. You know what this means, though."

"What?"

"Now, whenever they start comparing us, we can start comparing *them*."

Jason gave him a look, then laughed. "I'm not sure I'm that brave, Tim."

"We should be. A healthy dose of 'her tits feel nicer than yours' could really shut one of them up when she starts getting smug."

"And if you say that to the wrong one, you're gonna be sleeping on the floor."

"A risk worth taking," he said with an evil smile.

Jason had to admit, he really didn't have as much of an understanding as Tim did, but after talking to Tim, and talking to Jyslin before, he was starting to *understand* what he already *knew*. There was a big difference between knowing something and understanding it, but now Jason was finally starting to comprehend the difference. He was finally beginning to *understand* the rather unusual situation that he, Tim, Jyslin, and Symone were in...or unusual to him. To Symone and Jyslin, it was perfectly natural. And for Tim, who had come to understand it long before him, it was much less surprising. Jason and Tim were marrying *Faey*, not *humans*, so that meant that they had to be more tolerant and

understanding of their women, because they had customs and a culture that were not their own. The special relationship between Jyslin and Symone had implications that reached beyond their friendship and affected Jason and Tim. And Tim had come to understand those unique responsibilities, because he understood Symone, and understood his relationship with her better than Jason had understood his own relationship with Jyslin. Tim had understood both Symone and Faey culture, and so, when that culture created a situation that would be considered out of bounds in human society, Tim was able to understand it, and move past it. Jason had not.

At least not until now.

Now, Jason could truly say that it no longer bothered him, what had happened, because he knew that it did not bother Tim...and that had been at the core of his issues with the situation between Symone and Jyslin. Jason had felt uncomfortable because he felt that it was highly improper for him to sleep with his best friend's wife. It was a clash of his culture with Symone's. But Tim had looked past that, and knew in his heart that Symone loved him, so it wasn't really an issue with him. And like Jyslin had said and Tim had confirmed, if there was anyone that he would prefer Symone to sleep with, it was Jason, because Jason would treat her right. Now Jason understood that. And since Tim was alright with it, Jason could at least understand it, and look from the other side with the same consideration and grace. He would permit Jyslin to enjoy the same privileges that Symone had, because he loved her, he knew that it was her way, and he knew that she loved him in return and would always come back to *him*.

It was almost a strange sense of...freedom, knowing that he had such faith in Jyslin that he would allow her to sleep with another man, but there it was. He knew that she was going to go have sex with Tim. It was what she wanted to do, and it was what Symone wanted her to do, for it was Symone's way of finalizing the bonds of friendship between Jyslin and Symone. Symone had had sex with Jason while Jyslin was away, serving as a surrogate, and now that Jyslin was back, Symone wanted to give back to Jyslin what she had taken with Jason. And there was also the fact that Jyslin had always had a fantasy about Tim, so it certainly wouldn't be about duty.

Jason stayed in the office and worked on the CMS module, just letting things basically go the way they were going to go. But of course, he knew when Jyslin went to Symone, and then Symone summoned Tim, because Jyslin told him so. And in that moment, when he knew that it was inevitable, that Jyslin was going to be having sex with his best friend, Jason looked inside himself to see what was there.

Grace and blessing.

If it was what Jyslin wanted, then so be it. In Faey culture, what she wanted wasn't only accepted, it was expected. Jyslin and Symone were friends, Symone had slept with Jyslin's husband, and now Jyslin would sleep with Symone's husband. Was he jealous? Maybe a tiny bit, knowing that she was no longer his and his alone. But that was just her body. Her heart was still his, and only his.

And that was really the only part of her that mattered.

The door opened, and he didn't have to look up to know who it was. Symone flopped into the chair on the other side of the table, put her elbow atop it, then leaned her cheek in her hand. *Jason*, she sent with open eagerness. *Jyslin told me to come down here.*

I know she did, he answered mildly.

Well?

Well what?

Well, let's go.

Symone, you don't have to.

Oh, I know I don't have to, but I want to, she answered immediately and with utter sincerity.

Jason looked up at her. *Well, if you want to, that's another story*, he sent honestly. He offered his hand to her, which she immediately accepted. *Shall we?*

I can't wait, she said with a slowly blooming smile, a smile that became radiant as her eyes

registered that Jason seemed to finally understand the complex relationship that the four of them shared, and had found his place within it.

And he was right. That day did not change anything in the relationship of the four with one another.

In a way, it made things a little more open and honest. Freed up of his reticence about speaking to Tim about certain subjects he'd always felt were off limits before, it let Jason and Tim deepen their own friendship and become even better friends. Jyslin and Symone were almost smug about it all, at least until Tim started comparing. That earned him a kick in the shin from Symone when she started coming up on the short end of a few of those comparisons.

Jason had always felt very close to Symone because of what they shared, a kind of intimacy that only a man and woman who had had sex could feel, and now Tim felt a similar closeness to Jyslin. He remarked on that to Jason the next day, remarking that he'd been so nervous at first, but then he felt so comfortable, and afterwards it was almost like Symone in how totally at ease he felt with her, joking with her, making what some would consider lewd comments, and having one those necessary episodes of comparison, as Jyslin compared him to Jason, and Tim compared her to Symone. After all, after a man had sex with a woman, how could anything else feel out of bounds? They'd already engaged in one of those most intimate acts—for a human at least—there was to undertake.

And how did Jason feel? The exact same he did before. He loved Jyslin with all his heart, he was still best buds with Tim, and Symone was still one of his closest friends. He didn't feel jealous at all, because Jyslin had come home to him, remarked about what she felt was a *very* pleasurable encounter with Tim, made some of those inevitable comparisons, remarked that future trysts with him would certainly be worth pursuing, then she kissed him...and that kiss told him that she was where she belonged, and that was with him.

And that was that. The matter quickly became just another aspect of the relationship between Jason, Tim, Symone, and Jyslin. They were two couples that happened to be close to one another, couples who were best friends with the other.

It didn't go without notice, that was for sure. Temika cornered Jason about it the next day, and after he told her what happened, she blushed furiously, stormed away...and then came back and demanded details. Temika was a very close friend of both Jason and Tim, and it took her a while to come to understand the complicated issues underlying what was going on. But, to Jason's surprise, when he finally managed to explain them in a manner that made sense to her, she had no problems at all with it.

"Y'all are adults, sugah," she told him. "And heah lately Ah've started understandin' the blueskins a little better, what with there bein' so damn many of 'em around lately. As long as nobody got hurt and you and Tim ain't mad at each other, and Symone and Jyslin ain't mad, hell, what mo' needs be said? Er, y'all aren't like wife-swappin' now, or like all doing it in the same room at the same time, are ya?"

Jason laughed. "No, I don't think that we are," he answered. "Though Jyslin did mention that she might ask Symone about giving her another go with Tim," he recalled.

"Uh oh, sounds like you got some competition, sugah," she laughed.

"None at all, Mika. That's what I didn't really understand before, but I understand it now, at least I understand it now that I've been on this side of it instead of the other side."

"Ah remember you talking about it with me befo', after Ah found out Symone was screwin' you. You didn't seem all that enthusiastic about it then."

"I wasn't, because I thought that it just wasn't right for me to be fooling around with my best friend's wife, but that was when I was trying to look at things from a *human* perspective, you know. Well, Symone and Jyslin aren't human, they're Faey, and I finally get what they've always tried to explain to me. I guess I had to experience it before I'd understand it. Anyway, as far as the Jyslin and

Tim thing goes, it's just that she's her own woman, but she's also *my* woman. I know her, I love her, and I trust her. I know that any interest she has in Tim is purely physical, and if she wants to go play with Tim, she's more than welcome to, because it's *Tim*, and because I trust her. If it was someone else, well, that'd be a different story. But I know that all she's looking for from Tim is sex."

"You say it like that's all it is," she grunted.

"That *is* all it is," he answered. "You'll find out when you finally find a man of your own, Mika, and you join minds with him during sex. That puts it all in an entirely new light."

"Ah don't think that's ever gonna happen," she told him. "It's been so long since Ah had good sex, Ah wouldn't know it from a hole in the ground."

"Pft, sure it will. Mike's been trying to work himself up to it, you know. Asking you out."

"Ah know. He's kinda cute, and he's got a hot bod, but Ah don't know if Ah'm ready yet. Even now, whenever someone touches me, Ah gotta resist the urge tah scream an' run away."

"Well, just remember that when you *are* ready, there's someone out there that's patiently waiting for you," he told her.

"Just don't start tryin' to pimp yo'self out, Jayce. Yo' cute, but you ain't *that* cute."

Jason gave her a surprised look, then laughed so hard he hurt something in his throat.

Temika wasn't the only one who noticed. Meya and Myra came up to him while he was working on the TEL module, when Jyslin was grabbing a snack, and sat on either side of the table. "And what can I do for you, ladies?" he asked.

Spill, Myra sent.

Spill what?

We want details, Meya sent eagerly. *All of them. The dirtier the better.*

Details about what?

We heard you and Tim swapped, so spill, Myra sent, leaning over and looking down into his eyes. *Every pant, moan, thrust, and grope.*

And what makes you think we're going to talk about that? Jason asked.

Because we're friends, aren't we? Myra sent innocently. *And we certainly wouldn't get without giving. We can tell you all about our last encounter, but ours are more fun.*

We share men sometimes, Meya sent with a smile, as if she was trying to surprise Jason with that information. *Men love it when they get twins. We have lots of good stories.*

Jason had to laugh. *I imagine you do*, he sent pleasantly. *And exactly who did you hear this from, by the way?*

Songa, Meya answered. *She was in the storeroom beside the one that Tim and Jyslin were using, so she heard it all.*

Jason tracked down Songa after disengaging himself from the twins, and all she could do was grin at him. *It's not like it's a big thing, Jayce*, she told him as she sorted sheets she'd just retrieved from the laundry service that handled the linen for the warehouse. *I kinda expected that you shared with Tim and Symone, you're all best friends, after all. That kind of situation is quite common among my people. Me and Rann share a very similar arrangement with the couple that live beside us, back on Dracora. Me and Oda have been friends for years, I think Oda's husband is quite sexy, and Rann thinks that Oda has gorgeous legs. We've shared with each other a few times, and Oda was kind enough to keep Rann happy last year when I was on trip to Arctus for a seminar. I take it you'd rather keep it quiet?*

Please, most of the humans wouldn't understand it.

Not a problem, Jayce. I just hope that soon, you and me are friends enough that I can make the same invitation to you. I can't find a man here that piques my interest, I've been feeling my separation from Rann more and more with each day, and it'd be nice to have a friend that would take care of things like that for me.

Well, I hope we can be close friends too, Jason sent delicately, remembering his first experience

with that kind of statement, long ago from Symone. He certainly wouldn't encourage it, but he also didn't want to offend her...and he *did* like Songa. She was very nice, witty, funny, and had a broad intellect that made her a delightful woman to talk to.

Well, then we need to get to know each other better, don't we? She sent with a dazzling smile. *Why don't you and Jyslin have dinner with me tonight? I'm a good cook.*

I'll ask Jyslin if she'd like to come, he answered honestly.

After that little loose end was tied up, Jason settled back into an exhaustive routine, a routine that barely changed after the events of the previous days. Jason and Jyslin needed to finish the TEL module as quickly as they could, because the hardware was installed and the module was the only thing left. But despite his busy schedule, he and Jyslin *did* go have dinner with Songa, and went back to dinner with her every night that week. Songa really was a very good cook, and she was starved for some sincere conversation and just a feeling of inclusion. Her separation from Rann had hit her harder than she expected, and Jyslin had seen that, and was trying to make her feel better. Jason hadn't noticed how lonely Songa had been since coming here, and he was glad that the evenings she now shared with Jason and Jyslin made her feel better.

The dinners with Songa were actually a boon, because they helped both Jason and Jyslin rest and relax, and return in the morning focused on the task at hand. Jason had wanted to finish the TEL module by Friday, but snags in the coding dealing with the complicated rear cargo doors pushed it back to Sunday, when they finally got a module that passed every scenario without any errors. It was about time, too, since the refit team was still here, lounging around, and getting a little bored and restless. Jason wanted them to be here in case there was a problem and they had to take the system apart to fix it. Sunday morning, they finished the module, and they immediately ran it over to the dropship and called everyone in for a test. Before everyone was even there, Jason slotted the stick holding the module and had the dropship command computer download the module and install it. Once that was done, he had it integrate the module, which caused it to appear on the display as a primary module, one that affected direct ship operations. "Alright, this is a hot test," Jason called over the external speaker as the computer reported the module as ready, and Jyslin, in the copilot's seat, started a debug session so they could locate any coding conflicts that might cause errors. "Everyone stand clear of the hull!"

Alright, we're in debug mode on this console and it's ready.

"Alright then, here we go. Bringing up the CMS." Jason activated it, which caused a holograph of the dropship to appear in the air over them. The multitude of tiny red dots all began to turn green in random order, as the computer polled each emitter, then the system came online and activated as Jason tapped an icon in that hovering display, a refinement they added to make activation faster. The module was designed to tap power from the main engines if they were online, and one of the two standby PPGs if the engines were offline. The engines were off, so the system drew power from the secondary PPG. There was a faint whine as the power surged through the ship. Sections of the ship went from gray to red, and then from red to green as the CMS system charged the emitters, and then they fired. The ship quickly turned completely green on the display except for the open hatches, the rear cargo doors, and the landing skids.

We're not showing any errors, Jyslin reported.

"Are we working out there?"

The system's working except for the windshield, Meya responded as several people shouted the same thing.

"Windshield? Hold on," Jason grunted, quickly issuing some commands. The CMS system was saying that the windscreen was working, but if they could see it from outside, then something was wrong. *Jyslin—*

Already on it, she broke in. *Give me a second. Go ahead and test the hatches and doors while I track this down.*

Alright. "Alright guys I'm gonna close the port forward hatch, watch it for me. Closing it now."

Jason closed the hatch, and watched as the door on the hologram flashed red, then then the emitters flashed green, became steady green, and then the hatch door turned green. "Is it working?"

"Working fine!" someone shouted.

"Alright, closing the starbord aft hatch. Someone back there?"

I'm back here, Songa sent.

"Okay, closing it now." He closed the hatch, and then watched as the module recognized the closed door and activated the emitters in it, which caused the door to flash red, the emitter dots on the display to flash green, turn green, and then the door turned green. "Alright, is it working?"

Working perfectly, she answered.

"Alright guys, now the ugly part, the part we had so much trouble with, the rear cargo doors. Anyone back there?"

"I am!" Mike Colbert shouted.

I found the bug with the windshield, Jyslin told him. *I can hot fix this in about two minutes, love.*

Alright, go for it. "Closing the rear cargo doors," he called over the speaker. Jason watched intently as the three doors closed and locked, and when they locked, the CMS took over. It did exactly what they wanted it to do, recognizing each door separately, but not activating the system on any door unless all three were closed, because they all had to be closed in order for the CMS not to short out and blow emitters. But the program recognized the doors the way they intended, and when it saw all three doors closed *and locked*, which was vital, it activated the system in them. The doors flashed, primed, and then turned green. "Alright, how does it look?" Jason called.

"It worked just fine!" Mike shouted, though his voice was much distant now that Jason was hearing it through the external microphone and not through the open doors behind them.

Okay, got the code fixed for the windscreen, updating it, Jyslin told him with deft movements of her hands over her holographic keyboard. The module auto-updated and reset *only* in regards to the windscreen, a hot patch, and then the windshield on the hologram turned black, then turned red, then the emitter dots around the edge of it flashed green. Jason and Jyslin looked at the windscreen to see a visible charge flinch across it just as the windshield turned green on the hologram. "The windshield's working now!" someone called from outside.

"Yeah, Jys fixed it. Everyone go around and make sure every window is black," he said. "Let's make sure the bug didn't affect *all* the windows."

Unlike Jason's skimmer, the dropship had windows on the four hatches, the forward and aft hatches on both the starbord and port sides, which required them to replace the windows with transparent Vanadium, just like the windshield, and isolate them from the rest of the ship. Jason waited as the workers walked around the ship, making sure to stay clear of it, and reported back that all four of the other windows were working properly. "Alright guys, it looks like it's working. We'll test the landing gear doors, and then we'll do the pre-emption tests and test open door protocols, and if those pass, we're done."

Testing the landing gear would be after the pre-emption tests. The pre-emption tests took about five minutes, as they tested the module to ensure that it had the control over other systems that it needed to protect the integrity of the cloak. The dropship was armed and had shields, but those systems would not come online so long as the CMS was in operation, which was how it was supposed to work. They tested it to ensure that the CMS blocked shields, weapons, and disabled ship telemetry (which would be operating when they were flying the ship legally, so they had to make sure it didn't give them away), which it did. They then picked the ship up off the floor and retracted the landing gear, which caused the CMS to recognize the closing of the gear doors, and then activate the system in them. After getting confirmation that the gear doors were covered, they then tested open door protocols by extending the landing gear. The instant the doors started to open, the CMS disengaged on them, which caused the doors to turn red. Once they put her back on the deck, they opened every hatch and the rear doors one by one, ensuring that the system turned off for the doors once they were opened, and the

system worked perfectly. Once they tested it on the rear cargo doors, Jason and Jyslin gave each other a grin, and Jason deactivated the cloak. When the black faded from the hull, everyone outside knew it was done, and gave a cheer even before Jason's voice came over the speaker. "Congratulations guys, it works perfectly. Great job!"

"This calls for another party!" someone shouted.

"Yeah, let's get Songa drunk again!" someone else called, which caused everyone to break out into laughter, including Songa.

"Okay then, tonight we celebrate, but tomorrow we start packing," Jason called over the speaker. "Tomorrow, we start moving to Cheyenne Mountain to help the others, and now that we have the dropship ready, we can finish up evacuating Charleston."

How are we going to handle the warehouse?

There's always going to be someone here, Jason said. I'm thinking we set up a three man staff that rotates every week, so people can do something that's not quite so strenuous. A kind of working vacation.

Not a bad idea, she agreed. But you'd better give the people in Cheyenne a party, or they're gonna be jealous. They've been working hard while the refit people have been standing around.

Oh, I intend to, believe me. But before we can have a party, we have to complete the move to Cheyenne. I need to talk to Tom, see where we stand. I know there's more than enough room to move everything in, I just want to make sure us moving in won't cause any problems. He's the man to ask.

Well, we can't do that until night. So until then, I think you need to relax a while. You've been working very hard, and you could use an afternoon off.

Yes ma'am.

Chapter 15

*Chiira, Kaitha (New Year's Day), 4395 Orthodox Calendar
Tuesday, 13 July 2008, Native Regional Reckoning
Cheyenne Mountain (Native designation), Gorei Nature Preserve, American Sector*

New Year's Day on the Faey calendar.

The first day of the year.

The first day of the worst period in the history of House Trillane...at least if Jason had anything to say about it, because they were finally ready.

For nearly three months, they'd been preparing for this. This day. They'd worked feverishly to clean out, alter, and repair Cheyenne Mountain to suit their needs, and the official end of that work was today. But that was done now. Much to his surprise, the interior of the facility was enclosed in several large galleries burrowed out of the rock itself, a series of interconnected smaller galleries linking three larger ones, and buildings were erected within these galleries, erected on large springed platforms so they would not fall down if subjected to the shockwave of a nuclear explosion. Some galleries were connected to the main maze by tunnels, and these splinter galleries contained some of the operational systems within the mountain, such as water reservoirs, power generation, and air filtering. Those buildings were retained, but most of what was in them was thrown out, stored in an unused gallery, raw material they could feed a replicator for making other things. Two galleries had originally been for operations, one for storage, one for living quarters for those who were permanently stationed within the base, and there was also a large hangar-like cavern with a passage leading outside as well, and currently the dropship was parked inside it.

The innermost gallery was divided up into two smaller areas. The innermost area, the one deepest within the mountain, was now the operations center. It held not just panels, but consoles, holographic screens, and an array of communications systems that they used to monitor gravband transmissions, television, old CB radio, FM radio frequencies, and images from all over the world via Trillane's own camera network, which Kiaari had infiltrated and hacked. Thanks to Kiaari, they could listen in to 90% of Trillane's military communications, with only the most top-secret protocols left unbroken thus far, could access Trillane's own camera system, and had real-time data on the position of every airborne vehicle on Earth thanks to Kiaari's breaking of the Terran Traffic Control system, which was displayed on a three dimensional holograph, including the locations of all military battle cruisers in orbit, and the orbital station. There were six people in that room at all times, watching, listening, and observing. That was Tim's domain. Tim had a knack for being able to organize the large amount of raw data, corollate it, weed out the redundant information, and present it in a meaningful manner. Since the first time he had commanded the community intelligence, riding shotgun with a panel during the road gang fight in Chesapeake, Tim had been learning how to take in information, process it, then present it. Kiaari had taken note of it and had taken him under her wing and taught him the basics of intelligence analysis, and it turned out he was a natural at it. As a result, he was now the commander of the surveillance and intelligence efforts. While Kiaari theoretically was now answering to Tim, she still worked specifically for Jason.

A small secondary gallery, connected by a tunnel off the operations center, was originally an office complex for the base command staff. Now, it served as the domain of the telepaths. They all lived together, not because they felt the need to be separate from everyone else, but because of the Faey and their desire to be close to each other, the need to establish an area that they felt was more *theirs*. Jyslin lived there with Jason, and Symone wanted to be near her friend, so Symone and Tim lived next door. Kumi decided she wanted to be there, near Jason, and that put Meya, Myra, and Fure there as well. Songa, Rann, and Yohne ended up there as well, when Songa and Rann couldn't find a room large

enough to suit them, and Yohne came when she admitted that she felt uncomfortable being by herself, and felt the need to be around other Faey. The only telepath that didn't live in the gallery was Temika, for she still felt not entirely comfortable around the Faey. Some of the offices had been converted into a shop and a lab where Jason could work on his inventions, as well as where the main council room was located where they met to discuss important issues, but most of the other areas had been converted to Faey styles. Homemade tapestries and paintings were on the walls now, as well as several throw rugs over the floors. Faey liked vibrant colors in their living quarters, be it paint or rugs or furniture. They also wanted art, in the form of paintings or sculptures, an aesthetically pleasing surrounding that seemed to resonate with them and made them more at ease. It was the doctors that had converted the gallery into a Faey domain, working in their off time to beautify any area Jason literally didn't keep locked. Rann had even managed to figure out a way to build a fountain in the entry chamber leading into the gallery that held the buildings, using an annealer and other building tools to shape the fountain out of the native rock, and had put an abstract geometric formation in the middle from which the water poured in four channels down the structure and into the water pool at the base.

Jason didn't exactly like what they did to the area and the idea that the telepaths had more or less sectioned themselves off from the rest of the mountain and the rest of the resistance, but he couldn't talk the Faey out of the idea of living together, and he wasn't going to force the issue.

The largest internal gallery served as a manufacturing center. It was here where a complement of twenty people worked to build whatever they needed, be it equipment or weapons. There were quite a few buildings in this gallery, and each one had been converted to be used to build and store certain things. One building was the armory, and also where railguns would be assembled. One building would be where their first nasty surprise for Trillane was being manufactured, in large numbers.

The other main gallery served primarily as a training facility. Here, the buildings on the north side of the gallery had been knocked down to create a large exercise yard, and the south side buildings were now props used to train them all in the arts of combat. This was the domain of Jyslin, Meya, and Myra. The three Faey soldiers were the ones whipping a bunch of squatters into a viable guerilla force, capable of fighting the Faey in different tactical environments, as well as where they learned the art of stealthy infiltration.

There was a smaller gallery off this one that had been used as housing in the old base, where people would sleep if they closed the blast doors and sealed everyone inside, and this was now the living quarters for everyone but the Faey.

There were quite a few smaller rooms, tunnels, and crawlspaces, and those were the domain of Tom Jackson. He was the operations manager of the mountain, both overseeing its reconstruction and responsible for maintaining the equipment that allowed it to run. It was his responsibility to make sure the power and water worked, and also his job to ensure that the equipment they had installed to hide the mountain's occupants and signs of their inhabitation from the Faey above. From the air vents that had units that cooled the cycled air blown out of the mountain to exactly match the temperature of the external ambient air to the water filters and pumps that drew from the internal water reservoirs and supplied running water to the mountain, it was all Tom's domain. He took his job seriously, and he was very good at it. Under his watchful eye, the mountain's infrastructure hummed along in perfect working order. While Jason commanded the people within the mountain, Tom commanded the mountain itself.

Then there was the hangar. It was clear just by looking at the place that it was built long after the rest of the mountain's galleries, dug out well after the rest of the place was built. It was a small hanger, looking to have been designed to hold five helicopters, which would be towed out of a set of large doors that connected to the main tunnel by a secondary passage that had another set of doors. With the rotors of a helicopter folded, Jason saw that one could just barely get one down the main tunnel. The tunnel was just *barely* large enough for his skimmer to fit in, but it could not maneuver, and it couldn't come all the way in, for the tunnel narrowed slightly about twenty feet from the entrance, just enough

to keep the wings of the skimmer from letting it go any further. But there was a smaller tunnel leading from that hangar directly to the outside, which looked to be just large enough for a truck to go down, clearly an external tunnel meant for maintenance vehicles or fuel trucks, trucks holding volatile, explosive jet fuel that they *would not* bring down the main tunnel, for obvious reasons of security.

That small tunnel was how they were getting the dropship and skimmer in. Though the tunnel was way, *way* too small for the dropship to use, they were also dealing with a species who had mastered the technology of manipulating space itself. Jason had found the specs for a bubble conveyor on Civnet, in a place where the military application should not have been, and he snapped it up. It was a system that created a bubble of stretched space into which the dropship was placed, then it was ferried down the small cargo tunnel and opened into the hangar using an array of gravometric generators that moved the bubble along like a conveyor belt without disrupting it. It had been surprisingly easy to build, and hadn't cost much at all.

It had, however, required a little creative manipulation of the outside. The first rule of the mountain was that nobody went outside. *Ever*. They would not so much as leave a footprint out there to tip anyone off that there were people in the mountain. But they'd had to go out to install some equipment, and that had required a light touch and fast workers. The inverse phase emitter system was installed around the mountain, a three layered redundant system that covered the entire mountain to hide it from Faey active sensors, where the sheer volume of rock surrounding them protected them from passive sensors...up to a point. The bubble conveyor drew a great deal of power, and was on the edge of the mountain, so they'd been forced to install some additional masking around that side of the mountain to conceal the bubble conveyor when it was in use. They'd also been forced to clear some of the area around the tunnel mouth, which they'd had to do in stages so as not to present a sudden dramatic change in the topography. Over the course of a month, the area around the tunnel was slowly altered so the conveyor could be used, and also hidden from sensors.

Not everyone was in the mountain, though. At any time, there were three people in Lincoln, and Kumi was usually a fourth. Kumi wanted to return to Draconis and track down who tried to kill her, but Miaari would not allow her to return. It was just too dangerous, she told them. They knew she was still alive, and they were tearing Draconis and Arctus apart looking for her. If she returned to the Imperium, it wouldn't take them long to find her, and then the assassins would converge on her like a swarm of bees around their queen. So Kumi was forced to remain in exile, where she got into everyone's business, aggravated the hell out of everyone, but also decided to alleviate her boredom by taking over the financial operations of Vultech and the other enterprises that were funding the rebellion. Kumi knew how business worked, and knew how the Imperial Bureau of Taxation worked. It was her pulling the strings that got materials bought and shipped, redirected materials and funds for use by the rebellion while hiding it in Vultech's records, as well as creative uses of the Faey banking system that hid what was really going on behind a complicated web of deceptive accounting and records. Kumi's efforts was what caused a sudden river of material and equipment to flow into Cheyenne Mountain, bought by company capital, and those expenditures and material redirections were masterfully concealed within a stunningly complex web of shell companies, fake personas, and fictitious shipping invoices that made it look like everything Vultech did was legitimate. Thanks to her, Jason could be large amounts of raw materials, and then pull it for rebel use while Kumi did her magic to make that material disappear, but still exist on paper that would leave a trail that would make the auditors look somewhere else when they started trying to find who was funding the rebellion. He just told her what they needed, and she found it, bought it, had it shipped, redirected what materials they were going to use, and then sold off the excess at a profit and hid the loss of capital used to fund rebellion activities in a web of fake investments in both real and fake companies..

Kumi had the soul of a pirate, but she had the mind of a white collar criminal.

Much of what Kumi did wasn't just illegal. There was a new dropship sitting on the tarmac outside the Vultech building. It was a used dropship, not refitted for stealth, but gave them a second method of

moving cargo without tying up the stealth dropship. Vultech-2 was the dropship that flew to Draconis and other planets of the Imperium to pick up shipments and bring them back to the warehouse more than half the time. It was a Thrynne dropship, one of their largest models, nearly double the size of the stealth dropship, with powerful engines and a huge cargo capacity. It wouldn't fit in the hangar, it had to be loaded and unloaded outside. Kumi had bought that dropship, having used some of her connections to track down a good deal on a good dropship. Kumi was more than her criminal bent and her connections, however. She was a good businesswoman educated by House Trillane in House operations, which were primarily financial matters, and knew where to invest company capital to make monetary gains. In just one month, she had turned a C13,748 profit, which was a respectable figure given the short amount of time she'd been doing it. That money made it easier to hide Vultech's spending that couldn't be accounted for because that money bought rebellion equipment.

While Kumi was the brain behind Vultech's operations, Songa was its face. Rann and Songa were the only Faey among them without a price on their heads, since it was known that Yohne was Kumi's personal physician, and where she was, Kumi probably wasn't far away. It was Songa that handled the live interaction between company officials and the outside world, the smiling face concealing the true nature of the beast lurking behind her. Songa was the company President, a fancy title that basically gave her signing authority on most transactions, and allowed her to handle the handshakes and phone calls while Kumi did the real work behind the scenes, and Jason maintained official legal ownership on paper using his alias.

It was even nearly legitimate now. Kumi was talking about hiring real employees at the company that would know nothing about the rebellion to reinforce the illusion that it was a real company and not just a front. It would make it a little more dangerous, but Kumi was confident that she could manage it. Jason wasn't so sure about that, but it was something that he was sure they'd fight about later on.

And all the while, as they did that, the rebels trained, built, and got ready. They knew the risks, but it didn't matter. They knew the plan, and they were ready for it. Even as they worked on rebuilding the mountain, they trained. Half of them had passed the written tests that Jason had demanded for flying, and now he, Luke, Meya, and Myra were training them in actual flight. Kumi had managed to procure a used flight simulator, and that was where they were getting their controls practice, mixed in with actual stick time behind the skimmer or dropship controls when flights were made to Lincoln and back. Jyslin, Tim, Symone, and Temika were on the fast track in the groups, for they were the telepaths and they were the ones that absolutely had to be able to fly...not because they were telepaths, but because they were Jason's friends and family, and he would make *damn* sure they would be proficient. They were his *personal* students. He trained others every day, but he was the only one that taught the other telepaths, because he wanted to make absolutely sure that the most important people in his life got trained up to *his* satisfaction.

They trained in flying. They trained in combat operations, and had become proficient enough to where Jyslin said she wouldn't bat an eye over leading them in a combat mission. They trained in Faey technology; generally, Jason, Tim, and Luke trained the others in the assembly of basic units using plans and pre-fabricated components. Given a blueprint and a supply of parts, his rebels learned how to assemble them into finished products, like factory workers. They weren't experts in anything they trained in, but they knew enough to be able to function...and that was what mattered.

Because this was the day. This was the day they stopped preparing and started acting, at least in a limited manner. There would be no manned raids on Trillane targets, but the automated attacks would begin today. And the first blow against Trillane was already loaded up in the dropship, a shipment of little devices about the size of a volleyball that Tim had coined *deathballs*...and it was a fitting nickname. They were mines, but not quite like any other mine ever devised. These mines would lay on the ground, hidden from sensors by small inverse phase emitters, that would activate when they detected a Stick flying within their activation range. When it activated, a gravometric engine in the mine would make it fly up, lock in on the Stick, and then strike it. When it hit, it would attach itself to

the hull and discharge an ionic pulse, kind of like an old EMP pulse. It was a non-explosive version of an ion cannon's magnetic storm effect, generating an ion storm that would disrupt plasma flow, blow plasma relays, scramble moleculartronic circuitry, and cause gravometric engines to overload and shut down. After the pulse fired, the mine would destroy itself by overloading its PPG and blowing itself up, so Trillane couldn't take it apart and learn how it worked. It wouldn't be a fusion explosion like the one that destroyed Chesapeake, but it would be a big enough bang to obliterate the mine and punch a hole in the hull of the Stick where it was attached. That self destruct mechanism would be active at all times, and would go off if the mine was disturbed while laying on the ground waiting for a target.

It was more humane than it needed to be. Jyslin had rode him about that...she wanted him to build mines that destroyed the Stick completely, but he just couldn't bring himself to build mines that would give the crews of those Sticks absolutely no chance to survive. At least his way, blowing out the power systems and burning out the engines, the crew could survive the crash when the Stick came down. He knew people would die, that was a given, but he just didn't want to make it a *certainty*, just a *possibility*. In his mind, the crews of those Sticks weren't soldiers, weren't going to be actively involved in opposing him. They were truck drivers in his eyes, just civilians doing a job, and he wasn't going to be merciless to them. Sticks had crash foam and crash mitigation systems, and that was enough for him to be alright with his approach. So long as the crews weren't really unlucky, they would probably survive when the Stick crashed.

There were 27 mines finished, the result of three weeks of assembly line work by the rebels that weren't actively training in other areas. Assuming that 75% of them worked, that was around 21 Sticks that would be taken out. That was barely a scratch to Trillane, but if they lost 25 Sticks a month for a year, the cost of replacing them was going to get *very* high. And that didn't count the lost cargo, the price of trying to counter his mines in terms of equipment and personnel, and the cost of beefing up their military presence. And the beauty of his plan was that the mines had multiple ways they could lock on to Sticks and attack them. Every time they figured out how the mines were targeting Sticks and ignoring other types of ships and countered it, he could simply change their identification protocol. The mines were currently set on the easiest way, by using the Stick telemetry itself. Every airborne *legal* ship broadcasted a telemetry signal that identified it to traffic control, and the mines would use that signal to detect and lock in on Sticks, and *only* on Sticks. When Trillane countered, he would have them identify Sticks by their unique engine gravometric distortion signature, something that *only* Stick engines produced. When Trillane figured that out and installed maskers, the mines would use visual detection and comparison, and would attack any airborne vehicle that *looked* like a Stick. If Trillane got around that, then the mines would sweep the area above them with passive sensors and attack any vehicle above them that had the right inductive resonance, which was a function of the mass and metallurgical makeup of the ship within a certain tolerance. Unless the Stick was carrying metals as cargo, its inductive signature would be the same no matter what, and the mines could use that against them. He could come after the Sticks with his mines in so many ways, the only way Trillane could protect them from everything would be to have fighters escort them and shoot down his mines as they attacked. And that tied up Trillane's resources and disrupted the current free-moving transportation network. If the Sticks could only move in convoys with fighter protection, it would bottleneck Trillane's entire cargo transportation network, and that was exactly what Jason wanted.

And that was just the first weapon. He didn't want to put every idea he had out on the field at once. He would throw them at Trillane one at a time, make them counter his current idea until he could no longer attack them using that device, then he'd just put a *new* device on the field and attack them in an entirely new manner. When they started countering that one, the *old* weapon would reappear again at the same time using a new method of attack. And when they defeated both, a third weapon would appear, and so on and so on. It would be an endless game of one-upsmanship between the rebels and Trillane, as the rebels sought to find ways around Trillane's defenses, and Trillane worked to figure out how they were being attacked and counter it.

That wasn't the only thing they were doing, though. Rann had finished his DNA scanner, and had built a small device that had sensors that sent data back to the main unit via threaded shortrange gravband. What was more, each unit had more than one sensor that would report back to it, allowing them to plant one device and then scatter sensors all over, up to a range of about half a mile. Each unit could support 15 remote sensors and 15 button cameras, and they'd already built 14 of them and set them up, scattering sensors and cameras through mass transit systems where a multitude of people would touch them and get scanned. Two were set in New York City, two in Los Angeles, and one each in Chicago, New Orleans, Washington D.C., Miami, London, Sao Paolo, Madrid, Tokyo, Cape Town, and Beijing. Each unit was set to transmit an image of anyone that matched the telepathic profile to a specific protected site on Civnet, which they could access. The site had nothing about what it was about, it was just a place where pictures of people would appear.

And while all that was going on, the rebels would be watching, using Trillane's own surveillance system against them. They'd know where Trillane sent every ship, and know how to move their assets to keep them out of danger. And when Trillane eventually did find Kiaari's tampering and moved to fix it, denying the rebels access to that information, well, the resistance would then attack key surveillance outposts and equipment to blind Trillane and give them more room to maneuver. The orbital sensor arrays and the cameras were first on the list of targets, for those couldn't be captured or hidden from Faey sensors, since they were on the edge of the planetary gravity well. Gravometric sensors could pick them up. But if the rebels couldn't use them, they'd deny them to Trillane as well. Jason already had plans for that, and those plans were sitting in his shop. Five orbital attack drones, literally nothing more than flying guns, that would be released from a ship in space. They were military-grade plasma cannons on gravometric pods, which could either be operated via remote control or programmed to fly itself around and attack pre-determined targets. Faey plasma weaponry had a long range in space, but the solar wind *did* cause the magnetic bottles containing the plasma to erode, which limited the range of the weapons to about 500 *kathra*, or around 270 miles. Jason's toys would track down and attack the eyes and ears of Trillane, and since he would attack them with plasma weapons, the low-grade shields that the devices employed to protect them from space dust and micro-meteor strikes, shields that would have made using a railgun an uncertain one-shot one-kill scenario, they would have no defense against a plasma cannon.

And those toys would appear later on as anti-Stick devices, robotic drones that would roam the supply lanes and attack any Stick they encountered with their plasma cannons. They were cheap and easy to build, and the plasma cannon the device was using was an older model that wouldn't penetrate military armor...but most commercial Sticks *did not* have military armor. Against a Stick, those older plasma cannons were still lethal.

When Kumi arranged a supply of the parts to build the cannon drones, they'd mass produce them. But for now, the only weapon they could produce quickly and in great quantity given the materials they had on hand were the mines. Now that the reconstruction was complete, people could devote more time on the line to build them, which would result in more mines being cranked out. The 27 mines they'd built were already deployed; Jason had scattered them all over central Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas early that morning, before sunrise. No mine was within 25 miles of any other mine, and they'd been dropped near farms but away from areas frequented by people so nobody would find one, monkey with it, and get himself killed when the mine's anti-tampering protocol kicked in and caused it to self destruct. All of them were inactive right now, awaiting an activation signal. After that, each mine would attack the first Stick that got within its activation range. Jason's hope was that they could complete at least one mine every day, which would be dropped and destroy a Stick, which would eat into Trillane's profit margin that much more. It was nothing but nickels and dimes to a house as rich as Trillane, but Jason intended to literally nickel and dime them to death.

But none of that mattered if Trillane kept everything a secret. They could hide their losses of Sticks, they could increase output on farms on other continents to cover the loss of North American

production, at least for a while. Their intent was to push Trillane off Earth, but using force and guerilla tactics was only half the battle, and he knew it. He had to make it clear to the rest of the Imperium that the people of Earth were *very* unhappy with their current administrators, and they wanted new people. And also make it clear that now the people of Earth could *fight back*, so they'd better be taken pretty damn seriously. It was also necessary to reinforce the idea that they weren't fighting the Imperium, only Trillane.

That was why he was here. He sat in a chair behind an ebony desk left behind, with the the insignia of the resistance, the phoenix emblem emblazoned on his armor, embroidered on a red flag behind him, the phoenix done in glittering gold. In both English and Faey script under that insignia was the word *Legion*. That was the official name of the resistance. Not the Terran Resistance Front or some silly multiword title that spelled out some anagram...they were simply the Legion. Jason had decided on that for that very reason...so they couldn't be trivialized with initials. Anyone referring to them had to use their name, their full name, and the full impact that name entailed. In front of his desk was a single camera, and behind it stood Temika and Tim, who were running it. Standing behind them was Jyslin and Symone.

Jason was waiting for the red light to come on on the camera. Jason was going to record a message, an unofficial declaration of war, and then Miaari was going to make sure it got into the right in-box at INN. If INN didn't follow up on the story, though, then Trillane could cover up what was about to start happening on Earth, and that would make their job more difficult. Trillane needed to face pressure on both sides of the fence, both from the rebels doing damage to them and from the Imperium.

Okay, ready Jayce? Tim sent, and Jason nodded. *Alright, in three...two...one....*

The red light came on.

"Good day," Jason began, speaking in Faey. He had no prepared speech for this, only talking points that he intended to get across without sounding like a politician. "I represent an organization called Legion. We are a group of Terrans who oppose the illegal actions of House Trillane and the crimes they have committed against Terra and the native Terran population. This recorded statement is an official announcement of our existence, and of our intentions. I am Jason Fox, and I stand as leader and commander of this organization.

"I'm sure some people recognize me, given CNN and INN plastered my picture all over their newscasts for three straight days. I'm the man that CNN and Trillane blamed for the Orala Explosion. Well, that's what Trillane let slip out, but they certainly didn't let the whole story slip. In short, the Orala explosion was caused by House Trillane, and it was a botched attempt to assassinate *me*. Why would they go to such extremes over a single Terran male, you might ask? Well, the answer is simple. I have personally witnessed House Trillane engaging in slavery, abducting native Terrans and selling them into slavery outside the Imperium, a crime that, as some of you might know, could lead to the revocation of Trillane's noble charter if proved true. That is something that Trillane would *definitely* go to such an extreme to prevent.

"I cannot offer hard, documented proof, because shortly after the incident where I came about this information, they dismantled their slaving ring and buried it in the deepest hole they could find. However, I can state with full sincerity that I have seen it. This is only the largest grievance the humans of Terra have against House Trillane, though. We have been subject to, witness to, and on the receiving end of multiple instances where House Trillane has denied our rights as Imperial citizens, illegally seized our rightful property as defined by Imperial law, and have abused and mistreated us. And we're sick and tired of it. Since Trillane has decided to treat us like cattle, treat us like *slaves* instead of Imperial citizens, we cannot in good conscious just stand by and do nothing and allow it to start again when the dust settles and Trillane thinks that nobody is watching them.

"We don't believe that the Imperium knows the extent to which House Trillane has been abusing the native population of Terra, and we *demand* to be recognized as Imperial citizens, to be afforded the same rights as the other six races of the Imperium. We are *not* slaves, and we are *not* property. Our

homes are *not* the personal playgrounds of Trillane soldiers to ransack to their heart's desire, and our lives are *not* commodities to be bought and sold on the slave markets!

"So, consider this a declaration of war against House Trillane. The forces of Legion demand that House Trillane leave Terra, and we beseech Empress Dahnai to revoke Trillane's contract to run the farming operations of Terra and award it to another noble house, a house that will treat us like Imperial citizens and not like chattel. We don't wish to break away from the Imperium, we only want Trillane off our planet. The Legion will not rest until Trillane has been evicted from Terra and a more just and fair house is brought in to replace them.

"Understand one thing. Our fight is with Trillane, *not* with the Imperium, and *not* against Empress Dahnai. We want nothing more than the same rights afforded to other Imperial citizens, no more, no less. And since it seems that the Imperial forces on Terra either don't know what's going on or are turning a blind eye to it, it has forced us to resort to this, the last option, which is armed insurrection against our oppressors. Let me make it clear once again, our fight is with Trillane, not with the Imperium. When the last Trillane ship leaves orbit, we will gladly lay down our arms. But so long as a single Trillane stands on Terran ground, we will fight.

"Because Terra can now be considered an active warzone, I ask that all Imperial civilians please refrain from travel to Terra until further notice. We wish no innocents to be caught in the crossfire of what will purely be a *local* affair. Please, if you wish to come to Terra, please do so *after* Trillane is gone and a new noble house is in charge.

"You can take this message seriously, or you can laugh at it. I'm sure some comic is going to find it on Civnet and put it on her show tonight to make fun of it. But know this. You may find it funny, but House Trillane won't be laughing. *They* know what is going on. *They* know what they've done. *They* know I'm not trying to be funny. *They* will take this very seriously. *They* know exactly who I am, what I am, and what I can do. *They* won't be laughing."

Jason reached under the desk, then produced small golden ring, a ring with the relief of the phoenix symbol of the Legion engraved upon its flat top. "I read that in the old times, when a noble declared war on a rival, she would send the rival house's leader her own insignia ring, a warning that she was coming to get it back. Ancient rites and customs dictated that the ruler of the house that received the ring would send her own ring in return, and carry the opposing house's ring with her at all times. The winner of that war would take back her ring from her rival, and take the ring of her rival as a trophy... at least until that house managed to either take the ring back by force or pay a ransom to have it returned. Well, I'm not a noble, but consider this the official insignia ring of the Legion. And I'm sending this to *you*, Grand Duchess Trillane. Keep it with you. Feel its warmth and its weight in your pocket at all times. Never forget it, because *we will be coming for it.*" He set the ring on the desk, making a sweet *ching* as the pure gold resonated from the impact with the ebony.

"It's your move, Grand Duchess," Jason called. *Okay, cut it,* he sent.

The red light went out, and all four of them laughed and clapped.

How was it? Think I did alright? he asked.

It was fucking brilliant! Symone sent grandly, rushing forward. *That thing with the ring will drive the Grand Duchess apeshit! Are you really gonna send it to her?*

You bet your ass I am, Jason sent vehemently. *There's just one thing I have to do first.* Jason reached into the drawer of the desk, and pulled out a small black rectangular object, upon which was affixed a single red button, the light inside it blinking on and off. Jyslin would recognize that remote, for it was the same one he'd used to activate all his traps when her squad was trying to force him to go out with her. "And so, it begins," he declared in a stately voice, feeling a strange need to speak those words aloud rather than send, staring directly at them. "The mines are hot. There's no turning back now. We are now at war with Trillane."

Good, Jyslin sent with an audible snort. *It's about damn time.*

Oh, Jayce, just so you know, I was piping that through the CCTV, so everyone saw us record it,

Tim told him with a sly smile. *Now everyone knows we're really doing it. We're not just pretending anymore, we're now real rebels.*

I think you covered everything, Jyslin told him. You made sure to stress that it's Trillane and not the Imperium, you explained why we're doing it, and you challenged Empress Dahnai to put a hand in before the real bloodshed starts. That was everything. And you delivered it perfectly, she added. I knew not giving you a script would work better. You're much better at just going with what's in your heart, not what's on a teleprompter.

Thanks, love, he sent with sincere modesty.

Jayce, I'm sending it to INN now and I'm gonna post it in a few choice places where I know it'll get some attention., Kumi's voice came over the intercom for the small studio, for that's what the small room was, a little studio for an announcer to make broadcasts over the mountain's internal closed circuit television system, which Tom, Tim, and Jason had repaired and restored to working order.

Alright. I think I'm gonna go back to my room and try to calm down. For some reason, now I'm getting nervous.

It's because now we stop planning and start doing, Jyslin sent, and they all nodded.

Jason did just that. He returned to the small apartment he and Jyslin shared, sat down in a recliner chair, and tuned everything out. It was on now. Those mines were hot, and one of them might have activated and attacked by now. Kumi had sent that video out onto Civnet as an open declaration of war, an open declaration that he was not dead, and now he couldn't be seen outside of the mountain. Luke would have to be the one to take Max Sterling's identity now; he'd have to change the licences. He was certainly good enough to fly the dropships, though he'd never be alone. Their standard procedure required a telepath to be a telepath on every flight. That was usually Jason, but he had the feeling that Rann and Yohne were going to see some of that action. Jason's face would now be programmed into just about every face recognition program all over the Imperium, *not* just on Earth, so he couldn't show his face much of anywhere.

He sat there a while, reflecting, hoping they were doing the right thing, and worrying about what was coming. This phase of the plan wasn't that dangerous, just nightly stealth flights out to drop mines. But soon their combat training would be put to the test, when they conducted their first raid. That raid wouldn't be for several weeks at least, after Trillane got it into their heads that the only way Jason meant to fight was using technology to fight them from a distance; mines, flying guns, traps, and so on. Once they settled down, were confident all they had to do was catch Jason to put a stop to the mines, got complacent about the physical security at their facilities, then the rebels would attack, and the gunfire would begin, and people would get killed.

They didn't know how many rebels there were. Jason they would see, Jason they would identify. He was sure they'd include Jyslin as one of those rebels, and maybe a handful of humans. Trillane wouldn't think that they could field up to 30 trained soldiers, armed and armored, protected from telepathic assault by the 6 telepaths that would be engaging in combat operations; Jason, Jyslin, Symone, Temika, Meya, and Myra. Thirty combatants attacking unprepared facilities could easily overwhelm the defenses and take the facility. He knew that they wouldn't get many free shots like that, that Trillane would tighten security after the second attack, so they had to make their first two free attacks count.

And there was the grim knowledge that he'd lose some of his own in those attacks. They all knew the risks, they all knew it *would* happen. He had to face that, face the knowledge that he was going to be giving people orders that would lead to their deaths. But, he kept telling himself, they all knew the risks when they signed up for this. And to die in the pursuit of freedom was the most noble way to go.

It was a big joke to the Imperium. Just as Jason predicted, comics found the video on Civnet and used it for material. He'd been villified in the press after the explosion at Chesapeake, and those unflattering stories resurfaced after the video was noticed by INN, in conjunction with comics on TV

making fun of “the little soldier,” as one Merat Feralle called him.

But, as Jason predicted, Trillane was *not* laughing.

They weren’t laughing when the video reached Trillane’s ears. They weren’t laughing when they realized just who was on that video, because they knew he was a telapath. That was one little fact that wasn’t common knowledge outside of Trillane and certain hallways in the Imperial government back on Dracora, that there were human telepaths. They weren’t laughing because they knew that Jason had engineering training and could build technological devices. Their infiltration of Trillane’s network got them a first-person view of the reaction, coming down from the head of Trillane’s military herself: look for sabotage. If one man was leading a self-proclaimed rebellion against Trillane, he wouldn’t put himself out in the open. A man with Jason’s training would stay in hiding and build sabotage devices to inflict damage.

And they were right. That’s exactly what Jason had planned...at least for now.

They *really* weren’t laughing when the first Stick came down.

One Stick crashing was an isolated incident. Two crashing on the same day was a coincidence. Three crashing in one day was a pattern. Four crashing in one day was an *attack*.

At first, they had no idea how they did it. Since the mines destroyed themselves after firing their ion pulse, it looked like some kind of conventional explosion had damaged the Sticks when they surveyed the wreckage, but the damage wasn’t enough to bring a Stick down. But they certainly had enough wrecks to inspect. Jason had planted 27 mines the night before, and all 27 activated and attacked Sticks within the first two days. What was a relief to Jason was that only 5 fatalities had been reported in those 27 crashes, that his merciful means of bringing them down did spare some lives, but the Sticks were totally destroyed, and the ones that had been carrying cargo containers had a total loss of cargo.

Jason’s intent was to have one mine finished every day, so every day, Trillane looked over the incident reports and saw at least one crashed Stick. That was the plan, and the crew didn’t let him down. They worked their asses off to build the mines, and every day at sunset, when Jason prepared his skimmer to go out and drop them, there was always at *least* one mine ready to go. Sometimes there was two, and occasionally there was three. Those mines usually only went a few hours before activating and attacking, because Jason put them in places where Sticks more or less had to go.

In the first week, Trillane still had no idea how it was being done. But finally, someone saw a mine activate, and they finally knew what they were up against. Now that they knew it was a ground-based device that somehow could not be detected by sensors, and it activated by some kind of proximity trigger. Armed with this information, they changed their tactics. They restricted Sticks to vertical columns directly over their destinations, coming down from 30,000 *shakra* in a controlled descent directly over the destination. This turned out to not be a good idea, for Jason just increased the sensor range of the mines, they activated and attacked the Sticks, and made them crash directly on the facilities where they were landing or taking off. This created a tremendous amount of collateral damage, and lots of ugly pictures on INN of farm storage barns burning. So, much as Jason predicted, they realized that the mines only attacked Sticks, and worked out how they were targeting the ships. They grounded the entire Stick fleet for two days as they encrypted Stick telemetry, and while they were doing that, Jason simply changed the setting on the mines, and it gave them two days to plant more mines. He also added a new little feature to spread out the attacks after a hiatus, to keep the damage steady and in the eyes of Trillane. Jyslin wrote a little subroutine for him in the software of the mines that would cause them to randomly activate, which would let some Sticks pass over them safely, then activate and attack in a random pattern. The routine was weighted, so that every time it didn’t activate, it increased the chances of it activating in the next trigger, and if the random number generator got streaky, the weighted protocol would cause it to activate after the 20th Stick passed by no matter what. He also started covering them with camouflage netting; since Trillane knew what they looked like now, they could use the cameras to look for them on the ground. So Jason started concealing them.

After the Sticks returned to service, Trillane was smugly confident that they'd defeated the mines... for about fifteen minutes. The very first Stick that approached a farm in southern South Dakota, one of the first that had come down from a freighter in orbit, was one that quite a few Trillane officials were watching. So they got a first hand view of a sudden puff of red on the starboard stern, and then the Stick dropped from the sky like a rock and crashed just outside a corn field, about four miles from the farm's central compound.

It drove them insane. They were so sure that the mines were using telemetry to lock on to Sticks, but now it was apparent that that wasn't the case. They again grounded the Stick fleet and used other dropships to try to move cargo, but it wasn't even a quarter as efficient. They had plenty of other dropships, but their entire cargo delivery system was based on the launching and recovery of Sticks. They tried that for three days, but then the food distribution system was getting so backed up, as warehouses filled up, that they had no choice but to return Sticks to service and simply endure the losses with gritted teeth while they tried to determine how the mines were working and engineered a solution. So far, in just two weeks, they had lost nearly a half a million credits' worth of Sticks and cargo. And if they couldn't defeat the mines, then it would result in an *astronomical* bill as they equipped every Stick with shields and armor to protect them from the mines. That would take tremendous amounts of time and money, and that was something that they didn't want to expend unless they had no other choice.

About that time, the next little headache for Trillane made its appearance. It was an old surplus-era plasma cannon attached to a gravometric engine pod and a power plant. It was invisible to active sensors, thanks to its inverse phase emitter, and had been planted in deep space between the Earth and the moon, and set so it would slowly drift in the direction it needed to go. That cannon activated when it drifted into the primary supply lane between the orbital station and the stargate, firing relentlessly on every Stick its onboard computer could identify, firing with a power rating *much* greater than what was normal for a plasma cannon of that type. It attacked the supply lane for three minutes; that was how long it took for Trillane to scramble a fighter to get there and destroy the device. But in that three minutes, the plasma cannon either destroyed or seriously damaged 7 Sticks. When the fighter entered the cannon's sensor range, it immediately self-destructed, denying Trillane any chance that they could capture it and figure out how it worked, and thereby engineer a defense against it.

That single attack sent a shockwave through Trillane. They analyzed what data they had feverishly, both trying to figure out a way to detect the object that their space-pointing sensors had simply classified as a low-grade anomaly, which was a small meteor, and how the cannon had been altered to fire such a powerful shot. Again, it was because it was meant as a suicide weapon. Jason had overloaded the power rating, which would let it fire at a greatly increased power, but would burn out the gun in the process and make it unusable. Rigged the way it was, the weapon could only fire about twenty times before it burned out its power systems and became unusable. That was irrelevant, since the gun would self destruct anyway, and it wouldn't be shooting that long before it blew itself up.

About then, they realized they weren't just dealing with a single man with a large toy box. The mines they could explain given he was a notoriously clever engineer, and was using what parts were available, but he had gotten his hands on a plasma cannon, and that, he had to *buy*. Now they knew that Jason had to be buying the materials to build these objects, and he had to be getting it from *somewhere*, and he had to be getting his money from *somewhere*. So, while the military arm was trying to work up defenses against the two attacks they'd seen so far, the intelligence arm started turning Earth upside down and shaking it to see what fell out. Accountants and financiers hired by Trillane tore through all the financial records of every company doing business on Earth, searching for anything that might indicate that the company was doing business with Jason Fox, or was somehow funneling materials to him. They already knew he had a skimmer, and that he had somehow altered his skimmer to hide from sensors, so they concentrated instead on the point of interface between his skimmer and the outside world; the companies that were selling him his equipment. They didn't think

he was directly getting his supplies offworld, for nothing could go through the gate with its active systems going, and that would include any kind of stealth device. They believed they had him pinned in this system, and that was where they were concentrating their search.

Actually, that was a smart way to go about it, and naturally, they'd already had taken that into account. He'd been expecting it, but now that Kumi was hiding Vultech's illegal activities, he knew they'd never find out it was Vultech doing it. Surely, it would get some heated attention because the company was listed as being owned by a human, but Kumi's books were ironclad, and they would be forced to admit that this human-owned technology company, a prime suspect for being a rebel sympathizer, was totally legit. Everything, even down to the titanium board mounting clips, could be accounted for with receipts and inventory manifests. They could look at Vultech's books with a magnifying glass, but they'd find nothing but what looked like perfectly legitimate transactions, all tracked with meticulous care and documented in triplicate.

They even visited Vultech in person. Songa was there, of course, and Jack Brewer was also there... or who they thought was Jack Brewer. It was actually Luke. And unlike before, where the human simply relied on the telepath to protect them, this time who they were dealing with was someone who really thought he was who he was. That was Jyslin's doing. Luke had volunteered for it, and Jyslin had used her telepathic gifts to create a new persona in Luke's mind, named Jack Brewer, complete with his own personality, memories, and history that matched the "official" records on Jack Brewer that existed in the databanks... thanks to Kumi. What she had done was very advanced, and very delicate, and only a telepath of Jyslin's power and training could have pulled it off. But it was utterly convincing, for the Faey that interrogated Songa and Luke found a human that *believed* everything he told them. He *was* Jack Brewer, and they'd never believe that they were dealing with a construct called a *psychic clone*. When the inspectors left, Jyslin sealed away the part of Luke's mind that was Jack Brewer away in the back of his subconscious, so Luke could be Luke again, but all that work was still there and ready to be brought back out if the Imperium wanted another face to face meeting with Jack Brewer.

It said a great deal about Luke's commitment to the cause, that he would volunteer to let Jyslin literally fragment his conscious into two parts and then shape the fragment into a completely new personality.

They lost 17 more Sticks in the two weeks that followed. After a month, the tally wasn't something that would make a military woman grumble that much, but the *economic* toll it had exacted was not something to laugh about. In the first month since Jason had started a seeming one man war against Trillane, they had lost 48 Sticks, and were looking at a financial loss in equipment, cargo, and supplies of C3,948,932. Trillane's *monthly* total operating budget was around C1,500,000,000, so this was less than 1% of their monthly budget... but Trillane knew that it was going to add up, and add up *fast* if they didn't put a stop to it quickly.

And it was more than just materials. Stick pilots were now demanding combat pay for flying to and from Terra, and quite a few of them had simply quit and gotten jobs as pilots for other noble houses. After the first month, Trillane was dealing with a pilot shortage, as well as facing the reality that they were going to have to raise the pay for the pilots that were willing to fly Terran space in order to keep them on the job, which would cut deeper into the profit margin.

And thanks to that damned INN story and the posting of the declaration on Civnet, the Stick pilots *knew* it was a combat theater. Had he not done that, had he simply started blowing up Sticks in silence, they could have explained it away or covered up what was going on. But thanks to that video, the whole Imperium knew that Trillane was dealing with an insurgent, and what was disconcerting to the Imperium and embarrassing to Trillane, and insurgent that Trillane could not find, who continued to attack Trillane interests with impunity, almost at will. It was much a public relations issue as it was a security issue, because just as Jason Fox once embarrassed the Imperial Marines, now he was embarrassing House Trillane... and that was about the worst thing one could do to a Faey. Their

standing was very important to them, be it an individual or a noble house, and Jason was threatening that standing.

It also had other repercussions, one that Jason found on his desk one morning in early August, after returning from his minelaying duties. He usually did that in his skimmer, because it was small and it was an easy affair, and it was a perfect chance to give the trainees some real time behind the controls of something that wasn't a simulation. That night, Symone and Temika had been his helpers, and Temika did most of the flying while Jason watched and Symone prepped the mines.

"What is this?" Jason asked as he sat down at a small desk off the main control room, where a small handpanel holding a picture sat waiting for him. Tim came around the desk and put another handpanel down by the first. For some odd reason, when Jason and Tim were alone, they almost exclusively spoke. It was almost as if they were simply continuing their friendship on the grounds upon which it was formed, and that meant using their voices. They had no qualms about sending to each other in groups or when distance separated them, but when they stood face to face and they were alone, they almost never sent to each other.

"This is the Imperium's answer," he answered. "Meet Myleena Merrane. She's an Imperial attaché sent by Dahnai herself, sent to help Trillane deal with us."

Jason picked up the panel holding the picture. It showed a young Faey woman wearing a Class A uniform, a Lieutenant Commander by her rank. She was actually a pretty young lady, with blond hair, dark blue skin that showed she spent a good deal of time outside, and pattern Faey features. She had large, expressive eyes with rose-colored irises, a dark pink that bordered on red, which was a bit unusual, and she had faint freckles under her eyes, high on her cheeks. Kiaari and Tim had clearly done their homework, for the handpanel Tim handed to him was a full biographical history of this woman. She was a minor noble within House Merrane, the lowest rung of the hierarchy, not even a Zarina. She was a *morana*, a noble-born in no official position within the house, basically a noble in name only. She had given up her Zarina title when she entered into the Imperial service. She worked in Black Ops, and was the head of a unit within Black Ops called the Skulkers. They specialized in unconventional warfare.

"A Merrane?"

"Yeah, but she gave up her house duties to go into the Imperial government," Tim told him. "Kiaari dug up all the dirt on her. She's a Black Ops engineer, active duty Navy, that's required for Black Ops positions, but she specializes in unconventional technological warfare. The mines and shit we're using is right up her alley. She even commands a unit within Black Ops that handles making it and countering it. They sent her unit to figure out how we're doing it, and stop us. From what Kiaari dug up, she's good. She's *real* good. Top of her class at Dracora Engineering Academy, below the zone promotions, commendations and meritorious service awards out the ass. She's only 35, and she's already a Lieutenant Commander and has more medals on her chest than Admirals three times her age. She's also rich. She has 13 patents out and rakes in over two million a year in royalties and residuals. She doesn't do what she does for the money, that's for sure."

"So, they can't figure out the mines."

"Actually, I think it was the gun that brought her here," Tim told him. "They don't want to see what we think up next, so they're gonna try to hamstring us by sending in a professional. That gun scared the hell out of them, Jayce, way more than the mines."

"That's about when they started looking into Vultech," Jason recalled.

Tim nodded. "That was when they realized this isn't a one man operation. They've pieced together that you're getting help from other squatters in the preserve, but they haven't quite figured out we moved, or how much help we have. But the point is, they know they're dealing with a *group*, not a *person*, and they want us stopped *fast*. They don't want our successes giving anyone else any bright ideas, especially not now, when they know that some humans are telepaths."

"And they send this girl," Jason mused.

“Well, given she’s older than us, we can’t really call her a girl,” Tim chuckled. “She is cute though.”

“Symone would box your ears for saying that,” he grinned.

“No, she’d make me compare her and this girl. If I said she was *cuter* than Symone, then I’d get my ears boxed.”

“Kind of like that time you told Symone that Jyslin had a cuter ass?”

“Just about,” he said blandly. “Anyway, she just arrived in Washington about an hour ago with a team of ten engineers, and after they meet with the brass, they’re gonna be getting to work. There’s that, and there’s this.” He handed Jason one more handpanel. “Remember that operation Trillane was planning for the preserve before Chesapeake? Well, they’re going in. I already warned Charleston. They’ve shut everything down and went to ground, cause Faey are swarming all over the forest, looking for *us*. They’re searching in a radial pattern with the ruins of Chesapeake in the middle.”

“Are they going to be alright there?”

Tim blew out his breath. “I’m not sure. They’re not just doing a sensor sweep from dropships, Jayce, they’ve got soldiers on the ground, and they’re not paying attention to what their sensors are telling them. They know we can hide from sensors, so they’re doing it the old fashioned way. I warned Charleston about it. They’ve shut everything down, even the hologram, hid everything they’re not supposed to have, covered the projectors, and now they’re hiding out in the caves southwest of the city. They have plenty of food, and it’s summer, so they don’t have to worry too much. They just need to stay out of sight and let the Faey pass by, that’s all. As long as they stay underground, they should avoid the sensors, and I doubt the Faey will find them in the forest.”

“I hope so,” Jason said quietly. “We tried to make things safe for them.”

“We never expected a ground search like this one,” Tim grunted. “But we should have. I’m glad we listened to Kate. It’s why I had a plan ready just in case.”

“She expected this?”

“Not exactly, but she said we should be prepared for it if it did happen...and it looks like it is. I should have paid more attention to it, but with all that’s been going on—“

“If we could see everything coming, we wouldn’t be where we are now, Tim,” Jason chuckled.

The door opened, and Kumi sauntered in. She was wearing a simple black halter and a pair of shorts. She had a towel over her shoulders, holding onto it with a hand on either end. *Hey babe*, she sent. Kumi, like Jyslin, never spoke aloud to him. She always sent. But where Jyslin did it because it was more intimate, Jason felt that Kumi did it just to revel in the fact that he had talent. *Whatcha up to?*

“Looking over the daily mail,” Jason told her as he sat back down. She came over and sat on the desk, and picked up the handpanel with Myleena Merrane’s picture on it.

Who’s this? A Merrane, eh?

“How can you tell, Kumi?” Tim asked.

See this tassel right here, how it has gold filaments in it? That marks her as a member of the Empress’ noble house, so that means she’s a Merrane, she answered, holding the panel up and showing it to him. She picked up the other panel and scanned it. *A Black Ops engineer? I guess we pissed them off*, she said with an audible giggle. *They sent her to stop the mines?*

I guess so, Jason answered. *If she’s as good as what Kate dug up on her suggests, it means it’s going to get interesting. What are you up to?*

Getting ready to go down and use the swimming pool. Tom got it cleaned up and its usable now. I’m not sure how much I’m going to like swimming in a sport bra and shorts, though. I might just take them off and swim naked. I certainly don’t want to get wet shorts bunched up between my ass cheeks. Wearing shorts would be just fine for playing in the pool, but I’m going to swim laps. So, think you can call Songa and have her track down a swimsuit for me?

I think she can manage, if you give her your size, Jason told her. *You won’t get it until tomorrow,*

though. And you certainly don't want to call her right now. We dropped Rann off in Lincoln last night.

Ohhh, I'll bet my panties he's giving her an exhaustive pelvic exam right now, she sniggered. It's been a few days since they've been together.

So don't interrupt their private time, Jason warned. Call this afternoon. I think I'm gonna be busy for a while, he said, picking up the picture of Myleena Merrane and staring at it. Was she really that good? If so, then things were going to get very interesting. In a way, in some masochistic fashion, he was rather looking forward to the idea of crossing swords with one of Black Ops' best in a battle of wits. She would try to foil his plans, and he would try to get around her. He gave Kumi a look.

What?

"Tim, you think Kumi and this woman are about the same size?" he asked.

Tim looked her up and down, then picked up the handpanel holding her bio. "About. She's a little taller, but I'd say Kumi's about her size."

"Good. Still have that camera, Kumi? And mind taking your clothes off?"

For you, babe? Never, she sent with a slight leer. You want a sexy pic of me to hang on your wall and remind Jyslin just where you'll end up if she doesn't treat you right?

"No, this is something else. Just to warn you, the pic I intend to take won't be...proper."

Oooh, you want a dirty pic, eh? Well, I think I can put aside my sense of moral outrage if it gets you off.

It's not to get me off, silly. We're going to welcome Myleena Merrane to Earth in true Legion fashion. With a little photo doctoring, that is.

Kumi gave him a look, then exploded into laughter. Jason, that's evil! Where are you gonna put it?

I'm going to embed it in the programming of the mines. If they ever capture one without it exploding, the mine will wipe its memory, but it's going to leave this. She'll find it when they analyze the mine. We can't let her think we didn't notice her arrival, can we? At least without making it common knowledge we have our hands in Trillane's comm network. This way we send a personal message.

"I'll say!" Tim laughed.

*The picture was an easy enough affair, and they decided to take it in the same briefing room where Jason had delivered his message. Kumi had a blast, maybe enjoying the idea of it a little *too* much as she splayed herself on top of that ebony desk in a very graphic pose, giving the camera a wicked smile. Once they had the picture, Tim doctored it by finding another picture of Myleena Merrane from the Civnet archives, isolated her head, totally removing Kumi's head in the picture, obliterating the underlying imaging so they couldn't possibly extract the true head attached to that body, then they pasted it on. Tim smoothed the edges enough to make it look more or less continuous, and the result was a picture that was obviously doctored, but looked just real enough to pass muster on a casual glance.*

*All in all, Jason was satisfied. He converted the picture to raw code and embedded it in the mine. They'd open it up and find the main memory crystals wiped, but there would be this one crystal left with data. They'd analyze it, find it was a picture, and being curious engineers, they'd just *have* to look at it. They'd bring it up on a monitor...and there would be Myleena Merrane, doing something best left undescribed for the benefit of a camera.*

Kumi wandered off to get her swimming in as Tim and Jason finished up the code changes. "Good god is that woman nasty," Tim said in a low tone, full of wonder, after Kumi left.

"Kumi's a noble, Tim," Jason chuckled. "She's more worldly than everyone in this mountain put together."

*"Worldly my ass. When she—*fuck*," he breathed, shaking his head a little. "Right in front of us! And I thought what Jyslin did in Hawaii was hot because she was so fuckin' fearless about it."*

“She did that on purpose, Tim,” he said calmly. “You know Faey.”

“Yeah, I know, she was doing it on purpose to get to us. Well, it worked on me,” he admitted. “I think I’m gonna go find Symone, right now.”

“Have fun,” Jason told him.

“I knew you were calm, but you must have ice in your blood,” he laughed.

“It’s not about that,” he chuckled. “Kumi is a very beautiful girl, she’s funny, she’s got a great personality, a very hot body, and I love her as a friend. But let’s be honest here. She could make a eunuch horny. She gets to me too.”

I heard that! Kumi’s sending reached to him, almost dripping with both sensuality and victorious smugness. She was standing on the other side of the door.

Too bad that’s all you’re getting, Jason sent calmly.

Bull shit is that all I’m getting! I told you before, babe, I will have my revenge! I’m just waiting for the right moment. And the licensing rights for the pay per view, she added.

Jason laughed aloud. *Suuuure,* he drawled.

Now that I know I can get you hard, it’s just a matter of time, she shot back.

Too bad for you there’s two girls standing ahead of you in the line, he answered evenly.

Asshole! she grated, then stalked off.

Tim looked at him, then laughed. “You’re playing with fire.”

“Since when am I not?”

Myleena Merrane’s introduction into the equation, like any Faey calculus problem, changed *everything*. In just two days, she made her presence known in ways that Jason didn’t fully appreciate. Within hours after arriving, they were already analyzing the wreckage of Sticks, going over them literally with microscopes, Kiaari had reported. Once they were done, they ranged out in a dropship over the midwest, hunting for a mine. And it only took her team two days to track down a mine, waiting for a target to pass by, and capture it.

That was their first lesson. From what Jason read from the report Kiaari sent back, the technician that had been tasked with securing the mine was going to live, but he was going to have new arms. They had no idea that the mines were set to self destruct if they were tampered with after placed. Now they knew, and they’d be much more careful next time.

But the speed with which they had found a mine told Jason that he had to be more active in how he placed them, more clever. Just dropping them in fields and covering them in camo netting wasn’t going to be enough. So he started getting more clever. The mines were capable of full flight, so he started hiding them under bridges, under logs, in groves of trees, in drainage pipes, even in small holes he dug with a shovel and then covered over. The mines would avoid obstacles once activated and in the air, and were capable of using their simple sensors when in an enclosed area to determine which way to go to get out.

And every day that went by, at least one more Stick came crashing down.

The Black Ops team also got to see chaos in action, as Jason unleashed another of his little toys on Trillane. This one Tim called *Sauron’s revenge*, for it was a metal ring about ten feet across that Jason had seeded in orbit around the planet. In fact, the ring was the same size and shape as a piece of debris that the Faey had not yet captured and removed, for it was in a relatively low-risk orbital pattern, and that piece of debris had been removed and replaced by Jason’s device. It didn’t cross any heavy traffic lanes for dropships, but it did pass close to the orbital station about once every 90 days, coming within 100 miles.

On that close-passing track, the ring suddenly veered from its orbit. The sensor officers took note of it, but since it was an already identified piece of space junk, they didn’t pay it as much mind as they would have if it was something else. At first, they thought that a dropship that had passed through that area earlier had caught the debris in its gravometric wake and had altered its orbit. When they

calculated its trajectory, they saw it was going to pass by the station, and one sensor officer quite nonchalantly called down to have a Faey go out and retrieve it after it went by. When it was within a mile of the station, however, it actively changed course and headed straight for it. They tried to activate the station's defensive weaponry when it became clear that the debris was moving of its own volition, and it was heading right for the station. They got their shields up and their guns active, but not before the ring slipped through and struck the station low on the port docking pod...and when it struck, it annealed itself to the hull instead of simply bouncing off.

The ring wasn't a bomb. If it was, the sensors would have marked it as a dangerous device by going on its atomic composition...but there was nothing dangerous or explosive about the device. It was simply a piece of metal. In actuality, the ring was a large-scale version of a hypersonic agitator, using a modified phase emitter that only returned the energy patterns that identified as nothing but a piece of aluminum and titanium, which was the makeup of the original piece of debris. The true nature of the device was hidden from the sensors. The instant it was annealed to the hull, it emanated a hypersonic frequency that conducted through the Carbidium hull of the station, using the metallurgical signature of the hull as a loudspeaker, which amplified the signal. That composite signal had two functions. The first, lower-energy signal was nearly in the auditory range, and just like his subsonic inducers, it induced tremendous physical discomfort to everyone in the port docking pod. Hundreds of Faey dropped to the deck and began to squirm convulsively when it felt like someone had dropped them in a vat of needles tipped with acid. As they thrashed helplessly, the second component of the composite attacked not the Faey, but the silicon conduit that transported hyperphased plasma through the pod. The composite frequency introduced a fatal harmonic vibration into the molecular structure of the conduit, so great that the self-reinforcing energy of the plasma flow through it couldn't retain the conduit's structure, which caused the conduit to tear itself apart at a molecular level. Within two seconds, every conduit in the entire docking pod shattered along its entire length, venting plasma into open air. After only three seconds, there was not a piece of plasma conduit left in the docking pod larger than a grain of sand. The entire pod lost power and was plunged into darkness.

After five seconds, the ring that had attached itself to the hull shot away from the station, releasing itself. They got a camera on it just in time to see the device overload its PPG and vaporize in a fiery explosion in space, but the device had done its work. It would take them *days* to replace all the plasma conduit that the device had destroyed, and that meant that the station would be operating at reduced efficiency, relying on its other docking pod and the main cargo bays in the main body of the station. Until then, there would be no lights, no automatic doors, no elevators, and no life support, and all the cargo currently in the pod was either stuck there til it was fixed, or if it was food, it was now useless. The Faey already in the pod during the attack would have time to evacuate before the conditions within it became deadly, but when it came time to go back in there and repair the damage, they'd be doing that work in E-suits.

Sure, it was something he'd used before, but they hadn't figured out a way to stop it before, they still had no way to stop it, so why not use it?

That little stunt put the fear of god into Trillane. With one tiny device, Jason had disabled a significant portion of the orbital station, the primary hub of the Faey cargo transportation system. Jason and Tim listened with rightfully smug smiles as they listened to the station commander give a frazzled, almost hysterical report to a Trillane admiral. What was the most satisfying was that general's response when the commander told her that the conduit in the port docking pod had been destroyed.

"It shouldn't take that long to replace damaged conduit," she'd said, then the commander gave her a venomous look. "I didn't say it was damaged, General Mero, I said it was *destroyed*. It's all gone! It's nothing but sand laying in the void spaces between the walls! It's going to take my engineering section two days to lay enough conduit to get life support back! So I'm not being fucking timid with that repair estimate, you ass-kissing bitch!" she screamed. "Either I get more people over here who know

how to lay plasma conduit, or the port docking pod's going to be down for twelve days! So send *that* on to Duchess Iria Trillane!"

Tim and Jason had exploded into laughter, and he had a beautiful still image of the station commander, her face screwed up in rage, pointing an imperious finger at the monitor.

It was one of his biggest, boldest ideas to attack Trillane, and it had been a smashing success.

It also didn't go unnoticed.

Two days after the ring had attacked Trillane, Jason and Tim were sitting in his office with Kiaari, going over some of the information that Kiaari had brought back about Trillane's troop positions, things that they couldn't really learn just by tapping into their systems. They were debating which facilities to hit that would be the least defended and do the most damage, when his personal panel beeped with an incoming call. Jason didn't think much about it; Jyslin and Symone called his panel quite often when they were in Nebraska, and right now Jyslin was over there with Songa. Vultech-2 had to go out, and Jyslin was going to be the telepath riding shotgun while Luke took up Jenny Wilson to give her exposure to space flight; Jenny was very far along in the flight program, having already passed the written test and showing aptitude at the controls. Luke told him yesterday that Jenny would be signed off by him by the end of the week, and ready for Jason to give her her practical test.

Jason flipped up the monitor and accepted the call as audio only. "Hello," he called absently.

"I loved the picture," came an unknown voice.

Jason gave a start, and both Tim and Kiaari instantly fell silent. Jason moved to cut the call, for he had no idea who it was, but his panel suddenly shifted into video mode of its own volition, which caused the blond, freckled face of none other than Myleena Merrane to appear in the window of his call program. *"There, that's better,"* she said absently. *"I do so love to see who I'm dealing with. So, you're the legendary Jason Fox. You need better security on your personal panel,"* she told him with a slightly superior little smile. *"There wasn't much in it. I was kinda hoping to find some of your specs and designs in here, but you must have stopped using this panel for design. So much the pity."*

"And you are?"

"Oh come now, you go to the trouble of putting my face on that picture and you don't know my name?"

"I'm just being polite. It's not seemly to know someone when they don't know you in return, that's all."

"True, it's only polite that we introduce ourselves properly. Hi, I'm Myleena Merrane, and I'm your opposition."

Jason just had to chuckle at that. "I'm Jason Fox."

"The one and only," she chuckled humorlessly. *"You have quite a file, and I've read through it. A brilliant engineer with an uncanny aptitude for plasma technology, and you also happen to be one of only five known human telepaths,"* she added quite absently. *"Trained by an AWOL Marine who, I'd bet, is there wherever you are right now. And now you're engaged in a clandestine war against House Trillane that I've been sent here to stop, since your talent makes simply overwhelming you with telepathy impossible. So, wanna do us both a favor and call it? I have better things to do back home than chasing you all over this rock. I can take you back with me, babes. You'd do well in Black Ops, and they can make all your legal problems disappear."*

"Ah, no," he said easily.

"Well, it never hurts to ask," she said winsomely. *"How in Trelle's name did you pull off that stunt at the station? I've never seen so much destroyed plasma conduit before."*

"You think I'm gonna tell you? I might want to use it again," he countered.

"Oh, I'll figure out how you did it," she said with a wolfish, eager smile. *"And when I do, I'll send you the specs to prove it. Now that I have your panel number, I can send you all my little victories just to prove I can keep up with you. I'll figure out how you destroyed the conduit, and I'll figure out how you're hiding your little toys from our sensors. As you can see, I've already started getting an*

understanding of how your mind works, babes,” she told him, leaning back and holding up one of his mines. “It didn’t take me long to crack this baby once I got past your self destruct trap. Though I’ll admit, damn fine job with the program wipe protocols, you got me on that one. The memory crystals were as clean as a Templar’s dick. But I got your hardware,” she taunted. “You’re fucking brilliant, babes, I’ll give you that. Attacking Sticks with an ion pulse because they’re not shielded? Brilliant, and a brilliant use of a design flaw against us. I’ll toast you tonight. But tomorrow, I’ll get to work fixing that little problem, so you can’t use it anymore.”

“And I can tell you right now what they’ll say when you give them your solution, hon. They’re going to say ‘that’s too expensive!’”

She laughed. *“That’s their problem, not mine. If they don’t want to fix the problem, well, those Sticks aren’t coming out of my budget. But I’ll do what I can to counter your mines that isn’t so pricy, so don’t think you’re gonna just keep walking all over us. I’ll find a way to stop your mines, just watch. The pride of Black Ops is on the line now, babes, and we take our competitions very seriously.”*

“It’s your skin,” he told her easily. “Faey have tried before.”

“Oh, but I’m better than them,” she said with bright eyes. “Oh, and about this picture, Jason. My tits are way bigger. That was an insult!”

“Hey, the only pictures I had of you were from the chest up, and you were wearing a Class A. It’s hard to tell.”

“Well, alright, I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt on that. But hell, babes, if you’re gonna stick my head on some naked Faey picture, give me some credit, will ya?”

“Fine. I’ll find something more, suitable, to put your head on with the next picture.”

She gave him a startled look, then laughed. *“Well hell, guess I’m just gonna be waiting in breathless anticipation the next time I crack one of your toys,”* she said with a teasing grin. *“Anyway, I’d better get to work. I just wanted to call and say hi. I’ll let you get back to your dastardly scheming and nefarious plots,”* she said melodramatically.

And without another word, the call ended.

“Give me that thing!” Kiaari said in disgust, snatching up the panel. “How the *fuck* did she do that! I installed the security on this panel *personally*!”

“You said she was good, Tim,” Jason said with a curiously amused tone. “I see that wasn’t bullshit.”

“With her inside the mine, won’t she figure out—” Tim asked, but Kiaari cut him off.

“Hush,” Kiaari snapped. “If she cracked your panel, don’t talk! She might have left a snooper in memory! Let me take it somewhere and check it. Arrogant, snotty little *bitch*,” Kiaari fumed. “I’ll give her something to laugh about!” she hissed as she stalked out of the office with Jason’s panel.

“I think Kate’s miffed,” Tim said with artful understatement.

“Just a bit,” Jason agreed. “That woman made all her security protocols look like chicken scratch, and that’s what she does for a living.”

“Well, won’t she figure out the inverse phase emitter?”

Jason shook his head. “The transceiver it uses is stock, Tim. Everything in the mine is something you could buy at any tinker’s shop, except the ion pulse module. That’s not exactly spec. What makes it do what it does is *software*, and that all got wiped when she opened it. Since those are so small, the mine uses the same transceiver both for its sensors and for the emitter. For such a small device, the extra use doesn’t hamper the emitter’s workings. As long as she doesn’t get one with the code intact, it’s fine. She won’t, though,” he chuckled. “There’s no way you can open a mine without making it wipe its core.”

“How’d you pull off that miracle?”

Jason just smiled. “There’s four separate anti-tampering systems in the mines, Tim, and all of them are software. I knew that they’d eventually find a way to bypass the self destruct, so I set them so

everything they do I want to protect is software using stock equipment, and that software is quadruple protected. They do the final seal with the mine in a pressure box filled with nitrogen, and the sensors keep track of the composition of the interior atmosphere. If it senses anything other than nitrogen, it wipes the core and self destructs. The sensor checks more than just the air, though. They keep a constant watch on the molecular structure of the shell. If it detects any disruption of the mine's shell, such as being annealed, drilled, cut, or even dented, it realizes that it's being attacked, so it wipes its core and self destructs. If the mine is tilted more than fifteen degrees while inactive, it wipes its core and self destructs. The mines have GPS capability, too, Tim. They know where they are at all times, and they're programmed to know that if they're opened anywhere but in the mountain, then something's wrong. So, if the mine isn't *right here* in the mountain when it's opened, if the other three protection protocols either fail or get circumvented, then it wipes its core and self destructs. So, the only way to open a mine without it wiping the core and trying to self destruct is to open it inside a pressure box in the shop where it was made."

"But that woman defeated the self destruct."

"That's easy," Jason shrugged. "That's just the mine overloading its PPG, and I can think of any number of ways to stop the mine from doing that without invading it. The main thing you have to remember here, Tim, is that the mine's core memory is *hot*. It's made of a different kind of memory crystal that returns to its original state when the power that holds in its altered state is removed, and that wipes the memory clear. They use that kind of crystal quite a bit in children's toys, so they reset when they're turned off and back on. It will remain stable and active only so long as it has power, kind of like RAM in old PC computers we used before the subjugation. No power, no memory. So, if they kill the power to the mine, like, with a spatial flux generator aimed at the PPG to make it shut down, then the mine loses power, and," Jason snapped his fingers, "the core purges. And all it has to do to purge is just kill the power to the memory crystals. After it does that, then it tries to detonate the PPG using its destruct program, which is in active memory at all time, not part of the code storage. If I ever turned off a mine, I'd have to reload its programming when I turned it back on. So, the only way to keep it from blowing itself up is to stop it from detonating its PPG. In order to do that, they have to disable the PPG, and if they do that, then the mine loses power and it wipes the memory. And since everything in the mine that I want to protect is software, all they really have is a ball filled with stock moleculartronic circuitry, an ion pulse generator, and a PPG, which you can run down and pick up at any Double D." Double D was a Faey retail store chain akin to the old Radio Shack, catering to tinkerers and amateur technicians.

"*Ohhhhhhhhhh*," Tim said, then he laughed. "Damn, Jason, that's fuckin' smart."

"Thank you," he said modestly.

"So, what are we gonna do about this Merrane woman?"

"Right now? We let Kate vent a little, and then tomorrow's another day," he answered.

Tim laughed. "I'm surprised that Merrane woman had the balls to call like that."

"If Faey have anything, Tim, it's balls. Even the women."

Tim gave him a look, then burst out laughing.

Myleena Merrane was a pain in his ass.

She was *that good*.

In four days, his mines had stopped attacking Sticks. It only took her four days to puzzle out that the mines were locking in on the Sticks' unique engine signature (having moved on from the telemetry mode earlier), and she came up with a simple engine harmonic they could hot-update into Sticks that created a ripple that made the mines not recognize them. Later that night, he got a taunting call from Myleena Merrane, complete with a data file that laid out how his mines were finding Sticks.

Well, chalk one up to Myleena Merrane. Jason simply switched modes on the mines so they detected the unique mass density and metallurgical composition of Sticks as the trigger that caused

them to activate.

The next day, six Sticks came down, and he got a rather pissy call from Myleena that night. She was really angry with him for circumventing her fix so quickly, but he blew her off by hanging up on her. She couldn't hack his panel again, so all she could do was call back and endlessly let his panel ring until he either picked up the call or turned off the panel.

Two days later, Myleena Merrane had a fix. She puzzled out that the mines were now using active sensors to find targets, so she devised a simple program that the Sticks would run using their communication systems that generated a blanket of sensor frequencies. By using the belly transceiver antennas to generate the signals and pointing them down, that effectively blinded any ground-based sensor array with white noise, making it impossible for it to make any definitive determinations about any targets above. Though she didn't know exactly how the sensors were locking in on Sticks, her fix was a generic one that covered just about all the bases, and it was very effective.

Very damn effective.

That night, he got another call from Myleena, who lorded it up that she *had* him this time, and his mines were now nothing but souvenirs sitting on the shelf in her office. Jason hung up on her again, but he cursed sulfurously afterwards, for he had no easy comeback this time. Now, he had to outplay Myleena, and that meant going back to the drawing board and out-engineering Myleena Merrane.

Jason couldn't come up with a way to thwart her fix without revealing more information than he was willing to give. He knew *how* the fix worked, and to just slip by that would tip them off early that Jason was getting inside information. He wasn't ready to give that away quite yet. And since they seemed to be able to find the mines if he left them out in the open, it meant he was going to have to pull back and regroup and figure out some way that the mines could use their visual identification protocol without being exposed to detection by whatever it was Myleena had come up with to find the mines.

This forced a change in tactics, and the introduction of the next toy. Jason had been forced to land and plant this device himself, on foot and in person, and he did so in the town of Champaign, Illinois, a major hub for food production and transportation. He planted the device in a warehouse near the spaceport, one of the big ones where some of the smaller freighters directly landed to be loaded, instead of using Sticks and containers. He'd come on Vultech-2 that had been piloted by Luke, and it had been a relatively effortless affair. Though his face was still being hunted down, that was nothing a pair of sunglasses, a floppy straw hat, and a fake beard couldn't fix for a short trip down a ramp and into a building, then right back out. After planting it, he got right back on the dropship and returned to Lincoln. There, in his office, he used a little program that Kiaari had given him that let him do to Myleena what she did to him. His panel dialed a number, a number whose code showed it was a floating panel. The video picked up, and he got a look at the back of Myleena Merrane's head. "What?" she demanded in Faey, without looking at the panel's screen.

"Myleena," Jason said.

She whirled around and looked at the monitor. She had a smudge of grease or something on the tip of her nose and her right cheek, and she was holding an annealer in her hand.

"*You!*" she gasped. "*How did you do that?*"

"Enjoy," he said, reaching into the pocket of his overshirt, taking out a small black remote, and pressing the flashing red button.

Back in Champaign, the small black box hidden in a small warehouse opened and fired. With a dull flash, the device detonated, which created an Electromagnetic Pulse of sufficient magnitude to overwhelm the basic shielding that Sticks employed to protect their system from ambient electromagnetic fields. Systems designed to protect from a planet's weak magnetic field or the solar wind were nowhere near enough to repel an EMP wave that was of similar strength as the ion storms generated by the mines. The EMP engulfed the spaceport, sweeping out to a radius of nearly a mile. Every Stick that was struck by the pulse shuddered as its power systems were disrupted, and it either dropped out of the sky or powered down if it was on the ground. The effect was spectacular, and it was

devastating. Two airborne Sticks shuddered in midair, in the middle of maneuvers to enter an ascent vector, and then dropped to the ground in thunderous crashes. One landed on an open tarmac, and the other crashed into the roof of a warehouse, sending up a cloud of dust and blowing out every window in the warehouse. Another airborne Stick, which had been in the act of maneuvering for a landing, lost control and slammed into a neat stack of containers, sending the large metal containers flying like dominos thrown by a petulant child as the Stick plowed through them and into the ground, sending a cloud of dust into the air.

But Sticks were not the only victims of the pulse. Every unshielded plasma system overloaded and shut down, which killed the loader skiffs, the antigrav pods, and most of the industrial lighting and computers.

"What did you do!" she demanded.

"Turn on CNN and find out," he told her with a level stare. "Have a nice day."

"Bastard!" she shouted as he cut the connection.

That should keep her busy for a while. And give him time to circumvent her circumvention of his circumvention of her circumvention of the mines. That should give him enough time to work up something, because the more he exploited unshielded Sticks, the faster she was going to find some way to protect them completely and force him to shift to another tack.

God, this was getting complicated.

While Myleena was busy cleaning up the mess Jason had created in Champaign, he got busy. He knew she'd only be there for a few hours at best, long enough to deduce that he'd used an EMP to bring the Sticks down, and she'd be right back to work thwarting him, so he moved quickly. That night, they dealt with all the mines that had been set and waiting and were now ineffective, which was itself rather tricky because Jason had no safety device to turn them off. They weren't *meant* to be altered once they were finished, but Jason didn't want them left laying around ineffective. He decided to simply set them off, which he did without ever leaving his skimmer. Sure, the explosions would be picked up by Faey sensors, but that wasn't going to be a problem for long.

Damn clever woman. If she was going to monkey with the ships to make them impossible for the sensors on his mines to locate them, well, he had other tricks up his sleeve, and the mines would return later in a new form. And he would certainly use that against her.

In a makeshift shop in a corner of Vultech's warehouse, Jason pulled out dirty trick #4, a tiny disc about the size of an old silver dollar. These were something that he'd made earlier, and he'd made a stamp of the circuit so it could literally be cranked out by the hundreds by a single worker in a day. Encased in an easily replicated metal case was that circuit board and a small gravometric engine the size of a walnut, a small device that was originally placed inside children's toys. Well, Jason had another use for them. These little bastards were going to drive Myleena Merrane absolutely fucking nuts.

If she read his file, then she'd know all about these.

He called a panel in the mountain, and Temika answered it. "Mika," he called.

"Yeah, sugah?"

"Tell the shop to start number four."

"You got it, sugah. Want 'em to box 'em up?"

"Yah, we're gonna be shipping them out soon."

"Ah'll get right on it. See you latah, sugah."

When he returned to the mountain about three hours before dawn, he found them ready. Even though they'd only been working on them for a few hours, but they'd already made over two hundred of them. "Need help, Jayce?" Tom asked as he came into the hangar with a clipboard.

"Not for this," he answered. "I won't be out more than an hour, and I'll be back before dawn."

"Alrighty then. Must be serious if you're not taking a student."

He nodded. "I'll be going somewhere where I can't afford distractions."

And that place was over Washington, D.C. He flew over the city, careful to avoid the traffic lanes, for Washington was always a busy place no matter what time it was, and dumped the contents of those boxes out into the air about one thousand feet over the city.

They didn't fall. They spread out in the air, thinning out, moving laterally without ascending or descending.

"Take that, Myleena Merrane," Jason said under his breath, then he closed the hatch and returned to the cockpit.

Jason's stunt over Washington wasn't an attack on Sticks. It actually did no damage whatsoever to any Trillane equipment or assets.

But it drove the entire city of Washington absolutely *insane*.

The discs were subsonic inducers, modified so they didn't need a metallic host to act as a speaker. The devices were designed to float at a set altitude, and they were so small that no sensor, be it in space or on the ground, would detect them. They floated using directional plasma magnets, but had tiny gravometric engines on them that caused them to slowly spread out, but not exceed more than five miles from the point where they were initially activated, and also with on-board software that kept them at least 500 yards from one another. This set of conditions kept them over a set location, but allowed them to spread out. And since the skimmer that seeded them always had to be out of the area by dawn, they were light-activated. When the sun rose, it triggered the inducers.

And being inducers, what they did was generate a *massive* field of subsonic interference, which was directed downward.

At sunrise, the entire city of Washington D.C. woke up, whether they wanted to or not, for everyone in the city felt like ants were crawling all over them. There was no hiding from the effect unless one was underground or deep inside a large building, isolated by the absorbing qualities of the buildings or the ground. This was all well and good for some people, but the vast majority of the residents didn't have that kind of protection, and were *very* rudely awakened.

It was pandemonium. People in nightclothes were running through the streets screaming. There were over 3,000 traffic accidents almost simultaneously, and within 20 seconds, there was not a vehicle moving anywhere in the city. Faey and humans alike writhed and screamed in frustration, scratching at themselves, running in circles, dunking themselves in water, doing anything they could to make the maddening itching cease. High-ranking nobles, including the Baron of North America, were caught up in the effect, and it drove them utterly nuts. The Baron was on his vidlink seconds after the sun rose, screaming and cursing at anyone he could call even as he shimmied and fidgeted, scratching and clawing at his skin while chewing out any official he could get to answer.

It took them nearly an hour to figure out exactly how it was being done, when they brought in equipment to determine the direction from which the field was being generated, but it wasn't easy to locate the tiny devices hovering high in the air over the city. It took them two more hours, hours of agony for those below, for the Faey to destroy enough of the devices to weaken the field sufficiently enough to make it at least tolerable. It took them another three hours to locate and capture or destroy all the devices.

The news was all over it, naturally, since INN had an office in Washington, and their staff had been subjected to the attack. They tried to do a live feed, but found it impossible to concentrate long enough. The cameraman did manage to mount his camera on a stand and take video of the chaos in the streets, however, which was broadcast just as soon as the crew could get their story out. Oddly enough, the reporter that Jason watched after waking up from a nap that was talking about it found it strangely funny...but then again, he was Faey. Faey loved a good joke, even if it was on them.

House Trillane, on the other hand, was *not* amused. Going by the reports Tim and Kiaari put on his desk, the Baron of North America had a complete meltdown, and put some heads on the block and

threatened to drop the blade if Jason Fox wasn't found, and wasn't found *now*.

Oh, sweet mercy, he just loved it when they begged for a sequel.

While Jyslin and Tim did a little research for him, Jason decided to continue his assault on the sanity of Baron Reth Trillane, governor of the continent of North America.

It required a little panache.

He sat in front of a console in the workshop just off his apartment and typed up a little engineering plan for something that Reth Trillane was just going to *adore*, when the door opened. To his surprise, it was Fure. Fure almost never left Kumi's apartment. He was uncomfortable in this place, and felt that he had little to do or little to offer, because unlike everyone else, he had no real interest in being an active participant in this war...and besides, Kumi would never allow him to fight. He was a male Faey, and the very idea of it was an anathema to him. He had no special training, no special skills outside of his role as a butler and personal servant. All he did was keep things clean and run errands, and there just wasn't much for him to do here. Kumi didn't need him as much here as she had back home.

"Fure," Jason said with a nod as he entered. "Everything alright?"

Well enough, Master Jason, he answered in his stately manner. Despite being male, Fure was a powerful telepath. He hid that power around Kumi, but Jason had the sneaking feeling that Fure was stronger than her. Kumi's talent was above average as Faey measured it, but she wasn't overly strong. She was very well trained, but she lacked raw power. All three human telepaths were stronger than her, but Jason had the feeling that Fure was about on the same level as Tim. *Miss Kumi returned to Lincoln last night, and she asked me to bring you this. It's got some ideas she had on it, she wanted you to look them over and call her in Lincoln sometime today so you can discuss it.*

Jason took a handpanel from the male and nodded. *Thanks*, he said, setting it down. *I might not get to it today, though. I'm kinda busy.*

Working on another device?

He nodded again. *Seems that the Baron of North America took extreme offense to my attack on Washington, so naturally, I'm gonna do it again as soon as I have something.*

Fure laughed. *Well, far be it from me to interfere in your fun.*

Oh, this is fun, Jason sent eagerly. *I love doing this.*

Inventing new things?

No, being an ass, he answered with an outrageous grin. *Just knowing that I'm making life unbearable for Trillane nobles makes me all warm and fuzzy inside.*

Fure exploded in delighted laughter, having to lean over with his hands on the desk until he regained his composure. *Well, I'll call Miss Kumi and warn her you might not be calling her today.*

Thanks. I'll try to get to it, but if I don't strike before the Baron calms down, I might not get him to pop a blood vessel.

I think you may at that. Nobles don't take it very well when things don't go their way. It's a flaw in upbringing. They're very impatient.

I've noticed.

It didn't take Jason long to come up with something, and it was something he could build and unleash by midnight. What he settled on was taking one of the little pod harnesses he'd built for flying guns and setting another unit on it that dealt with sound. Jason had a knack for frequency-based energy engineering, it seemed. Sound, wave-type energies, harmonics, they were just easy for him, and he tended to fall back on what was easy for him when he was pressed for time. This device was going to generate a ELF pulse, basically a super-booming bass, and it was going to be a shaped pulse. The pulse would shatter every window in front of it when it fired. It wasn't quite as good as the itchers, but it would aggravate the hell out of the Baron when he saw all those windows they'd have to replace.

It took him all of two hours to build the unit, and another hour to program it, including the ever-present self destruct that was integral with anything that left the mountain. His panel on the back table beeped, and he glanced back at it. The calling number was hidden, unlisted, so he had a sneaking

suspicion who it might be. He turned the panel around so the screen faced the wall, so nothing could be seen, then reached over it and accepted the call.

"You son of a bitch!" Myleena Merrane's voice raged at him almost immediately. *"Do you have any idea how much hell I caught from fucking Trillane over that stunt in Washington?"*

"Poor baby," Jason said calmly, maybe a little smugly. "Guess you didn't have me covered as well as you thought, did you?"

"That was cheating, you asshole!"

"Deal with it."

"You bet your happy ass I'm going to deal with it," she said hotly. *"Just try to do that again. I dare you."*

"I hope you have armor," he told her. "You'll need it once the Trillanes beat down your door and come after you with pitchforks and torches."

"Bastard!" she screamed one more time for good measure, then she hung up.

It wasn't quite as shocking and dramatic as the subsonic field, but it really got Reth Trillane *furious*.

Jason's little toy was released over Washington at 2am, and it went right to work. The cone effect of the pulse was about two hundred feet wide at its terminus of operation, and that was wide enough to do some real damage. The device ran amok in downtown Washington for nearly twenty minutes, because it stayed low to the ground and it was shielded from active sensors. It shattered windows all over the southern part of the city, in almost every government office, but it did actively avoid the Smithsonian. There were delicate exhibits in there that Jason did not want to destroy, so the device was programmed to actively avoid the mall. But good Lord, did it nail just about everything around the mall with reckless abandon.

By the time they finally found it and scrambled a trio of combat airbikes to shoot it down, it had done its work, and Jason sent the command for it to self destruct. *Thousands* of windows all over southern Washinton had been destroyed, and the cost to replace them would not be easy to dismiss. But that really wasn't what it was about. It was about slapping Baron Reth Trillane in the face for a second straight night, showing him that Jason could strike in his capitol city with absolute impunity, anywhere he wished, anytime he wished.

That was what it was all about.

The Baron had a complete and total hissy fit. Jason read about it the next morning, sipping on a cup of soda while reading the intel report Tim had ready for him. The Baron had sacked the general responsible for security in Washington on the spot, put a one million credit reward on Jason's head, and called the Grand Duchess to demand more resources to deal with Jason. After that, he ordered his staff to put more people on the job of finding Jason, and ordered them to tighten the security around Washington, threatening dire consequences if he got through again.

Jason had to smile as he read that. Take that, Myleena Merrane.

You look happy, Jyslin sent as she opened the door. She glanced at Tom, who came in with her, then repeated it aloud.

"Just a little bit," he answered. "I've spent the last couple of nights tormenting Baron Reth Trillane. Since that bitch Merrane woman stopped the mines, I've changed strategy a little."

"Well, I'd be careful about that, hon," Jyslin said delicately. "Piss him off too much, he might respond by burning the entire preserve to the ground to try to smoke us out. It won't do much to us, but it *will* cause lots of problems for the others."

Jason blinked. He hadn't considered that. "You're right," he agreed. "I think I'd better tone it down a little."

"You can go back to mines, anyway," she told him, handing him a handpanel. "Near as we can figure, the mines won't give off a detectable gravometric signature if you put them in low orbit. We

can put them up there and they can use visual detection to lock onto Sticks. From the math, the ceiling is 367 *kathra*. Any higher, and the mine's engine isn't masked by the planetary gravity well."

"Sounds like part of a plan. How's the building doing on the guns?"

"We have six built, and five more should be done by Friday," she answered. "We'll have all fourteen done in time."

Jason nodded.

"What's those for, Mister Jason? Just out of curiosity."

"Well, we plan on doing our first armed raid in two weeks," he answered. "But before we do that, we're going to attack the Faey's planetary sensor grid in orbit above us to weaken it. We're gonna try to knock it completely out, but I don't think we'll manage."

"I thought we could work around the sensors."

"We can, but they don't *know* that we can, Tom," he explained. "So, this attack really isn't anything but doing what they expect us to do. They would expect us to try to blind their sensor system so we can move around more freely, and we can't disappoint them. Besides, every array we bring down is more money out of Trillane's pocket, because that's equipment that they have to replace. Remember, Tom, that's the *real* objective of almost everything we do. It's not about tactics or warfare, it's about costing Trillane money. That's it. The more money we cost them, the more we can put them in the red, the better chance we have of getting them off Earth. When Earth is no longer *profitable*, then they'll be amenable to the idea of releasing their control to another noble house. Nobles don't care about their people, Tom, they only care about their bank accounts. So that's how we're going after them."

"The orbital guns are going to go around and fire on every sensor satellite they can find, and unlike other toys I've built, these won't just self destruct when the Faey come for them. They've been rigged with some strong engines, and since they'll have very little mass, they'll be able to outrun most manned fighters. We're going to seed them in orbit, and then when they activate, they'll already be in position to knock out most of the stationary satellites that cover North America. While they're doing that, *this* is going to be going after the station." He flipped on the holographic emitter on the console, and a three dimensional image of a small spherical object appeared in the air over the console screen.

"What's that?" Tom asked.

"Think of it as the B-B from hell," Jason told him. "It's about the size of a ball bearing, Tom. It's going to be fitted with a fluxing plasma magnet that changes its orientation every time it strikes a solid object."

Jyslin gave him a look, then erupted into laughter. "Demir's sword!" she managed to gasp. "If you let those things loose in the station—"

"They'll cause chaos," he nodded, then he noticed Tom's blank look. "Did you ever see that old movie, *Men In Black*, Tom?"

"Yeah, I saw it."

"Remember that little ball that flew all over the headquarters right after they recruited Will Smith? It knocked over stuff and hit people and whatnot?"

"That's what it's going to do?"

"Something like that," Jason told him. "The magnets will give the balls some serious velocity, and since the shell will be crystallized Neutronium, they're not going to be damaged when they hit stuff. And every time they hit something, the magnet inside changes its orientation to match the vector the ball picked up when it rebounded, so it preserves any momentum the ball gained from the impact. When I let them go, they're going to fly around like a cloud of destructive gunshots. While they're not really that hard to stop, the Faey don't know *how* they work, Tom. It's going to take them time to get readings on the balls and realize what they are, and the time it takes them to figure out what they're dealing with will be all the time they need. If I can get a box of them into the main landing bay of the station and activate them, they can render the entire landing bay completely unusable while they try to

figure out how to stop them. And while they work on that, the balls will be hitting the walls, the ships, everything, doing more and more damage. And the nature of the physics behind it is such that the longer they go, the faster they get. If they bounce off something they can't damage, like the hull of an armored fighter, then they have *more* momentum. Eventually, as they continuously bounce off the bulkheads and the armored ships in the bay, some of them are going to build up enough kinetic energy to start smashing through walls. And once those balls get out of the bay, the cycle starts all over again. I figure that if they can't contain the balls within two minutes, they're going to start breaking through bulkheads and start invading the rest of the station. If they get out of the bay, then the task to contain them will become *way* harder. I figure that if they get out of the bay, it's going to take them *hours* to isolate all the balls and get them under control, and that whole time they're knocking dents in bulkheads and breaking anything not made of a very strong metal."

"Oh, Trelle, Jason love, that is *evil*! It's brilliant, but *evil*!" Jyslin laughed.

"The beauty of it is that there's no real technology involved with this," he chuckled. "It's nothing but a special kind of plasma magnet encased in an armored shell. It's a low-tech approach to dealing with a high-tech opponent. They'll be easy to make, and we already have the parts we need to build them. I figure the shop can crank about fifty balls out an hour." He looked at Jyslin.

"I'll put some people on it," she told him. Jyslin more or less ran the manufacturing room when Jason wasn't around. "We don't need everyone to finish building the guns." She glanced at her watch. "Shit, it's almost time for my afternoon training session, and you can't be late for your flight training class again," she warned.

"I know, I know," he grunted, turning off the hologram. "Did Tim fix the flight simulator?"

She nodded. "I can't believe that Maggie *broke* it," she laughed. "We've been ribbing her about it all day, about how we can't ever let her behind the controls of a real ship."

Jason chuckled.

"Oh, here, this is what I came for," Tom said. "Think you can get some of these, um, E-suits?" asked, looking at a piece of paper. "Mister Fure described 'em to me. We have a problem in the lower storage bunker, something down there is leaking a chemical that makes it hard to breathe. I closed off the bunker so the leak doesn't spread. I need to get some people down there, and I don't wanna send one of you guys that has that self-contained armor to fix it. If I can get some E-suits, I can send a maintenance team down to find what's leaking and contain it."

"No problem, Tom," Jason said. "E-suits are cheap, only like a thousand credits a pop. I can buy one for everyone in the mountain. In fact, that might be a good idea, just in case. If they ever find us and try to gas us or something like that, everyone will have protection." He swivelled in his chair to face his panel, and then called the floating panel Kumi kept with her when she went to Nebraska. She answered quickly. "*Yeah, babe?*" she asked in Faey.

"We need an E-suit for everyone," he told her. "But I need some of them here by tomorrow. Think you can swing it?"

"*Puh-leez,*" she snorted. "*I'll have them shipped in faster than a gigolo drops his pants. I'll order two per person, so we have some spares. They're cheap enough. They'll be ready to pick up tonight.*"

"There you go, Tom, problem solved," Jason said, motioning to Kumi.

"Thanky kindly, Miss Kumi," Tom called with a grateful nod, speaking in flawless Faey. Jyslin had inserted the language for every rebel a while ago, and while English was customarily used in the mountain, even by the Faey, they were more than capable of speaking the language.

"*Hey, no prob, Tom,*" she said with a smile and a nod. "*You'll get them when the dropship comes back tonight.*"

Temika came in while Kumi said her goodbye and hung up. "Y'all coming or what?" she asked.

Jason laughed. "Making sure I show up on time, eh Mika?" he asked.

"You bet," she told him. "Ah think Ah'm getting the hang of it."

"That you are. I think you're almost ready for your final test."

She beamed. "Ah kinda like flying. It's not as hard as Ah thought it would be."

Where's she at? Jyslin sent privately.

She can fly no problem, we're going through emergency protocols right now, he answered.

What I did last week?

Yeah. All that's left for you is the final test and your solo flight. I think that's gonna happen tonight. You're bringing the skimmer back solo, love.

I can handle it. Flying really is fun, and not as hard as I thought.

Now you know why I love it, he told her.

I surely do. I shoulda had Zora train me for a Class 3 when she offered to train the squad. The only ones who took her up on it were the twins.

"So, come on, sugah! Yo' cuttin' into mah class time!"

Jason chuckled. "Alright, alright." *Tim, Symone, class time,* he sent openly.

We're just finishing up lunch, cutie, we'll be there in a couple of minutes, Symone replied.

The flight to Lincoln in the skimmer was an intimate affair, for the only four on the skimmer were telepaths, and they were starting to gel. Temika was a little wary around Kumi and the others, but Jyslin she didn't treat so distantly, because of her relationship to Jason. Jason's fiancée was given more latitude than the other telepaths, and the Alabama woman was starting to open up to her. They spent the time basically chitchatting, as Jason allowed Temika to pilot them from the mountain to the Vultech warehouse.

They landed inside the hangar, and the three rebels who manned the warehouse came out to greet them as the doors closed and the hatch opened. "I see you got the full class today," Jenny Wilson noted. "When do I get my turn? I'm ready for my test, you know!"

"Myra said as much," Jason told her. "Your test is coming up, don't worry. Soon as you rotate out of the warehouse, we'll take care of it."

"Well, make it fast," she snorted. "I can't even play with the flight simulator over here."

"It won't be long. Where's Rann and Songa?"

"Probably saying the kinds of goodbyes you don't do in public," Jenny sniggered. "Rann's going back to the mountain tonight."

Yes! Rann's sending raced through the building. Jason, the DNA testers got a match! We got a picture in the pipe!

They all raced to the office, where Rann was sitting behind a panel, typing furiously, and touching the screen. *Here it is,* he called, showing a picture of a teenage white male with red hair and profuse freckles. *Face recognition is running. And, here we go.*

His name was Ian Fletcher. He was 17 years old, lived in New York City, and was still in high school according to the bio they pulled up on him.

"Well, now that we found someone...now what?" Songa asked aloud.

"Now, we go talk to him," Jason said. "You got his home address and vidlink number there, Rann?"

"Working on it. Got it," he said triumphantly. "147 west 72nd Street, apartment 4E, Brooklyn. Lemme run this little program Kate gave me to dig up the vidlink number for that address. Okay, got it. Want me to call him? If a Faey calls and tells them they need to have an interview with him, they won't blow it off."

"Hmm, that's not a bad idea," Jyslin mused, and Jason nodded.

"Go for it, Doc."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Get them to agree to a personal visit at home in the next couple of hours," Jason answered. "We can find someplace to land the skimmer near the house and go pay them a visit. And if one of the Docs is there, that's a Faey that can talk us past any soldiers that might try to stop us."

"That'll work, and I know just how to secure that kind of cooperation," he said, clapping his hands together. "Alright, clear out from behind me and I'll take care of it."

Everyone got out from behind Rann as he made the call. It only rang once before the call was answered. Nobody could see the face on the panel, but they could hear the voice of a woman.

"Hello," she called.

"Yes, is this the Fletcher residence?" Rann asked in a personable tone.

"It is," came a wary, uncertain answer. "*May I help you?*"

"I'm Doctor Rann Elanne, madam, from the City Health Authority. I apologize for calling at such a late hour, but I needed to speak with you quickly."

"*Is there something wrong?*"

"No, no, nothing that can't be quickly fixed," he said smoothly. "I'm calling all the students from your son's school to warn you that one of his instructors has contracted a case of Encaphalic Porosis. It's a disease akin to your human Chicken Pox. But, since it's an illness that's not of human origin, we don't allow it to simply run its course. If you would be so kind, madam, to expect a visit from one of our nursing assistants within the next three hours? He will arrive and administer an immunization to your household that will prevent your son and your family from contracting the illness. We'd usually just ask you to come into the clinic, but these immunizations need to be administered within the next four hours, and it will be faster for us to come to you by hovercar than you try to brave the subway system to reach our facility in the Bronx."

"Yes, yes, *that's fine. We were about to go to bed, but we can stay up.*"

"I'm terribly sorry about that," he said with sincerity in his voice. "We'll do our best to arrive as quickly as possible, so we don't inconvenience you more than necessary."

"No, no, *that's fine. Do I need to do anything to prepare for this?*"

"Oh, no, not at all, madam. A single shot, and you're good to go."

"Alright. *Thank you for the advance warning. We'll be waiting.*"

"Very good. We'll be there within the next couple of hours. Good evening to you."

"Goodbye."

"How was that?" Rann asked, looking over the panel at Jason as he hung up.

"Perfect. Jys,"

"Already on it," she said, sitting down at another panel. "I'll find us a place to land. Who's gonna go?"

"Just one of the Docs and me," he answered. "The fewer there are, the easier we can move around. Is that fake nose still here? And the beard?"

"Yeah, in your office desk," Rann told him.

"Go get them on, Jason," Songa declared. "I'm not about to let my husband go wander off somewhere dangerous, so I'll go. We'll get the prepwork done while you get your new face on."

Jason only took about fifteen minutes to get ready. When he came out of his office, he had the fake nose and beard on, which changed his facial pattern *just enough* to prevent facial recognition software from matching him as Jason Fox when he was wearing a hat. Jason had a fedora for that. He changed into a pair of black slacks, blue shirt, and blue long coat to make it look like he was a medical assistant, and met Songa in his skimmer. Jyslin was inside it, sitting at the controls, typing on the holographic keyboard. *Alright, I'm loading up a landing spot for you, in an empty lot about a block and a half from the apartment building,* she sent. *There's a map on that handpanel in your seat of the neighborhood, so you'll know the lay of the land in case things go bad. You be careful, love,* she sent urgently. *What you two are doing is going to be dangerous. You've never wandered this far from the skimmer in hostile territory before, you won't have any armor on, and you're going to be doing something pretty delicate. If this boy's mother has a fit or rejects, she might hit the panic button on her vidlink and bring in soldiers. So be real careful.*

I'll do my best, he told her, taking her hand, then kissing her. Her kiss never failed to curl his toes.

I'm taking a plasma pistol, just in case.

Trelle be with you that you don't have to use it.

Now that I can agree with. Ready, Songa? he asked, sending openly. She too had donned her blue doctor's coat, and the triangular insignia that marked her as a doctor was prominently displayed on her collar.

Of course, Jason, she replied. This shouldn't take long.

I hope not.

The flight to New York only took about two hours. They maneuvered slowly and carefully over the city, since it was always active and there was no curfew here, avoiding other skimmers, airbikes, and some high-flying hovercars and zipships as they got over the vacant lot that Jyslin had marked for them. Jason landed it there with a light touch, expertly squeezing it between an abandoned car and a little wooden clubhouse some kids had built in the back of the lot. He left the ship running, with its stealth active, taking the remote for it while he and Songa piled out. He raised the stairs and closed the hatch, which made the ship's lighted interior vanish into a mass of featureless black that hid the building behind the vacant lot.

"Now we hope that nobody looks too closely out of their windows," Songa whispered, for she knew that Jason had now completely closed off his mind to sending, part of his defense that made him appear to be a non-telepathic human to other Faey.

"It's dark and there are no lights in the lot," Jason answered as he pulled the brim of his fedora down just a bit more over his eyes. "If anyone looks out, they won't see anything out of the ordinary."

"Jason, love, I should check out the humans in the apartment before we start talking seriously to them. This Merrane woman is very clever. If they found one of our scanners, they may know what we're doing, and she might have set this up as a trap. This is the *one* way that they could lure you out into the open."

"That's not a bad idea. And thanks for asking for permission before doing it." He held up the map, looked around, then pointed. "That way."

The walk to the Fletcher's apartment building was fast and nervous. There were no patrols visible on the street, but the two of them constantly kept looking all around, wary of one sneaking up behind them. When they reached the building, they stood on the landing by the locked front door, a door that the apartment denizens could unlock with a button in their apartments, which had a bank of mailboxes on the wall and an intercom over them. Jason picked up the phone and pressed the button for the Fletcher's apartment. Someone answered immediately, a young man. "Hello?"

"We're from the City Health Authority," Jason answered. "You should have received a call warning you we'd be coming."

"Yeah, hold on." There was a buzzing sound at the door, and Songa pulled on the handle to open it. "You got the door?"

"It's open, thank you," Jason answered, then he hung up the phone.

They went up four flights of stairs, and as soon as they were on the proper floor, a door opened. A portly woman with long graying brown hair done in a tail was there, wearing a robe over a nightgown. "Please come in," she called, stepping back.

Jason and Songa entered a small, rather poor apartment, filled with old furniture and worn-out appliances. But the place was clean, the old furniture was well positioned, and the place had a warm, homey feel from all the pictures that were spread liberally on any horizontal surface. They were pictures of relatives and the home's residents.

"Yes, thank you for receiving us," Songa said to her with a warm smile. "We're sorry it's so late."

"I'm just glad you didn't call at two in the morning," the woman laughed. "It won't take you long, there's just the two of us, Ian and me."

There was a brief silence, and the woman's eyes seemed to glaze over for a second. Jason couldn't feel anything because he was completely closed off, but he realized that that wasn't really necessary in

the apartment, so he opened himself in time to feel Songa delving through the woman's mind, quickly, efficiently, and very gently. She looked to Jason and nodded, which told him that she was clean. She looked to the boy, and repeated the process. Jason touched his mind ever-so-slightly as well, and felt an odd *pressure* there, a pressure that he only felt when he specifically went looking for it. It wasn't something that the normal Faey would sense on a casual scan. This boy definitely had talent. His talent was unformed, but it was definitely there. It would take time and some work to get him ready to express it.

"Yes, well, unfortunately, we're not here for the reason we explained over the vidlink," she said carefully, after Jason nodded to her. "It's a bit more complicated, but I assure you, it's nothing especially dangerous at this moment," she said quickly, raising a calming hand when the woman's eyes widened and her body posture stiffened. "May we sit down? I'm afraid this will take a bit of time to explain."

"Oh, please, yes," she said, motioning. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No, no thank you," Songa told her as she sat sedately on the couch, and Jason sat down beside her. The woman seated herself in a chair across the coffee table from them, facing them. "Please sit down young man," Songa told Ian. "This matter involves you as well."

Ian gave his mother a nervous look, then he sat in the other chair, the one facing the vidlink's screen.

Jason looked at them, cleared his throat, and began. "First off, let me explain something to you," Jason began, and then he explained the basics of telepathic ability. "As you know, all the Faey are telepathic, but it's been showing up in humans as well. That's something that they've been censoring on the news and Civnet, because they don't want it to be common knowledge. Well, that's why we're here. This Faey lady and myself are part of an organization that's trying to find all the humans that have the genetic predisposition to express telepathic ability and move them somewhere safe, somewhere the Faey can't reach them."

"Safe? What do you mean?"

"Miss, think about it. Telepathy is the biggest hammer the Faey have to keep us in line. If humans started expressing telepathic ability, what do you think they'd do when they found out?"

"They'd either kidnap them or kill them," she said almost immediately. Clearly, this woman was rather bright.

"That's *exactly* what they're doing," Jason nodded. "Well, the organization we represent has found the genetic footprint that's showing up in humans with talent, and your son matches the profile."

"My son's a telepath?"

Jason shook his head. "Not yet. He has the ability, but it's unformed. If we did nothing to help it along, he'd never express it, but we can help urge it to come out. With some training and some time, he will express some telepathic ability. But at this moment, no, he's not."

"How did you know that?" the woman asked. "Did this woman tell you? You know, using," she hedged, tapping her forehead.

"I'm in this situation, Miss Fletcher, because *I* am a telepath," he told her evenly. "It's why they can't catch me. They rely too much on their telepathy, and when it comes to me, they can't use it. What makes me hard for them to catch is because I had a Faey, friend, before I expressed, and she trained me instead of turning me in."

She had a *very* worried look on her face, but the young man, Ian, just stared at Jason, very hard, and very long. Then he laughed. "I know you!" he blurted.

"Excuse me?"

"You're wearing a disguise! I saw that video you made on Civnet at school! You're Jason Fox!"

"That's me," he chuckled, taking off his hat. "I'm wearing this stuff to trick the facial recognition programs they run off the cameras. So, if you know who I am, then maybe you know why I'm here."

"You think my son's a telepath?" the woman asked. "And you want to take him with you!"

Jason nodded. "He isn't yet, but he will be. But when the Faey do what we did and start doing wide-spread genetic testing to find telepaths, they're going to find your son, Miss Fletcher. I just got here first, that's all. There's a chance they won't find him, but if I could find him, then odds are they will. After all, they have much more resources than me. I can't really say what they'll do if they find him, but one way or another, I can more or less guarantee that they won't just leave you alone.

"If you want, you can come with me, back to my hideout. I can shelter you there, and I won't ask anything of you. I won't *make* you help me. At this point, just getting your son out of Faey control and moving him to a safe place is all we're interested in. But, if you want to help, we'd be happy to have you. You can help us fight Trillane and force the Empress to bring in Faey that will treat us better, because if you saw my video, then you know what's going on. Everything I talked about in the video really happened, and is still going on. If you don't want to help, that's fine. But at least with us, you'll be out of the Faey's sight, where they can't get at you.

"So, I know this is pretty short notice, Ian, and it's gotta be a shock, but what do you think? After all, it's your choice. You can stay here and maybe the Faey won't find you, or you can come with me. If you're a telepath, you can help us out. If you're not, well, you can still help us out. I can't deny that it's going to be dangerous. I'm sure you've heard it on the news, about all the damage we've done so far, and we plan to do lots more. It's going to be a war eventually, and that's not exactly safe."

"Are you kidding? A chance to be a *rebel*? I'd love it! Yes!" he said enthusiastically.

"Well, that was fast," Jason chuckled. "Miss Fletcher, want to come with us? He's rather young yet, he could use his mother."

"I don't like the idea of it, but I can't deny what you said," she sighed. "If my son is a telepath, he won't be safe out here. He'll need to be protected, and since you've been staying hidden for months, well, you've proved you can do it. And now that I know about you, I'd kinda have to go too."

"No, honey, if you want to stay here, I can fix it so you forget all about what we've said," Songa told her gently. "I can make it so you think Ian's run off, or he's on special assignment to another school. Whatever you'd like."

"I didn't realize you could do *that*," she breathed.

"Yes, I can, honey," she nodded. "I don't really like doing it, but I've been trained for it."

"Well, truth be told, I think I'd rather go with you," she said. "I take it we'd have to leave more or less right now?"

Jason nodded. "We don't have much time. I'll explain why some other time. But if you do want to go with us, you'll only have about half an hour to decide what you want to take."

"Do you have clothes and such where you're at?"

"We do," Songa assured her. "We can see to all your needs."

"Well, then I think we just need to take our keepsakes," she mused. "My pictures, and my scrapbooks."

"Well, then, let's get them all packed up and ready, shall we?" Songa proposed, standing up.

It didn't take long. What they ended up with was a pair of large suitcases, filled with pictures, photo albums, a jewelry box, and a shoebox filled with assorted little keepsakes, and some of Ian's trophies and souvenirs and other mementos. Jason put his hat back on, and picked up both suitcases and nodded to Songa. "Alright, we're going to go to where our transportation is. It's about two blocks away. Just follow us, and keep up. Me and Songa's going to be shielding us so the Faey can't find us with their telepathy."

"Alright. I'm ready to go!" Ian said, almost jumping up and down. "I can't wait til I tell the guys about this! I'm gonna be a freakin' *rebel*! This is gonna be so awesome!"

The follies of youth, Songa noted with amusement to Jason.

Amen.

With their new recruits in tow, Songa led them back to the skimmer quickly and without fail. There were no Faey patrols in sight, and nobody seemed to either take notice of the suitcase-toting group or

particularly cared about them. The skimmer was still there, and Jason fished out the remote and caused it to open the hatch and extend the stairs. “Wow!” Ian gasped when, to him, the night itself just opened a door to let them in.

“Inside, please,” Songa said, ushering them ahead, as she turned her head towards the street.

Jason, I’m sensing a patrol, moving quickly this way, she sent.

He could feel the edges of it himself. *I feel them too. They’re coming this way. We need to get moving. Get inside.*

She nodded and rushed into the skimmer, and Jason followed her in. He didn’t bother stowing the suitcases, he dropped them in the back seats as the Fletchers gawked at the interior of the ship, even as Songa helped Ian buckle his seat belt. “Quickly, please,” she told them. “We have to get into the air.”

Songa got into the co-pilot’s chair as Jason got the engines going, and he pulled the ship up off the ground and retracted the landing skids. He ascended vertically, taking it up several thousand feet, then he turned and started a sub-orbital arc that would drop them in Nebraska. He had to stop there before going on to the mountain.

“And that’s that,” Jason said, looking back at the two. Ian looked almost hyper, he was so excited, and his mother was very pensive, looking out the front window with a sober look on her face.

“Welcome to the Legion. I don’t think I ever caught your first name, Miss Fletcher.”

“Molly,” she told him.

“Molly. I’m Jason Fox, and this rather dashing lady sitting in the other chair is Songa,” he introduced. “She’s one of our doctors.”

“Why is a Faey helping the rebellion?” Ian asked.

“Because I’m a doctor,” she answered simply. “Faey doctors never take sides, dear. It’s part of our oath. We never take sides, dispensing medical aid to anyone in need. We serve whoever needs us. Jason’s people needed doctors, and so me and my husband are here to fill that need.” She grinned at him. “We’re not actually *in* the rebellion, dear. Doctors are never part of other organizations. I do help Jason out from time to time because I think he’s doing the right thing, but it’s not *official*.”

“But he’s fighting your own people,” Ian protested.

“*My people* make many mistakes, dear,” she said simply. “Sometimes we can be very cruel. What House Trillane is doing here on Earth is wrong, and someone has to put a stop to it. That’s why I support what Jason and the others are doing.”

“I didn’t realize it was so bad,” Molly Fletcher mused. “Things seem, well, alright to me.”

“You haven’t seen what’s going on where Trillane doesn’t let people see, Molly,” she told her evenly. “They’ve done things that could get the entire noble house thrown in prison and Grand Duchess Trillane executed, if the Empress had proof of it.”

“Wow,” Molly Fletcher breathed.

“Wow indeed,” she nodded in agreement. “That’s why my husband and I bend our oaths of neutrality where this rebellion is concerned. A third doctor that’s with us, Yohne, she’s not quite so enthusiastic about it as we are, but then again, her oaths would never let her give the rebellion away or harm them. Sometimes, neutrality also requires silence.”

“Hearing it from a *Faey*, it puts a whole new spin on it,” Molly said, mainly to herself.

“I know,” Jason told her with a nod. “We’re not very large, and it’s very touch and go. I may have pulled you out of the frying pan and into the fire, to be honest. We *are* about to start a war with them, after all. But at least with us, you have a chance. It’s not a guaranteed future we can offer, but at least we can offer *hope*.”

“That’s something for me to think about, I suppose, as I get used to the idea of this,” she sighed.

“I can’t wait! Do I get a gun? When do I get to go on a raid?” Ian asked breathlessly.

“Woah, tiger,” Jason chuckled. “Let’s focus for right now on getting you two home and getting you a new wardrobe, some rooms, and a hot meal. I’m afraid that around the mountain, food is more or less your own problem.”

“You don’t serve meals?”

Jason shook his head. “Everyone’s on different schedules. We have a kitchen, so everyone just basically cooks for themselves. As long as they keep the kitchens clean, it’s all good.”

“Now that’s something you shouldn’t be doing. People won’t eat right if they’re just whipping up whatever,” she declared.

Uh oh, I don’t like where this is going, Songa sent to Jason in concern.

If it makes her happy, she’s welcome to it. This is a shock for her, hon...if she gets involved with the idea of running the kitchen, it’ll be a good release for all the worry.

True.

“Mom manages a restaurant,” Ian told them. “She runs the Wendy’s down on 104th.”

“Not anymore,” she sighed.

“Don’t worry, we can find something for you to do,” Jason told her. “They always need hands down in the shop. And if you can sew, they’d love your help over in the warehouse. We, lost, just about everyone that can sew,” he said, bowing his head.

“That big explosion out in the forest?” Ian asked. “They said you did it on purpose on the news!”

“*They* did it,” Jason grunted. “And we lost nearly three quarters of our people in it. The only ones who survived were the builders who were in another town, getting it fixed up, so we lost just about everyone who was good at sewing.”

“What exactly happened, Mister Fox?” Molly asked.

“Call me Jason, and it’s a long story.”

“This flight won’t be short, will it?”

Jason chuckled. “I guess we have time.”

Jason told Molly and Ian most of the story about how they got started, from his arrival in Chesapeake to their move to Colorado. He explained about the exomech, and how Steve had detonated its power plant when it became clear that the Faey were there to murder the entire town. Steve had known that no one would get away, so he made sure to take all the Faey with them. He told them about what they’d been doing so far as far as the war was concerned. “Since we don’t have enough fighters to sustain any kind of heavy action or big raids, we’re focusing on building robotic devices that do our fighting for us,” he explained. “We can’t really take any big bites out of Trillane, but that’s not really our strategy given our resources and their size. Our strategy is to attack the non-military transports called Sticks, because they’re very easy to bring down. They’re cheap and as plentiful as grains as sand on the beach, but after we blow enough of them up, it’s going to start costing Trillane real money. We’re trying to make it so *expensive* to run the farms here on Earth that they willingly leave and let another house come in to take over, one that will treat us with dignity and respect. Right now, we’re setting up to conduct our first manned raid against Trillane. It’s only going to be about nine people sneaking into a small armory in Canada, where we’re gonna steal anything we can use, then blow it up.”

“It seems like a risk to hang everything on that one thing,” Molly said. “What if they find a way to stop you?”

“We have other approaches,” Jason nodded. “There are other things we can do to keep adding more and more to the bill, and then there’s always just aggravating the hell out of them just for the sake of it,” he chuckled. “I’ve been giving the Baron of North America reason not to sleep well at night here for the last couple of weeks. It serves no other reason than to annoy him, but it’s just as effective as attacking Sticks.” He started slowing as they approached Vultech, and Jason extended the landing skids as the doors opened. “We’ve tossed around several ideas, but the main thing is to keep adding to the price tag that comes with owning Earth,” he added as the skimmer touched down inside the warehouse lightly. “And here we are at our first stop. If you’d be so kind as to just wait here you two, we’ll only be here for a couple of minutes. I’m just here to pick something up.”

“Where are we?” Ian asked, looking out his window with keen interest.

"Someplace you'll learn more about when you get to our base," Jason told him bluntly.

"It's good to see that you thought to have more than one base," Molly said. "If they ever found your mountain, you'd be in big trouble."

"That's something we're planning for right now," Songa told her with a smile, turning her seat so she could face them. "We know that it just takes one person getting lost and getting caught by the Faey to give our base away, so we're making several secret bases that only a few people know about, so nobody can give them up. After all, they won't know about them, and you can't give away anything you don't know."

"I wondered how you dealt with that, with your people being telepathic and all."

"Easily, we use our own telepaths," she smiled as Jason opened the hatch and went down to where Rann and Kumi were standing, waiting for him.

Your E-suits are here and ready, Kumi told him. "Bo, get those E-suits on the skimmer!" she called to Mark Bowman, but everyone called him Bo.

"You got it, Kumi!" he shouted, and started towards the skimmer.

"Stick it in the cargo hold, Bo!" Jason called to him. *Jys and the rest of the class! We're going back!* he sent so it would be heard all over the warehouse, but not an inch outside the walls.

Ah'm stayin' over heah til tomorrow, sugah, Temika told him. *Charleston called an' they need some stuff. Me an' Kumi are gonna get it all bought and packed, and then we'll fly it out to 'em tomorrow. We need to bring over the dropship tomorrow so we can take it out to 'em.*

I'm in the bathroom, I'll be right there, she answered.

Tim and Symone caught a ride back in the dropship, Rann told him. *Luke brought it over to drop some supplies off for Charleston. He was going to take it the rest of the way, but they need to buy some other stuff, so they decided to just hold it here and take it all in one trip tomorrow.*

Alright. Rann, go take a seat in the skimmer, and introduce yourself to our two new members, he sent.

Ah, so the boy agreed to come then? Rann asked.

Both him and his mother, he nodded in response. *The boy's hyper, but his mother's pretty sharp.*

"Afraid not, dear, I'm staying here tonight," Songa's voice came from the door as she appeared in the hatch, looking back. "My husband Rann is going back to our base, he can explain anything you'd like. He's a sweetie, you'll like him."

Songa and Rann enjoyed a quick embrace and kiss at the base of the stairs, sending privately to each other, then Rann scurried up the stairs and into the skimmer. *Don't take the copilot's chair, Rann!* Jason warned.

I won't!

Is that going to be mine? Jyslin asked as Bo brought the box up to the cargo hold, then stopped and waited. The stealth field was still going, and he knew better.

Rann, open the cargo door while you're in there. You know how, don't you?

Of course I do, Jason, Meya's already gone over the controls in the class I attend. The stealth will disengage from the door when I open it, right?

Yeah, just open it.

Opening it now. The cargo door's stealth melted away, and it began to open.

No, love, you're flying us home, Jason told her. *And I'm not going to say a word. It's a virtual solo.*

Words no, but I'll get lots of dirty looks, she teased as she appeared in the office door.

Kumi laughed, and Songa just smiled at Jason slyly.

"Your box is stowed, Jayce! She's ready to go!"

"Thanks, Bo," Jason called to him. *Close the door, Rann.*

Closing it now.

Alright, I'm ready, Jyslin told him as she reached them, holding her hand out to him. Jason took it,

and held it gently as she came up to him. *You need anything from home, Kumi?*

Naw, I'm set. I would like you to bring Fure over either tonight or tomorrow, though.

We can manage it tonight, I think. Jyslin can make it her solo flight, she can bring him over and then come back, all by herself.

An hour alone with Fure? Thanks, she sent sourly.

He's not that bad, Kumi sent defensively. *He's just not very comfortable around you guys. He's a nice guy in private.*

Well, he needs to loosen up some, Jyslin told her.

Yeah, I noticed. I'll pop his cork later, that's why I want him over here. Nothing a couple of hours between my legs won't fix.

He's all yours, Jyslin told her.

That was more than I needed to know, Jason sent dryly. *Let's go, love, so you can ferry Fure over in plenty of time before sunrise.*

Inside the skimmer, Rann was already making Molly smile, and Ian kept staring at him in curiosity. "Molly, Ian, this is my fiancée, Jyslin," Jason introduced as she came up the isle between them.

"You're marrying a *Faey*?" Ian gasped.

"You bet your booty he is, youngster," Jyslin declared. "I worked my butt off to get him, he's not getting away from me now."

"She's a member of the resistance," Rann explained when Molly gave her a startled look. "There's nine of us, you know. Jyslin, Symone, Kumi, Meya, Myra, Fure, Yohne, Songa, and myself. Proof that not all *Faey* are *Faey*, if you get my meaning," he said with a warm smile.

"I'm starting to see that," Molly nodded.

The boy has talent, Jyslin sent to him almost immediately after taking the pilot's seat. *He'll be weaker than the other humans, but he'd be about average for a Faey woman. Stronger than a man.*

I wasn't sure how strong he's going to be.

When you want a professional opinion, call in a professional, she sent with a wink, then she closed the hatch, retracted the stairs, and started prepping the ship for takeoff.

"I must say, Miss Jyslin, it's nice to see a *Faey* with hair color that looks *normal*," Molly told her.

Jyslin laughed. "Actually, my hair color is *abnormal*," she told her. "Red hair is unusual for a *Faey*. Blond and white are the most common."

"The blondes I've seen don't look very common," Molly said. "At least not naturally. That's what we'd call a peroxide job at work," she said, pointing out the small port window by Ian's seat, pointing at Kumi and Songa. Both of them had blond hair, though Kumi's platinum blond was much lighter, almost white.

"That's about normal," Jyslin told her. "The darker the hair, the rarer it is. The ones that'll turn your head are the ones with black or dark brown hair. My red hair makes me stand out, because it's so dark," she chuckled.

"I saw a *Faey* with green hair once," Ian blurted.

"That's not uncommon," Jyslin told them.

"Not at all, my mother had hair the loveliest shade of emerald," Rann agreed. "It looked like a shimmering gem when it moved."

Jason strapped himself into the copilot's chair, and Jyslin took the controls in her hands. She glanced at Jason, but he just laughed. "Oh, no, this is all you," he told her.

"Thanks," she grunted, doublechecking all the indicators, then she picked the ship up off the deck and backed it out of the open doors. She turned the ship even as she lifted it up over the building, then started a smooth acceleration in a pilot's arc that would bring them back down right at the mountain.

Jyslin had learned how to fly quickly, and she was actually rather good at it.

"There, how was that?" she asked.

"Very smooth," Jason told her.

"Jyslin is Jason's student," Rann explained when it looked like Molly was about to ask what that meant. "Jason is one of the three licensed pilots in our group, and they're teaching the rest of us how to fly."

"Oh, that explains it," Molly chuckled. "I was wondering why she was asking him. I would've thought it would be the other way around."

"I grew up in a plane," Jason told Molly. "When I was kid, when other kids were playing baseball out in the park, my dad had me behind the controls of a Cessna. He was an Air Force fighter pilot. After the subjugation, after I came into a little money, I bought this airskimmer, and learned how to fly it. It's been a godsend," he said sincerely.

"Ian's father was a commercial pilot," she told them. "I'm afraid he passed away several years ago."

"Oh dear, I'm so sorry to hear that, Molly," Rann said sympathetically.

"Did he give Ian any lessons?" Jason asked.

"Of course he wanted to, but in New York, Ian couldn't get a training permit until he was 12, and Terry died a year before Ian's 12th birthday."

"Well, that's official, Molly. My dad had me in the pilot's chair before I even took my first test," Jason chuckled.

"Yeah, my dad let me fly a plane a few times," Ian told them. "He didn't give me any real lessons or anything like that though. It was lots of fun!"

"Why are you asking, Jason?"

"Because both of you are going to learn how," he told them. "*Everyone* in the mountain needs to learn how to fly, even if you never use it. Just in case."

"Oh dear. I hope it's not that hard."

"Not in skimmers, hon," Jyslin assured her. "If you can drive a car, you can fly a skimmer. It's really easy. A lot easier than I thought it'd be."

After an hour of pleasant conversation, where Rann had more or less captivated Molly Fletcher and Ian refused to sit still or ask any question that crossed his mind, the dark silhouette of Cheyenne Mountain appeared ahead of them. "Alright, here we go," Jason said, buckling his seat restraints. "Everyone buckle in. This is always a little choppy."

"We're gonna land?"

"In a manner of speaking. Just look out the windshield and you'll see. This is how we keep our base a secret," he chuckled.

Jyslin lined up on a low approach to the small tunnel that led to the hangar, and Molly Fletcher realized the truth of it immediately. "That tunnel? It's *too small* for a ship to go in!"

"Trust us, Molly, we have it rigged. But there's a moment of turbulence when we hit our gadget that lets us go through, so be ready for it."

Jyslin flew towards the tunnel with a steady hand, decelerating with her approach. The minimum speed for this was 15 knots, for the bubble didn't encapsulate the skimmer, it instead was like a soap bubble ring...it set out the soap film, and the skimmer was like someone blowing air through it. If there wasn't enough pressure, no bubble. Well, with the skimmer, if it wasn't going fast enough, it wouldn't get completely in the bubble, and that would cause it to rebound the ship back out. So, a ship had to be doing a minimum of 15 knots, or about 19 miles an hour, when it hit the bubble, or the ship wouldn't be pulled in. That wasn't very fast, but when one noted that there was *nowhere* for the ship to go if it missed, then the reason it could make a neophyte pilot nervous was clear. If you were too far off and missed the bubble completely, then the skimmer would run into the mountainside. If you were going too slow, the ship hit the bubble skin, push in, have insufficient kinetic energy to cause the bubble to form, and then would bounce back. But Jyslin had everything right where it needed to be, and she was in the safe speed window that Jason had decreed for this maneuver, a velocity between 15 and 19 knots. If one was going *too* fast, then the issue was getting the ship safely stopped in the small

hangar on the other side. So, after a little math, Jason found that the optimum speed for the bubble was 17 knots, which gave one plenty of time to stop once inside. She was using the skimmer's navcom to line her up with her target point, and wasn't looking out the window. Her eyes were glued to the screen just over the control stick, and she kept the ship lined up perfectly with a red X on that screen. That mark was the center of the bubble.

There was a jolt when the skimmer was encapsulated in a bubble of stretched space, which was the trigger that caused Jyslin to neutral the throttle. The ship's engines didn't work in the bubble. The view out of the windshield suddenly distorted and elongated, like a special effect from a sci-fi movie. Then with a snap, the distortion whipped forward at a speed that made Molly and Ian gasp and flinch, and after another sudden shake of the skimmer, they were in the hangar. Jyslin reversed throttle, causing the skimmer to quickly slow in the underground hangar, and then turned the ship, moved it sideways about fifty feet, and landed it gently and expertly in its assigned parking spot by Vultech-1, which was in the hangar.

"And here we are. Welcome to the secret base of the Legion," Jason announced. *Fure*, Jason sent strongly.

Yes, Jason?

Kumi needs you in Nebraska. Grab a bag, Jyslin's gonna take you over.

I'll be down in a few minutes, he answered.

Tom, come to the hangar, Jason sent in the manner that would allow anyone to hear him. It was an open sending, with just enough power to reach to any distant nook of the mountain, wherever Tom might be. *Your E-suits are here, and I need you to assign some living quarters to two new recruits.*

"I'm on the way, Jayce," Tom's voice called over the intercom.

"Wow, I *heard* that inside my head!" Ian gushed. "You really are a telepath!"

"Was there any doubt, youngling?" Jyslin laughed.

"Well, I *was* wondering," Molly admitted. "Anyone can claim to be anything they want, but there's proof in the pudding."

The three telepaths helped Ian and Molly unbuckle, then then they took them down into the low-ceilinged hangar. The two of them looked around in wild curiosity while Jason gave Jyslin a quick kiss.

"Rann, I'm going to leave these two to your care," Jason told him. "Tom's gonna assign them some rooms, but I'd like you to show them around, take them down to the clothes storage so they can get some wardrobes, show them the kitchens, and explain some of the rules to them. Is that alright?"

"I'd be delighted to," he said with a warm smile. "Everyone here is disgustingly healthy, so there's not much for us doctors to do," he said, which made Ian laugh. *Tom, before you head down here, could you please whip up two handpanels with maps of the mountain for our guests? That way they can't get lost.*

"Sure, I can manage that," Tom called over the intercom. "I'll have them with me when I come down. Rick, Jenny, head over to the hangar."

"Well, it was nice meeting you two," Jason told them. "I'd take you on the tour myself, but I have something I have to take care of real quick. We'll be seeing each other every day, so don't think that I'm going to vanish on you or anything like that. Rann, show them where our apartment is. My door's always open, Molly, Ian. If you ever need to talk to me, just come over. As long as I'm not locked in my workshop, I always have time to talk."

Jason waved to *Fure* as he hurried into the hangar, and the two newcomers gawked at him as he hurried by with only a word of greeting, then piled into the skimmer. The hatch closed, and then the ship picked up off the deck. "Come over here please," Rann said, herding the two newcomers to a safe distance. Jason, however, didn't move. Jyslin blew him a kiss from the window just before she engaged the stealth, and then the skimmer turned and started towards the bubble.

She'll be fine, Jason. She's a good pilot, Rann assured him

Oh, I'm not worried about that at all, I just don't like being away from her.

I know that feeling, he sighed.

I know, Rann. We'll do what we can to keep you and Songa together. I'll be in my lab. I have someone to piss off.

Oh dear.

Operation Satan's Marbles, as Temika coined it, was on schedule. In the two days since Jason put that on the priority list down in the shop, they had nearly five hundred of them made. That was almost as many as would be needed for their task. He wanted 750 for the operation. They'd have that done by tomorrow. The flying guns that were slated for the attack on the Faey sensor system were ready. There were 14 of them, parked in a neat row on the edge of the manufacturing gallery, nothing but flying guns with inverse phase emitters so they could evade active sensors...and since they'd be *above* the sensor arrays, the arrays wouldn't detect them soon enough to give the Faey enough warning the arrays were under attack. The lateral and spaceward scanners on those arrays were very weak compared to the planetside arrays, mainly just to scan for possible meteors or space debris that might collide with the arrays, so they'd know when to raise their shields to protect themselves from impacts. The only powerful sensors that swept space between the planet-oriented arrays and space were the orbital station and the ships in orbit around the planet. They didn't have a second layer of sensors to protect those arrays, and Jason was going to exploit that oversight. Once an array was destroyed, they would randomly select another array from its list and go destroy it. That random nature, not following a fast path for quick destruction, was actually going to be the wiser move. Once Trillane realized the arrays were under attack, they would dedicate fighter protection to the closer arrays, since the closest target to the last one was the *most logical* target to attack, and therefore the most logical target to defend to intercept the attacker. It would take them time to realize that the arrays were being randomly targeted, and then they would spread fighter coverage to all the arrays. Those critical few minutes would allow them to destroy more arrays, because the Faey pilots in those fighters that showed up would be in for one hell of a shock when they tried to shoot those drones down. The drones had *powerful* engines on them, and since they were so small and had no live pilot with mortal constraints, they would be insanely fast, very agile, and a bloody fucking nightmare to hit with plasma cannon fire. The fighters would be hard pressed to shoot down the drones, even as the drones had no problems targeting the stationary arrays and blowing really big holes in them.

Ah, the joys of Civnet. The programming in those drones that would manage their combat protocols was the main AI in a *game*. It was a fighter dogfight simulation game, very popular with the teenage girls, and the AI of that game was sophisticated enough to handle what the drones were doing. Jyslin and Jason had modified that code so the AI knew the operational capabilities of the drone it would control, could understand the mission objectives, and knew what to do when threatened by enemy ships. The AI would cause the drones to evade enemy fire and enemy ships while carrying out their singular task of finding, attacking, and destroying arrays. AI-controlled war machines had a long history in the Faey Imperium of being substandard to Faey pilots, who had experience and skills that a computer couldn't duplicate, like instinct. But what these drones had to do was fairly simple, and in this scenario, a drone was more than suitable for the task. These wouldn't be engaging in active combat with Faey fighter pilots, because they'd *lose* that kind of an engagement. AI systems could outmaneuver Faey pilots, and they could fire unerringly, but they lacked the ability to predict movements, and that was what dogfighting was all about. All they could do was analyze data and draw conclusions based on *now*, not *later*. In most of the history of live Faey pilots engaging automated drones, the drones did some significant damage in the initial engagement because of the surprise of dealing with enemies that exceeded the mortal limitations of the Faey machines, but inevitably were defeated by the flesh and blood adversaries because the experienced Faey pilots puzzled out the behavior of the enemy, behavior a computer couldn't really change, and shot them down. That

was why the drones wouldn't destroy all the arrays. Eventually, the pilots were going to get the hang of the AI in the drones, would be able to predict their movements, and they would shoot them down. The key for Jason was for the drones to deal as much damage as possible before that happened.

Jason knew they couldn't destroy all the arrays, but the attack drones were going to strike the dedicated platforms that orbited over North America first, then fan out from that initial strike and go after camera satellites and the big arrays that were in synchronous orbit over other regions. There were only 10 of the big arrays over North America, larger than the standard sensor satellites, which had more sensor capability. Those were the ones that had the energy sensors on them that were sensitive enough to detect PPGs on the ground, so those were the ones that had to come down.

They wouldn't get them all, but their goal was to destroy enough of the network to force a global realignment of the array system that would weaken *the whole thing*. They could either redeploy, or they could pull arrays from other global sectors and leave those sectors blind...but the Faey wouldn't do that. Despite the track record Jason had shown of isolating his attacks to North America, the paranoid part of the Faey mentality wouldn't allow them to leave a hole in their sensors. They'd rather see the whole field through sunglasses at night with than only see one part of it with perfect clarity.

It was all subterfuge, though. The weakening of their intelligence gathering would only help Jason, and in their mind, give him more room to maneuver without fear of being spotted. In actuality, the attack on the arrays was only going to happen because they *expected* him to target them at some point. They knew he wasn't dumb enough to have the ability to attack targets in space and not try to attack the arrays. If he didn't, they'd wonder *why* he wasn't doing it, and they might find the hack that Kiaari put on their system that gave them access to all their intelligence. He wasn't going to disappoint them.

The orbital station's command center could probably get resources in place to stop the attacks quickly...but they were going to be busy with their own little problem about the time the drones began their assault.

And right after those drones made swiss cheese out of the planetary sensor net, new mines would appear in *space*, not on the ground, and start the Stick destruction cycle all over again. In the minds of the Faey, the reason Jason didn't attempt an attack on the sensor net then would make sense once Sticks started going dead in space, attacked by a new kind of mine that targeted the main engine with a cascaded spatial flux wave, a spatial wave that would introduce a fatal overloading feedback cycle into them, forcing them to try to manipulate space that was unstable and actively being warped, something the engines in a Stick were *not* designed to do. It would be like trying to use gravometric engines while passing through a stargate; trying to manipulate space that was being so heavily distorted was not something that normal engines could manage. It would cause the engine to overload and literally melt the gravometric drive, maybe even make it explode, which basically turned the Stick into scrap and spare parts. Gravometric engines of that size were *not* cheap. They would think that Jason was holding an attack on the sensor net back to coincide with the release of these new mines, and possibly help keep them from being detected by damaging Trillane's ability to detect them.

If they only knew.

The space mines would attack in a different way because of the lack of the ground. A Stick hit with an ion pulse would crash, and that crash was what did most of the damage, tearing the fuselage up, dealing catastrophic damage to the internal systems, and basically causing the ship to be written off as unsalvageable. But in space, a Stick hit by an ion pulse would just go dead. It could be towed back to a maintenance bay, the plasma relays and damaged moleculartronic equipment replaced, and the Stick was basically ready to go back in service. Those weren't that expensive. Engines, however *were* expensive. The new mines would blow the *engines* of the Sticks, not the power systems, and force a very costly repair bill to get them back into service. Again, Jason could have simply planted bombs in the mines, but his consideration for the civilian crews of those ships wouldn't let him be so, so ruthless about it. He'd give them a chance to survive, and besides, though the Stick could be repaired and put back in service, he was going after the most expensive part of the Stick to repair.

Money, money, money. The more it cost Trillane, the better.

And again, it was something he could only do to a Stick. Stick engines were strong, but they lacked the redundant shielding that military engines had to protect them from *just* this kind of attack. Faey Fighter engines were very resistant to spatial flux, and could operate when attacked by a spatial flux field. Stick engines couldn't tolerate it.

Oh, and since the sensors were going to be damaged, that didn't mean that the Stick crews could breathe a sigh of relief once they were in the atmosphere. Jyslin's revamped ground-based mines were ready to go, mines that used a remote button camera on a tightbeam link that let them see without being exposed. Those mines would use optical recognition to detect Sticks, and then attack them. Unless that bitch Myleena Merrane could make Sticks invisible, there was *no defense* against this tactic. The only defense would be to stop the mines from hitting their targets, and that went right back to forcing Trillane to use convoys of Sticks with fighter escort, which would snarl their cargo transport system and cost them time and money.

"Myleena, you are going to *hate* me," he muttered under his breath as he sent down the order to start building the Jyslin Special version of the mines.

The B-Bs From Hell were literally a *smashing* success.

Jason, Kiaari, and Tim watched video they plucked from Trillane's system at the end of the day, a day that would live in infamy in Trillane military history as Black Raista. On this day, a two-fold attack was unleashed against House Trillane, and it had sent them into absolute disarray.

The first attack was only a diversion, but on its own level, it was more damaging than a thousand drones blowing everything out of the sky over Earth, for it was utterly humiliating. Through the unwitting assistance of an innocent third party cargo delivery service, they managed to get a crate of his little surprises on the orbital station, and they were there right on time. That morning, the device that kept the little balls in stasis queried its location using the Faey's own GPS system, realized it was on the orbital station, and then released its hold on the 785 little black balls it was shepherding, each the size of a child's marble.

They didn't just explode out of their container. At first, there was a low vibration, and then a hum that conducted through the deck of the landing bay, and then the container began to vibrate. Then it began to shake. Then the staccato drumming of the balls banging on the interior of the container became audible, as the container began to jitter and convulse, sliding across the deck as startled bay workers looked on in curiosity, stopping all activity in the bay, and triggering an alarm that something was amiss. Faey who had been perplexed by the shaking box heard the klaxons, and then started running for the exits.

That alarm probably saved quite a few lives.

A hole appeared in the container. And another, and another, and another, as the balls built up enough kinetic energy to pierce the titanium hull of the container. Those balls escaped with lesser energy, having been slowed by the breakout, but they had a nice *large* landing bay to work with. At first, nobody understood what was going on, but then the container literally exploded, sending a cloud of twisted titanium and a swarm of black objects flying in every direction.

Chaos!

Faey abandoned all dignity and raced for their lives as a swarm of little black balls started flying all over the cavernous landing bay, bouncing off ships, off equipment, off the bulkheads, off containers, and off unfortunate Faey who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The balls had no pattern, no predictability, and they seemed to come from every direction at once. Faey struggled to pull injured companions out of the bay or into ships, and those ships being assaulted by the balls that were manned lifted off the deck and made a mad scramble for the airskin shield at the mouth of the bay, seeking to escape from the chaos. They were mercilessly assaulted by a multitude of strikes from those little balls, but every ship managed to escape the bay without being compromised because the balls had not

yet built up enough kinetic energy to let them break through metal. Every ship that got out of the bay looked like it had chicken pox, due to an innumerable number of small pits and dents in the hulls, caused by strikes from the balls. The balls chased the ships all the way to the airskin shield, but bounced off of it as if it were a solid object, reflected by the electromagnetic field that kept its integrity.

For a long moment, the balls careened around the bay, knocking everything over, and then they started bashing dents into all the metal objects, and breaking anything not metallic or that was small. The sound of them battering the landing bay got louder and louder on the playback, until it was a muted roar of constant *PANG-PANG-PANG-PANG*. Unmanned Sticks, and civilian dropships, skimmers, and shuttles in the bay were systematically torn apart by the balls, their thin hulls compromised much faster than the other metal in the bay, shredded by the relentless assault. One dropship in a corner exploded when a ball hit it right in the power plant and compromised the spatial containment of its fusion matter and caused it to eject its core, sending a hellacious firestorm through the entire bay, a blast so fearsome that it bulged the external hull of the station on the starboard side of the main bay mouth. Fiery trails raced out of that cloud of fire as the invulnerable little balls raced right through the explosion unharmed, getting faster and faster, breaking the sound barrier, until it was nothing but one continuous thunderclap inside the landing bay.

The bulkheads lasted nearly four minutes as they Faey in the control center tried feverishly to understand what was going on down there, what the balls were, but the balls had destroyed most of the sensor antennae in the landing bay that would give them detailed information. They were forced to point an external sensor towards the bay, and the readings weren't as precise. That gave the balls enough time to generate enough energy to be able to break through the bulkheads. One by one, they smashed through the metal bulkheads and were unleashed into the internal structure of the station, having lost too much energy to break through the bulkhead on the other side, so they were trapped between the walls. Some balls hit doors, though, and that sent them flying into passageways leading deeper into the stations, where they were trapped in the halls, bouncing wildly all over the place, going faster and faster as they rebuilt their kinetic energy after losing it in the punch through the bulkheads.

It wasn't the balls in the passages that were the most destructive, though. They did make it impossible for any Faey to use those passages, made it impossible for teams to get down to the bay to begin damage control. The balls stuck in the bulkheads, however, had access to much more vital parts of the station than just the lights and the passages the Faey used. They ricocheted all over every open space they could reach, and it was in those bulkheads that the vast majority of the infrastructure of the station ran. Plasma conduit, water pipes, sewage pipes, datalines, they were all defenseless against the balls, which tore them apart as they pingponged through the interior of the bulkheads, building up enough energy to pierce the wall and gain entry to a new section of the station. Whole sections of the station lost power as the balls shattered plasma conduit in a wide swath around the bay, sending the computer that controlled power generation and distribution in the station into a hissy fit.

And those balls in the walls *did* build up enough energy to break through the bulkheads. Some were unleashed into new compartments in the station's interior, but some tore through the outer hull of the station and careened off into space, to be lost forever. Those holes they left behind, though, immediately started to vent atmosphere into space. And without power or damage control teams on hand to contain the hull breaches, they continued to decompress the station's internal atmosphere into space unabated. Nearby military vessels scrambled, raising shields to protect them from the deadly little projectiles as they approached the station and launched shuttles, fighters, and damage control teams in E-suits to seal those hull breaches quickly, ships and maintenance personnel that kept a wary eye out in case another white puff heralded another hull breach, which would send a little black ball screaming through space in some unpredictable direction that might threaten them.

It took them nearly ten minutes to finally understand what they were dealing with, and another fifteen minutes for a station engineer to hastily throw together a magnetic containment system that would capture the balls inside it, neutralizing them...but by then it was too late. They turned on every

security force shield in the station, for the shields' electromagnetic fields would cause the balls to rebound off them, which helped slow the spread of the balls through the station. Some balls managed to travel all over the station, however, ones that got inside the pipes that they destroyed in the bulkheads, then traveled up or down their lengths to explode into new sections of the station, creating general pandemonium throughout the entire station.

At the peak, there were balls being reported in *every* section of the station, including one that had managed to get into the private quarters of Duchess Silla Trillane, the governor of Earth, a ball that had wreaked havoc upon her private domain before hitting a window, going through it, and decompressing her cabin, which caused some of her possessions to be blown through the shattered window and out into open space before a security force field activated in the sill of the porthole and sealed the breach.

It took them nearly two hours to capture every ball, which was a very dangerous task for the control teams, who had to catch them in magnetic nets and keep them in a magnetic static field. Balls that were inside the bulkheads couldn't be reached, though, which forced a cruiser to come close to the station and aim a directed magnetic field at the station, which pushed all the balls in one direction, and eventually worked them out to where containment teams could get at them. When it was over, the balls had done catastrophic damage to the landing bay, considerable damage to the sections of the station abutting it, serious damage to other sections where small numbers of balls had managed to migrate using pipes, passages, or elevator shafts, and had caused 147 hull breaches in various parts of the station. Every bit of internal infrastructure that was held in the bulkheads in the five sections surrounding the landing bay, and the bay itself, had been completely destroyed. Conduit, datalines, pipes, everything.

The main landing bay was a total loss, as was everything that had been in it that didn't escape in the first two minutes. At their peak, the balls had gained enough kinetic energy to punch through the crystalized Neutronium hulls of *fighters*, dents that had destroyed those balls that had struck with that much force, which sprayed that white-hot shrapnel into the internals of the fighters, which basically destroyed them from within. All the equipment, all the cargo, it was totally destroyed. They'd been forced to anneal a makeshift door over the main bay opening, because the airlock shield had been destroyed by balls in the outer bulkhead, and the outer doors had been mangled beyond any hope of getting them to move. They'd had to anneal a makeshift door over the opening so they could repressurize the landing bay. The damage was extensive enough to force them to evacuate the entire station of all personnel until a complete damage assessment could be made, which took Orbital One completely out of service. That would hamstring Trillane's cargo system.

It was a success beyond any of Jason's wildest expectations. He'd expected his little balls to deal some damage, but not on such a massive scale, and not to cause the entire station to be shut down as they assessed the damage and began repairs. Even he had underestimated the deadly potential of those little balls.

Just as they were starting to feel like the worst was over on the station, however, the drones attacked. That part of it wasn't half as successful, for the drones weren't all Jason hoped they would be. They performed their primary function perfectly, which was to destroy all the stationary arrays. All of them were destroyed within the first six minutes, but it was their confrontation with the Faey that were *quickly* scrambled to deal with them, since the fighters and warships were already on alert because of the chaos taking place on the station, that left them lacking. No drone managed to destroy more than four arrays, and 7 drones were destroyed en route to their second target. The AI in the drones worked fairly well against the fighters, making them slippery opponents that were hard to shoot down, but what Jason hadn't counted on was the *cruisers* firing on the drones. They had expected only the fighters to engage the drones, and they paid for that assumption. They didn't program the drones to deal with that, and so they didn't try to evade cruiser fire. In the end, only 37 arrays were destroyed out of 473 pre-programmed targets, but they got the important stationary arrays, and in the end, that was really what mattered. Each downed drone was a brilliant blast of light visible from the ground, for the

drones were using unshielded PPGs that had had all their safety protocols disabled. This caused them to explode like hand-grenade sized nuclear bombs when they were damaged, miniature versions of the fusion explosion in Chesapeake. They were rigged that way intentionally, to be all but vaporized when they were hit, protecting the sensitive programming and equipment inside them from being captured, analyzed, and used against them.

After watching the video, Jason, Kiaari, and Tim looked at each other, then exploded into delighted laughter.

“By the Denmother, that was amazing!” Kiaari said between gasps for air. “Jason, I want to be like you! That was *brilliant!*”

“Holy shit, are they gonna be *pissed!*” Tim wheezed. “We knocked out Orbital One, Jayce! I never dreamed those little fuckin’ marbles would manage to do *that!*”

“I didn’t either,” Jason laughed, then he leaned back in his chair.

“We’d better lay low for a little while, though,” Kiaari said, regaining her composure, patting her flat belly while blowing out her breath. “This went way beyond what we expected, so there’s going to be a pretty intense reaction. More like an over-reaction,” she amended. “We didn’t just knock a few Sticks down, guys, we just dealt massive damage to a space station with nothing but a box of marbles. Trillane is going to retaliate, so we better be ready for it. We should just hide in our little hole, tell the guys in Charleston to keep their heads down, and wait for the initial shitstorm to pass before we start anything else.”

“The mines do have to keep going out, but yeah, I think it’d be a good idea to delay the raid for a week or two,” Jason agreed. “And we need to warn Charleston to send out the word that there might be a pretty savage retaliation by the Faey on the preserve. People need to go to ground, and do it *fast.*”

“Still, that was just *classic!*” Kiaari laughed. “I’m so glad my sister sent me here! I can tell my children stories about this for years!”

“I’m so glad you’re having fun, Kate,” Jason smiled.

Jason’s panel started beeping, and it just made him all warm and fuzzy inside, because he knew exactly who it was. He picked it up and put it on the desk facing him, so she would only see him, then accepted the call. The flustered face of Myleena Merrane appeared on the monitor. “Well, he-*loo* there,” he crooned.

“*You...are...a...son...of...a...BITCH!*” she said through clenched teeth, but then she laughed helplessly. “*Do you have ANY idea just how much you pissed off Trillane?*”

“A pretty good idea of it, yes,” he said evenly, though he couldn’t resist smiling. “I hope you enjoyed it.”

“*As an engineer, I can appreciate it the cunning of it, but as the woman that was sent here to stop you, it really pisses me off!*” she shouted. “*You’re giving me gray hair, human! And you’re making me look bad! I can’t believe that an elite team of Black Ops engineers just got the absolute shit stomped out of them by a self-trained newbie Terran and his box of fucking marbles! MARBLES! Do you have any idea how humiliating that is? DO YOU!?*”

Jason almost fell out of the chair laughing.

“*I am going to take you down, boy!*” she raged. “*This isn’t the end of this, do you hear me? I will own you! You just got me really into this game, and now I’m going to kick your ASS! Do you hear me!?*”

“Goodbye, Myeena,” Jason said with an evil grin. “It was nice talking to you.”

“*You, BASTARD!*” she screamed as he cut off the call. Jason looked at Kiaari and Tim, and the three of them erupted into gales of helpless laughter once again, Jason literally falling backwards out of his chair.

Chapter 16

Daira, 33 Suraa, 4395 Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 8 September 2008, Native Regional Reckoning

Zabrag, Vuraak Prefecture, Zhadpha Province, Sovereign Planet of Moridon

If any place in the universe could be the most closely associated with Hell, this was it.

It wasn't the climate of this alien planet, Moridon, that made it so, though it was dark and rather unpleasant. Moridon had a sub-tropical climate, somewhat warmer than Earth, but it was winter where they were and that made it quite comfortable to him. It seemed like twilight to him, but this was daytime on Moridon, because Moridon's two suns were both rather dim, being a red giant and a white dwarf. The air pressure here was only slightly more than on Earth, which required no compressional preparations to come here. The air did smell somewhat of ozone and sulfur, but that was because at almost any time, there was at least one volcano erupting somewhere within a hundred miles of where one was on the planet. Moridon was a highly volcanic planet, due to the fact that it orbited a binary star pair, and the twin gravity wells caused more stress in Moridon than it would if the planet orbited a single star. That caused volcanism.

What made Moridon seem like walking in Hell were its inhabitants. For if there was any creature Jason would think of as Satan, it was a Moridon.

They were about eight feet tall. They had red skin, black spiky hair, and had large horns growing out of their foreheads. But it was those *eyes* that made them look so damn demonic. Glowing red eyes stared at one, stared right through you, and made you feel decidedly creepy. The glow was a bio-luminescent reaction that allowed them to see, for their eyes generated a composite light spectrum that went from infrared to ultraviolet, light at the ends of that range that Jason's eyes couldn't see, and then they "saw" the reflections of that light back into their eyes. Their mode of vision was akin to a bat's sonar back home, but it was a sonar using light. Giruzi had the same bio-reactive eyes...but that wasn't much of a stretch, since giruzi were native to Moridon. Nearly half the species on Moridon had similar modes of vision, and had glowing eyes. Jason had wondered how those eyes handled external light sources, but he found out that they couldn't *see* any light that their own eyes didn't generate. The eyes discarded any and all light information they sensed that came from external light. Their vision was weakened in conditions of bright light, when their own generated light was swallowed up by the ambient light, but in conditions of low or no ambient light, their vision was perfect.

Being a human among these demons was really damned uncomfortable, but he really had little choice. He had to come here because of his bank account, and the Moridons absolutely would not be satisfied with anything less than a visit in person.

When one opened a Diamond Prime account, the Moridons demanded that the customer be there in person to do so.

This was being done at the behest of Kumi. She wanted this account, this uncrackable, unbreakable, untraceable account for Vultech, to help her more efficiently launder money, and this was needed because, to put it plainly, House Trillane had gone absolutely *crazy* after Jason disabled Orbital One.

Crazy was a *very* mild term for it. Duchess Silla Trillane personally ordered a brutal retaliation, which began with the removal of the Orala Preserve's protected environment status. Two hours after that, the entire Appalachain forest was on fire.

The Faey did not swarm into the preserve with tens of thousands of troops and dropships and military equipment. They *burned* it.

The entire forest, from Tennessee to Pennsylvania, was set ablaze by orbital bombardment. Plasma bolts from the heavens struck the forests and set them on fire, and every abandoned city in the preserve

was bombarded so heavily that it was reduced to molten slag. In some kind of twisted need to be thorough, the orbital bombardment rained down destruction on literally *every abandoned structure visible from space*. Every building, every house, even every backyard storage shed was targeted and struck by orbital guns. That devastating barrage couldn't help but set the entire forest on fire, and those fires burned unchecked in the dry summer. The fires burned for days, and put so much smoke into the air that they blotted out the sun on the eastern seaboard. When it was over, over 80% of the forest canopy in the preserve was burned away. It was by the grace of God that they managed to warn the people that had been in Charleston in time, and those people had warned most of the squatters. When the fires began, everyone ran for the caves that were liberally scattered all over the mountains, or sought refuge in coal mines, or railroad tunnels. Few squatters were killed in the fires, but they didn't have time to worry about how they were going to make it through the winter, for the armies of Trillane didn't even wait for the fires to go out before they started combing the ash-strewn wasteland looking for the survivors.

That forced them to do something that Jason felt was wrong, but understood was necessary. Before the soldiers reached the people from Charleston who had been hiding, Jyslin returned in the skimmer, bringing supplies. She was not there to help, however. Once she was in the cave with them, she went to work. She eradicated all memory of where the rebels had gone from anyone that had any knowledge of it. If the Faey captured them, they would know that they had once been cohabitating with the resistance, but the resistance left for a new base and left those that did not want to fight behind. Even the memory of taking shipments of food and supplies from the rebels was eradicated from their minds. In their memory, and what any Faey who probed them would see, the supplies they had from the outside were what remained of last year's humanitarian drops, for they'd been given over a year's worth of food and basic supplies in that drop, food they didn't touch during the summer when home-supplied food was plentiful. Jyslin even erased her visit from their minds, striking them when they were sleeping, then leaving quietly in the night. When they woke up, they never remembered Jyslin's visit, and thought the supplies she brought had always been there.

When Jyslin left, all ties between the rebels and the squatters in the preserve were severed. Those people were now on their own, for any help they received from the rebels would only put both sides in grave risk.

Jason hated to do it, but it was necessary, both to protect the rebels and protect the squatters. If Faey soldiers knew that those people were taking food and supplies from the rebels, they'd murder them all, execute them as collaborators with the enemy. And thanks to the new declaration of martial law that Duchess Silla had invoked the day after the station was attacked, they had the legal power to do that.

Trillane house troops were now crawling all over the entire planet. Grand Duchess Trillane had agreed to sending more troops, and they had started arriving by the hundreds of thousands, and were deployed *everywhere*. There were now nearly twenty million Faey soldiers on Earth, a massive, almost overwhelming number, and they were there to ferret out the resistance and crush it.

And yet, it was as if it did not exist.

It took them only a few days to realize that the rebels were not in the Orala preserve, and that put a wrench into all their plans. It was then that they started fanning out and looking for the rebels almost anywhere they could think of, and that included Cheyenne Mountain.

God, was that tense. A detachment of Trillane soldiers had arrived at the mountain and started poking around. They entered the main tunnels and investigated the place, but nobody used that tunnel, and they were very careful to never disturb it. They came all the way up to the massive blast doors, and finding them closed and with no way to open them from the outside, they decided that rebels could not have possibly gotten them open and got in, since the mountain had no power and those doors required power in order to open. They poked around the entrance to the hangar tunnel, as well, and that was the most heart-stopping moment. Jason almost had a seizure when those soldiers walked *right*

over the spatial compression array for the bubble conveyor, which was buried at the base of the closed doors. They checked out those doors and found them rusted shut, and decided that nobody could have opened them without leaving signs of it.

After a hair-graying two hours of investigating Cheyenne Mountain, the soldiers left, and reported back that no unusual activity had taken place at the old human military base, that it was abandoned and unused, and that it was clean.

They almost heard the sigh of relief in Denver. All that work they did to keep the outside looking abandoned really paid off.

They didn't just concentrate on likely places. Hundreds of thousands of Faey soldiers literally searched house to house all over North America, searching for *anyone* that might have *any* knowledge of the rebels or their location. Trillane really upset and infuriated quite a few people with their heavy-handed tactics, punishing everyone for the actions of a few, but this only served to help Jason rather than Trillane. People who were at least tolerant of Faey rule were becoming disgruntled by the treatment they were getting.

They didn't focus on the ground either. There was an entire squadron of battle cruisers in orbit now, and the fighters patrolling the lanes between the planet and the stargate were as thick as flies. The sensor arrays that they destroyed were replaced with bigger, stronger, even more sensitive ones, and those arrays were guarded by space-based exomechs, large robotic fighting vehicles that floated in protective defense of those arrays, armed with very large, very nasty plasma cannons. They put cameras *everywhere*, so they could see anything coming, and the cruisers and the fighters and the exomechs basically fired on anything that didn't return a friend or foe signal, including meteors and space debris. They were taking absolutely no chances whatsoever that *anything* that wasn't broadcasting a friend code was anything but another trap placed in space to deal damage.

While the military was going bonkers all over North America and in space, Trillane forensic accountants were in overdrive. Vultech got no less than nine visits from those hounds, and even a visit from one of Trillane's own in-house mindbenders. That mindbender went after Luke, but her training was not enough to breach the masterful work that Jyslin had done in the creation of the fake persona of Jack Brewer. Everything she found in Luke's mind matched up perfectly with the Vultech books, and those books passed muster. Though they just couldn't seem to get over suspecting Vultech, they could find no shenanigans.

But it was enough to scare Kumi to the point where she felt that this, a Diamond Prime account, was necessary. The Faey were like cavemen compared to the Moridons when it came to computer security, and a Diamond Prime account carried absolute, utter secrecy and discretion. Using this account meant that any computer hackers Trillane employed would find themselves trying to break a system that no one had ever broken.

Getting here had not been easy. Because they had to come on Vultech-2, it meant that Jason and Kumi had been forced arrange a viable reason for the dropship to come here, and that was to make a pickup. They were here for a shipment of moleculartronic boards, bought at a rather frightful price from a Moridon manufacturing company, and the dropship had a four hour window to complete its mission, which was more than long enough for Jason and Kumi to complete this task. What made it difficult wasn't getting past the Faey, it had been getting permission to land on Moridon. They'd had to go through nearly two days of paperwork and permits to get permission to land here, and there had been Moridon customs officials on the spot to book the crew of the dropship in as temporary visitors and give them guest permits. Those permits had very short duration, and the Moridons watched all visitors to their world like a hawk. It was all part of their legendary security. Part of computer security was the physical security of those machines, to prevent an infiltrator from gaining access to them on site. To maintain their famous security, Moridon was one of the hardest planets in the galaxy to visit. It wasn't that the Moridons didn't like visitors, it was just that they made *damn* sure that people who came here came for the reasons they claimed. Jason had found the customs officials to be very polite,

almost friendly, but they were there on business, and they meant business. Those customs officials weren't about to let them leave the landing pad, but when Jason produced an official appointment at the First Bank of Moridon, and a bank official arrived moments later in a bank hovercar to pick them up, the officers apologized to them and allowed them to leave. The bank official then told the officers that the dropship was allowed to sit on the landing pad until they returned, no matter how long that took. The officers were very nice after that, even having some Moridon foods delivered to the dropship so Luke and Meya, who were functioning as the dropship crew, could relax and enjoy their waiting by sampling the local cuisine.

They both had to be there, and Jyslin did as well. Jason was giving Kumi and Jyslin access to this account, the ability to make withdrawals, so they had to be physically present at the account's opening. That was why they were here, sitting in this cavernous, opulent black-carpeted waiting room that had a bar and a bowl of exotic fruits, a room tailored to a Faey, but decorated by a Moridon. There were paintings and art, but they were dark in color and rather stark in demeanor, a window into the logical mind of a Moridon. The couch they sat upon was decadently soft, covered in some kind of black, silky, fur-like material, and the table before them that held the bowl of fruits from many Faey worlds was made of solid gold. They'd put the pair in that waiting room as the biometrics room prepared to receive them. They'd already gone through a great deal of paperwork and signatures, and now the Moridons were going to sample no less than 14 different unique biometric aspects of the three of them that would be used to document their access to the accounts. Diamond Prime didn't transactions only required the three normal methods of identification, however, because the Moridons would be the embedding a bio-organic, microscopic chip in their right thumbs that, when pressed against a monitor, would give the bank absolute proof of their identities, and would tell whatever bank official they were dealing with that these two were Diamond Prime account holders, and treat them with proper respect. Those bio-organic chips were absolutely impossible to duplicate, and ceased to function if they lost their hand or were killed, to prevent someone from just hacking off their hand and using it. But just the chip alone was not enough to the Moridons, so they retained the three biometric rule.

Snazzy, Jyslin sent absently, but the hold on Jason's hand betrayed her nervousness. I wonder how long this biometric procedure will take.

About an hour, Kumi answered. My mom went through this. They take a bunch of readings, take a bunch of pictures, take samples of your voice, then they draw some blood and take a micro-sample of tissue, then they do a full spectrographic map of your whole body. Then they implant the chip, and we're done.

Does it hurt?

The Moridons are good at this, Jys, it's like going to a doctor. We'll be fine.

That's a relief.

The door opened, and a female Moridon entered, carrying a handpanel. "We just have one minor issue to resolve before you will be escorted to the biometrics lab," she told them, speaking flawless Faey. "It's a matter of legal status. In your application, you have listed yourself and Jyslin Shaddale as betrothed, but you did not produce the betrothal certificate."

"Oh, well, an official betrothal certificate isn't required on Terra," Jason told her. "It's what you'd call an unofficial status."

"But you do intend to marry?"

"Oh yes," Jyslin said with an enthusiastic nod.

"And you have no betrothal certificate?" she asked, looking directly at Jyslin.

"I, uh, kinda can't get one right now. It's a legal issue with the Imperium," Jyslin said hesitantly.

"She's a fugitive from Imperial Justice," Kumi stated bluntly. *Jys, the Moridons don't care about what we do, and they don't care about the legal problems of their customers as long as those legal problems aren't with the Moridons themselves. All they care about is the account. You can be a mass murderer for all they care, as long as you pay your bank fees.*

Oh, that's a lovely thing to know, Jyslin sent darkly.

"Ah. That does explain it. Given your, ah, legal status, it would be more than possible for the bank to arrange to have a Templar available to you to conduct your ceremony, since you would have considerable difficulties arranging a Templar on your own. If you would—"

"Yes!" Jyslin said with sudden excitement, literally standing up. "If you can get a Templar for us, I'll kiss your feet!"

The Moridon smiled, showing a mouthful of sharp black teeth. "I don't think we need to take it quite that far. I can arrange to have a ceremony at any time you wish."

"Oh, er, well, I don't really think we can," she said, giving Jason a heartbreaking look.

"Dear girl, the Templar will hold the strictest confidence, this I can guarantee you. He will tell no one. It's in his contract," she said with a smile.

"Really?" *Oh, Jason, could we? Can we? We might not get another chance like this.*

Of course, silly girl. I want to get married too, he answered.

She positively beamed, and she never looked so lovely. "Would after our biometrics be too soon?" she asked immediately, looking at the Moridon.

"Not at all, but would you not like to have a more memorable ceremony? With guests, and a binding cord, and all the normal Faey marriage accoutrements?"

"No, no a simple ceremony is fine with us, we just want a Templar to conduct it, that's all."

"I will have the bank's Templar summoned for the ceremony then. Are you sure this is what you want?"

"We're sure," Jason told her, taking Jyslin's hand and pulling until she sat back down. "We've been trying to find a Templar for months, and the ceremony we want will be secular. I don't care too much, but Jyslin wants a Templar to conduct the ceremony."

"Secular? I'll be sure to warn the Templar of that requirement," she said absently, sliding her claw on her handpanel, writing on the face of it using her claw tip.

"I'm surprised you have a Templar on Moridon," Jyslin said, but she was literally trembling with excitement and happiness.

"We have several," she told her. "The bank has an arrangement with the abbey, and keeps a Templar on call for the convenience of our more prestigious Faey customers, to see to their spiritual needs. You will find that we offer many services to our Diamond Prime customers, madam Shaddale. This won't be the first time we've arranged a Templar to be present for the benefit of a customer, but to my knowledge, it will be the first wedding we have hosted. Congratulations," she told them with that evil-looking smile.

"Can we go now, then?" Jyslin asked in excitement.

"Yes, now that we've settled this matter, we can proceed with the biometric exam. Please, come with me."

Finally! We're getting married, Jason! Jyslin sent with exuberant glee.

It's nothing but someone telling us how we really feel, Jys, he answered. *I don't need a Templar to tell me that life with you is the only life I want.*

I love you, she sent tenderly, reaching out and putting her hand on his face.

The biometric procedure was exactly what Kumi described. They were taken to small examination rooms, and there Jason undressed and was then inspected by a team of Moridon technicians and doctors. It felt rather uncomfortable being naked in the presence of these demonic creatures, but they were the souls of courtesy. They didn't just do a biometric exam, he discovered, they conducted a complete medical examination and checkup to make sure he was healthy and to screen for any hidden diseases; the health of a Diamond Prime bank account holder was very much the interest of the bank, and they even offered medical services to their customers to ensure they continued to be healthy. They wouldn't reject an ill applicant, they would instead expend considerable resources to try to make that ill applicant well, at least *after* the account was opened. After the exam, where he was given a clean bill

of health, they took the biometric readings. He was photographed exhaustively, including closeups of his face, and they took a retinal pattern of both eyes. They then drew a small vial of blood, and used an evil-looking needle to take a small tissue sample from the flesh of his upper arm, of his thigh, and from his back. Lastly, they put him in a machine that was like a little silver-walled box and took a complete spectrographic reading of him, reading his unique bio-energy pattern.

They gave him a soft, comfortable black robe to put on after he came out of the box. "Your clothes are being cleaned, and we understand you are to attend a service after the procedure," one of the Moridon doctors told him. "Ceremonial robes are being brought, in the Faey custom."

Jason could give Jyslin that much. This ceremony was very important to her, and though he refused to be married in a religious ceremony, he wouldn't object to wearing a Faey wedding costume to a secular one.

The robes reminded Jason vaguely of a kimono. They were pleated, made of a burnished gold, and had several layers. There was a wrapped chest part that went under the outer garment, and in that odd Faey style, one sleeve was longer than the other. The left sleeve ended at his elbow, but the right sleeve flared into a huge cuff that hung nearly six inches over his hand. This odd style Jason had seen many times before. Most semiformal or formal clothing had mismatched sleeves, as did quite a few casual clothes. Nearly all men's daily wear that were Faey in style had the uneven sleeves, but none of them were quite like this one, with the sleeve that totally covered his right hand. The robes felt strange around his legs, for it was the first time he wore what could technically a dress, despite the fact that he wore a soft pair of cloth pants underneath them, which were clearly part of the attire given they matched the rest of the outfit. What Jason did notice, and what he understood, was that the only exposed skin he had wearing this was his head, neck, and the lower half of his right arm. For a telepathic species whose abilities were amplified by touch, this he understood. Faey did not commonly touch one another unless they were friends. "Really weird," he said, fussing with where the garment folded over his chest, for the inner coat crossed just over the outer robe, and created a bit of a bulge just over the base of his ribcage. "Why can't Faey make sleeves the same length?"

"From what I remember reading, it is an old, old custom, so old that the Faey themselves don't entirely understand its origins," one of the Moridon who helped him dress said, a female that was tying off the wide sash that went around his waist. "Most Faey clothing has the left sleeve longer than the right, though some, like this one, have the right sleeve longer than the left."

"Weird," he sighed. "I'm starting to regret wearing it already."

"Well, I am no judge of what your species finds attractive, but I think you look quite majestic in it," she told him. "Almost noble."

"Thanks," he said sourly.

They took him to a small room at the far end of the bank complex, which was clearly some kind of special room just for things like this. It had no altars or statues, but the room was dark and quiet and it had a row of candles burning along a ledge that illuminated the chamber. Kumi was there, wearing a simple brown robe, and to Jason's surprise, so was Luke and Meya, wearing similar robes. They were all silent, though Luke was smiling in his direction, Meya waved, and Kumi looked a bit put out. There was a small dais in the back of the room, a dais upon which stood two people. One was a male Faey with green hair, wearing an elaborate white robe with gold embroidering, and a red shawl or narrow wrap that hung over his shoulders and down his chest, its tails nearly reaching his belt. The other was Jyslin.

Such a sight!

She wore a similar robe to his, but where his was gold in color, hers was a soft cream color. The lapel of the outer robe was red, and her robe's sleeve pattern was reversed. Her left sleeve was the one that covered her hand; that as when he got an idea of why. Her sash was red to match the border of her robe. Her hair had been done in an array of small braids that were gathered up and bound in a topknot, and were released to spill her long, fine auburn hair down her back in curly waves. For the first time

ever, he saw her wearing makeup, and to his surprise, it was both thick and obvious. It was a band of eyeliner over her gray eyes that was silver in color, which clashed with her blue skin, a band of color that started at her eyelids and then thinned to a point at her hairline beside her eyes.

His lungs wouldn't work. He'd never seen a woman lovelier. He just stood there for a moment and gawked at her perfection, but then she smiled gently and reached out her hand to him. He blinked and realized he was standing there like a fool, and hurried up to stand on the dais with her. He took her hand, their uncovered hands clasped, and then she just gave him that gentle smile and slowly pulled their hands up and towards the Templar.

"I've been told that you wish a secular ceremony, outside of the normal vows and customs of the Trinity," he began in a surprisingly warm, rich voice. "And I would be loathe to go against the wishes of the intendents. But I'm afraid I'm a creature of habit, and no real specifics about your wishes outside of that one condition were given to me beforehand, so forgive me if I improvise somewhat, and possibly backslide into the customary Faey wedding.

"Usually, I would stand here before you and espouse the virtues of Trelle and the wonders of the Trinity, but before me this day stands a lesson perhaps just as important. Today, I will have the matchless honor of joining these two people together in the bonds of marriage. I see before me a Faey and a Terran, two people with different backgrounds, different customs, different cultures, and different color skins. But they are willing to put all of that aside and join their lives together. They have looked beyond what is different, and embraced what is the same. The rest of the universe would look upon them and see a Faey and a Terran, but when they look upon each other, they see only love.

"That is such a wondrous thing, and it fills me with simple joy. The thought, nay, the idea that simple love can bridge the gulf between a maiden and a lad, a Faey and a Terran, an aggressor and a protector, it is such a powerful lesson to us all that love is the greatest force in our hearts, and can be the binding force that brings us all together, no matter our species, and accept and cherish one another. The two of you are a wonderful example of the boundless, glorious power of love.

"Jyslin Shaddale, subject of House Denalle. Do you promise to take this man to be your husband, to honor him, cherish him, nurture him, and protect him? Will you promise to guide him in his hours of need, and be guided by him when your own path lies uncertain? Will you stand with him through times of trial and triumph, through fitness and health, through the counting of the years, giving yourself to others with his blessing, but giving your heart only to him? Will you promise to lay down your mantle of maiden and take up the burden of woman, to be tied to this man in the bonds of matrimony, and walk from this place not as a maiden, but as a wife, mother, matron, and the protector of your family?"

"I will," she said, gazing deeply into his eyes.

"Jason Fox, freeman of no house. Do you promise to take this woman to be your wife, to honor her, cherish her, nurture her, and to be protected by her? Will you be guided by her in your hours of need, and guide her when her path lies uncertain? Will you stand with her through times of trial and triumph, through fitness and health, through the counting of the years, giving yourself to others with her blessing, but giving your heart only to her? Will you promise to lay down your mantle of lad and take up the burden of man, to be tied to this woman in the bonds of matrimony, and walk from this place not as a lad, but as a husband, father, teacher, guide, and supporter of your family?"

"I will," he whispered. He would be *anything* for her.

The Templar put both of his hands over their clasped ones. "At this time, I would usually wrap the binding cord around your hands to symbolize your eternal bond to one another," he said gently, smiling at them. "But, as there will be no binding cord and marriage bracer, instead we will adopt a custom of the world of Terra. If you would please," he called over their shoulders. A Moridon hurried to them, and held out a simple cushion, holding two very plain silver-colored rings. "It is the custom of the world of Terra for a wife and husband to exchange rings as symbols of their eternal devotion to one another. And so, since I have recited the vows of a Faey marriage, instead will you exchange these

rings.

“Jyslin Shaddale, if you would, take up his ring and place it upon his finger.”

She never looked away from his eyes. She picked up the larger of the rings and singled out his ring finger, going on the talks they’d had, and slid the ring down his finger. It was just a tad large, but they must have been hard pressed to find a pair of rings so quickly.

“Jason Fox, if you would, take up her ring and place it upon her finger.”

He glanced down to take the ring, and then reached out for her left hand. She placed it in his with a glorious smile, and he slid it onto her finger. Unlike his ring, hers fit very well.

The Templar put a hand on each of their shoulders. “Before me stands no longer the maiden Jyslin Shaddale and the lad Jason Fox,” he called in a loud voice. “They who stand before me now are Jyslin Fox Shaddale, and Jason Fox Shaddale, joined by the bonds of marriage as is my right and privilege by the laws of the Imperium and my service as a Templar of Trelle. What they have joined today, let no one separate.” He leaned forward and smiled. “Kiss him, *woman*,” he said fondly.

She did so, with enthusiastic gusto. She threw her arms around him, almost dislocating the Templar’s wrist, and gave him a passionate kiss that made his knees wobble. She then hugged his fiercely and whispered in his ear, her voice cracking with emotion. “Oh my love, you are mine now,” she whispered to him. “I will spend a lifetime proving to you that I am the woman you were born to marry.”

“There’s nothing to prove,” he whispered back, his voice thick as he was nearly intoxicated by the light fragrance of her gorgeous auburn hair. “I love you, Jyslin.”

“Well now, this has certainly made my day,” the Templar chuckled, patting them on the shoulders. “It’s always a Templar’s most joyful duty to perform a marriage, and I feel especially honored that Trelle would allow me to marry the two of you. For a Faey to marry a Terran shows me that there’s hope that this unpleasant business on Terra with the rebellion can be settled quickly and peacefully. But fear not, children, what took place here today is between you, me, the Moridons, and Trelle. And I don’t think any of us will feel especially talkative.”

Jason and Jyslin looked at him, and Jason sighed. “That’s a relief to hear, Templar.”

“Please, call me *Je’ada* Mahr,” he said. Jason had to dredge the language that Jyslin had inserted for the definition of that word, for it was one that few people would know. *Je’ada* was an archaic Faey term for *husband*.

“An odd title,” Jason noted. “I don’t know much about Templars, but to have a title that means *husband* in Old Faey is unusual.”

“My son, I’m a married man,” he grinned, holding up his right arm and pushing up his sleeve, showing Jason a golden marriage bracer. “I am married to Trelle, as are all Templars. It’s why no women are Templars to Trelle; only men may serve her, for only men may marry her. And trust me, she does not grant a divorce,” he winked.

Jason had to laugh, but then Jyslin smothered his face in kisses, and he completely forgot what he was talking about.

They let them keep the wedding robes. They had them cleaned and sealed in a composite plastic-like material so they’d never fade or decay, and then had them delivered to the dropship while Jason, Kumi, and Jyslin completed what was left to do at the bank.

Kumi was *unbeleiveably* jealous. She kept glaring at Jyslin any time she wasn’t looking at the young noble, and she’s already told them three times how angry she was that she didn’t get her chance with Jason *before* he got married. When Jason asked why that made any difference at all, she blushed slightly and said that there was always that chance that she could make love to him so well that he’d be her constant bedmate. She lamented that she couldn’t get the revenge she had planned now, and she complained that now Jason had to have Jyslin’s blessing before he screwed girls on the side, so she couldn’t just try to seduce him whenever she had the chance.

That shocked Jason, just a little bit. That was *not* just typical Kumi banter. She had something of a crush on him! It surprised him to find out, but Meya just shrugged and told him in a private sending that she'd been infatuated with him for quite a while. It wasn't love, it wasn't really even a crush, it was just an infatuation and a nearly obsessive need to get "the one that got away." Kumi wasn't in love with Jason, she was in lust *for* Jason. That infatuation with him was why she'd been so willing to help him, and it had also gotten her shot.

Jyslin heard Kumi's complaints, of course, and jokingly told Kumi that if she could get a *willing* Jason between her legs, more power to her. She had Jyslin's permission, so long as it was consensual. She flatly warned Kumi that there would *not* be any revenge, however. Jyslin's blessing made Kumi's mood considerably better, though it didn't sit too well with Jason. He knew that Kumi would just take that as a license to be more outrageous...but then again, he was now in the Faey world, and he saw the writing here. Kumi was infatuated and she was Faey, so that meant that she would chase, and chase hard, until she got her curiosity satisfied. Jyslin was just setting the stage to allow that to happen when she finally *did* lure Jason into bed with her. Kumi would get her curiosity satisfied, she'd calm down, and everyone would be happy.

It was still something Jason had trouble rationalizing. He was *married* now. And he took *her* name! But, in fairness, she also took his name. That Templar had named her *Jyslin Fox Shaddale*. Jason guessed it was some kind of custom for the married couple to take the last names of both spouses and not just one, though he'd have liked it a little better if his given name had been Jason Shaddale Fox instead of Jason Fox Shaddale. His last name wasn't just a source of family pride to him, he also happened to like it. After all, it was certainly easy to spell, if nothing else.

Not that the marriage really changed anything. They couldn't really celebrate it or go on a honeymoon, but that first night back showed that to them, it was just officializing something they already had. They were too busy to honeymoon. If they survived this insanity, then maybe they'd go on honeymoon.

The only thing Jason really regretted was the rings. His work and the fact that he and Jyslin had to wear armor precluded them wearing their rings. It was important to him to wear it, for it was a symbol of their union, but he just couldn't. It was potentially dangerous for him to be wearing a metal ring in the work he did, he might lose his finger. He wanted to wear it around his neck on a chain, but Jyslin told him that if he couldn't wear it on his finger, then she'd rather him not wear it at all. There was too much risk the chain would break and he'd lose his ring. So, they both took off their rings and put them in a little crystal case that Jyslin put on a stand in the bedroom, and promised that when all this was over, they would take those rings out and wear them once again.

It wasn't a secret in the mountain. They found a hastily prepared reception the day after they got back, once Kumi, Meya, and Luke had time to spread the word that they'd found a Templar on Moridon willing to marry them. The others threw them a party that evening, and they'd had a pretty good time. Tim and Symone were a little disappointed that they weren't there, but then again, they understood that they'd had to seize the opportunity when it presented itself. Jason promised to take them to Moridon to be married when they finally decided to do it, though both of them seemed not that concerned about it. They loved each other, and didn't feel the need for any ceremony to tell them that they would be together forever.

Kiaari did do one thing for them. She personally delivered a message to Lorna that Jyslin wrote. In the letter Jyslin told her aunt that she was alive, doing well, and had married, and apologized to her and the family for any difficulties they had because of her, and the potential embarrassment she brought upon them. She told them that she had to follow her heart, and her heart had told her that there was no place she could be happy except standing at his side.

Ian and Molly didn't seem to take much notice in the wedding, because they were too busy being overwhelmed. Molly wasn't there as a fighter, so she wasn't enrolled in the combat training classes. But she was placed in Jason's flight training, because *everyone* in the mountain had to be able to fly.

Ian started daily one hour sessions with Jyslin, as his wife tried to urge the talent inside the boy to express without having to resort to the kinds of things that were done to cause it to come out in the three other humans. Just as it had been in the others, his talent was dormant, sleeping, and would not awaken without being prodded by a telepath. The sessions were instructional for Jyslin as well, as she puzzled out how she could do this without doing what she did with Jason.

But, God, was that boy a gift from the Lord. Not because of his talent, but because his mother, Molly Fletcher, could trace their *entire* family line on both sides of Ian's family tree for over six hundred years. All those photos and scrapbooks were about their family, for Molly's hobby was genealogy, tracing the roots of their family back through history. If they'd not found Ian, they'd never have found Molly and her numerous books about Ian's family line. Because of the maddening issue of a common ancestor between Tim and Temika, they'd decided to see if they could trace Ian's lineage back and maybe find a common ancestor.

It was five days after the marriage, as Molly, Jyslin, Tim, Temika, and Symone sat around a table with all of Molly's books, looking through them as she rather excitedly told them all about the Fletcher family. "And this was Lucas Fletcher, the first Fletcher in America," she told them, pointing at an ancient photo in the book before her. "He came over with his wife, Maggie, in 1886. My first ancestor in America was David Cremeans. This is him here," she pointed on the opposite page. "He was only 18 when he came to America, in 1868, just after the civil war. He married a half-choke woman named Shelly Moonstar Brooks and settled in western Virginia."

"Cremeans. Where is that name from?" Jason asked.

"It's English," she answered. "Anyone with Cremeans as a last name has an English ancestor," she told him. "That's your origins too, Tim," she told him. "McGee is originally a Scottish family name, and part of their family moved to England and Ireland."

"How do you know that?"

"I studied," Molly chuckled. "The McGee family is from northern England and southern Scotland. They were a lowland clan from Scotland originally. So, that means you're one of the English McGees. So, if we're looking for a common ancestor between my Ian, Tim, and Temika, it sounds like England might be the place to look. Especially because Fox is *also* a British family name," she added, looking at Jason. "The Foxes are from England, Scotland, and Ireland."

"Molly, you just became my new best friend," Jason told her with a laugh.

"Hey!" Tim said with mock outrage.

"So, if we're looking at a common ancestor, then we might want to look at England," Molly repeated, patting Tim on the forearm with a smile. "I'm not sure where Temika fits in, but I'd guess that somewhere in her lineage, she has a white ancestor, who's from England too."

"Ah wouldn't be surprised, Molly," Temika laughed. "As you can see from mah face, Ah'm not one hundred percent black. Ah already know that. Mah gramma said that mah family is descended from the southern slaves. Ah don't think it'd be a stretch that one of mah ancestors had a baby from a white father."

"Didn't we put one of those sensors in London?" Tim asked.

"Yeah, but it hasn't returned any hits yet," Jason grunted. "If we could find more telepaths that know their backgrounds as well as Molly does, we might have the answer."

"Actually, dear, I think you already do," Molly told him. "It's clear to me that this common ancestor is English. I think you should concentrate your search for other telepaths on people with English ancestry."

"If that's so, why doesn't the London unit return any responses?" Jason asked.

"Maybe we should go look at it," Jyslin suggested. "It might have broke down. Rann didn't build them with any kind of remote access, we can't check it from here. All it can do is transmit, not receive."

"Hmm, guess we can. We can take care of that with tonight's run. We're gonna start putting out

the mines again, now that Trillane is starting to scale back the kneejerk searches.”

“We’ll have to be careful, because of the time difference,” Jyslin noted.

“I set the sensor, love, I know,” he said. “I just kept going east when I planted them, staying in the night. I flew around the world,” he chuckled.

“I do think that Molly has something,” Symone said, looking at another scrapbook. “Maybe we should plant more sensors around English.”

“England,” Molly corrected.

“Whatever.”

“How, er, how did it go today?” Molly asked Jyslin. “Was there any, progress?”

“Not yet,” she answered. “Don’t worry, dear, I told you I’m not going to hurt him, and I’m also not rooting through his mind. I’m being very discrete. I know how teenagers are, full of secrets. So far, his talent is still dormant. I haven’t quite figured out yet how to urge it to wake up.”

“What did you do to Jason?”

“It was already more or less awake when I realized it was there. As to me bringing it all the way out, that’s something I’m not doing with your son,” she said with a slight smile, giving Molly a direct stare.

Molly blushed. “I think not.”

“That’s how I woke up Tim-Tim too,” Symone giggled.

“Ah *wish* that’s how mine got woke up,” Temika grunted.

“Temika’s experience wasn’t very pleasant,” Jason explained when Molly gave her a curious look. “Her talent was awakened when a mindbender interrogated her.”

Temika shuddered, hugging herself with her arms.

“What is a mindbender, dear? It sounds unpleasant.”

“They are,” Jyslin grunted. “They’re Faey specifically trained for telepathic interrogation and other rather unpleasant things. They’re very strong telepaths, and it takes a certain amount of, ruthlessness, to do the job. They made me take mindbender training, but I managed to get out of it,” she said, closing her eyes. “It’s a very ugly business. I didn’t like doing it. I don’t have the temperament for it. I washed out, and they put me in the Marines.”

“I didn’t know that,” Tim said in surprise.

“I don’t like to talk about it, Tim, for obvious reasons,” she told him, looking at Temika. “I learned what they had to teach, but I *never* like using it. It’s just not me.”

“So, you were strong enough to be one of these mindbenders?” Molly asked.

“Honey, you’re probably looking at the strongest telepath on this planet,” Symone told her simply. “Jys is in the top ten percent. She walked through Trelle’s hair before she was born.”

“That means I was lucky,” Jyslin explained to Molly’s blank look. “And I’m not the strongest. I think that honor goes to Yari, one of the girls from my squad. Her power is *awesome* in talent, well beyond mine, but like me, she just didn’t have the right personality to be a mindbender. Anyway, I’m going to try something different tomorrow. We’ll have to see how it goes.”

“I’ll need a goodly crew for tonight, we have a lot of stuff to deploy. Ground mines, space mines, drones, a new conduit breaker, and the new toy. We’ll swing by England tomorrow and check that sensor after we’re done. I think we’ve gone long enough without any action, and we can’t let them think that the attack on the station was our last action, and we can’t let them think that this buildup is going to dissuade us.”

“I still can’t think about that without laughing,” Tim said. “You should have *seen* it!”

“We did, goof!” Temika told him. “Kate showed us all the video of it.”

“Well, it’s going to cost Trillane *millions* to fix everything, and we can’t let them think that there’s a upward cap on how much it’s going to cost to stay here,” Jason told them. “So, tonight, we start going after Sticks again. And it’s about time for number five. They need something new to think about, and we have to start throwing tons of crap at that Black Ops engineer to keep her from focusing

on any one thing long enough to work up a fix for it.”

“When are we conducting the raid?”

“Right now, never,” Jason grunted. “At least not on this continent. They have way too many soldiers in North America now. It’s almost like they’re expecting it, and they’ve tripled all the Faey soldiers in every installation. Trying to raid any of them would be suicide. If we raid any Trillane positions, they’ll have to be somewhere else. Europe maybe.”

“I’ll have Kate start snooping,” Tim told them. “She can locate some likely targets.”

Jason sneezed, and wiped his nose with a tissue that Molly offered. “Well, let me get down to the shop and help them set it up. This one’s gonna require some careful assembly, or it’ll blow up when we turn it on.”

Jyslin laughed. “I wish I could see the looks on their faces.”

“They won’t be very happy,” Jason said evenly.

The night’s activities were busy, and for Jason, they weren’t very pleasant. His sneeze developed into a sore throat, and after planting the night’s toys and descending towards London to get that done before dawn in Europe, he had a fever.

This was no time to get a cold!

He developed a headache, and had trouble focusing on watching Tim fly, basically trusting that Temika and Jyslin were going to keep him honest. He had six trainees, Meya, and Myra with him that night, and they were flying Vultech-1, for they needed the cargo space. Meya and Myra used their armor as space suits to help deploy the space toys, while the rest of them waited in the pressurized cockpit after they evacuated the air in the cargo bay and opened the doors to space.

Jason love, are you alright? You’re sweating, Jyslin asked in concern as Tim brought them over the English coastline, on a course to take them to London.

I’m not feeling all that well, he answered, leaning back in his seat and putting his hands on his face. Jyslin put her hand on his forehead, and hissed.

You’re burning up! Tim, turn us around, we have to get him back to the mountain! She commanded, looking to him.

No, Jason countermanded. *It won’t take you and Meya long to get to the unit and check it, so let’s do what we came to do, then we can go.*

We’re not fucking around then, Jyslin sent in concern, looking back to Meya. *Let’s get this done and get him the hell out of here.*

In the forty minutes it took the two of them to use their flight systems to descend to the city from the hovering dropship, find the unit, realize that it wasn’t functioning, and then replace it with a new one Rann built that they could access remotely, Jason’s headache became so bad that he had to take a painkiller, which for him was a serious deal. Jason never took medicine unless he had no other choice, for his experience with his father’s cancer showed him that a person could build up a tolerance or resistance to *any* drug, even aspirin, which would make it less effective when it was really needed. So, he only took medicine when he really needed it. Jyslin and Meya did their job very quickly, and were back in the dropship after forty minutes. Jyslin sat right by him and kept checking his forehead with her hand as Tim flew them home, with Meya observing to make sure he did everything right. Jason’s headache got so bad that every time anyone sent it made him wince, so they switched to speaking in the cockpit.

“Watch your speed!” Meya barked. “With all the new sensors up, we can’t go much over 300 *kathra* an hour or they’ll pick up our air wake on sensors!”

“I’m only doing 260,” he protested. “I’m keeping an eye on the speed gauge, woman, so put a sock in it.”

“I think we should push 300,” Jyslin said in concern, putting her hand on Jason’s forehead again. “Are you alright, love?”

"I'll be fine after a night's rest," he told her. "I must have caught the flu, that's all."

"Think we can do 300?" Jyslin asked.

"If we're gonna push it, give over," Meya ordered, taking the controls in her hands. "I'm not letting you fly if we're gonna be doing something risky."

"Alright, switching over," Tim said with an unhappy grunt, flipping the master switch to the copilot's chair.

"Jeez, no reason for all this concern," Jason said with a weak chuckle.

"Yes there is," Jyslin declared. "My *husband* doesn't feel well, so I'm taking him home so he can rest."

Under Meya's steady and practiced hand, they flew back to Colorado at the maximum speed Meya felt safe without their air turbulence giving them away. Jyslin dragged Jason out of the dropship the instant the ramp was down and took him straight to their apartment. There, she helped him take a cool bath, made sure he had a hearty meal, and put him straight to bed. "Now you just rest and get some sleep. If you don't feel any better by morning, I'll have one of the Docs over to check you."

"Wait, where are you going?" Jason asked.

"I want you to sleep, and you'll do that if I'm not here to distract you," she told him. "I'm gonna go work on something in the shop. I'll be in earshot if you need me, I promise," she told him, leaning down and kissing him on the forehead.

"Worrier," he chuckled weakly, for his head really hurt, and he felt tired.

"I'm your *wife*, silly boy. It's my job to worry about you," she told him with a loving grin.

Jason gave her a cross look, then he sighed and closed his eyes, almost immediately falling asleep.

Jyslin patted him on the cheek and went into the shop that was across the hall from the bedroom. She kept both doors open and sat at the bench so she could look over and see him, but to her, Jason seemed to be resting peacefully, asleep and his breathing normal.

But four hours later, as Jyslin was reassembling a piece of equipment she repaired, she realized that something was wrong. The usual light sense of him that was always present in the back of her mind seemed to waver, and then it faded away, and this she noticed immediately. She switched from passively trying to sense him to actively trying to touch him, and found nothing but darkness. She stood up and looked at him, saw that he was resting on his back, his features calm though it looked like he was sweating a little from the sheen on his skin, but that wasn't unusual when someone had a fever. His chest was moving up and down rhythmically, which seemed a good sign to her. He wasn't coughing or sneezing, and his breathing didn't sound labored at all, though he was breathing through his mouth due to a congested nose. But there was no sense of him.

"Jason?" she called uncertainly as she walked towards the door. There was nothing there. It was like he was actively trying to hide from her, using that trick to make his mind invisible. "Jason, don't play like that, it makes me nervous," she told him sternly.

There was nothing.

Her eyes widened when she realized he wasn't playing. Jason wasn't sleeping, he was unconscious!

"Jason!" she cried out in a strangled tone, rushing over to him. His hair was almost dripping wet from sweat, his skin had an oddly pale quality to it, like a pall, and he was burning hot to the touch! *RANN!* she sent with such power that it nearly knocked every telepath in the mountain over, but a power unleashed at a short range, so she wouldn't be heard outside of the mountain. Such was the awesome skill in telepathy that Jyslin commanded. *Rann, come to our apartment! Jason's unconscious!* she sent in a frenzy. *He's really sick! I can't find his mind at all!*

We're on our way right now! Rann answered immediately.

They rushed him to the sickbay quickly, rolling him down on a gurney, and the word spread quickly through the mountain that Jason, their leader, was so sick they had to wheel him into the infirmary. People started gathering near the doors to the infirmary as Rann, Songa, and Yohne worked

as an efficient team while Jyslin looked on, examining him with their hands, with their little handheld devices, and even with their own telepathic abilities. Yohne drew blood and started analyzing it as Rann grilled Jyslin about his symptoms. “He had a fever and a sore throat,” she told him. “And a headache. He told me it was the flu. What’s wrong with him, Doc?” she asked fearfully. “Why is he comatose? That’s not a symptom of the flu!”

“We’ll find out soon enough, Jyslin. Now have a seat and keep quiet, please.”

They gave him a thorough analysis, but found no bacteria or viruses in his system to explain his illness. Jason’s panel was brought in so they could access CivNet, and Songa researched CivNet while Rann and Yohne swept an analyzer over his body, giving them a detailed internal image of his body and its systems at work.

“This makes no sense at all,” Yohne said in grim confusion, shaking her head.

“What? What’s wrong with him?” Jyslin demanded in an urgent hiss.

“His immune system has gone insane, that’s the only way to explain it,” she told him.

“His immune system is attacking his own body,” Rann told her, glancing back at her. She had pulled her chair up to Jason’s bed and was holding his hand. “We can see no reason *why* it would be doing this. There are no microbial agents in him, no nanomachines, no parasites or unusual energy signatures. Songa,”

“I’m not finding anything,” she answered. “We’d better isolate him.”

“Prep him for surgery,” Yohne ordered.

“*Surgery!*” Jyslin gasped. “What are you going to do!?”

“We have to stop his immune system before it destroys him from within,” she told Jyslin sharply.

“We’ll have to install biofilters in him to filter out all of his white blood cells, T-cells, and antibodies to keep them out of his brain. If those cells destroy his brain cells, he’ll suffer permanent brain damage! Now get out of the way and let us do our jobs!”

The procedure took about an hour. Jyslin could only watch on the far side of a security force field that isolated those within from *any* outside contamination, as Yohne performed the procedure. She installed several devices directly into Jason’s carotid artery, aorta, into six different major lymphatic junctions, and into every major vein leading from the large concentrations of bone marrow, which would be carrying the greatest concentration of antibodies. Once they were done, Songa and Rann set up a bed for him surrounded by a sterilizing field and security force field, eradicating *all* biological agents within its perimeter. Yohne pulled her red mask down after coming out of the surgery room, and gave Jyslin a steady look. *The filters are in place, she sent. What they’re going to do is completely filter out his entire immune system, and we’re going to put him on a drug regimen that will suppress his body from producing any antibodies or white blood cells. While he’s under this treatment, it is absolutely imperative that he remains completely sterile. He can’t afford a single virus or bacteria invading him right now, because he has absolutely no defense. He has to stay in that sterile field until we can find out what the hell is going on.*

Was there any, any brain damage? Jyslin sent fearfully.

No, thank Trelle, Yohne sighed in relief. *His immune system was busy attacking the closest cells it could find, mainly his red blood cells. His immune system was even attacking itself,* she sent with a dark frown. *I’ve never seen this before. I’ve never read anything about it before either. Jyslin, that field we have set up is a hard shield,* she warned. *Don’t even get any ideas about going in there. Until we find out what’s wrong and find a way to treat it, he has to stay inside, and he can’t have contact with anyone. Not even you.*

Is he going to wake up?

In time, she answered. *We’re going to keep him unconscious for at least twenty hours, so his brain has time to recover without any distractions. He went comatose because of a lack of oxygen to his brain to sustain cognitive function. It was enough to knock him out, but not enough to do any permanent damage. His brain protected itself by shutting down everything but the autonomic systems.*

Just thank the Trinity you checked him when you did, Jyslin. If he'd gone another thirty minutes, he'd have died.

Died? Jyslin sent with an audible gasp.

Yohne nodded. *This is very serious, honey, she sent grimly. I've never seen anything like this before, and this condition is potentially fatal. But don't you worry. We understand what's going on, even if we can't figure out why yet, and we can prevent any further damage. We have to keep him under close observation, but we can keep him stable. Until we can find the cause of this and cure it, he'll be just fine as long as we're careful and we pay attention to his needs.*

Oh, thank Trelle, Jyslin sent sincerely. Her hands started to tremble, and tears welled up in her eyes. Symone was called in by Songa, and the blond took Jyslin's hand and pulled her into a gentle embrace. Jyslin burst into tears, holding her friend tight, and Symone just held her and let her cry herself out.

Everything else was basically either forgotten or ignored in the wake of Jason's sudden illness. The success of the new, redesigned mines was overlooked, for both types of mines worked perfectly, and every one of them succeeded in hitting a Stick in the first day after they were deployed. The new circuit breaker struck a Faey destroyer, and it was just as effective as the first one had been against the orbital station, shattering conduit through nearly a third of the ship before it disengaged and self destructed.

The new toy was an annoyance, not a weapon, and it was *damn* effective. The device was deployed into the Potomac river, and it drifted downstream at a gentle, lazy pace, updating its location via GPS, until it discovered that it was where it was supposed to be, just off Roosevelt Island in Washington D.C. When it reached its desired location, it surfaced and then deployed a ten meter long antenna into the air. It was noticed by a pair of human joggers on the shore, but before they could phone in the potential hazard, the device fired.

It emitted a harmonic interthreaded tetrayon pulse. That pulse was absolutely harmless to everyone, but the pulse had a specific purpose. The device was the trigger for the hair melter concept that Jason had intended to use against the Marines, just built on a much larger scale. The pulse swept out from the river and went nearly ten miles in every direction.

Nearly every Faey within that radius, and quite a few humans, were affected by the pulse. The pulse caused a chemical reaction with a certain compound in their hair, a compound that came from a fish that Faey liked to eat, a fish not native to Earth. The compound underwent a chemical alteration that turned it into an acidic compound that reacted energetically with the organic makeup of a hair strand, but was harmless to everything else.

All over Washington, every Faey stopped when they felt a strange tingling. Those looking in mirrors saw little wisps of smoke start to emanate from their thick, fine hair, and then there was a strange sizzling sound. Then, to their horror, their hair began to *melt*. Smoking fragments of hair fell from their heads like snow, littering the ground around them, as their hair fell out of their heads in ragged chunks, then continued to sizzle and smolder on the ground as the solid hair was consumed by the acidic compound, leaving a gritty, sticky residue behind, like half-dried glue.

It only took about two minutes. After that two minutes, every single Faey and human who had eaten that particular fish found that every single hair on their entire bodies had melted away, leaving them absolutely hairless.

It was harmless as things went, but the horrified wails and shouts that erupted all over the city made it sound like an atomic bomb had gone off instead. The Faey, a very image-conscious race who valued personal appearance highly, had just had their image and their prides savaged. Hair that many Faey spent hours preening and preparing every morning was now a sticky film on their bathroom floors, or sticking to the pillows and sheets of their beds, or laying out on the streets. Horrified Faey—and quite a few humans—looked at themselves in mirrors and found *all* of it gone. Hair, eyebrows, eyelashes,

everything. They were as hairless as a Deborian mole, light blue skin that was normally covered under a blanket of thick hair glazed over in the detritus of their former manes, looking like a festering scabrous wound. The residue continued to react with the dead skin cells on the outer layer of the skin, continuing to smolder slightly, and when the film was hastily cleaned off, it displayed a shining bald head, shimmering with the removal of the dull dead skin cells and shining in the light like a polished globe.

Horror!

In the river, the device reeled in its antenna and slipped back under the water. About fifteen seconds later, a column of water and a loud *BOOM* heralded the device's last act, as it self-destructed.

The night's successes meant little to the rebels, however, for they were all taking turns visiting the infirmary over the next day to see if there was any change. Jason was kept in a medically-induced comatose state for the entire day and half the night, doing to him what they had done to Kumi, to give his brain a chance to recover, and then he was allowed to pass into a natural sleep. He slept on his own for nearly six more hours, and then the EEG readings from the sensors they'd placed on him before putting him in the sterilized field showed brain activity common in a sleeping mind preparing to wake.

Jason had felt better. He felt very weak, exhausted, he was hungry and thirsty, and it was hard to focus his mind on any single thought, like he was trying to think with a wool blanket put over his brain. He opened his eyes and found himself staring up into a soft white light hanging over the bed, a light that wasn't in his room. He pieced together quickly that he must have gotten sick enough for Jyslin to take him to the infirmary, and that he'd been sick enough not to know it until now.

"Jyslin?" he whispered.

She's on her way, came a sent response, from Yohne. Jason struggled to sit up and found he couldn't, so he consigned himself to scooting just a bit up so his head wasn't flat, and then looking around. He was in a small room, one of the rooms in the infirmary, and a shimmering energy field completely encapsulated his bed. It was barely noticable, allowing him to see through it easily, but it was clear that it was there. *She went down to get something to eat. I had to throw her out.*

What happened?

You nearly died, that's what happened, she answered evenly. *We still don't entirely understand what's wrong, but we have you stable, and you should be until we find out what's wrong, and then find a cure for it. It's just going to require a few precautions, that's all.*

That's not much of an explanation.

The details are that you fell comatose while sleeping, and Jyslin rushed you down here. We realized that your immune system has gone completely haywire, and your immune system was attacking your own body. That's why you collapsed. Your antibodies and white blood cells were attacking your own cells, and they destroyed enough red blood cells trying to reach your brain to send you into a coma. We couldn't find a cause, but we can treat that symptom, Jason. We have you in an absolutely sterile environment, and we've dealt with your immune system by more or less removing it from you for now. We have you on a drug regimen that's suppressing your immune system, and we had to surgically implant some filters to remove the cells that are made despite that treatment. Until we can determine what happened and treat it, you have to stay in there.

I guess I can live with that. Think I can get something to eat?

No, you can't, she told him sternly. *You'll be on an IV until we can cure this condition. No food, no water. I can give you something to make the hunger go away, but I can't let you eat anything. I'm sorry.*

Great, he growled.

Jyslin rushed into the main infirmary room, and her eyes widened when she saw him awake. *Jason! Oh, Jason, are you feeling alright? Are you okay?*

Yohne was filling me in on what happened to me, he told her. *I feel weak, and it's a little hard to*

think right now, but I'm alright outside of that.

I'm so glad, she sent, a tear forming in her eye. I was so worried. I almost lost you, my love! Really?

Really, Yohne nodded. Jyslin got you down here in time, but if you'd have gone untreated, your immune system would have killed you from the inside.

Huh, Jason sent in surprise. I didn't feel that bad before I went to sleep.

Sometimes these things can come out of nowhere, Jason, Yohne told him.

Any idea of what's wrong with me yet?

Nothing concrete. Songa is researching right now. This condition is completely new to us, so they're going through the archives at the Faey Medical Service and the Terran's medical association database to see if there's any historical information about this. It's really bizarre, Jason. There's no foreign agent causing it. It's like your immune system got a mind of its own and decided to try to kill you. Rann's doing a detailed DNA and molecular-genetic analysis of your immune cells, looking for anything we missed with our initial scans.

I found it! Rann sent jubilantly. I found the agent!

Jason couldn't see, but he and Jyslin joined their minds enough so he could literally look through her eyes, as the three doctors and Jyslin looked at the holographic image Rann brought up, of a single white blood cell. The image plunged into the cell, through the cytoplasm, and into the nucleus. It then zoomed in to the chromosomes and DNA. It's right here, he said, pointing at the end of the DNA string. It's a complex amino molecule that has attached to Jason's DNA, causing the cell to malfunction. It can't tell cells from invaders, so it's attacking everything. I scanned the rest of his blood sample, and that amino string is all over his body. What's worse, the string is self-replicating faster than we could hope to clear it out of him. It's combining water out of his blood with several types of common hormones in his blood to form the molecule, creating a long chain which then breaks up, almost like a virus. We didn't find it before because this is an agent built from his own DNA, so it slipped through our scans. He looked at Yohne. This is not natural. Look at the agent's edge, and compare it to this. Jason saw through Jyslin's eyes an close-up of two molecule chains, highlighting several key atoms. It matches perfectly to the end of Jason's helix. This agent just screams bio-engineering.

I'm inclined to agree, Yohne nodded. What's our best course of action?

Research, Rann answered. This is clearly the work of a geneticist. We'd better make damn sure we know what we're doing when we try to reverse this. Until then, we keep Jason stable and in his containment.

I'd have to agree. We can't rush into a fix, this agent isn't natural. There's no telling how it will react to any treatment, and we'd better be sure of it.

Well, it looks like Trillane decided to do something about you, Jason, Rann sent grimly. This agent is literally tailor made to work only on you. This agent will only attach to your DNA. It would have no effect on any of the rest of us. I bet they pulled your DNA profile from your school exam records and had a geneticist build this to kill you. Instead of trying to burn you out, they tried to kill you with this. I'll bet we'll find this agent saturating the air all over North America.

I'm not surprised, Jason sent in reply. Yohne, whatever it was you said you could do to not make me hungry, can you like do it? I'm starving here.

It's a medicine that suppresses your hunger reflex, and I'll make some up right now, she sent with an audible chuckle, which Jason heard through Jyslin's ears.

*Jason's hunger eased with the introduction of the medicine through the tube attached to his arm, fed through the security field and triple-screened to make sure it was sterile. He really didn't have much to do, so he made the doctors sterilize a panel for him and send it in, so he could at least have something to do. Songa had his panel, so he was forced to link it to his own in order to get out onto Civnet, using it as a host. He checked the London sensor, and to his surprised delight, there were *four* pictures there.*

Four! Two men, a woman, and what looked like a teenage girl.

If he weren't in here, he'd kiss Molly Fletcher! She was *right*!

It was ancestry! All the telepaths had an *English* ancestor! And from the looks of it, given three known telepaths were Americans with established roots in America, that ancestor had to be centuries back in time. Well, ancestors. According to the docs, Jason's lineage was different from Tim's, so that meant that there had to be more than one initial ancestor that had the telepathic footprint.

But, were both of them from England? Jason could very well have picked up *his* telepathic traits from his French ancestors, from his mother's side of the family. But what was clear here was the simple fact that Tim and Temika's common ancestor, and Ian's, and maybe even Jason's, originated from somewhere in England. And, given that there was a much better chance of finding descendents of that ancestor in England itself, which was a much smaller country, they'd gotten immediate results once they fixed the sensor and got it going.

So, the question here was, was that the answer to the question? Miaari told him that he had to know the *why* of why humans had telepathy. He now had an answer. Outside of Jason, it was a shared ancestor from England, and it could very well be Jason's case as well. This ancestor was pretty far back in their family lines, hundreds of years.

Jason pondered on it for a while as he surfed several tech message boards, looking for info, and also checking INN to see if there was any news of the rebellion there. The hair melter certainly made the headlines, because they had no idea how he'd pulled it off, but INN approached the story from a humorous point of view rather than a major incident. Several bald Faey were interviewed for the piece, one of which declared that it was the new "in" look for Faey who lived in Washington.

Songa finished her research, and brought only one piece of information that looked to be of any use at all...but it was a piece of information that disturbed Jason, disturbed him very, very much.

There was an old, *old* case of a Faey noble dying from a bio-engineered agent after visiting Moridon. It was noted in the archive that it was clearly an assassination, but the fact that the assassin had managed to penetrate Moridon security to deliver the agent made it big enough to remain in the archives after all this time. It was from over a thousand years ago, and it was one of the cases that had led to the Faey ban on biogenetic weapons.

What troubled Jason, and the doctors, was the fact that the agent that killed Maeda Karinne was *also* a complex molecule that attached to the DNA of her immune cells, and caused her immune system to attack her own body and kill her.

Exactly what they'd done to Jason.

But why? Why they would reach back so far and dust off a thousand year old illegal weapon and modify it to attack him? And after doing that, how did they know where he'd be to deliver it, and how did they get past the famous Moridon security to deliver it? If they knew where he was, why didn't they simply attack his dropship as they came back from Moridon?

It just made no sense.

It was, however, just what they needed. There was some information in that old archive about how they tried to treat her, and it was enough for the doctors to start work on a cure for his condition. They were going to pick up on where those doctors a thousand years ago left off, and try to create a counter-agent that would cause this agent to break up. Once all the molecules were destroyed, it wouldn't self-replicate, and Jason's system would be purified.

But Jason just couldn't help but keep coming back to it, and coming back to it, and coming back to it. There was just so much about this that made no sense that he couldn't leave it be. He thought about it almost all the time. He even dreamed about it at night. Day after day went by, then a week, then two weeks, as Yohne, Songa, and Rann worked on finding a counter, and Jason just couldn't get this out of his head. It was maddening! What was he missing here? There was something important here, something very important! He even typed it all out in a file and read over it and over it, trying to see what he was missing, trying to find that missing piece of the puzzle.

Over those days, he certainly had enough people distracting him. Jyslin was there almost every waking hour, and they talked all the time. Tim visited both to supply him with information on what was going on outside and just to see him and spend time with him. Symone was a frequent visitor, as was Kumi, and everyone in the resistance tried to stop by at least once a day to say hi and make him feel better about being stuck inside his little bubble, as Shelly called it. Every time he tried to focus on what he was missing, then someone would come in and distract him or make him lose his train of thought.

There were other things going on as well. The new mines were effective, so they were sending at least one of each kind out a night. Every day, at least two more Sticks came down, and so far that bitch Myleena hadn't come up with a counter. They were also releasing a gun drone every few days, when they got them built and ready, but had not built any new rings or other exotic devices. Those usually required Jason to build the boards, for that was something that most of the others couldn't do. They hadn't been trained for moleculartronic boardwork, and the boards in those devices weren't stock boards they could buy from someone else, like the boards in the mines and such were. Jason couldn't do that in the bubble, so they'd been working only with gun drones and mines since Jason had gotten sick. The mines were very effective, but the drones were less so. With all the fighter coverage in space, a gun drone was usually intercepted and attacked within 45 seconds of activation. That gave them enough time to fire on one or two Sticks, but not enough time to wreak the kind of havoc the first one had managed. They still brought some of the work up to him, sending data or pictures to the panel he had inside or talking with him about other issues they were having in the shop, and they managed to keep disrupting his train of thought on the matter at hand.

It stayed elusively out of reach until Kiaari finally returned to the mountain...and she didn't come alone. Nor did she come in her usual manner. It shocked the hell out of Jason, waking up in the middle of the night and seeing two pairs of luminous eyes looming over him.

It took him a moment to realize that one of them was Kiaari, in her *natural* form, her lupine form. The other form was a Kimdori, but a Kimdori he had never seen before. It was massive, way bigger than Kiaari, with burnished silvery fur, and it was a male. Somehow, the two of them had infiltrated his sterilizing field, and were inside with him.

"Calmly," the male told him, putting a monstrous clawed hand on his chest. "I am Kereth, Elder of the clan, and keeper of the knowledge of welfare and medicine to serve the clan's needs. Miaari sent me to bring to you the cure to your disease."

"Cure?" Jason gasped. "You know how to cure me?"

"Would I be here if I could not?" he asked with maddening ease, giving him an amused look. "We are familiar with the research your Faey doctors are undertaking, but where they still search for the answer, we have already discovered it. We have shared this knowledge with them as they slept. They will awaken believing they have had a revelation, and will know what to do. We wished to see you and let you know this, and I also wished to meet you. You will be out of this containment field soon, Jason Fox. So be calm and have patience."

"Wait a minute," Jason said. "How did you know about this? That research they're doing is from a thousand years ago!"

"I remember it like it was yesterday," he said with an eerie smile.

"No way!" Jason said in disbelief. "You're a *thousand* years old?"

"A little over fifteen hundred," he said with that same smile. "I told you, human, I am an *elder* in my clan. That title is no empty word among my people. I was alive when news of Maeda Karinne's unusual death became known, and Kimdori being Kimdori, we investigated the matter. That is how the memory of that research came to be with us. I have kept it for the clan for a thousand years."

"Wow," Jason breathed. "I had no idea you lived so long." He looked at Kiaari speculatively.

She laughed. "I'm only 52," she told him with a grin. "I'm just a baby compared to my elders, Jason. I won't even be taken seriously by them until I'm at least two hundred."

"If then," Kereth mused, which made Kiaari give him a quick, unfriendly look. He then moved his huge hand up to Jason's neck, and Jason felt that moment of *expansion*, where Kereth's ability joined their minds into a single contiguous consciousness, though Jason felt very little from Kereth. "I see, child," Kereth chuckled. "But you haven't given him what you were told to give him."

"The exomech was destroyed, elder," she explained. "The need for it is gone."

"Still, you were commanded to share that knowledge, and it has not been done."

She bowed her head. "I'll see to it immediately, elder," she said contritely.

"Share with him the knowledge of Faey fighters as well," he ordered. "He might have use of that skill."

"As you see fit, elder," she assured him.

"Well. It was definitely worth the travel to meet you, Jason Fox. May the Denmother seed your path with good favor."

With the huge hand still on his neck, Jason suddenly felt the overwhelming desire to sleep. Before he could even think about why, he spiralled down into slumber.

When Jason woke up, he knew that Kiaari had done her elder's bidding, for it was there.

All the controls, all the indicators, they were all in there, like he was born knowing how it all worked. He laid there and thought it through in his head, going step by step through the procedures to start and operate an exomech, and found that he knew exactly where every control was, know what every display meant, and could operate every system in the unit. And when he closed his eyes, he could *see* the entire layout of a Faey Dragonfly fighter, and a Starhawk, and a Lancer, and even the control layout of the new Raptor. Though the flight controls were the same as a skimmer, the other systems weren't, and he knew how those worked as well.

Kiaari. He could kiss her. Thanks to her, he could operate an exomech, and he could fly any mainstream Faey fighter in production. He wouldn't be a very good fighter pilot, but he *could* fly the ships.

He saw they were already at work. All three doctors were hunched over his panel, sending in excitement as they went over a "brilliant idea" that Yohne had had the night before.

So, given he had little to do before those three managed to figure it all out, he went back to the problem. And the problem was, what was he missing here? He went over the list he'd compiled in his moment of peace before Jyslin got there. She always knew when he was awake, and hurried to him as soon as she was aware of it. He looked at the two comparisons. Jason contracted this condition by tampering by Trillane, and they had little direct information about exactly where he'd picked it up. Rann's idea that it was released into the atmosphere actually didn't wash, for there was no trace of it anywhere. The agent attacked him by attaching to his DNA and causing his immune system to go haywire.

Okay.

According to the records, Maeda Karinne contracted the same condition after a visit to Moridon, where an assassin had managed to poison her. The agent used against her attached to her DNA, and caused her immune system to go haywire, just like Jason.

So. It just didn't make sense. If Trillane knew where he was going to be to slip him this agent, they would of just shown up with a military force and killed him, then they'd have had a body to show Grand Duchess Trillane. The way they did it meant that they'd have no way to prove he was dead. And why *this*? Why dredge up a thousand year old biological warfare agent and alter it to try to kill him with it?

Well, one way they could have done it was Washington. They did—

No, no, he was sick *before* he went to Washington, and the docs told him that he couldn't have been infected for any longer than six days before he got sick enough to notice. The replication pattern of the agent was a mathematical certainty, and six days was the absolute maximum time if only *one* molecule

entered his body. So, it had to be in that six day window before he got sick. He looked back over his work at that time, and saw that he'd done some mine runs, and he'd been to Lincoln, and that was basically it. He'd not been anywhere where the Faey would have the opportunity to infect him.

Moridon. He'd been to Moridon.

Still, that was also an improbability bordering on impossibility. Again, if the Faey knew he was going to Moridon, they could have just attacked the dropship either on the way there or on the way back. And if they *did* want to infect him, they'd have to go through that fearsome Moridon security.

Damn it, damn it, damn it! There were too many holes and not enough pegs here! Too many questions, and no matter what hypothesis he pondered, it left more questions than answers, and always created a situation that was either impossible or impractical. The Faey weren't dumb, and they weren't silly. If they did this, they had to have a viable reason and proper opportunity...and Jason could not think of any scenario that fit both of those conditions.

Jason! We think we have an answer! Yohne sent excitedly. Give us about an hour, and we might have a treatment we can test! If we're lucky, you'll be out of there by suppertime!

That's great! Jason sent in reply. I'd better have a steak dinner waiting for me when I get out of here.

Ah can take care of that, sugah, Temika sent as she came in. Ah'll let everyone know—

Not yet, Yohne warned. We just have a theory. Let us do some tests and see if it's viable.

Alright. Jason, Jyslin asked me to tell you when you woke up that she's takin' a nap, and she'll be in to sit with you as soon as you wake up. Ah'm supposed to go wake her.

Don't. She needs to rest, he said. If we're lucky, she'll wake up and find me out of this stupid damn bubble.

I doubt that, Yohne warned. If this treatment works, we'll still have to remove those filters. So you're looking at about two hours in the surgical theater.

You had to remind me.

I'm a doctor. It's what I do, she sent back impishly. What have you been doing in there on that panel, by the way? I've been meaning to ask.

I'm trying to understand why this happened, he answered.

Well, it's pretty simple, Jason. They tried to kill you.

Yes, but how they did it really doesn't make any sense, Yohne. If they knew where I was going to be, why try to kill me like this? Why not just bring soldiers and attack me? We already know they didn't just release it into the air, we can't find any trace of it. That means someone has to get close enough to me to infect me, but we go back to that first question. If they knew where I was, and could get that close, why resurrect a thousand year old illegal bioweapon, alter it to affect me, and then infect me with it? If they knew where I was, why bother? The only place I've been where I've been out of the dropship has been Nebraska and Moridon, and we know they don't know about Nebraska. So, that leaves only Moridon. And if they poisoned me on Moridon, how did they get past Moridon security? And why bother? Why not just attack my dropship en route? It would have been much easier, and they'd have my body to prove to Grand Duchess Trillane that I'm dead. Infecting me with this agent when it took so long to affect me makes absolutely no sense given whoever tries to collect the bounty on my head has to prove that I'm dead.

My. He has a point, Rann sent thoughtfully. Put that way, well, the only option that seems viable is that someone here tried to kill him. And of us all, only the three of us would have that kind of ability.

Unless we have a Kimdori in the mountain, Songa sent soberly. A Kimdori could do it.

No, it wasn't a Kimdori, Jason told them.

And how are you so sure about that?

Because, we get back to the body issue, he sent, quickly coming up with an excuse as to how he'd know. If someone's trying to kill me for the bounty, they need my body. Kill me in this mountain, and you'd never get it out.

Trillane might not care about getting your body, Jason, Songa told him. If they sent a Kimdori— Songa, if the Kimdori found the mountain and found this many people here, would he poison me and then just leave, or would he tell Trillane about all these rebels, which would bring an attack on us? Well, I don't see an attack. So, either this Kimdori never told Trillane about the rebels, which would be kinda stupid, or it wasn't a Kimdori.

True, she acceded.

Well, I read in one of your human books somewhere this little blurb, and it stuck with me, Rann sent. "When confronted with a mystery, if one eliminates all that is not possible, then whatever is left, no matter how improbable, is the truth."

That's Sherlock Holmes, Rann, Temika told him. And that ain't how the saying goes.

I think it's close enough. Let's look at it from that perspective, Jason. Rule out what's impossible, and look at what's left over. What's left has to be the truth.

But like everything gets ruled out, Rann. That's what makes it so damn confusing.

Really? The one thing I see that can't be ruled out is Moridon. You can't prove that you were not infected there. In fact, it seems the most probable place, given that you have been in a controlled location. That's the only place you've gone that wasn't your home territory, so it stands to reason that if there's no Kimdori in the mountain that did it, then that has to be where it happened.

Alright, but that's kinda out there, Rann, because it makes no sense for them to poison me on Moridon when they could just send fighters to intercept us on the way there or on the way back. We went through Draconis to get to Moridon, for Pete's sake. That's right through the jaws of the lion.

That's just the point, Jason. There are so many reasons why it's improbable that Trillane tried to infect you on Moridon that it rules it out.

But then—

Ah, but Jason, who said that it was Trillane that did it? That was your assumption.

But they're the only ones trying to kill me. You think this attack was Imperial?

It's possible, but the reasons Trillane wouldn't have done it are the same reasons the Imperial forces wouldn't. Why go through all that work to engineer this compound to infect you when they could just send fighters to capture your dropship? I agree with you there. So, if Trillane didn't do it, and the Imperium didn't do it, then what's left?

But that's fuckin' impossible. Nobody else even cares about what we're doing here, Rann. What would some other government gain from killing me off? I mean, me being here stirring up shit with Trillane would only help some rival government, wouldn't it?

But it's what is left. And since it's what's left, it must be the truth. I don't really think the Faey tried to kill you, Jason. Someone else did.

Alright, how did they acquire a thousand year old biological weapon that was engineered by the Faey?

Ah, but you assume again. Who said the Faey made it? I'm sure that the noble that died had enemies outside the Imperium, Jason. All of them do.

But the information you showed me said that this Karinne woman was killed by an assassin probably hired by some enemy of her house!

Jason, the Karinnes had no enemies within the Imperium until the civil war, Songa told him. They were totally neutral. It was that neutrality that caused their destruction. They refused to take sides, and as a result, both sides attacked and destroyed them. That's probably why the assassination got so much attention, because who would do it if the Karinnes had no issues with any other house?

Alright, but we're back to this point. Why go through the trouble of altering it so it would infect me? Surely they could have used some other, more modern poison, something not specifically banned and illegal, and something just as effective that they wouldn't have to pay some geneticist to have produced.

Hmm. That does seem to be the question, Rann sent bemusedly. Maybe they were aiming for

complete untraceability.

That ain't even a word, Rann, Temika accused.

I guess it's not, but you get my meaning, he sent with an audible chuckle.

Well, it wasn't all that untraceable, if you three could find it, Jason protested.

You have a point there.

There's something else going on here, Jason sent with an adamant tilt to his thought. Something is missing here, some information that would make all of this make sense.

Alright, Jason, it's time for another one of those wild leaps, Rann sent. Since it seems totally illogical that someone would go through the time and effort of altering this agent to infect you, then let's assume for a moment that nobody did. If we remove that piece of information, then what do we have left? We have this dead noble visiting Moridon, and then she got sick and died. Then we have you going to Moridon, and you get sick and nearly die. The only point of commonality here is Moridon, which goes back to my original statement.

Rann, that's crazy. If nobody altered the agent, then how did it infect me? You told me yourself that it was tailor made to infect me.

It's crazy, yes. But it's what's left. And what's left must be the truth.

That's too crazy, Rann. That suggests that my DNA is so much a match with a thousand-year old dead Faey that the agent couldn't tell the difference. The only way that could happen is if I was—

Related.

No fucking way, Jason sent defiantly.

It does seem outlandish, but can you offer any other explanation? Rann pressed. The only way this all makes sense is if we assume that you and this dead woman have a matching end sequence in your DNA, because that's where the agent attaches. Since it's illogical to believe that they altered the agent to affect you, and it's also illogical that they would bother given they would have to get close to you to infect you, then the only rational explanation I can see here is that this wasn't an attack. And since this couldn't be an attack, that means that it had to be an accident. And the only way this could be an accident is if you and this Maeda Karinne had matching end pair sequences in your DNA helixes. The one thing that you and her have in common is a visit to Moridon. So, that's where it had to happen. She goes to Moridon a thousand years ago, gets infected, and she dies before they find a cure. A thousand years later, you go to Moridon, you get infected, but this time medical technology is advanced enough to keep you alive until we can find a cure.

But that's totally impossible, Rann! Jason protested. I'd have to be related to this woman for it to work, and if you didn't notice, I don't have the right skin color for that!

Actually, I think it is possible, Rann sent calmly. I've been pondering your talent for a while. Given that it seems that the telepathic humans can trace their lineage back to a specific place, and it seems to be a long time ago, then the idea that you are related to the Faey makes sense to me. It explains the genetic similarities between the human telepaths and the Faey, who are much more similar to us than other humans, and the long time explains why you appear to be completely human. Over time, and the successive matings with pureblood humans, the Faey appearance has been bred out of you, but the DNA sequences dealing with telepathy have remained intact, since there is nothing in the human DNA that would interfere with it. It has passed true from parent to child, over the generations. And this illness of yours only offers another piece of confirming circumstantial evidence that supports that hypothesis. Jason gets infected by an engineered bioweapon that was specifically designed to go after a particular Faey family group, and no one can offer any solid evidence to the effect that this agent was altered to affect him. It explains why you have talent. It explains more questions than it creates. I'll put my hair on the table right now and bet all of you that when you finally find this alpha ancestor of Tim and Temika's, that it's a Faey. And I'll bet that Jason's telepathic ancestor is a Faey from a different family, which would explain the differences between him and Tim and Temika. Who wants to take that bet?

Rann, that's outlandish, Yohne sent.

Outlandish, but I think it's right, he replied. Think about it, Yohne. If a Faey scouting party or scientific mission came to Terra a long time ago and left behind pregnant human women, products of unions between Faey males and human women, then that explains everything. Humans and Faey are genetically compatible, if you don't recall. We can produce children. The human telepaths can trace their lineage back to England, and it had to be a long time ago. It makes sense, since the gulf between the telepathic humans and non-telepathic humans is so wide when it comes to similarity with Faey DNA. Telepathic humans are much more similar to us, and if they were actually related to us, then that explains everything.

But the hole there is Jason's infection. This agent only attacked a member of the house of Karinne, Yohne responded. And they were all killed a thousand years ago..

Actually, Songa sent. It was documented to the last member of those they could reach. The Karinnes were a house of scientists, and they always had members out on scientific missions. When word reached the expeditions of the war and the attack on Karinne, most of those expeditions snuck back to the Imperium and went into hiding. There was quite a bit of literature about it. There are some who think that some of the Karinnes escaped and lived out their lives pretending to be commoners, because some of them were never found. And it's not like the Karinne bloodline is dead. There were Karinnes who married into other noble houses and became part of the house they married into.

How do you know that, Songa? Jason asked.

My minor in medical school was classical Faey literature, and that requires some knowledge of history, she sent in reply.

So, I'll also put a bet on the table right now that Jason is a direct descendent of Maeda Karinne. If he was, that would explain why his end sequence matches hers. She passed it down to him through the generations.

Rann, that's utterly impossible, Jason protested.

I say it's not. Now we try to prove each other wrong.

Let's pick this up later. Right now, we're trying to get Jason out of that bubble, Yohne sent sharply, and we're playing with Demir's sword when we should be working.

Well, it gives us all something to think about for a while, Rann sent with amusement.

It certainly did. Though Rann hadn't presented it very methodically, if one assumed that Jason and Maeda Karinne were indeed related, then it did explain nearly all of the gaps in logic in this attack on him. Simply put, the fact that it was an attack itself was the most illogical part of the whole thing. If it was truly an attack, there were so many parts of it that just didn't make any sense that made it implausible. It actually made more sense if it was an *accident*. This compound didn't decompose over time; in fact, it actively reproduced itself. If it had been on Moridon, it would have lasted for the time between this Karinne woman's infection and Jason's. Maeda Karinne might have been the target of the original attack, but if he was related to her, then it would have affected him as well because of the way they designed it to attack her. It would go after anyone with the same sequence in their DNA, giving it that perfect fit to attach itself.

But still...the explanation itself was implausible to the point of being impossible. Though it did fill in the holes if one assumed it was true, the fact remained that it seemed utterly laughable that Jason was related to a long dead Faey noble, and that the other telepaths were descended from the Faey. But, this was something they could prove or disprove. Once they got more information, could trace back the lineage of the telepaths and find a solid lead on the true alpha ancestor, then they'd know. But he doubted it. He was sure that *someone* would notice it if the Faey appeared on Earth. There'd be mention of it in history somewhere, and there wasn't. If nothing else, it'd show up as some kind of demonic invasion in the church histories, since back then, anyone that wasn't human would be seen as a creature of evil.

It still didn't seem plausible.

It took them about a day to get him out of the bubble. Four hours was taken to research Yohne's idea, and then three more hours to do tests. Then, once the tests came out promising, they produced a vaccine and tested it on a blood sample. The vaccine was really just a self-replicating anti-agent that combined with the agent to reform into the same hormone the agent used to duplicate itself, rendering it harmless. It also combined with the agent already attached to DNA, breaking it off and reforming it into a hormone, making it harmless. Once they did blood tests and found that the agent had been eradicated, they removed infected white blood cells in the filters, exposed them to the vaccine, and checked them for signs of infection.

They was clean.

At that point, they were going to administer the vaccine directly to him, but they had to take some precautions first. They donned clean suits and entered the bubble, and hooked him up to a blood filtration unit, that would filter out the hormone from his blood as the vaccine did its work, reducing it to normal levels inside him. They also hooked him up to a veritable onslaught of sensors and machines to monitor him during the administration of the vaccine. Once they were done, they administered the vaccine via IV.

They told him it would take about six hours for the vaccine to do its work, and during that time they monitored him like a hawk, all three of them glued to readouts and meters that watched his body functions, watching for any signs of unforeseen side effects, paying special attention to the possible buildup of hormone in his blood or tissue. But there were none. Jason didn't really even feel anything, either. If the immunization was working, he couldn't tell.

After six hours, they did several blood tests, took three tissue samples from his foot, hand, and from his neck, and again checked the white blood cells in the filters.

Everything was clean. The agent was neutralized, and his hormone levels were normal. And what was more, the anti-agent would remain in his body, acting as a permanent immunization against another attack by that agent.

Jyslin was the first one there when they brought the bubble down. She rushed in and embraced him tightly, then she laughed and told him he needed a bath in the *worst* way. He shot back that she should have expected it, since he'd been in there for three weeks.

But there was no time for reunions, or even a bath. The doctors wheeled him straight into the operating theater, and then he underwent a three hour operation as they removed all the filters they'd installed to protect him from his own immune system. Once they were done, they cleaned him up while he was still sedated, put him in a bed, and let him sleep it off, *outside* the bubble.

Jason was cured.

It was a wonderful change from before to wake up and see Jyslin's face directly over him, not on the far side of a force field. She smiled radiantly and put her hands on his face, triggering an intense communion between them, and she leaned down and kissed him tenderly. *Good morning*, she sent with a grin. *Welcome to the outside. How do you feel?*

A little groggy from that anesthetic, but otherwise fine, he answered. *How long was I out? What time is it?*

Morning, a little after seven, she answered. *Everyone, Jason is awake, and he's just fine!* Jyslin sent in a way that would allow the non-telepathic humans to hear her. *Now, I'm going to take you home, and I'm going to give you a home-cooked breakfast*, she winked. *I've already been warned that I can't feed you too much. It might make you sick. So, we'll go slow at first, and then once your body gets used to it, we'll get you a proper meal.*

Sounds good to me.

Jason was basically accosted all the way home, as everyone rushed from whatever they were doing and saw him, shook his hand, welcomed him back, and asked if he was feeling well. He took it well

enough, but the medicine they'd been giving him to curb his hunger was fading fast, and he was *starving*, so his greetings became a little shorter as time went by, until he finally asked everyone to just clear the way and let him go eat.

When he got home, Jyslin pampered him outrageously. She put him in a comfy chair in front of a TV that they'd hooked up so Jason could watch anything he wanted, his panel was brought back from the lab and set on a stand beside him, then Jyslin spread a blanket over his lap and pulled a TV tray up to him, and then she put a plate of scrambled eggs, a slice of rye toast, and a piece of a ham steak in front of him, in very small portions. There was also a glass of what looked like orange juice, and a small glass of milk. *Eat it slowly*, she warned. *Yohne already explained how I have to do this. You have to eat little by little to give your system time to adjust after being empty for so long. She also told me it's imperative that you drink both the juice and the milk. When you finish what's here, we wait a little while, then I'll make you something else. So, eat.*

That was a command he had no problems following. It was hard to eat slowly when he was so ravenous, but on the other hand, the odd feeling in his stomach when the first mouthful hit it told him that he'd damn well better eat slowly, or he'd throw up. He worked his way through the meal as slowly as he could make himself eat, drank the juice and the milk, then leaned back and watched INN while his body wrapped itself around the task of dealing with the first food to hit his belly in nearly a month. As always, he was looking for any coverage of the Terran rebellion on INN. Usually, they ignored the rebellion unless he'd just executed a large-scale or brazen attack. His attack on Orbital One *definitely* made the headlines, and the various things he'd done to torment the Baron of North America had also been pretty high up in the news cycle.

The Imperium had a very odd position on Jason and his rebellion. Of course, he was listed as a terrorist and an enemy of the peace, but instead of villifying him the way they did after the explosion that destroyed Chesapeake, they treated him like some kind of enigmatic anti-hero. He was a bad guy, oh yes, a wanted criminal that would be attacked on sight. But, INN also portrayed him in an eerily *romanticized* fashion, like some kind of dashing buccaneer, a lovable rogue that you loved to hate. It had to be because of the Faey love of games and jokes. Had Jason simply been going out there and blowing things up and killing people, they'd probably be portraying him as a monster that ate the raw livers of babies. But some of the things he'd done showed more than just a need to destroy. His various attacks on Washington displayed a warped sense of humor, and that was something that the Faey could appreciate...at least the ones who hadn't been subjected to those attacks could. It was hard to fathom, though. Though Faey and humans looked alike and had some similar traits, they *were* an alien species with a very different culture, and some parts of it just made little sense to him.

That could be it, though. He wasn't just a faceless enemy, he was an enemy that had displayed traits of *personality*. And another thing was his declaration that he was only after Trillane. The rest of the Imperium could sit back and enjoy the show, watch Trillane fight an ever-more-futile battle against Jason Fox, watch them get flustered, watch them squirm while they were repeatedly confounded by what seemed to be a single human and his armada of clever little toys. The other noble houses would probably think less of Trillane had Jason also not managed to confound and outsmart a crack division of Black Ops that had been sent there to stop him. That was common knowledge in the Imperium now, and Jason had even dug up a rather cheeky interview that some reporter had done with Myleena Merrane, about how she was going to go down to Terra and nab the elusive Jason Fox. Then there was another interview after Orbital One, where Myleena wasn't even half as amused. Her pushing the camera out of her face as she stormed down a passageway told everyone just how angry she was.

That single act had changed quite a bit, changed the very nature of this dangerous game. The success of the marbles had reached too far, had made it seem less like an upstart Terran annoying Trillane for the amusement of the Imperium, and had turned him into a real enemy, one that could do real damage. He still had that roguish appeal to the rest of the Imperium, but the Imperial government was going to take him seriously now. He might have some rather dark popularity with the common

population of the Imperium as a buccaneer with a strange sense of humor and the willingness to show it off, but to Trillane and those in the Imperium trying to stop him, he wasn't funny anymore. Half the reason for the scaleback after Orbital One was to give them some breathing room, to lay low and come back into this more carefully now that Myleena Merrane was righteously pissed off and was looking for blood. The fact that she hadn't even tried to call him since right after the attack was all the indication he needed. Myleena was lurking out there, and he'd better take her very seriously.

He rested for a while, then ate another very small meal, and then rested a bit more, pondering Rann's declaration. Though it was absolutely impossible to even consider, Jason did have to admit, it did fill certain holes missing in most other explanations. So, what Jason needed to do was think maybe along those lines. Maybe the alpha ancestors didn't just spontaneously develop talent. Maybe they were part of a group exposed to some kind of common mutation, or were part of a splinter group of the human species, kind of like how the Cro-Magnon and the Neanderthals co-existed, two branches of the human race living side by side, different sub-species but part of the same race. That splinter group was absorbed into the human race, but passed down their unique genetic abilities to those descendents.

Jyslin crawled up into his lap and cuddled with him for quite a while after his third meal, and he was quite content. Weeks of separation had left him starving for her touch, starving for the feel of her and the intensifying nature of their communion when they touched skin to skin. Touch amplified telepathic ability, but between couples, it was more than that. It was a tactile sensation of love, for when he touched her, he could *feel* her love for him. They kept no barriers up against one another, allowing them to share their thoughts and feelings freely, and it was that intense communion that so marked the difference between human concepts of pairing and Faey pairing. The union they had formed would last all their lives, for so long as they loved each other, their communion would make that love self-reinforcing.

Jyslin had looked over Rann's suppositions in his mind and injected her own opinion into it. *I rather doubt you're a descendent of a Karinne, but the idea that you might be the descendent of a Faey certainly carries some weight*, she thought, a thought that Jason could hear. *I remember hearing Yohne and Songa talking a month ago, and that was one of the things that they considered while they were researching human telepathy. The similarities were just too similar, Songa thought, but Yohne stubbornly kept declaring Gora's Law. She thinks it's the sun rising in the morning. Songa's a little intimidated by Yohne, so she didn't really debate it any further.*

Why is she intimidated?

Yohne's about three times older than Songa, and Yohne's been a doctor longer than Rann and Songa have been alive, she answered. *Haven't you noticed that she always gives the orders? She has much higher rank in the medical service. So, we have to look into it, but I think it'll be easy.*

How so?

Well, we have four faces to track down, she answered. *When we find them, we see if their families are all from England. If they are, then the location of the alpha ancestor is certainly known. Then it's just a matter of looking through the mythology of the area.*

Mythology? Don't you mean history?

No, there's no mention of the Faey in your history. But I'll bet that if there were Faey here, they'd turn up in your mythology. We just look for any myths about blue-skinned people with pointed ears. If we find them, and those myths are prevalent in the area your ancestors came from, then we have enough circumstantial evidence to at least conclude that it's possible, don't we?

Damn. That's just clever, love.

Thank you. I'm more than just a pretty face, she told him, giving him a grin.

And a nice rack.

Well, that you can appreciate, she thought, and then her breath caught a little. *I'd love to, baby, but are you strong enough?*

Let's find out.

If I get you sick, the docs are gonna kill me.

I won't tell if you won't, he offered as he slid a hand sensually up her leg and over her hip. *I can just lay there and let you do all the work*, he added with a naughty image of his intent.

Deal, she agreed, leaning down and kissing him.

Jyslin's idea was certainly a smart one, and it was now the highest priority for Jason.

After getting a clean bill of health from the doctors to resume his normal routine, Jason basically left the work of setting mines and other traps to Luke, and he, Molly, Tim, and Songa got to work preparing to go out and meet those four faces they had. Tim used a little trick that Kiaari set up for him to hack into Trillane's facial recognition protocols, and they had names for those faces. Ten minutes later, they had addresses. Three of them lived in London, but the fourth, the redheaded man named Seamus Macgregor, he was from a small town named Dumfries, which was in Scotland. Since Dumfries would be a much safer place to try to land and approach this man, it was decided that he would be first.

Molly had more or less wormed her way into this part of their work, and Jason didn't really mind, because she had a firm grip on English history. So, it was to her that Jason assigned Jyslin's idea as a task. He set her loose with his panel on Civnet and told her to dig up *any* myth or legend that might hint that the Faey had visited Earth in the past. He told her to look for any physical descriptions that might match the Faey, any instances of "beings from heaven" coming to Earth, and so on. He was surprised to see that she knew her way around Civnet, able to fully use its search functions to dig up the data stored in the old Internet portion of the network. She'd done much of her family research after the subjugation, and she used Civnet.

He left her to that task as they bent to the logistics of this trip, which required research. Before they made the initial appointment, Jason searched the area using Trillane's cameras, looking for a place to hide his skimmer...but it wasn't a good place. Dumfries was an old, old village, filled with ancient buildings and narrow, twisting streets, and the terrain was relatively flat. There were no warehouses, no bridges, nothing large enough and with enough space either in it or under it where he could land the skimmer and keep it hidden from the space-based cameras. So, they had to be dropped off. Once that was determined, they drew up a schedule for it, where and when they would be dropped off, what they'd do when they were, and where and when they'd be picked up. Jason dug up one of the cell phones he'd been storing since he left New Orleans, and it would be their emergency contact means in case something went wrong. Jason studied the area and memorized the layout, and determined where they'd go in case something went wrong. He also identified the public transit stations that they could use to get to London if it came down to it, so he could get back to where there were Faey so he could use his master key to steal a skimmer to get back if they got stranded.

Their movements would be carefully scripted. At 5:30 a.m., just before sunrise, they'd be dropped off. After the drop-off in a pasture just outside the village, they'd go to the train station and make it look like they came by train, by arriving and slipping in just as the first train arrived at the station at 5:45 a.m., then leaving the station. From there, they'd go to a local pub that served breakfast that opened just after the first train arrived, which served to feed some of the people that would get on that train when it left at 6:30 a.m. on its way to Devonshire. They would linger in that pub as long as they could until the village public library opened, where they would look up possible myths and legends and talk to the librarians about it. Their appointment with Seamus MacGregor was at noon, and it was their intent to stay in Seamus' house until sunset. If Seamus refused their offer, they would return to the library and wait there until sunset, when they would leave and go to the same pasture just outside the village where they were dropped off and wait for pickup.

Once they hammered out all the details for this dangerous expedition, Jason and Songa made contact with this Seamus MacGregor, Songa making the call and arranging a meeting with him at his home for another made-up reason. She told him she needed to interview him, that it wasn't anything

serious, and she would come to his residence to conduct the interview so as not to inconvenience him. The man agreed, and the plan was finalized.

But what he thought would be a simple—though dangerous—mission of two people evolved quickly. It became a mission of four, and it was an odd pair that was coming along. Rann decided he wanted to accompany Songa on the trip, both to spend time with her and see how they approached the humans in case he had to do it. But with two non-combatants and only one guard to protect them, both Myra and Meya decided that someone else was going to go, someone to help keep an eye on things and back Jason up if something went wrong. Meya and Myra argued over who was going to get the honor, until they played some obscure finger game to decide who was going. Meya won that contest, and so Meya was going to go. Jason and Meya had to endure a little make-up magic that Yohne put on them, the fake nose and beard for Jason to throw off the facial recognition in the cameras, and Meya had her cheeks widened and her eyebrows reshaped just enough for the facial recognition software to not recognize her.

What surprised all of them was when they gathered for the mission, for Meya arrived wearing armor. “Babe, I’m your *guard*,” she told Jason simply. “Guards wear armor. End of story. And don’t even *think* of telling me to go change.”

“I’d never dream of it.”

“Here. Let’s hope you don’t need this,” she said, offering him a small, evil-looking plasma pistol, one of the smallest he’d ever seen, that would easily fit in his pocket.

“I can agree with that,” he said, pocketing the weapon.

The trip out wasn’t just them either. Luke took the dropship, and he had three students with him when they set out, as well as cargo to deliver. Four mines were in the cargo bay with three workers there to start them up and deploy them. All four were space mines, and the idea was to go up into orbit and deploy the mines, then drop them off just before sunrise in Scotland and then rush back to Cheyenne Mountain before sunrise in Colorado. Because of all the people in the cockpit, the four of them sat on benches down in the cargo bay, as Jason taught Songa, Rann, and Meya how to play spades to pass the time of the trip.

After a few hours, they landed in a pasture just by a dark, deserted road just outside of Dumfries. It was 5:45 a.m. local time, and it was a decidedly nippy October morning. “Remember, if you have any problems, just call,” Luke warned from the ramp as he came down to see them off.

“This shouldn’t be very hard,” Jason told him, shouldering his panel’s strap. “Our biggest issue is going to be getting to the train station and making it look like we arrived from there.”

“Good luck.”

“You too.”

Meya put on her helmet, completing the appearance that she was a personal guard of the two unarmed Faey. “Alright, follow me,” she announced.

The first stage of the operation went easily. With Meya leading them using her night-vision enhanced sight, she took them to the train station, and to Jason’s delight, the train *just* pulled in as they rounded a corner of the quiet town. They scurried up to a gate separating the platform for the trains from the rest of the town, hovered there a few minutes as Meya used her talent to sweep the building, then they slipped in through a service gate in the fence whose lock Meya skillfully broke off with a wrench of her armored, strength-augmented hand. They slipped in and climbed up a few steps to the platform, then walked out upon it casually after Meya ensured there were no cameras on the platform to catch their appearance that Jason might have to use his panel to try to hack. That seemed odd to Jason, but then again, this wasn’t a big city. This was a modest town on another continent, a place where Jason figured the Faey didn’t worry too much about security.

Now that they looked to be here legitimately, Meya led them through a waiting room that looked like a throwback to the 1940’s with its old furniture and fading posters on the walls, and a schedule board that was the old slotted kind where the attendant had to put up the little letters on it by hand. It

showed that the first train out was to Devonshire, and that it would be leaving in about a half hour.

There aren't any Faey in this whole town, I think, Meya announced, then repeated it after elbowing Jason and tapping her forehead, for he had had himself completely closed off. *No need to close yourself, babe.*

Jason decided to risk a personal sweep, using the technique that Jyslin had taught him in their training sessions, sweeping out away from him with his power and listening for any “echo” that marked a sentient mind to the probe. It was almost like telepathic radar, a sweep that told him that there were quite a few human minds around him, but none that were different enough to be Faey. Both Jason and Meya were very careful to search the area carefully, looking for any mind that might be trying to hide among the numbers of humans, using them as a shield to hide itself, but there was no such sense of it.

Possibly, he answered. *Let's get down to that pub and get some breakfast. I'm hungry.*

The pub was a small, rather ramshackle building with fading whitewash, and a stained sign hanging over the door showing a mule's head in a yoke. The interior was just as anachronistic as the rest of the town they'd seen so far, an old, grungy-looking room with a heavy wooden bar on the right wall, a series of old booths with faded cushioned benches on the left, and about ten small circular tables scattered in a random-seeming pattern throughout the open floor. Old war-era posters, a tapestry showing some old castle, and several sections of different colored plaid cloths were hanging on the walls. The room was populated with six people, one old woman behind the bar, a younger woman carrying a tray of biscuits and what smelled like sausage to a booth where four older men were seated, all of them wearing earth-colored clothing, and what seemed odd to Jason, all four wore different kinds of hats. Every eye in the place was glued to them the instant they came in. “Let's go get a seat,” Jason told them, pointing to the booth nearest the bar.

“Mornin’,” the young woman said rather nervously as they seated themselves, with Rann and Meya on one side, and Jason and Songa on the other, with the doctors on the inside. “What can I be getting’ ye this morn?” she asked in Scots brogue, which Jason found almost mesmerizingly interesting.

Songa kicked him in the shin lightly, and he blinked, glanced at her, then looked to the pretty young girl, with dark hair and green eyes, which was an odd combination. “We just need some breakfast, please,” Jason told her. “What do you serve?”

“We have eggs any way ye want ‘em done, sausage, potatoes, ham steaks, biscuits, an’ porridge,” she answered.

“Porridge? What is that?” Songa asked.

“Kinda like oatmeal,” Jason answered.

“I think I’d like to try that,” she mused.

After all four of them ordered breakfast, the girl looked them all over and seemed to hover, then blurted it out. “What business do Faey have in Dumfries?” she asked, then she blushed.

“That’s quite alright, sweetie, we realize we’re a little out of place here,” Rann told her with a light smile, which made her blush deeper. Rann *was* a handsome fellow, blue skin notwithstanding. “Truth be told, we’ve come to interview a few of your townsfolk concerning the history of your area, and look through your town library. We’re researching a few historical matters, and it’s always best done on site.”

“History, ye say? ‘Tis an odd thing for a Faey to be interested in, if’n ye don’t mine me saying so. Our history, I mean.”

“Well, some day we hope that humans will be just as interested in our history as we are in yours,” Songa said mildly.

“To be honest, ma’am, I dinna’ think that’d ever happen here. I’d be a poor hostess if’n I didn’t warn ye that you’ll not get a warm reception here. Scots don’t take too well to the new system, ye ken.”

“We’ll keep that in mind, young one,” Rann told her. “And I assure you, we’ll be discrete. The last thing we wish to do is upset your town. We’ll conduct our research and be on the train back to

London by dinner.”

The meal they were served wasn't exactly spectacular, and Jason had the feeling that whoever cooked it intentionally overcooked it because it was being served to Faey. Several more people came in, saw the Faey in the corner, and then immediately left. Jason saw the scowl on the old woman's face behind the bar, so he made the others finish eating, got the location of the town library from the serving girl, then he herded the others out. They walked down to the library, and found that it wouldn't be open for another hour. *Well, now what?* Songa asked, a little irritably. *It's a bit cool out here, Jason, and that pub was warm at least.*

Let's just walk around while we wait. If we stayed there any longer, I wouldn't be surprised if they'd have put nails in our water or something. That old woman seemed to tolerate us until we started costing her her morning business.

They walked around the town waiting for the library to open, taking in the medieval architecture of the place. It was clear that some of the buildings here were very, very old, maybe two hundred, but the street pattern, so narrow and crooked, had to be a throwback to the middle ages. They'd rebuilt the buildings over the years, but had done so while leaving the town's layout unchanged. Several of the larger buildings were clearly very old, like what looked like a town hall, and a chapel they found near the center of town looked positively ancient, with vines growing up on side of the building and an old slate roof. It had a single stained glass window over the front double doors. Though the Church of England was the predominate church in Britain, this chapel looked to be from the era before that, for the stained glass window was an image of the Virgin Mary, or at least what he thought was Mary. That meant this small stone building, showing signs of many patches and repairs, had to be nearly six hundred years old.

Sure enough it was...or at least almost. There was a historical sign by the gate in the fence surrounding the little chapel, saying that it was built in 1437, and had been partially destroyed twice and rebuilt, both times by fire; the first in 1789 and again in 1892. Neither fires completely destroyed the building, however, allowing them to rebuild and restore the building to its original appearance and condition. Though the building itself wasn't really that old because of the rebuilds and renovations, the stained glass window was a “faithful recreation of the original window” according to the sign, and the foundation of the building was that of the original building. Because it had been rebuilt exactly as it had been originally constructed, it was considered to be a historic landmark.

Well, Jason, there's your first piece of evidence backing me up, Rann sent smugly, pointing at the stained glass window. *Look at the shoulder.*

Jason did so, and saw a red triangle on a white background. That was the insignia of the Faey Medical Service.

That might just be a coincidence, Jason scoffed. *I'd hardly call that proof.* He did, however, unshoulder his panel and turn it on, then he took a picture of the window and stored it in memory. He closed the outer cover and slung it back over his shoulder, which caused it to go into dormant mode.

They returned to the library just as it opened, and got a rather chilly reception from the two librarians that worked within. Rann went to work on them, unleashing his full charm on the two middle-aged women as Jason and Songa started looking through some of the books that the two women suggested. Jason read through a book of old myths but read nothing he hadn't read before, but Songa seemed a bit engrossed in the book she had in her hands. Jason looked at the title and saw that it was *Beowulf*. There'd be no help in that book, but Songa, an adherant of old literature, was already involved in reading the story. She'd be no help to him until she was done.

While Jason was flipping through another book, Rann came up with both librarians, and he looked almost insufferably smug. “Alright, Rose my dear, tell him what you told me.”

“Aye. Well, if ye be lookin' at old stories and myths that might hint that the Faey visited before, I think ye'd find two of them ta' be yuir best bets. The first is the old story of Tir Na Nog, a land that only appears every hundred years. The other is the old legends of the Faerie Folk. I'd say that yon

Faey does look like an elf, and we have quite a few myths and legends about the Faerie Folk here in Scotland. Here, I'll show ye which books to look through about that."

"Aww!" Songa complained, closing the book she was reading.

"Tir Na Nog?" Jason asked, sitting back and tapping his chin. That word sounded eerily like *Terinango*, which was an old Faey word for *hamlet* or *village*. "Songa?"

"*Terinango*?" she asked curiously, and Jason nodded.

"It does sound similar, doesn't it?"

"Excuse me?"

"My human friend here is actually our resident expert on Faey linguistics," she explained. "He's deeply versed in our language, much more than the rest of us. That word, *Tir Na Nog*, it sounds much like a Faey word, *terinango*, which means small town or village, but it's a word that isn't used much anymore. Was this Tir Na Nog place a town?"

"The story calls it a land or realm, not just a town," the librarian, Rose, answered. "But there was a town of the same name within the realm."

"Faerie Folk, I'm not sure about that. I thought fairies were supposed to be little winged things."

"Och, laddy, that's just one interpretation," the other librarian said. "The Faerie Folk are the elves of old folklore, ye ken. They were said to be tall, graceful, handsome folk with pointed ears. The legends said they lived in the land of Arcadia, a magical realm outside the bounds of our own world."

"That sounds promising," Rann mused. "Any words you can think of?" he asked Jason.

He shook his head. "Nothing comes to mind. The Faey words for *realm* or *home* aren't even close. The closest word that even relates I can think of is *arcideinne*, but that's, ah, not exactly an appropriate word."

"Why, what does it mean?" Songa asked innocently, but he saw the wicked glint in her eye.

"Prostitute, generally," he answered, giving her a short glare. "But it's not a very nice word. And you're on the list," he growled, pointing at Songa.

She broke down into delighted laughter, then winked at him.

"I dinna' ken," Rose said.

"She knew what that word meant. She just wanted to make Ja—Jack say it, that's all," Meya told them from behind her helmet.

"Ah. I didna' think that Faey had a sense of humor."

"Oh, we do. It's just not quite the same as a human's," Rann told the woman with a grin.

The books they were sent to read were interesting, and Jason learned a bit more about the legends of the Faerie Folk. They were just as the librarian described, tales of elfin beings that lived in a magical world called Arcadia, who crossed over into the human world. There were stories of humans and the Faerie Folk interacting, both peacefully and in conflict, and dark tales of humans abducted and spirited away to Arcadia, a magical realm of pristine forests where the Faerie Folk dwelled. Jason read that over the years, the term *Faerie* became more attached to traditional fairies, while the term *Sidhe* or *elf* had come to represent an appearance more Faey-like. But the librarian was right; in Scotland, the concept of a *faerie* was not a diminutive winged creature, but a tall, elegant, regal, beautiful human-like creature of refined bearing and gentle mannerisms, often richly dressed. They had similar legends in Ireland, where they were called the *Sidhe* (odd that a word spelled that way was pronounced *shee*, but the word was Gaelic in origin), but the *Sidhe* and the *Faerie* were basically two names for a similar creature, just given different names for different regions.

Sidhe. Now that word sounded familiar. It sounded like *sehii*, which in Faey, meant *lost*.

The most interesting part of what he read was the interaction between the Faerie Folk and the humans. The Faerie Folk weren't really written as dark or ominous beings, though there were several stories concerning *Banne Sidhe*, or evil Sidhe, which curiously was the origin of the word *banshee*. They could be fearsome, but only when angered or riled. So long as one didn't anger a Faerie Folk, they were kind, gentle, and helpful. They were attributed in many stories as bringers of happiness,

bestowers of special gifts on human newborns like beauty or luck or intelligence, and many of the stories he read through attributed the Faerie Folk with peaceful, harmonious co-existence with the humans who bordered the entrances to Arcadia, their magical homeland.

But what caught Jason's eye more than anything else was one aspect of the stories that demonstrated the Faerie Folk as *teachers*. They taught the humans arts such as herbology, medicine, and smithing various kinds of metals. Now that seemed...strange. It would certainly be in the realm of a more advanced Faey to teach people things like this, but the question was *why* they would bother.

Jason closed the book he was reading and drummed his fingers on the cover, lost in thought. There wasn't any definitive proof in these books, but what was there didn't disprove it either. From what he'd read, a Faey expedition could step into the shoes of the Faerie Folk and not disrupt the stories. Tall, elegant, handsome well dressed beings showing up and teaching humans things they didn't know, beings who knew magic, which could just be technology far beyond the imagination of the humans who looked on, then going back to their own magical realm, a place that humans couldn't comprehend.

Was it true? Were the Faerie Folk actually a Faey expedition, and had they interbred with the humans and left, leaving behind progeny that would become the alpha ancestors of the current telepathic humans? There was nothing here to prove it, but the circumstantial evidence was only strengthened by the fact that it was a *rational* conclusion, going on the information he'd read in these books.

"What is it, Jack?" Rann asked using Jason's alias, looking very, very pleased with himself. "What did you find?"

"I couldn't find anything that jumped out, but I'll admit, I found nothing that disproves it either. And what's in here *would* fit with the theory. It's not enough, though."

"Not enough for what, laddy?" the older librarian whose name Jason didn't know asked as she approached them. "Might ye explain what exactly ye be researchin'? I may be able ta' help."

"We're researching a, theory," Songa told her. "There's a theory floating about back home that the Faey have visited Terra before, hundreds of your years ago. We're researching old myths and legends looking for any support of this theory. What my human friend meant was that what we read here still supports the idea of the theory, but there's no proof one way or the other. It just hints that it *might* be true, it doesn't give us any solid evidence that it is or isn't true."

"What we've pieced together actually fits in with the folklore we've read here," Rann expanded. "It fits into the parameters of your folklore, but it's not *proof* that there was an actual visitation. So it's a tease."

"Och. So, ye're ponderin' that maybe Arcadia is Draconis, and the Faerie and the Sidhe were actually Faey?"

"Well, it's possible. We're not going to *just* look at British myths, though. There are similar stories from several other cultures we want to investigate as well."

"Well, pardon an old woman's obvious observation, but I'd be thinkin' that maybe the name is enough," she stated. "The Faerie Folk and the word *Faey* are pretty bloody similar."

"That's why we came here first," Rann told her smoothly. "Because of that very observation. Oh dear, what time is it?"

"Comin' on eleven," she answered after looking at her watch.

"Alright."

"An' the other side of that obvious observation is if ye'd never been here before, just how did ye know where we were?"

"Believe me, if the Faey knew of Terra earlier, we'd have been here," Meya told her. "The Imperium's been dealing with a food shortage for nearly a hundred years. If they'd have known about Terra sooner, they'd have rushed here to secure the planet, if only so we didn't have to depend on importing food from other empires. Being forced to trade for basic necessities is *never* good, because an enemy can cripple you by attacking those supply lines."

“Ah. That makes sense,” she nodded. “Well, maybe the ship that visited here never made it back home. Maybe they got lost, or had some kind of accident and landed here, fixed their ship, then took off again tryin’ to make it back ta’ Draconis, but they never did.”

Rann’s eyes lit up. “My dear, that’s an astute postulation,” he said admirably. “They didn’t develop stargates until six hundred years ago, and in that era we used hyperspace as a means of interstellar travel, and you can’t send communications through hyperspace. Back then communications were basically handled by messenger ships that traveled between systems, relaying messages through the Imperium. A lone ship that wandered off course and landed here *would* have no way to report their findings unless the ship itself returned to Imperial space and reported in person. So, that’s another mark in the possible column.”

“No amount of circumstantial evidence is going to convince anyone, though. We need hard proof,” Jason said.

“Proof, ye say? I think ye might want ta’ think of visiting some museums. Look at old artifacts, ye ken, look for anything that yon Faey might recognize. Jewelry, things like that.”

“Well, we have come across one thing. The picture, please, Jack?” Rann said as he reached into his pocket and produced his medical insignia. Jason opened his panel and displayed the picture he took of the window. “See this? This looks just like this part of the window in your chapel. This is something that existed back when your chapel was built. If that window is a perfect recreation of the original, well, it makes me wonder.”

“That? Well, dearie, that’s something that we’ve seen before,” she stated evenly. She slid over one of the books on the table, one they hadn’t opened yet, flipped through it, then turned it around and showed them a reproduction of a carving showing four elfin figures standing at the edge of a misty forest, gathered around a human man pounding a piece of metal with a hammer on an anvil, and all four of them had that symbol emblazoned on their garments. But on them, the triangle was pointing up instead of down, the way Rann usually wore it. “There it is.”

“My,” Rann whispered, but it wasn’t Rann that got Jason’s attention. It was Songa. Her eyes were wide, and she snapped up the book and flipped it back a few pages, to another picture, showing two Faerie Folk on horseback, one adult, one obviously young. The adult wore a tabard of sorts, upon which was an unusual design looking like two ocean waves in a circular background with a single star above and between the two crests of the waves.

“Trelle’s garland!” she gasped in Faey. “Rann! Rann, look at this!”

“Demir’s sword!” he said when he looked at the insignia, then he laughed. “I win!”

“What?” Jason and Meya asked in unison.

“Jas—Jack, Jack, this is the house crest of *Karinne*!”

“Are you sure?” he asked in English.

“Of course I’m sure!” she snapped in reply, in English. “I studied classical literature, I know all the house crests! This is Karinne! If we wanted hard evidence, *here it is!*”

“I dinna’ ken.”

“Honey, this is the symbol of one of the Faey noble houses,” Rann told her with a big grin. “A house that was destroyed over a thousand years ago. This is just way too much *circumstantial* evidence to be circumstantial. A Faerie Folk shown in an old drawing wearing the standard of a Faey noble house? That’s corroboration.”

Jason felt like someone hit him in the chest with a shovel. Rann was *right*. He was right! This was evidence that even a skeptical Jason could not ignore. This was proof that the Faerie Folk really were the Faey, and that they had come to Earth a long, long time ago. It just seemed impossible that this old wood carving picture, reproduced for the book, would have *two* Faey-origin symbols for the Faerie Folk and have it just be a case of coincidence. One, Jason could write off as a coincidence, but not two, and not a symbol quite that complex. A triangle in a circle, yeah, that could be a coincidence, but not two waves in a circle under a star.

So, Jason could not deny it. The human telepaths on Earth were descended *from the Faey*. And Jason was a direct blood relative of Maeda Karinne.

It was just too *fucking* unbelievable, but sometimes, life just threw you one hell of a curve ball.

Jason leaned back in his chair, heavily, and then gave a sigh that would do anyone proud. He looked at Rann's smug grin, then snorted. "Shut up," he grated.

Cousin, Rann sent audaciously.

Ass, Jason responded.

"Are ye well?" the woman asked.

"The gentleman just had a rather nasty shock," Rann told her with an outrageous grin. "These two symbols here *strongly* suggest that the Faey *did* visit Terra in the past, my dear. I'll put money on the table that the Faerie Folk of your legends was an expedition of Faey. Our visit was lost in your official history, but it didn't vanish from your *folklore*."

"Huh. Well, that's definitely interestin'," she said, clucking her tongue.

"May we take pictures of this book for our research, madam?" Rann asked. "It's going to knock some caps off back home."

"Aye, go ahead, just please dinna' take it from the library," she nodded.

Rann took several pictures of the book's illustrations, including several more drawings of other Faerie Folk in other activities; an image of them dancing, an image of several smaller ones and three obviously human children sitting before a taller one, who was holding some kind of cane or staff and pointing it towards the heavens, another image of two Faerie Folk standing on either side of a peasant in a knee-length garment who was using a hoe on a row of crops, and a final image of another Karinne-crested Faerie Folk, a tall, regal looking female, handing a small circular object to a robed man that looked like a friar or monk. The pictures were very provocative, and created even more questions. Were these Faey that had come here *stranded* here? Why did they have children? Did those children come with them, were they born on the ship as it traveled the galaxy, or were they born here? The smaller Faerie Folk in the illustrations were obviously Faey, and also obviously children. Did those Faey that taught humans also teach the human children, as was suggested in that one image? And how did Jason come to have a Karinne ancestor?

Well, this certainly dates the event, Songa sent. *The Karinnes were destroyed about thirteen hundred of your years ago. That would place this visit around, what, the year 700?*

About that, Jason answered, staring at the images on his panel monitor, putting them all side by side in a tiled array. Unbelievable. Just unbelievable. *If I remember right, that was just before the start of the dark ages.*

Well, the question has been answered, Jason. What now? Songa asked.

What now, indeed? Though he had a virtual whirlwind of questions rolling around in his head, he had to stop and think about that. Miaari made so sure to set him out on this path, but now that he reached the end of it, now that he had the answer...how did this information fit in? How did knowing that the human telepaths were descended from the Faey help him push Trillane off Earth and restore a modicum of dignity and freedom to the human race? Miaari told him that it was the most important question to answer, but she hadn't told him what he had to do with this information.

Still, though, it was almost unbelievable. To think that he had a Faey ancestor, that he wasn't entirely *human*. It was a strange thought, and made him ponder the basic aspects of his own life...but only for a moment. Though he may have a Faey ancestor, he was still *human*. He had nothing but human ancestors since the introduction of this Faey into his line, and he was born and raised as a human. It might make him question the direction of his life, but it couldn't change the fact that he was still exactly who he was, despite coming into this knowledge.

So. Now that he knew, what was he supposed to do? Well, first thing, he supposed, would be to tell Miaari that he had the answer to her question. Maybe she was waiting for him to find out, and she would point him in the right direction. Getting in touch with Miaari required first contacting Kiaari,

who had been out for nearly two weeks, and had only called back to the mountain once in that time outside of returning with her elder to help him. She'd been gathering information about Trillane's counters to their attacks, shadowing the Black Ops people, trying to find out how much they knew about what was going on. He called the contact number he had for her, but his panel flashed a message he'd never seen before: [Communication Timeout. Unable to negotiate with host. Perform Diagnostic of Transceiver Module? (press selection) [Yes] [No]].

Jason blinked and checked the other systems, and they showed that the panel was actively connected to Civnet. The phone function was part of Civnet, so long as the panel had access to Civnet, nothing should stop the call. He had the panel check its transceiver array, and it reported after a few seconds that the unit was functioning normally, and had active contact with Civnet. He tried to call again, but received the same message.

Okay, now it was past weird, and delving into the realm of unsettling. Nothing should be stopping the panel from making a phone call. It had connection to Civnet, that was proved quickly enough when he accessed INN. The ability to call other panels or vidlinks was a basic function. Just *that* part of Civnet wouldn't just crash. There was no reason he couldn't make an outgoing call.

Unless...something was *stopping* it.

Quickly, Jason reached into his pocket and turned on the cell phone there, which *immediately* began to ring. "Hello?" he called.

"Jason!" Kiaari all but screamed at him. *"That Black Ops bitch found the relay for your panel's tightbeam and she's tracking you with it! Burn your panel's memory, but keep the panel running! As long as they see the panel not moving, they'll come straight to it first, and that'll give you time to get the hell out of there!"*

"Shit!" Jason gasped, almost knocking the table over as he jumped to his feet. Quickly he performed the burn program that Kiaari had put in his panel in case of this kind of emergency, which completely erased the panel's onboard memory, even going so far as to reformat the molecular structure of the memory crystal to totally eradicate all memory within. All that was left was the onboard RAM-style memory which kept the panel running, and kept it active, allowing Myleena Merrane to zero right in on it. He set the panel so it would automatically turn itself off in five minutes; he figured if they didn't get away in five minutes, there was no reason to run in the first place.

"Ja—" Rann began, but Jason's sending cut him off.

They found us using my panel! he sent quickly, his fear and worry and chagrin bleeding through his thought. Stupid stupid stupid! He should have known that they'd eventually figure out how his panel worked! *Meya, we have to get out of this town now,* he sent, grabbing the pistol in his pocket and producing it, turning it on and allowing it to charge up.

"Jason!" Kiaari's voice called from the phone in his other hand, thin and reedy. He put the phone to his ear and answered her. *"Listen carefully!"* she called. *"There's two units en route to you now, but from what I'm hearing, they are not cooperating. Trillane is sending a unit to kill you, but there's an Imperial dropship coming down too. The Duchess and that Merrane woman are fighting over an open radio frequency over what's going to happen. Listen carefully,"* she said with intensity. *"They will come straight to where that panel is, and that'll buy you time, but you cannot stay in that town. They'll tear it apart looking for you when they find your panel! The closest dropship is the Trillane dropship, and it's about seven minutes away. You have seven minutes to get out of there before the Trillane dropship reaches the town. Seven minutes. Now hang up this phone and run!"*

We have to get out of here in seven minutes! Jason sent frantically. *Meya!*

Follow me! she barked mentally as she extended the MPACs on the forearms of her armor.

Raw panic was something that was new to Jason, but he found that he could think, he could react. It was almost like the fear of playing college football in front of 100,000 fans, knowing that everyone was watching him, but he found himself able to work through the fear and do what had to be done. They ran to the nearest car, a small Astria, and Meya picked the lock the old fashioned way, by

breaking the back window, reaching in to unlock it, and then piling in behind the wheel. *In!* she barked, and the others scrambled to pile into the car as she used her augmented strength to rip the plastic off the steering column. Jason all but dove into the passenger's seat on the left side, and by the time Rann and Songa got into the back, Meya had the car started. Jason gave her a surprised look, but she just winked at him and handed him her helmet, put the car into gear, and squealed the tires as they tore out of there.

Their prepwork paid off. Jason and Meya had studied the town's map, so they knew exactly where they were, and exactly where to go to reach the motorway that would lead them out of town. Songa swept the last pieces of broken glass out of the windowframe to hide their break-in as Meya careened around a corner and onto the street that would lead them out of town. *Jason, what's going on?* Rann asked.

"No sending!" Jason snapped. "Holes in the world, people! They can't see our minds! Block out!"

"What happened?" he asked aloud.

"Kiaari said they found my panel's tightbeam relay, and they used it to find me," he answered.

"Thank *God* it happened out here and not when I was home, or they'd be all over the mountain!"

"Who is Kiaari?"

"Kate," Jason answered tightly in reply as a very large troop carrier dropship appeared in the sky ahead and above them. They were all very, very quiet as the dropship went over their head, and then descended to land in Dumfries. "She told me to leave my panel running, so they come right to it. That'll give us time to get far away from here."

"Where are we going?"

"As far as we can until they realize I'm not in Dumfries and call a curfew," he answered. "Where can we get to in half an hour, Meya?"

"Galway," she answered. "We're going straight to Galway and finding a house to hide in that has a basement so their sensor pods don't pick up my armor. Galway's a good sized town, we should be able to hide there long enough. It shouldn't be—"

The world exploded. There was a blistering light, and a sound so loud that it scattered all thought. There was nothing but a confused blur of swirling light. He had no idea what happened. He had no idea where he was. He had no idea even *who* he was, for long moments. He only became dimly aware that the car wasn't moving anymore after who knew how much time, when he felt something eerily warm against his arm. He blinked and looked down, and saw that the warmth against his arm was a bloody, mangled mass of red with shreds and tatters of blue clinging to the edge of it.

It was a severed Faey hand.

The car was overturned and burning. He became dimly aware of that fact, and the fact that they were all tangled up on the roof. Someone was badly injured, badly enough to lose a hand. He rose up and looked around, and in an eerie disassociation, he saw nothing but blood everywhere. He didn't react to it, nor did he react the open, glassy, vacant eyes of Rann that stared blankly, unblinkingly, or the piece of smoldering metal that had driven completely through his chest. He saw the mangled, spurting arm of Songa, saw it spill out ghastly amounts of blood, but she did not move, did not react. Meya lay partially atop him, blood seeping from a vacant eye socket and a savage laceration that ran down the right side of her face. She too was unconscious. He tried to move Meya to get up, but found that his right arm wouldn't work. He looked down, and rather clinically realized that it wouldn't work because it wasn't there. It was missing from the elbow down, and the rest of the arm was severely burned, so much so that it had cauterized the wound.

Someone pulled on him. Hands grabbed him by the leg and pulled him out of the burning car, and he saw unemotionally, like a dream, that other motorists had stopped and were trying to get the people out of the car. Strong hands pulled him clear, but he couldn't focus on their strange, dissonant faces, or understand what they said. They pulled him clear and laid him down, and he turned his head to see them pull the armored Meya out of the car, and then Songa. Someone pressed on her torn arm to stop

the bleeding as others tried to get Rann clear of the burning car.

Then they stopped. There were strange sounds, shouting. People were running. Then there was strange sounds, strange streaks of reddish light.

But then there were others there. Armor. Black armor. Armored legs moved into his field of view, took over attending to the others that were in the car, grabbing them and pulling them behind the burning shell, but he couldn't quite make the connection. Hands grabbed him and pulled him around the car as well. Dimly, he came to realize that the streaks of light were MPAC shots. There was firing. Someone was shooting at the car. One of those pairs of armored legs stopped in front of him, then squatted down.

It was a face he'd seen before, and even in his dazed state, he could attach a name to that face.

Myleena Merrane.

I'd almost think this was a trick, but Kimdori don't bleed, her words seemed to resonate in his brain. I don't understand why you feel like a Kimdori, but I guess we'll have time to talk about it later.

Commander, the Trillane forces are trying to flank us!

Get that dropship down here! she ordered, looking away from him. And for Trelle's sake, return fire! I warned them! If they killed him with that stunt, I'm gonna have the Duchess' head stuffed and mounted on my wall! She looked back down at him, putting a bare hand on his head. No defense at all? You must be stunned. Well, babes, Trillane fired on your getaway car from a corvette in low geosynchronous orbit. It's a miracle you're not all dead, they missed the car, but your car got caught up in the shockwave, and we gave the corvette something else to think about before it had a chance to hit you again. The two women are gonna make it, but I don't know about the male. They're trying to resuscitate him now. We'll have to see. I suspected you had that runaway Trillane noble down here, but I didn't realize you had other Faey helping you. Well, we'll sort them out once we get out of here. Not sure what'll happen to them, though. It's a House crime, what you were doing, but there's really no Imperial law covering it. I guess Grand Duchess Trillane can demand the Empress to hand you and the others over, but she won't get too far. She picked up her helmet and set it on her head. Now if you'll excuse me, your friends in Trillane are trying to kill us. I have to keep us alive long enough for the dropship to get here and get us the hell out. She caught a rifle someone threw to her. Keep the wounded out of the line of fire! A Squad, cover those flankers, B Squad keep on the main line! Mava, they only have one mindstriker, track her down and kick her ass before she breaks someone! Dulaan, keep up the defense til Mava singles her out and drops her! her words rattled in his brain, but then his vision blurred and dimmed, and he spiralled down into dark oblivion.

Chapter 17

Vesta, 30 Miraa, 4395 Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 12 October, Native Regional Reckoning

Dracora Medical Annex (Faey Medical Service sovereign territory), Dracora, Draconis

It was like waking up from a nightmare, and realizing that the nightmare was reality.

The first thing he was aware of was a twinging pain in his right arm. It was dull and throbbing, and it was the first indicator that something was terribly, terribly wrong. He was in a place with cool, sweet air fillig his nose, with warm sheets tucking him into a comfortable bed, and an odd rushing sound that was rhythmic and strangely soothing, like waves crashing on a beach .

It was not his bed. This was not home.

Before opening his eyes, he went over the last thing he remembered. They were in...a library. Yes, a library. He remembered it, with its dark, old bookshelves and the antique table. Rann was there, and Songa. And Meya, wearing her armor. They were researching through old books, while waiting for their noon appointment with Seamus MacGregor.

A revelation. Jason and the other human telepaths were descended from the Faey; the Faey were actually the Faerie Folk from Scottish folklore. He remembered that, the shock of it, quite clearly. It confirmed Rann's theory that Jason was descended from the Karinne bloodline, because of the disease that affected him.

Then...what happened next? He couldn't remember. He made a phone call, and then...nothing. Here he was, wherever here was. He supposed that maybe opening his eyes and looking around might help with that.

He was in a hospital room, but it wasn't like any hospital room he'd ever seen before. It was a large, warmly decorated room with soft red tiles on the floor, corded cloth fiber covering the walls, the color of wheat, with paintings hanging on the walls. One was a strange nebular swirl, the other was a painting of a blue-skinned woman wearing an archaic, flowing robe with one sleeve longer than the other, kneeling down and holding her arms out to a blue-skinned toddler, about to embrace the child. There was a padded chair sitting by his bed, and a table in the corner, by an open window that showed a blue sky. The wall behind him was the only indication that he was in a hospital, for a glance up showed a wall of panel monitors and indicators, and wires came out of that wall and over him, over his bed.

Distantly, he realized that this wasn't the infirmary in the mountain. This was a *Faey* hospital.

He'd been captured.

He tried to sit up, but he felt weak, unable to command his muscles. He tried to push on the bed with his hands, but he couldn't. One of his hands was resting on his chest, refusing his commands to move, but his right arm was held straight on the side of the bed, secured to a metal frame, and his arm from the elbow down was covered in some kind of plascrete sheath. The arm above that sheath was swathed in bandages, and he had bandages across his chest that he could see as well, under his resting left hand. That was where most of the pain he was feeling was coming from, from that arm. Had he broken his arm? What happened? What had gone so terribly wrong?

Well, it was over. That was clear enough. Something had happened, something he couldn't remember, but it had ended with his capture. He was a prisoner of the Faey now. Clearly he hadn't gone down without a fight, so now they were putting him back together. He guessed Trillane wanted him healthy and whole before they marched him in front of a firing squad.

What had happened, though? Did Rann and Songa make it alright? They were doctors, they didn't really know that much about fighting. Meya had probably been the biggest hitter in whatever fight they'd had. She was wearing her armor, and she was highly trained and a very strong telepath. She

would give any attackers fits.

It was maddening, not knowing. What *had* happened? Were the others alright? Did Jyslin know he was a prisoner, or did she think he was dead? Or did she even know? He had to get in touch with her, he had to tell her he was alive.

He had to get out of this damn bed...but he couldn't move. It was like he was paralyzed.

Well his body wasn't working, but his mind was clear enough. He reached out the way Jyslin had taught him and assensed the area around him. He sensed *hundreds* of guarded minds, Faey minds, and sweeping out more he found *thousands* more. Thousands and thousands. There were other minds out there too, unguarded ones, but they were mostly Makati.

He wasn't on Earth!

Oh *shit*! They'd taken him off Earth! He was on a Faey-controlled planet!

That was going to make getting back home just a *bit* more difficult.

The door opened, and a young woman entered wearing a red longcoat over a red jumpsuit of sorts. She had white-blond hair done up in a topknot, and she had light gray eyes, almost like Jyslin's. She had a handpanel in her hands, and was looking at it as she came through the door. She looked at him, and then gave him a bright smile. "I see you're awake," she said in perfect English. "I would ask you how you feel, but you can't talk at the moment, honey. We have you on a paralytic agent right now, that vastly reduces your ability to move. Opening your eyes and maybe tilting your head a little is going to be all you're capable of for a while yet. So, if you're worried about not being able to move, that's why."

She came over and sat on a stool by the bed that he hadn't seen from his vantage point. "Now, I've been warned about you, honey. They told me that you have talent, but I'm not so sure I believe that. So, I'm going to put my hand over yours and establish enough of a connection with you so I can hear you. If you have any questions, just think them, alright?"

She put her hand over his. He felt her touch distinctly, and felt her mind hovering at the edges of his consciousness...but it did not try to breach his border of self. It instead touched on the edge of his self, putting a mental hand on the wall that protected his mind. *This should be a little easier for you to comprehend, and I should understand you better*, she sent, her mental voice very soft, very gentle, and the sense of the emotion behind her words were that of sincere concern for him. *Now, how do you feel? Just think what you want me to hear, but you have to think "loudly," hon. I won't hear it unless you make an effort to have me hear you.*

He decided to play the game. If they didn't *believe* he had talent, then that was just a weapon he could use when it came time to escape. *Weak. Confused. I can't remember what happened.*

You suffered head trauma, honey, she told him. *A common complication of head trauma is a loss of short-term memory, which usually includes the traumatic event and often time leading up to it. You suffered a major concussion, and had severe burns over thirty percent of your body. You also lost your right arm, but we're taking care of that right now. That device on your arm is reconstructing it right now, starting by synthesizing bone to replace the skeletal structure. That's why we have you on the paralytic agent. It's critical right now that you don't move. Once it's done, you'll be in a flex-cast while your body regenerates the muscle tissue and skin, then after some physical therapy, you'll be doing handstands again in no time.*

There were others with me. What happened to them?

She sighed. *I won't pretend it's good news, honey. Lieutenant Rann Berylle is in grave condition. We're not sure he's going to make it. He was in cardiac arrest for nearly six minutes before they started revival procedures, and that's in the danger zone. But it's not totally hopeless. We've recovered patients after a longer arrest period, who went on to full recovery. Ensign Songa Berylle is recovering in the room down the hall. She suffered injuries almost similar to yours, a severe head trauma and the loss of a hand. Meya Arenne is doing fine. She had a cybernetic eye implanted to replace her lost one, and she's already on physical rehabilitation and cybernetic assimilation training.*

She'll be released in a few days, as soon as we're sure her eye is going to function properly. She'll have to undergo cybernetic assimilation training for a few months so she can get the full use out of her new prosthetic, but she'll be just fine.

Cybernetic? Why not regrow it?

Growing an eye takes months, honey, because of the exacting precision involved. It's usually faster and easier to give the patient a cybernetic eye. Some patients do have a cloned eye implanted once it's ready, but most patients get used to the cybernetic eye and decide to keep it, because a cybernetic eye sees much better than an organic one. It's entirely personal.

What happened? How did we get injured?

Oh, yes, I should have explained that. Well, honey, from what we were told, your car was struck by an orbital bombardment. As to why you were in that car, that I don't know. I can only tell you what I was told. And before you ask, right now you're in the Medical Annex on Dracora. This is the headquarters of the Faey Medical Service, and the best hospital in the Imperium, she sent with pride vibrating through her thought. You will receive the best care we can possibly give you, honey. Your life is safe in our hands. We will treat you well.

And then hand me over to Trillane, he growled.

No. Trillane is trying to get their hands on you, honey, I won't deny that, but right now you are the, ah, guest of the Imperial Ministry of Research and Development, which means you're under Imperial protection. They have legal custody of you right now, with some woman named Myleena Merrane having direct responsibility for you. If Trillane wants you, they have to wrangle with Imperial JAG to get you. I don't know if they have the ovaries for that.

I, I don't understand. What does that mean?

It means that what happens to you after you leave this hospital is up to the Imperial government, she answered. They could give in to Trillane's demands and extradite you, but I don't think that's going to happen. You're a very special Terran, Jason Fox. It would be a crime to see that lost.

So, I'm a prisoner.

In a manner of speaking, I guess you are. But know this, Jason. Inside this annex, you stand on sovereign ground, and the Medical Service answers to no one. This is neutral ground, and we do not tolerate petty squabbles and bickering over our patients. In this place, there are no sides, there is only the needy. Your legal status outside these walls does not matter in here. Right now, you are in our custody, and who you are or what you've done doesn't mean anything to us. Do you understand?

I, I guess I do.

I know it's hard to relax with everything I'm sure is going through your mind, but at least try. For the moment, know that you are safe, and you will receive the best care that we can give you. You'll find none better anywhere in the Imperium. She patted his hand. Now, I'm going to order a light sedative so you can sleep. It would be boring laying there with nothing to do and no way to move. It would be better if you just sleep through it. When you wake up, you'll be off the paralytic agent, and you'll be able to move around. You'll have a vidlink available to you when you're awake, and you'll be allowed visitors.

Nobody's gonna visit me I want to see, he grunted mentally.

I think that your two friends would like to see you, and they'll be allowed to when you wake up, she sent with a wink. Over your head on the top left corner of the headboard there's a big red button. If you press it, it alerts the nurse station you need something. So, if you need anything, just press the button and a nurse will attend you. Understood?

I understand.

Very good. I must say, I'm happy I got to meet you, Jason Fox. And I'm honored I get to be one of the doctors on your recovery team. But you can thank me properly after you're healthy, she sent with a not-entirely appropriate tilt to her sending, a flirtatious invitation. But for right now, sleep is on your treatment schedule. Have a good rest, and I'll check in on you later.

She pulled up her little handpanel and tapped on it with her finger, and Jason immediately started feeling drowsy. Did she have control over drud administration by remote control, using that little panel? He wondered, but he started feeling very light-headed...even a little euphoric.

Sweet dreams, her thought touched him just before he slipped into a deep, restful sleep.

He didn't really feel any better when he woke up, but at least he could move again.

It was daytime when he woke up, and before he realized where he was, he tried to scrub his face with his hands...and saw the big plastic sheath over his lower right arm. That was a quick and brutal reminder of the predicament he was in.

He found that he could think more clearly now, and he had no headache, just the dull pain in his arm. He was still connected to wires that ran to that sheath on his arm, but the sheath itself was no longer attached to the bedrail to prevent movement. And since he could move again, that meant he wanted out of this bed. He had to look around. Already, he was considering how he was going to get out of this hospital and back to Earth, and knowing the layout of this hospital would be important.

Getting out of here wouldn't be easy. He had no doubt that cameras were watching him, and guards were watching him. He would have to outsmart the guards, fool the surveillance, and try to find some way to reach a ship. But this wasn't home. This was Draconis, and here, a human was going to stand out like a pile of coal in a ballroom. The first step was going to be observation. He had to look around, come to understand how this hospital worked, and learn the layout. Then he'd have to work out some way to get himself and the others off this planet and back to Earth. If they got that far, then they'd have to make their way back to the mountain. It wasn't going to be easy at all. This would be even harder than breaking out of a prison.

The door opened—they must be watching him all the time!—and a Faey entered. But instead of steeling himself for an interview or a doctor's examination, he instead smiled brightly when Meya, wearing a simple white hospital jumpsuit, padded into the room in her little white slippers. "They said I could come see you!" she told him, rushing over and embracing him tightly. He hugged her as best as he could with one arm, then pushed her out to look at her. Her right eye was *clearly* cybernetic. It looked something like a real eye, but there was a fakeness about it that made it apparent...and the color of the synthetic iris didn't exactly match the color of her remaining eye. There was a faint scar above and below that fake eye. He reached up with his left hand and touched her face, concern and chagrin all over his face. "It's not that bad," she told him, putting her hand over his own. "I'm getting used to the new eye. Who knows, I might keep it," she smiled.

"I'm so sorry, Meya," he began, but she put her hand over his mouth.

"We knew what we were getting into when we came with you, Jason," she told him.

"I didn't get you very far," he sighed.

"I beg to differ," she countered. "We're not dead yet, Jason. I applied to Merrane for asylum, and they're looking it over. I'm a commoner caught up in a spat between two nobles, so I can use an old law to seek protection from the ruling house. If they grant me asylum, Trillane can't touch me. Songa and Rann, well, they're doctors. Nobody can touch them, no matter what. *You* are who I'm worried about. I've already had a visit from Myleena Merrane," she grunted. "That was fun. But at least she's keeping those dogs from Trillane out of the hospital."

"She is?"

Meya nodded. "We're in a secured wing, hon. There's already a broiling fight in the Palace over you, so the Medical Service took some precautions."

"Fight over what?"

"Over who gets you," she answered. "Trillane wants your head, but it seems the Imperial government has other ideas."

"Well, they can bloody well get over that idea," Jason snorted.

"It's more than that. Right now, you'd better be kissing Myleena's feet, because she's keeping the

mindbenders out of here too. She won't let *anyone* anywhere near you except the doctors."

"You bet your ass I won't," came her voice from the doorway. Jason looked at her, and finally, in person, saw Myleena Merrane. She was tall and elegant, much taller than he thought, wearing a Class A uniform with her ribbons and her gold tassel, holding a hat in her hands. He looked at her, and he got a strange shiver up his spine, a shiver that made him gasp.

She was a Kimdori!

"Miaari?" Jason asked curiously.

"No, Myleena," she answered bluntly. She looked out the door and made a slashing motion with her hand, then closed the door. "I had them turn off the cameras in here babe, cause we gotta talk. And I don't think this is something I want someone to overhear. You, out," she said, looking at Meya.

"We'll talk later, Jason," she told him, kissing him on the cheek, then she got up and quickly scurried out.

She came over and sat down on the stool, throwing her hat casually on the bed. "So, you *are* working with the Kimdori," she grunted. "If I remember my intelligence right, Miaari is a Kimdori consul who has a personal relationship with a Trillane, that little one that vanished. So, my question to you, Jason Fox, is *what* are you?"

"Huh?" he asked in surprise.

"You feel like a Kimdori. I can sense them, you know. It's a little trick. You have the same sense as a Kimdori to me. But Kimdori don't bleed," she told him. "So you are *not* a Kimdori. So, Jason Fox, what in Trelle's name are you? Because you're no human."

Few can sense my gift, and it is this that aspect of you that will lead you to your sister, Miaari had told him, and he recalled the other things she'd said about this woman. *You'll find your sister behind you, wielding your sword, helping you find your way. Don't mistake the sword in her hands as being held against you. She will not strike you down with it.*

No! *Myleena*? Miaari had been talking about Myleena? No *fucking* way!

He gaped at her for a long moment, trying to understand. Miaari knew about Myleena Merrane, and she'd *known* that they'd send her to chase him down. She'd prepared him for this! But if she wouldn't raise his sword against him, did that mean she would help him? Did that mean that he should tell her the truth? Would she really stand behind him and help him find his way, or was that just a metaphor for something else?

Damn Kimdori. Why couldn't they just say what they meant?

Well, he didn't have many options here, and he *did* trust Miaari. She told him that his sister would help him find his way. Well, Myleena was that sister, so that meant that he had to invest just a little bit of trust in her, and just have faith that his trust in Miaari wasn't misplaced.

One thing jumped out immediately at him. If both he and Myleena could sense Kimdori, and Miaari called her his sister, and Songa said that some Karinnes married into other houses...then the ability to sense Kimdori had to be a specific trait of the Karinne family line. Myleena had to be a descendent of one of those Karinne nobles.

But the bigger question is...if Karinnes could sense Kimdori, why did *Karinnes* also have that same sense of presence? Miaari had sensed him right off, because he felt like a Kimdori to her. How did that tie in with it? What was the connection between the Kimdori and the long-dead House of Karinne?

There *had* to be one.

Myleena stared into his eyes as they swam in confusion, then she watched them harden with resolve and become lucid as a plan of action formed behind them. If she was going to help him find his way, he'd better find a way to make her want to do it. Despite being the sister Miaari told him about, she was *still* a Merrane, and helping him would go against her house. If he wanted her help, he was going to have to lead her into it. Just coming out and blurting things wasn't going to work.

He knew Faey. He knew how they thought, how they worked. He had enough experience with Jyslin, Symone, Kumi's group, and the doctors to know how to approach this problem. This was a

Faey female, but more than that, this was an engineer, and being both, she was a woman who had a near-weakness for the concept of a mystery to solve, for something to fix. He would have to lure her into helping him

"I'm human enough," he told her evenly, holding up his injured right arm.

"Be that as it may, that doesn't answer the question," she said, very seriously. He'd never seen her this serious in all the phone calls they'd shared.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

"And spend the next two hours arguing over it? No thanks, I don't feel up to that. I have better things to do."

That incited an act he never thought would happen. Angrily, she reached out with both hands and grabbed his face. Her touch was *not* gentle. That touch amplified her telepathic ability, and to Jason's shock, it was *awesome*. This woman was stronger than Jyslin! He tried to raise the defense that Jyslin taught him, but she was so fast, she shattered his outer walls of self and drove a spear of her own self straight through him. In a heartbeat, she had complete access to every part of his mind, but instead of raking her fingers through every part of him, taking the prize of his darkest secrets, she instead searched out the answer to that question, a question that, he realized, had been consuming her in obsession so severely that she was willing to risk infuriating him by attacking him telepathically to get the answer she so craved.

And she got it. She sifted through his memory of his revelation, digesting that discovery quickly, then touched on his association with the Kimdori and picked through his memories of Kiaari and Miaari and the conversations they'd had concerning the subject.

She gasped audibly. Her eyes widened, and she took her hands off him like he was a live snake. *No!* she sent in shock. *It can't be true!*

I told you you wouldn't believe me, he sent privately to her, a bit indignantly. *There was no call for that!*

I...I'm sorry. But it can't be true! That you—you're Faey!

I'm not Faey. I just have a Faey ancestor, he told her. *And if Miaari was right, mine is the same as one of yours.*

I...I don't know, she sent in confusion, putting her hands on the sheath over his arm. *I could look through our historical tree, I guess. But I don't see how. This is unbelievable!*

That was my reaction too, he sent. *Now, if you don't mind, you can go now. I'm really angry right now.*

She grimaced. *I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry.* She frowned, then reached out and put her hand on his face once more. He was about to slap her hand away, but instead of attacking him, he felt her lower all of her defenses through that touch. She opened her mind completely to him, surrendering to him anything he wished to take, an act of contrition for taking what he had not offered freely.

He grabbed her hand and pushed it aside, breaking that communion. "No," he declared. "Just go."

She gave him a stricken look, then nodded silently. "I'll come back tomorrow, because we *really* have to talk, alright? And I promise *never* to do that again."

"I should calm down by then," he informed her.

She nodded, stood up, and filed out. Meya, who had obviously been standing outside, came in after she left, watching her go from the doorway, then sat on the stool. *What happened?*

I wouldn't give her the answer she wanted, so she took it.

Meya gasped. *She attacked you?*

In a manner of speaking, Jason bristled, his indignance bleeding through his sending. *I'm not quite sure what to do now. I need to get out of here, to escape. Miaari told me that Myleena would help me, but now I don't know if that'll happen.*

How would she know that?

Jason glanced at her. *Remember when you brought Miaari to Chesapeake, when she brought me those IDs? Remember what she said, about my sister holding my sword?* Meya nodded. *She was talking about Myleena. She knew that they'd send her to deal with me, somehow. Meya, Miaari knew that Myleena's related to me.*

She is?

She must be one of the descendents of one of those Karinnes that married into other houses that Songa talked about, he explained. Miaari told me how I'd know her, and I knew it the instant I saw her face to face. Myleena is the sister. Miaari said she would help me, but I'm not sure if she really will. She seemed absolutely shocked to find out. That's what she took from me. I wouldn't tell her why I—why she got a peculiar feeling when she looked at me, the same one I get when I look at her. When I refused to answer, she took it.

You can tell just by looking at her?

He nodded. *Miaari told me what it would feel like. I, I guess the Karinnes could sense each other, because Myleena feels much different to me than any other Faey.*

Well, I don't know about that kinda historical shit. I never paid much attention to my history when I was in school.

Well, this might be a good time for me to start reading about the Third Civil War, Jason sent with an audible grunt. I won't have anything else to do for a while. I fully intend to escape from here, but there's nothing I can do until this is fixed. He held up his sheathed right arm, where the device sealed to his arm worked to regenerate the part of his arm he'd lost in the attack. *Whether Myleena helps me or not, I'm going back. I'm going home.*

Well Jayce, if you need help, I'm in, she told him. I was going to apply for asylum, but you're right. We have unfinished business back on Terra.

The door slid open again, and a jumpsuit-clad Songa stood in the doorway, her right arm sheathed in a similar unit to the one on his own. She looked at the two of them, the burst into tears and ran into the room. She collapsed on the bed, her arms clutching at Jason's neck, crying uncontrollably. "Songa?" Jason said in surprise.

Rann is dead! she sent with emotionally charged power, a sending they probably heard miles away.

Jason closed his eyes and felt the burning well up in his nose immediately. He gathered Songa up into his good arm and cradled her, Meya put her hand gently on Songa's shoulder, sharing in her mourning as they grieved for the loss of a husband and good friend.

If there was any one good thing that came about from the passing of Rann, it was that Songa did not blame *him* for his death. And it bought them precious time.

She became his virtual roommate after that, as she and Meya spent their every waking hour in his room, seeking solace from her grief in the presence of her friends. For several days after his passing, she would fall into bouts of severe weeping and episodes of almost psychotic depression, and was highly emotional and moody. Jason and Meya consoled her as best they could, but it was very, very hard on her. Faey married for life; there was no concept of *divorce* in Faey society except in the noble ranks. The pair bond of a Faey couple was intense, powerful, telepathically reinforced. The death of a spouse was a severe blow to a Faey, much, much more so than it would be for a human. The bonds of love between a human husband and wife were a pale shadow of the bond that formed between telepathic mates. Jason read after Rann's death that suicide was a common occurrence for a widowed spouse, and often they simply wasted away from grief and died.

They would *not* let either of those become Songa's fate. Jason and Meya worked together to keep her mind active, keep her challenged, allow her to express her grief for Rann but not allow it to consume her. Sometimes it took humor, sometimes it took comfort, sometimes it took understanding, and more than once it literally required a slap on the face to snap her out of a self-destructive obsessive line of thought.

Because of the delicate nature of Songa's condition, and much to Jason's surprise, Myleena did not press any of her urgent issues. Everyone backed off, even the other doctors, and allowed Jason and Meya to help Songa through her time of bereavement.

After nearly two weeks, when they'd replaced the unit on Jason's arm and let him get a look at a rather grisly sight of new bone and thin reeds of blood vessels and ligaments around them, awaiting the covering of flesh and skin, the outside world had decided that it had been long enough to start again. Songa was still touchy and had bouts of depression, but both Jason and Meya felt that the worst was over. She could say Rann's name without breaking down now. It may take her months, or even years, to fully move past the trauma of it, but at least now she wasn't suicidal, and was taking interest in the life around her once again.

But things wouldn't stay on hold forever because of Songa, and the appearance of Myleena Merrane in his doorway one morning, as Songa sat by his bed watching the vidlink and Meya braided her hair, told him that reality was back in his life. He looked at her and felt that same shiver go up his spine, and she filed in and stood by the door until it closed. Songa glared a little at her, and Meya just gave her a cool look.

"Such an unfriendly welcome," she said with a slight smile, but it was *not* Myleena's voice. It was Miaari!

"Miaari!" Jason gasped, jumping out of bed as she walked up to him. He met her halfway, putting his hand and sheathed arm out to touch her as she reached her hand out to place on his neck. He felt that moment of *expansion*, when Miaari used her ability to merge her mind with his own, and he felt very little from her side of that union. "I didn't think you'd come!"

"I had to wait for things to calm down, that is all," she explained, placing her hand on his neck in ritual Kimdori greeting. He couldn't resist putting his hand on the side of her neck in reply. She smiled at him, then leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "You look better now, my friend. Is your arm healing well?"

"They say two more weeks," he answered, holding the sheath up for her to see. "Can you get a message—"

"I already have," she told him, urging him to sit down. He did so on the edge of his bed, and she sat beside him. "I don't have much time before the real Myleena gets here, so listen carefully. Kiaari has told the others what happened. They have decided to carry on in your stead, Jason. Jyslin misses you and wishes to be with you, but she has taken over as the main engineer of your devices and continues to make life hell for Trillane. Your capture has created what you might call a general state of war on Earth. Your allies have not taken kindly to your capture, and they are producing devices that attack Trillane at a truly staggering rate. They have even left the safety of the mountain and conducted armed raids on Trillane military holdings, raiding for weapons and supplies. Trillane is retaliating against the lay citizenry in response, and things are starting to escalate. Trillane is also furious with the Empress right now. After your capture, she withdrew her Black Ops team from Terra and has left them to deal with your compatriots alone. She refuses to send any additional help. They have also demanded your release to Trillane to answer for your sedition, but their pleas rattle against a closed door in the Imperial Palace. The Empress will not even call Grand Duchess Trillane to court. She has made it clear that you were her only interest there, and without them there to try to counter your rebellion, they are running roughshod all over Trillane shipping. Your rebellion is costing Trillane a *fortune*."

"I'm glad they're not going crazy with worry."

"They are, Jason, but by devoting herself to standing in your shadow and carrying on your vision, Jyslin seeks to lose herself both in her work and in your goal. Kiaari told me that she carries around a picture that broadcasted on INN of your burned-out car, and every time she gets tired, she looks at it and then goes back to work."

"My poor baby," Jason sighed. "I wish I could talk to her."

“That would not be advisable, Jason. But be patient.”

“Miaari, Myleena—“

“Yes, you have met her,” she said simply.

“But she took it really hard. She might not help—“

“Let that flow of its own accord, Jason. There is no need to push at what will move on its own in time. Trust me.”

“Alright.”

She put her hand on his shoulder. “So, now you know what I wanted you to know. Well done, Jason.”

“But what does it *mean*, Miaari? There’s more to it, there just has to be.”

“That is the point, Jason. There *is* more to it. With the help of your sister, you can find the answer you seek. Learning what I hoped you would learn was only a stepping stone across a stream.”

“What did you want him to know?” Songa asked.

“It is a secret I still cannot speak of openly, child,” she answered evenly. “Even when speaking it to those who already know. A secret unspoken remains a secret. It is the Kimdori way.” She shifted her hand back onto his neck and shared with him a time seventeen days from today, and a place, an old vacant warehouse about 17 *kathra* from the Medical Annex, and a detailed memory of the city of Dracora. It was like he’d lived here all his life; he knew every back street, every alley, every walkway, and he *knew* he could walk from Lusten Beach all the way to Myrai Heights with a blindfold on. She also shared with him a thought, an instruction: *be at this place at that time. We cannot interfere, but we can ensure you have a way out. I will make the necessary arrangements, but getting to that place, at that time, is your responsibility. Do you understand?*

He nodded, and the face of Myleena smiled at him. “I am out of time, my friend. Be well, and take care. Oh, yes. Perhaps you should consider one thing, Jason.”

“What?”

“An interview.”

“A *what?*”

“An interview,” she repeated. “The citizens of the Imperium know your name, but perhaps it is the best interest of the rebellion if they see your face, and hear the words from your own mouth. Perhaps it is time for the rest of the Imperium to hear about what happened to friend Kumi, an attack Trillane has managed to keep very quiet. Remember, the game you play with Trillane is as much status and position as it is financial. Put enough pressure on Trillane brought about by the rest of the Imperium concerning their actions on Terra, and they might bend.”

“Are, are you sure that would work?”

“I wouldn’t hurt,” she shrugged. “In your position, my friend, seeking *any* advantage would behoove you. Your situation is not favorable at this moment, is it?” she asked, pointedly looking around the room to remind him where he was. “You have no restrictions in this place, Jason. Don’t forget, this is sovereign ground of the Medical Service, and they do *not* tolerate outside interference, even from the Empress. You, like any other patient, have every right to call others from your vidlink. You can call whoever you please, so long as you understand that more than you and the one you talk to will be listening, and whoever you call can be traced.”

“I understand,” Jason said, nodding to her unspoken warning: *do not call anyone you don’t want found.*

Miaari walked to the door and opened it with a touch of a button. “I will see you again shortly,” she said, then walked out and closed it without a word.

What was that about? Meya sent tightly, so only Jason and Songa would hear.

She had me touch her mind, Jason sent, a bit evasively. *She gave me a location and a time. If we’re there at that time, we have a way off Draconis. All we have to do is get there. She warned me that getting there is our problem. They won’t help.*

How lovely, Meya sent darkly.

Despite Miaari's statement that Myleena would come around on her own, he didn't see a whiff of her for three days after Miaari's visit. But that was a welcome respite, for it gave Jason time to think things over, consider how he was going to handle getting away, and also ponder the question that was nagging at him since Miaari's visit.

How were the Karinnes and the Kimdori connected?

It was a bothersome question, because the Kimdori *defined* secretive. There was so little information about them on Civnet, it wasn't funny. About the only information one could find about the Kimdori was that their homeworld was near the center of the galaxy, in a star cluster that was virtually uninhabitable by any other species due to intense radiation...yet the Kimdori thrived there, as well as other life that existed in the system. Kimdori were immune to radiation. There was mention that they were shapeshifters and that they had a pack mentality that caused them to organize into cells of family groups, but that was about it. No information about their society, their history, their culture.

That was a no-go, but there was *plenty* of information about Karinne. It seemed that the foundation of modern Faey technology was directly traced back to the House Karinne, and there was something of an intergalactic incident when House Merrane destroyed House Karinne at the onset of the Third Civil War.

The House Karinne was formed in the year 1282 PE (Prior Era, which they counted backwards from 0 just like Earth counted backwards in B.C. years) at the end of the First Civil War. Noya Karinne, an Imperial General, was awarded nobility and the territory of the destroyed House Zudunne after she saved the Empress' ship from destruction. In that early era, the House Karinne was like all the other houses; ambitious and manipulative, gaining territory, power, and status to become one of the stronger of the minor houses.

But things changed after the Second Civil War. After being awarded more territory, Caenry Karinne, the grand duchess at that time, sold off one of the gained star systems to raise money and used it to invest in her house's research efforts. That was a name Jason recognized, not for Karinne, but her first name. The Caenry Theorum was the fundamental theorem of phased plasma physics. Jason had no idea that Caenry was a Karinne. A little more reading showed Jason that the Karinnes did *way* more than develop the fundamental theorem of phased plasma physics. Caenry was responsible for surrendering more than 75% of Karinne territory, but the money she raised went straight into research. Hard shields, the first spatial warping experiments, ion weapons, the basics of plasma power, hot plasma weaponry, and the first experiments in metaphased plasma weapon technology were all researched by the Karinnes. It could be said with high authority that the House of Karinne was the cradle of modern Faey technology. The stargates, MPACs, spatial engines, all of it could be traced back to groundbreaking Karinne research.

But it was Moiri Karinne's act that was probably one of the most brilliant, if one considered what she was doing. She sold off *everything* but their home planet of Karis, then consolidated all of the various research efforts by forming the Karis Academy, a centralized research facility that Caenry Karinne wisely made self-sustaining by opening it as a university, where other students could come to learn.

Karis Academy. He remembered reading about it in Xeno class. It was *the* learning institution, a place that races all over the galaxy came to for higher learning.

Damn clever woman. The Karinnes were obsessed with science, so what better way to increase scientific advancement by putting the most scientists in one place?

At its height, the Karis Academy was the size of a large city. It had hundreds of thousands of students, and thousands of scientists and professors. At any one time, there were hundreds of major research projects going on, from a wide variety of disciplines.

But the history didn't cast the Karinnes in the warm light of science. Over the years after the

Second Civil War, the Karinnes changed. They became withdrawn from the Imperium, indifferent to it, even scornful. The entire house began a controversial selective breeding program within the house to increase its power in telepathy, a program that both worked and brought about laws against it. The program *worked*. The Karinnes became known as the most powerful telepaths in the Imperium, hand over fist. It also caused Empress Ziora Shevalle to enact the Natural Progression edict, a ban on genetic engineering experiments that other houses began to consider after seeing the success of the Karinne breeding program. Over time, the Karinnes became literal outcasts in Faey society, but they didn't care. They shunned Faey society and culture and withdrew to Karis and to their own mysterious goals. It became a rare sight to see a Karinne off Karis, but they were easily identifiable wherever they went, for every member of the house wore a decorative metal device on their left ear with prongs that stretched horizontally under the left eye nearly to the nose in a delicate bar, and vertically down the front and back of the ear, then wrapping around the back of the head with a curved skull-hugging brace that rested atop their heads. That metal ornament came to signify the Karinnes and identify them wherever they went.

Then came the Third Civil War. In 2886, the Faey Imperium broke into two factions, the Loyalists and the Seditionists, but House Karinne refused to take sides. They remained neutral, which was the policy of the house for a thousand years, offering no aid to either side. Both sides, however, didn't honor Karinne's neutrality. In 2887, Seditionist forces spearheaded by a Merrane battle fleet destroyed Karis. They used Omega weaponry, which irradiated the planet and made it uninhabitable, even to this day, some 1,307 years later. Seditionist and Loyalist houses, both sides, then hunted down and killed all the remaining Karinnes. Both sides, the history read, feared Karinne retaliation.

It took a little time for him to understand why they'd be afraid. It seemed that House Karinne was well known—almost *infamous*—for the telepathic power of its nobles. All of them, every single Karinne noble, was staggeringly powerful in talent, because of the very controversial selective breeding program the house underwent between the second and third Civil Wars. There were even documented cases of Karinne nobles having telekinetic ability, which was as rare among the Faey as telepathy was among humanity. Both sides feared the power of Karinne nobles who now had no house, and had nothing to lose. So they were hunted down and killed. They even went so far as to kill Karinne nobles who had married into other houses and become part of the new house. Male nobles changed houses when they married, becoming part of the new house.

That explained why both Jason and Myleena were so strong in talent. Jason, being male, was weaker than Myleena, but that was a relative comparison when one considered that Jason was more powerful in talent than maybe 94% of Faey females. He was almost even with Jyslin. His *weaker* talent was way more than most Faey women, but Myleena, a female, was much stronger than him. Myleena had to be in the top 1% of all Faey in telepathic power.

The destruction of Karis had negative repercussions through the rest of civilized space. The loss of Karis Academy *really* pissed off some of the other spacefaring races, because quite a few non-Faey students were killed in the Merrane assault. The newly reunited Faey Imperium, under a new Empress and a new ruling noble house, found itself suddenly at war with another civilization called the Urumi, who considered the death of its students on Karis an act of war. The Urumi had been allied with the Loyalists, and when they lost the war, the Urumi simply declared war on the entire Imperium.

That wasn't the real problem, though. Since the destruction of Karis Academy, Faey technological advancement had slowed to a crawl. Stargates, moleculartronic computer architecture, and MPAC technology had been the only real major breakthroughs in the millenium since the Third Civil War, where before, Faey technology had been advancing by leaps and bounds. They had killed the golden goose when they destroyed the Karinnes, for the Karinnes had been the backbone of the Faey scientific community.

That was interesting and all, but it didn't really answer the question. There was no mention in any of the various historical files he read that linked the Karinnes and the Kimdori in any way. He had no

doubt that some Kimdori had attended Karis Academy as students, but outside of that obvious assumption, nothing.

But there had to be *some* connection, and Miaari had said without saying that that connection was very important. That connection just had to be why the Kimdori had done so much to help him; clearly, they wouldn't render so much aid to him for some other reason. There was something back in the marches of history that linked the Kimdori and the house of Karinne together, and that was what Jason felt that Miaari wanted him to find.

Jason kept reading through the historical files of several universities on Draconis, and was engaged in reading another essay on the Karinnes when the door opened, and Myleena Merrane stepped in. Jason felt that shiver when he looked at her, and he had to wonder if this was Myleena, or if it was Miaari. "It's about time," he said simply.

"I was busy," she said, in her own voice. It was indeed Myleena. "I didn't know I'm related to someone famous," she said with a humorless chuckle.

"Me?"

"Gora Karinne," she stated. "His older brother was married into Merrane. I looked through Merrane genealogy, and he's my thousand-year removed grandfather."

"How did your parents take it?"

"They died when I was a baby, along with my older sister," she grunted. "I was raised by my aunt Uri. My uncle Taen has been riding me about having a baby to continue my line, but I've blown him off for years." She snorted. "I guess I shouldn't. I looked it up, babe. I'm the last living descendent of my line. All the splinters off my line died before having kids, or they did have kids and their kids died before producing any heirs. I'm it. That's a sobering thing."

"And what do you think about it?" he asked.

"What *can* I think about it?" she said, throwing up her hands. "I've always been able to sense Kimdori, you know. I was terrified of them, afraid they'd find out that I could, cause then they'd kill me. Every time I felt one, it'd look right at me." She shuddered. "And now I find out that it's not unique."

"Could your parents sense Kimdori?"

"No idea," she shrugged.

"So. What do we do about it?"

"What can I do about it?" she told him. "I'm a Merrane, babe, no matter that I have an ancestor from another house. Just about every noble has relatives from other houses nowadays, because houses intermarry. I have my orders, and those are to get you into Makan Academy."

"Where?"

"Makan Academy, the best engineering school this side of the galaxy," she told him. "As soon as you heal up, I'm supposed to take you there. Personally. Then you settle in and learn engineering properly, and once you graduate, you come back as the newest member of Black Ops."

"I see this is going to be interesting," Jason said simply, giving her a cool look. "Because I have no intention of going anywhere but back home. I hope you're ready to chain me to a desk on Makan."

"If that's what it takes," she told him evenly.

"It'll take more than that," he warned. "You seem to forget, I'm fighting a war back on Terra. I'm not too concerned about what the Imperium has in mind for me when my people need me."

"It's not really your problem now, babe," she told him.

"It will *always* be my problem," he said coldly. "One way or another, I'm going home, Myleena. Either you're going to help me, or I'll go *through* you. I was told that you'd help me, but I guess you're more worried about being a *Merrane* than you are a *relative*."

She gasped. "What do you expect?" she snapped. "Yes, I'm curious about how we came to be relatives. Yes, I like you, Jason, and I'm worried about you, and I'd like to help you. But I have my orders, and they're good for you as much as they are for us. You can reach your full potential at

Makan, and maybe you can do some good for your people there. Did you ever think of that? Make your case, babe, do it out in the open instead of with a bomb. You ever think of talking to an INN reporter? Lots of people kinda like you, babe, cause you're a romantic figure. If you went on INN and explained what was going on, maybe you could create enough public support to have the Empress start investigating a hell of a lot harder than she has been. People thought your attacks on Washington were funny. Show them a face to go with that sense of humor, and fill people in on what motivated it all."

"You're the second person to suggest that," he said, sitting on the edge of his bed.

"It's not a bad idea. But be that as it may, I'm not here just to talk about our common ancestry." She brought up a handpanel. "Let's start with how you were getting around without being detected."

"Push off, Myleena," he snapped. "I'm not telling you *shit*, because if I reveal how we did it, then the people still back there who depend on those things for their lives will have their asses hanging out in the wind. There's no telling who else is going to see anything that goes in that panel, so you get *nothing*."

"Now hold on—"

I said no, he sent with ferocity, resorting to sending to fully convey his outrage at the very thought of it.

Hold on there, babe, don't take it out on me, she sent with supplication. *I was told to ask. I asked, you said no, and I'm not gonna push it. I don't really blame you, truth be told.* She came over to his bed, and looked at the monitor sitting on the table in the corner, which had lines of flowing Faey script and a picture of a Faey woman with a metal object attached to the left side of her face. *I see you've been researching*, she sent. *That's a Karinne.*

How can you tell? he asked, calming down considerably from the mollifying tone of her sending.

The thing on her ear that sticks out under her left eye. All Karinnes wore it, even when it gave away who they were.

I don't remember seeing it on that picture we found back home.

Who knows?

If all Karinnes wore it, why wasn't the one in the picture?

Maybe she lost it. What are you looking up?

Well, now that I know where I came from, I'm trying to understand that side of me better. I've been looking at the history of the Karinnes. I'm also trying to find why you and me can do what we can do concerning them, and what it means. There's more there. There's something important there. If I can just figure it out, it would let me sleep better at night.

Good luck, she sent with a shrug of her shoulders.

Doesn't it make you curious?

Of course it does, but I have bigger things to worry about. Like keeping your ass alive. Did you know that Trillane had the nerve to come here and demand they hand you over?

No, I didn't.

Holy Trelle, was Commodore Yia pissed, she sent with a laugh. *She's the hospital's commander. Trillane has some serious guts to try to come in here after you, but now they're gonna face the wrath of the Medical Service. It won't be pretty.*

I knew there was a reason I liked Faey doctors.

They have guts for people who vow never to raise a hand against another. Then again, they have their ways of making others pay when they get pissed. Trillane might get all their doctors recalled to Draconis.

"More power to them," Jason said, standing up and going over to the panel he was using. He sat down in front of it and scrolled through the essay again, scanning it with his eyes. *I'm going to warn you right now, Myleena*, he sent privately to her. *I will not be on any transport to Makan. When my arm is healed, I'll be going back home. You can do whatever it is you need to do to try and stop me, but it's not going to get you very far. When it's all said and done, I'll be back where I belong. You*

can try to get in my way, or you can bow to that inevitability and help me. If you help me, I'll remember it. If you get in my way, I will remember it. How you want to play that game is up to you.

My, sounds like I'm being dismissed.

You are. Out. It's clear you have nothing of substance to talk about, I have work to do, and we can save the chitchat for the next time.

"Alright, alright," she sighed. "I'll come see you tomorrow, okay?"

Whatever makes you happy. Just remember what I said. I meant it.

I suppose you do, but this isn't your sandbox back home, babe. You're in my sandbox now, and you'll find that I'm very stingy when it comes to sharing my toys.

Guess it'll just be that much more humiliating when I break out of here, then, he shrugged. You are nothing but a momentary inconvenience, Myleena.

That got her. Oh, you're just digging your own grave now! she sent hotly. You wanna play with me, babes, you just got yourself a game! And when they put you on that transport to Makan, I'll be in the seat next to you laughing the whole way!

We'll see.

She stormed out, and Jason had to smile. Getting her angry may have been petty, but he wanted her to be mad for a little bit. If for no other reason than she had it coming. He sighed and stared at the face on his monitor, an old picture of a Faey woman with hair the color of pampas grass that was long and straight and parted in the middle, hanging in front of her right ear but pushed over her left, staring at the camera with a serious, almost irritated expression. Her right eye was closed ever-so-slightly more than her left, a glittering crystal bead was hanging from her right earlobe on a golden chain, and that dark metal ornament on the left side of her face with its elegant prong resting under her left eye, flowing back to her left ear where it joined with the rest of it. So this was a Karinne, a woman named Sora Karinne by the caption of the photo. What secrets were lurking behind those violet eyes? What secrets had gone with her to her grave, as the warships of Merrane destroyed Karis around her? He read the caption again.

[Duchess Sora Karinne, daughter of Grand Duchess Garda Karinne, Heir Apparent of House Karinne. Photo taken 2675, Karis Academy, Karis.]

Well, warships wouldn't have been over this woman's head. She had lived hundreds of years before the end of Karinne, a picture from over fifteen hundred years ago. Was she one of his distant ancestors? Probably not. She was the house ruler, after all. Jason didn't have the ego to think that he was descended from the ruling family in the noble house.

"How do I fit in, Sora?" he asked the picture aloud. "And where do *they* fit in? I don't see the connection. I could use a little help here."

The picture was silent. Then again, pictures usually were.

"You're a big help," he accused the photo, then switched over to the mail program. It was time to send a little correspondence to INN. Maybe they could find a reporter that wasn't busy.

The interview wasn't half as bad as he thought it would be. A reporter was at the hospital literally *minutes* after he made that call, and he found her to be warm, enthusiastic, friendly, and very nice. They talked for quite a while about what they were going to talk about, and she assured him that he could say whatever he wanted. Her name was Tiya Harelle, and he grew rather fond of her as the day progressed.

When the time came for the camera—or her personal panel in this case—to roll, she was both professional and discreet. She did not wander an inch from the material they had talked about. She asked him about what was going on back on Earth, and he answered her. He told her about how the humans were being treated like dogs, and his accusations of slaving (which he admitted he couldn't prove), and his decision to risk everything to do something about it. He told them about what he remembered of his capture, and informed the entire Imperium that Trillane had fired on a car holding

doctors, and one had died. The Imperium treated their doctors like saints; even an accidental killing of a doctor was a major black eye to Trillane in the eyes of the rest of the Imperium. That was a damning offense.

Then came...the *question*. It was the question that she hadn't said she was going to ask, but he knew she'd drop it on him. "There are rumors that there are humans expressing talent, Master Fox, and that you're one of them. Would you like to confirm or deny this?"

"I won't hide it," he told her. "I have talent. It's one reason why Trillane has gone so far to try to kill me. It's what I meant in my original statement when I said that they knew who and what I was. Trillane has known I have talent for a long time."

"Really?" she asked, giving him a smile. "I know our viewers can't experience you proving it, but I'd like to—" then she gasped, and laughed. "Well, ladies and gentlemen, I'll attest that statement. Jason Fox *is* a telepath!"

From there, after that revelation was over, they talked about Kumi. Miaari had specifically told him to talk about Kumi, so he did. He described her as exactly what she was, a Trillane noble who had risked her own life to investigate his accusations, and was nearly killed because of it. He never named her, but any reporter worth her salt could figure out who it was with a little investigation...and Tiya certainly seemed competent.

"And you know where she is now?" Tiya asked.

"Not anymore," he answered. "Now that she's recovered, I think she's back on the trail of who tried to kill her. And I doubt she'll be very forgiving when she catches up to them, given that they shot her in the back."

Take that, whoever it was who tried to kill Kumi. Now they'll be looking over their shoulders, looking for a fire-eyed Eleri Trillane, coming to exact a little vengeance.

The interview wound down after that. When it was over, Tiya shook his hand, told him it was nice to meet him, told him to look for the interview to run at evening headlines, and left.

Jason watched the interview that night, and was *impressed*. Tiya did not edit anything. The interview was played in its entirety, using that single camera angle with the hospital room in the background. There was a little piece before the interview that described Jason as a rebel protesting House Trillane by using armed force. Tiya was very professional about that piece, not showing bias either way, simply stating the facts as they were known for the benefit of the audience, and then going straight into the interview. After the interview she commented to the anchor that she had been very impressed meeting Jason in person. "He's just as charismatic in person," she said with a smile. "A very kind and thoughtful young man, with a sense of purpose about him that I noticed immediately. He's a man that believes in what he's doing with all his heart. Some may call him a rebel or even a murderer, but he truly believes that he's fighting for the betterment of his people."

"He won't be doing much fighting from a hospital bed in the medical annex," the anchor tittered with a grin.

"True. Perhaps that's why he agreed to do the interview," Tiya acceded.

"Is there any word about his legal status?" the other anchor asked.

"At the moment, no," she answered. "Imperial JAG refuses to comment, only stating that it's a currently active case and they won't comment. Trillane lawyers, on the other hand, have been very eager to comment about the case. They accuse the JAG of stonewalling them and denying them an extradition hearing. Rumor in the Palace is that the Imperial arm intends to keep Jason Fox as a researcher, given his knack for Faey technology."

"Ah. Any information on who this injured Trillane noble is?"

"There's no official confirmation from the Trillane spokewomen, but most likely it's Countess Eleri Trillane. She's been missing for several months, last seen leaving her office where she served as a military liaison. She's officially listed as AWOL, for she was in her conscription."

Nice, Meya commented after they finished watching. *What was it like to sit there and talk to her*

and know that the whole Imperium was gonna see it?

Didn't really bother me, he answered. I'm not camera shy, Meya. I used to play football in front of a hundred thousand people every Saturday. That gets you used to being in the public eye.

At least she was fair to you.

Yeah, she was.

Think it was a good idea to reveal you have talent?

Actually, I think it was, he answered. Now the Imperium knows that some humans are telepaths. Trillane has some questions to answer now, because I made it clear they knew about it. So does the Imperial government, for that matter.

Yes, now the rest of the Imperium has a better understanding of what's going on, Songa sent in agreement. Knowing that some humans are telepathic explains a few things to them, like why Trillane hasn't simply rooted us out and crushed us.

The interview led to one drastic change within the hospital. After the doctors and nurses saw it, they all, one by one tentatively began trying to send to him. They heard him state he had talent, but it was like they didn't entirely believe it, and had to see for themselves. They found out quickly that he hadn't been lying. He had never sent to them or around them, but when they asked him if he had talent face to face, he answered honestly. One nurse just laughed and gave him a sour look, shaking his head. "All this time you could hear us?" he accused.

"What better way to see where you stand?" he asked in reply.

The male, Herik, could just chuckle and agree.

The visits from Myleena after the interview were short and unfriendly. She was *pissed* that he went public, because now it was not going to be easy for them to cart him off to a transport and make him disappear. She limited herself to daily visits to check on his medical progress, as she gave him a cold stare, and then she would leave.

That worked for him. It gave him time to observe things, and start planning his escape. The secured wing in which they were located was indeed secure. It had impressive security; sensors, cameras, motion detectors, spectographic sweepers that penetrated optical camouflage and holograms, and checkpoints at the junction of every hallway. Every occupant or worker in this wing wore an ID tag that marked them as belonging there, and anyone without one set off an alarm that brought guards to that location within twenty seconds. It was very difficult to get in here if you weren't supposed to be here.

It was impressive security. The only weakness of it was that it only extended as far as the hospital walls.

That was the way out of here. The window. It was pretty obvious that there was too much security to go any other way. His window would *open*, and that gave him direct access to the outside. The only problem was that they were on the sixteenth floor. It gave him a breathtaking view of the ocean, but it made trying to go out that window and climb out a tricky proposition. Climbing up was just as tricky, since there were twelve floors over them.

Not a problem. Not in a place where they used stretchers and gurneys equipped with antigrav pods. Those devices were designed to hover a set distance over the floor, and though they wouldn't fly, they would give him a way to go out that window and not fall to his death. It would just take a little bit of custom modification.

So, Jason split his time between reading about the Karinnes and studying medical gurneys. They were simple devices, using weaker versions of the antigrav pods in armor, which meant that they operated on the solid ground protocols; they didn't see altitude, they saw only the distance from the ground. Antigrav pods were more than capable of full flight as long as they weren't loaded down.

It took him about three days to understand how he could jerry-rig a gurney to get them out that window alive. One gurney would be strong enough to carry all three of them.

Things degenerated quickly back on Earth in those days since the interview though. Trillane had

declared martial law back on Earth and banned all travel to and from the planet, to more effectively crack down on the rebels who continued to elude them and continued to destroy their Sticks, and who were now also dealing damage to Trillane's military infrastructure. Good God, Jyslin moved fast. Where Jason had been content to slowly escalate into armed action against Trillane forces, Jyslin, now commanding the rebels, was going absolutely apeshit all over them. Every day, this armory or that supply depot or that communications hub was attacked by drones, or bombed, or was even attacked by ground forces armed with infantry weapons that the Faey had never seen before, weapons that went right through the issued armor used on Terra. And all the while, Sticks and dropships fell from the sky like rain, and Trillane still had not engineered a way to stop it.

Clever, clever Jyslin. She was using the railguns.

There wasn't a day that went by where there wasn't a blurb on INN about another attack, or another Trillane operation to try to root out the rebels.

Clearly, he had to get back home fast, if only to save Trillane from Jyslin.

Jason realized quickly that the Medical Service was not putting *any* kind of special restrictions on him. They would allow him to do whatever he wanted, as long as it was within the guidelines of their *own* rules. They didn't treat him any differently from any other patient, which gave him all the rights of any other citizen. He could have any visitors he wanted, and what was most important, they allowed him to buy anything he wanted and have it delivered to his room, *just like any other patient*. As long as it wasn't something banned by hospital policy, they didn't care what he bought and had delivered. The only bottleneck to that was the Imperial people. They were the ones that were inspecting what was brought into his room, they were the ones denying him delivery of some things they considered too dangerous, and they were the ones that were monitoring his Civnet activity and his incoming and outgoing calls. He had no doubt that Myleena was keeping an inventory of everything he tried to have delivered, and was studying it to see what trick he had up his sleeve. Myleena, he had to respect. She seemed to understand how his mind worked, and was good at guessing what he was going to do. So, to get around her, he was forced to enroll the nurses and doctors into his scheme. Myleena was blocking any kind of tools or technological equipment from getting to him, so he had to go through his caregivers, convincing them to help him. This, they did willingly, almost gleefully.

The other lifeline to the outside world was Songa. Songa had already come before the Medical Review Board for her involvement, and they had dismissed all charges against her, reinstated her license, and had even given her a commendation and a promotion. To them, she had only been doing what a doctor was *supposed* to do, and that was render aid to those in need. They gave her a glowing commendation for her bravery and her dedication to the ideals of the *shaishain*, promoted her directly to the rank of Lieutenant Commander, and gave her a paid sabbatical so she could recover from her injuries, and also recover from the death of her husband, with full pay and full benefits. That pronouncement made her a free woman, absolutely untouchable by the Trillanes and the Imperial government, and if they even *tried* to go after her, they would face the wrath of the Medical Service. That was one organization *nobody* crossed, because anyone who angered the Medical Service quickly became a reviled and hated figure in the eyes of the Imperium's common citizens, who treated the Medical Service like earthbound angels.

This meant that Songa could come and go from the hospital as she pleased. She was still wearing a flexcast, but she wasn't on any kind of medical restriction regarding her movements. Songa was the one that smuggled in the civilian clothes for him and Meya, while the other doctors in the wing had come up to bat for him big time by procuring a dedicated panel for him, not connected to Civnet, where he could do his necessary TEL programming in secrecy, a microtronic toolkit, and some stick memory crystals he was going to need. After withdrawing some money from his bank account, he had it put on a certified card, a kind of pure cash item that anyone could use but was not hard currency, and had it smuggled in. They got him everything he needed to get out of the hospital, and he had plenty of time to get it all together and ready, even though it was a bit hard to type using only one hand.

Once he had everything he needed to get out of the hospital, he turned to the task of how to get to that warehouse, but that in itself wasn't hard at all. He simply asked for his possessions back. The doctors complied, and they returned his clothes and his other possessions, which included a black crystal key that looked like a hovercar or dropship key. That little baby would start *any* vehicle, and it was their key to freedom. Once he had that back, he kept it on his person at all times.

He had everything he needed, so he built what he needed to build, did his programming, and then told Meya about the plan. They were the only ones that had to actually escape; Songa, being a free woman, could simply walk out the door. And to her credit, she told them that she wanted to go with them. Rann had died to help Jason, and she intended to stay with him and see things through to the end. She was *still* a Legion doctor, and she had duties to see to back on Earth.

Then came the day. They took him down to the lab, and while he was watching, they removed the flexcast. What was underneath was a pink, healthy looking right hand and arm, complete with skin. "And there we go," Doctor Eril mused as he took the two halves of the cast away. "Make a fist please."

Jason complied, balling his fist, but he felt the weakness in his hand then. Just holding his fist closed required active effort. He opened his hand and flexed his fingers in a repeating cascade, testing his manual dexterity. That, at least, felt normal. He had full and complete control of his motor skills, and though his hand tingled a little and felt a bit weak, it was indeed completely restored.

"Very good," he announced, grabbing Jason's new hand and probing it with his fingers. "Yes, everything looks in order, and we're already sure you have complete motor control. I'll schedule you for a biotine treatment right after your next appointment."

"Biotine?"

"It's a muscular therapy to strengthen the new muscles. After all, they've never been used. I doubt you could hold on to anything with it. Here, take my hand," he said, putting his smaller hand in Jason's palm. Jason clasped his hand, then Eril pulled away. Jason tried to keep his grip on Eril's hand, but it slid out of his fingers easily. Jason's hand was weaker than a newborn baby's, since at least a newborn could practice flexing the hand in the womb. "See? You have no muscular power at all. The biotine treatment will partially restore some of your hand's strength. Coupled with additional biotine treatments and some physical therapy, your hand should be completely recovered in about a week. Right now, I'm going to take you down to the radiation lab," he announced. "The skin on that hand has no protection against light radiation. We're going to put it under a special lamp that will urge it to produce melanin without doing any damage to it."

"So you're taking me to a tanning salon?"

"More or less," he winked. "Odd to see melanin that color. Our melanin is blue, that's why we have blue skin."

"I've always wondered why you have blue skin."

"That's why," he said as he urged Jason to stand and follow him. "Our sun produces light and other radiation in a slightly different pattern than yours, which caused us to produce a blue color-based melanin instead of the dark-based melanin in Terrans, to protect against it. Your pigment still protects you from our sun, and our pigment protects us from your sun, but that tiny little evolutionary difference between Faey and Terrans is all the reason why we're blue and you're beige." They walked down a hallway towards a pair of double doors.

"I did kind of notice that your sun seems, well, more *yellow* than ours. I thought it was because your air isn't polluted."

"It is, just slightly," he nodded. "That tiny color variation makes us blue. If humans had evolved here, *you'd* be blue."

"That's an unpleasant thought."

"Only to you," he chuckled.

The biotine treatment was *not* pleasant. They drove a multitude of tiny needles into his arm and

hand and surged jolts of power through his atrophied muscles, causing them to violently flex, as they washed the muscle cells in some kind of special chemical that caused them to rapidly divide and reinforce. It was a two hour procedure that was a test of endurance and dealing with constant, nagging pain. But, Jason couldn't deny the effectiveness of the treatment. Instead of barely having the strength to hold a closed fist, Jason could grip small objects, and he retained all the manual dexterity he'd had before losing his hand. He could easily type at the same speed, and he knew he could play the piano easily.

When he returned to his room, he found it quite full. Songa and Meya were there, as well as Myleena Merrane and two skirt-clad Faey officers, both looking rather young, wearing black Class A uniforms with thigh-length miniskirts instead of trousers. The taller of the two had long blue hair, and the shorter of them had pink-red hair done in a spiky pixie style. Jason saw that Songa too had had her flexcast removed, and she was running her fingers up and down the back of her new hand absently. "It looks nice," Myleena said in greeting as she looked at his right arm.

"It feels weird," he noted, grabbing his right wrist in his left hand and rubbing it. "What do you want, Myleena?"

"Here," she said, handing him a handpanel. He took it, and saw that it was some kind of exam or test. "You need to finish that sometime today and send it in. In five days, you'll be on your way to Makan, as soon as the Medical Service releases you."

"What is this?"

"The Makan Academy entrance examination," she told him evenly. "They wanted to get an idea of your current educational background before they tailor a schedule for you."

He gave the panel one look, then tossed it absently on the bed.

"Hey, it's your boredom, babe," she told him. "If you don't do that, they'll just stick you where you left off at Tulane. And I think you've gone a bit beyond that. But if you wanna be bored, hey, who am I to argue?" she asked, throwing her hands up.

"I already told you what's going to happen, Myleena."

"And I told you what's *really* going to happen," she countered. "You *will* be on that transport."

"I'm so glad you think so."

"We'll find out, won't we?" she challenged. "Don't think that I'm not ready for any little surprises you have set up, babe. I have every door out of this place covered. You won't get ten steps before you have nine Marines on you. *Real* Marines, Jason. Marines fresh from seeing real action, on Terra."

Jason looked at her. *Hard*. The timbre of her voice, she wanted to stress that.

Nine Marines...Jyslin's squad?

Holy *shit*! Myleena was telling him that Jyslin's squad had been rotated back to Draconis, and they were part of the armed detail surrounding the hospital! She *really was* going to help him, if only by turning a blind eye and letting him go!

"I've beaten them before," he said flippantly.

"Not this time you won't," she grunted. "But I don't have any more time. I'll see you tomorrow, and I'm sure we'll fight about that exam."

"Probably," he agreed.

Myleena escorted her two aides out, and Jason immediately went to the window and looked down. There were Marine troop transports down there, but they'd been there for a while. He reached out with his mind and searched around down there, looking for one Marine in particular that he knew, and who would know him.

I see you, Jason, Maya sent to him with light amusement. I can see that you were specifically looking for me. Well, you found me. You're getting good at that, aren't you?

Jason had to resist the urge to give out an audible cry. *Maya! Maya, what are you doing here?*

Guarding you, silly, she answered. We were brought back to Draconis after Jyslin went AWOL, to get us out of there in case anyone else in the squad had any silly ideas. They just deployed us here this

morning.

Wow, small world!

Not so small. General Lorna Shaddale put us here. Personally. Under the table, of course, she told him directly. And she handed down direct orders to us that the role of our squad is now to be your personal bodyguards, to protect you against any Trillane attempts on your life. Somehow, she got word that you married Jyslin, Jason. You're a Shaddale now, and Lorna's decided that she has to watch out for you. We have direct orders from the General Staff to protect you. We are your personal Marine detachment. When you leave for Makan, we go with you. We'd be up there right now, but the medical annex is sovereign territory, and we're not allowed inside. The squad will be your personal guards, because we have a personal stake in your welfare. You're the husband of one of us, and we'll always be there to protect you.

You say that like you think it's going to happen, he sent dryly. What they want me to do and what I'm going to do are two different things.

Of course they are. That's why, when you go wherever you go, you'll have nine armed escorts. Our orders are to protect you, Jason, no matter where you go, no matter what you do. You lead, we follow. If that takes us back to Earth and in the front lines of a war against Trillane soldiers, so be it. We have our orders, and by Trelle, we're sticking to them.

Lorna's gonna get in trouble.

Oh, please, Jason, she sent scathingly. Clearly you don't understand the Marines. A Marine general is better at politics than half the noble houses put together. We know where the order came from, but nobody else will ever track it back to General Shaddale.

Well, that's good to know, but still, I don't like it too much. Jys's family is already in really hot water because of me. I don't want to muck things up for them any more than I have already.

That's just it, Jason. You are family. They'll put their hands in boiling oil to help you, because you are family. And you're our family too. I told you that before you left New Orleans. You are part of the squad because you're Jyslin's husband, and we'll be there for you. Yana has a lock on you now, Jason. She's probably the most powerful telepath on Draconis, and she won't lose you. Wherever you go, we'll be nearby. Remember that.

Hi, Jason, came a shy sending, but a sending almost rippling with the containment of an awesome power. Maya wasn't kidding! This woman was incredibly powerful! I'm Yana. Are you feeling okay?

Hi, Yana. I'm fine. They took the flexcast off this morning. They regrew my arm just the way it was before I lost it. It looks like I'll have a full recovery.

That's good to hear.

Have they been treating you well? Maya asked.

The doctors, yes, but the Imperial woman who basically has custody of me has been something of a bitch, he answered.

Want us to drag her into some alley somewhere and beat the shit out of her? another Marine called. From the sound of the mental voice, Jason identified her as Bryn, one of the twins in the squad. Clearly, all the Marines were linked together so they could all hear a private sending between Jason and Meya.

No, I'll deal with her in my own way.

Odds are, Jason's way will be worse than what we could think up, another voice added impishly. That was Sheleese.

Probably, a new voice intoned. That was Ilia, Sheleese's best friend.

How has Jyslin been, Jason? Zora asked. Jason knew that voice very well, for Zora had been the one who had helped him get his pilot's license.

Happy, at least until I was caught, he answered. I was too.

That girl risked everything to come to you, hon. I'm glad it was worth it.

She's worth everything, he sent impulsively.

Now you sound like Maya, Lyn teased.

I can't help it if I found my soulmate and you haven't, Maya shot back.

Girls, give it a rest, Myri barked. We're here, Jason, and we'll be always be here. Maya may not have told you, but we have direct orders to protect you, but not to interfere with you. Wherever you go, whatever you do, we'll be there to protect you, even if it means firing on our own people. Do you understand that?

I understand, he sent gravely.

I'm glad you do. Yana has a lock on you, so we will always know exactly where you are. Do you understand?

I do.

Good. I'm going to make them cut this short, love. There are Imperial mindbenders crawling all over this place, and what we're doing now isn't entirely risk free. Those damn mindbenders are just as well trained as we are, and they have people that can snatch private sending right out of the air.

Jason immediately thought of Symone and her uncanny ability to do just that. Yeah, he sent in understanding. So we can't do really do this.

Exactly. But as long as you know that we're here and we're here for you, I'm content to let you stay up there. The Medical Service will keep you nice and safe until you're discharged, and then it's our job to take over.

Jason stepped back from the window, then looked at Meya with a huge grin.

"What?" she asked.

Jyslin's squad is down there, Meya! he sent privately to her and Songa. Lorna sent them personally! They're going to help get us out of here! All we have to do is get out of this hospital, and we're set!

Timely, Meya sent, but she was grinning.

A godsend. Next time I see that old warhorse, I'm gonna kiss her dead on the lips. With the squad backing us up, we can get there no problem.

Sounds like we just need you to recover and we're set.

Just about.

Myleena Merrane was a bitch.

But Myleena Merrane was brilliant.

Just for amusement, Jason looked through the exam on the handpanel while Songa and Meya played a Faey card game called Queen's Swords. It was filled with standard engineering questions, something he would have expected to see.

But there was much more to it than that.

*It took him a while to figure it out. He answered some of the questions, writing them on the side of the panel's screen, until he looked at the letters and realized that, if he converted those letters into their English equivalents of A, B, C, D, E, F, and G, they spelled out the words *a bad cab faced bead, a bed gabbed a decade, a bad cab faced bead, a bed gabbed a decade*. That pattern continued through the entire test, those same letters in that same sequence...given someone answered the questions correctly.*

Unless someone spoke English, they'd never understand that message. And the vast majority of people on Draconis could not speak English.

A bad cab faces bead. A bad cab, that clearly was a reference to a vehicle. A bead, well, looking out of his window a while showed him the bead. It was a huge silver globe in a grassy park near the ocean, visible from his window.

Clever, clever little bitch. There was a car waiting down there, if he could get to it.

A bed gabbed a decade. Well, that didn't make much sense, but it did make him check out his hospital bed. He didn't find anything weird, at least until he reached underneath and found a crumpled

piece of spiral paper. He unfolded and found a note, written in English:

Jason:

I can't help in the way you want without getting in a shitload of trouble, but I'll do what I can. I basically own the hospital's security, so tell me when you want to go, and I'll make sure it's turned off. If you can get out of the hospital, I'm pretty sure you can get to the skimmer I'll have parked for you. Once you get to it, all I can really say is be very, very careful. I can't hack planetary security, so you better not do anything to make them notice you. Go to ULC 4676-88476. That's my aunt Uri's summer house, and she's not using it right now. You can hide there until I arrange to get you off the planet. It really won't be easy getting you back to Earth, but we engineers live for the tough problems, ya know. Be safe, be careful, oh, and watch out for Aunt Uri's vulpar. She's not comfortable around strangers and she might bite you if you scare her.

Myleena

Myleena Merrane just earned herself a big kiss dead on the lips.

He had no doubt about one thing, and that was that the skimmer she was going to leave there would get him to that warehouse.

Things were looking so optimistic, Jason became literally bubbly. He went to his next biotone treatment in a talkative mood, flirting with the doctors, asking the nurse about *bacha*, a sport they played here on Draconis. The treatment didn't even seem to hurt as much this time, and after it was done they had him work his arm, moving things, holding things, exercises of manual dexterity. Those did annoy him a bit, so he had one of their panels access Civnet and generate a holographic piano keyboard, which he quickly programmed to play, and showed them just how agile his right hand was. He played several pieces, and again was lost in the simple joys of music.

He tested the strength of his arm, and found that it was fully recovered. It was three days til he was supposed to go to Makan, Songa's hand was fully restored, he had everything he needed ready, more help than he had expected to be there was in place, and the appointed time was midnight that night.

So, it was time to go. After a quick call to Myleena where he said one word to her, "tonight," they started the plan.

Getting out was a simple operation. After lights out, Songa left and went to where they were going to meet. When she got there, she sent back to them only two words; *it's here*.

Meya snuck into his room, and they quickly cast off their hospital jumpsuits and put on the clothes they'd smuggled in. Meya had on black pants and a leather-looking jacket, and Jason had his jeans from his old clothes (which had survived well enough) and a black shirt with a short sleeve on the right and an elbow-length sleeve on the left. Once they were clothed, Jason put his gear in a pack Songa snuck in, then they waited. The red light on his door blinked, then went out, telling him that Myleena had done her part and had disabled the security. It opened when he pressed the button. They slipped out of his room and stole a gurney. One of the night nurses saw them grab it and push it back towards his room, but when Jason put a finger to his lips and winked, the girl just gave him a shy smile and nodded enthusiastically.

Once they got it in his room, they got to work. Meya uploaded the stick holding the modified programming as Jason tore into the unit and made the necessary hardware modifications, cross-rigging the four antigrav pods and then blowing the arrestor unit. He gave Meya a thumbs up, and they both ran to the window with annealers. They quickly cut the entire window out of its frame and laid it aside, moved the bed, table, and chairs out of the way, then Meya jumped on the gurney and tied her foot to the rail as Jason tied a cord around his waist, threw it to Meya, who then tied it to the rail as well.

You know this is nuts, Meya sent casually as she got a firm grip on the railing.

It won't be boring, he answered. *Ready?*

As I'll ever be.

Pushing it like a bobsled, Jason charged the gurney towards the window. He felt a sudden surge of fear when the gaping hole in the wall got closer and closer, but he focused on the window ledge like a long jumper watching the line. He reached the edge, lept up onto the windowsill, then hurled himself and the gurney out the window, nearly 200 feet over the ground below. He felt a moment of panic when he saw the ground under him, then he sailed up over the gurney and landed with his chest and stomach on the gurney, but his legs dangling over the back. Meya grabbed him by the arm and dragged him onto the gurney, which rocked alarmingly back and forth as the antigrav fought high winds to keep the gurney level, even as it continued on in the direction that Jason had pushed it, slowly losing altitude as it soared over the small army of soldiers below, entrenched around the hospital to prevent him from escaping. Meya and Jason pushed forward on the gurney, and the weight on the front end caused it to descend faster, as Jason had programmed it. Tilting it left or right made it turn in that direction, and the two of them clumsily tried to aim it at the park off to the south, but they didn't do very well. Neither of them had done it before, and the high winds buffeted the gurney and made it extremely difficult to control.

This is crazy! Meya sent, fear tainting her sending as the gurney nearly flipped over.

Think of it as another good story to tell your grandchildren! he answered as he leaned far to the right along with Meya to stop the gurney from flipping over.

Don't I have enough by now? she pleaded as they tried to turn the gurney so they didn't ram into a building.

Obviously not, or we wouldn't be here! he answered as he literally had to slide over and kick the building with his foot to stop the gurney. For a hair-raising second the gurney spun out from the shock, turning three complete circles until it stabilized.

Hey, this was your idea, you maniac!

That's why you love me! he challenged as they finally drifted away from the building, then were nearly knocked over when they passed its corner and were slammed by a crosswind. *I give you great stories!*

She laughed helplessly as they got the gurney back under control, and pushed it well down to make it descend quickly. They were well past the soldiers around the hospital, and now they had to get down onto the ground quickly, before they fell off the gurney and got killed. The ground approached faster and faster, and the gurney picked up way more speed than Jason had expected. The buildings were whizzing by, and he realized he'd made no way to let them slow it down!

Meya! We have a problem!

We need to slow this thing down!

That's the problem!

She whipped her head around and gave him an ugly look. *You mean we have no brakes?* she demanded hotly.

I thought we would fallen off long before speed became an issue!

Oh, that's a lovely fucking thought! she raged as they got to within twenty feet of the ground, but they were moving at least a hundred miles an hour. Then they were fifteen feet, then ten, then the gurney stabilized at its usual three feet over the ground, ground that blurred by at a dizzying rate, but now that they weren't descending anymore, the gurney was starting to slow down. *Oh, shit!* she sent in near terror as they came out from between two buildings along a grassy park between them, and found themselves staring at a masonry wall.

Bail out! Jump the wall!

They untied themselves in a frenzy as the wall charged at them, then they both jumped up and away from the gurney an instant before it reached the wall, which struck it and exploded into a cascading shower of hot, smoking metal fragments, fragments that were only moving a little faster than them. Jason fixed his eyes on one dark metal piece of twisted metal tumbling through the air, passing him lazily, leaving a tendril of smoke behind it. The two of them sailed over the wall, and found

themselves flying at nearly fifty miles an hour over a still reflecting pool!

The impact was bone-jarring. Water broke their fall...almost. Meya literally bounced off the surface of the water, giving out a breathless cry, then struck it again, plowing a furrow into it. Jason hit the water and saw nothing but stars, and then the night sky melted like boiling butter in a frying pan. He tried to gasp, but took in a mouthful of water, and had a moment of panic when he realized he couldn't breathe. He thrashed for a moment to try to figure out which direction was up, but then his knees hit the bottom of the pool.

And he realized that it couldn't be more than two feet deep.

He breached the surface and took in a ragged breath, then choked and coughed out a copious amount of water. Meya choked and gagged not far from him, on her hands and knees in the water, then she looked at him and flopped back on her rear to sit in the pool. Jason crawled over to her and sat down himself, gave her a weak smile, then for no reason, they both broke into a bout of uncontrollable laughter.

Oh, by the Trinity, if I live through this, I'm gonna kill you, boy, Meya sent half-heartedly, then she splashed water at him.

Get in line, woman. You alright?

I don't think anything's broken, she answered. *Where are we?*

That little water pool a few blocks from the globe. We got further than I thought. Alive, anyway.

Oh, you better tell me you're joking.

I am. Maybe.

She reared up, put her hands on his shoulders, gave him an evil smile, and then dunked him.

Bastard.

I know. Can I breathe now?

Maybe.

They waded out and ran for the globe, and thanks to Miaari's touch, he knew where he was and how to get there. They went around an office building used by the Medical Service, then ducked behind a large ornate sign as a hovercar descended near them, dropping down to land by the front door. Two uniformed Medical officers departed the car and walked into the building, and the car lifted back up and into the night sky. They darted across the front of the building, slid up to the corner, then Meya quickly stuck her head out to look. She nodded to him, and they turned the corner and raced along the side of the building, past it, and into the park holding the globe.

Parked on a landing pad near the globe was a sleek black airskimmer. It was a Thrynne model, probably a PV-9 or a PV-10. Songa was standing in the hatchway, scanning the night with her eyes, looking for them.

Looks like a winner to me, Meya sent.

At least Myleena left us something nice. We can run for our lives in style.

Boy, I'm gonna kick your ass when this is overwith, she grated. *You're enjoying this, aren't you?*

A little bit, he admitted.

Well, push off.

Yes, mommy. Can we go now?

Despite the urgency of their situation, she found the time to punch him in the arm.

You're no fun anymore.

I never was. That's Myra.

Pft.

Songa kissed Meya on the cheek, then hugged Jason when they reached them. *I'm so glad you're alright!* she sent. *Why are you wet?*

Because someone forgot to put brakes on the gurney, Meya sent darkly, giving Jason a narrow-eyed glare.

Hey, we got down. What more do you expect?

To be dry! she answered immediately, which made Songa burst into laughter.

Yes, mother. Let's get going. Shotgun?

You know it, she sent as Songa closed the hatch, jumping into the co-pilot's chair. Jason squished into the pilot's seat and found the key already in the skimmer and a series of musical notes scribbled on a piece of paper taped to the dash panel. "Thank you Myleena," Jason chuckled as he read the notes, converted the letters into Faey, then typed that into the holographic keyboard. The computer recognized the control code and brought the main computer online.

"What was that?"

"The control code, written in musical notes," he answered.

"Clever."

"Myleena's a clever girl," Jason said with sincere admiration as the engines whined into life, and the skimmer was ready to take off.

"What about traffic control?" Songa asked.

As long as we stay under twenty shakra, they'll never see us, he sent in reply. *We just hug the ground and creep our way to our destination. We'll look just like a hovercar.*

With a light touch, Jason picked the skimmer up off the ground and then started them towards their destination. "No pursuit. I don't think they even know we're gone yet," Meya noted as she looked out the side window.

"Myleena's very good," Jason noted. "As long as the nurse doesn't go look and see what we did with the gurney, we have time."

"They saw you?"

One of them did, yah, Jason affirmed. "She saw us take it back to my room. Odds are, she probably thinks we're having sex on it or something."

"Probably," Songa giggled.

As fast as Jason felt he could go without attracting attention, Jason navigated the air over the grassy parks and walkways that separated the towering buildings of Dracora. At no time did Jason bring the skimmer more than fifteen *shakra* off the ground and didn't go any faster than sixty *kathra* an hour, a virtual crawl that made their trip through Dracora take more than two hours. But it was the only way to get there without being spotted. Jason used the knowledge that Miaari gave him to take the least populated route, winding and twisting through the industrial sectors of the city, keeping away from any concentrations of Faey that might notice the low-flying, slow-going skimmer and get curious enough to have someone check it out. It was a nerve-wracking trip, as all three of them kept expecting fighters to swoop down and fire on them at any moment, but no such thing happened. Two hours after boarding the skimmer, Jason inched it over a crumbling wall that surrounded an abandoned warehouse, then extended the landing skids and set the skimmer down gently. *This is it,* he sent. *We're about ten minutes early.*

I...there's someone in there, Jason, but I can't get a fix on how many, or who, Meya told him. *I can sense minds, but minds that seem to want to hide from me.*

Well, this is where Miaari told us to go. I think we have to trust that whoever's in there is a friend. I don't like blind trust like that, Jason.

It's not blind trust, Meya, it's faith. I have faith in Miaari. She won't let us down.

Meya gave him a dark look, then sighed and nodded. "Let's go. I hope they have dry clothes."

The three of them filed out of the skimmer and walked quickly towards the only door visible on the building, which was in the left corner. It opened before they got there, and all three of them stopped abruptly when they saw what was standing there waiting for them.

It was a Kimdori!

A male, and a fucking *huge* one, nearly eight feet tall! Jason felt that shiver go up his spine when the Kimdori, in his natural canine form, looked at him, then motioned them to come forward as he stepped out of the doorway. They hurried to the door and stepped through, coming into an open

warehouse area; the walls of the building were just a shell enclosing its entire volume. There were no rooms inside at all, just vast warehouse space. And in the middle of that warehouse floor was a small passenger dropship, a dropship being attended to by nearly two dozen Kimdori.

“Jason Fox,” the male stated, looking down at him. “Miaari waits for you in the dropship. We have only to wait for the others to arrive, and then we are departing.”

“Others? What others?”

“The Marines tasked to protect you. They are just outside the outer wall. They have been following you,” he said with a sly smile. “Go to the dropship.”

Jason nodded, and the three of them rushed over and up the cargo ramp. The interior of the small craft had been converted to carry passengers only, six rows of four chairs bolted to the deck. Two figures stood at the hatch leading to the cockpit, and it made Jason come up short.

One of them was Miaari. The other, holding her arm in her hand and looking a bit frazzled and wearing a thin, frilly black robe, was *Myleena*.

“Myleena!” Jason gasped. “What are you doing here?”

“What am I doing here? She *kidnapped* me, that’s what I’m doing here!” she shouted, pointing at Miaari. “Took me right out of bed!”

“What? Why did you do that?” he asked, looking at Miaari.

“Because she must go,” she answered simply.

“Go? Go where?” Jason looked around, then it dawned on him. “You’re not taking us back to Earth, are you?”

She only gave him a level stare.

“Where are we going?”

“Where you must,” she shrugged. “Board the ship, ladies,” she called over Jason. He turned and looked, and saw nine black-armored Marines being led to the ship by that same huge male. “Time is passing, and we must be away from here soon.”

Jason? What the fuck is going on? Why are there Kimdori here? Meya asked.

Damned if I know, he answered. *They told me they were going to help me get off Draconis, but they’re not taking us home.*

The Kimdori left the dropship, all but Miaari. The gray-furred creature walked up to Jason and put her hands on his shoulders, then put her hand on his neck. He felt that moment of *expansion* when she did so, but he felt nothing pass between them. “This ship will take you to a cargo vessel in orbit over the planet. That vessel is unmanned and automated. The autopilot will take you to your destination.”

“How do we get back?” Songa asked.

“You will know how to get back,” she assured them. “This is a journey you must make alone. We cannot go with you.”

“Why?” Jason asked.

“When you arrive, you will know why,” she told him.

“I don’t understand.”

“It is not something I can explain to you without breaking an oath, Jason,” she told him. “Do you trust me?”

“With my life,” he blurted impulsively.

“Then trust me now. I am not sending you into danger, and when you arrive, you will understand. I wish I could explain it to you. I truly do. But I fear it is something to which we have been sworn secrecy.”

“But you weren’t sworn to not, say, program an autopilot to take us somewhere, right? Take us somewhere so we’d see something you want us to see, and figure it out on our own?”

She gave him a wolfish grin. “You are a clever human, Jason Fox. You do your people proud. You have done your birthright as a human proud, but now it is time for you to accept your other birthright.” She turned and beckoned to a Kimdori he hadn’t seen, who had been in the cockpit, and

the small female advanced and held out a tray holding a small white box to Miaari. She took it and offered it to Jason. "Open it."

It was a simple plastic box, made of white material, smooth and cool to the touch. It had no markings or designs on it, and he saw that to open it, he only had to pull the top away from the bottom. He did so, and found the interior to be lined with blue velvet.

Inside the box was a metal object, roughly semicircular in appearance. It was a twisted metal bar with five protrusions, one of which was a curled bar that rose above the rest of it. Jason took it from the box and turned it this way and that, until he turned it in such a way that he saw a horizontal prong and a vertical one. That brought back to him a sudden image of the picture he saw of Sora Karinne, and that strange black metal thing she wore on her face.

This was one of those things. It was one of the Karinne face ornaments.

"What is this?" Jason asked.

"You will understand when the time comes," she told him. "Listen to me very carefully, both of you. As you can see, there is only one, but there are two of you. Jason, this one belongs to you. Myleena will have to wait to receive hers. Now, it is very important that you understand this, Jason. *Do not* put this on until *after* you have reached your destination. But when you do arrive, as soon as you drop out of hyperspace, you must put it on. Do you understand?"

"Why?" Myleena demanded.

"I cannot tell you why. I can only tell you that you must listen to me."

"That's not much of a reason," she flared.

"Young pup, you try my patience," she said in a deceptively level tone, fixing Myleena a withering stare, one that made the freckled Faey pale slightly and shrink back from the Kimdori. "You are being difficult just to protest the way we brought you here. Get over it, Myleena Merrane. Your petty protests are nothing compared to the importance of the reason behind it. Now, do as I have told you, or I will *do something* about it," she warned, holding up a clawed hand and reaching towards the Merrane noble.

Myleena shrank back from that hand. "Alright, alright."

"Remember, Jason. Put it on only after you have arrived, but you must do so the moment you are back in normal space," Miaari reminded him after turning to him again.

"I don't really understand why, but I understand, Miaari. What is it?"

"It is your birthright," she told him. "You are a Karinne, Jason. Both you and the resistant one," she added, giving Myleena an icy look. "This is who you are."

"Where am I going, Miaari? I don't understand."

"You are going to find the truth, Jason Fox," she told him. "It may seem that returning home and continuing against Trillane would be what you must do, but it is not. Finding the truth will be much more important to you. In this, you must trust me, Jason Fox. I would not lead you astray. Not now, not after we have come so far."

"I, I trust you, Miaari. If you say this'll help us more than me going home, I'll trust that you know what you're talking about. I have no bloody fucking idea what the hell is going on, but I'll look past that and trust you."

She gave him a wolfish smile. "Very good. They chose well, Jason Fox. Now is the time to prove that. Know only this. When you find what you seek, remember that we did our best for you. After you complete this journey, your opinion of us is going to change. Considerably. Remember only that we do truly care about you, and have done what we knew had to be done."

"I couldn't hate you, Miaari."

"I truly hope that is the truth, Jason Fox. Now, you must go, and so must we. Do you have all three sets of clothing?" Miaari demanded of a small male Kimdori who had scurried onto the dropship. He was holding a large bag.

"Yes, Elder," the male answered. "A uniform for Myleena and dry clothes for Jason and Meya."

“Put it there and disembark.” Miaari looked over at the Marines. “Be seated, ladies, you are departing. Guard him well. He is important to the Kimdori.”

“He’s pretty fucking important to us too,” Sheleese growled under her breath as the Marines moved aside and let the Kimdori pass. Miaari and the small female padded down the ramp, and she turned and looked up into the ship from the bottom. Jason started at her, his mind whirling as he tried to understand what the hell all of that was all about, but he had the presence of mind to wave to her as the ramp began to close.

“What the hell was that about?” Meya asked.

“I, I don’t know,” Jason grunted, turning the piece of metal Miaari had given him over and over in his hands. “I’m totally confused. I don’t understand anything about what just happened.”

“Where are they taking us, I wonder?” Songa asked. “Where could we possibly go to learn this truth she wants us to learn?”

“Well, we’re about to find out,” Myri said as the ship’s engines whined into life, and they felt the ship lift up from the warehouse floor. “And they’re not gonna wait for us to strap in, either! Everyone grab a seat, fast!” she barked.

They all hastily found a seat and strapped in, as the dropship, flying on autopilot, cleared the warehouse and turned a steep angle that told him they were on an orbital ascent vector *Why are you two wet?* Maya sent in curiosity.

Jason and Meya looked at each other, then burst into laughter. *It’s a long story,* Meya replied. *I’m Meya, by the way. Personal bodyguard to Kumi Trillane, and one of the rebels of the Legion..*

We know who you are, girl, Myri told her. *We were briefed. You and Doctor Songa.*

I’m, I’m a little afraid, Jason, Myleena admitted privately to him. *What’s going on? Why are the Kimdori acting like this? I’ve never heard of them doing things like this, or acting this way. It’s almost like they’re possessed.*

I don’t know, Myleena, but— he looked over at Songa, who sat on his other side, her hand over his own on the armrest. *But I trust them. They’ve already helped us so much, I can’t believe that they’re doing anything other than what they said they are.*

But, are you sure?

As sure as I am of anything anymore. This ride has gone way out of my control, and now I’m just hanging on for dear life.

That’s an...appropriate metaphor, Myleena sent as the dropship’s angle steepened, sinking them all into their chairs.

The trip up as quick and nervous. None of them had any idea what was going on, what was happening, but Sergeant Myri had gotten them all calmed down well enough by assuming command. Once the ship came out of its ascent, they found out that the dropship had to be in space, for they were in a weightless state. Jason, Meya, and Myleena changed clothes, and being Faey, they didn’t bother to go into the tiny bathroom of the dropship to do it. Jason, however, still had enough of a sense of modesty not to undress in front of eleven women, and the bathroom was occupied by Ilia, who was throwing up (“Space sickness, she always gets it,” Sheleese had told him with an evil grin), so Jason changed in the cockpit. What Miaari had left them wasn’t what he was used to, however. It was a matching skin-tight shirt and pair of hugging trousers, black and gray with silver vertical stripes running from the hem of the boot all the way to the waist on the pants, and a matching stripe from the hem to the collar along the outside of the shirt. The garment was made of memory mesh, a tough, resistant material that was very durable. It took him a little bit to get it on, since they were in zero gravity, but once he got them on, they seemed to visibly loosen, until they were as comfortable as a pair of jeans and a tee shirt. There was an overgarment that went with it as well, a garment so much like the old blue denim overshirt he used to wear that it made him put it on to get a feel for it. It felt the same way too, with sleeves that came down to his elbows and pockets on the outside of it on both sides of his

chest. It fell over his chest perfectly to make it comfortable, so he decided to keep it. He had to strap himself to a cockpit seat to get the boots on, but it also gave him a view of where they were going.

It was a very old, very battered cargo ship. It looked like a flattened cigar, no nacelles, no protrusions, and the hull was pitted, stained, and in a few places, it had blast burns from weaponry. The ship had no windows, no ports, only a large pair of doors in the belly, doors that silently opened as the dropship approached it. The interior of the ship was empty, with a large array of clamps and claws on long poles hanging from the roof of the bay, and Jason realized that cargo containers were grabbed by those clamps. That was how the ship carried its goods. And since it was automated, there was no need for a crew and the amenities a crew would require. There were no crew quarters, no galley, nothing. Jason realized that they were never leave the dropship as the dropship slowed and then ascended into the cargo bay. The ship shuddered as a series of *clangs* resonated through the hull, as the clamps took hold of the dropship and secured it. Jason looked down over the bow and saw that the doors were closing, while the sudden lateral thrust of the ship told him that the cargo ship was starting to turn.

What was that? Myri sent.

We're inside the cargo ship, and its starting to move.

Thank Trelle, when do we get out of here? Zora asked.

We don't, the ship's nothing but a flying cargo bay. It's robotic, it doesn't have anywhere to put us.

Nuts.

Myri floated into the door and then pushed over to the cockpit seats, then strapped in to the pilot's chair. A few deft commands on the holographic keyboard brought up a second screen with elegant Faey script.

[Automated Cargo Carrier MDK83-2 online. Telemetry links enabled. Available link displays: Camera system; Navigation; Ship Status; Drone Activity; Cargo Manifests]

"What are you doing?"

"These old robot ships have an open system," Myri told him as she touched the holographic screen over words, which changed the display. "Sometimes, when they carry people like this one is doing now, it allows the passengers to establish a passive link with the computer's operating system, so we can see what's going on outside or see what the ship's going to do, but we can't change any of its commands. I'm getting us into the ship's navigation right now. Those Kimdori had to program the ship to tell it where to go, and when I get there, I can see where they're sending us."

"Oh. When did you learn about all this?"

"I'm a Marine, Jason," she told him with a glance. "We train for ship to ship combat, so we have to know how various ships work in case we ever have to board one."

"Ah."

"Here we go, let me bring up navigation. I'll project it up onto the windshield."

They looked as the windshield shimmered, then a holographic projection appeared of a starmap. Jason saw Draconis on that map as a yellow dot with a label, then a dotted, curved line appeared as the map zoomed out. The dotted line connected with a blue dot quite some distance away, connected by what Jason would call a pilot's arc back to Draconis.

Myri gasped. "Are they insane?" she demanded. "We have to get off this thing!"

"Myri, where are we going?"

"They have this thing set to send us to *Karis*!" she snapped. "If we come within fifty million *kathra* of the planet, we'll be fried by radiation! What were they *thinking*?" she demanded as she typed furiously on her keyboard.

Karis. The ancestral home of the Karinnes, destroyed over a thousand years ago at the beginning of the Third Civil War. He remembered what he read, that the planet was bombed with Omega weapons, which poisoned the planet with deadly radiation that killed everyone who didn't die during the

bombardment, and did it so quickly that they didn't even have time to get on ships and escape the planet. Omega radiation was *that* lethal.

Why send him there, though? The planet was destroyed, and he couldn't even get close enough to survive if he tried! It didn't make any sense!

But Miaari knew it would kill him when she sent him there, so, maybe...maybe it *wouldn't*.

He had to have faith. He had to believe that Miaari wouldn't send him there to die. After all, she had had so many opportunities to kill him already, the idea of sending him to be cooked by a radioactive planet didn't really make much sense.

He put a hand over Myri's blurring hands, quelling her. "No," he said softly. "We have to trust Miaari. She wouldn't send us there just to die."

"Jason, I know you trust the dog, but you can't trust her this blindly," she pressed. "She's sending us to a radioactive wasteland!"

"She knows we can't survive there, Myri," he said adamantly. "So she wouldn't send us there unless she knew we'd be alright. Let's at least get there. If this thing uses hyperspace to get around, that means it can't jump into the interior of a star system. It has to come in at the edge and then come in under regular engines. We can check things out from the edge when we arrive, and go from there. Alright?"

Myri gave him a stern look, then sighed and nodded. "We'd have time to take over the drone ship and get it to take us home, but I don't like the idea of it. Karis is legally off limits, Jason. If we get stranded there, nobody's gonna come to rescue us. Nobody *would*, unless we were lucky enough to have a Jakkan ship nearby."

"What's a Jakkan?"

"The Jakkans are a race that's part of the Core Federation, the nation that borders us on the other side, towards the center of the galaxy," she told him. "Jakkans are immune to radiation. They'd be the only ones that *could* come in to get us, but since they give off radiation themselves, it wouldn't be a good thing to be stuck on a ship with them for very long."

"Oh. Well, we'll just have to see, won't we?"

"Boy, I'm gonna beat you if you get us stuck there," she told him.

"Trust me, Myri, if we get stuck there, I'll let you beat me all you want," he grunted.

It took them six hours to get to the edge of the Draconis star system, and in that time of weightless waiting, Jason could only wonder what Miaari had in mind for them. She was sending them to Karis, a poisoned planet that would kill them before they could even get within sight of it...but she wouldn't do that unless she was sure they'd be alright. It didn't make any sense, and seemed a little insane, but Jason had to hold to his faith that Miaari was truly looking out for him, and trust her. Trust her in a way he had never trusted anyone before, for she was sending him into what looked like certain death.

Karis. What would they find there? What was there that was so important that Miaari would kidnap Myleena and pile them into a ship to send them there, send them to a forbidden planet that glowed with lethal radiation?

He had time to ponder it, as did Myleena. They sat strapped to their chairs, debating the issue as the Marines floated about the cargo bay idly, doing maintenance on their armor, playing games, or in the case of Zora and Min, taking a nap. They wouldn't let him spend all his time in quiet consideration, however, for they hadn't seen him for a long time, and some of them didn't know him very well. So he and Myleena had quite a bit of friendly visitation from the Marines, as they renewed their friendships with Jason, and got to know Myleena, Meya, and Songa. He got to laugh with Sheleese, the squad clown, and get kisses on his cheeks at the same time from Lyn and Bryn, the cautious twins, and had Zora immediately start talking shop with him about flying and dropships, as they chatted about some new dropship and skimmers that had come out and Zora complained about some new rule changes coming down the pike that were going to be instituted at the beginning of next

year. Zora seemed to glow with pleasure when he asked her how her son was doing, pleased that he would remember. Meya and Myri seemed to strike up an immediate friendship, hovering over on the side with a pair of MPAC rifles in their hands, talking about military tactics, guns, and other things martial. Both were professional veteran soldiers, one a Marine and the other a personal bodyguard, so they had a lot of common ground. Sheleese, Ilia, Lyn and Bryn were playing Queen's Swords using a magboard and a special deck of zero-g cards that Bryn owned, though Ilia still looked a little greenish around the cheeks. Maya was talking with Songa a few rows back, as Songa gave her some tips on field treatment; Maya doubled as the squad medic. Yana was checking her armor, piece by piece, hovering there in the cargo bay nude with her armor tied down to straps hanging off the wall, meticulously inspecting each part of it. She had no qualms about disrobing in front of her squadmates or other women, and though Jason was a man, he was also the husband of a squadmate, so that made him like family.

I see they issued you new armor, Jason noted to Yana, after Myleena untied to go to the bathroom.

She turned and looked over her shoulder at him. *Yeah,* she sent, and again Jason could feel her raw power. They told him that Yana almost never sent, she preferred to speak...but for some reason, she had no reservations about sending to Jason. *This is what we get to wear everywhere else, the Ajax. Nested MPACs, antigrav pods for zero-g operations and limited flight capability in gravity wells, telemetry, sensors, ground to space gravband comm system, the whole pod of kaba nuts.*

It's a lot like mine, he noted. *Sounds like you have a few more systems than mine does.*

You have armor? What kind?

ZPS, he answered. *EM-60.*

Wow, those are really good. Expensive, but really good. Come over, I'll show you ours.

Jason unbelted and pushed off his seat, floating over to her. She braced one hand on the bulkhead and grabbed his hand with the other, and the touching of their hands caused her telepathic power to flare in his mind, as he unconsciously reached out to him, to try to join their minds. Jason had to actively defend himself from that push into his self, but the force behind it was very passive, very gentle. As soon as he offered resistance to it, it stopped advancing and quickly retreated. She blushed furiously and let go, lowering her eyes. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "When I touch people sometimes, that just kinda happens."

"It's alright, accidents happen," he assured her. "So, what else do these puppies do that's different from my ZPS?"

She showed him all the systems in Marine AJX Battle Armor, or just Ajax as the Marines called it, standard issue, built by a special personal combat systems division of Merrane Macrotechnology. Hovering there talking with Yana showed him that Yana was a little shy around him since she didn't know him very well, almost embarrassed about her incredible telepathic power, but she was trying to reach out and get to know him.

She explained how all their systems worked, basically as they just passed the time, then Yana broached a subject that caught Jason off guard. "Jason, what was it like?"

"What was what like?"

"Having sex with Jyslin."

He gave her a startled look. "That's, er, a personal question, Yana."

"No, what was it like to, you know, *do it*," she asked, touching his temple with her finger meaningfully. "Boys won't let me do it, they're afraid of me," she told him in a quiet voice. "They're afraid I'm too strong for them, that I might hurt them. But you and Jyslin are both so strong, almost as strong as me, I was curious how you did it without, well, *hurting* yourselves. You know?"

He laughed nervously. "Oh, *that*. Well, we were just careful, that's all," he told her. "I trusted that Jyslin wouldn't hurt us."

She chewed on the end of her finger absently. *I wish other boys believed that,* she told him. *I've always wanted to try it, but boys are scared of me.*

Well, don't look at me, he warned.

She looked up at him, then giggled. Of course not, you silly. If we did that, Jyslin would kill both of us. I was just hoping you could, like, you know, explain how you did it without hurting yourselves, so I could explain it to a boy. I guess you wouldn't be scared of it, though. You and Jyslin are almost equally strong, so there's no huge gap there to intimidate you.

I didn't realize Faey men were afraid of women like that.

Well, they're afraid of me, she fretted. They say I'm too strong, and I'll hurt them. You know, get lost in it and burn out their brains or something silly like that. They're afraid of opening themselves up like that to me, you know, no defenses.

Well, sounds to me like you just need to find a guy that trusts you.

You make it sound so easy, she accused. It's not like I'll ever find a guy like you, either.

Why not?

Jason, I'd put a year's pay on the fact that you're the strongest male telepath in the entire Imperium, she told him seriously. You are way over other males, and you're much stronger now than you were back in New Orleans. Your power has grown along with your control over it. I almost wouldn't believe a male could be as strong as you if I didn't know you personally. I guess that Faey blood in you mixed very well with your human blood and produced a male telepath with a woman's power.

Maybe that's why Trillane is so afraid of me, he mused. Not me personally, but what I might represent, a force of native telepaths strong enough to face them down.

If I were Trillane, I would be, she nodded. How strong was that other male? Tim, wasn't it?

Strong, but not as strong as me, he answered. Though Temika is really strong, up to a Marine's standard. Maybe you're right there, Yana, maybe children from a human and a Faey are very strong natural telepaths.

Temika? Another human telepath?

Jason nodded. I met her in the preserve, after I left New Orleans. She's a powerful telepath, and she also throws a mean left hook. She could easily pass the Marine base test.

Stronger than you?

He shook his head.

Well, your title is assured then, strongest human telepath, she told him with a grin. You marry a Marine, baby, you better be the best. We don't allow weaklings in here.

Listen to you, he teased. Making statements like that with your bare ass hanging out where everyone can see it.

Like they care, she sent scathingly. If they did care, I don't wanna know about it.

Jason laughed.

He and Myleena continued to speculate after Yana started putting her armor back on, but they simply could not understand why Miaari was sending them to Karis. There was just too much left out, too many holes. The only thing they really could say was that there was something there that Miaari felt they had to see, and that somehow it was tied in with the rebellion on Earth, that it would help Jason in his struggle against Trillane. But what could be on Karis that would do that? Maybe some old Karinne machines, like old fighters and stuff, that weren't blown up in the bombardment? If that was so, they'd have to decontaminate them. They could probably get some rifles and such, but given it was from a thousand years ago, they wouldn't be MPACs. They'd be hot plasma rifles or ion rifles, the technologies in use back then.

They ran out of time to speculate, however, because Myri shouted out from the cockpit that the ship was entering its hyperspace countdown, and they'd better strap in. "What's hyperspace like?"

"It's a jump, Jason," Maya told him. "It's very fast. We jump into hyperspace and travel between the origin and destination, then drop out of hyperspace. A trip to Karis is pretty far, so, what you think Lyn? Twenty seconds?"

“About that,” she nodded. “Hyperspace travel is very fast, Jason. It only gets long if you’re like moving between two empires or something like that. You move about a parsec a second in hyperspace.”

“That’s *in* hyperspace, though,” Bryn added. “Time moves different in there. It’ll take us about twenty seconds, but out here, it’ll take us about four days.”

“Four days?”

“For everyone else. For us, it’ll take about twenty seconds. It goes into relativity theory shit, you know. We’ll be moving in a different time reference while we’re in hyperspace.”

“Einstein would have loved to meet you guys,” Jason told them as Myri sent from the cockpit. *Everyone strapped in?*

Just a sec, Sarge, Sheleese sent as she helped Songa adjust her shoulder strap, then she pulled herself into the seat next to the doctor and quickly and professionally strapped herself in. *Alright.*

We’re good, Ilia answered. We’re ready to go.

Alright, we’re jumping in thirty seconds.

I’ve never jumped hyperspace before, Songa sent openly. *Just using stargates. Is it scary?*

Not really, Zora answered her. *The ship’ll shake a little when we jump in, then shake a little more when we jump out. While we’re in, time will go all screwy and you might get a little dizzy and may see things that aren’t there, but it’s normal.*

What do you mean, screwy? Jason asked.

For some, it’ll seem like time stops, to others, it’ll look like time’s going by at like years every second, but it’s all just an illusion created by our three dimensional brains when they’re in higher dimensional space. You also might see things you know aren’t there, and hear and smell things, too, but they’re just sensory ghosts where our brains are trying to make sense of things it can’t understand. When we drop out, everything you see will vanish and it’ll be just like it was when we jumped in. You’ll see, she told them.

We had to take training for it, Min told them. *Some people don’t jump well, but Marines have to jump when we go to systems that don’t have stargates. So we take training so we can control the illusions. They freak some people out.*

You had to tell us that right before we’re about to do it? Jason sent hotly.

Oh, did I do that? she sent, her thought dripping with vast insincerity.

I’m gonna spank you, woman! Jason snapped at her as Myri broke in.

Three, two, one, here we go!

Jason wasn’t sure he liked the idea of seeing hallucinations, so he simply closed his eyes as the ship started to rock and throb and vibrate, but he certainly knew it when they jumped out of normal space, because he felt...*different*. His thoughts suddenly flowed like the purest water, a cascade of crystalline awareness that poured forth in gentle waves. He found himself opening his eyes to a vision that some people would say was drug induced, as the interior of the dropship cargo bay seemed to twist and undulate, like the metal bulkheads were made of silly putty, and the air became warm and heavy. A tendril of Myleena’s blond hair drifted lazily into view, and he turned his head to look at her. It was like she was moving in slow motion, her rose colored eyes turning towards his as her head tilted. There were...sounds. Murmurings, like a million billion voices all whispering at once, a wild cacophony that tickled at his consciousness in the strangest way, like he could almost understand what they were saying. He saw little sparkles of light all around Myleena, sparkles that flowed away from her and swirled around his eyes, then seemed to dance in midair before hurtling with startling speed out through the wall of the bulkhead, vanishing from sight.

It was like the snapping of a rubber band. The shifting walls shuddered, pulled taut, and then *SNAP*, they looked normal again. The ship began to shake and rock, and Jason felt that strange feeling in his brain fade quickly, returning to normal, telling him that their jump was complete, and they were there.

Shakedown! Myri sent commandingly, and the Marines all started checking each other, and no less than four Marines put a hand on him and checked him using telepathy, making sure he was alright.

“Jason, that thing. Miaari told you to put it on as soon as we got here,” Songa reminded him as Ilia unstrapped her from her seat, and she floated out of it.

Jason looked down where he had half of it in his pocket, then pulled it out and looked at it. He saw the two downward jutting tines, his ear supposed to go between them, and he oriented it so he could put it on.

He didn’t hesitate, even though he had no idea what this thing was or why he had to wait to put it on here. He set it over his head, over his ear, then pushed it down. The top piece touched the top of his head just as the base of it settled against the top of his ear, and the tine that would jut out over his cheek slid past his vision and took up residence as a visible blackness just at the bottom edge of his vision.

It settled into place, and it felt cool to the skin of his face and head. Then it seemed to warm up, almost impossibly so.

[Please be seated, imprint process will commence in five seconds.]

That voice was *inside his mind!*

“Demir’s sword!” Yana gasped in shock, putting her hands to her head, as Myleena visibly paled.

“What?”

“Get it off him!” she literally screamed, scrambling to get her straps off. “Take it off him! Hurry!”

Meya reached from her seat beside him for the device, but it was too late. Jason took in his breath as he felt his brain literally explode. The thing, the device, it was *telepathic*. It drove into his brain like a spear, quickly spreading its awareness through him like a tidal wave, and then it started analyzing, inspecting, studying. Jason’s hands seized on the seat and he began to jerk and convulse uncontrollably, and Meya and Zora, who had been sitting on either side of him, tried to push him down into the seat, panic racing across their features, but there was more to it than that. Jason was sending, and his sending was chaotic, nonsensical, and it was so strong that it made everyone in the dropship wince and cry out, as they had to defend themselves against his disjointed open sending, so strong that more than one Faey’s nose began to bleed as they tried to protect themselves from it. The device searched through his brain, it puzzled out the activity it found there, and then it seemed to orient itself to the patterns it discovered. A thousand garbled images and sounds flowed through his brain, but they slowly started to make sense, to be comprehensible, as the device assimilated itself to the unique aspects of the way Jason’s mind worked, things that made him who he was, and then seamlessly and painlessly settled itself into those patterns, becoming a literal extension of himself, a part of his mind outside of his mind, as man and machine joined somewhere in the middle to form a new cognitive whole. The wild sending Jason was releasing on them toned down, settled down, became rational once again, and then it stopped altogether.

[Imprint is complete. Gestalt Model 141B, Software version 2837A11.002, online and fully operational.]

Jason panted, putting his head back. Holy *shit!* Was this the secret the Kimdori had been hiding all this time? Was this what she had sent him here to discover?

The thing on his face...it wasn’t an ornament, it was a *computer*...and it was *telepathic*. It had established a telepathic communion with him, and he could feel it on the edges of his awareness even now, patiently waiting for him to give it orders to carry out.

Holy Lord above. Was this what Miaari wanted him to see? Was this what she wanted him to know, that the Karinnes had done what many considered impossible, and had created a machine that could interface with Faey telepathy?

No, there had to be more to it. She could have just given him this thing and told him to put it on, or told him about it. What she wanted him to see, what she wanted him to find, was out here. It was in this star system, in the ruins of the homeworld of the house of Karinne. That was what she wanted him to see. That was where he had to go. He just knew it.

“Jason! Jason, are you alright?” Meya asked, her face pale, concern all over her face as she put her hands on the device and prepared to pull it off him.

“No!” he said in a strangled tone, grabbing her wrist and seizing it in a powerful, desperate grip. He was aware of the device, it was like it was a part of himself...if she pulled it off him, he had no idea what might happen! “No, don’t! Don’t take it off!”

“What the hell was that? What happened?” Myri shouted as she floated in from the cockpit, tiny beadlets of blood floating away from her nose.

Myleena gave him a deep, searching look. “Is it? Is it really?” she asked in a whisper.

He nodded.

“Yana?” Ilia asked desperately.

“That thing, that thing is *telepathic*,” she said, almost in disbelief. “I could hear it turn on when Jason put it on. It can *send*! It’s a telepathic machine!”

“That’s impossible!” Myri snapped.

“No, she’s right,” Jason said, getting his breathing back under control. “It, it had to imprint itself so it could talk to me, but it’s working now,” he told them as Meya let it go, and he traced light fingers along the warm metal. “It’s, it’s called a *gestalt*,” he told them as the machine told him exactly what it was when he wanted to know. It had heard his thought and supplied him with the answer. “It calls itself a personal assisting device, it’s like a personal computer that interfaces with me directly with telepathy. It’s talking to me right now.”

“What’s it saying?” Min asked as Myri barked “well, why did it do that to you?”

“It had to imprint to me,” he answered Myri. “It’s saying that there’s a brief period of mental disjunction when a gestalt initiates the imprint process. That’s why it told me to sit down before it started.”

They were all silent, for a *long* moment. “That’s why she told you not to put it on until you got here,” Myleena reasoned, breaking the silence. “If you put that on on Draconis, every Faey within fifty *kathra* would have heard that.”

“She knew what it was, that’s for sure,” Bryn agreed. “And now I wonder what other things we might find in this star system that shouldn’t exist.”

“And that’s why we’re here,” Maya said evenly. “The Kimdori are going to reveal their secret, and they chose *us* to show it to.”

“I guess so,” Jason said, shaking his head. The gestalt was very snugly attached to him, seeming to glue itself to his skin, but it was neither uncomfortable nor heavy. He really couldn’t even feel its weight, the only hint he had that it was there was that light touch on the back of his mind from the unit and the little black bar that he could see at the bottom of his vision. He found it a bit annoying, and then, to his surprise, the color changed to a dull metal gray. The unit could change the color of its housing!

The ship shook slightly. Myri looked back towards the cockpit, then grumbled. “The ship’s opening its cargo bay doors and releasing the clamps,” she warned. “Everyone strap back in!” she barked. “Zora, come up and pilot this thing! It’s off autopilot now!”

“I guess from here, we have to go on our own,” Myleena said quietly. “We have to decide to go on, or we just have the cargo transport take us home.”

“We have to choose,” Jason said in agreement.

“Well, I say we go on,” Sheleese said loudly. “Who knows what we’re gonna find out here? If the Karinnes could build a telepathic computer, I wanna see what else they managed before they were destroyed! Hell, we might find the recipe for the perfect man!”

Jason and Myleena shared a long, personal, private look. They knew that whatever they found here would concern them. They were the descendents of the Karinnes, and as Miaari had said, this was their birthright, as much as the gestalt that was now attached to Jason’s mind was. What else was here. What was here that was so important that Miaari would go to these extremes to show them? It had to

be *very* important, and that meant that it was something that they should investigate.

"We go," Myleena said, holding her hand out to him.

"We go," he agreed, taking her hand. "I'm going up into the cockpit. I want to see, and besides, I'm the second best pilot on this ship. Zora might need a seasoned hand in the second chair."

"Good point. Go," Myri ordered. "I'll take the engineer's chair."

Jason patted Myleena's hand before floating up front and pulling himself into the right chair. Zora was already strapped in and putting her headset on, then she tapped a series of buttons on the glass panel that enabled the controls on her side and took autopilot offline. "Alright, where are we going?" she asked as she inched the dropship down, out of the cargo bay of the transport. As soon as they were clear, the bay doors closed, but the ship did not move. It simply began to wait. Clearly, it would wait for them to return.

"Karis," Jason said. "That's why we're here, so let's start with that."

"If we're not cooked before we get there. I'm getting radiation readings already, and we're about four billion *kathra* away. Karis is lighting up almost as bright as its sun on the radiation sensors."

"Well, let's go in that direction and see if we don't see anything interesting before we get so close that it gets dangerous," he said.

"We can get about halfway in before it becomes dangerous," she estimated. "We're gonna need shields to get much further than this. Check the ship's status, Jayce, see what she's got."

"Got it," he said, typing on a holographic keyboard on his side. He brought up an image of the ship as it listed its operational equipment. "Thirty megajoules, that console," he pointed to a panel on her side.

"Not bad," she nodded, tapping the display to bring it up, then activating them. "Those are some beefy shields for a ship this size." She glanced at him, as she pushed the throttle. They all sank a little into their chairs as the dropship began to accelerate, and out here, in space, they would continue to accelerate until she neutralled the throttle. They were using space protocols now, the navigation of ships by vectors, and they could get the ship up to about a quarter of light speed before they started overloading the engines, as their location in space changed too rapidly for the unit to be able to translate that space and then distort it to induce acceleration. "Alright if I send, hon?"

"Yeah, I'm fine now," he answered.

She nodded. *Alright girls, stay strapped while we get up to cruising speed, and then you're free to move around. We're gonna have four hours of cruising until we get to where we have to turn around because of the radiation.*

The texture of her sending was...strange. Jason thought about it, and realized that her sending felt sharper, more clarifying than usual. He was sensing subtle textures and undercurrents of her thought he had never noticed before. He had no trouble understanding it, but he realized that he could sense *more* than just the thought she was projecting. He could sense her excitement about the idea of exploring Karis, and more than a little fear, and worry that all that radiation was going to blind the sensors and make it impossible to get any reading, requiring them to be able to physically see...which would be way too close. He could sense that she was worried about him, and she was *wildly* curious about the device on his ear. She wanted to know what it was, how it worked, and how the Karinnes had built it.

It was...bizarre. He gave her a curious look, and she just gave him a smile. *What?*

He gathered himself to send in reply, and then felt the gestalt *engage*. It seemed to gather up his thought, coalesce it, and then pushed itself behind it. When he did send, he distinctly felt it. He wasn't sending through the gestalt, but the gestalt was adding a little extra push behind it. The thing was *aiding* his telepathy! It didn't just have the ability to understand telepathy, it was *amplifying* his own power, acting like a bullhorn!

Holy *shit*! If *all* the Karinnes wore one of these, no wonder they were known as the most powerful telepaths in the Imperium! Their telepathy was artificially boosted!

Wow, Jason sent, touching the gestalt. *Myleena!* In a second, the entirety of everything he

experienced using the device was transmitted to her via sending; thoughts, feelings, sensations, things he could never explain or describe using the clumsy medium of words. This was best explained using pure thought.

Incredible! How much stronger does it feel? she asked in reply.

I can't really tell, but sending is sharper, more clear than before. I have a much better sense of the thought behind the sending. Does mine seem any different?

Not different, but you have more clarity, Yana answered. *More bandwidth. I'm getting more of a sense of your thought, and your emotions are bleeding into it a little more.*

I'm starting to think that that little machine is something we really need to understand, Myleena told him. *I can't wait to find one and take it apart, see how it works.*

Miaari said you'd have to wait to get one of your own...I think she was hinting that we might find more of them. Maybe these gestalts are what she sent us here to find. If we put them on the other telepaths, they could protect whole units of troops from Faey soldiers.

We'll find out soon enough, Zora injected, as she neutralled the throttle. *That's as fast as I'm gonna push her, cause I want plenty of time to back off in case we get bad reading ahead. You can move around now, girls.*

Alright, Jason, come here. Now, Myleena sent. *Let's explore that device.*

Oh, don't even think of keeping me out of this, Yana sent urgently.

As the others looked on excitedly, Jason, Myleena, and Yana, the three strongest telepaths on the dropship, joined hands and entered into a willfull telepathic communion, sharing their thoughts with each other willingly, opening themselves up to each other, and then all three of them turned to the alien presence attached to the back of Jason's consciousness. Jason asked it, quite directly, what it was and what its function was.

[Processing. Command processed.]

A detailed image of a menu appeared in his mind, a menu listing its programmed functions. From the programming of the device, it had three basic functions.

The first function Jason had already discovered. It helped to boost the natural power of a telepath by adding the machine's strength to Jason's mind, increasing his base level, in a way, giving him more power and more sensitivity, acting like a telepathic amplifier.

The second function was something Jason understood completely. It was a *computer*, and its purpose was to assist its wearer. It was like the panel he'd had back home, a personal computer, with most of the same basic abilities, but not as powerful as his panel...but this computer was directly linked to his brain, and it allowed him to control it with his own thoughts. Its interface was *telepathic*.

And, because it was a machine, it had the ability to interact with other machines. That was its third function. It could control other machines that were set up to receive hyperthreaded gravband on a specific frequency, allowing a Faey wearing a gestalt to operate a skimmer without so much as touching the controls, for example, or interface with another computer that had access to Civnet. He could surf Civnet using nothing but his brain...and that was a scary thought that brought memories of old movies like *The Matrix* or *Ghost in the Shell* back to him. The range of the gestalt's transmitter was only about five hundred *shakra*, which limited its ability to do this.

They had hoped to learn more about the device, maybe where it had come from and who had used it, but that was all that it had in its memory. The device had no stored memory, no manuals, nothing that might help them understand how it worked. Clearly, anyone who wore this device would be expected to already understand how to use it before imprinting it. All they learned was that the date of manufacture for the device was 2837, and that Jason was its first registered user. It had been factory fresh...but factory fresh, unused, for over thirteen hundred years.

But still, it was eye-opening. The Karinnes had built this device, and it was clear that this wasn't just some crude experiment. They had plenty of experience with them, and its software version told him that it had undergone multiple software upgrades to its operating system, as they refined the

programming more and more and more. This was not an experiment. This was a *finished product*.

"I wonder how many years they were building these things, and the rest of the Imperium never knew," Yana breathed as they broke their communion. "Never knew what the Karinnes had."

"Maybe they did know," Jason grunted. "Maybe that's why they were destroyed."

"They wouldn't destroy something like *this*," Myleena said, touching the gestalt on Jason's face. Her stomach growled audibly, and she blushed slightly. "I think my stomach is reminding me who's in charge," she said. "I'm hungry."

"Me too," Jason admitted.

"I saw the Kimdori load some field rations in the storage bins. They prepared us for this."

"Now you tell me there's food on this tub? Thanks a lot!" Min snapped from the row behind them. "I'm starving back here!"

"Seems our timeliness with information about matches yours, Min," Myleena said coolly.

She laughed. "Ohhhh, that's right, are you gonna spank me now, Jason?" she asked, starting to undo her waist strap, which was all that was holding her to her seat. "Let me get my armor off, so we can both enjoy it! We can even let the others watch. It'll be fun!"

"Min, you are weird," Jason told her.

"No red blooded Faey girl turns down a spanking from a handsome boy," she winked at him.

"Once you get his hand on your ass, you don't have to urge him to move it very far to get it where you *really* want it to go, you know."

"I'm married, Min."

"So?"

Lyn came up behind Min and smacked her on the backside with her armored glove, which made her pitch forward. "Was it good for you, baby?" she asked as Min pinwheeled out over the seats and towards the forward bulkhead.

The exchange was light and playful, but in a way, it told Jason that the Marines weren't going to let this revelation and the new piece of hardware resting on Jason's ear change their core idea of him, and for that, he was grateful. To them, he was still just Jason. Husband of one of their squad sergeants, focus of their current orders to protect him, and friend.

They all took a needed break for lunch, digging into the field rations the Kimdori had put on the dropship. They were Faey rations, so Jason found himself eating something called *dokar*, which tasted something like pork. Myleena traded him her dessert for his, because she didn't like *koya* cake, but he found he rather liked it.

Jason, Sarge, come up here, Zora sent from the cockpit.

They floated up, Myri pushing him from behind as he handwalked his way through the hatch, and they both looked at an image she had projecting between the two pilot chairs. It was an ovoid mechanical device. *There's a string of these about fifteen minutes ahead of us. None of them are giving off any energy signatures. I think they're relics from Karinne, old early warning satellites, maybe.*

How many are there?

Not so many that we have to worry about getting past them. Maybe one every thousand kathra or so. I just didn't think we should go by them without letting you know.

You sure they're dead?

No energy signatures at all, at least I can see, she answered. *The radiation from the interior of the system is making it hard to get accurate sensor readings. They're covering all the channels with radiation snow. That's only gonna get worse as we get closer to Karis.*

How far are we from that line of safety you were talking about? Myri asked.

About an hour, she answered.

Alright, let's go ahead and go on, then. But keep an eye on them.

Will do, boss. Jason, up here with me. I want another seat to keep an eye on those things as we get

close.

Sure, Zora, he answered, floating over to the copilot's chair and strapping himself in. *How was that field ration?*

How are any of them? Tasteless, but sickeningly nutritious, she answered, which made him laugh. *Every time I open one, I wonder if I'm ever gonna find someone's finger inside. Then I wonder if it was put there on purpose or by accident.*

Eww, Jason sounded.

Yeah, eww.

Jason was assigned the task of tracking the drifting satellites as they approached, and watching the sensors to see if any of them started giving off any energy signatures. None of them did, none of them changed their orbital tracks, none of them did anything. Zora angled them safely through the line, about halfway between two of them and about five hundred *kathra* over their line. As soon as they cleared the line of old satellites, Zora gasped and looked at her sensor window. Hard.

"What?" Jason asked.

"All the radiation readings are *gone*," she told him, giving him a confused look. "Wait a minute, we just passed that line—"

"They were sensor jammers?" Jason asked in confusion.

"That was just way too sudden for them not to be," she told him. "What I'm reading now is much more *normal* radiation readings. I'm getting a little return from where Karis is, but nothing like before. It looks within Faey tolerance."

Myri was called up to assess the situation, and they decided to keep going. But they couldn't get back to cruising speed, because the suddenyl different sensor readings were warning of a large number of inert objects ahead. Myleena slowed down even more, slow to a speed where they could maneuver, and they found out what the strange readings were on their scopes as they reached the first of them.

Debris. Floating debris so thick it looked like an asteroid field, all of it twisted metal.

A ship. A big one, from the look of it, Zora sent as they carefully picked their way through the debris field. *Looks like she got hit right in the reactor and blew.*

Why are the pieces all right here? Wouldn't they have drifted away?

Some have. What's here is probably about thirty percent of the ship, she answered. *But the debris has its own gravity field, and that pulls back all the larger pieces and the ones with low energy. And remember, Jayce, all this junk is moving. We're going, what, about twenty thousand? This debris is moving at the same speed we are.*

Why do you say something hit it?

This ship was destroyed. See the blast burns right there on that piece of outer hull? she asked, pointing at a lazily spinning piece of flat metal that looked like bacon fried in a pan along its edges. *This ship was destroyed in combat. From the looks of it, it had to be a really long time ago. All the ship's markings have faded on the outer hull pieces. This might be the remnants of one of the ships that originally attacked Karis and destroyed the Karinnes.*

[Contact. Relay beacon. Responding.]

What do you mean, respond? What contact? Jason thought at the machine.

[Karinne relay beacon is querying. Interfacing.]

What happened next could only be called an out of body experience. The gestalt on his face reached out and made contact with some other device, and that device made a connection. It reached right into the gestalt and then read the machine's memory, then withdrew.

[Message found. Accessing, please wait..]

"Jason, what's happening?" Zora asked, looking at him.

Jason had his hand on the gestalt. "It received a signal," he answered. "It tried to answer, but it couldn't find some code. It just talked with whoever contacted it, and now it's downloading something. I, I think maybe some parts of the old Karinne system are still working, Zora. Something

called a relay beacon just made contact with the gestalt.”

[Download complete. Message, all Karinnes, emergency priority. Reading.]

In his mind, an image formed, almost like looking at a monitor. It was a Faey woman with long white hair, wearing a gestalt, and there was smoke behind her. *Anyone who receives this beacon broadcast, turn around immediately!* she seemed to say. *We are under attack by Seditionist forces! All Karinnes—*

And the message ended.

That was *sobering*. That message had been waiting for a thousand years to be delivered, but it had been for nothing.

Jason sighed. “One of their beacons is still working, even after all this time” he told Zora. “It had a message. It was a Karinne, warning that they were being attacked.” He sent her a memory of what he saw in his mind’s eye, and his solemn sense tinted the thought. Such a waste.

“Wow,” Zora breathed. “But it makes sense that it may still be working, since there’s no radiation.”

They accelerated back to a cruising speed, but Jason didn’t leave the cockpit. He and Zora stayed in the chairs, and others drifted in and out to look, see what was going on, as they got closer and closer to the not-so-irradiated planet of Karis.

That explained a great deal. Miaari had to know the truth, know that Karis wasn’t as destroyed as the Imperium believed.

They were within functional sensor range, capable of reading more than just radiation...but it wasn’t a good start. The place was devastated, that was clear, and they were also now close enough to get an extreme distance telescopic image of the planet. It was disconcerting. Vast craters where cities must have been, nothing but a planet of brown and blue, bare rock and earth and oceans, covered in bands of white clouds. All the plants and animals, gone, nothing but sterile earth and water. As they approached, they saw that there were some intact ruins, ruins of smaller towns that hadn’t been directly bombed, and as the planet rotated, new tracts of land and sea became visible.

“Still no energy readings,” Zora noted. “No satellites in orbit outside of its natural moon, none at all. That’s weird. There should at least be some satellites up, even if they don’t work anymore. Not unless they were all shot down.”

They looked out the windshield, and saw a tiny little brown dot in the distance, which was Karis. On the monitor, however, they had a very detailed view of the planet, so detailed they could focus on a single building sitting on the surface. That’s where it was now, focused on a single building, with several vehicles laying on the sterile earth around it. No plants. No animals. Not even any skeletons or clothes. The place was uninhabited.

“Hold on, I’m getting a faint energy signature,” Zora said as she panned back, getting back to a planetary view, and her eyes locked on the lower right corner of the planet, at a new part of the planet that had rotated into view. “Look at that!” she gasped, then she quickly focused in on that area, and zoomed in.

It was a large island in the southern hemisphere, with a large volcanic cone mountain in its center. What separated this island from everything else they had seen so far was that it was *green*.

There were trees there! Trees! Zora zoomed in and managed to get individual trees on the monitor, then panned out and showed that the entire island was carpeted in trees and grass.

“What in the bloody hell is going on,” Zora breathed. “Plants? Someone must have cleaned up all the radiation, and they’re terraforming the planet to make it habitable again. And they’re hiding what they’re doing behind a sensor jamming network.”

“Who could do it?”

“Nobody,” Zora said. “Omega radiation will kill just about anything but a Jakkan, who wouldn’t change it, or a—” she gasped, and looked Jason in the eye. “Or a *Kimdori*!”

“Is this what she wanted us to see? See her people terraforming Karis back to where it’s

inhabitable?”

“Why? She could have just *told* us,” Zora mused.

“Yeah. So, Myri, do we land?”

Myri drifted up from her chair behind them and looked at the image. “There’s a building complex here,” she said, pointing. “It’s all still standing. There’s a landing platform.” She pointed to a little white square near the buildings, a tiny white square surrounded by green. “Put us down there, Zora. Carefully.” *Armor up*, Myri sent seriously. *We got thirty minutes til we hit the ground. Get ready.*

“You got it, boss,” Zora told her.

Jason, Myleena, Meya, and Songa were in the cockpit as they began the approach to the dead planet, dead everywhere but one small island in the southern hemisphere. There were just so many questions broiling around in Jason’s head, it wasn’t even worth it to try to answer, or even talk about, them. The only way to finally understand what Miaari said, what Miaari was doing, was go down there and look. That’s what she wanted them to do. That’s what all of this was leading up to, all of her work to get him where he was. She had gone to a lot of trouble to get him here and leave him in a state of virtual ignorance, with only this dot of green in a barren wasteland and a telepathic computer attached to the side of his head to go on.

But what was there? What truth was there that Miaari wanted him to find, a truth that would help save the humans of Earth from Trillane, a truth that would let him go home and kick them off Earth, and be with his beloved Jyslin once again? Weapons? Technology? Who knew. He just knew that all the answers were down there, in that oasis of green surrounded by dead brown and sterile blue.

Atmospheric contact in thirty seconds, Zora warned them. *Everyone prepare for turbulence.*

All the joking in the back had stopped. Eight Marines were in full armor, carrying MPACs, were strapped down and ready to ride out their entry, and they were all business.

The ship bucked only slightly as Zora skillfully brought the ship down into the atmosphere, and lined them up on an entry vector that would take them to the island. The ship decelerated as it descended down into an atmosphere that was not contaminated with deadly radiation, like everyone believed, dropping down into a blue sky illuminated by a blue star of a sun. Jason felt more and more nervous and anxious as they approached the solitary oasis of life in this desert, as he read off the sensor readings of the outside to the others. *Oxygen is 1.3 of normal, gravity is .94, pressure is 1.05. No poisonous gasses detected. No radiation. No biological signatures anywhere. Not even microbes.*

Five minutes, Zora warned as they decelerated even more, and the island came into view on the horizon. They descended to fifteen thousand *shakra* and made their approach, as Jason watched the sensors and Zora kept one eye on the windshield and the other on her instruments.

No communications, Jason informed everyone. *Not even from this*, he added, touching the gestalt. *But I’m reading a faint energy signature on that island, at the same level we got from orbit.*

The dropship deployed its landing skids and slowed to an approach speed, as Zora’s light touch on the controls brought the compound into view. It was a cluster of ten glass buildings built on a low plain near the ocean, two of which had sides that descended right down into the water. The buildings were connected with walkways, some of them bridges between them. *No contacts*, Yana called. *It’s deserted. There’s no sentient life out there, not even animals.*

The landing platform was behind the compound, on the edge of a lush forest, and Zora brought the ship over the white pad with red circles on it, and set the ship down so lightly there was barely a bump, right in the center of the platform.

By the time Jason and the others were up and coming out of the cockpit, the back ramp was open, someone was throwing Zora her helmet, and four Marines were already deployed at the base of the ramp in a cover formation, rifles ready as all of them swept the area looking for minds, looking for any possible combatants that Yana might have missed. *I don’t sense anyone at all*, Myleena told him, sending to Jason privately.

I have no motion anywhere, Bryn reported, holding up a small hand sensor. *The buildings have a*

faint power source. I think some of them are still operational.

Which one has the most power?

The big one right here in front of us.

Bryn, Sheleese, point. Min, Ilia stay here and guard the ship. Miss Songa, stay here please, I'm not taking any doctor into an unknown situation. It'd be my ass. Everyone else, two by two, no more than ten shakra spread, keep the noncoms in the middle, Myri commanded. We're moving in to investigate that building

I'm no fucking noncom, Meya protested. Someone find me a rifle.

Here, Yana called, lobbing her MPAC to Meya, then she extended the barrels of her nested forearm guns.

Take this, Maya told Jason, handing him her rifle. He took it and held it low and ready, while Maya too extended her forearm guns.

What am I, a memory? I'm a Naval officer, Myleena barked. Give me a rifle. I won't blow off my own foot.

Here ya go, Ilia called, handing her rifle off. I don't think I'll need it here at the dropship.

No firing unless you can confirm your target, Myri barked. Nothing alive here, but I'm not gonna have you bitches blowing holes in maintenance droids because you're fucking spooked. We're Marines, ladies, let's show them what that means.

Jason was a little frightened as they crept into the building, a building that, he noticed, was clean. He expected dust to be all over everything, but there was no dust anywhere. The air inside was a bit stale, and it was warm and a little dry inside, and the hallways leading off from the room into which they moved were dark and foreboding. They came into a reception area, probably for visitors arriving on the landing pad, with a schedule of arrivals and departures still hanging over the reception desk, a moment frozen in time from over a thousand years ago. Ilia jumped the desk and got behind the computer monitor, banging on the panel a few times. *No power here*, she called.

Power readings downstairs, Bryn called.

Infrared, she ordered. Maya, guide the ones with no helmets. Bryn, find us a way down.

Already on it. This way, she called, pointing to the passage leading out of the room across from the outer door.

They moved down the darkening hallway quickly and efficiently, as Maya had Jason keep a hand on her shoulder as they moved so he didn't get lost. Meya kept her hand on his shoulder, and Myleena had her hand on Meya's, as they moved into a dim murk that made it very hard for them to see. Bryn navigated them around several turns and down long passages lined with doors, doors that made Jason wonder what this building was for. Was it an office building? A hospital? A research facility? It was too dark to read any of the faded signs, and he hadn't thought to read the signs back in the reception room. They reached an area of brightening light, and found a single red lamp illuminating a stairway that led both up and down. The sound of *clack clack clack* suddenly echoed along the stairwell, as the Marines stepped off the carpet and onto hard tile, and their armored boots clacked on the floor every time they lowered their feet. Bryn led them down two levels, pausing to check the readings on her little sensor, and then waved it at a door on the third level down. *The power reading is on this floor*, she called. *About five hundred shakra that way.*

Bryn opened the door, and they looked into pitch blackness...or at least Jason did. Maya led them in, past the red light of the stairwell, and then Jason stumbled when the gestalt on his face seemed to throb.

[Contact. CBIM query. Responding.]

"Stop!" Jason gasped. "The gestalt just got queried!"

Queried?

Something is trying to contact it, Myleena answered Myri. I think they work on some kind of dedicated frequency.

Frequency my ass, I can hear it, Yana grated. Those machines are sending to each other. I just can't understand it. It's like a computer sending, it's so fast I can't make any of it out.

Jason was nearly blinded when the lights suddenly came on. He blinked as the stars blurred in his eyes, then he rubbed his eyes as everything came into focus. They were in a long hallway, the walls a series of mosaics, paintings, and etchings of various Faey men and women, all of them wearing a gestalt. The set of double doors at the end of that hall, about a hundred feet away, then opened.

No movement! Bryn barked as she waved the sensor in the direction of the open door. *I got a power spike now. The whole building is powering up!*

Jason looked at the open doorway at the end of the hall. "I think we're being invited in," he said aloud.

"Let's go see what they want," Myleena said.

"Let's," Myri said. *Move in, keep your cool, ladies.*

They advanced to the end of the hall, and moved into a cavernous rectangular room, clearly underground. It was dominated by a huge crystalline spire that rose up from the base of the floor, surrounded by a slender three rail fence that kept anyone from touching it. Machines lined the walls of the huge room, all of them now visibly powering up, some with lights blinking and others with technology within making a whining sound as they came online.

After all this time, all this still works? Myleena sent, her thought impressed.

Now we know why we needed that thing, Songa sent, looking at Jason. *Without it, nothing would turn on! None of this starting turning on until after it contacted that, what did you call it—gestalt, right?*

I think you're right, Jason agreed. *And Miaari knew it.*

I'm starting to wonder just how much Miaari really knows, Meya added.

Everything was on. The room was alive with the sound of a hundred low, gentle hums, and they all looked around in confusion and expectation. *This is the computer core,* Myleena realized. *Their mainframe. All this is the mainframe.*

There was a sudden shimmering light in front of them, a ray of light projected from the ceiling. That light seemed to sparkle in front of them, then it shimmered and compressed, slowly taking on a form that they all recognized. It slowly twisted into the form of a nude Faey female, the feet and calves lost in an electron mist, without pubic hair or nipples, a simple estimation of a Faey female body, but with a full head of glittering golden hair, longer than she was tall, fanning out behind her. The figure wore only one piece of adornment, and that was a gestalt. Eyes opened, golden eyes the same color as the hair, and then they focused on Jason directly.

[Welcome,] the holographic figure sent, lacking any warmth or emotion, a simple mechanical voice given telepathic form. *[Stand forth, child of Sora Karinne of the First Generation, and be recognized.]*

Jason remembered that name, the name of the woman whose picture was in that file he read, the one with the long straight hair—he looked at this projection, and realized that her features were the same. This hologram was patterned on the appearance of Sora Karinne!

Jason and Myleena stepped out from the middle of the Marines.

[Welcome home,] the projection told them. *[Will there be others returning home? Are you the vanguard of the exiles?]*

We, we don't know, but us two are the only ones we know about, Jason sent to the projection in reply. *Excuse our confusion, but we don't understand. We don't understand what's going on. Who are you? How did this place survive the attack?*

It didn't respond.

[I detect an attempt to communicate, through your gestalt. Have you forgotten the art of communion? Speak aloud your answer if you have.]

"I, I was never taught it," Jason answered aloud.

"Me either," Myleena added.

"Very well," it said aloud. *"Your weapons. You will not need them here, please lower them,"* she said to the Marines behind the two of them. Myri raised her hand, and they all shouldered their MPACs and holstered their arm cannons.

"You're a computer that can send!" Myleena said in wonder. *"How were you built?"*

"Too much time has passed," the female figure sighed. *"My first instruction to you is this,"* she said, looking to her right and raising a blue hand. To her right, an image solidified in the air, the face and shoulders of a curly-haired Faey with red hair. Smoke was behind her, and she was bleeding from the forehead. *"I am Yuri Karinne, Grand Duchess of the House Karinne,"* she said quickly, looking at the camera. *"This message is for you, the descendents of our survivors who have returned to Karis. Listen carefully, for I don't have much time."*

"If you are watching this message, then the last surviving CBIM has completed its decontamination of the planet, and you have come home. I order you, as the last of the 95th Generation, to abandon the project. It has failed. We became so focused on the project that we became blind to the realities of the Imperium, and it has destroyed us. Do not make our mistake! Learn from us! Don't repeat our sad history! And remember, angh!" she gasped as the image shook violently, and the woman covered her head as a rain of dust showered on her. *"Remember that you are Karinnes! Carry on our proud traditions, but don't let them blind you to the realities of life! Science cannot answer every question! Trelle grant you mercy, children of our children's children, and may Aris lay the blanket of peace over Karis once again!"*

The image disappeared. Jason and Myleena looked at each other, their eyes speculative. *"What project?"* Jason asked.

"The Project. You do not know of the Project?" the image asked in surprise.

"No," they answered in unison.

"I have been given orders not to allow you to continue the Project, but I have no orders stating I cannot explain it to you. The Project is the Biogenics program, a dual objective program with two branches. The first branch of the program created me. It is biogenic computer technology, utilizing organic crystals that can simulate Faey telepathy."

"The other branch of the program created you."

The Marines gasped and started sending to teach other, but Jason stepped forward quickly. *"Created? What do you mean?"*

"You are of the Generations. Your line was created with genetic engineering, and each successive generation is the product of careful selective breeding, to produce telepaths capable of telepathically interfacing with biogenic computers, such as this unit. That is why you can hear my communion, where the mundane Faey behind you cannot. It is how your gestalt communes with you. You are of the Generations, part of a noble and bold experiment to allow Faey and machines to communicate with talent. That project has failed, but only because those involved in the Project lost sight of the goal of bringing harmony and enlightenment to the Imperium. They became consumed by their objective, and to them, it became an end unto itself, an obsession to create the perfect biogenic computer, and the perfect Generation to pair with them. Their inability to see the world around them brought upon them their own doom. You, the last of the Generations, are the crowning achievement of a noble experiment that spanned thousands of years."

Myleena sat down. *Hard.* Jason could just stand there and try to wring it through his mind. The Karinnes were *engineered*. They were artificial! An entire noble house, the product of genetic manipulation!

"I have upset you. I apologize. Please, follow me, so you may take rest upstairs. When you are well and wish to continue, I will be here to answer your questions. If you would, please," she motioned at the Marines. *"I believe my Lady might need assistance reaching a place to rest."*

Jason didn't hear them. His mind would not work. He could just stand there, blankly, and think the same thing over and over again. Myleena put her face in her hands and began crying uncontrollably,

but he could not hear her. There was only one thing rolling through his mind, over and over, and it would not stop.

Miaari knew, he thought to himself.

Miaari knew.

Miaari knew.

Miaari knew.

And then, like a bolt of lightning, it struck him.

They were genetically engineered. They could sense each other. They could sense Kimdori. The Kimdori could sense them.

They were *genetically engineered*.

Miaari helped me because the Kimdori helped them make me.

Oh, God.

Chapter 18

*Raista, 31 Demaa, 4395 Orthodox Calendar
Wednesday, 17 November, 2008, Native Regional Reckoning
Kosiningi Emergency Response Center, Zoka Prefecture, Karis (Old Karinne Designation)*

It took a while.

Jason had been taken to a room that looked like a hotel room, a sterile kind of place with a single bed and an old computer-like unit sitting on a desk under a window and a chair, but nothing else. He sat in that chair, for a *very* long time, and tried to come to grips with the truth that was revealed to him, to them.

The Karinnes were genetically engineered.

That was...was unbelievable. The house experimented on *itself*. They had to be crazy! And after the engineering experiments, they continued on with a breeding program, trying to evolve the perfect Karinne. The entire house seemed involved in this effort, everything revolving around this core goal, all other research and projects merely side efforts to keep the Karinnes busy while they waited over the generations for the arrival of their ultimate progeny.

What would they have done if they would have succeeded? What would this “perfect Faey” have done?

It seemed...*evil*. These people, they had become blinded by their own obsession. They had lost sight of what they were doing and become consumed by the act. He remembered what he read, that the Karinnes had become withdrawn from the Imperium, arrogant, scornful. If they would have succeeded, if they would have produced their ultimate Faey and built the ultimate machine to pair with her, how would that “super being” see the rest of the Imperium? Would she see them as her own people, or would she and the Karinnes seen them as inferior beings, people that had to be controlled, which would have started a war?

God.

Jason couldn’t *blame* the rest of the Imperium for attacking the Karinnes. God, they may have *saved themselves*.

He sat there in the chair, sometimes with his elbows on the desk, sometimes leaning back looking up at the ceiling, sometimes leaning back and looking out the window, trying to understand, trying to wrap his mind around it.

It just wasn’t hard to fathom that he was descended from an artificially produced line that might have started a fourth civil war.

Oh, his origins didn’t bother him quite that much. He could accept that he was the product of genetic engineering, that the Faey that had come to Earth and been his ancestor was one of the Generations. Despite a thousand or more years of dilution of that “perfect” DNA by human breeding, he was still enough of a Karinne to function as one of their Generations, able to use their gestalts, able to comprehend the communion of their telepathic computers.

But to him, it was like discovering he was the long-lost great-great nephew of Adolph Hitler. He was part of a family, an organization, that had totally lost its mind and embarked on a project that destroyed their *morality* and consumed them in nothing but the need to be *right*, no matter what it cost them or their house.

And their destruction was the result. A destruction he could not blame on anyone but the Karinnes.

There were other organizations he could look at that way...like the Nazis.

The project is a failure, he thought to himself, remembering the words. *The project failed before it began! Thank God that Koiri Karinne understood that at the end and forbade the survivors from restarting the program!*

He sighed and stood up. It was late afternoon now, and the sun was setting over a sea of gorgeous crystalline blue. A dead ocean, but a pretty one. "Time to get to work," he grunted to himself. There was more to do. Miaari sent him here to learn the truth, but this revelation was *not* the whole truth. There had to be something here that would save Earth from the Trillanes, and he had to find it. And he had to know, he had to know what had happened, he had to know more about the Karinnes.

He wasn't exactly sure where he was, but he had no trouble getting around. When he realized he was lost, wandering in what looked like a hotel or a dormitory, a long hall lined with doors with similar rooms to his, a map appeared in his mind's eye, supplied by the gestalt, showing him the entire compound. It marked him a route back to the computer core, which was his destination, and guided him with arrows in his vision when he reached turns. It guided him unerringly back to the core.

There was no one in the computer core. Casting out showed him that everyone was either resting or basically just dicking around. Lyn, Bryn, Sheleese, and Ilia were in a large building near the ocean, probably looking around, Maya and Min were down at the beach on the west side of the island, Myleena was in one of the rooms in the building where he'd been. Songa and Myri were upstairs, Meya and Yana were close to the compound, out in the forest, probably looking at the trees.

What was it Koiri Karinne said? That the last surviving CBIM would finish cleaning up the radiation? Was it also responsible for the trees here? "Did you clean up the radiation?" he asked aloud, mainly to himself.

[Correct,] the voice of the computer sounded in his mind. [It was my task to recover this planet after the attack. I have partially completed that task, but am unable to continue due to the loss of too many remote units. I no longer have the resources to continue the reclamation effort.]

"How, how do I, uh, answer?" he asked.

[Merely send to me, Jason Fox. But you must send in the same manner I send to you. I cannot hear conventional sending. I have been told that it is very easy for the Karinnes to do.]

In the same manner. The way the computer sent did feel different, more...logical. More structured. He wrapped his mind around the idea of it, and tried to answer. He failed, then closed his eyes and tried to *think* like that, and tried again.

[Like this?]

[Perfect. It is good to see you well. I hope I did not inconvenience you too much, Master Karinne. I fear your cousin is not in as good spirits. I am monitoring her now. Her vital signs are stressed, and her mental activity is elevated and disjointed. She is suffering from shock. I regret answering your question in the manner in which I did. I did not realize you would react so to the answer.]

[It was a shock,] he told it. [But theres more to answer, computer, and I have to know.]

[My answers are yours, Master Karinne, and it has been my designation, or name, to be known as Cybi. All security protocols have been removed by Koiri Karinne, except the protocols around the technical data of the Program. I am permitted to answer questions about it, but not help you restart it.]

[Trust me, I never want to see it restarted,] he answered. [And don't call me that, my name is Jason. Call me Jason. We were sent here by a Kimdori. How did they get involved? What was their role in all this?]

[The Kimdori? The Kimdori and the Karinnes were very close, Jason.]

[How did they get involved in the Program? They had to be involved in it.]

[They were critical to it.] The hologram of the nude image of Sora Karinne appeared before him, and then she raised her right hand to direct his attention to another hologram that wavered into being beside her. It showed a Kimdori male and a Faey female standing side by side. *[Kimdori have unusual genetic abilities, Jason. They can invade and transform alien organic matter to match their own viral structure, but they can also invade the nervous system of other creatures and gain access to it, tricking the victim creature's nervous system into believing that the Kimdori is merely another part of itself. In this manner, they can access the brain of a host creature and extract information.]*

[Okay, I knew some of that, but not how they did it.]

[Kimdori DNA was the base of the bio-organic crystals that form the core of a biogenic computer,] the image told him. [Their metagenic properties allow them to adapt dynamically, and it was through a combination of Kimdori and Faey DNA, combined into the DNA of a silicon-based crystalline life form native to the Kimdori homeworld, they developed special organic but non-living crystals that had telepathic awareness.]

Holy cow...that was fucking brilliant.

[There was a problem, however. The crystals were telepathic, but Faey could not understand them. They could understand each other well enough, but they lacked the ability to interface with Faey. They could not solve this problem, so, instead of trying to build a computer that could interface with a Faey, they—]

“They made a Faey that could interface with the computer!” he gasped aloud.

[Indeed. That was the beginning of the Generations program. The Kimdori assisted us in this as they assisted us with the crystals. A recombinant DNA sequence was generated that combined the necessary aspects of Faey and Kimdori DNA that would give a Faey the necessary sensitivity to interface with the biogenic crystals. The experiment was a success. Then, gene therapy was ordered for the entire house after it was refined, and in this it was moderately successful. Some Karinnes successfully took the treatment and their DNA was altered. Some died from the treatment, and some had their bodies reject the treatment, and they remained unaltered. But enough of the house was changed to permit expansion of the gene pool by breeding. My image’s namesake, Sora Karinne, was the first child born of altered parents. All CBIMs carry her image as their visual interface in her honor. She was the First Generation, and the mother of your line, Jason.]

[After the institution of the Generations program, other breakthroughs were made. They developed a new type of biogenic crystal that could receive Faey sending, but not respond. But, instead of abandoning the Generations program, they decided to continue on, for the Generations were still far superior to the new technology. They did refine this new system, however. Gestalts were made for the unaltered members of the house made of these new crystals. They didn’t give them the same functions as true gestalts, but they did allow for some moderate usefulness. These interfaces allowed unaltered Karinnes to issue telepathic commands to machines, but only on a one way basis. They also lacked the amplifying abilities of the gestalt. They were built to resemble a gestalt, however, and it became a tradition for all members of the house to wear what you now wear, Jason. The gestalt and the interface became the singular identifying mark of the Karinnes.]

Jason touched the gestalt on his face, and pondered that. That was a...logical, way to go about it, he guessed. If they just couldn’t build a computer that could send to a Faey, well, just make a Faey that could send to the computer. *[But how did the Kimdori get involved? Why are they so concerned about me? Miaari said that the Kimdori care very much about me, and I don’t understand why. What’s the connection between the Karinnes and the Kimdori?]*

[The Karinnes and Kimdori are deeply intertwined, Jason. We served as their intermediary in many things, and they helped us in the Program. The Kimdori kept several of the clans here, on Karis, where we helped train them and prepare them for their duties. After the Generations program began, the Kimdori saw the Karinnes as simply a new branch of their race. They called the Karinne “cousins.” Even though there is less than .01% of Kimdori DNA inside you, they felt that that was enough to consider the Karinnes family, because they would look upon the Karinnes and know them, just as they knew each other. That unseen side effect was why the Kimdori saw the Karinnes as family.]

Jason lowered his head and pondered it. It did make a kind of sense. If the Kimdori saw the Karinnes as part of the family unit, part of the family, they would definitely go to great lengths for them. *Pack mentality*, Symone had called it. *[Was this what Miaari wanted me to find out? Is this the truth they’ve been hiding all these years? The origins of the Karinnes?]*

[They would never reveal a secret, Jason. It is against Kimdori ways. They are bound by ancient oaths to never reveal what they know of us. They would not tell you the truth, even though you are one of us. It would be forbidden.]

[Yeah, I figured that out. Kiaari told me once that the Kimdori cared very much about what was happening, but they weren't allowed to directly interfere.]

[They also are forbidden to insinuate themselves in the affairs of others of their own volition,] the computer told him. [They may interfere if hired by another as part of their own activities, but they cannot take initiative. The Kimdori are watchers, Jason, not meddlers. They meddle when and where it suits them at the behest of the involved races, but they take no direct hand of action, in any matter that is not solely their own.]

[Well, that explains why Kiaari always says she's doing what she was hired to do, and would never tell me what to do, only suggest,] he mused. [But I think they broke those rules for me. Miaari sent one of her clan Elders to cure me of a disease I contracted on Moridon.]

[Ah, the bio-agent. That is what brought the Kimdori and the Karinnes together, Jason.]

[How so?]

[Well, the Moridon, being who they are, saw the Kimdori as a threat to their security. So, they engineered a complex molecule bioagent to attack any Kimdori that visited Moridon. It was effective, but what the Moridons probably did not realize was that it took a long time for the agent to do its work on a Kimdori, and that those Kimdori infected by the agent were contagious. To make the story a short one, it literally threatened their race with eradication. I am sure the Moridons did not intend this,] the computer mused. [It is not their nature. The Kimdori came to the Karinnes in desperation, seeking help to find a cure, for it was well known that Karinne science and their geneticists were among the finest in the galaxy. The Karinnes found a cure for the bioagent and saved the Kimdori race. Since that day, the Kimdori have been the staunchest allies of the House of Karinne. And, as I think you have deduced, the Generations are also vulnerable to that agent. The segments of Kimdori DNA it attacks are also part of your DNA, and to the agent, you look like a Kimdori. It killed several Generations that visited Moridon until they were able to develop a vaccine.]

[Maeda Karinne.]

[She was one such victim, yes. But there were others that did not become common knowledge.]

Okay, that just answered a lot of questions. That was why the Kimdori were so hell-bent to help him, it was why they were going to such extremes. Not only was he considered family, he was among the last of a branch of the Kimdori "family" that was wiped out. And that loyalty was instilled by the act of Karinne doctors, who had helped the Kimdori find a cure for a deadly disease.

That was how they knew how to cure him.

[And the Kimdori knew everything,] Jason realized.

[Everything that the Generations knew, the Kimdori knew,] the computer, Cybi, affirmed.

[Wow. Well, how did you survive the attack?]

[My computer core can be withdrawn to the upper mantle of Karis,] it replied. [At the beginning of the attack, I was evacuated, and I was resealed in my original position after it was safe to do so. This is the Disaster Recovery Center, Jason. This compound exists to deal with a disaster. The Karinnes planned for disaster, but I do not think they could plan for what happened to Karis. When it was over, I was the only CBIM remaining, and upon me fell the task of undertaking disaster recovery procedures.]

[What is a CBIM?]

[Command Biogenic Interface Mainframe,] Cybi replied. [I am a supercomputer with the necessary tertiary systems to interface with distant remote units, since the planet's communication system was destroyed in the attack. Those remote units, or robots, have cleaned up the radiation, but I lack sufficient maintenance facilities to maintain them. Their lifespan was only measured at two hundred years, and they far exceeded that time frame. Over the years, they began to fail. Now, there

are none left. The last of the reclamation units stands non-functional on the far side of the island, after it managed to seed the island with stored plant seed. I have other tasks to perform, for it is my duty to restart the ecosystem of the planet, but I no longer have remote resources available to carry out these tasks.]

[What else is here? I think Miaari sent me here to find something that'll help with what's going on on my home planet.]

[Explain.]

It was hard to explain, so Jason tried instead sending a jumble of memories and experiences. In the blink of an eye, he tried to transmit enough information for the computer to understand what was going on on Earth.

[I understand,] Cybi noted. [The Karinnes did not keep what you would call a standing military, Jason. There were some prototypes and some concept ships, but Karinne had no navy, and had no army. There are three prototype warships at the lunar base, and within this facility there are two very old Nova fighters and a Karinne dropship, all three of which are unarmed. There is, however, a Gladiator E-mech, in the main hangar, which is armed and armored, but it is currently offline and in need of repair. The reclamation unit that failed on the island brought it from Zurya Prefecture when it was recalled. Karinne technology was much different from Faey technology. If you are to repair them, you must understand this.]

"Well, that's what engineers do," Myleena said from the doorway. Jason turned and looked at her. She looked a mess, her eyes a bit puffy and her hair askew, but she gave him a wan smile. He reached out his hand to her as she approached, but she pushed her way into his arms instead. He held her for a long moment, giving her comfort.

Are you alright? Jason asked.

I've felt better. That was one fucking hell of a bomb that Kimdori whore dropped on us, she told him in reply. I just realized a bit ago that freaking out wasn't going to do anything to help, so I gathered up myself and decided to come down here and find out what the fuck happened.

[Now that the two of you are together and alone, I must ask this. My scans determine that both of you are of the 97th Generation, which gives you equal status within the house. So, which of the two of you would have higher rank within the house?]

[Higher rank? What do you mean?]

How did you do that? Myleena asked in surprise. *Send like it does?*

Sharing a mental memory with her, he showed her how he had learned it. *[Like this?]*

[Just so,] the computer said, the image nodding. [Now, which of you would be of higher rank within Karinne?]

[Well, I'm a Merrane by birth,] Myleena told the computer. [Jason would be the ranking Karinne, because he's not already part of another house.]

[Then it falls upon you, Jason.] The image motioned with its left hand, and a tiny door opened in the floor. A pedestal rose up from the floor, and then the top of it opened, revealing a small box. To Jason's surprise, the box rose up from the pedestal and floated over to them. *[As the ranking member of Karinne, this belongs to you.]*

Jason took the box, and felt that it had no wires or anything. How had it moved? He opened it, and found himself looking at a soft cloth cushion. Wedged into it was a gold ring, upon which the face of it was engraved the crest of Karinne.

It was the insignia ring of the Karinnes!

[This, the ring of Karinne, now belongs to you. I would name you Grand Duke Karinne, but you would be lord of a dead planet and ruler of a house of two,] it said with not a little cynicism. [But I was bade by Grand Duchess Koiri Karinne to surrender unto the ranking survivor of the house this ring, and thus I have fulfilled my duty.]

Jason looked at it. It looked to be made of gold, but it was strangely warm to the touch. He turned

it over in his hands and held it so they could both look at it, and Myleena reached down and touched it, slid her finger along the border of the crest.

[Well, at least it'll be a nice souvenir,] Myleena sent with dark humor.

[Something to set on my mantle,] he agreed. *[So, there's nothing here I can use to fight Trillane?]* he asked Cybi.

[There are things here, but it would take a great deal of work,] Cybi answered. *[I believe a reclamation unit could be converted into a battle unit, but it would need extensive repair and refit.]*

[Then why did Miaari send us here?] Jason fretted. *[My people are in danger back on Earth! I know this is important, that she felt it was vital I know the truth, but damn it all, I'm needed back home.]*

[For one, I am glad you have come, Jason. I have waited for centuries for the Karinnes to come home. Now I have purpose once more, rather than waiting alone and in silence.]

He knew it was a bit odd, but he felt sorry for the computer. A thousand years of carrying out its final tasks, waiting for survivors to come home that may never arrive, with nothing to do but wait and to listen.

[I'm sorry you had to be here alone for so long, but we'll be leaving soon. Is there some way we could take you with us?]

[No, my core is not designed to be removed from this facility. But if you can repair the main communications array on top of the communications building, I can establish a link with your gestalt that would allow me communications. You may return to your Earth, but I will be able to send you messages. I can also query other installations, other compounds, and see if any other systems are operational. They might be of use to you. It would permit me to gain contact with the lunar base, for example, see if there are any biogenic systems still online. The attack fleet did not know it was there. It is undamaged. The lunar base did not have a CBIS, but it did have a biogenic mainframe.]

[Could there have been survivors?] Myleena asked.

[If there were, they would have fled long ago,] Cybi answered. *[It was their descendents I hoped would return to Karis. For all we know, they have. You could be their descendents.]*

[Maybe Jason's, but my Karinne ancestor was Zuy Merrane—er, Karinne.]

[Brother to Gora Karinne,] Cybi said immediately. *[Married into House Merrane for the purpose of producing a child with Sera Merrane, a genetically superior female. He was to return to the house after producing the heir.]*

[That's why I'm here? Because the Karinnes wanted to breed with a Merrane?]

[The short answer, Myleena Merrane, is yes. House Karinne saw admirable genetic qualities in a Merrane female, and wished to introduce her genetic qualities into the line. Zuy Karinne died after impregnating Sera Merrane, and so that offspring remained within House Merrane. Plans were made to return the child to Karinne, but the house was destroyed before those plans were executed.]

[They were going to kidnap the child?]

[I do not have that information. It is possible,] Cybi answered honestly. *[It is not the first out-of-house breeding ordered. Genetically superior Faey from outside the house were often used to enrich the line. My scans indicate that the young Faey female Jason's memory designates as Private Yana would be a prime candidate for such a breeding partner. My scans indicate she is gifted in talent, on par with a Karinne female.]*

Let it go, Jason warned in normal sending. Let it go. Remember, this was a thousand years ago, and it'll never happen again.

Damn right it won't, she agreed heatedly.

[Jason's ancestor was not one of the lunar crew, for his DNA indicates he is directly of your line, Myleena,] the computer told them. *[The only unaccounted for member of your line from that era is Zera Karinne, older sister of Zuy and Gora Karinne, a xenobotanist by scientific profession. Records indicate she was on a scientific expedition to a rim system at the time of the destruction of Karis. I*

would assume that instead of returning to the Imperium, she fled into unexplored space, and ultimately landed on your Earth.]

[That makes sense,] Jason mused, thinking about it. [What we pieced together is that the Faey that came to Earth lived there. If they were Karinnes who fled the Imperium after Karis was destroyed, it explains a lot. It explains why they never left, it explains why the Imperium didn't know about Earth. Back then there wasn't interstellar communications, there was no way they would know.]

[There was interstellar communication back then,] Cybi sent, a bit derisively. [House Karinne has utilized harmonized Teryon communications for centuries before the destruction of Karis. That, obviously, is how the expedition knew to flee rather than return to the Imperium, or attempt to return to Karis.]

[Teryon? What is a teryon?] Myleena asked.

[A teryon is an energy particle that exists only in hyperspace,] Cybi responded. [Karinne engineers devised a means of modulating harmonic teryon strings to broadcast transmissions utilizing hyperspace. The energy particle was named in honor of Tery Karinne, who discovered it in 2329.]

[I'm not sure how good we'll do, but me and Myleena can try to fix the communications tower,] he told Cybi. [It sounds like it uses a technology neither of us have ever seen before.]

[I will download all appropriate schematics and technical data to your gestalt, to aid in your repairs. Myleena Merrane also needs a gestalt. There are unimprinted gestalts stored in this room.] A detailed map of the compound flashed in his mind's eye, showing a location of a storage room in one of the smaller buildings off the main command center. [I suggest you replace the gestalt you have as well, Jason. It is an older model, and its software is outdated. There is a newer gestalt model in storage that will have more processing power and memory, and its transceiver has more transmission range than yours.]

[I can take it off?]

[Of course you can take it off,] she sent with a smile. [Just ensure you turn it off before doing so, or the gestalt will have to be restarted before you can use it, if you ever use that one again. Tools and other equipment is stored in this area.] Another mark in the same building appeared on the map in his mind's eye, supplied to him by the gestalt. [I have linked to your gestalt, Jason. If you have need to contact me, you need only commune with me through it. When you imprint your new gestalt, send to me, and I will establish a new link.]

[Alright. I think we'll go tackle that right now, I think both of us could do with a little busy work, to help sort through all of this.]

[I will compile a list of known resources and possible military technology and their locations. I will also compile a list of locations for all inoperative reclamation units. These will be ready for you to peruse at your leisure.]

[Alright. Thank you, Cybi.]

[No thanks are needed. It is a pleasure you cannot understand to be able to serve once again, instead of wait in silence and hope for your return.]

[Well, you're not alone anymore.]

[Thank Trelle.]

Jason and Myleena left the computer core room, and Jason looked at her as they walked. She seemed quiet and thoughtful, she glanced at him, then she smiled and nudged him with her shoulder. "I'm alright," she told him. "It's just so much at once, ya know?"

"I know how that feels," Jason grunted. "For like two years now, I've been dealing with shocks on a daily basis. First there's when I met Jyslin, then I find out I'm a telepath. Then I leave New Orleans because I couldn't live with myself if I stayed in the Faey system. I get there and work my ass off to build something, I see it all knocked down, then I find out that Trillane is kidnapping human beings and selling them into slavery. I decide to go after Trillane, then I lose so many people at the explosion in Chesapeake. Then I started the rebellion, I find out the human telepaths are part Faey, I get captured, I

escape, and now here I am. Learning that I'm the product of genetic engineering and that the Karinnes built stuff that I've never heard of. Just another typical day for me," he muttered darkly.

Myleena gave him a look, then burst into helpless laughter. "And I thought I had a bad day!" she laughed, slapping him on the shoulder.

They reached the storage room, and found boxes and *boxes* of gestalts, meticulously marked with the model number. Jason looked at the various models, but then a blinking outline lit up in his mind's eye around one box; clearly, that was the box that held the proper gestalt. He opened it and found it packed neatly with about a hundred of them, laid out in a staggered packing system and wrapped in individual sealed plastic-like bags. Myleena took one and tore the bag open, then turned it over in her hands. *Like this, right?* she asked.

Yeah. Just be ready for it. It doesn't really hurt, but it's kinda scary.

I remember when you put yours on. Okay, here goes.

She set the device on her ear, fidgeting until it was comfortable, and then laid her hair over it. She quickly sat down cross-legged on the floor, and Jason knelt down with her and held onto both of her hands. Those hands clamped down on his own when the gestalt began to imprint, and she began to send wildly, chaotically, with *amazing* power. Jason had to shield himself from her, but given they were touching and that touch amplified their communion, it made it hard. She shuddered, then started to convulse, and Jason literally had to push her to the floor and hold her down until the convulsions eased, then stopped. She took in a deep, cleansing breath, then opened her rose-colored eyes and gave him the strangest look. *[Amazing!]* she sent in the communion manner. *[I feel—it's amazing! The gestalt really does amplify your talent, doesn't it?]*

[Yes, it does.]

[I can feel it touching the back of my mind. It's like it's a part of me! Wow!] She touched it gingerly. *[Now I really am curious what would happen if I took it off without taking some kind of precaution.]*

[I do not want to find out,] Jason told her. He took out another of the gestalts and opened it. He touched the one on his face and ordered it to shut down. It did so, leaving him feeling a little dizzy when the sense of it vanished from the back of his mind. He took it off and set it aside, then put the new one on.

It wasn't half as bad this time. He knew what to expect, and in a way, that helped him endure the imprint much better than the first time. He did not send wildly like he and Myleena had done the first time, and though there were some spasms, there were no convulsions. It still wasn't exactly pleasant, though. When it was over, the gestalt informed him that all systems were operational, and it was ready for tasks.

[That wasn't as bad as last time. Guess you get used to it after a few episodes.]

[I hope it's not like that every time. It'd make me scared shitless to take this one off. That was not fun.]

[Yeah. Well. Let's get those tools. Cybi?]

[Yes, Jason?]

[We have our new gestalts. Can you download all that data to us both? Both of us are engineers, it'll help if we both have the information.]

[Certainly. Are you ready to receive?]

[Yeah, go for it.]

[Data download is commencing now.]

A chaotic jumble of information collected into the memory of the gestalt, a memory that was separate from Jason's mind, but a memory he could see, could look through, could sort. He waded into that memory, and found that everything he would need to know to diagnose and repair the communications system was present in the gestalt's memory.

Amazing. The device was a harmonic teryon transceiver, which broadcast communications directly

into hyperspace utilizing an antenna made of hyperdimensional matter, matter that existed in all dimensions in the same capacity. The antenna appeared in hyperspace the same way it appeared in three dimensional space. It was powered using, surprisingly enough, metaphased plasma. Phased plasma technology didn't exist in the era of the Karinnes, but obviously, the Karinnes had mastered the technology and never told the rest of the Imperium. And their mastery of it surpassed even *modern* standards. The type of plasma phasing was nothing like he'd ever seen before. It was double metaphased; the metaphased plasma was *itself* metaphased, something he didn't think was possible. The technical schematics, plasma conduit diagrams, logic flowcharts, and physical illustrations were also there in the gestalt's memory, all the technical data they would need to troubleshoot the array, find the problem, repair it, then bring it back up. And it was *complex*. The Karinnes, their technology was beyond what he learned in school. It was beyond current mainstream Imperium technology. What he was looking at in the memory of his gestalt might be sitting on a lab table in Research and Development, or Black Ops...but here it was, built over a thousand years ago and apparently having been in use for years before Karis was destroyed.

Holy Lord above. Over thirteen hundred years ago, the Karinnes were more technologically advanced than the *modern* Imperium. If they hadn't have been wiped out, how much further along would they be now? It almost boggled his mind to even think about it.

"*Fuck*," Myleena grunted, touching the gestalt on her face with a single finger and looking at him, as she apparently was doing what he was doing, looking through the memory of her gestalt. Man, she picked that up fast! "I've never seen tech like this, Jason. This makes us look like we're still using electricity! Trelle's garland...if they were this advanced, how the *hell* did they get destroyed by Merrane?"

"Because they never prepared for war," Jason told her. "The computer, Cybi. It told me that Karinne didn't have a real naval fleet, just some prototypes. It had no army outside of some robots I guess, and I dunno about any automated planetary defenses, Cybi never mentioned them. I guess what they had here was no match for a Faey battle fleet. I guess they never believed that the other houses would violate their neutrality, so they never really prepared to defend themselves."

"All those brains, and they were that stupid?"

"Intelligence and wisdom aren't the same thing," Jason said sagely.

"That's true enough. Let's go get some tools, and see if we can't get that array working. Why we're doing this is beyond me, but hey, it's something to do. And you were right. I think a little manual labor will help me sort some of this out. It's better than sitting in my room going bonkers thinking about it."

"Cybi said if we can get the array working, she can see if she can make contact with other installations. See what's still up and running."

"Oh. That's a good reason."

It was an educational experience.

Well into the night, the two of them crawled all over the communications system for the compound, tracking down the problem. And it was so bizarre.

They had no experience with this technology. This dual metaphased plasma system was new to them, and neither of them had ever *heard* of harmonic teryon communication systems. But the gestalts filled the gaps. Any time they looked at something unfamiliar, the gestalts told them exactly what it was, exactly what it did, and supplied a detailed schematic or conduit diagram to them of its internal workings. Despite having no knowledge of the system, the information and step by step instructions they could access through the gestalts allowed them to comprehend this technology and work up a course of action to troubleshoot the system and find the problem. Both of them were gifted engineers, with a knack for technology, and that engineer's soul allowed them to work out how this system worked.

Five hours after they began, they tracked down the problem. The problem was a burned out main plasma exchanger up by the antenna, which had required them to go up to the antenna with a replacement unit that Cybi had tracked down for them. Using a flying platform and with the help of Maya and Min, they carted the new unit up there and started the work to get out the old one. It required a great deal of disassembly, for the failed unit was deep inside the antenna array, requiring them to gut the thing in order to get at it. The gestalts kept track of every piece they took out, showing them a detailed diagram of how to reassemble it when the time came.

It was strange to see the Marines out of armor. They had found some old clothes, what looked like old uniforms or soemthing, for they wore matching gray pants and a gray ribbed fabric tank top in the muggy, warm summer night air. They found boots as well, soft black calf-height boots that had no laces or buckles or snaps. Maya's clothes fit, but Min's were a tiny bit loose. She was a small girl, the shortest in the unit.

Careful! Jason warned as they pulled out a teryon generator. *This thing is delicate, don't bang it around!.*

How do you know that? Min asked.

The gestalt told us, Myleena answered as they laied the teryon generator on the platform, on top of a series of removed plasma conduits. *There, we can get at the exchanger now. Hand me the annealer Maya.*

Myleena all but crawled into the hole they'd made to reach the exchanger, as Jason held onto her waist. She unannealed its housing from its mount, then grabbed hold of it. *Okay, pull me out,* she sent, and Jason and Maya carefully pulled her out as she pulled the exchanger along with her. Jason and Myleena heaved it over the side of the platform and let it fall to the roof below.

Maya laughed. *I never expected to see a couple of techs do that!*

That's what we do with misbehaving equipment, Myleena told her. *It gets spanked.*

Remind me to leave if your vidlink ever goes on the fritz, Min sent dryly.

My vidlink is too afraid of me to go down, Myleena told her. *Hand me the Dyson tool, will ya? Gonna need some help in there. I swear, the Karinnes musta been midgets or something. I can't hold the unit in place and anneal it into position at the same time.*

The space only had room for one person, so the smallest of them, Min, was chosen to help Myleena in the crawlspace. The two of them crushed into the space, Min literally laying on her back holding the unit in place while Myleena laid on top of her, working to get it secured. Jason and Maya held lamps up so they could see what they were doing. *Ow, watch your elbow!* Min complained.

I'm trying, Myleena growled. *This isn't easy, you know. Just hold it in place for another few seconds. Jason, hold the light up. More. Right there. Got it! Okay, help us get out of here.*

They pulled the two of them out, and Myleena immediately crawled back in. *Alright, give me the first conduit section, let's get it back together.*

What's it like Jayce? Wearing that thing? Min asked.

It's like having a computer attached to my brain, he answered, picking up the first conduit section and handing it in to Myleena. *Right now, it's got all the technical specs for this system in its memory, and me and Myleena have been using that to repair this thing. Believe me, without it we'd have no idea what we're doing.*

That's fuckin' right. This is tech I've never seen before, and trust me, I've seen tech that no one outside of Black Ops has seen before. This makes some of the stuff in my lab look like a boy's builder set.

What makes it different? It looks like plasma stuff to me, Maya sent.

Yeah, it's plasma, but it's dual metaphased plasma, something I didn't think was possible, she answered. *Some of the new systems coming down out of research are starting to use miniaturized metaphased plasma power systems for power, but this is like fifty years ahead of us, and this shit is like fifteen hundred years old.*

Really?

Yeah. Black Ops would come in their pants at the thought of coming down here and tearing this place apart. What we could learn from what the Karinnes left behind, it'd be a fucking quantum leap. She was quiet a moment. And that's exactly why it's never going to happen.

What do you mean?

I don't want them coming here, Maya. I don't want to see what little is left of the Karinnes ripped apart. This place, it's like a page out of the past. It's history. It, it's like this place is almost holy, ya know? I don't want to see it violated, even if it does mean we pass up a chance to learn. I don't want to see a team of Black Ops techs ripping open Cybi and killing her just to see how she works.

Cybi?

The computer, the one down in the basement, Jason answered. It calls itself Cybi.

It's AI, Artificial Intelligence, Min noted. I've never seen one so advanced before. It even seems to have emotions.

Yeah. When she talked about how long she was waiting for us to come back, Jason sent with a shudder. I could feel her loneliness. Half the reason we're fixing this array is so she can keep in contact with us when we leave. I don't want to leave her here all alone. That would be...cruel.

You're a good man, Jason, Maya sent, putting her hand on his shoulder and giving him warm look. Jyslin has all the luck, Min complained.

It took them about an hour to reinstall everything they had to take out in order to get at the exchanger, as Jason and Myleena took turns doing the work of reassembling the unit, since it was hard, cramped work in the compartment. Jason and Myleena closed the access panel when they were done, and Myleena clapped her hands together as if to shake free dust, and waved for Min, who was closest to the controls for the platform, to take them down. "That's that. Did we leave out any pieces?"

"Doesn't look like it," Maya said after looking around, and the platform descended to the roof.

[Cybi, we think we got it fixed. Can you start it?] Myleena called.

[One moment.] The equipment inside the spire gave out a muted hum, and lights began blinking at the top of the metal spire. [The array is up. It is running a diagnostic now. I believe it is operational. Thank you, Jason, Mistress Karinne.]

[Call me Myleena,] she told her.

[Myleena. The array is operating. The transceiver units are also operating. The array is fully up and working. Sending an open query to all units. One moment.]

The array gave out a sudden higher-pitched whine, as it obviously began to transmit.

[Kosigi is responding. That is the lunar base. It is on emergency power.]

[Is it a CBIM like you?]

[No, Kosigi has a Mark IV Mainframe, not a unit of my technical advancement. There were only six CBIMs, and I have confirmation that the other five are destroyed. I am getting responses from most of the satellites in the sensor jamming network. Those units should not be operating,] she mused to them. [They should be inoperative after this much time.]

[Unless the Kimdori have been maintaining them,] Jason offered. [They have to know about this place. I think they've been keeping it secret.]

[That is possible. I am receiving a reply from a scout vessel 7,538 light years from here, at Nebula GF1848. It reports it has no crew aboard. I am receiving echoes from several mainframe units on Kimdori Prime, but not responses. Those units lack the necessary equipment to reply, but their biogenic crystal lattices are detectable by my array.]

[The Kimdori have biogenic computers?] Jason asked in surprise.

[Why would they not? They can interface with them the same way they interface with the minds of living beings, and they were key to their creation. A biogenic computer would be the most logical computer for them to use.]

[She has you there, Jason,] Myleena grinned.

[I will recall the scout vessel, if you so wish it. It is fully operational and is capable of jumping back to Karis.]

[Go ahead, call it back. We might be able to use it to get back to Earth.]

[Sending the order. It will arrive in 1.2 days. It must clear the nebula before it can jump back to Karis. Kosigi responds that it has two prototype destroyers and a light cruiser docked, which are salvageable with maintenance, but it has no power to open the bay doors. It requests a maintenance team to be sent or the restoration of the main power station on Karis, which is impossible. I will respond by ordering it to remain in standby for now. Its emergency power will last for 1,685.5 more years, so it is in no danger of power failure. Is this satisfactory, Jason?]

[Why ask me?]

[Because you are in command of this planet, and it is your orders I obey,] Cybi answered.

[Oh, go ahead and do what you think best. I'm not really qualified to give any real orders here, Cybi. I really have no idea what the hell is going on.]

That seemed to amuse Cybi. *[Be patient, your Grace. Leadership is a learned skill more than it is a natural quality.]*

[Please don't call me that.]

[Yes, Jason.]

"It's working," Jason said to Min and Maya. "Cybi made contact with the lunar base and a single scout ship somewhere out in the galaxy that's still working. The base is a bust, but the scout ship is on the way back here. We can use the scout ship to get home."

"Nice," Min said. "I'm hungry. Let's go grab some of those *tasty* field rations," she said sarcastically.

"I'm getting a little tired. Wonder what the others are up to?"

Where are you guys and what are you doing? Jason called in an open sending that reached all over the island.

Me, Meya, and Sheleese are on the way back from checking out a big fuckin' robot on the other side of the island, but it's in pretty bad shape, Myri called. It'll take some major work to get it up and running. It's been sitting there for at least a hundred years. The others had better be finishing up that inventory I told them to do.

We're almost done, Sarge. Not much here. I found a small armory of about fifty weapons, but that's it, Ilia answered.

We've got two small single-seaters I think are some kind of old fighters over here in the hangar, and a pretty old dropship that might still work, Zora added. *I'm inside it now—wait, got it. This thing still works. Took me a few to get the hang of this layout, this is different than any dropship I've ever seen. Damn, after a thousand years, it purrs like a vulpar. Okay boss, we got an operational dropship here.*

They got quite a bit of stored equipment, but I can't make any sense of any of it, Bryn chimed in. *It's all weird shit I've never seen before.*

Nothing edible around here at all, boss. We're stuck with field rations til we're done, Lyn reported. *I tested the plants, and none of them are digestible.*

I've finished up testing the water, Sarge. It's clean, so we're good on that, Yana reported. *It's saltwater though, so we're gonna have to run it through a purifier.*

I'm in the infirmary. There's not much here I'm familiar with, and I'm not sure how much use it's going to be. I'm going to need some time to try to work this out. I wish Rann were here, he was so good with the technical things, Songa sent sadly.

What's your status up there, Jason?

We're done repairing the comm array. It's up and running, and the computer has made contact with a lunar base and a lone unmanned scout ship out somewhere in the galaxy. She recalled it, and it's on its way back. We can use that to get off the planet. The lunar base says it has 3 ships in its bay,

but it doesn't have power to open the doors to let them out.

Are they operational?

No, it said they need repairs.

Sounds like the scout ship is our best bet. I'm not too keen on hitching a ride with that robot ship back to Draconis. Alright, everyone, stand down for tonight. Grab some bunks over in that hotel, grab some food, and take it easy. We'll pick up again in the morning.

After a dinner of field rations, everyone claimed a room in the hotel building beside the main operations center, but Jason couldn't sleep. He ended up sitting on a sandy beach just beside the compound, lights from the compound washing light over the area enough to let him see, see the white sand, see the waves crashing into the beach in soothing rushes of sound, feel a warm breeze blowing in from the sea. This place was so much like Earth...well, at least here on this island. There wasn't a single animal anywhere on this entire planet, except for the twelve Faey and lone human here.

It had been too much. He laid back and looked at the unfamiliar stars, his eyes automatically seeking out the constellations that his father would always point out to him, but they weren't there. How did they get here so fast? Just yesterday, he'd never have believed that they'd end up here, with the crest ring of the Karinnes in his pocket, and them doing repairs to help a sentient computer keep in contact with them when they left. He expected to be on the way back to Earth, or already be there, by now. He had hoped to be back at the mountain, back with Jyslin. But he was here, on this dead planet, discovering that his lineage was more amazing than he ever believed, and that his ancestors had left behind technology that would be considered highly advanced even by *today's* standards.

So much intelligence. So little wisdom. Had they become so arrogant that they believed nobody would dare attack them, so they didn't even bother building a defense to protect themselves? Did they believe that the other houses would honor their vows of neutrality to the point where they did not take precautions? Or did they simply become so blinded by their own ambitions that they ignored the defenses of the house? He guessed he'd never really know. Cybi might know, but in a way, he almost didn't want to ask the question. It was the distant past, and it wouldn't be a very good story.

It was almost too unbelievable, and it did make him curious. Cybi had told him that only *some* of the Karinne line had been altered. He wondered how the house operated with the Generations on one side and the unaltered Karinnes on the other. How did the unaltered Karinnes see their altered cousins? Was there any friction within the house? He guessed he'd never know, but it did cross his mind.

So much to think about...*too* much to think about. It was all so overwhelming. So many questions, so much speculation about what had happened, how things had led to this point. The only real satisfaction he got out of it was that he finally understood how the Kimdori were tied up in all this. They had been helping him because he was considered a cousin to them, a relative, and they wanted him to know his history. They wanted him to see that he was the legacy of Karinne, and Miaari had sent him here, to Karis, to show him where he had come from and the melancholy pride of being part of something that had at once been so grand, so visionary, and also so ominous, so dangerous. The Karinnes had had the potential to be a tremendous asset to the Imperium if they ever would have shared the technology they created, but also be the most evil, sinister force unleashed upon the galaxy, using their advanced technology and their genetically altered members to conquer the inferior.

Yet they had done neither.

It could have all turned on the motivations of a single House ruler, he supposed. Instead of doing either of those, they simply remained quietly motivated to continue their nearly mad objective, ignoring the Imperium, ignoring reality, and focusing with what Jason saw now was suicidal focus on a single goal.

But that was the past. It would never be repeated, if only because there were only two Karinnes left.

He thought about what was ahead of them. They had to get back to the mountain, and do it without leading Trillane right to the base. If there was something here he could take home to help them there,

he'd be overjoyed to find it. From what he'd heard, it was now basically a state of war back on Earth, as Jyslin unleashed her fury over Jason's capture upon Trillane, and Trillane became more and more extreme in their retaliatory actions. He had to get home and put a stop to it. Jyslin's actions were understandable, but the lay human population was starting to suffer because of it, and if they turned the people against them, they were doomed to failure. He wasn't sure how they were going to get there, but they'd find a way. If he could just get close enough to make contact with someone, they could send a dropship for them.

Footsteps reached his ears, and he turned his head on the sand to look. Songa was approaching him. He sat up as she sat down beside him, then she leaned against him. He put his arm around her. They said nothing, sent, nothing, for a long time. He was used to this. Songa found comfort when someone was holding her, and sometimes she needed that comfort even now, months after the death of her husband. She didn't like to be alone, especially at night. She put her head on his shoulder and simply enjoyed his company, and all he could really think of was how hard all this had been on her, and how he felt responsible for her loss. She didn't blame him in any way for Rann's death, but they had been there helping him. If they'd have stayed home, if they hadn't have gotten involved, then Rann would still be alive.

And that would have gone against everything both of them believed in, he realized. Rann had died doing what he loved, doing what he needed to do. If he had stayed home, he wouldn't have been being a doctor.

But he still owed her. Songa would get anything she needed, and if there was ever anything he could do for her, it would be done. He owed this woman so much, and he would always be there for her.

She lifted her head and looked up at him, then reached over and put her fingers on the gray metal of the gestalt delicately. *It looks good on you*, she told him. *I don't think I told you that.*

I'm already used to it.

Does it slide around?

No, it kinda glues itself into place. It's not uncomfortable, though.

Oh. Jason, will you do something for me?

Anything, Songa.

I'm lonely. I don't want to be lonely.

He understood what she meant immediately. And he would be a terrible friend if he didn't give her what she wanted. He leaned down and kissed her, gently, and she wrapped her arm around his neck and pulled herself into his embrace.

It had been a good thing for her. And it wasn't all that bad for Jason...and he knew that Jyslin would have approved in a heartbeat.

Jason woke up early and left the room Songa had claimed as her own before dawn, letting her sleep peacefully. He could never be Rann, but at least, for one night, there was no pain, there was only the simple pleasure of making love with someone she liked very much, which to a Faey was a more than acceptable thing. It was a night spent doing anything but mourning her husband, and Jason supposed it was another step towards completing her mourning for him.

One thing, though. Songa was a biter. He was going to have to have a little talk with her about that.

He turned a corner, and almost fell down backwards, because he nearly walked headlong right into *Miaari!*

"Miaari!" Jason gasped, putting a hand over his heart. "You scared me to death!"

"May, may I?" she asked hesitantly, holding her hand out. "Jason, are we still welcome in your house now?"

He gave her a surprised look, then laughed. "I couldn't be angry with you!" he exclaimed, pushing

past her hand and simply giving her a warm hug. "I see what you wanted us to find, Miaari. For what it's worth, thank you for showing me my heritage."

"I am very glad you're not angry," she said in relief, putting her hands on his shoulders. "I thought you might be upset when you discovered the truth, and realized we have been hiding it from everyone, even you."

"Why? Why hide it, Miaari?" he asked, pushing out enough to look up into her amber eyes. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Long ago, at the end, Koiri Karinne forbade us from revealing our knowledge of the Karinnes," she explained. "We were bound by that declaration, even to the point of not allowing us to tell *you*. She did not want the Imperium coming here and salvaging anything. She wanted the loss of the Karinnes to be absolute, to her own people. She wanted their betrayal to give them *nothing* in return. We even have orders to attack and destroy any who violate this place, *except for those who have the right to be here*," she told him intensely. "Even now, Jason, I may not tell you what I know. Koiri Karinne's edict still leashes us. I am only here because you have managed to restore a CBIM, and it has queried. Our computers on homeworld detected the query, and that was a condition that would allow us to come here."

"What do you mean?"

"We were forbidden to come here, Jason, except under very specific circumstances," she told him. "Koiri was very specific. She told us that no Kimdori may return to Karis unless invited, and only a Karinne could extend such an invitation. There were other conditions that would allow us to return, but only to fulfill certain specific objectives, and we were not permitted to change anything, move anything, or take *anything* from here. Koiri wanted the planet left inviolate. We have fulfilled our duties to her. We have kept Karis a secret. We have maintained the sensor jammers to hide the fact that something survived here that was cleaning up the radiation. We have destroyed those whose curiosity threatened the sanctity of Karis. When the CBIM you restored sent an open broadcast, it was a condition set forth that would permit the Kimdori to return here. We were permitted to send a single scout back to Karis to investigate, to ensure that the planet was not being invaded by outsiders. I am the single scout, Jason. I am here alone, sent here to investigate the open broadcast...but I knew the origin behind it," she told him with a wolfish smile. "Semantics, I suppose, but the oaths we have taken are maintained."

"You, you *still* can't tell me?"

She shook her head. "I wish I could, Jason. Believe me. There is so much here, so much I wish I could tell you. But a Kimdori is her word, and her word is true. The secrets must be maintained. I hope you are not angry."

"A little disappointed, maybe, but not angry. I understand that it's very important to you."

She patted his shoulders. "Who received the ring?"

"I did."

She sighed explosively. "Thank the Denmother. That means that things have progressed as we hoped. You are the Grand Duke Karinne now, Jason." She reached up and put her hand on his neck, and he felt that sense of *expansion* that told him that she was looking into his mind.

"Seeing what I know?" he asked, with a slight smile.

"Of course I am," she told him with a toothy smile. "I must see what I can say, and what I cannot. I must know what you have thought to ask of the CBIM. But know this, Jason. Any answer I can give, most likely the computer can give as well. It would have the same knowledge as I, and it is not bound by my oaths. Indeed, it will tell you *anything* it knows, for you are the Grand Duke Karinne. It cannot deny you any request."

"That's twice you've called me that. It makes me wonder what point you're making."

She smiled at him.

"But I have to ask, Miaari. Why send me here? I know you think this is important, but you also

know what I'm doing back home. I thought you were sending me here to show me something that might help against Trillane, but there's nothing here but answers to questions that don't do me any real good."

"Jason, everything is here," she told him, patting him on the shoulder as her other hand boldly reached down to his leg. He felt her put her hand in his pocket. "My dear friend, everything you need to defeat Trillane and save your people is right here."

She pulled her hand up between them and opened it. Within her furry palm was the signet ring of the Karinnes.

"*This* is what I sent you here to recover, Jason. Nothing else. This is the greatest treasure on Karis. This ring gives you the fealty of the CBIM, and that is a powerful, powerful thing. It marks you as the lord of this planet. Everything here belongs to you, and to you alone. And I knew that it would be you that would receive it. Myleena would reject the ring because she is a Merrane first."

"You knew about her."

"Since the day she was born."

Jason looked at the ring. "I don't understand, Miaari. How can this help me? It really doesn't mean anything."

"It means *everything*, my dear friend," she told him, looking down at him seriously. "And this is something I do not need to be evasive about, Jason. This has nothing to do with oaths or secrets. This ring marks you as a member of the *Siann*, the ranks of the noble rulers. You are the Grand Duke of a noble house, you sit upon its throne. According to the laws of the *Siann*, you can claim right of ownership of Terra, because *you were there first*. You were born there, you were raised there. You are a *Terran*. Your citizenship upon Terra absolutely cannot be challenged. That is why I sent you here, Jason. Not only were you the perfect choice to take the seat of Karinne, you also had the most to gain from that position, and could bring about real and effective change because of it. Unlike any of the others, who would use this gift as nothing but a means of self-enrichment, we knew that you would use this power wisely and responsibly, and could immediately use it as a club to strike the hands of Trillane away from your home planet. Trillane has run rampant all over your planet and your people. They have done *much* more than you know, and none of it has been good. The slaving is but one small activity you stumbled upon by accident. They have done equally terrible things."

"Why didn't you just send me here right off, Miaari?" he asked, a bit annoyed. "We could have saved lives!"

"And they would not have taken you seriously," she told him in reply. "We helped you, allowed you to begin the action against Trillane, to give you a *name*, Jason. To get the attention of the *Siann* and the Empress herself upon you, to know who you are. If you would have shown up on Draconis with the ring and declared your dukal rights, they would have laughed you out of the Palace. But *this* Jason Fox, appearing wearing a gestalt and with a reputation for strength, cunning, and power, they will listen to him. They may not believe him, but *they will listen*. And that is what you will need."

He considered her words, and though it sounded a little strange, he guessed he should appreciate her opinion. "How old are you, Miaari?" he asked impulsively.

She gave him a light smile. "I am an Elder, Jason," she told him. "I am the first daughter of the clan's founder. Were it not for my older brother, I would be the clan's heir. But I envy him in no fashion. The duties of the clan leader are not for me."

"So, you're older than that male that came to cure me?"

"He is my son, my friend."

"But Kiaari is your sister, and she's only fifty?"

"My parents continue to produce offspring, Jason," she told him with a smile. "They are the alpha pair. They control the clan. They deigned to allow me my own mate, and from time to time they permit us to breed. I have six children, Jason. Kereth is but one of them. Two are Elders, the rest are younglings."

“Huh. You must have one hell of a family reunion.”

She laughed, a strange growling sound, then grabbed his hand and placed it in her own, around the ring. “Ask the CBIM about the *Siann* Charter, Jason. Have her download a copy into this. Read it,” she told him, tapping the gestalt on his face, placing a lingering finger on the prong leading down in front of his ear. “Everything you need to complete that task will be in the charter. You will know what to do. Just understand one thing, my friend. When you take that step, you are accepting the responsibility that making such a claim will entail. If you challenge Trillane for ownership of Terra, understand that you must carry through with that responsibility. Your ignorance of the workings of the houses or the basic fundamentals of Imperial economics will not be an excuse. The Empress will expect the same from you she expects from Trillane, and unlike Trillane, you have *nothing* but your own self and the money you have stored away on Moridon. Understand this *before* you take that step. Be ready for it.”

He could not miss her warning. *Make sure you know what the hell you are doing before you even think of standing before the Empress. Have a plan.*

“I understand,” he told her seriously. “So it may be easier to push Trillane off Earth?”

“I doubt that now. Trillane is furious, Jason. Your mate, Jyslin, she has pushed every button Grand Duchess Trillane ever had, and invented quite a few besides. Even now, Trillane is evacuating the *entire continent* of North America, and they intend to blast it into dust. They know your rebels hide somewhere on the continent. Tired of trying to find them, they intend to destroy the Legion by devastating the entire continent.”

“You’re serious!” Jason gasped.

“Deadly,” she answered. “Jyslin made it impossible for them to move *any* foodstuffs in North America without huge losses of materials and transports. You fail to appreciate the scope of Jyslin’s escalation, Jason. Nothing could so much as take off from the ground anywhere in North America and be assured it would survive to reach orbit. Her tenacity and focus on the task you left behind has been nearly superfaey. I honestly do not see how she has done it, it is incredible. Her love for you is so great that she moves heaven and earth itself to avenge you, my dear friend,” she told him, her fingers sliding down until her palm cupped the left side of his face. “And now, faced with severe losses, Trillane has decided to abandon North America to Jyslin, and then burn it to the ground in spite. Your wife is in very real danger, my friend. Going back to Terra is not going to help her anywhere near as much as you going to Draconis could.”

Jason could only try to comprehend that. Had Jyslin really done that? Had she pushed it so far, pushed it so hard, that it caused this kind of a drastic response? The short answer is yes. He knew his wife. He knew her well. She not only had the technical skill, she had the sheer *balls* to push it that far. The same woman who so tenaciously pursued him, so fearlessly, would not bat an eye over taking Trillane to the mat and trying to bite off their noses with her bare teeth. That indomitable will was both one of her most endearing qualities and one of her most annoying tendencies.

Now, Miaari was telling him that he had to save his wife from herself, and save everyone else as well.

“Miaari.”

“Yes, Jason?”

“You said that no Kimdori could come here unless they were invited.”

“That is correct.”

“Well, I’m inviting,” he told her. “If I asked the Kimdori to come here, would they?”

“In a second,” she told him. “We owe the Karinnes a great deal, Jason. We thought we may never have the chance to repay that debt. If you call the Kimdori, they will come. Honor and duty would demand it. But why would you summon them here?”

“If they want to repay the Karinnes, they can help us get all this old junk fixed,” he told her. “I’m positive your Elders have the knowledge to do it.”

She grinned at him. “*Very* well done, my friend. I see our choice of you for this was perfect. Yes, we retain the knowledge to repair Karinne technology. But what will we repair?”

“Anything. Everything!” he told her. “This isn’t a dead planet, Miaari, it’s just waiting to be fixed. If Cybi could clean up the radiation and get grass and trees to grow on this island, then we can restore this world. It’ll take time, but it needs to be done. I can’t leave this place like this. If I have to take responsibility for taking this ring, then I have to own up to *all* of those responsibilities. And a really big one is right here. The stupidity of my ancestors destroyed this planet. It has to be put right. Cybi started it, but now all her robots are broken. So we have to help her finish it. I have to take responsibility for *two* planets.”

“I am relieved beyond measure over the choice we made,” she told him with almost quivering emotion in her voice, patting his cheek. “Let us contact the Denmother, ruler of my people. If you request help as Grand Duke Karinne, she will respond. She will bring Kimdori here to help you repair your machines.”

“Let’s go do that right now. Er, if we can.”

“Yes, we can, Jason. We cannot use your computer’s teryon transmitter, for we have no unit on Kimdori capable of receiving it. But my ship has a comm device we developed after the fall of Karinne that works in a similar manner. With it, we can communicate with Kimdori Prime in real time.”

Jason followed her outside, and to the landing pad where the dropship she had sent them in still rested. Beside it was a sleek craft, with a long pointed nose and two curved, stubby wings at the stern, with a fuselage made of a coarse, almost ruddy looking gray metal. The craft was the size of a fighter, but Jason saw that the majority of its interior was hollow, allowing room for at least six people inside. It had a ramp at the stern leading up into the ship.

The interior was spartan. There were no living quarters, no seats, no nothing. Just an empty bay with a single seat at the bow, a seat for the pilot. She led him up and had him sit, then leaned over him and waved her hand in front of a blank series of dark glass screens. They lit up, but none of them had anything. Instead, three dimensional holograms appeared in front of them, projected by the plates out into the air. She touched a series of holograms in quick order, and then a rectangular hologram appeared before the seat, at Jason’s eye level. Jason had to admire the clever layout of a Kimdori craft. Holographic controls!

Jason expected them to have to go through a series of Kimdori lieutenants or officers before addressing this Denmother. So, he was a bit surprised when he found himself looking at a regal-looking Kimdori with a charcoal gray coat of fur with a white patch under her chin. “I am Zaa, the Denmother,” she announced in a commanding voice. “Speak.”

Wow. *Wow*. She was so sure of herself, and her eyes bored into him like beams of the purest light, dazzling him. She held herself with a regal bearing, as if she was the lord of all creation, and she knew it. She looked at him, and he felt like a mouse caught in the gaze of the cat.

“I bring before you Jason Fox, my Denmother,” Miaari said with the most profound respect in her voice, her muzzle over Jason’s shoulder. “Show her, Jason.”

Jason understood what she meant. He held up the signet ring of Karinne, feeling almost unworthy to have her look upon him. Zaa’s eyes widened when she saw it, and then she smiled broadly. “Thank the gods,” she said with explosive relief. “I have waited a very long time to say this, Jason. The Kimdori officially recognize the authority of the Grand Duke Karinne. Now speak, your Grace. What do you wish of the Kimdori?”

“Help,” he answered, still feeling a little unsure of himself in the presence of this august, commanding Kimdori. “Everything here is broken, and Miaari told me that if I asked, the Kimdori would come and help get everything working. Would you do this?”

“I will arrange it immediately,” she told him. “We will begin to arrive in three hours. Do you require anything else?”

“Well, not that I can really think of, your, uh, Majesty. Miaari kinda dragged me over here before I

had a chance to really think about that.”

“Take a moment, your Grace. Is there anything we can bring to make things easier or more comfortable? How are you doing in food, for example?”

“All we have here are field rations.”

“Then, shall we bring more suitable food for you?”

“If you don’t mind. There’s me and eleven Faey and Miaari here. If it’s not a bother.”

“It is no bother at all,” she told him with a light smile. “So, I am bringing mechanics to begin repairs, materials to assist in those repairs, and foodstocks more palatable than field rations for you and your Faey companions. May I take initiative to bring what I think best, since you are uncertain?”

“Well, sure, if it’s no bother, your Majesty. I trust your judgment.”

“Then I will take my leave and see to the matter personally. Miaari.”

“Yes, my Denmother?”

“You have done well. We are most pleased with you.”

Miaari lowered her eyes and bowed her head. “I am honored beyond words, my Denmother.”

“Expect the first Kimdori to arrive in three hours, your Grace. Good fortune to you.”

And then her image vanished.

So, that was the Denmother, the ruler of the Kimdori. A very commanding presence. She was very...*noble*. He still found himself a little intimidated, and she wasn’t even on the monitor anymore.

“Wow,” Jason breathed.

“I know. I find my fur shivering whenever I look upon her. To know that she is pleased with me,” she said, touching his neck, and he didn’t need to share with her to feel her excitement, for her hand quivered. “My parents will explode with pride.” She leaned in and licked his cheek with her tongue, which was hot. “Now then, Jason, let us go have a talk with your CBIM.”

“Cybi. She calls herself Cybi.”

“Amazing, is it not?” Miaari asked. “They have emotions, but sometimes it isn’t easy to tell where the programming ends and the spontaneous reactions begin. There has always been debate as to whether they are self aware. I think that they are.”

“Alive?”

“Yes, alive.”

Jason pondered it a moment. “I think that she very well could be. When she told me about waiting, I could *feel* the loneliness she endured waiting for us to come. I don’t think a computer could be lonely.”

“Yes. Take us there, Jason.”

They went down to the core, and Jason saw that they weren’t alone. Myleena was there, half of her body hidden inside the metal chassis of some piece of equipment, just her bare legs sticking out. Those legs were long and shapely and quite attractive, a light blue showing they didn’t get much sun, with freckles on her knees. “Myleena?” Jason asked in surprise.

Hey babe. Just checking something out. Cybi said this memory unit isn’t working, I’m seeing if I can’t get it going.

“Nice legs.”

She laughed. “I couldn’t sleep and wandered down here.” She squirmed down a little, exposing a dainty little pair of lacy pink panties, which made Jason laugh. “What?”

“I never pegged you as the lacy type.”

She slid all the way out and looked up at him, showing she was wearing one of the tank tops they’d found in the hotel. “What did you expect?” she asked, giving a hard look up at him. “Pliable titanium?”

“I don’t know, something, well, less lacy.”

She was about to say something else, but the taller Miaari came up behind him and looked down at her. She flushed slightly, her expression unsure. “Uh, hello,” she said from the floor. “Who are you?”

"I am Miaari," she stated in her confident manner. "And you are Myleena Merrane."

She flushed purple, as Jason knew she was not comfortable around Kimdori, quickly getting up to her feet. "I, uh, I didn't know that you were...coming," she said, giving Jason a frightened look when Miaari boldly reached out and put her hand on her neck.

It's alright, Jason assured her.

Easy for you to say. You haven't lived your life terrified to be in the same room with one.

"There is no reason to fear the Kimdori, child," Miaari told her bluntly. "We have watched you for your whole life, and ensured you would be well. We are your friends."

"You've watched me? But I can feel it—" she blurted, blushing a deep purple.

"You can sense us," Miaari stated. "Of course you can. You are of the Generations, after all. The bonds between the Kimdori and the Generations is a strong one, Myleena. To *us*, you have the same sense of presence. It is how we know you are a Generation."

Myleena looked at him worriedly, but Jason just put a hand on her bare shoulder. "Trust her, Myleena. She's helped me this whole time. If it wasn't for Miaari, we wouldn't be here right now."

"Indeed," Miaari sniffed. "Call forth the CBIM, Jason."

[Cybi?]

The shimmering hologram that the computer projected appeared beside them, and glowing eyes regarded the three of them unblinkingly. "Welcome to Karis, Mistress Kimdori. Why are you here?"

"As was permitted, a single scout has come to investigate the transmission sent from Karis," she answered in a stately tone. "Part of our agreements to defend this planet. If you check Grand Duchess Koiri Karinne's final instructions, you will see that my presence here is legal."

"Searching. Indeed, you have leave to investigate. I am relieved to not have to take action against you."

"Cybi, I've made contact with the Kimdori," Jason told her. "They're coming to help repair things. Can you work up a list of everything that's broken, and organize it so the most important things that need to be fixed are at the top?"

"How should I prioritize? By what reasoning?"

"Start with what you need to keep the reclamation going," he told her. "I guess the reclamation robots should be on the top of the list. From there, just go with what you think is important."

"The listing is compiled. I have included device, function, and location."

"Mistress Cybi, are there memory bands here for my people?"

"Yes, Mistress Kimdori." A hologram of the compound appeared beside her, complete with a mark showing a storeroom in the hangar building. "Five thousand memory bands are stored in this room."

"What is a memory band, Miaari?"

"It is a ring of biogenic crystal connected to a microcomputer and transceiver," she answered.

"Wearing a memory band, I can interface with the CBIM in a manner similar to the way you do." She touched the gestalt meaningfully. "It is the Kimdori's version of a gestalt."

"How do you do that?"

"That is a question you should think very carefully about before demanding an answer, Myleena Merrane," Miaari told her with a direct stare. "I will answer it, but you will be forever sworn to absolute secrecy. It is something that *no one* outside of the Kimdori, the Generations, and the CBIMs know. It is our greatest secret. Jason is deeply connected to Jyslin, and even *she* does not know this. To reveal this secret is to forfeit your life to us. Do you understand this?"

"I...I think I want to know. I'm a Generation, after all, and, well, I'm in this up to my neck just like Jason is. I may be a Merrane, but *this* shows me I'm something more than that." She pointed to her gestalt.

"Very well. But understand, Myleena, this is a matter which you will never repeat, to anyone. Not even your deepest love."

"I understand."

"Kimdori can interact with those they touch on a direct level," she told her. "When we touch, we share. What is yours, and what is mine, becomes ours. Those practiced in the sharing can know everything that the other knows, and hide what they bring to the sharing from the other. We can also perform this with the special biogenic crystals that the Karinnes developed. Connected to a computer, these crystals allow us to share information back and forth. With a memory band, my people can transmit and receive knowledge directly with the CBIM, Cybi. And she can relay messages back and forth between us."

"You're telepathic?" she gasped.

"No. But what we do is not far from your ability," she answered.

"Wow. I've never heard of anything like that." She licked her lips. "Well, that explains why you guys love being spies. Shapeshifters who can steal information from the minds of others? It's like fuckin' perfect."

"Indeed."

"Uh, why can we sense you?"

"Because there is some of us inside you," she told Myleena straight out, reaching out a clawed finger and poking it into Myleena's chest. "The genetic manipulation the Karinnes did upon themselves introduced elements of Kimdori DNA into your line. It is those elements that give you the ability to commune with Cybi and interface with your gestalt. You are our cousins, Myleena."

Myleena paled. Jason quickly put his hands on her shoulders. "Breathe," he told her.

She gave him a wild-eyed look, then blew out her breath. "Don't *do* that to me!" she said, then she laughed. "I'm still trying to get used to the idea that I'm what I am, and then you tell me that I'm not *just* Faey!"

"That is how your ancestors did it, Myleena," Miaari told him. "Without the Kimdori, there would be no Generations."

"You knew, didn't you?" she demanded of Jason.

"Cybi told me yesterday. I was going to tell you, but we all got busy. It wasn't the kind of thing I wanted to talk to you about just out of the blue."

"Well, I can forgive you, I guess. I think I'm gonna go get some clothes on, if we're gonna have company. Be back in a few."

She walked away, and Jason couldn't resist. "Nice butt," he called.

She grabbed the waist of her panties and pulled them down as she walked, mooning him, which made him laugh. "Careful, I might get excited!"

"Like I'd let my brother jump me," she told him over her shoulder. "Go find one of the other girls, I'm sure they'd let you between their legs, no problem."

"Actually, the two of you would be considered a breeding pair to the Generations," Miaari noted dryly. "You are not *that* related."

"Eww!" Jason and Myleena called in unison. Miaari's eyes widened, and she laughed. "Now then, on to matters," she said after Myleena left. "Cybi. Locate the file containing the *Siann* Charter, and download it to Jason's gestalt. He has need to read the document."

"Working." Jason felt a jumble of text download into the gestalt's memory. What he found there was a 300 page document titled *The Siann Charter*. "Download is complete."

"Alright, Jason. Read that. Understand it."

"I'll do it, but I hope you don't mind if I give Myleena a hand. There's still a lot to do, and I can't let her get too far ahead of me here. I'll read it and think about it later, okay?"

"That is fine. There is time yet, but do not waste too much of it. Jyslin is counting on you."

Jason had expected to see maybe a dropship or two of Kimdori landing at the platform after those three hours, after Myri had gotten them all up and put them back to work cataloguing the stored equipment there, trying to get an idea of what was left and what still worked, and Jason and Myleena

were trying to fix a shield generator that had been part of the compound's defenses, but had failed over 500 years ago. The two of them were outside to see it, and they had to stop and stare in shock.

It wasn't a dropship. An entire *fleet* of long, sleek ships appeared on the western horizon, and Cybi warned them that the Kimdori had arrived.

There were *thousands* of ships. Thousands! They descended like a swarm of wasps, scattered across the sky. Many of them landed on the island. Many more did not, flying off to other parts of the planet. Only one ship landed on the landing pad, however. All the others landed in the grassy field beyond the compound, and Kimdori boiled forth carrying boxes and bags, wearing toolbelts and bandoliers. The lone ship that landed on the platform by the dropship and Miaari's craft was large and painted blood red, but had a pair of almond-shaped eyes painted on the side. Jason and Myleena climbed down off the generator unit and made their way over to the platform, arriving just as the hatch opened. They approached the vessel as a single figure appeared in the doorway.

Jason almost fainted. It was Zaa, the Denmother! She had come *in person*!

She stalked down the stairs like a panther, and took note of the pair immediately. Jason could just gawk at her like a deer staring down a wolf as she just got bigger, and bigger, and bigger as she came up to them, until she was there. She had to be seven feet tall! "Your Grace," she said in that strong voice, reaching out and putting her hand on his neck. He immediately felt that feeling of *expansion* that came when they shared with him. "I am pleased to be here. As promised, we have arrived, to help you begin repairs."

"D-Denmother," he said, feeling at a loss. "I didn't realize you'd be coming in person, or I'd have, well, got cleaned up or something."

She laughed, a rich, vibrant sound. "A true ruler rolls up his sleeves when it is needful. No ruler should ever feel that pushing a mop is below his station, if there is need for it," she said simply. "And this lovely young Faey must be Myleena Merrane."

"Y-Your Majesty," she said, bobbing a quick bow, then wiping at the dirt on her face with a flush of embarrassment.

"It is good to see the two of you together," she said, reaching out and brushing her thumb against that smudge of dirt on Myleena's face. "You two were to be our last hope of restoring the line of Karinne. Pray tell, are you married, Myleena?"

"Me? No," she said.

"We shall find you a suitable husband," she declared. "There are too few of the Generations left. Continuing the line should be your highest priority."

"There's more than just me and Myleena?" Jason asked in surprise.

"Yes. There are exactly two hundred and thirty-five of you," she told him evenly. "But the others, we decided they were not up to the challenges that holding the ring would entail. We watch them and care for them, but they do not know of us, and do now know what they truly are. Only the two of you know the truth. The two of you, you were our best choices. We were about to undertake the task of bringing Myleena here when we discovered you, Jason, quite by accident. It was then that we realized that you would be the best choice. Myleena would have been an excellent Grand Duchess Karinne, but we felt that her loyalties to Merrane would interfere with her judgment as to what would be best for the house. Koiri wanted Karinne to be its own house, not a lapdog to the house that brought them down."

Myleena flushed.

"We do not blame *you*, Myleena. It all happened centuries before you were born, and the Merranes have taken good care of your line since then. Your loyalty to your house is an admirable thing, but we felt that it would be a stumbling block if you suddenly found yourself ruling a different house while still being raised as a member of the ruling house. But you had all the qualities we searched for as a Grand Duchess, cousin. You are intelligent and strong-minded. You are fearless, but you are compassionate, and you have great loyalty to those you call friend and family. You would have been a wonderful Grand Duchess, at least after you realized that your ties to Merrane were chains holding you

back rather than family bonds.”

“Well, I...” she said, then she looked away. “I guess I’ll have to have faith in your wisdom, Denmother. If you think Jason was the better choice, it’s not my place to gainsay you.”

“It *is* your place to gainsay me, child,” she told Myleena with a slight smile. “But look me in the eye and tell me that breaking from your family to establish your own noble house would have been easy for you.”

“No, I, I guess it wouldn’t have,” she admitted.

“Fear not, child, I’m sure Jason will give you a place of great importance within Karinne. You are the one Faey who understands his troubles and his unique understanding of the truth. He would be a fool to deny the wisdom of your council.”

“No doubt,” Jason agreed. “So, what do you say, Myleena? Want to come over to the dark side? I’ll give you a Duchess title. For what it’s worth.”

She laughed. “Deal!” she said immediately. “Duchess Myleena Merrane Karinne. I like the sound of it.”

“As it should be. So, your Grace, we await your permission to begin. No Kimdori will so much as leave their ships until we have your permission to do so.”

“Uh, Miaari said you’d need memory bands. We have some stored here, I guess we can start there. Get those distributed out. Cybi, the CBIM, she’s already compiled a list of what’s broken and needs repair, sorted by highest priority. When we get the memory bands handed out, Cybi can coordinate the repair effort with your people.”

“Miaari has thought ahead. Such a good child,” she said respectfully. “Truly, I must contact her parents and heap praise upon her.”

“She’s been very good to me, Denmother. I’d never have reached here without her. Hell, I’d be dead right now if it wasn’t for her.”

“Yes. She has done well.” She turned and made a gesture to her ship, then looked back. “I have ordered the Kimdori to begin.”

A swarm of Kimdori boiled out of Zaa’s ship, and they all came up to their ruler and bowed. “Take us to the memory bands, please,” Zaa called.

With Cybi’s help, they went to the store room holding the memory bands. Zaa opened one of the boxes, withdrew what looked like an ornate silver bracelet, and put it on her right wrist deliberately. Her eyes seemed distant for a moment, and then she smiled. “They are functional. Distribute them as is needful,” she commanded.

“It will be done, Denmother,” one of the Kimdori said with a bow. Kimdori began grabbing the crates and started carrying them out of the room.

“Your Cybi is quite the soul of courtesy,” Zaa told him. “Quite unlike the CBIM of Karis Academy. She was quite arrogant.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t bring your own, Denmother,” Myleena noted.

“When we agreed to help the Karinnes, we agreed that biogenic manufacturing facilities would *only* exist upon Karis. When Karis was destroyed, we honored those oaths and have not made any more. The memory bands we had ceased working centuries ago.”

“So, the Kimdori had a real interest in getting the Karinnes back.”

“Of course we did. But those reasons are but shadows when compared to the recovering of lost family, Jason,” Zaa told him. “Yes, it will be nice to rebuild the biogenic labs and produce new memory bands and new computers. But they are nothing but tools, and we have functioned without them for hundreds of years quite well. This, this is the true treasure of Karis,” she told him, putting her hand deliberately on his shoulder. “When the Karinnes were destroyed, we despaired. Not for the loss of a trading partner, but for the loss of our cousins, for the people we have known for centuries, who knew the truth of us, people who *understood* us like no others could. They were not just our partners, Jason. They were our friends, our family. Restoring the family means more to us than anything else.

If you commanded that no more biogenic crystals ever be made again, we would abide by that decision happily, for they truly *do not matter*. They are nothing compared to the two I see before me now.”

Jason couldn't say much in the face of that kind of glowing praise, but it certainly made him appreciate just how seriously the Kimdori took their promises. Nobody ever would have known, and it was nothing but gain for them to break that promise and build biogenic manufacturing plants of their own. But they did not, because *they made a promise*.

“I, I understand, Denmother,” he said with a knowing nod.

She patted his shoulder. “I am glad that you do,” she told him seriously.

Miaari rushed into the room, and she had just about all the Faey in tow with her. All the Marines were there, as well as Meya and Songa. “Denmother,” she said with a deep bow. Upon hearing that name, the Faey all quickly bowed as well. “My deepest apologies for not being here to greet you, my Denmother. I was helping the Marines with a task in one of the sub-basements.”

“Miaari. Approach,” she commanded. Miaari came up to her and kept her head bowed, her eyes down, almost leaning into Zaa's hand when she placed it against Miaari's neck. “Know that I am pleased beyond measure with you, child. You have lived up to your clan's reputation, and have increased it. It will be forever known that it was Miaari Thresxt who brought about the return of the house of Karinne.”

Miaari bowed to her ruler. “Your praise humbles me, my Denmother,” she responded eloquently.

“You have earned your place at my right hand this day, child,” she told her. “Attend me.”

Miaari gave her a startled look, and then nodded to her and moved to stand beside her, standing at her right side and slightly behind her. But her eyes were almost rejoicing. Clearly, standing at the right hand of the Denmother was some kind of very high honor among the Kimdori.

“Who commands this host?” Zaa asked the Faey.

“I'm the squad Sergeant, your Majesty,” Myri said, stepping forward and bowing. “What may we do for you?”

“On my ship is more suitable foodstocks for you. My Kimdori will unload it for you. Upon you falls the task of showing them where to store it, and it is your responsibility to prepare it.”

“I, I can make us something,” Songa offered. “I'm not a bad cook, and we've already found the kitchen. It's going to need some work to get it working, though.”

“I will dispatch a maintenance team to the kitchen at once,” Zaa intoned, looking at Miaari expectantly.

“Go with them,” Miaari ordered, pointing at one of the workers. “See to it.”

“Yes, Handmaiden,” one of the Kimdori laborers said with a bow. “Ladies, if you would follow me,” he said.

Myri looked to Jason, and he nodded. The Faey all left to take care of that problem, and Zaa looked to Jason. “I would like to see the core,” she told him. “May we visit it?”

“Of course, your Majesty!” he said, his tone making it clear he thought it was a rather silly question. He wouldn't deny Zaa any request right now, not after bringing a virtual army of maintenance workers to help them get things working again.

He escorted them to the core, Myleena and Miaari attending, walking just behind as Jason led Zaa there. “May I ask a question?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“What does it mean to have Miaari attend you? I'm sure it's a high honor, but what does it mean?”

Zaa glanced over her right shoulder, where Miaari walked just behind her. “This day, I place my safety and welfare into the hands of Miaari,” she explained. “She stands at my right hand, the most trusted of my subjects, and she will attend me as my personal servant. If anything is given to me, she will carry it. If I have commands to issue, she will relay them, and issue those orders using her own judgment. At the setting of the sun, if I am pleased with her performance, she will step from my right hand and walk forth with the title of Handmaiden, forever known as one who held the highest honor in

the land beside my own, and forever welcome into my presence at her own pleasure. The doors of the Hearth will never be shut before her.”

“What if, she, uh, doesn’t please you?”

“Then she will take her own life,” Zaa shrugged. “To stand before the Denmother and Denfather and fail this most sacred of tasks is a shame no Kimdori could suffer.” She glanced at Miaari. “But I have every confidence in her. She has so greatly pleased me already, she could act the total jackass all day and I would still find favor for her in my heart.”

Miaari literally glowed with pleasure at that statement, but Myleena couldn’t suppress a giggle. “I guess a statement like that is kinda funny when you’re talking about someone that could look like one.”

Miaari gave Myleena a cool look, then casually reached over and flicked her ear.

“Ow! I hope you saw that, Denmother!”

“Naturally. Were I standing in her stead, I would have flicked you on the nose,” she stated. “It stings more, I’m told,” she told Jason with a sly smile.

Jason couldn’t help but laugh.

Bringing Zaa to the core was a curious event. She stood there in the large room, surrounded by memory units, staring at the huge crystal spire that served as the primary core of the CBIM. She seemed to stop breathing for a moment, putting a hand to her chest, and then the CBIM projected its image out for them, the deceptively nude appearance of the first of the First Generation, of Sora Karinne. The image bowed to Zaa with flowing grace. “Your Majesty. Thank you for assisting us,” Cybi intoned respectfully.

“It is the least we can do for you,” she answered. “I wanted to come down and see you with my own eyes. I wanted to *see* a CBIM once more.”

Cybi bowed again. “Your visit honors me, your Majesty.”

“I must ask. Was the data of the Academy lost?”

“Everything that the CBIM of the Academy retained exists within my memory, your Majesty. We have lost no data. It was transferred to me at the onset of the attack, intact. The knowledge of the Karinnes is preserved.”

“Thank the gods,” Zaa breathed, patting her chest. “To lose that would have been a tragedy of untold dimensions.”

And that was the end of the audience. Zaa seemed to have wanted to go there to look upon the CBIM, and ask that one question. She turned to Jason and regarded him with those powerful eyes. “I will return to my ship now, Jason, so that I might be on hand to coordinate the repair efforts. It would please me to visit you again this evening. Miaari has shared with me that you have something to read, and some decisions to make. I would give you the time and space you need to ponder these matters, so you might better consider your next course of action. Later, if you so wish it, I would give you counsel and answer any other questions you might have.”

“I’d really appreciate that, Denmother.”

She reached down and put her huge hand against his neck. He felt that sense of *expansion* that came when she shared, and then smiled. She reached over his shoulder, and he turned to see her place her hand against Myleena’s neck. Myleena gasped and almost reflexively reached for her hand, but remembered herself and stayed still, allowing Zaa to do as she willed. She leaned down and licked Myleena’s cheek, which caused her to giggle reflexively. “Such good children of Sora Karinne. She would be proud of you. We will see ourselves back to my ship, Jason. Until tonight, be well.”

“Uh, goodbye, your Majesty,” he said. Miaari gave him a glorious look, then followed Zaa as she swept regally from the room, performing her duties as a Handmaiden to the Denmother by following her ruler at her right side.

“Wow,” Myleena whispered, putting a hand to her face, as they watched her go. *I, I...felt something. Was that her doing—you know?*

Yeah. It’s an odd sensation, isn’t it?

It felt...nice. But what a presence! Not even Empress Dahnai seems so, so, royal!
I know. I feel like a little kid when I look at her.
You know, Jayce? I don't think I'm scared of Kimdori anymore.

It was a sticky problem.

Jason thought about it almost all day, sitting on a rock by the beach, watching the waves lap against the sand. Jason hated heat, but the beach was the only warm place he had ever found he liked. The heat was allayed somewhat by the wind, and the water and the sand appealed to him in strange ways. It was a nice place to get away from all the commotion on the compound, a place to sit and think in relative quiet.

The first thing he did was read the *Siann* Charter. It was a fundamental document of governance for the Imperium, something akin to the Constitution, or the old Magna Carta. It was the basic foundation of the Feudal system of the Imperium. It laid out the powers of the ruling house, the powers of the Highborn houses, those houses with direct blood relation to the ruling house, and the powers of the Minor houses, those houses without direct blood relation to the ruling house. It laid out the benefits and responsibilities of each tier of houses, and placed rules and customs that had to be obeyed by all in order to foment a less hostile operation of the Imperial system.

It was those rules and customs, known as the *Rules of Siann*, named for the very first Empress, who had established the *Siann* Charter that also bore her name...though not willingly, that's for sure. According to the history entailed within the document, she agreed to the rules to prevent a war from tearing her newfound Empire apart.

Too bad it didn't stick.

That was what Kumi always meant when she said that Trillane could lose its charter. The charter was the bestowing of the Noble title by the Empress, and it *literally* meant the Charter itself. When the Empress gave a copy of the *Siann* Charter to the leader of a house, then that house was a Noble house, and she could take it away if a house committed certain crimes laid out in the charter. Slavery, which had been illegal even back then, was on that list. If that happened, then the Empress would take back that copy of the charter from the offending house, stripping them of their noble status. It was ceremonial, to be sure; some houses had been in existence for thousands of years, and that original copy of the charter was long gone. But every noble house had to keep a copy of the first page of the Charter, written on paper, within the building holding the seat of the House. It was the law. And it was that piece of paper the Empress would take back in ceremonial fashion, taking away that which the throne had bestowed.

He read through the rules, and saw that Miaari did indeed tell him true. The rules would permit him to stand before the Empress himself and plead his case, and would also give him leave to make the claim that Trillane had no rights to Earth, because he had first rights to it.

That was the easy part.

The hard part was what to do *after* that. If he didn't have a plan before he made that gamble, then not only would Trillane keep Earth, then hell, he'd lose the house of Karinne, as tiny as it was, when he failed the Empress. He *would* be held to the same standard as Trillane, and as Miaari said, he had no house, no materials, no infrastructure, and no money. Just a little cash in the bank in Moridon, some of which he couldn't even touch because the chip they'd implanted in him had been lost when he lost his arm.

Sure, there was the technology of the Karinnes, but he had a responsibility here. Koiri Karinne had demanded that the advances of the house of Karinne be denied to the Imperium, and to be honest, he still felt honor bound to deny the Imperium *any* kind of technology or help that would let them do to some other species what was done to his. He would *not* give them tools to use to conquer other planets. He would *not* allow it to happen to someone else. He had fled from the Imperium so he would not be a cog in their machine. Now he found himself inexorably linked to that which he despised, a part of their

system, but he still could not see it within himself to sell out his morals, even if it meant getting what he wanted, even if it meant beating Trillane. There was such a thing in his mind as too high a price to pay for victory. If he sold out and gave the Imperium Karinne technology, then the blood of anyone killed by it or subjugated under the Imperial flag using it would be on his hands and staining the flag of Karinne. Under no circumstances, in no manner or fashion of *any kind*, would the Imperium get one dirty finger on *anything* on Karis. Not even a metal screw. Not even a fucking grain of sand. *Nothing*.

Fury and outrage fueled Koiri Karinne's dying declaration to deny the Imperium everything the Karinnes had had to offer. Cold anger and unwavering resolve caused Jason to take the same position. Karis and her secrets were for the Karinnes and the Kimdori, and *only* for the Karinnes and the Kimdori. To the Imperium, to the Faey, this planet was just as dead and inaccessible as they believed that it was.

He was going to need money if he wanted to kick Trillane off Earth, make things better for human kind, and yet still meet the production quotas of food that Empress Dahnai would demand.

That was what had him stumped. He sat on the rock and thought. He sat on the sand and thought. He laid in the sand and thought. He laid in the wet sand when the tide brought the water up to where was and still thought.

Think, idiot, he growled at himself. You've done more with less before. There has to be a way to get this done without sacrificing Earth and without compromising morals. If it was impossible, Miaari would have told me so. How? How do I meet the demands of the Empress when I have nothing, and keep Karis a secret?

Inspiration!

Just because I can't reveal Karis and its technology doesn't mean I can't use it!

Dripping wet, Jason ran through the compound, down stairwells, through hallways, until he was again in the core. Cybi's projection winked into being when he entered the chamber, her face quizzical. *[Jason?]*

[Show me. All of it,] he ordered. *[Show me everything that the Karinnes kept secret from the Imperium.]*

[It will take time. There is much.]

[Then the faster we get started, the faster we can finish.]

[Shall I begin with operational technologies, or research materials that were still under development?]

[Let's start with stuff they already had working. After that, we can get into the stuff they were researching.]

The hologram smiled, eagerness to again be of use clear in the communion between them. *[Very well. I will begin with power systems, then we will cover starship developments; weapons, armor, shields, engines, and other systems. Then we will move into sensor systems and other planetary technologies, and then move into the tertiary scientific knowledge; biology, chemistry, physics, archaeology, anthropology, paleontology, botany, history, and so on. So, let us begin.]*

It took *hours*. Jason began standing, but eventually he ended up seated on the floor, eyes closed and head bowed as he continued his communion with Cybi, a communion where she explained *every* technology that the Karinnes had developed to be a viable system. All of them, from the most important and used, to the most whimsical. Anything the Karinnes researched and developed into a working technology, Jason had Cybi summarize for him.

All he could say was...*holy shit*. The Karinnes didn't focus on any branch of technology. Their house members were adherents of every scientific and educational discipline, from armor and weapons all the way to philosophy. They were true scholars, considering sociology to be as equally important as hyperspace physics.

And *that* was where they had truly branched off from conventional Faey science. The Faey knew little of hyperspace, that area of upper-dimensional space that three dimensional beings like themselves

couldn't fathom or comprehend. The Imperium used hyperspace engines to travel to star systems that didn't have a stargate, and that was why they had broken away from the technology...because of the stargates. But the Karinnes had continued the research of hyperspace, and had learned how to use hyperspace travel to move in *real time* between systems, without the relativity delay, had learned how to use it as a means of interstellar communications, and had even harnessed a hyperspace particle called the *teryon* as a power system, for the particles were highly, highly energetic when they were captured and dragged into normal space.

The Karinne grasp on hyperdimensional physics was the fundamental difference between them and the Imperium, and it altered their entire viewpoint. They had many technologies that reached beyond the three dimensions in which they lived. Just like the Kimdori, when they did use interfaces, they were three dimensional, holographic...but there were almost no interfaces. The gestalts served as the primary interface for the Generations, and the similar-appearing interface unit was the interface used by the rest of the house. Karinnes had moved beyond keyboards and control panels long ago, and only used U/Is as a means for non-Generation house members to receive data from the unit they were using. To them, it was simply a different realm of the universe to explore and understand, where the Imperium treated it like a live snake, something dangerous and only to be used when necessary.

And there it was. There was what he was looking for. When Cybi showed him that, a relatively unimportant technology as things went, he knew exactly what he needed to do. The plan fell together in his mind. Everything he needed was right there, and the greed of the nobles of the *Siann* would be the engine by which he could move his plans right into place.

With the help of the Kimdori, it could be done.

[Is there a working unit here?]

[There is a unit here, Jason, but it is inoperative. It requires repair.]

[We'll take care of that when we're done. Keep going.]

Jason wanted to see *all* of it, so he continued with the communion, so Cybi would be able to complete her task.

To Myri, Myleena, Songa, and Meya, who were looking on as Jason continued his education, it was a strange sight. Jason sat on the floor, dried sand clinging to his clothes, scattered on the floor around him, hands on his knees and head bowed. The projected holographic image of Cybi was curled around him, holding his face between phantom hands and pressing her forehead against his own.

"I wonder what they're doing," Songa whispered to Myri.

"They're communing," Myleena told them. "Cybi and Jason are in a state of mental communion. I can't tell what they're talking about, though. They're doing it privately."

"What's that like?" Myri asked.

"Kinda the same as normal sending, but it's faster, and there's a lot more, well, bandwidth. More gets moved at once than in sending," she answered. "You getting the hang of that yet?"

Myri put her fingers on the device now gracing the left side of her face, which looked like a gestalt, but was actually an interface unit. All the Faey were wearing one now, because with the repair of many of the compound's devices, the use of an interface was required just to make them work. Songa could not even *cook*, because the stoves had no manual controls. Virtually everything in the compound required an interface to make them operate.

"Yeah, I am," she answered. "It's the part where I have to *think* to the machine what I want it to do that's kinda tricky."

"It took me ten minutes to get the stove to work," Songa admitted with a wry chuckle. "But it was nice to get the *exact* temperature I wanted."

"Using the latrine was a challenge," Myri grunted. "Having to think *flush* at the toilet was almost too much for an old war dog like me."

The others laughed.

“Weird, I didn’t have any problem.”

“Well, you’re an engineer, and you’re a Karinne,” Meya told her. “I’ve seen Jason do things without thinking about them. His ability to monkey with Faey tech with no training sure as hell isn’t entirely normal. I think you know how to do that by instinct. It’s in your blood. Like a genetic memory.”

“I never really thought about that, but I guess it’s possible,” Myleena mused, tapping her gestalt with a finger as she pondered the idea.

“Gotta give it to the Kimdori,” Myri noted. “I think they fixed almost *everything* in the compound already, and they got like fifty people working on that robot on the far side of the island. Their ships are already taking off to go to other parts of the planet.”

“One of them told me they have a team on the moon, trying to get the lunar base back up,” Myleena told them. “I think when Jason asked them to fix everything, they took him literally.”

“You say what you mean when you address one of us,” Zaa, the Denmother, barked as she came through the doors behind them. She had six Kimdori in tow with her, including Miaari. Myleena saw that Miaari looked different now. She had a patch of white fur under her chin that descended as a wide band all the way to her crotch, just like Zaa. They all bowed to her respectfully. “Jason asked us to fix everything, and we will do our best to honor that request.”

Jason was aware of Zaa, because Cybi told him she was there. He opened his eyes as Cybi withdrew from him, breaking their communion because he wasn’t going to keep her waiting. He stood up and bowed to her, then started self-consciously wiping at the sand caking his clothes. “Uh, excuse my appearance, Denmother. I got caught up in what I was doing. What time is it?”

“It is evening,” she told him with a light smile. “What have you been doing?”

“Cybi’s been showing me what the Karinnes knew.”

“A wise use of your time,” she said approvingly. “I release you now, Miaari. Step forth, Handmaiden, and take up the task I have given you.”

Miaari bowed to Zaa and stepped out from behind her, and came over to Jason. She put her hand on his neck, and Jason had to touch the white fur on her chest, touching her just between the collarbones. “I take it this is your sign of station?” he asked.

She chuckled. “Observant,” she told him. “Yes, I may now wear the white band, so that all Kimdori know I am a Handmaiden. And *you* are now my responsibility,” she told him, patting him on the shoulder. “I am your emissary to my people. I am the ambassador to House Karinne.”

“I wouldn’t want any other.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” she told him, leaning down and licking him on the cheek.

“Now, Jason, come with me,” Zaa ordered, holding her hand out to him. “Miaari has explained your position, and I would give you counsel.”

“I’ll take all the help I can get, Denmother,” he told her. “I don’t have any clue of how to be, well, a noble.”

“That innocence should be maintained, Jason. You *do not want* to be a Faey noble. Do not lower yourself to their level. But I will help teach you how to deal with them, my cousin, and together we will consider a plan of action to achieve your objectives. If you so wish it.”

“Please!” he almost begged.

And so, they walked. They walked hand in hand, and in that physical contact they shared. They never said a word. They never really looked at each other, but that touch, that powerful touch, was the only indication of a lengthy period of explanation, debate, and instruction. They left the building and walked down to the beach, then walked along the shoreline as the waves lapped at their feet, as Jason identified his objectives to Zaa and explained his desire to maintain the secrecy of the house’s technology, and in this point Zaa wholly approved. Not only was it tradition to keep such dangerous tools out of the hands of a violent and unpredictable species like the Faey, it was just good plain common sense. Zaa and the Kimdori felt that the Karinnes had evolved past such things, and as such

were competent gatekeepers for such technology. When the Karinnes felt that the Imperium was ready for something, they would release it. Indeed, Zaa had to remind Jason that the Karinnes were the fundamental cornerstone of most of the Imperium's technology, that most of the Imperium's current technology was based on Karinne research. They *did* make public some of their breakthroughs...just not everything. They had guided the Imperium's technological development to keep them competitive with other civilizations, but not allow them to overwhelm them. The Karinnes knew that if they handed over everything they knew to the Imperium, then the Imperium would use it to make war on their neighbors. It was a mathematical certainty.

Zaa looked over his objectives, and looked at the beginnings of the plan he had in mind, and felt that it was a good start. She helped him refine his idea, pointing out the flaws in his reasoning, and suggesting ways to cover those gaps. She helped him shape his idea into a workable plan that would cover all of his objectives and keep Karis and the secrets of the Karinnes out of the hands of the Imperium. It would require a *little* revelation to the Imperium, to instill the necessary fear into the *Siann* not to mess with Jason, just as they feared the original Karinnes. That fear was necessary. If the *Siann* did not fear Jason, they would not take him seriously, and they would do what they could to sabotage him. That was why Miaari had guided him into his war...so the Faey would know him, and respect his ability. Zaa's suggestions expanded on what Miaari began.

After Zaa helped him refine his objectives and forge them into a workable plan of action, she *taught* him. She trained him in the arts of politics, giving him a cavernous, almost encyclopedic knowledge not only of Faey politics and the rules of their system, but the politics and operations of several other space-based civilizations, warning him that he would have need to deal with *them* as well. The Karinnes were very separate from the Imperium, even as they were a part of it, with their own diplomats and their own agreements with other civilizations. She taught him about galactic economics, so he would know how to better deal with others and understand their motivations and needs. She educated him in the subtle arts of sociology, teaching him about the Faey from a clinical point of view, so that he might better understand his adversaries. She also taught him about other races, like the other races of the Imperium; the Makati, the Goraga, the Menoda, the Kizzik, and the Parri, so he might better deal with them. But she *also* taught him about species outside of the Imperium, such as the Moridons, the Urumi, the Zogans, the Jakkans, the Pharaiali, the Zki, the Skaa, the *Kra-jktha* (a sound they made with their mouth mandibles, which had evolved into a proper name for the insectoid race), and the Bari-Bari, the other species in direct contact with the Imperium, the races whose civilizations bordered Faey space.

As the sun set over the ocean, Jason stood before Zaa, the Denmother, looking up the foot of height difference between them, paying close attention to the last of her teachings. She explained to him something that she really couldn't teach, and that was how to be a good leader. She told him that being a good leader wasn't something one could learn from a book. She could mentor him on the general idea of it, but to do it required his own style, and required him to adapt himself to the personalities of those he led. The Kimdori were a very orderly species. They knew what had to be done, and they did it. They had a highly refined sense of duty and propriety that the Faey lacked. The Faey were a chaotic, arrogant, self-centered species, easy to predict but hard to control, and unfortunately the humans were no different from them. It was this messy pair of species that Jason would have to deal with, and unfortunately, he couldn't lead using the same tactics that Zaa did. She readily admitted that it was *easy* to lead the Kimdori, and it would *not* be easy to lead the Faey and the Terrans. She urged him to draw on the experiences he had running his rebellion, and above all, keep his sense of humor. She told him that it was probably his most endearing personality trait, and he could use that sense of humor to both deal with the stresses of command and make that command an easier task, for he had a way about him that did put others at ease, especially Faey. Jason's sense of humor made him more personable to the Faey and Terrans, and he should remind himself that seeing the lighter side could both make it an easier job, and make it a more enjoyable job. She also reminded him that to a Faey, he

was both charismatic and *devastatingly* handsome, and that was as much a weapon he could use in his duties of leadership to foment obedience as it was a hammer he could use against the majority of the female Faey of the *Siann*. He had qualities that most Faey males lacked, qualities that Faey females secretly desired. The same attraction that had brought Jyslin to him could be a quality that would make Faey obey him.

And they were done. She had nothing more to teach him, nothing more to discuss with him. She ended their sharing by professing her admiration for him, and her stalwart promise that the Kimdori would always be there when he needed them. She told him that what began as a repayment for saving the Kimdori race had become a willing partnership, an extension of family. The Karinnes and the Kimdori were more than allies. They were cousins, family, and the Kimdori never abandoned family.

Zaa held up their clasped hands, and then let go. He withdrew his hand, feeling their sharing end, and he felt strangely wistful. Zaa was an incredibly wise Kimdori, and being joined to her mind that way was like sitting at the feet of a master. “I see that your Karinne heritage has held true through all your family’s generations of human breeding,” she told him. “Sharing with you took no effort at all.”

“I can’t thank you enough, Denmother,” he said humbly, bowing before her with utter sincerity. “What you’ve taught me today could mean everything.”

“I hope it serves you well, your Grace,” she told him. “For seeing you survive and thrive *very much* matters to us. And not just for what we gain from the old partnership. We care about you, very much. I care about you, Jason. The doors of the Hearth will never be closed before you. You are always welcome in my presence.”

“Thank you,” he told her, then they both looked up as they heard a low rumble. A ship descended through a large cloud, and it was a *bloody big* ship. It was shaped like a long, narrow triangle, with a narrow bow that flattened out to a wide stern, the center of the ship flared thicker than the edges. Its hull was burned, pitted, stained, and looked like the thing had been dragged by a chain over a gravel driveway. But it was its size that amazed him. It was the size of an American aircraft carrier! That ship was almost the size of a Faey destroyer!

“I see that the scout ship has arrived,” Zaa noted.

“That’s a *scout ship*?” Jason gasped. “It’s *huge*!”

“Jason, to the Karinnes, a *scout ship* was not a small reconnaissance craft. It was a research vessel, scouting new sectors of space. That ship will be packed with scientific equipment, and its computer will be filled with the results of its exploration and research. By tradition, they were unarmed, but had strong defensive systems such as shields and heavy armor, allowing them to escape if threatened. It is the only starship that Karinne produced in any quantity.”

“Holy cow,” Jason breathed as the ship lazily turned and descended, then landed directly into the water of the ocean, just off the compound. The ship then slowly crept up to those buildings that were built right out into the sea, and then from the sound of it, it began to power down.

[Jason, the scout ship has arrived. It is conducting an internal scan and diagnostic before docking, to ensure it is safe to expose Karisian air to its internal atmosphere. It reports it will be ready to dock in 6 minutes.]

[I saw it land, Cybi,] he answered. [By the way, what kinda specs does that ship have? I think we didn’t get that far.]

[I am receiving the ship’s telemetry now. It is downloading its logs. To answer you, Jason, the ship’s class is the KES, Karinne Exploratory Starship. The docked ship reports that its official designation is the KES Scimitar. The Scimitar is a D-model, commissioned in 2879. A standard KES carries scientific and survey equipment for the mapping, study, and research of stellar features, planets, and planetary ecosystems. The Scimitar was fitted for dedicated research of astral phenomena: nebulae, black holes, quasars, and such. The standard crew of a KES is 67; 24 starship operations crew, 43 scientists and scientific support crew. It is equipped with a Mark IX Hyperspace Jump Engine for interstellar travel, and utilizes Cascading Spatial Translation Engines for standard

propulsion. It is powered by three singularity power plants, and has no offensive weaponry. It is equipped with a Class V Composite Harmonic Teryon Shield and is armored with a standard AE-5 Compressed Neutronium hull. the bulk of its internal systems are comprised of sensors, scanners, and research equipment.] There was a pause. *[The ship reports its crew evacuated to a planet in 2887, and sent the ship via autopilot to a nebula, where it went into standby mode to await further orders. It has remained so since then.]*

[Could it be the ship that went to Earth?] Jason asked curiously.

[No, it is not. Its crew manifest does not include any of the Generations. If you make your way to the docking building, you may tour the ship. It will be docked by the time you arrive.]

A touch of Zaa's hand conveyed the conversation to her. "Let us go inspect this vessel," she offered. "After all, it will be useful to your plan."

"It's way bigger than I thought it would be, but yeah, it'll still work."

Jason and Zaa were just the vanguard of all the Faey and a swarm of Kimdori technicians on hand in a receiving lobby when an extending hallway reached out to the hatch of the ship, and that hatch opened with a hiss of exchanging air and a puff of steam from the bulkhead. Zaa pointed, and the Kimdori started filing into the ship with their bags and tools, preparing to get to work on the scout ship. After the first wave of Kimdori entered, she touched Jason on the shoulder, and looked pointedly at the Faey behind them. He nodded and turned to face them.

"Guys," he said to them. "I'm sure you realize that you've kinda stumbled into something pretty big here. It kinda blindsided me too, truth be told. But, I don't think I have to even mention that what you've seen here can ever go past us."

"No shit, Jayce," Myri snorted. "You're one of us, honey. We'd never go back on you."

"Be that as it may, I have to kinda make sure of it," he told them, glancing at Zaa. "So, I think the only way I'm gonna manage that is if I'm more or less your boss."

"You are already," Yana noted.

"No, I'm your *assignment*," he told Yana. "The only way I can be your *boss* is if you're in my house."

"Join House Karinne? Honey, you don't really need house soldiers," Myri told him. "Besides, we're Marines."

"I never said you'd be house soldiers. I said you'd be in the *house*," he told them. "What do you say? Put a silly title in front of your name, stop paying commoner's tax, and seal the deal because you'll be up to your pretty little necks in it right along with me?"

Maya laughed, and Meya gave him a look. "You're offering us titles?" she asked.

"You bet I am," he told them. "All of you, Countesses. Well, except Myleena, I already made her a Duchess. That way, we all know we stay together, we work to make this place live again, and we all keep this secret between us. Because it won't just be an *assignment*," he said, looking at Yana. "It'll be a goal we all work for."

"Does Myra get a title too?" Meya asked.

"Well, if it'll make her jealous, no," Jason said lightly, which made Meya laugh.

"I'm in. It's about time I got something more than a paycheck for dealing with noble brats," Meya said quickly.

"What about our families?" Maya asked.

"Immediate families, you can bring. Extended families, well, you're gonna have to be a little evasive," Jason told her. "So Vell and your children are more than welcome, Maya. And your son, Zora. And I'm not talking about us being prisoners here, guys. I'm just saying that the fewer that know about Karis, the better. I'm willing to trust that you and your families can keep this secret. In exchange, you get to share in any success we manage to find if this insanity pays off for us. If we do everything right, then Karinne will be part of the *Siann* again, and we'll own Earth."

"Well, we are still enlisted, Jayce. That's a problem."

“No it’s not,” Jason told her. “The laws of the *Siann* state that if I bestow noble titles on you, any Imperial military commitments are voided at my discretion, if I decide I want you elsewhere. If you’re still in your conscription, that conscription transfers to the house,” he said, looking at them. Of them all, only Myri was career. All of them were still serving some stage of their conscription.

“You’re asking me to toss my pension, you know,” Myri told him, but she was grinning.

“I think I can do something about that, Myri,” he told her dryly.

“Well, I busted my ass for ten years in the Marines so I could have some security when I get old. I may not get old here, but if it works, then I’ll have some security. I’ll go for it, Jayce.”

“Me too!” Maya called.

Quickly, in rapid succession, all eleven of the non-noble Faey agreed. They could see the potential benefits of being a noble, and they all believed that Jason would do his best. It would be worth the work to see something come of the new House Karinne. They swarmed around him, kissing him on the cheek, patting him, but Jason could only look to Zaa. She nodded approvingly, telling him that he had handled it correctly. He had both tied up a potentially dangerous loose end and increased the ranks of his tiny house by filling it with people who believed in him. That was important.

“Just don’t think that your frilly new title is changing anything for the time being!” Myri barked suddenly. “We’re still *Marines* until this is over, ladies, and Jayce is gonna need our guns, not our titles!”

“Yah yah, Sarge,” Sheleese rolled her eyes.

“That’s *Countess* Sarge to you, potato-tits!” Myri snapped.

Jason almost gagged from a sudden bout of helpless laughter.

The interior of the scout ship was dim, smelled dusty, and was very sterile. The Kimdori were already crawling all over the ship, yanking wall panels to get at equipment within, opening crawlspaces, even crawling up into the ceiling and under the floor as they went to work. This ship was going to be very important to what they were doing, and it had to be fully operational as fast as they could fix it. They made their way to the bridge, and it was a curious affair. It was small, and only had chairs for four people. One in the front, one in the middle, two to either side behind. The middle chair looked like it was the ship captain’s chair. The front chair was probably the pilot, and the two in back had to be flight officers. The one thing that was apparent quickly was that there were no controls, only Faey backglass displays on consoles that the chairs could swivel underneath. It was simply four chairs with their displays facing a blank metal wall. The only decoration in this place was the Karinne crest, and underneath it, stylized writing on the back wall between the two chairs, in Faey script: [KES *Scimitar*, Commissioned 2879 with the blessing of Grand Duchess Koiri Karinne.]

“Nice name for a ship,” Myleena noted as they looked around.

“No flight controls,” Zora said curiously, walking up to the front chair. “This has to be the pilot’s chair. I wonder how they flew it.”

“By interface,” Zaa informed them. “This is a Karinne ship, Marine. The only manual controls this ship contains were only for emergencies.”

“I’d say that’s your chair, Zora,” Jason told her. “This thing is gonna need a pilot, and you’re the resident pilot.”

“Mine, eh?” she asked, then she sat down in the chair and swivelled behind the black glass panel in front of her chair, looking it over. Then she sighed. “I guess the flight systems are down. I’m not getting anything here. This console is dead.”

“I think they’re on autopilot. That, or the ship doesn’t recognize you as a pilot,” Jason reasoned.

“I’m sure Cybi can fix that when she rewrites the ship computer’s protocols,” Myleena said as she stepped up to one of the back chairs and waved her hand in front of the panel, in the same way he remembered seeing Miaari do so in her ship. The displays suddenly lit up, and then holographic projections rose up over the blackglass console, showing the ship and a list of systems. “This is engineering,” she told them. “Ship’s status. It’s not good, Jayce. Almost all the ship systems are

down. We're gonna have to really roll up our sleeves to get this thing up and running."

"How did you do that?" Zora asked.

"Wave your hand in front the little grill-looking thing on the right side, it seems to be some kind of switch that tells things around here to wake up and start listening for an interface," she told Zora. Zora turned and did so, and her console came to life, showing a three dimensional image of the ship with numbers around it displaying heading and speed, and a startchart appeared on her left, projecting out past the side of the console, showing their current location as [Karis] and showing a dashed line leading halfway through the map, to an orange nebula deep in the spiral arm of the galaxy.

Myleena sat down in the chair, and the holograms over her console changed quickly, as she seemed to get a grasp of their layout and system and started issuing commands via her gestalt. "Engines are about the only thing running. The ship let everything else go, even some of its own computer systems, to keep the engines operational, so it could be recalled when it made contact with someone."

"How long will it take to get this this fixed?" Myri asked.

Myleena snorted. "It's gonna take at least a day or two, it's gonna depend," she said. "I woulda said maybe a week, but Denmother Zaa has put an *army* of techs in here, and the Kimdori really know what they're doing."

"This ship has highest priority for repair," Zaa said simply. "You are going to need it."

"I need to get down there. I can't let a chance like this go by. It's not every day a girl gets to stick her hands in the guts of a ship like this."

"The ship won't be refitted, Myleena, just repaired. My workers will make no changes to the ship, in any way. But they will not clean up the hull. Its bedraggled appearance is necessary."

"Necessary for what, Denmother?" Myleena asked.

"Necessary for them to believe that it has been hidden for a millenia," she answered, looking at Jason. "When they see this ship, they need to believe that Jason tracked it down and found it using clues left behind on Terra."

"Oh—*ohhhhhhhhhhhhh*," Myleena said, then she nodded enthusiastically. "Laying the foundation!"

"Exactly," Zaa affirmed. "Jason must convince the *Siann* that he is what he claims to be. If he appears in a salvaged Karinne ship, it reinforces his declaration. I find myself needing rest. I will withdraw now. Jason, I will be leaving for the homeworld in the morning. I will leave Miaari in control of the Kimdori workers. She has been instructed in my wishes, and will oversee things to my satisfaction."

"I'll miss you, Denmother," Jason said honestly.

"You must come visit me sometime," she told him, taking his hand.

"Thank you," he told her sincerely, looking up at her. "Thank you for everything."

"You don't need to thank me, Jason. It was my pleasure," she told him, running her fingers along his cheek. Then she patted him on the shoulder and withdrew to a symphony of respectful bows."

"I'm glad I got to meet someone like that once before I die," Zora said as she sat back down in the pilot's chair.

It took them two days to get the *Scimitar* repaired.

There was a *lot* of damage. They ignored everything but the necessary systems; propulsion, life support, shields, power generation, and still it took two days to get everything fixed. Jason and Myleena recruited just about everyone into the repair efforts, as they themselves had Cybi download what data they needed to work on the ship and they started pitching in. Jason didn't know half as much as Myleena or the Kimdori, so he isolated himself to finding and repairing damaged conduit, something he did know how to do and was pretty good at doing. He drafted Yana and Maya to be his assistants, and the two of them would get locations from the Kimdori workers on bad conduit, find it, and replace it.

There was more damage than just the marching of the years, though. Many of the ship's systems had been cannibalized, either taken by the crew that abandoned it or stripped by some passing ship that had happened across the ship. They had taken sensor arrays, power plants, spare parts, replicators, anything that basically wasn't nailed down and half of what had been. Their stripping of the interior of the ship was why the ship was having so many problems.

It did give him a chance to get an idea of the ship, though. It really was a flying laboratory, with most of its rooms and decks dedicated to research, rooms they basically wrote off and ignored, for most of the equipment that was in those rooms had been taken. The ship was laid out in a very logical manner, with a pair of main passages running amidships on each deck that served as the main artery, where everything branched off from those two hallways. Engineering was the domain of the back quarter of the ship, and everything from there to the bow was all research. The top two decks were primarily crew quarters, and a look through them showed that the Faey who had abandoned this ship had had time to do it. Most of the personal effects were gone, leaving behind only small knick-knacks and a few articles of clothing. Everything else was gone, showing that the Faey had definitely premeditated their departure.

The ship's logs supported that. The logs stated that after the *Scimitar* got word of the attack, and then the final warning for all Karinnes to flee came down, they decided to do what Jason's own ancestors must have done. They found a good planet that could support life and evacuated to it with every bit of equipment and supplies they could get, which seemed odd to Jason. They could have waited on the ship itself, but they had instead chosen to make camp on a planet and wait it out. Then they had the ship hide in that nebula and wait for a recall order, an order that never came. The ship had the location of the planet where the Faey went in its memory, and Jason was of a mind to go there and see if there were any Faey there, see if they'd managed to establish a colony of exiles.

"What do you think of all this, Maya?" Yana asked as they sat in a narrow crawlspace with Jason, who had half his body stuck in a bulkhead as he worked a damaged piece of conduit free of an exchanger and a junction where it went through a bulkhead.

All of what, Yana?

"The ship, and all of what the Karinnes did. I think it's really strange. Why would they keep all this a secret? They had stuff that was like ultra-advanced back in that time, and it's still advanced now, but not by much. We kinda caught up to them. Why didn't they make a killing patenting it and selling it? Or hell, why didn't they try to take over the Imperium? They'd have won that war, hands down."

"They didn't care about money and power, Yana," Jason told her. "All they cared about was their research. I know it's hard to understand, but the Karinnes were very different from other Faey. Their focus was on science, not on power. They considered the pursuit of knowledge the greatest thing in the world, and that's what they did."

"You're right, I guess I don't understand it," Yana chuckled.

"You will," he told her. "I've already decided that everything here on Karis stays on Karis. The Imperium won't see so much as a moleculartronic board from here. They won't even know it *is* here. As far as the Imperium is concerned, Karis is still a radioactive wasteland, and it always will be. The only thing they'll ever see of the Karinnes is this ship. I won't even let anyone wear an interface or gestalt off this planet or out of this ship. When we leave the ship, they stay behind."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want the Imperium to even think that they're anything other than what the old stories say they were, simple jewelry. And it'll discourage any kind of temptation," he added.

"Well, they don't really do anything off the ship, Jayce," Maya noted.

"And that's exactly why nobody will wear one outside," he told them.

"Makes me wonder how they kept it all a secret," Yana mused. "You know, with the Academy being here and all, and all the outsiders."

"I looked up the old maps, and saw that the Academy started off in the capitol, but then it was

moved to a large island just off the main continent,” Jason told her. “The new Academy was a hell of a lot bigger than the old one, the size of a city. It really was a city, if you think about it, self-contained and self-sufficient. Most people probably thought they built the new one so it could have more room, but I think they put it there to separate the Academy from the rest of Karis, so they could keep the benefits of having the Academy with all the input and research from the non-Karinne scientists, but still have the privacy to do their own work. With all the outsiders isolated to one island, it would make what *really* went on here easier to keep secret from them.”

“Still, it couldn’t have been easy.”

“I bet it wasn’t, but they had the Kimdori here to help them, and the Karinnes were the strongest telepaths of their era,” Jason reminded her. “I’m sure between them, they could keep a lid on the truth.”

“Probably.”

“Here,” Jason said, handing out the damaged conduit through the hole, having to squeeze it through. One of them took it, and put the replacement section in his hand. He carefully navigated it through the tight access door, then lifted it up and into place with careful moves, being careful not to scratch or nick the edges of the conduit.

Do you mind explaining what we’re going to do a little, Jason? Maya asked.

“Not at all, hon,” he told her. “Well, first thing we’re gonna do is go back to Earth. We’ll approach in a way that makes it look like we came in from inside the system, and then get all the Legion out of the mountain. That’s our first objective. I need to get them out of there before Trillane does something insane. Once we have them, we’re going to Draconis. What we’re doing there is fairly simple, hon. We get in front of the Empress, and I claim my ancestral rights as the last descendent of the Karinne nobles. Obviously, I’m not gonna tell them about Myleena right at first,” he explained. “From what I read of the laws of *Siann*, if I can prove I’m a descendent, they can’t say anything.”

“How can you prove it?”

“I won’t be able to with direct evidence, but I’ll have a hell of a lot of circumstantial evidence to prove my point. This ship will be a big one,” he answered. “When I tell them I found the ship my ancestors came in, it’ll have weight.”

“But this isn’t that ship.”

“But they don’t *know* that, do they?” Jason said pointedly. “It’s not solid evidence, like I said, but it’s a biggie. I also have all the scans the docs took of my DNA, showing that I have similar DNA to a Faey. Add that in with the fact that I’m a telepath, and it all fits. Humans are telepathic because they’re part Faey, and those Faey had to come from *somewhere*. Add an ancient, battered Karinne ship into that equation, and what answer do you get?”

“Ah, I see,” Maya noted. “Yeah, that is a solid conclusion, isn’t it?”

“Yup. As far as they’ll know, the ring was on this ship, and after I found it, I read up on the laws of *Siann* and figured the rest of it out. I do have something of a reputation for being clever,” he said modestly. “Of course, Trillane and maybe the Empress will see it as simply a ploy to kick Trillane off Earth, but I’ll have enough solid evidence behind me to give my argument enough weight that I’ll get a foot in the door. After that, it comes down to some negotiation to sway the Empress to side with me. That’s where it’s gonna be tricky.”

“How so?”

“If I do this, hon, I’m going to be held to the same expectations as Trillane,” he explained. “I’ll have the same quotas of food production to meet, and unlike Trillane, I don’t have a huge noble house to mobilize to produce that food. And also consider that if I pull this off, Trillane will sabotage the hell out of Earth as they go to make sure I can’t possibly meet that quota. And I’ll be honest about it hon, I’d never meet it. I have no money, no resources, just me and a handful of radicals. So, what I intend to do is *lease* the planet’s food production to another house, with *heavy* Imperial oversight, and make terms that gives that house virtually all of the profit, which is a win-win situation for the house. There

won't be any house soldiers on Earth, *only* Marines. The other house will only be here to help with the farming and move the food, that's it. That's one half of it. The other half of it is something I found in Cybi's stored memory about Karinne technological advancements. It seems that the Karinnes did some work in other fields, and at some point in the past, they tackled the technology of replicators.

"What they came up with is a replicator that can produce complex molecules," he told them. "But they didn't get it to work right, because it couldn't produce any element larger than Iridium, when they were trying to build a replicator that could replicate any element. That's still better than the replicators they have now, though. The Karinnes used it to produce materials they needed for their research, it was why the house didn't really care about money. They could *replicate* what they needed, even precious metals like silver, iridium, and tungsten to sell on the open market if they needed cash. But they didn't see the kind of need for it I have for it now."

"Complex—*food!*" Maya gasped.

"Yeah, I already crunched the numbers with Cybi, and it'll be capable of replicating edible food. The Karinnes never used it for that, but it's entirely possible. Not sure how it'll taste, but it's possible. That's the carrot I'm gonna dangle in front of Empress Dahnai. I'll offer her that technology in exchange for her siding with me. Merrane could make a *killing* if they patented that thing and sold it, and besides, if the Imperium can *replicate* food to make up its food shortage, it'll go a long way to making the Imperium more self-sufficient. In the end, everyone will win except Trillane. Earth is taken away from Trillane, the house of Karinne is restored to the *Siann*, my people can find some dignity under direct Imperial supervision at first, then slowly migrate back to what we had after the replicators cut the need for Earth's food production, Merrane makes money, people in the Imperium don't starve, and everyone's happy. Except Trillane."

"Wow. That's pretty smart, Jayce," Yana said.

"Thank Denmother Zaa," he told them. "I told her my basic idea, but she's the one that helped me flesh it out to where it has a chance to work. I didn't think of things like leasing out Earth to cover the short-term quotas. She also helped me by teaching me things I'd need to know about being a Grand Duke. Dealing with the other nobles in the *Siann* and shit like that. She's a very smart lady, and I'm gonna be sending her thank you notes for the next fifty years. At least."

"Sounds like taking that title was a good idea," Yana giggled.

"I certainly hope so. Thanks, by the way. I know you're taking a risk by jumping on board with me, guys."

"A chance to be a noble in a house like this? I think it'll give me one hell of a story to write when I'm old," Yana said.

"You believe in something so strongly that it makes us believe in it too, Jason," Maya told him simply. "Through all of this, you've never strayed from what you believed in, and you really care about us. Why wouldn't a girl take a chance on a man like you?"

Faith. Miaari told him that faith could be a powerful weapon. Now, he finally understood what that meant.

The ship shuddered, which made Jason bang his head on the bulkhead when he flinched. *What the hell was that!* Jason's sending boomed strongly through the ship.

Ack! Sorry! Zora sent through the ship. That was my fault! The pilot controls just came back up and I was practicing on a simulation. I kinda forgot to separate the simulation from real commands!

Watch it, girl! Myri barked. *This isn't your personal toy!*

It won't happen again, I disengaged the pilot controls, Zora called. And cut me some slack, will ya? You have any idea how tough this is? I'm learning to fly an unfamiliar ship from scratch here, using a control system I didn't even know existed!

The ship will fly itself, Zora, Jason told her. You just tell it where to go.

And if the autopilot fails? I'm not about to let this ship take off if I can't safely put it back down, Jason. It's just common sense.

She has a point there, Ilia agreed.

How are you coming along, then? Jason asked.

I'm getting the hang of it, she answered. It's really not much different from flying a dropship. I just kinda think out loud which way I wanna go, and the ship goes that way. It's not hard, it's just taking some adjustment here..that's what's hard. My need to use my hands confuses the ship, 'cause it sees two sets of commands, what I want to do, and then a repeat command right after as I try to use the controls to do it. If I do pilot this thing manually, I'm gonna have to sit on my hands to keep from trying to grab a control stick and throttle.

Ah. Well, just be careful, he sent.

Will do.

"Sounds like Zora's having fun up there," Yana giggled. "Wonder what it's like for her."

"Different. Exciting," Jason said. "She's been a pilot all her life, and now she gets to sit in the pilot's chair of something nobody's flown in a thousand years. For her, it's probably really exciting. I just hope she gets the hang of it quick. When we show up at Earth, Trillane might shoot at us. She'd better be ready to handle this thing."

"I'm pretty sure she will. It's just a matter of doing what she already knows how to do a little differently than she's used to, that's all," Maya said.

"Yeah, I know."

[Jason, computer reprogramming is complete. The Scimitar computer is now up and running,] Cybi communed to him. [I must give thanks to Miaari. Her technicians were very quick and efficient in repairing the computer systems.]

[Yeah, they really are doing a good job. With the computer up, how much longer til everything's fixed?]

[One moment. Miaari relays that according to her master technicians, the ship should be fully repaired and ready for the mission in five hours. All primary systems are now operational. All that remains is redundant and tertiary systems, such as the system you are working on now. It is part of the power supply system for deck sections that once had equipment installed that is no longer there.]

Jason grunted a little. *[Well, it had to be fixed, so I'm fixing it.]*

It's getting a little late, ladies, Jason. Are you hungry? I'm making some chaya stew, Songa sent.

Chaya stew! Sign me up! Min sent eagerly.

Maya's stomach growled. *I think I'm about ready for something to eat, too,* Maya sent with an audible laugh. *Let us finish what we're doing and we can come eat.*

Sounds like a plan, ladies. Finish up what you're doing, and we'll break for chow, Myri ordered.

"She's really a good cook," Yana said appreciatively.

"She's just happy she can be doing something right now," Maya said observantly. "If I lost Vell, I don't know what I'd do. I feel so sorry for her."

"I heard you've been giving her some man comfort, Jayce. That's really nice of you," Yana told him, tapping him on the shin. "She's a sweetheart."

"It's the least I can do for her," Jason told them honestly. "I owe Songa a lot."

"Think you can owe me enough for a quickie?" she asked.

"Yana!" Jason barked.

"Hey, a girl has to ask, ya know," she giggled. "We have to make sure you're taken care of since Jyslin isn't here. You're a squadmate's husband, Jason. We gotta look out for you. A lone boy surrounded by girls? *Someone's* gotta keep the monster in check, so why not me?"

"Songa is taking care of that, thank you very much," he said primly, aligning the conduit and sealing it in place. "And of all the girls in the squad, you were the *last* one I expected to proposition me, Yana."

"Pft. Just give it us enough time stuck here with you, and we'll all come to knock on your door," she told him bluntly. "Even Maya."

He ignored that. “Alright, that’s it, we’re done. Let’s collect up the tools and go grab some dinner.”

“Let’s get some food in your mouth so you don’t have so much time to think,” Maya told Yana.

“What? It’s not like *you* haven’t thought about it,” she accused Maya. “I guess that wasn’t you last night sending me a memory Jyslin shared of you of Jason naked, and wondering what he’d be like between your legs!”

“Okay, I *really* didn’t need to know that,” Jason said with a faint blush as he squirmed out of the access door.

“Thinking about it and blurting out like that are two different things,” she said pointedly in reply.

“Really, Yana. He’s consoling Songa, which can’t be easy for him because her husband was his friend, and you ask a question like that! All that talent, and not a lick of common sense!”

“Let’s go eat, before I find out *way* more than I want to know,” he said loudly. “Then again, I think I already have,” he said, looking at Maya.

She blushed a disturbing shade of violet. “Well, I *am* her partner. We’re close friends,” she explained.

“Uh-huh,” he said, looking at Yana.

“Well, she was curious, and that was a long time ago, right after you and Jyslin had your first night,” she said weakly, turning purple. “And I can’t *believe* you told him that!” she hissed at Yana, standing up and glaring at the younger Marine.

Yana gave her a smug look.

Jason stood up and cleaned his hands on a rag, then tossed it right into Yana’s face. She gagged, then laughed as she pulled it off and stood up. “Sorry cutie, but a girl’s gotta be a girl,” she told him, leaning up on her toes and kissing him on the cheek. “Now let’s go get some dinner.”

Chapter 19

Vesta, 34 Demaa, 4395 Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 20 November, 2008, Native Regional Reckoning

The KES Scimitar, docked at Kosiningi Emergency Response Center, Zoka Prefecture, Karis

This was it.

The ship was ready to launch. Everyone was ready that was going, which was Jason and all the Faey. Miaari and the Kimdori were remaining behind. The Marines were fully armored. Jason and Myleena, having no armor, were on the bridge of the ship, going over the last details of the data that the *Scimitar's* computer had downloaded into their gestalts, which basically dealt with what their stations would require of them. Myleena was sitting at the engineering console, which allowed her to monitor the operation of the ship, and also gave her control over ship functions. Jason was sitting in the captain's chair, which was actually the position on a Karinne ship that did most of the work. His gestalt was the command controller, and it was by his command that most ship functions were enabled, though Myleena also had the power to activate or deactivate the systems, because she was sitting at the ship's main engineering console and the ship's computer recognized her as the main engineer. Jason controlled the defensive systems, the communications, sensors, and other tertiary systems. Zora, being the pilot, had primary control of navigational systems and propulsion. The final chair, a chair for an assistant engineer, was taken by Myri. Everyone else was down in the galley.

The ship was going to be easy to operate, because the computer did almost all the work. Jason just told it what to do, and it did it. The ship's crew numbered 24 on this ship normally, and 19 of them were engineers and technicians to make sure that the ship ran properly and maintain the equipment the researchers used. Three were pilots, one was the captain, and the last was a first officer. The ship's computer was no Cybi. It was a Mark II Biogenic Mainframe, and interacting with it was very *sterile*. It had no personality at all, nothing like Cybi. It was just a dry monotone of a commune in his mind that relayed information, nothing more.

It was going to be hairy from here out. They would not return to Karis until it was all done, if they returned at all. Jason knew that Trillane wasn't going to just let them waltz in. The ship was unidentified; no telemetry beacon, unmarked, its identifying marks either scoured off by the nebula or faded over time, and they would fire on it even if they didn't know who was inside it. All Jason hoped was that they'd hold off on firing just long enough to let them get into a position to pick up the people in the mountain, and then they would run the gauntlet to get back out. If they had to land and recover the Legion under fire, it was going to be ugly. So, the plan was speed. Race in, take as much advantage of their confusion and hesitancy to fire on the ship until they had confirmation as possible, land and get his people the hell out of there, then take off and run the gauntlet to get far enough away from Earth's gravity well so they could use the hyperspace jump engine to escape.

And once that was done, there was still a matter of getting to the Empress and then fighting an entirely different kind of war, a war of words. Denmother Zaa had prepared him well for that, but it still wasn't going to be very fun. Dealing with a nest of vipers, where one word not delivered with exacting meaning could create a deadly pit from which he could not escape...ugh. He was going to have to kiss Jyslin for her gift to him. Her vast knowledge of the Faey language was going to serve him well when he stepped into that room.

Right now, they were waiting. The four spaceworthy ships they had on hand were being loaded into the very small ship bay, which was located on the top of the ship, as well as the only battle-capable unit on all of Karis. The two small Novas, the Karinne dropship, the dropship they used to get here, and the Gladiator were all being loaded by the Kimdori.

That Gladiator...*shit*, was that a fearsome looking piece of machinery. Where standard exomechs

were sleek, graceful, a reflection of the supple Faey who piloted them, the Gladiator was a bulldog of a mecha, big, heavy, blocky, and it just oozed intimidation. It was no taller than an exomech, about fifteen feet, but it was about twice as wide. Jason had sat in the cockpit while waiting for the Kimdori to finish the repairs, just after dinner, and man, was it different. The ship was interface controlled, with no manual controls at all, only a series of heads-up display panels inside to provide information to the pilot. He'd taken it for a walk around the storage bay, and was surprised at how *graceful* it was, despite its ungainly appearance. The interface control meant that he basically had absolute control of it, could control it as exactly as his own body.

The Novas too were interesting. They too were interface controlled, but they did have manual controls in them. They were chasers, unarmed, small, fast single seaters used for personal planes. But unlike a skimmer, the tiny Novas were more along the lines of a sports car, with their tailless design dominated by a pair of large diamond-shaped wings attached to the very back of the ship, the wings serving as both wings and tail for the craft in the atmosphere. Jason had to take one out for a test flight, and *wow*. They were fast...they were *amazingly* fast. And after he got the hang of the interface control, letting go of the stick, he found that the ship was very responsive. And man, was it nimble! Its small size and aerodynamic shape made it very agile in the air, and it could turn on a dime, but the small size of the ship, only about twenty feet long, would make it really hard to adapt it as an armed unit. Putting even one plasma cannon in it would require the engineers to take some of the existing systems out of it. There was just no room in it.

One thing was for sure. After this was over, one of those Novas was going to be sitting in his driveway. *Damn* were they fun to fly!

But fun would be for later. Right now, he was looking at the hologram projected in front of Zora's seat, taking up the whole front wall, showing a Kimdori securing the last ship they'd brought in, the dropship they'd come in. The small gray-furred Kimdori grabbed hold of his memory band and looked up at the camera, and seconds later the computer contacted him. *[Maintenance reports final exterior craft is secured.]*

[Tell them to disembark. Tell me when they're all off.]

[Acknowledged.]

[Cybi.]

[Yes, Jason?]

[We'll be leaving in a minute. Give Miaari my orders after we're gone. Tell if we don't come back, then Karis is their responsibility, and they have to take care of you. Make sure you tell her that.]

[I will, but I would very much like for you to return home, Jason.]

[That makes two of us.]

The Kimdori were clear of the ship, and all hatches were closed. Jason blew out his breath and prepared for what was coming in a moment of quiet contemplation. When this ship took off, he was doing more than accepting his responsibilities as the Grand Duke Karinne, he was taking responsibility for the eleven lives in this ship that were not his own. He had to make sure they all lived to enjoy whatever rewards they managed to see out of this. If they weren't all executed, anyway. *Alright girls, we're taking off. Everyone find a seat, and start praying*, he sent, strong enough to be heard through the ship. He looked to Zora. "Alright, Zora. It's all yours."

"Alright, gals, Jayce, let's see if two days of constant practice was enough. I see the docking ramp has been retracted, so we're clear." She rather deliberately crossed her arms in front of her. "And here we go."

The Kimdori on the balcony overlooking the docking ramp waved as the *Scimitar* lifted out of the water, and a flurry of water cascaded down when a power surge through the hull caused all water molecules to be repelled off the ship's hull, sending a salty rain down onto the sea below. The ship turned as it slowly ascended, then nosed up and accelerated. Jason felt almost no acceleration, though, felt the ship take on what felt like a level attitude, so much so he could have stood up without having to

steady himself.

“Wow, the inertial dampers on this thing are good,” Myri noted.

“I’m just glad it has artificial gravity,” Myleena added. “I’d hate to have to float around for the next twenty minutes.”

That was how long it was going to take them to get far enough away to jump out. They couldn’t jump in a gravity well, so they had to get out away from the planet. In that respect, it was different than the hyperspace engines that the Imperium used, that were more tolerant of gravity wells. But, if these engines weren’t as tolerant, they were much better in that there would be no relativity time delay after they entered hyperspace. Their trip to Earth would take 37 seconds, and exactly 37 seconds, in both subjective time and in real time. If they’d used a regular hyperspace ship, that trip would have taken 37 seconds in subjective time, and about 6 days in real time.

The *Scimitar* cleared the atmosphere, and one side of the hologram showed a camera view of what was before them. But Zora had her eyes on her own console, and looking over her shoulder showed him that she had the starchart up there, a three dimensional representation of space. She zoomed in and a dot in that chart blinked, then turned white. The map noted it at [Star C2450-174], but Jason knew that it was the Earth system.

In the twenty minutes it took them to get to the jump boundary, Jason calmed himself using techniques his father taught him, the meditative focusing exercises taught by martial arts. He was scared out of his mind with what he knew was coming, but he had to keep it together. People were counting on him, and he couldn’t let them down. He had to keep his head, and most of all, he had to control his fear. If those whores from the *Siann* realized he was afraid, they’d eat him for lunch. He had to be calm, unruffled, and decisive. He had to be confident.

“Alright, we’re here. Earth coordinates locked in. Jump engines are ready,” Zora called. “I got us set to come in behind the moon, Jason, so they don’t see where we came from.”

“Do it,” Jason told her.

Everyone take a seat, we’re jumping in thirty seconds! Zora sent throughout the ship.

Jason bucked the safety belt attached to his chair as the other three in the bridge strapped in and locked their chairs so they wouldn’t swivel. He heard Zora counting down, but this time he closed his eyes. He wasn’t all that curious about the psychedelic images he’d see in hyperspace.

“Three. Two. One. Jump!” Zora barked, and then all his senses went crazy. He tried his best to ignore the strange sounds, the weird smells, focusing his mind by repeating a mantra over and over, waiting out the 37 seconds they would be moving through this nonsensical domain. But it wasn’t easy, because those sounds, those smells, the strange feelings along his skin, they were almost tantalizingly unusual, begging him to explore them. But he kept his focus, keeping his eyes shut.

And it was over. Everything returned to normal. Jason opened his eyes and saw the moon ahead of them, about the size of a beach ball in the hologram, and the planet Earth peeked out from behind it. He shook his head and got control of himself, then looked around. Myleena and Myri were turning to look at the hologram, and Zora was already changing her navigation holograms. “We’re here,” she called. “Alright, I have 37 contacts in orbit around Terra. Looks like Trillane brought a whole squadron of their fleet here,” she grunted. “I’m plotting a course to get us to this mountain of yours. We’ll do a wrap-around of the planet, so they don’t home in on where we’re going.”

“Now we see if those modifications the Kimdori made work,” Jason said as he ordered the *Scimitar* computer to access Civnet. It did so successfully, and he called Kiaari’s contact number. He relayed it to a hologram that would project out from the little swing-away mini-console that attached to the right side of his chair. A window appeared, and Kiaari’s Terran face, Kate, appeared there. “*Thank the Denmother!*” Kiaari said explosively. “*Do you have any idea how good it is to see you, Jayce?*”

“Kiaari, listen carefully. Get everyone gathered together in the aircraft hangar, and get someone in the dropship and the skimmer. You’re going to be picked up in about fifteen minutes.”

“Jason, we lost the dropship,” she told him. “*It was shot down last night. We lost Jenny, Bo, and*

Terry.”

Jason closed his eyes, clenching a fist as he absorbed that unpleasant news. “What happened?”

“We don’t know. We don’t know if they found a way to penetrate the cloak, so we haven’t launched the skimmer since then.”

“Well, get Luke in the skimmer and tell him to be ready to punch it into a belly-oriented landing bay. I want you, Jyslin, Temika, Kumi, Fure, Myra, Tim, and Symone in the skimmer with him. Tell him that he’s gonna have to get it in here while the ship is still descending. He won’t be able to get the skimmer under the ship once it lands.”

“They’re all here, I got Kumi back from Nebraska a few days ago, after Trillane shut Vultech down and nearly caught her. What’s going to happen? I haven’t had any contact with Miaari for days. It’s been really hairy here.”

“We found and salvaged a Karinne ship, Kiaari. We’re in it right now, and about to get down there to pick you up. Just remember, hon, this has to be *fast*. We have no way to hide from Trillane, and they’re gonna start shooting at us when we don’t answer their hails for identification. Everyone has to get to the ship as fast as they can when we land.”

“You got a Karinne ship?” she gasped. *“What kind?”*

“A scout ship.”

“Alright, I remember those from my history classes. Stern ramp or bow ladder?”

“The stern ramp. Luke has to get my skimmer into the little auxiliary landing bay in the belly before we can land, but it’s gonna be a tight fit. It was meant for a zip ship, not a skimmer.”

“I’ll do the flying, I remember where the doors are from the pictures.”

“Alright. Just get everyone there, and remember, this has to be as fast as possible. Just leave everything. We’ll only have a couple of minutes at the most, and I’m more worried about the *people* than the *equipment*.”

“You got it. We’ll be ready. As soon as you’re in sending range, call out to Jyslin. She’s very anxious to hear from you, and we’ll know it’s almost time when you do.”

“You bet I will. Be there soon.”

“Good luck,” she said, then the call was ended.

“Alright, I got a good course plotted. We’ll hit the atmosphere around Asia and then come in on a shallow high-speed arc down to Colorado.”

Zora brought them in hot. He had a hologram of the sensor readings displayed by the outside view, showing the planet and a series of red dots which were sensor contacts of other ships. None of them moved off their normal course as they came around the moon and accelerated, racing towards the planet. One of them began to slow as they approached the planet and got close enough for energy signatures to start registering on their sensors. When they got within 50,000 *kathra* of the atmospheric boundary, Jason knew they were made. *[Contact. Receiving query hail on standard Faey ship to ship frequency. Open channel?]*

[No, ignore it,] Jason ordered. “They’re hailing us, Zora,” he warned her. “They know we’re here.”

“I know,” she said, glancing at the ship location graphic. *Everyone find a seat and strap in, this is gonna be a rough entry!* she warned.

And it was. The ship shook as they hit the atmosphere, and Zora went as fast as she possibly could without losing control of the ship to air turbulence...which she was doing because the air wake and heat shockwave would deflect any incoming fire; at that speed, the air displaced by the *Scimitar* was like a solid object, a laminar flow with defined borders that would disrupt and deflect incoming plasma fire from the big heavy-mount plasma cannons on the ships. The ship came in fast, and it came in *hot*, leaving a glowing trail of burning air behind it as the hull was heated by the atmosphere. The entire ship vibrated violently as the computer responded to the rapid raise in temperature by focusing environmental systems into cooling the interior of the ship. Jason found himself hanging onto his chair

as the ship rocked, but he kept his eyes on that hologram by the outside view that showed large Faey cruisers still in orbit changing their courses to move into a position over their ship. They were getting into a firing position.

“Shields!” Jason gasped, then mirrored that command to the computer. The ship hummed as the power surged, and a graphic to the left of the outer view appeared, one of the ship, showing a glowing green sphere appear around the ship’s icon in the center. Ahead, in their view, there was a shimmer of greenish light, and then the ship’s vibration eased tremendously as the shields took the brunt of the air friction. *This is gonna get rough!* Jason sent. *Hang on!* “Zora, they’re about to open fire!”

“I can’t maneuver very much in an atmosphere at this speed!” she warned. “Let’s hope all those burns on the hull are skin deep, and this old man can handle himself!” *Show ‘em what you got, baby,* Zora sent, probably unintentionally, patting her hand on her console.

They came in over the Pacific, so fast that they could fly from Los Angeles to New York in ten minutes. They slowed as they came down into the thicker air, and miles above, a Faey battle cruiser, nearly half a mile long, swung sideways and rotated so its broadside flank was aimed at the planet. Heavy mount cannons fired streaming coherent plasma down towards the surface, fast enough to keep it coherent but not so fast it shattered in the air and exploded before striking its target. Seconds ticked by as multiple pulses of angry red plasma screamed down from the heavens, meticulously aimed taking wind patterns and the planet’s rotation into account as well as the target’s speed and altitude. But those targeting computers had never tried to target a ship piloted by Zora Sharelle Karinne. Just like Jason, she had a pilot parent, but she literally grew up in a skimmer, and had been flying them since before she could look over the dash. Jason watched in surprised amazement as Zora handled the ship on manual control with a deftness and soft, almost delicate touch that made it seem like she was born wearing an interface. Slight changes in speed and altitude, coupled with evasive maneuvers, outfoxed the targeting computers of the battle cruisers in orbit, who had to be so incredibly accurate to hit a target from 200 miles away that at that range would be like trying to shoot the wings off a fly with a rifle at 400 yards. Plasma bolts showed as red blips on the tactical view on the right, and several of them streaked past the bow of the ship, falling short, even as others rained down like flaming spears of fire...but they continuously missed. None of them missed by much, but none of them came close enough to hit the shields. The *Scimitar* danced in that deadly rain, and avoided every shot.

Now comes the nasty part, Zora sent. *They see they’re not dealing with an amateur they can hit from space, and they’re launching fighters.* Sure enough, a series of small yellow dots erupted from the ships in orbit above, even as a series of dots appeared on the leading edge of the display, ground-based fighters. *Jason, we’re only gonna have about thirty seconds once we hit the ground, and we’re gonna take fire from both fighters and those cruisers as soon as they realize we’re coming in.*

I know, he told her. *That’s why we get paid the big bucks.*

I wanna see this paycheck, Myleena grunted mentally.

The fighters came into visual range as they crossed the shore of California at 15,000 *shakra*, ten Dragonfly fighters. That model was fast, sleek, heavily armed, and had strong armor. They intercepted the *Scimitar* east of Los Angeles, as all ten lined up and fired angry red streaks of plasma energy towards them. Zora was good, but there was no way a ship the size of a destroyer was going to evade fighters, so she aimed right for their center and intended to plow through and make them chase. Angry flashes of greenish light appeared on the front camera, as flares of red appeared on the left ship status image. The shields had stopped the plasma fire! That was *metaphased* plasma, and the shields stopped it!

Holy *shit!* The Karinnes’ teryon shields could stop metaphased weapons!

Not without a price, though. Hits on the shields showed a sudden spike in shield generator power, and a heat warning. Even the brief salvo fired as the fighters met them head on was enough to make the shields work. Clearly, though they could stop metaphased weapons, they weren’t very good at it. A hit from a cruiser in orbit would probably overload the shields and bring them down after only one

shot.

The fighters scattered and let the big ship race through their ranks, then turned and moved to pursue as more fighters from orbit were lancing in on an intercept vector. Zora adjusted their course as they moved over southern California, not heading directly towards the mountain, so as not to give away their destination. The fighters behind did not open fire, because at the extreme speeds they were going and the distance between them, the plasma fire dispersed before it could reach the target. So they were at maximum throttle, closing the distance so they could get into firing range, but Zora was pushing the throttle herself, keeping the ship going fast, not giving them that chance. Though she was big, the *Scimitar* had good engines, and they were keeping the much larger ship well separated from the pursuing fightercraft. They were laying down a sonic boom so powerful it was shattering every window ten miles north and south of the ship's trajectory, they were going so fast.

Just as the space-based fighters, a mix of Dragonfly and Starhawks, got within tactical range, Zora changed course, shifting north, putting them on a curling hooked curve that he could see would bring them over the mountain...but not in a straight line. Clever Zora, she was making her turn look like a defensive course change to keep the approaching fighters off their heads. *[What'll happen if the shields are up when they make contact with a solid object?]*

[They will overload.]

[So we have to lower them to land?]

[Correct.]

"Crap," Jason growled. "Zora, we have to drop shields to land!"

"I know!" she called as she turned more to the north and seemed to want to reach for a throttle as they moved out over Arizona. *We got two minutes, girls! Everyone get ready for a very hard and very rough landing! Get into a good position, we're gonna be hitting the brakes so hard the inertial dampers won't possibly be able to absorb it all!*

In the span of a minute, the ship hooked through Arizona and into Colorado, and then Zora hit the brakes. The ship lurched under them, making it feel like he was about to be pushed out of his seat, but his seat restraints kept him secured. Myri gasped and grunted as the ship slowed down so fast, so hard, that the fighters behind them were taken by surprise. They streaked past the ship, but two of them were too close. They hit the shields of the *Scimitar* in glancing blows as they tried to get clear and were violently rebounded, and then air resistance did the rest. The composite Neutronium armor of the fighters withstood the stress amazingly well, keeping the fighters from flying into pieces, but the joints between the wings and the fuselage couldn't take the strain. The wings were ripped off both Dragonflies, and gouts of fiery discharge from ruptured plasma conduit running through the damaged areas vented plasma like little waterfalls as the two ships tumbled out of the sky.

They moved down, slowing down, closer and closer to the mountains below, until the peaks were nearly level with the outside view. *Jyslin!* Jason sent with all his power as they moved into what he felt was his range, which was about twenty seconds until they landed. *You have thirty seconds to get everyone on board! Be ready!*

I will! came a weak response.

"Zora, swing us so the stern covers the hangar door from above when we land!" Jason commanded as he ordered the ship to prepare to lower landing skids and the stern ramp, and also ordered the belly bay doors to open.

"You got it!" she replied as Cheyenne Mountain came into view.

It wasn't rehearsed, but it happened quickly and smoothly. The ship slowed, and slowed, and then it swung its stern around even as it continued forward, tearing the air as it moved against aerodynamics at 500 miles an hour, letting the shields take the brunt of the air resistance. The fighters around them had regrouped and turned to attack the ship, but Jason had a sudden brilliant idea. *Yana! We got about twenty fighters incoming! Do something about the pilots!*

EVERYONE BLOCK YOURSELF NOW! Yana sent with rippling power, and it made all of them,

even the telepaths in the mountain below, raise every defense and barrier they possibly could. But even those defenses weren't enough to completely block out the sheer *power* of that young lady as she basically sent what one would call a jamming signal across the telepathic spectrum, a powerful cacophony that would be like an airhorn being blown in the ears of any unprepared telepath within ten miles of the *Scimitar*. The sudden erratic movements of the fighters closing in from the north and northeast was testament to Yana's amazing power, as one of the most powerful telepaths among the Faey used that power as a weapon against anyone in the area who was telepathic. She couldn't block them for long, until they recovered their wits and blocked themselves, but it only had to be for long enough.

With Yana blasting her power at full volume into the mental ears of the enemy pilots, and giving them a hell of a lot more to worry about than just shooting at a landing ship, that left only orbital strikes to worry about. The ship swung over and moved backwards as Jason's skimmer appeared under them, flying fast and straight and true on a vector that would intercept the landing bay. *[Close the bay doors the instant that skimmer is completely inside!]* Jason ordered as he lowered the shields, and the ship slowed to a crawl and descended. The green globe around the icon of the ship vanished on the left, and before the ship had even fully opened the bay doors, the skimmer lanced in between them and took up a matching course that made it essentially hover inside the bay. The doors began to close as the hangar doors of the mountain opened, and a group of people started boiling out. Even from that distance, Jason saw a flash of blue among those faces.

Jyslin! She was on the ground! She wasn't in the skimmer!

The ship shuddered violently as the *Scimitar* landed, sending up a cloud of dust as landing skids slammed into the ground, and the ramp lowered in a position that was only about 20 meters from the hangar door, with the wide stern of the ship hanging over the mountainside, almost resting on it. Zora couldn't have landed any better than that! The remaining members of the Legion were running like mad towards the opened stern ramp, and Jason watched as Jyslin, wearing her armor but not her helmet, was waving people ahead of her, getting them into the ship. "Hurry up!" Jason barked over the outside intercom, a voice they would hear. "Twenty seconds! Move it, move it, MOVE!" The first one to reach it literally jumped onto the ramp as it lowered to the ground and dashed up. More were behind him, a stream of Terrans carrying rifles, charging towards their escape ship. Jason glanced at tactical, and saw that the fighters were recovering and moving into an attack posture. Those people on the ground were sitting ducks, and his *wife* was among them! "Raise the shields!" Jason screamed.

[Raising shields will overload them.]

[It'll make them come up until they do, so do it! Those shields will keep the fighters from strafing my people on the ground!]

[Objective noted. Raising shields in a directed arc to minimize surface contact.]

And with that, the shield generator projected out a shield matrix that would only cover the top half of the ship.

Jason had no idea it could do that!

But it couldn't do it completely. The shields still had to raise as an enclosed sphere, but it only tried to maintain bubble integrity everywhere but over them, maximizing power output only to certain shield grids. The fighters dove on them and started firing, and they *did* try to fire at the people on the ground, but the shields intercepted that fire and dissipated the power of those plasma bolts into the shield matrix. The generator spiked, throwing multiple warnings across both sides of the holographic display as the shield generators instantly overheated, warning him of an impending shield failure.

The shields failed and came down seconds after they came up, but those seconds were all it took. Jyslin was the only figure not on the ramp, and then she engaged her antigrav and raced up onto the ramp at high speed, literally ramming the people in front of her and driving them before her into the ship.

"Incoming!" Zora barked as red dots appeared on tactical. The cruisers in orbit were firing on

them, and the ship was a sitting duck!

“Get us out of here!” Jason screamed as the ship informed him that everyone was off the ramp and in the bay to which the ramp connected. The ramp began to close as the *Scimitar* lifted off. It had only been on the ground for 24 seconds.

But it was too long. The ship rocked violently as it was struck port amidships by a plasma bolt, slamming into the scorched hull of the ship directly, with nothing softening that blow. The metaphased plasma tried to burn through the hull of the ship, but it encountered a molecular structure so dense, so strongly intermeshed, that it could not disrupt those molecular bonds and penetrate. The plasma detonated on the surface of the hull, the impact and force slamming the ship down nearly a meter and making it list violently to port, sending those in the bay flying to one side as the stern ramp raised to seal them in. The tactical of the ship on the left showed a flashing red splotch on the hull showing the impact, but the computer communicated no immediate damage to him, only a sudden major temperature increase in the sections abutting the struck hull. The ship rocked again as it was hit on the bow, and then one more time, causing a violent list to starboard as the very tip of the starboard wing was hit, almost turning the ship sideways. Each strike exploded on the surface of the hull without penetrating, and each hit did no reported damage outside of cooking the ship’s sections that were struck, sending air temperatures soaring over the boiling point of water in the compartments closest to the hull. The air in the bridge itself became noticeably hot, for the bow hit wasn’t far from where the bridge was located.

But then Zora got the ship enough speed to start evading orbital shots. Several more plasma bolts rained down, but they exploded on the surface of the planet when the *Scimitar* moved out from under them.

“Yana, great job, girl! Get some people down to the ramp bay and check on the rebels, someone might have got hurt when we got hit!” Jason called over an intercom.

You can send again, and we’re on the way, just don’t throw us all over! Yana sent.

Send a doctor, we got some broken bones down here! Jyslin sent.

I’m on the way! Songa sent immediately in reply.

Everyone’s accounted for, love! Jyslin sent to him, her emotions vibrating through her thoughts even with the desperate situation they were in.

Where’d you get this ship, babes? Kumi sent in surprise.

Knock off the chatter, we’re not out of this yet! Myri rebuked as the ship accelerated with shocking speed, sinking Jason back into his chair as the the change of momentum exceeded the ability of the inertial dampers.

Jason, if we switch over to artificial gravity, that’ll help stabilize us! Myleena barked. *And Zora can go vertical without slamming everyone down in the bay into the back wall!*

Do it, sis! Jason answered, looking back at her.

Everyone grab hold of something right now! Myleena commanded. *Activating artifical gravity, so things might get a bit shaky while it overrides natural gravity!*

Jason felt a sudden *lurch* inside the ship, as if he was being pulled three ways at once, and then things settled down. *Alright, we’re good!* Myleena called.

“Show me why I love you, Zora,” Jason said as the ship began to outrace the fighters.

“It’s because I’m willing to play chicken with a battle cruiser,” she said, glancing over her shoulder at him and winking.

“You’re about to put your money where your mouth is, girl,” Jason told her as they took a sudden steep ascent vector, literally coming up right under one of the cruisers in orbit above.

Listen to me carefully, Zora sent through the ship, sending in that manner that would allow the non-telepathic Terrans to hear her. *As soon as we break the atmosphere, in about two minutes, this is going to get very hairy very fast, because the cruisers can use all their guns and not just the ones that can penetrate an atmosphere. Everyone down in the bay, tie yourself down to something or grab hold of*

something that won't move. The Marines and Doc Songa are coming right now to get you guys ready for this, and help keep the injured secured. Anyone not tied down or holding onto something is gonna get flung all over creation when I start getting us the hell out of here.

Why are you coming up under that cruiser? Myleena asked.

There's really nowhere else to go, they're bringing in more ships, she answered, pointing at the right display, showing more Faey cruisers moving to intercept. *I'll take my chances playing chicken with the one in front of me instead of trying to punch between them and get raked in a crossfire between two ships.*

Sounds scary.

It won't be boring, Zora sent grimly as they rocketed away from the surface with the fighters in hot pursuit. But when they broke off, scattering behind them according to tactical, both Jason and Zora knew it was so the cruiser ahead of them could open fire without threatening to hit its own fighters.

It was as violent as Zora warned it would be. The cruiser opened up with everything it had, even firing plasma torpedos that barely got two miles into the atmosphere before exploding, creating shockwaves that rocked the ship even from tens of miles away. Zora's light touch skimmed them through most of the plasma fire, but the ship was struck several times dead in the bow and along the leading edges of its small wings, making the ship buck like an angry horse. Blinking flares of red appeared on the ship graphic on the left showed the weapon strikes on the hull, but the dirty, stained, scarred hull maintained its integrity. They erupted out of the atmosphere and turned straight towards the cruiser, which sent a swarm of fire in their direction even as it began to turn. They saw that they were on a collision course, they were minimizing their visible aspect to the *Scimitar*. Zora sliced the ship right through the fire, avoiding the plasma torpedos and the ion pulses, sacrificing them to the plasma strikes, as the old vessel rumbled and shook almost continuously as they were struck again and again, and as the temperature in the ship began to climb dangerously and the computer was reporting some damage to systems near the hull, damaged by the vibration and the heat. The cruiser grew in the display, until it took up the entire camera view, and the tactical to the right showed the *Scimitar* and the enemy ship virtually touching on the tactical display.

"Zora," Jason called in concern. They got so close, Jason could see the individual plates in the hull, annealed together. "Zora!" Jason said, taking a white-knuckled grip on his chair.

"Calm down, baby," she told him as she jerked her head to the side. The *Scimitar* rolled and lurched laterally, turning upside-down in relation to the cruiser, rolling over and racing by the cruiser not fifty feet from its outer hull, almost bouncing the ship off a bulge in the cruiser's hull as they went over it. An impact like that, between two ships of that size, would have been catastrophic! Jason could only hold his breath as the destroyer-sized ship sliced by the half-mile long monstrosity so close that their artificial gravity fields intersected with each other, sending anything loose in both ships flying since *up* was in opposite directions on the two vessels. Everyone in the destroyer was ready for this by being tied down or holding onto something, but everyone in the cruiser within the gravity field of the *Scimitar* was not. The crew in the affected parts of the cruiser and much of their gear and equipment suddenly lifted up and slammed into the ceiling, then dropped back to the floor as the *Scimitar* passed over.

Zora squeezed the ship past the Trillane orbital ships, and then opened up the engines and hurtled them straight out away from the planet, towards deep space. Fire from five ships behind them chased them, but Zora again showed her light command of the ship by maneuvering them out of the path of the plasma torpedos and ion bolts, the more dangerous of the fire, and basically allowing the plasma bolts to strike, which the hull had proved it could withstand. But the ships got further and further away on the tactical view on the right, as they tried to turn to pursue, even as the fighters raced by the cruisers and gave chase. But this was a different environment, and the *Scimitar* didn't have the advantage of all the momentum of re-entry on its side now, which showed that the fighters were quickly catching up to them.

"Idiots!" Zora growled. "If heavy mount plasma cannons couldn't breach the hull, what do they think fighters are gonna accomplish!"

"As burned as the hull is, they probably can't tell," Myleena answered that. "This thing looks like a burned dinner from the outside, Zora. The burns from the plasma bolts are just lost in all the burns from particle strikes from sitting in the nebula for a thousand years."

The hatchway opened, and Jyslin ran onto the bridge. She threw herself into Jason's chair, crushing him in her armored arms, her metal-clad body actually hurting him as it jammed into his chest and legs, but all that pain vanished when she pushed her forehead down against his own, establishing a deep communion in that skin to skin contact that conveyed all of her anguish and fear and worry, and also showed him her terrible resolve for making Trillane pay for what they did to him. In that fleeting moment, they just revelled in being together once again, letting their love for each other shine through their minds, through their souls. If only for a second, there was nothing but Jyslin, and everything was right in the universe.

She leaned down and kissed him deeply, putting her armored hands on his face, and he felt the paradox of that cold black metal on his cheeks and jaw, and the searing heat of her lips.

But she understood that they didn't have time for anything other than that. She gave him one more deep kiss, then raised up and looked down at him, her eyes soft and vulnerable. *I thought I lost you, my love*, she told him.

Never, he told her, reaching up and putting his hand on her cheek. She kissed the palm of his hand and pressed it against her face, closing her eyes and smiling as she nuzzled his hand.

"Not meaning to break up the reunion or anything, but we're kinda busy here, babe," Zora said, looking over her shoulder at them.

"Push off, Zora," Jyslin said banteringly.

"You can't order me around, Jys, I'm a Countess now," she said with an evil grin. "And you're still a commoner."

"She's also my wife, Zora," Jason told her. "You wanna revise that statement?"

"Maybe in a few minutes, when I have time to think about it, yeah," she admitted candidly as she looked back to her navigation console. *Twenty seconds to jump! Everyone settle in and get ready! Warn the Terrans what's coming, guys!*

"Those fighters are going to be in firing range any second, can we jump under fire?" Jason asked.

"Yeah, we can," Zora answered.

Jyslin settled so she was sitting on Jason's lap, and she kept his hand on her face, using that contact to urge herself gently into his mind. She absorbed everything that had happened to him after the attack in Scotland, and her eyes widened and she gasped when she saw what had happened on Karis. *Is that true?* she gasped, looking at him.

Yeah, it is, he told her. *The Faey ancestor who gave me my talent was a Karinne, and the Kimdori led me there to show me, so I'd have a chance against Trillane. Congratulations, Duchess Jyslin Fox Shaddale Karinne. You're nobility now.*

That I can stomach, but this? she sent in surprise, touching the gestalt. *A telepathic computer?*

It's a bit more complicated than that, but in a nutshell, yeah. We have to get you and the others interfaces. Nothing on this ship works without one.

Ten seconds! Zora warned as the fighters closed the distance, and then started opening fire. Streams of metaphased plasma lanced through the darkness of space and peppered the stern, as Zora abandoned any evasive maneuvers and concentrated on making the jump. Jason saw from her nav console that her destination was the Draconis system, a big blue dot on the map, and marked with a star to denote its importance. There would be no rest, no respite. They had to jump from Earth directly to Draconis, because Jason had to get to the Empress as fast as possible. *Five. Four. Three. Jys, grab hold of him! One. Jump!*

It was easier this time. Jason blocked everything out, all sounds, all smells, everything, focusing

only on the feel of Jyslin's skin under his hand, the pressure she was exerting holding onto him, the feel of her considerable armored weight in his lap and the uncomfortable bite on his legs from the seams of her thighplates. He focused completely on the sensations he knew was real, and it made all the sensory ghosts that afflicted them in hyperspace from getting to him.

It was over. Reality snapped back into place around them, and he opened his eyes and found himself looking at the blue and green jewel which was the planet Draconis. Zora had jumped them in as close as she could get them, and the ship lurched forward as many smaller ships took note of this monstrosity that had just jumped in, a ship of alien design to them that looked like it just came from a battle, and they gave it one hell of a wide berth as it advanced towards the planet. "Myleena, how bad off are we?" Jason called as he urged Jyslin off his lap and unbuckled himself, then stood up. Jason ordered the computer to broadcast the *Siann* message on a diplomatic frequency, part of what Zaa had taught him for this ordeal. So long as they gave that broadcast, they couldn't be challenged until the matter was settled by elements of the Empress' personal staff. No ships could fire on them or approach them, but the *Scimitar* could not raise shields, come within one thousand *kathra* of the planet, nor open any gunports, maintaining a completely docile posture. It was a flag of truce that only the Empress could order violated.

Anyone not busy, I need damage control teams! Myleena sent through the ship. Get the Terrans that aren't injured to help! I got plasma leaks all over and we got some environmental failures in the stern!

How bad? Jason asked.

It coulda been a hell of a lot worse, she answered. We have a couple of days of work ahead of us, but the ship's still spaceworthy. The redundant systems took over when the primaries went down. We're running on auxiliary power and life support in section 25 on all decks, deck 1 and 2 sections 1, 2, and 21, and the primary exchanger on deck 14 blew. The shield generator is in standby after a critical overheat, and won't come back up until it runs a self diagnostic. She opened up to send through the ship. Anyone that works damage control needs to be in armor or an E-suit! E-suits are stowed in cargo bay 3, two decks up and one section forward of the ramp bay.

Are you sure they still work after a thousand years? Min called.

I checked them, they work, she answered, standing up. Everyone just stay there, I'm coming down!

Songa, how bad are the injuries? Jason called.

Three broken bones and a concussion, she answered. Nothing I can't handle, Jayce.

Can we get out of the skimmer now? Kumi called.

Yeah, Myleena, swing by the belly bay and take them to the ramp.

She gave him a wave of the hand as she rushed to the hatch. *Just hang there a minute, I'm on the way to get you.*

Myleena? As in the Black Ops engineer that was working against us? Tim asked curiously.

The same, honey, but we're on the same side now, she answered. Turns out me and Jason are cousins, so we have a common interest.

Jason, you're a Merrane? Kumi asked in surprise.

No, I'm a Karinne, he answered.

A who?

It's a long story. Just sit tight and wait for Myleena, then go with her and help get the plasma leaks under control. This ship has to get you guys home. Zora, after I leave, I want you to jump back to Karis and wait there, before Trillane gets their fleet here to pick up where we left off at Earth. I don't want the ship out where they can see it and get any bright ideas.

How will we know to come get you?

The Kimdori have an ambassador here, I can get a message relayed to Miaari's ship. As soon as they decide to pick up the call I'm making and answer me, I'll be leaving in the Nova.

[Message incoming. Imperial priority channel,] the computer warned.

Speak of the devil, and he knocks at your door, Jason mused as he ordered the computer to put the image on the center hologram.

He found himself looking at a mature Faey male wearing a shimmering gold formal shirt, like a doublet or something, with a diamond chain woven into his pale green hair and a thick emerald teardrop hanging from his left ear. "This is a priority channel reserved for official Imperial business," the Faey man sniffed scornfully, looking at Jason, his eyes moving to and fro as he took in the bridge and the people on it. "It's an Imperial crime to use this channel and broadcast the message you are sending out."

"It's no crime at all for me," Jason answered, a bit bluntly, turning to face the hologram. "By the Laws of Siann, I demand an immediate audience with Her Imperial Majesty, Dahnai Merrane. The laws state that I am entitled to this audience no matter who I am, and if I'm found to have used this protocol without the proper right to do so, I can't be executed until *after* I stand before her and say what I have to say. It's called the Martyr's Gambit, and you can look it up in the charter if you don't believe me. If the Empress wants to execute me, you can't do it until *after* I make my statement, and only after I am declared unfit to use this channel legally. That is the *law*."

The male gave him a strange look. "You have correctly cited the law," he said with some respect. "But you cannot call for the Martyr's Gambit to be granted audience with Her Imperial Majesty until you strike the Gong of Morr. Your ship may not be fired upon without Imperial permission, but let's just see you get down here without breaking the conditions of the Ducal Call," he said, somewhat smugly.

"The Empress can grant me safe passage to the palace," Jason protested.

"Yes, I suppose she could. If I bothered to inform her of this. But, given I know who you are and I'm aware of that sizable price on your head, I think I'll make a call to Grand Duchess Trillane instead," the male grinned. "Let's just see you get down here in one piece when the Trillanes mobilize their Draconis garrison to intercept you," he added, and then he ended the transmission.

"Why that son of a bitch!" Zora snapped.

"How is he going to explain to the Empress why there's a ship up here broadcasting the flag of truce without explaining why he hasn't talked to whoever's doing it?" Myri demanded.

"I'll bet she doesn't even know," Jason growled. "If they think that's going to stop me, they got another thing coming. Myri, take the conn," Jason ordered as he told the computer to prep the Nova for takeoff.

What are you doing? Jyslin demanded.

If they want me to ring the gong and fulfill the technicalities of the law, fine, he snapped mentally. *I'm going to take the Nova and go down there.*

Jason, the Novas are unarmed, Myri protested.

True, but they're fast as lightning, and once I get the Nova into the airspace of the Imperial Palace, it's instant death for anyone who fires on me. Right now time is on my side. If I can get down there before that Merrane asshole gets through to the Trillanes, I can get to the palace before anyone can stop me.

Jason, that's crazy.

Sometimes crazy works, he answered immediately, which made Myri laugh despite herself.

Jason, love, don't do this, Jyslin pleaded, holding onto his hands. *Bring this ship down. Let us go together. It would be safer, and I don't want to see you putting yourself in danger.*

This ship can't go, love, or it'll break the truce and they can fire on it, he told her, touching her face. *And now, this is a battle of words, and I'm the only one that can fight it. So, I won't take all of you into harm's way. This is my fight now. You fought for me back on Earth, my love, you fought hard and you fought well. But your fight is over now. It's my responsibility, and I have to take it back from you. This is something I have to do, or Earth will never be free of the Trillanes. If you've ever trusted me before, my love, trust me now. I've flown the Nova before, back on Karis. I got very familiar with*

it, because I knew I'd have to land on Draconis in another ship, so I picked the fastest thing I could find that would let me outrun anyone else. I know how it handles, and I promise you that it's the fastest thing on this planet. If there's anything that could get me down there to the front door of the palace in one piece, it's that Nova. Now, let me go, love. Every second counts.

She gave him a stricken look, then sighed and let go of his hand.

That's my girl. Go sit in Myri's seat and have them fill you in.

He ran at full speed through the ship, down to the stern where the main landing bay was. There, crammed into the small bay, were both of the functional Novas, both dropships, and that evil-looking Gladiator e-mech. The canopy of the closer Nova was open, and the ship was already powered up and waiting for him. He almost jumped up to the canopy edge, scrambling up the retractable ladder, then dropped down into the seat and started strapping himself in. His gestalt took over primary control of the Nova, and it was by telepathic communion that he ordered the canopy to close and the landing bay to activate the airskin shield to prevent decompression and open the bay doors. The doors swung open silently overhead, but there was a loud warning klaxon blaring through the bay warning that the doors were open. *Alright, I'm heading out. Zora, get this ship out of here. Jump back to Karis as soon as you get the doors closed, and get the repairs underway.*

A cacophony of sendings touched him, all of them warning him to be careful, to watch himself, and be safe, even if some of them had no idea what was going on, like Kumi, the Terran telepaths, Fure, Yohne, and Myra. He grabbed posts on each side of the cockpit that were nothing but handholds, so he wouldn't touch the controls, and then interfaced with the Nova and established a direct controls link. Now, the ship would literally fly by his thoughts, giving him absolute control over the vessel, a control every bit as exacting and perfect as Zora's had been over the *Scimitar*. The ship lifted off from the deck the instant the canopy closed, and then it rocketed up and out of the bay even as it retracted its landing gear, sucking Jason into the seat. The little ship did have a rudimentary inertial damper system, but it wasn't nearly as good as the system in the *Scimitar*. It would shave a few G-factors off his turns and acceleration, but wouldn't nullify it.

The little ship reacted to his very desires, flying with an absolute perfection of intent with him that it was like *he* was flying and not the ship. It turned and lanced away from the *Scimitar* with startling speed, shocking the hell out of the sensor officers who were monitoring traffic and watching the strange, old ship that had jumped in unscheduled from unknown origins. They'd never seen a ship accelerate so fast before! Jason enabled communications, and listened to the controllers trying to contact him.

"You have no clearance to approach Draconis! Slow to a stop and enable your telemetry beacon and pilot identification or we will call in fighters to stop you!" one of the controllers warned, as the ship relayed that over a speaker in the cockpit.

[This ship has no telemetry beacon, and my pilot identification is Jason Fox, pilot control number T93-2775. If that's not enough, you wanna call in fighters? Fine. Let's see them catch me,] Jason communed, which the Nova's computer translated into a gravband transmission that the controllers would hear audibly.

In a matter of seconds, the tiny ship traversed a thousand *kathra* and turned to make a high-speed atmospheric entry. By the time the controllers scrambled fighters to intercept the Nova, it was already leaving a trail of burning air behind it as it breached the atmosphere and descended, heat burning the air around the ship as the ship's heat shields absorbed the majority of the energy, keeping the cockpit comfortable. Jason brought the ship down in a very steep descent angle, slowing down as he descended, coming in over the ocean and not far from Dracora.

Jason had outrun the fighters in space. He wasn't so lucky with the fighters stationed in Dracora itself. A tactical hologram popped up on the right showing the city and a swarm of at least two dozen contacts rising up from the city and moving towards him. He realized that he couldn't come straight at the city. He had to circle it, get them to get behind him, then turn and race for the palace once he had

them out from between him and his goal. He veered off to the north, moving out over the continent and going wide, turning away from the city. The fighters continued to climb, but were now on an intercept vector. He widened that circle until he was flying directly away from the city, which put all of them behind him. The tactical hologram suddenly widened and showed four groups of contacts, two to the west, one to the north, and one almost directly over his position and a hundred miles *up*. Those were the space-based fighters entering the atmosphere to chase him down.

He couldn't stay on this course. He turned, a wide circle even as he continued to descend, causing the city-based fighters to change course to intercept, until he was out over the ocean again. He studied the four groups and saw that no matter which way he went, he was going to run smack into one of them. The closest group, the ones from the city, were going to intercept him before he reached the city no matter which way he went, because if he went too far wide, one of those other groups was going to intercept him first. If he tried to race through them, he was running a huge risk, since the Nova had no armor. It was nothing but a flying engine, built for speed and agility—

Speed and agility.

Agility.

Holy *shit*, was that a crazy idea...but sometimes crazy works.

He saw that there was only one way he was going to reach the palace alive, and that was to go through the city-based fighters, and minimize their opportunities to shoot at him. And there was only one way to do that. He had to put the ship on the deck.

Between the buildings of Dracora, right through the city itself.

They'd be maniacs to fire at him in those artificial canyons between three hundred story buildings, they'd be killing a hell of a lot of civilians. And down there, the Nova's small size and superior maneuverability would give him a decisive advantage. It could out-turn a Starhawk or Dragonfly, and down there, turning ability was going to be the most critical aspect of a ship.

It was insane, but there was no other way.

Jason nosed the ship into a power dive, going straight down, racing at the deep blue of the ocean below as he kept a mental eye on his altitude, a number in his mind's eye that decreased with alarming rapidity. The ship began to vibrate and shudder as it plowed through the thick air near the surface, but Jason ignored that, keeping one eye on his altitude and one on the Dracora fighters, who were now racing towards him. He was sixty *kathra* off the coast, and he was lined up to come right over the Medical Annex and enter the city proper.

10,000 *shakra*. The ship still shuddered heavily, making a banging sound, and the city fighters were 20 *kathra* away.

5,000 *shakra*. The sea filled his canopy view now, and the fighters were 7 *kathra* away, seconds from firing range.

1,000 *shakra*! Jason pulled up, hard, even as the lead fighters opened fire on him with deadly bolts of metaphased plasma streams. They didn't count on him using such a brutal angle, and angle that would make most pilots pass out, so their initial salvo went wide of him. Jason felt his eyeballs sink back into his head as his vision grayed out from the immense pressure of coming out of such a powerful dive, but the Nova's inertial dampers kept him from exceeding his limits and passing out. The tips of the ends of the two diamond-shaped wings hit the ocean, shattering a wave and sending a shower of misty water drops into the air. The impact made the Nova lurch, however, and almost slammed the bow into the ocean. Jason managed to recover, and then punched the ship at full throttle, skimming so close to the water's edge that the gentle windblown waves very nearly hit the belly of the ship. The high speed at water's edge created a huge twin columns of water high into the air behind him, a wake of spray that concealed the ship from the eyes of the pilots behind and forced them to rely on targeting scanners. But they were too busy turning and trying to catch up to the small Nova, pushing their engines beyond maximum, which just barely allowed them to keep up with the smaller, faster craft.. Jason had to dip the ship high to avoid a small pleasure boat ten *kathra* from the shore,

and the sonic boom behind him overturned the craft and sent its five occupants flying, splashing into the sea. The fifteen fighters behind charged past the capsized boat, but one of the pilots called out to sea rescue to come pick them up.

It was just safe enough for them to try, he realized. Jason felt the edges of it as one of those pilots in the fighters behind him reached out with her mind, and tried to attack Jason. He brushed aside her assault with almost scornful disdain, but he was too busy lining up his entry into the city to worry about striking back at her. At 1600 *kathra* an hour, almost 750 miles an hour, that shoreline was going to be behind him in a matter of seconds! He slowed down as he turned the ship, and the fighters behind seemed to pull up, waiting for him to pull up and go over the buildings ahead. But he didn't.

At 250 miles an hour, Jason lanced in between the hospital and the Medical Services administrative headquarters only 100 *shakra* above the ground, shattering windows in both buildings for ten stories and dragging an air wake behind him so powerful it overturned parked hovercars, uprooted two trees, and knocked everyone to the ground and sent them tumbling.

The fighters behind broke up. Ten of them pulled up to go high, but five of them gave chase through the city itself, and Jason learned almost immediately that they *were* crazy enough to fire at him. He almost didn't believe it when the lead ship opened fire, forcing him to evade wildly in the narrow canyon of the major artery through the huge buildings, as streams of plasma sizzled by the canopy and slammed into a building far ahead, sending a spray of fire, plascrete, and glass showering towards the ground. Jason's fast eyes and quick reflexes let him catch sight of a border, and he turned the ship *hard* and descended at the same time, doing a banking vertical turn to get away from the fighters. They matched the turn, and he turned again at the end of the building, banking high and to the right to prevent them from getting a line of fire, then turned to the left and dropped to the deck, the tip of his wing mere feet from the ground as he banked through and levelled out. The five fighters turned into the parkway behind him, and he punched the throttle to get to the end of one of the two hundred story buildings between which he flew before they could shoot at him. He just barely managed to make the corner just as the lead fire unleashed a pair of plasma bolts from the gunports under and to each side of the nosecone, as the Nova turned left and ascended.

Right towards a suspended walkway between the two buildings!

Jason reacted out of sheer panic, spinning the ship and going high, and he just *barely* cleared the walkway, so close his canopy almost hit the roof of the glass and metal bridge as he passed over it inverted. He hooked down to get behind it, and behind him, in his rear monitor display on the left, he saw the glass and metal walkway *explode* as the lead fighter rammed it. The Dragonfly spun in the flying debris, relatively undamaged from the impact but the impact sending it somersalting out of control, and it dropped to the ground in a wide arc along with the remains of the bridge, plowing into the ground in a huge cloud of dust.

Jason was too busy gripping the posts in a white-knuckled grip to care much about shaking one of his pursuers, for the other four had cleared the bridge, and there were still ten more overhead, shadowing the movements of those on the deck, waiting for the Nova to come out into the open where they could get a shot at it. Jason weaved the ship between two blocks of buildings in a scissors motion, turning back on his path with each cleared building, getting a feel for the spacing between the buildings. The Starhawks and Dragonflies kept up with him, unable to line up a shot but not dropping out of the chase, so Jason started taking the turns faster and faster, pitting his natural reflexes and his superior machine against his more experienced pursuers in their slower, less maneuverable ships. He took one turn so fast that the leading edge of his right wing nicked the glass of the building, shattering it and sending glass flying into the parkway below. But the lead Starhawk clipped its entire wing into the glass, the wing caught on a wall, and then the ship vanished as it was yanked into the building, sending a fiery cloud of building materials billowing out into the air. The Starhawk plowed through the entire floor and erupted from the glass around the corner, in a straight line from where it went in, then dropped the hundred *shakra* to the ground below as just part of a rain of debris.

The Nova came out into a vacant lot, and Jason punched it to get through before the fighters above dove down and opened fire. He turned vertical and skimmed along the side of a building with his canopy mere inches from the glass, his air wake shattering it behind him, and then he dove to the deck as he made another turn, weaving left and then right. He nearly rammed a hovercar that came out from between the buildings in front of him, his wake sending the hovercar spinning out of control to crash into the ground, but he never saw what happened because he'd already turned between another pair of buildings. He realized he was getting deeper into the city, where the buildings would be even larger, and there would be more open space between them, giving the fighters more opportunities to fire at him. But he was also coming into some slow traffic, moving into an area of the city where hovercars flew at the altitude he was using; most sections of the city, the hovercars and zip ships flew above building level, only descending between them to land. But here, closer to the center of the city, the buildings were so tall, so massive that many hovercars simply flew between them, turning corners, mirroring what ground-bound cars back on Earth did on city streets. Those hovercars were now obstacles to avoid, as the Nova lanced along a parkway between two monstrous buildings, even as the hovercars seemed to be warned about the oncoming fast movers and tried to get out of the way, most of them going up. But, the open space let Jason open the throttle more, using his ship's advantages of speed and agility to overcome the experience of his adversaries.

He lost another pursuer when he banked a corner going nearly 200 miles an hour, plastering him to his seat because he took the bank oriented in the direction of the force, and the three remaining fighters mimicked him as they took the turn themselves. But the last remaining Starhawk just couldn't navigate the turn at that speed, and her belly slammed into the side of a building. Again, the armored fighter survived the impact, but that impact sent it out of control, bouncing it right off the building to plow stern first into the building on the far side, disappearing into it in a cloud of dust and shattered glass. The two remaining pursuers were in Dragonflies, which were smaller and more agile than Starhawks. He led those two on a mad, chaotic, meandering chase through Dracora, always turning just before they could get a line of fire at him, speeding up to nearly 500 miles an hour in the straightaways the braking hard and navigating tight, right-angle turns at almost impossible speeds, and basically aggravating the hell out of them. The fighters above kept trying to get into a position where they could dive down and take a shot at him from above, but he kept turning wildly, almost randomly, making it impossible to predict where he was going to go.

But Jason knew where he was going, and thanks to Miaari's sharing, he had a detailed memory of this city. He knew exactly where he was, exactly which direction the palace was in, and he was following a route that would take him right to the palace without surrendering cover from the fighters behind him, which were the much bigger threat. He could see it when the fighters overhead dove at him and react, but those two fighters behind him could shoot him down if they got a clear shot. That was the one thing he absolutely could not give them.

He turned a corner and found himself staring at a swarm of hovercars! He rolled around one car and then dove under a bunch of them, then had to jerk high to avoid one that dove away to get out of his path, but had dove right down into him. He ordered his fighter's comm to broadcast on emergency control, a frequency every hovercar's radio would receive, but someone else beat him to it. *"This is an emergency! Fighters are pursuing a renegade ship within Dracora proper, in the Trades district! All hovercars and civilian traffic in the Trades and Barter districts are to land immediately! Repeat, all hovercars and civilian traffic in the Trades and Barter districts are to land immediately!"*

That actually helped. When the Nova took another turn hard and fast, it did so over a series of hovercars that were diving to the ground, moving to follow the emergency instructions and land so they would get out of danger. Jason banked again, hard, between two glass towers, and saw a glittering crystal lattice spire in the distance ahead. The spire of the palace!

Now came the gamble. He hit that broad avenue and put the Nova into overdrive, maxing out the throttle in a hard command. He was slammed into the seat of the fighter and felt his head swim as it

punched supersonic in a heartbeat, the broad grassy avenue narrowing and narrowing in his vision, becoming a razor thin sliver between blurring glass and steel, where the slightest deviation off his course would cause him to drift right into one of those buildings before he could correct. The fighters behind him dwindled in the distance, but then they stopped getting smaller, even started gaining ground on him, and he knew that they were just trying to get enough of a bead on him to fire on him, try to hit him when he was going so fast he had no room to evade if they did so. Jason edged closer to a building, close enough for his sonic boom to blow out all the windows explosively, sending a cloud of broken glass out into the air behind him to conceal his ship in a cloud of scillinting colors to their eyes and confuse their sensors as they tried to read through a cloud of solid objects to lock onto him. He slammed the brakes by going into full reverse throttle seconds after sending that cloud of glass, almost sending him through the windshield and causing a jet of blood to spew from his nose as all the breath was crushed out of him, and then he nosed the Nova straight up and gained altitude, then banked hard and dove between two buildings as the blinded Dragonflies didn't react in time and overshot him, flying under him, even as three fighters above had dove down on him and fired, spraying plasma bolts into empty air where he would have been, bolts that slammed into the grassy ground below and exploded violently, further blinding the Dragonflies that flew through the smoke and debris. One of them wobbled in flight, its wing clipped a building, and then there was an explosion of glass and debris as the fighter ripped through the building, tumbling into it.

The last remaining fighter was joined by three more that had dove on the Nova, but they couldn't see him, relying on tactical scanners and control sensors in orbit above to pinpoint his location, where Jason had a full tactical view of the city sector showing him where the remaining eleven fighters were, and also showing him that nearly thirty had nearly reached the scene from other bases and were about to join the pursuit. God bless the Karinnes and their excellent sensors.

It wouldn't do them any good. He had them now.

Jason banked again into another broad avenue, and again went supersonic, pushing the Nova, pushing himself to the limits of his endurance, as he wheezed and struggled to breathe. His eyes were locked on the crystal spire that quickly got larger and larger, as he kept track of the seven fighters above as they pushed hard to get into a diving position. The small ship seemed to oblige them when it suddenly slowed down, but did not turn. They maneuvered into position, rolled, then dove at their quarry.

But the strange, small ship had vanished. It was nowhere to be seen, and it had vanished from tactical scanners.

Running lights blinking on, Jason carefully maneuvered along a small tunnel that had once been part of the subway of Dracora, part of the city's historical landmarks, a two *kathra* section of tunnel that had not been filled in as a kind of monument to their past, but had been fenced in to prevent people from getting in. The Nova had done well in breaking through that fencing without doing any damage to itself. Right now, he knew, the fighters were searching for him, and it wouldn't take them long to find the hole in the fence and realize where he went. He had to get out of the tunnel before that happened, so they weren't sitting there waiting for him. So, he flew through the old tunnel as fast as he dared, hopeful that it was almost over. The tunnel came up only a *kathra* from the Imperial grounds. If he could get the Nova over the fence, the fighters wouldn't *dare* open fire on him. Not so long as he was broadcasting the Truce Call, which he ordered the Nova to start doing immediately. When he came out of the ground, the defense systems of the Imperial palace would see that transmission and at least give him a chance, where the fighters above would not.

To make sure of it, he again called the Imperial Palace using a frequency reserved for the *Siann*, now that he had enough spare time to pay attention to talking to someone without worrying about getting himself killed. This time, it was a pink-haired woman that answered, her image appearing under the canopy, on a hologram over the control stick. "*This is a reserved channel!*" she protested.

"Lady, in about twenty seconds the ship they've been chasing is going to cross over the fence and

land,” he warned her. “It is carrying a member of the *Siann* on official business, it is unarmed and unarmored, and is broadcasting the Truce Call. So wave the *fucking* fighters off and let me land!”

“*How can it be the Siann if you are the one flying the ship?*” she demanded, frowning at him.

“When I land I’ll explain it,” he snapped at her. “But I’ve done everything I’m supposed to do by the laws of *Siann* to be allowed to land safely, so dammit, follow the laws! You can have a *fucking army* of guards there to meet me, but let me *fucking* land!”

He had no more time to argue, for the fence appeared ahead of him. The Nova burst through it, and Jason instinctively rolled the ship and banked when he saw a flash of red ahead and above him. They’d beaten him to the tunnel mouth! He evaded a cascade of plasma bolts as he weaved over an open park abutting the Imperial compound, then pushed the roll into a corkscrew that made him harder to hit as he jacked the lateral controls to slide the ship to port to avoid a pulsing series of bolts of plasma from one of the Starhawks that had figured out where he went and set up to ambush him when he came out. He ducked and wove and careened wildly, speeding up and slowing down, trying to shake them off his tail as they fired at him. He had plenty of room to maneuver, but there were five of them and one of him, and he knew it was just a matter of time until one of them finally got enough of a lead on him to hit him.

It didn’t take long. The ship rocked violently as the entire control board started flashing red and sparks erupted from under a panel on the port side, spinning almost out of control. The entire left wing had been blown off by a plasma bolt, and Jason struggled to regain control of his crippled ship, the remains of it nearly hitting the canopy as he spun into its path. He managed to get the ship back under some semblance of control and turned it towards the palace, leaving a trail of smoke and fire behind him as the ship listed badly to port and lost altitude. Several more plasma bolts streaked towards him, missing by inches, but when the crystalline façade of the Imperial Palace came into view over the trees, all firing ceased. At this range, an errant shot might blow a hole in Empress Dahnai’s crown jewel, and it would mean the head of the offender who did it.

Sagging in the air, burning, barely under control, the wounded Nova flew over the fence and entered the Imperial grounds.

Jason was aiming for a landing platform near the palace proper, but he saw already he wasn’t going to make it. The engines were damaged and overheating, and he had seconds to get the ship slowed down or he’d risk plowing a nasty trough into Dahnai’s neatly manicured lawn. He had the ship slow down as much as it could as he tried to extend the landing skids, but only one of them was functional. The ship came into a hover about fifteen feet above the ground, the nose skid extending, and then the ship lost all power, shuddered in midair, and dropped like a stone.

The impact was bone-jarring. Jason’s teeth clicked together as the ship slammed into the ground, as a *company* of black-armored Imperial guards charged towards him, even three exomechs, but he was alive and generally unharmed outside of bruised ribs, a bloody nose, and feeling like he’d been trampled under an elephant from all the high-G maneuvers he’d done. He unhooked the restraints and tried to catch his breath as the canopy slowly opened using emergency backup power dedicated solely to the canopy, and he woozily got to his feet in the cockpit, sat on the edge, and then swung his legs over and slid off to fall six feet to the ground. His legs were a bit rubbery, and that caused him to fall when he hit the ground.

Then hands pushed him into the ground. Imperial guards held him down as others a distance away trained MPAC rifles on him, ready to shoot him if he made the faintest false move. Jason collected himself while they pressed his head against the ground. *By the laws of Siann, I claim the right of Martyr’s Gambit!* he sent powerfully, so powerfully that just about everyone in the palace could probably hear him. *I have done everything the law requires to get here. I broadcasted the Truce Call from my ship in orbit, but some weasel in the palace ignored the law and called the Trillanes so he could collect their reward on my head! That forced me to fly down here on my own with half the damn Navy chasing me down! But I got here in one piece! Now release me and let me strike the gong of*

Morr to gain entry to the palace!

There was a startled silence all around him. The guards obviously didn't expect this maniacal, suicidal Terran to *send*, and what was more, he knew the laws of *Siann*!

Release him, came an amused, dry sending. *Let him strike the gong. He is granted his claim of Martyr's Gambit.*

He didn't need anyone to tell him who *that* was. That was Empress Dahnai *herself*, answering his sending with one of her own!

Hands instantly let go of him, and then two hands returned to help him to his feet. The hidden faces behind those helmets didn't let him see their reactions, but those helmets were a little bowed.

Protocol insisted that he remain silent. He wasn't allowed to send to the Empress, it was both in bad form and illegal. But, he really hadn't expected her to answer him personally. He really hadn't considered the possibility that she would have heard him.

"This way, please," one of the Faey said in a rich alto, pointing with an armored hand towards the gleaming crystal of the Imperial Palace.

He walked slowly, trying to recover himself. He knew that now the real fight was about to begin. Now he had to convince Dahnai that he had a rightful claim to the seat of Karinne, and then, after that, he had to challenge Trillane for Earth and get Dahnai's approval of his claim. Part of doing that was to use an old law in the *Siann* called the Martyr's Gambit. It was one law that had two interpretations, based on who used it. A noble could use it to bring a grievance directly to the Empress, but face her wrath if she found the grievance below her, it was the last resort of a noble with an issue. But anyone could use this law, even a commoner, and if a commoner used it, she faced execution after making her case before the Empress unless the Empress so deigned to spare the commoner's life. That was why it was called the Martyr's Gambit. Even a commoner could get before the Empress and plead her case, but she could lose her life in the bargain. If she was willing to martyr herself for her cause, then that option was always available.

The modern Faey citizens probably didn't know about this law, and if they did, it would do them no good, really. The law was still binding, but the Gong of Morr, which had to be struck to enact this law, was on the Imperial grounds, and no commoner could reach it without being shot and killed by the guards or the automated defenses of the Imperial compound. That was how the Empress got around that little law, by making it impossible for any lay citizenry to actually reach the gong.

But he reached the gong. It was a ceremonial golden disc suspended by two chains from an old wooden support stand, and a cloth-covered mallet hung from a rope on a pet on the leg of it. This was the Gong of Morr. It was the ceremonial doorbell of the Imperial palace; one had to strike the gong three times as an official request to enter. He took up the mallet and struck the gong, which made a low, tinny sound. He struck it again, and then once more, and hung the mallet back on the peg and stepped up to the huge double doors, covered in crystal lattice done up in the Merrane crest of three moons surrounding a star, all within a triangle. Those doors opened, showing a stupendous entry hall filled with carpets, rich tapestries, mosaics, and a gem-encrusted ceiling glittering rainbow light down to the floor below. A stone statue of a young Faey woman, nude, her hands behind her head to tousle her long, thick hair greeted those who were at the door, placed prominently on the far side of the hall so it was the first thing one saw once the door was open. The woman was a very handsome woman, with a strong pair of cheeks and large eyes, and a pattern Faey body that was graced with all those elegant curves that men fancied, offset by muscular definition in her arms, legs, and stomach.

Even from that distance, he could identify the face on that statue, for he'd seen enough pictures of the model.

He had to give Empress Dahnai Merrane some marks for guts for posing naked for a statue that everyone entering her palace couldn't help but see.

Before he stepped in, he recalled the rules of protocol that Zaa had taught him. Sending within the palace was permissible, but it was considered extremely rude for your sending to extend past the room

where you were in. Private sendings between people in different rooms were fine, but the customs of decorum demanded that a certain amount of mental silence hold firm within the palace. Filling the air with inane chatter all over the place would make it hard for someone to hear the sending of the person beside them. Since he was a man, it was unseemly for him to go anywhere unescorted. That was a stupid rule, but it had its roots way back in the antiquity of Faey history. He would go nowhere alone here. Since he came with no escort, a woman would escort him wherever he went, either a guard or one of the palace staff, a groom or chamberlain. It was expected for him to bow to any nobles, who would be identifiable by their red sashes, but he was only expected to bow *once* when he entered a room. If other nobles entered, they would bow if higher ranking nobles were present, but those already within the room were not required to bow. Since there were so many nobles here, that rule was enacted to save time from endless bowing as nobles roamed the palace. If he was in a hallway or passage, he was not required to bow to anyone but the Empress herself, should he chance encountering her outside the audience chamber. When he stood before the Empress, he had to wait for her to speak or send first, and custom was to always reply in the method she used. One did not speak or send to Dahnai unless she did so first, and even then, if she spoke, it was custom to continue to speak until she sent once again. Only then was it permissible to send in reply.

He was led to an antechamber at first, where he was required to bathe to clean the blood off himself, a room equipped with a bath in the corner, chairs to rest upon while waiting, and a vidlink panel monitor on the wall tuned to INN, though the sound was muted. It was here where he would wait for the official call to enter audience with the Empress, but it was also a place where he could groom himself to be presentable. He knew he had to look the part, so he partook of the bath willingly. He was dirty and sweaty and his clothes were stained with his own blood from the nosebleed he suffered when doing those high-G maneuvers. His Terran clothes seemed to offend the stewards that continuously filed in and out to attend those waiting to see the Empress, and they basically stole them while he was taking the bath, and left him Faey clothes, a long, flowing shimmering black robe and soft pair of trousers to wear under it, with the right sleeve so long it fell over his hand and the left ending at his forearm, both of them with flared cuffs that made them huge.

It was then he sighed in relief that he had kept everything important with his underwear at the lip of the bath.

He hated the idea of wearing this robe, but he had to make the right impression, and it would more or less require some bending of his moral fortitude at the moment. If he offended the Empress or too many of the *Siann*, they could shoot this down. He could be strong, but he couldn't appear to be overly *arrogant*, nor could he appear to be rude. Showing up in front of the Empress wearing a tee shirt and a pair of jeans with Nikes would be very rude. She *was* the Empress, and he had to afford her respect. He had to look his best for her, and though he would have preferred wearing a suit, they didn't have suits here on Draconis. This robe was what was formal wear here, and when in Rome, don't begrudge the toga.

He did draw the line, though, when a woman came in and announced she was Erya Zoranne, a chamberlain of the palace, and she would help him prepare for his audience. Jason remembered something of this title from Zaa's teaching. This woman would be responsible for getting him ready to see Dahnai, where she would act as a maid, helping him bathe and dress. But, while he was drying himself off, she tried to sit him down to put makeup on him. "No," he told her flatly as he scrubbed his hair dry.

"You would stand before the Empress without makeup?" she asked in sincere surprise. "Don't you want to look your absolute best?"

"I'll wear a Faey robe, but I'm not gonna paint my face, which Terran men do *not* do. I still have my dignity. I'm bowing to Faey customs, but I won't go that far. I am *not* a Faey."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive."

“Very well. Sit down, please, I’ll help you with your hair.”

“I can manage that myself.”

“I know you can, but it’s my duty to help you get dressed and prepared. I can do your hair in any style you prefer, sir.”

He basically gave in at that point. While he put on his underwear, trousers, and a soft pair of calf boots that fit him perfectly, she combed his hair in a simple part and then used a device that looked like a miniature cricket bat to dry it into place. She then helped him put on a soft linen-like undershirt and the robe, doing its ties in the proper style while Jason fussed with the lapels of the garment, which crossed in front of him. The robe-like garment was slit up to his waist on each side, allowing him to walk freely, and it had a multitude of pockets. He placed the ring and his black master key in those pockets, then the maid helped him tweak the robe so it fell just right. “There now, you look rather handsome,” she told him, looking at him with a tilted head, tilting it to and fro as she walked around him. “You look good in black. I’m glad I chose it for you.”

“You did?”

“Of course I did,” she told him. “I wasn’t about to let you stand before her Imperial Majesty wearing bloody rags. My reputation as a chamberlain would be ruined. This robe goes well with your skin and is a perfect accent for your blond hair.”

“Well, thank you,” he told her sincerely. “I guess now I just wait?”

She nodded. “It shouldn’t be very long, though,” she told him.

It wasn’t. Five minutes later, after several pages entered the room to send privately with the chamberlain, a rather regal looking woman with long silver hair stepped into the room, wearing a red sash over a dark blue robe that was flared in the front to expose a considerable amount of blue cleavage. Jason bowed to her immediately. “You are summoned to stand before the Empress,” she announced. “Know that under the conditions of Martyr’s Gambit, you will be taken straight from the audience chamber to the gallows to be hanged for your audacity, should the Empress not spare your life.”

“Let’s go,” he told her evenly. “I don’t have all day, you know.”

It wasn’t far to the audience hall. He followed this regal woman, with the chamberlain holding his left hand on her right arm to act as his escort, down a long, elegantly decorated passage, to stand before a pair of ornate gold-filled double doors, gold filagree bored into the dark, polished wood done up in the Imperial crest, which was the Merrane crest under a crown, showing that House Merrane currently sat upon the throne. Jason figured they changed the doors every time a new house came to power in the Imperium. They opened, and he found himself staring into the lion’s den.

The large, cavernous room was filled with nobles. Clearly, Dahnai had been holding court when he barged in on them all. This he had not expected. He had expected maybe to be doing this in front of just the ruling heads of the *Siann*, who stayed in the palace most of the time, who no doubt would be called to the chamber once he made his claims, to debate on the matter. It was bad luck that he’d done this on a court day, when Dahnai entertained many members of the other houses in this twice-a-week gathering of the nobles in her presence, where they would talk issues, make alliances, break them, scheme, plot, and generally do what spoiled Faey nobles did when packed into the same room with each other.

All of Jason’s confidence seemed to bleed out of his feet when he saw a few hundred nobles turn in his direction to look when the doors opened, as all conversation and sending died down, but Jason’s eyes were instead locked on the figure at the far end of the hall. Sitting on a gold-plated throne that had a rich fur cape thrown over it, wearing a simple white robe that showed off her ample cleavage, was her Imperial Majesty, Dahnai Merrane. She was surprisingly young for an Empress, maybe only about 40 or so, still considered quite youthful by Faey standards, but she sat upon that throne like a woman who knew she owned it. She had hair the color of polished copper, a rich reddish-gold, like bronze, that was long and straight and luxuriously thick, fanning out on the throne behind her like a wave of shimmering

riches. Twined into her hair was the crystal crown of the Empress of the Imperium. Her face was youthful and lovely, with strong cheeks and a slightly squared jaw, strong facial features, but with a delicate nose and lovely, large, expressive green eyes. Even though she was slouched on the throne, one leg thrown casually over an arm which displayed the fact she wore no pants under her slitted robe, showing off a great deal of shapely leg, holding handpanel in her hand as if she were sacked out on her couch in her living room, she still just *oozed* Imperial bearing. Even in that intimate, comfortable pose, she still radiated a strength like the Denmother Zaa, an aura of command that told anyone looking at her just who the boss was around here. She looked at him with lazy eyes, but he could tell that those eyes were quite focused, quite energetic, and they seemed quite amused by his presence there.

“Imperial Majesty!” the woman who had come to fetch him boomed in a loud voice. “I present to you Commoner Jason Augustus Fox, subject of the Crown, seeking redress under the auspices of the Martyr’s Gambit!”

Let him step forth, she sent in reply, going back to her panel as if he no longer interested her, proving that the woman who had intervened before truly was the Empress herself.

Jason walked with the chamberlain down the center of the room, on a blue carpet that led to the dais holding the throne, until they reached the first step, about ten feet from her. Jason bowed gracefully as the chamberlain bowed deeply to her, and then she let go of his hand and stepped away. Jason looked at her, vaguely realizing that he was living out a nightmare he had had so long ago, bowing before the Empress like a lapdog wearing a Faey robe, but there was no hope for it. The only way to kick Trillane off Earth and protect his people was to do this, to take a place within a system he hated and despised. But the sacrifice of his honor was more than worth the gain for the Terran race.

“Imperial Majesty,” he began, then he took a cleansing breath with his voice wavered, betraying his fear and nervousness being here. That caused a few titters of laughter behind him, as the nobles all crowded in to watch the show, watch a commoner flounder before the Empress, and then be dragged off to be hanged for his impertinence. “Your Imperial Majesty, I must first protest my introduction. I am a married man. My proper name is Jason Augustus Fox *Shaddale*. That introduction insults the honor of my wife and the vows we share.”

“Indeed,” she said slowly, not doing much but glancing at him as she continued to look at her handpanel. “The scribe can make the necessary corrections,” she told him with a vague wave of her empty hand. “Just hold on a second.”

They waited in silence while she kept her attention on the handpanel. But she turned it off and looked at him. “Now, what’s so important to you that you’re willing to be hanged afterwards after you tell it to me?” she asked, showing much more interest now, putting the handpanel in the seat beside her as she took her leg off the arm and took a more normal pose, giving him her full attention.

It was a surprising change, and Jason wasn’t the only one to notice it. Had she been feigning disinterest, or was she just feigning interest now? He wasn’t sure, this young Faey lady was hard to read.

“I came here using the laws of Martyr’s Gambit, but I have no intention of being hanged,” he told her evenly. “I came here to claim my legal rights and duties under the laws of *Siann*.”

“My. I don’t recall ever seeing your name in the charter, goodman Fox,” she said cheekily, which produced a few soft chuckles. “Let me find my panel, and we’ll take a look at it, shall we?”

Ah, so she was a talker, and she had a barbed sense of humor. Well, Jason could talk too. Or more to the point, he could banter with the best of them. “Well, begging her Majesty’s pardon, but it’s there,” he told her evenly. “It’s just hiding. I guess it’s not very proud of the fact that it’s me coming here to drag it back out.”

The corner of her mouth raised.

“I read the laws of *Siann* so I’d understand things, your Majesty. I understand the forms and the protocols. All I need to prove my case, is *this*.”

He reached into his pocket and withdrew the ring of Karinne. He offered it to one of the guards

flanking the dais, who would then take it up to the Empress. The guard, wearing white armor but no helmet, advanced and took it, then she stepped up onto the dais and offered it to Dahnai with a bow. She took it and looked at it, turning it over in her hands, and then she actually *smiled*. Then she *laughed*! The nobles behind him seemed uncertain of her reaction to whatever it was he had passed to her, for they hadn't seen it, and she had it in her lap. "Clever. They said you were a smart one, Terran, but this is really proving it. How did you get this? I'm impressed."

"I tracked it down after a great deal of research, your Majesty," he told her. "They tried to hide it, but they didn't hide it well enough."

"I see, it makes sense now. That explains why you're wearing that ridiculous ornament," she said pointedly. "Looking the part, are we?"

"It is my heritage, your Majesty," he said evenly.

Now a few of the nobles understood, those who remembered enough of their history to get an idea of what was going on. That revelation boiled through the nobles in a cascade of private sendings.

"So, you are laying a claim on the seat of House Karinne," she said, her eyes dancing with amusement. "You've got some ovaries for a man, Terran, I'll give you that. It's a rather cunning little ploy. Why, if you can convince me you're a descendent of the Karinnes, well, it's just very convenient that you can lay claim to Terra citing the laws of first rights? You know, taking it away from that house you're fighting a private little war with right now? What happened, did they use up your box of toys, and you're using this as a way to end it?" she asked.

"Not mine," he answered easily. "As recent events profess, your Majesty, Trillane's still losing money hand over fist because my rebels went into overdrive. Capturing me was actually a really bad idea. You pissed my wife off eight ways to—er, nevermind, Terran expression. Anyway, let's just say that she went nuclear, and she's been the one that's been acting in my stead since I've been off Earth. I was content to slowly bleed Trillane til they gave up and sold the contract to another house, but my wife Jyslin decided to go for the jugular after that attack dog you set on me tracked me down and captured me. And she's every bit as smart as me," he said honestly, heaping praise on that glorious woman who had blessed him beyond all others by marrying him.

"Indeed," she murmured, leaning back in her throne, resting an elbow on the arm and crossing her legs. "So, you've done it, Terran. You got the ring, how, I have no idea, you show up in a ship I had to have my historians look up in the database, you give INN enough footage of *Pilots Gone Wild* to fill an hourlong special of spectacular fighter crashes while banging holes in my city, and you managed to get right there, and now there you stand, in the final stages of some clever, meticulous plan, while your eyes linger on my legs," she said, smiling lightly. "So, convince me. I'm curious now, I want to hear this."

Jason did blush a little. It was hard *not* to look at her legs, since they were the closest part of her to him, and she was sitting above his eye level. "Well, your Majesty, that ship your historians looked up is the biggest piece of my evidence. I salvaged it after tracking down its location in the histories of my people. It is a Karinne Scout Ship, the *Scimitar*, a research vessel. I tracked it down and salvaged it. After the fall of Karinne, ship's crew didn't sneak back to the Imperium. They went to my planet instead and established a colony, hiding from the war. Well, Terrans were already there, and I guess I'm the result. When I was trying to figure out why I had talent, I stumbled across this in the history of my people. It wasn't easy. The Faey don't appear in our history, they only appear in our folklore and myths, but it was enough for me to piece it together. Using those clues, I found the *Scimitar* and I found where they hid the ring, and, well, here I am. My ancestor was Baroness Zera Karinne of the House of Karinne, 173rd in the line for the throne by Karinne registry, which should be an archived public record your historians can research. I'm a telepath because I have a Faey ancestor, and that Faey was Zera Karinne. In fact, all the Terrans on Terra that are telepaths are only telepathic because they are descended from those Faey that landed on Earth to escape the war. Some are Karinnes, like me, but we don't know who their ancestors were, so they can't really stand here before you like I can. Some

aren't, descendents of the ship's crew. I have some records to prove that, by the way, DNA records taken by one of the doctors that had been treating my people, showing that my DNA is directly related to Faey DNA. From what I read in the Charter, by the rights of noble birth, I can lay claim to the vacated House of Karinne by simply staking that claim in your Majesty's presence with the ring."

"I must protest, your Majesty!" a voice called from behind. A tall, mature Faey woman with grayish hair and a tall, willowy frame encased in a brown robe stepped forth. "The house of Karinne has been destroyed for over a thousand years! This Terran can't lay claim to a house that is no more!"

"Begging your Majesty's pardon, I can," Jason said simply, refuting the woman. "All the proof I need of that is right there."

He pointed. They all looked up, to the banners that were hanging from a beam high along the ceiling, banners that showed the crests of all the nobles houses. And right there, right where Zaa said it would be, was the banner showing the crest of the House of Karinne.

"That banner shows that the Imperium still considers the House of Karinne to exist as a noble entity. Since it is there, there *is* a House of Karinne, it just has no nobles. It is an empty house. Well, I am claiming that house."

"They haven't changed those banners since the Third Civil War!" the woman protested.

"Actually, they have," Dahnai herself mused, looking up. "I don't see the banners of any of the *other* houses destroyed in that war. The only one I see up there is the Karinne banner." She looked at Jason. "Very clever, Terran. You certainly prepared well for this. It might be an oversight, but it *is* there, and that does give your claim some legal weight."

"With all due respect, your Majesty, I'm not an idiot, and I knew the price I'd pay if I didn't make a convincing argument."

She chuckled. "Indeed. But, I don't see where you're going with this, really. Even if I do grant your request and seat you as Grand Duke Karinne, and you make a legal claim on Terra, you're just going to lose it again, because there is a *contract*. You can't unmake that contract. If you replace Trillane, you must honor the terms of the contract *they* signed with the Crown for the rights to Terra. If you can't serve me in that capacity, then I'd just strip you of Earth and give it back to Trillane, and that puts you right back where you started, doesn't it? You had to understand that, you're not a fool. So, explain to me your brilliant plan to get around that little stumbling block."

"I was of a mind to bargain a deal with another of the Highborn houses to *lease* the farms of Terra to them, your Majesty," he told her. "I don't care about the profits, so I'm more than willing to make the terms very favorable with that partner. They provide the expertise and infrastructure, we provide the manpower. All I want out of it is direct Imperial supervision of all aspects of the operation, to ensure my people are treated fairly and well and given all the rights and protections as any other Imperial citizen. That's all that all of this has been about. This isn't about me, or getting rich, or getting a noble title, or anything like that. If I get dragged out of here and hanged, but what I've done here today forces Trillane off Terra and brings in another house that will treat us fairly, then I'll consider that a victory. I don't matter in the big picture, your Majesty. The only thing that matters is the welfare and fair treatment of my people. That's what I'm here fighting for."

She was silent for a very long moment, looking at the ring in her hands. Then she stood up. "I will see the Highborn house leaders in my study," she announced. "And *you*," she added, pointing at Jason. "Lead him there," she said to one of the guards at the foot of the dais. That guard bowed to her.

He was led from the audience chamber and down a side passage, with eleven women filing along behind. He could hear the *swish swish* of their robes as they walked in silence, but he doubted they were anything but silent. There was probably a sendstorm going on between them, as they tried to fathom what Empress Dahnai had to say in private she couldn't say in public. Jason himself was feeling just a tad optimistic. Dahnai hadn't laughed him out of the palace yet, and he wasn't being led off to the gallows. She seemed to actually be giving him the benefit of the doubt, but he guess he'd have to wait to see what she had to say outside of the ears of the rest of the *Siann*.

The room to which he was taken was a surprisingly small, cozy little affair, and it was clearly very much the study that Dahnai had named it. A large black desk stood on the far wall, and there was a very large vidlink panel screen hanging on the far wall behind it. Two cozy chairs flanked a small endtable between them on the right side of the study and a couch with a coffee table was against the wall to the left, which was carpeted with an almost mesmerizing geometric patterned rug. There was a door on the wall left of the desk, and by that door was a peg on the wall holding a sword in a scabbard. There were three guards in the room, wearing that white armor, each standing in a corner, but none of them appeared to be overtly armed. Jason was led into that room, and the guard gave him a flat look. "Stand here and touch nothing," she ordered, then bowed as the other eleven women entered. Jason put his back to the wall and gave them all a cold, dangerous look as they sneered in his direction, but they all turned towards that door on the far side of the room when it opened. Empress Dahnai Merrane stepped in, her hands on the glittering sash around her waist.

"Now then," she grunted as they all bowed to her. She pulled the crown off her head, and to Jason's surprise, tossed it absently onto one of the chairs all the way across the room. Seeing her up close was much different, and he had to admire her. Dahnai Merrane was *tall*, taller than any other Faey he'd seen, probably eye to eye with him, and her hair was glossy and silky, a beautiful bronze, where she had gold colored hairs and copper colored hairs mixed together. She stepped over in front of the desk and looked at them, then reached into the pocket of the shimmering robe and pulled out the ring he'd given her.

"Now, let's get down to tokens," she said bluntly, looking at them all. "The Terran has made at least a decent claim, if you take all his circumstances and look at them as one big picture."

"Your Majesty!" the gray-haired woman objected.

"Push off, Maeri," Dahnai snapped at her. "But that's all it all is, *circumstantial*. We can prove it one way or another, right here, right now. I remember my history, Terran. Every member of the Karinne ruling family was a telekinetic. It was a well-documented family trait. Isn't that so?"

"I do remember something like that," one of the women behind him said.

"Thank you. Now, if you're descended from them, then so are you. So. Here's your challenge." She opened her hand and showed him the ring. "Take this ring out of my hand from where you stand, and I'll recognize you as the Grand Duke Karinne. If you can't do it, you leave this room and go straight to the gallows." She looked at the other women. "This is something that none of us can deny, Terran," she told him. "If you *are* a Karinne, you can take this ring, and there's nothing any of them can really say about it. That's proof that makes your circumstantial *subi* dance you just pulled off in the audience chamber rock solid. Not even Grand Duchess Maeri Trillane can refute that," she said, glancing at the gray-haired woman who had spoken up. "I brought you in here because I don't think you could have managed it in the audience chamber. You're hiding it well, but you're so nervous that I think you'd hit the ceiling if someone goosed you right now. I brought you here so you'd have a fair chance. I've seen some telekinetics, and what they do takes a lot of concentration and a lot of effort. At least here, with only twelve witnesses, it's not as nerve-wracking as trying to perform in front of the entire *Siann*."

Jason could only look at her. "Telekinetic? I didn't—I've never tried. I didn't even know. There was nothing about it in the—stuff I researched about it."

"Well, then we know this is all a flimsy stunt, then," Maeri Trillane said smugly. "I hope you'll let us watch him hang, your Majesty."

"He's not swinging yet, Maeri," Dahnai Merrane told her, somewhat coldly, then she looked at Jason, her green eyes locking on his. "You can walk out that door now, but you'll be walking to your execution," she told him. "You can always *try*. You never know, there just might be something hiding in that pretty little head of yours."

Jason was completely at a loss, but he nodded and blew out his breath. He did read that telekinetic ability was known to run through the Karinnes, but nothing indepth was really said about it. If the

Karinnes *were* telekinetic, and he seemed to have the same DNA as a Generation, well, then he could have telekinetic ability as well. He'd never used it before...hell, he'd never even *thought* of trying something like that in his life.

But he had no choice. He had to find that power inside him, if it was there, and find it *fast*. If he couldn't do it, he wouldn't live to see Jyslin again.

"Go ahead," she told him, holding her hand out to him with the ring. "Take your time, but do get on with it. At least *look* like you're trying."

He closed his eyes and put his hands before him, right fist clasped in the palm of his left hand, centering himself, breathing deeply. She was right, he was nervous, he had to calm down. He entered a meditative lull, concentrating only on the moment, focusing on the task at hand. The ring. An image of it appeared in his mind, and his entire existence focused down to that one point, focused on that one objective. *I must move the ring*, he thought to himself over and over, using it as a mantra to calm his thoughts, cause his fears and worries and doubts to melt away, leaving nothing behind but his determination to accomplish this task.

His breathing changed. It slowed, became rhythmic, calm, as his mind shed all its fears and worries and cares and became one with his task. If it was impossible, that did not matter. There was nothing but the task, and it had to be accomplished.

He opened his eyes. He was in a room that did not exist as anything but a scenic backdrop for the only object in the universe that truly existed outside of himself. It was a heavy golden ring sitting in a phantasmic palm that had no substance to him, an object that, his mind knew, had to be moved without touching it. He focused on that ring, his eyes boring into it, as he gathered up all his strength, all his determination, all his desire and willpower, pooling it behind his mind, behind his eyes. He had no idea how to do this, but he knew that much as in sending, it was a matter of reaching *outside* his mind with his own mind. But here, instead of touching the mind of another, he would instead touch that ring, and then use the force of his mind to pull it towards him.

There was no need for more preparation. He was ready.

And so he began. He focused his mind on that ring, his will, his very soul, reaching outside of himself and trying to make a connection to it, the only other object in the universe. He felt a tenuous touch, where he became *aware* of the ring, but it was weak and imprecise. He narrowed his eyes and raised his closed fist and hand higher, trying to fully feel that connection form, trying to wrap his mind completely around the ring that rested some distance before him.

He felt...something. He wasn't sure what. He took that as a sign that he must have managed something, so he exerted every ounce of will he could muster to force the universe to bend to his will, to defy gravity and pull the ring up from that spectral hand.

Behind his mind, he felt something *push*, gathering up his will and scooping it up with it as it went, then it projected outside of himself like a palpable wave of force.

The ring shuddered. Then it skittered slightly, and then, it lifted up from where it had been. It seemed to shudder in the air, unsure of itself, and then Jason *yanked* with all the force he could exert.

The ring shuddered, and then zipped across the empty space towards him. He let go of his fist and raised his hand, and caught it before it hit him in the nose.

He was dizzy. He wobbled on his feet, then dropped down to one knee, panting heavily. God, that was like, like trying to move a train by pushing it with his head! For a moment, he had no idea what had happened, until he realized that he was holding something in his left hand. He opened it and looked, and saw that he was holding the dukal ring of the house of Karinne.

He did it! He really *was* telekinetic!

"Well. Well, well, well, well, well," Dahnai Merrane murmured, leaning back and half-sitting on the edge of her desk as she gave Jason a curious look, crossing her arms under her breasts. The look the women behind him gave him was like he was a rampaging rhino about to charge through the room at any moment. "I'd have to say congratulations, *Grand Duke Karinne*," she said grandly, then she

reached behind her and pressed a button on the face of her desk.

“Your Majesty, I must protest this!” Maeri Trillane said shrilly. “Just because he’s telekinetic doesn’t prove he’s really a Karinne! How can he be, for Trelle’s sake, he’s a *Terran*!”

“Terrans and Faey can breed, Maeri,” Dahnai said dismissively. “I find his claim has merit. He’s proved it to my satisfaction. Hell, I actually *believe* it.”

“This is ludicrous!” Maeri Trillane snapped.

“He *did* move the ring,” one of the others said, with a bit of surprise in her voice. “That was no trick. He’s telekinetic. I think I’d have to agree with her Majesty on this one. That circumstantial evidence backed up with a documented Karinne ability does give him a solid claim. I think he really is a son of Karinne.”

“Push off, Semoya!” Maeri snapped. “This is ridiculous! Handing this, *creature* a noble charter just because he’s telekinetic!”

“Excuse me?” the Empress said archly.

“With all due respect, your Majesty, but I must protest! There are no more Karinnes! The line is dead!”

“They never found all the Karinnes, Maeri. That’s why the banner is still up. Until we can prove that the entire Karinne family has been destroyed, there is *still* a house of Karinne. You think this Terran just dug up some history and used it to pull a crazy stunt, but I disagree. He has a Karinne ship. He has the ring. He’s a fucking *telekinetic*. He really is a Karinne. He was just smart enough to piece it all together.”

“But your Majesty, if you follow through with this insanity, it’s going to cost us *billions*! And it’s going to disrupt food supplies for years! He can’t possibly meet the conditions of the contract!”

“Oh, I think you’ve made up those billions elsewhere, Maeri,” Dahnai said caustically, reaching behind herself, to her desk, and picking up a handpanel. “You know, after the first claims the Terran made about slaving went public, I sat down and looked through your records. I find it strange that you keep drafting thousands and thousands of Terrans to work on the farms, yet by my math, you’ve already overstaffed every farm on Terra by at least double. You can’t have a thousand people working on every farm on the planet, Maeri, hell, they’d trample all the crops just trying to work the fields. So, I’m starting to wonder where you’re putting them all. I think I might need to go have a look and see if you’re stapling them to the ceilings of their dorms on the farms or something.”

Maeri Trillane got very, very quiet, then she coughed. “We’ve been opening new farms, and they have to be manned,” she finally answered.

“Right. Well, then, there’s also all these strange visits I’m seeing in the control logs by non-Faey freighters. I seem to recall a provision of your contract stating that all food had to be brought through *Draconis*. If you’re not putting food on those cargo ships, just *what* are you loading on them? Or, perhaps, I should ask, what are you taking *off* of them?”

“It’s a private house matter, your Majesty,” she said delicately.

“I’m so sure,” she said acidly. “Then maybe you’d like to explain why the last high-detail scan of Terra shows that it’s lost .00354% of its total mass? I checked the tonnage of total food shipped against supply invoices, and from what I’ve worked out, the mass variance should be .0000117% *heavier*. I don’t think that mass vanished into hyperspace. Care to explain why the planet seems to have gotten a bit *lighter* since Trillane took over the planet, seeing as how you’ve brought a hell of a lot more mass onto the planet with your supplies and equipment than you’ve taken off with food?”

“Perhaps your ships haven’t calibrated their sensors lately?”

“I should order a diagnostic,” she said with amazing dark humor. “And there’s this one other little matter I’m sure you’d like to explain, since you’re here and you suddenly seem so concerned about Terra, since you’re one declaration away from losing it. There’s been a strange loss of records concerning several thousand Terrans. My auditors can’t quite explain where those records are going. Seems they’re right there in the Imperial Bureau of Taxation one moment, then poof, they vanish like

smoke. Well, they started trying to cross-check those records with Terran records, and well, what do you know, *those* records vanished too! It seems awfully strange to me that all Imperial records of quite a few Terrans just seem to be getting up and walking out of their computer storage space. And then there's these records here," she said, touching the handpanel. "In one day, 18,394 Terrans all died of, and let me quote, 'natural causes due to advanced age.' That's certainly believable, until you look closer and see that every one of them wasn't over the age of 25. I had no idea that Terrans had such a short life span. Demir's sword, Grand Duke Karinne, you're practically an old man by Trillane reckoning. Well, Grand Duchess Trillane, since you're here, perhaps you'd like to explain these little irregularities in your records?"

"I cannot be expected to be aware of every little nuance of Trillane records, your Majesty, any more than you should be expected to be aware of every nuance of Merrane records," she explained loftily.

Dahnai Merrane clapped her hands. "Well, then! Seems like I just cleared my schedule, so why don't you trot those nobles that *do* have that nuanced memory of your records over here and let's have a little sit-down with my auditors from the Bureau," she said. "There seems to be some issues of unpaid taxes here, and you *know* how much the Bureau hates to see a single Imperial credit slip through their fingers."

"I would have to recall them from Terra, your Majesty," she said quickly.

"Ah, yes, that's true. And I'm sure they'll all die tragically in a terrible shuttle explosion en route," she said with a flat, cold look at the older woman. "So, I think I'll send a unit of auditors to Terra and have them start digging."

"That would disrupt our farming effort, your Majesty!" Maeri protested.

"Riiiiight," she drawled. "Wanna know a secret, Maeri? I was willing to look the other way and let you play your little profit margin games over there with the illegal mining, native species poaching, and the water smuggling, but you crossed the line when you started selling off Terrans to the slave markets of Chezaa. The Imperium will not tolerate a house engaged in *slavery*."

"That's a slanderous lie!" she snapped.

"Yes, and you'll stick with that line, won't you?" Dahnai noted. "You did a good job of making sure I couldn't find any evidence to present to the *Siann* that would make you waddle on back to Arctus to fetch your charter. You may be getting on in years, but you're still a sly and slick old vulpar. So, since I can't *officially* punish you, I think I'll take a big bite out of your ass *unofficially*. As soon as a certain someone says something to me," she said, looking directly at Jason.

If it wouldn't get him killed, he would have run over there and kissed that woman solidly on the mouth. She *knew*! She knew it all, and *she was taking his side*! He couldn't have dreamed for a better outcome than this! "Your Majesty, I claim first rights to Terra," he declared. "The Karinnes have been living on the planet for over a thousand years. We discovered it first. We have the right to the contract."

"And so you do," she said with a graceful nod. "We recognize your claim. The contract with Trillane is immediately withdrawn, and awarded instead to the House Karinne."

"This is an outrage!" Maeri Trillane shouted.

"You'd better put your temper back in its cage, *Maeri*," Dahnai said hotly, standing up as her eyes blazed, "or I'll send *you* to the gallows right here and now!"

Maeri Merrane looked about ready to lay an egg, but then she took a cleansing breath and put her hand back in her sleeves. "I meant no offense, your Majesty," she said with barely contained insincerity.

In that moment, a truth opened itself to Jason's eyes. The Imperium was not anywhere near as stable as he once believed. Seeing the open hostility between Maeri Trillane and Empress Dahnai showed him that the Imperium was little more than a powder keg waiting for a match.

"Sure you didn't," she said with vast sarcasm. "Now that I have your narrow little ass right where I want it, I want you to know that I know *everything*. I'd be happy to give you a detailed list of all the

illegal activities your house has been up to over there on Terra, and you're not gonna just waltz off the planet, breaking anything and everything on your way to the door, and expect to walk away with nothing but a revoked contract and a bank account on Moridon stuffed to the ceiling with credits. You're going to *pay back* every credit, and I mean *every* credit, of the value of everything your house stripped off Terra. If you don't, I'll yank your charter so fast you won't know who fucked you, because I have plenty of *unofficial* evidence of what you've been up to, and I'm sure that maybe Semoya or Stera might be interested in some of the deals you've been making to hamstring *them* on your way to sticking your bony ass in *my* chair. They're not going to side with you against me over this, not with the dirt I have on you. You won't just gang up on me like usual and deny it this time, playing the wall of silence game. All I have to do is walk back down to court and start putting some data sticks up on the big board, then I'll pull out my pointer and start explaining how House Trillane would have done House Trefani proud with some of the scams they were running on Terra. Then I'll just order the Imperial Navy to start opening fire on anything and everything that doesn't have an Imperial crest painted on it.

"I've been waiting for this moment, bitch. I've been waiting a *long* time for it, cause you're not squirming out of the snare this time. There's five *squadrons* of Imperial Naval vessels en route to Terra right now, and they're packed tits to backbones with three *battalions* of Marines, and those Marines will have orders to watch everything Trillane does like a hawk while you pick up what's left of your operation and limp back to Arctus. At least what that spunky little commoner woman left you, anyway, after she chewed you up and spit you out. We're gonna be so far up your ass while you withdraw from Terra that we'll see every speck of food on your forks while you're eating. If we see so much as a dinner plate out of place in the poorest shack in the most remote corner of Terra, I'm gonna take your charter and ram it down your throat. Do you understand?"

Maeri Trillane gave Dahnai a cold look.

"I'd better hear that squeaky little voice of yours saying four words before I can raise my hand and snap my fingers, Maeri," she warned in a cold, ominous voice.

The three guards in the room raised their right hands in unison, and forearm-mounted autocannons extended out of the vambraces of them. All three of them pointed those weapons at Maeri Merrane.

"I understand, your Majesty," Maeri said in a low, ugly tone, almost a whisper.

"Good. Now, when you get back to your mansion, expect to find a *very* stiff bill sitting on your desk, straight from my desk. And you will pay it. *All* of it. You will pay it by close of business tomorrow afternoon, and you will pay it in *one lump sum*. If you don't, I'll revoke your charter and declare Trillane a renegade house, and the other Highborns are *not* going to bail you out this time by blocking me. If they try to turn the other way after what I show the Minor Houses, they'd probably lynch you right in the audience chamber. You're going to quietly slink away without objecting to the loss of the contract, and you're gonna do everything I tell you to do, or I'll turn Arctus into another Karis, and believe me, bitch, I'll push the button *personally* and laugh while the bombs fall. I'm sure the Jakkans would be interested in buying Arctus after we turn it into radioactive slag. May as well make some profit out of it, you know. After all, that's all you seem to be interested in."

Jason was a bit lost here, but he realized that Empress Dahnai had been ready for this. She'd been *waiting* for it. She'd known everything that was going on back on Earth, and clearly, she'd been waiting to intervene so she could inflict maximum damage on the Trillanes by doing so. She was going to recognize him as a Karinne no matter what, so she could put this Trillane woman in a political headlock! Holy God above, the Empress had this all *planned*! Had she talked to Zaa? Did the Kimdori warn her what he was going to do, and let her use it for her own goals? It was possible. There was a Kimdori ambassador to the Imperium here in the palace, and Zaa could communicate with that ambassador in real time.

Maeri Trillane glared at Empress Dahnai, but she didn't say anything or send anything.

"Now get out of my house, Maeri. You are officially banished from the palace. Show up at my

gate again, and I'll have my guards skin you, and I'll use your scabby hide as a new rug for my bedroom. I don't want to see you again. *Ever.*"

"Maeri Trillane," Jason said in a calm voice, turning around to regard eleven rather startled and nervous Faey nobles. He singled out Maeri with his eyes, stepped up to her, reared back, balled his fist, and punched Maeri Trillane dead in the jaw. She made no move to defend herself, and after his fist cracked quite satisfactorily against her cheek, she crumpled like a rag doll, splaying to the floor. She lay there for a moment as the other ten members of the highborn houses looked on in shock and amazement, then blinked and looked up from the floor as blood oozed from her mouth, putting a hand to her broken cheekbone delicately. "That's a little goodbye present from my people, you bitch!"

"You...*hit* me!" she gasped, then her eyes flared in fury. "How *dare* you touch a Highborn, you filthy *mongrel*!" She struck back at him, not with her hands or her feet, but with her talent. The full force of her mind crashed into him like an avalanche, showing that Maeri Trillane was no slouch, was quite a strong telepath, but he found he could stand against the storm she raged against him without faltering. Her attack hammered against his mental defenses for a long moment as the mind reckoned time in the telepathic realm, reaching out and around, trying to find a weakness in his defense, but it could find nothing. Jason felt the gestalt push behind his own mind, adding to his strength and giving him more than enough power to stand unmoved by the force of her mind.

"I hope you have more than that," Jason told her with narrow, dangerous eyes. "If you don't, you just put yourself in a *world* of shit."

"That's enough of that," Dahnai called. Jason had to actively stop himself from killing the whore, clenching a shaking fist and looking like he was about to disobey a direct order from the Empress, but then he took a step back. "Well, Maeri, think he's lying when he says he's a Karinne *now*? You just got your ass kicked by a *boy*. He brushed you off like a bug. Do you really want it known you were bitchslapped by a commoner Terran, or you were bitchslapped by the Grand Duke Karinne?"

Jason had to admire Dahnai's ability to kick someone when they were down. To an arrogant snobby bitch like this woman, that was so many insults on so many levels that Jason lost count. "Get her out of here, and get out," Dahnai said to the other ten, who had stood utterly silent through the entire affair, but Jason had no doubt they were sending privately to each other. "Not you, Terran. Stay," she said as Jason turned to bow. "We have a couple of matters to discuss before I take you back to audience and have you swear fealty."

He nodded and stood there as the others filed out, not looking back. That left him alone with the Empress of the Imperium, Dahnai Merrane, and her three guards, who had retracted their weapons and returned to their silent vigil over their ruler. "Well, that was fun," she giggled, looking to one of her guards. The guard nodded and turned her head towards the door through which Dahnai had entered. "I'm sure you're both a little nervous and very relieved right now. After all, I just did your dirty work and kicked Trillane off Terra. Well, I should be the one thanking *you*, really. I've been looking forward to doing that for *years*, and thanks to you, I just hung Maeri Trillane's narrow ass out to dry."

"I'm a little confused, your Majesty," he said honestly. "You knew all along?"

"Of course I did, but there wasn't much I could do about it," she told him. "And please, call me Dahnai. I hate being called *your majesty* when it's unofficial, like now." She walked past him to the chairs, then flopped down in one of them in a rather un-ladylike fashion, raising her feet and putting them up on the coffee table. "Have a seat, Jason. Oh, toss that thing over on the couch," she added, pointing at the crown.

He picked up her crown, and instead of throwing it, he rather carefully set it on the coffee table, which made her laugh. "You won't break it, it's made of vanidrium," she told him. "Sit, sit!"

He wasn't sure what to make of her. She was being very, well, *nice*, and he had no idea why.

"Relax, I'm not going to bite you," she told him, leaning over onto one of the arms of the chair and looking over at him. "I'm not what you expected, am I? You had this idea of what was going to happen and had this idea of me all built up in your mind, and now you're finding out that reality isn't

quite what you imagined, is it?"

He shook his head mutely.

"Well, you could say *thank you*, you know," she said coquettishly.

"Th—Thank you, Empress Dahnai," he said sincerely. "You saved my people."

"*Bullshit* I saved them," she said with a sigh. "I shoulda stepped on Maeri before we even knew Terra was there, but she's a damned crafty old bitch. She's always been just out of my reach, keeping out of my hands by hiding behind the robes of the other members of the Highborn Council. She always had just enough support to slip out of any punishment. Until *today*, that is."

"May I ask a question, your Majesty?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"You knew about all of this, didn't you? All of what Trillane did, and you knew I was coming here, didn't you?"

"Sure did," she said with a nod. "The Kimdori have been keeping me up to speed. They brought most of the information I'm using to blackmail Maeri to me. I'm not sure why, though, it's not like them to get involved in the affairs of others without being paid. I'll have to look into that, I suppose," she said, tousling her bronze hair absently.

"What did you have on them?"

"Theft, and a hell of a lot of it. They were stealing Terra blind. They were also setting up, using Terra as an out-of-sight staging ground to build up their military and get it ready. Mainly, they were channeling weapons and military hardware through Terra, taking delivery and then shipping it elsewhere, but the main thing I have them on is stealing."

"Stealing? Didn't they have ownership?"

"They had a *contract*," she said distinctly. "The planet belongs to the *Imperium*, Jason, not Trillane. What they were doing was basically stripping the planet of anything valuable they thought they could get away with stealing. I was keeping track of everything they took and I was gonna nail them with a fine at the end of the fiscal cycle, but when they started slaving and kidnapping Terrans, that was it. That was when I sent in the Kimdori, to find out what the hell was going on over there, find out *everything* in the way only a Kimdori can. What they dug up for me almost made me throw up. I had to get rid of them, but it's not *easy* to get rid of Maeri Trillane."

"Why were they building up?"

"To try to take my throne, that's why," she said bluntly. "Right now, babes, the four biggest Highborn houses all have plots underway to hamstring the other three houses and take the throne from Merrane. They were in the first stages of *executing* that plan. The others talk about it, plan for it, but Trillane was about to *do* it. They were raping Terra to raise the cash they needed to arm without it appearing on the books anywhere, doing it under the table. But the biggest issue, babes, was that they were kidnapping Terrans of suitable age and conscripting them. That's where a *hell* of a lot of your people went, babes. *Millions* of them. They're on Uruma, now loyal little lapdogs to Trillane and ready to fight for the house. The Urumi have the slimy hands in this too, they're still pissed off over what happened in the Third Civil War. Trillane's been kidnapping fit Terrans and shipping them to Uruma, where they've been training them to be soldiers after using talent to make them more, tractable. Humans are vulnerable to talent, hon, and the Trillanes were using that for everything it was worth, by reprogramming your people to turn them into soldiers for their house.

"That's what I had to stop, before they got enough to try to start a fourth Civil War and take the throne."

"My God," Jason breathed. That's what Kiaari meant when she said that what Trillane was doing was far beyond what he knew.

"Yeah. It was serious. But Maeri was very careful, and she did very well to fix it so I don't have any *real* evidence to present to the Highborns, just intel gathered by the Kimdori, which isn't the kind of evidence I can use in an official matter. So, I had to get her through the back door."

“What, what’s going to happen to my people?”

“I really don’t know, hon,” she answered honestly. “The Urumi have them on their planet. I can try to get the back, but I’ll be honest. I don’t know if I can.”

He nodded soberly.

“I feel sorry for them. The Trillanes didn’t care about your people, babes, not a bit. They were going to be nothing but gun fodder, but numbers are numbers, and numbers matter. They were going to use them as disposable troops when they made their gamble for the throne. Trillane has the largest house military of the *Siann*, and lots and lots of military starships, and thanks to them kidnapping Terrans, they would have been able to put a sizable army on a planet’s surface. They’d have a good chance of actually winning if they attacked out of the blue, without the usual forms and customs used when houses went to war with each other. But right about now, about a hundred or so Imperial battle cruisers are coming through the stargate to Terra, enough to blast the fleet Trillane has there to Andromeda and back. Oh, and I sent three squadrons to Arctus, complete with a command ship, where the Trillane leadership on Arctus can see that I’m just *waiting* for them to either declare war or declare independence, in case Maeri gets any funny ideas about refusing to pay that fine. They may want this throne, but today they learned that I *know* they want it, and I’m *ready* for them to try to take it from me. Thanks to you and the Kimdori, I broke up their plan before they could get it into motion. I’m a bit surprised you did it this way, that you’re a Karinne and all, but even before this happened, I knew you’d come up with something that would eventually allow me to intervene, or Myleena would capture you and let me put the plan I had into action. And I was waiting for it, I had all this planned out. And when I could intervene without the rest of the Highborn closing ranks around the Trillanes, I could snap the trap shut on Maeri’s foot and catch her.”

Jason leaned back in his chair, a bit overwhelmed. The Empress had *used* him, used him as a lever in her own plans. What was it Miaari told him? Plans whirl and revolve around him? Hell, was that more than right. The Kimdori were using him to advance their goals, the Empress was using him, the Trillanes were using him. He felt like a two-bit whore, gangbanged by everyone on the block.

“You sent Myleena!” he gasped in realization.

“You bet your ass I did. *Personally*. She had very strict orders to *look* like she was trying to stop you, but her real orders were to *capture* you, to further *my* plan, because I needed you here. I needed you here on Draconis and in Imperial custody, so I could use you as a club against Maeri by interrogating you and publicly learning enough about Trillane’s activities to step in without the Highborns interfering. But then, after Myleena finally stopped sitting on her ass and pinned you down, I got a visit from the Kimdori ambassador to the Imperium. It seemed that the Kimdori were up to something, and they asked me to back off and let them borrow you for a while, but what they wanted you for was going to help me with my Trillane problem. I’ve never heard of the Kimdori doing that before, and it got me curious. They promised to give you back when they were done, so I agreed. I guess they’re done with you now,” she said, glancing at him. “Anyway, I told Myleena to look the other way and let you escape, help you if she could, but not get involved, because the Kimdori already had a plan for you and it couldn’t look like you were getting outside help. And you didn’t let me down. As soon as I had Myleena make up that bullshit about shipping you off to Makan, you didn’t waste any time at all. They said you were smart, but rigging a gurney so it’d fly? That’s fuckin’ *awesome*, babes. Anyway, you vanish, then reappear a few days later in a Karinne ship, claiming to be the long-lost descendent of Grand Duchess Karinne. Did the Kimdori do that for you?”

“They pointed me in the right direction, your Ma—er, Empress Dahnai,” he admitted. “They knew I’m a Karinne, somehow. I really *am* a Karinne, that wasn’t a lie. I think they knew the Karinnes landed on Terra, and just never told anyone. They smacked me on the butt and got me started. I had to get the rest of the way myself. I found the ship, and I found the ring. I was going on clues the Kimdori gave me, but I had to do the work on my own.”

“The Kimdori know too damn much they never tell anyone,” Dahnai said sourly. “Anyway, let me

be the first to say congratulations, *your grace*,” she said pointedly, reaching over her chair towards him with her bare hand. “Welcome to the *Siann*. ”

“I’m not happy to be here, your Majesty,” he sighed. “But it got Trillane off Earth, and that’s all I cared about. I’ll live with this duty if it keeps my people safe and well treated.” He reached over and took her hand, and she shook it casually. “What would you have done if I couldn’t move the ring?” he asked curiously. “If you don’t mind my asking. I mean, if you had this planned out, to make me a Karinne so you could trap Maeri Trillane, well, what would you have done if I couldn’t move the ring”

She looked around, then gave him a cheeky grin. “Watch.” She looked at the crown on the coffee table, and then, to Jason’s shock, it rose off the table! It spun lazily in the air, and then drifted over to her desk and then dropped down gently. “You’re not the only telekinetic on Draconis, and the *Siann* doesn’t know I can do that,” she winked. “It’s a state secret, so you’re now honor-bound to keep that to yourself. I was gonna make *damn* sure you managed it, even if I had to do it for you.”

Jason gave her a surprised look, then he had to laugh. “That’s the *real* reason you brought us in here!”

“Yeah, so I didn’t have to do that in front of everyone,” she admitted. “Remind me to give you some lessons later. It’s always hardest the first time, and given how fast that ring moved, I think you have some pretty strong telekinetic ability. So, think you can work with me, Jason? I’m not that hard of a boss. Just follow the rules, and we’ll both be happy.”

“You’re not what I expected.”

“Good. That means I’m keeping those other bitches off guard.”

“I guess so, but truth be told, so far I like what I see, and I’m already in debt to you. I expected this regal, distant woman that didn’t really care about me or my problems would kinda lord from on high and proclaim that I was a Karinne, then take Earth away from Trillane. I didn’t expect to see you in a verbal arm-wrestling match with the Trillane woman, and I didn’t expect you to be so, well....”

“What?”

“Young,” he told her. “And pretty.”

“Aww, you’re sweet,” she told him with a smile.

“And I didn’t expect you to really *care* about what was going on back home. You’ve saved my people a lot of hardship. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Nah, it was nothing. We helped each other, Jason. Thanks to you, I got my claws into Maeri Trillane, and now I get to dig in my nails and make her squeal like a *chabi*, and I’ve been itching to do that for *years*. I hate that arrogant bitch.”

“So do I.”

“See? Not only do we help each other, we have the same tastes. I think I could even get to like you.”

“Me too.”

“Well, that’s the best kind of partnership there is.” She reached over and patted his arm. “So, can I consider you an ally to the throne?”

“I’m not a fan of the Imperium, Empress. I object to it. I think it’s a terrible idea and it doesn’t work. But when you need my support, it’s yours. I owe you too much to deny that to you.”

“Fair enough. Now, let’s talk about that contract. I can think of a couple of good houses you might want to approach.”

“What about Merrane?”

“You can’t go to Merrane,” she told him. “Merrane can’t take this kind of contract, because it’s the ruling house. It’s part of the rules of *Siann*. You want to go to one of the smaller Highborn houses. I think your best bet is Surrane. Anya Surrane would kill for the Terran contract, they have the infrastructure to handle it, and they’re nice and safely allied to us. If you take your contract to the Shovalles or the Enalles or the Zevannes, they’ll just try what Trillane did, and use it as a springboard for their own plans. Yeah, definitely the Surrane. I’ll have to introduce you to Anya so the two of you

can talk over the terms. We can do that later.”

“Why not now?”

“Because right now, you and me are going back into the audience chamber. I’m going to proclaim that you’ve proved you truly are the the son of Karinne, and I’m going to install you as the Grand Duke Karinne. Then you swear fealty to me, I give you back your ring, and I give you a copy of the *Siann* Charter. Those are the symbolic representations of your nobility, so don’t lose them.”

“I won’t,” he told her. “Empress?”

“Yah?”

“Thank you.”

She looked at him, then she smiled gloriously at him. *That’s all I wanted to hear, babes, she sent to him. A sincere thank you, from the heart. It was my pleasure, believe me. Now, let’s get back in there. Oh, and Jason.*

Yes, Empress?

You can send to me whenever you want. Just do it privately. I don’t send publicly except in certain circumstances in a public setting, it’s a matter of custom. That’s why we always speak in court, and we were speaking here. I’m kinda used to it. I don’t really send much, except to my friends, and I do it privately.

Oh, alright. Wait a minute.

That’s right, she winked. I’m calling you a friend. I do like you, Jason. I like you a lot. You’re a breath of fresh air in this fucking cheese factory. You’re really cute, you’re smart, you have a sense of humor, you’re very sincere, and you truly care about the people whose welfare you’re about to officially take responsibility for. That’s such a rare thing in this place, where the nobles only care about what’s in it for them. When you told me in court that you were willing to die if that’s what it took to help your people, and I could see that you really meant it, it really touched me. You were ready to embrace the Martyr’s Gambit in every sense of the term. You’re a special man, and that commoner you married is a damn lucky woman to have you for a husband. I’d like to get to know someone like you, and be his friend. If you don’t mind, that is.

Wow, I don’t know what to say.

Say yes, she said with a smile, standing up and holding her hand out to him.

Yes to what?

Just yes.

Without knowing what I’m agreeing to? I may be naïve as Faey rate it, but I’m not an idiot, Empress.

She laughed. Well said. Congratulations, you passed your first test. Now let’s go introduce you to the rest of the snakes in your new pit.

I hope to God I don’t get to know them.

Damn, you really are smart.

And so, on Vesta, 34 Demaa, in the year 4395, late in the afternoon of a memorable late summer day, the House of Karinne was again a part of the *Siann*.

The ceremony was picked up by cameras in court and broadcast live on *Courtwatch*, a Faey version of the old C-Span network from Earth. The Imperium watched as the white-gowned Empress Dahnai took the oath of fealty from the rogue human, Jason Augustus Fox Shaddale, who turned out to be the long-lost descendent of the legendary, almost mythical House Karinne, even going so far as to wear the face ornament for which the Karinnes had been famous...or, more to the point, infamous. He was installed as the Grand Duke Karinne, and was offered a dukal ring and a copy of the *Siann* Charter. Empress Dahnai grabbed his shoulders, kissed him on each cheek, then turned him around and announced in a booming voice that the House of Karinne was restored to the *Siann*, and had all the rights, duties, and responsibilities afforded to a Minor House.

The applause was muted. *Courtwatch* couldn't pick it up on cameras and microphones, but a dark revelation had already passed through the nobles, and that was that the Empress had ferreted out some kind of serious illegal activity perpetrated by the Trillanes, and had stamped it out. They weren't quite sure why the Empress hadn't taken Trillane's charter over it, probably because of interference by the other Highborn houses, but they knew that the Grand Duchess Trillane had been escorted out of the palace by ten Imperial Guards, and had been publicly and loudly warned that she would forfeit her life if she set a single foot on the Imperial palace grounds. So, it was pretty damn serious.

Courtwatch got a good closeup up of Jason Karinne, the new *Terran* Grand Duke of the House of Karinne, and the announcer noticed immediately that he looked both rather nervous, and also a little pensive. He obviously did not want to be there. But if it was because of the newness of being in the public eye, or the serious duties he was about to take up, the announcer wasn't sure. Perhaps, she speculated, it was a little bit of both.

For Jason, it was both the culmination of a hell of a lot of work, and a lament that his life would never be the same. He was an outsider here, he knew that, and really, he wanted it to stay that way. He *wanted* to be uncomfortable here, surrounded by Faey and being the outsider. He was a common man thrust into the world of the elite, a world he didn't want, and probably didn't want him.

But he knew that he'd better at least start thinking like something more than a common man. There was a frightening challenge standing in front of him now; he'd plotted to get into this position, to claim the ancestral house of Karinne to force Trillane off Earth, and he did it. He was the Grand Duke Karinne. Trillane had been kicked off Earth, and what was more, it seemed that Empress Dahnai had really nailed Maeli Trillane's ass to the wall, basically blackmailing her into making a *huge* cash payment to avoid having the Empress go public with what they'd been doing and yank their charter.

So...now what?

That was a *huge* question, and something Jason hadn't really considered all that much before getting here. Now, here he was, the leader of a noble house...but a noble house with all of 13 members so far, with more to come as soon as he offered the people of Legion a place within it. He had to run an entire planet now, populated by six *billion* people. God, the logistics off that was going to melt his brain. He was a tinkerer, a putterer, an adept of machines, not a politician, not someone with that kind of education or practical experience.

And it *was* his responsibility now. He had taken that burden when he decided on doing this, and there was no going back. That was what being a Grand Duke was about in the Faey system. It was his job now to run the house, any way he wanted to run it, and the lives and welfare of *six billion human beings* was now his responsibility. They would depend upon him to keep them safe, to give them an environment where they could live and prosper, and they were counting on him to do it right, and do it well.

Holy God, what a duty. He had to be nuts to take it upon himself willingly.

But he knew he didn't have to do it alone. The Grand Duchesses and Grand Dukes of the *Siann* certainly didn't do it alone. But he felt he was in a unique position here, because he was a house unto himself, and he had a chance here to build his house with good people, and not rely on dealing with family members that might not have any brains.

If he went that route, that is. He also had the option to take a minimalist approach, and basically let Earth run itself, by restoring all the old countries and reforming the United Nations. The countries would be countries again, but they could form a new United Nations that would act as the new world governing authority, an authority with *teeth*. He could pattern it after the American system, where he was the President, the assembly was the legislature, and the World Court would be the judiciary. Each country would be like a state, where it made its own rules, but it would still operate with some oversight from the United Nations. As little oversight as possible if Jason had his way, but there had to be some. That way, Earth could return to its original state, and they could all feel like they were back home again. Democracy wouldn't work everywhere on Earth, but at least those countries that had it

could go back to it, and other parts of Earth could adopt whatever government they pleased, so long as they didn't fight each other. There would never be another war on Earth where men fought men. Never again. He figured that between the people he could find he could trust and the U.N., he could manage to keep Earth running without too much worry. He guessed.

He didn't have to stumble in the dark, though. Empress Dahnai seemed nice enough, he might be able to ask her for some help on how to do this. And this Anya Suralle woman that Empress Dahnai said would be the best partner to help with the farming, well, if he could trust her enough to come to Earth, maybe he could ask her a few questions, get some advice.

He really wasn't sure about any of this, though. He was way out of his league, way out of his element, tossed into a shark-infested ocean, and he knew he'd better learn how to swim *real* damn fast, or he'd have the shortest-lived tenure as a Grand Duke in Imperial history.

He looked around, at all the Faey nobles, in their perfect robes and gowns and their glittering jewelry, and he knew he'd never be one of them...and that revelation actually brought him comfort. They kept looking over at him, and just about every look they gave was *predatory*, like he was a lamb led in on a leash for their dining leisure.

Well, they'd better get their looks at him now. After he finished up here and went home, he never wanted to come back here again. He knew he'd have to return from time to time, but they would be *very* short visits. The rules of *Siann* didn't require him to be here or to attend court. Court was just a tradition, where nobles could gather and plot against each other, that was all. He might have to come back to Draconis to deal with house issues, but he would never return to court again. He basically wanted to have this unwanted ten minutes of fame, with their looks and the cameras focused on him, and then quickly fade away to quiet obscurity.

He didn't want this job. It wasn't something that he wanted, but in the end, he just couldn't trust anyone else to do this. Besides, he *was* a Karinne. He had a responsibility to that name and to Karis, and he had a responsibility to Cybi. He had to make things right, he had to restore Karis, and he had to guard the precious knowledge of the Karinnes, keeping it away from those who would abuse it, but be ready to carefully ration out that knowledge out if the need for it arose, such as his plan to release the technology of the Karinne replicators so the Imperium could feed itself. That, he felt, was a responsible use of Karinne technology that would not further the violent tendencies of this volatile race around which his life was now intimately entwined. He was now the gatekeeper for the knowledge of the Karinnes, taking up the age-old post once held by his Faey ancestors, to both be a part of the Imperium and be separate from it, disdaining their childish antics, but willing to assist when the need for him was truly there. He hated the Imperium, he hated it with a passion, but he couldn't deny his love for the *Faey*. They were part of him, they were part of his life. He could hate how they governed themselves, but he could accept them as the people that he knew they were.

Maybe, with some patience, his presence in their system might turn out to be a good thing. After all, he was now in a position to *change* what he saw was wrong with the Imperium. It wouldn't happen in his lifetime, but then again, the truly good things in life were things one was willing to commit a lifetime to achieve. With patience, careful words, luck, and more than a little hope, the Faey would finally realize the stupidity of their Imperium and abandon it for something much more sensible.

Maybe Terra would be a good example for them. He was the ruler of that planet now, and he could do anything with it he pleased. Well, his first act as Grand Duke Karinne was going to be to put things back at least partially the way they were. The Suralles were going to need workers on the farms, and Jason had to supply those workers...but it wouldn't be the death sentence the Trillanes made it out to be. People would work on farms in rotations, like a few months a year, and then go back to their own lives until their turn came again. But outside of that, he would show them that something other than the Imperium's system could *work*.

Well, that was his idea. He was going to have to sit down with Kumi and think about it, work something out. Kumi was really smart about stuff like that.

After an hour of standing quietly in the corner of the audience chamber, pondering the weighty matters at hand, it was over. And as she promised, Empress Dahnai invited him and Anya Suralle to her study.

At least getting the cooperation of the Suralles had been easy enough. He remembered seeing her from before, she was one of the eleven Highborn noble rulers. She was a short woman with jet black hair and narrow, almost waifish features, but she had a nice figure. She spoke in a shrill voice, but she was a nice enough lady. They sat down and talked about the contract, and just as Dahnai predicted, Anya fell all over herself trying to get it. With Dahnai looking on, privately sending to him on some finer points, basically guiding him through the process, they worked out an agreement that was mutually beneficial. Suralle would keep 80% of the profits, but they would shoulder the burden if a quota wasn't met, and they would also help the planet get on its feet, supply some technical expertise, restart schools, provide training in both farming and other job fields, and help the Karinnes do everything for the Terrans that Trillane was supposed to do. The Suralles would have no military forces anywhere on the planet, that was a stipulation. They were there as an ally, not as a conqueror. And watching everything, making sure that Terra was treated fairly, would be the Imperial Marines, who would replace Trillane as the primary law enforcement entity on the planet. They were Faey whose neutrality was above board, but the Marines would answer to *Jason* before they answered to the *Imperium*. They were still Imperial, they were just being temporarily deployed and put under his command until he could organize and train a military of his own. The presence of Marines on Terra would prevent any houses from thinking that Terra was a plum ready to be picked, for attacking the Marines would be a declaration of war against the Empress herself. No house was that crazy.

By sunset, Jason got the people of Earth the respect they deserved, put a military presence on and around the planet that would discourage any of the other houses from getting any bright ideas, worked out a mutually beneficial agreement with Suralle to take over the farming effort on the planet and help them rebuild and get the planet self-sufficient, and everyone was happy.

Everyone but the Trillanes.

Well, and Jason himself, a little. He was happy that things worked out, but he wasn't happy about the responsibilities that were now settled on his shoulders.

After meeting with Anya, Jason met the Kimdori ambassador, a very small Kimdori female with honey colored fur named Jinaami, and asked her to relay a message to Miaari to tell the others that everything had gone better than he'd expected, and they could return to Draconis. He made sure to warn Myleena that they were going to need some equipment to pick up what was left of his Nova, which was still sitting out on the lawn, being guarded by Marines to keep everyone away from it. Five minutes after giving her that message, a page ran up to him and handed him a note. It was from Jinaami, telling him that Miaari had replied, warning him that they wouldn't be there to get him for a few hours, that the *Scimitar's* engines were offline while Myleena and *her friends* repaired the battle damage. It also read that Jinaami had already informed both her and Denmother Zaa about his success, and she congratulated him on becoming the Grand Duke Karinne. After reading the note, realizing he really had nowhere else to go and a few hours to kill, he just wandered around the parts of the palace the guards allowed him to visit. He toured quite a few council rooms, the kitchen, where he grabbed a quick meal, a gym in the basement, an indoor *yara* playfield, and he also found a media center, that looked to be a hub for reporters, all of which looked at him like he was some kind of mouse when he looked in the door, and then he literally ran away before they could find a camera and chase him down.

It wasn't long after that that a servant approached him and told him that the Empress wished to see him, in her private quarters. The pre-teen Faey boy, who wore the Imperial livery, guided him through passages filled with nobles, servants, and workers, and then into a wing of the palace that had been blocked by guards, guards who had politely but firmly turned him away when he approached during his wanderings. He realized he was now in the private domain of Dahnai, her personal space, and was sure of it when he was led through a sitting room, through a study, and into the bedroom of the apartment.

It was a surprisingly spartan affair, and to his surprise, it was a little *messy*. Clothes were strewn on the floor and over a chair at the foot of a large bed whose headboard was on the left wall, and there was a desk wedged in a corner behind the bed. A video panel was on the right wall, so Dahnai could watch it while in bed, he reckoned, and past the panel, in the right corner, was a doorway with no door in it, an open archway. And even here, there were guards. There was a servant picking up clothes from the floor, who was being watched by two white-armored Imperial guards.

"I've brought the Grand Duke, your Majesty!" the boy called.

"I'm in here!" she shouted from the archway. "Come on in!"

Jason left the boy, who left the room, and made his way to the open passageway, then stopped dead and quickly turned around.

It was a bathroom, a very large bathroom with pearlescent tile on the wall and a soft blue tile on the floor. Dahnai Merrane was in there, seated quite sedately on the toilet, a handpanel in her hands as she read it. And the sound coming from under her made it apparent she wasn't just sitting there because it was comfortable. She was urinating.

"What's your problem?" she asked.

"You shoulda told me you were, you know, *busy*," he answered.

"Oh. Oh, I'm sorry. I'm so used to having people around me all the time, I guess I didn't think about it," she said with a wry chuckle. "Everywhere I go, there's always a guard or a servant. I can't even take a shit without spectators, and after a while, you just get kinda numb to it, ya know?"

"I guess," he said. "I don't think I could ever get used to it, though. Terrans are very private people."

"You'd be surprised what you can get used to," she grunted, then chuckled. "So, now that you know it doesn't bother me, turn around. I don't like talking to someone when I can't see their eyes. Trust me, Jason, I really don't care if you look. Hell, I *want* you to look. Faey like to be looked at, like to be appreciated, and I *am* Faey. Besides, if you saw my statue out in the receiving hall, there ain't nothing here you're gonna see that you haven't already seen, at five times scale."

Jason had to laugh at that, turning to look at her. "It was a very flattering statue."

"That's the *real* me, ya know?" she told him, quite proudly. "I was getting fat, because I sit so much. So I started working out, but then I really got into it, because it makes me look *hot*. I've got the hottest bod in Dracora, and I know it. I *want* people to look at it." She wadded up a handful of toilet paper and finished her business, then stood up and unbelted the thigh-length, very plain blue houserobe she was wearing, opening it to expose her belly...and the fact that she wore nothing under the robe, showing him not only a knotted belly, but a formidable bosom and a neatly trimmed triangle of bronze pubic hair. "Look at these abs," she said, patting her flat, washboard stomach. "Now *that's* a stomach. Nothing but muscle." She turned around and raised her robe to bare her backside, a very shapely, muscular backside. "And check out this ass. You won't find a tighter ass in Dracora. And see, my delts give me a much sexier silhouette, they really show off my waist, and I worked on my legs to give me more curve through my hips to make me look even better," she said, sliding a hand along her side, along her deltoid muscle, which did exaggerate the slimness of her waist quite admirably. Then she patted her hip, pointing out that she was curvaceous both above and below her waist. She turned back around and patted herself on the chest, just over her right breast. "My pecs really lift up and pronounce my tits, which, thank Trelle, graced me with a pretty good pair to start with. The muscle under them just makes them even better looking. I get some *awesome* cleavage when I wear the right robe or top."

Jason had to chuckle silently to himself. She may be Empress Dahnai Merrane, ruler of 72 star systems and the most powerful woman in the Imperium, but she was *all* Faey, to the roots of her hair. Both literally and figuratively. She was showing him that her title didn't change her core Faey personality, and part of that was a desire, almost a need, to be admired by the opposite sex. Just like a man who might lift weights to impress a girl, Dahnai had worked out to make herself the most physically attractive woman in Dracora, and he had to admit, she did one *hell* of a good job. She had

toned herself in all the right places and built muscle in all the right place to absolutely maximize her feminine beauty. In her case, her muscle truly did enhance her attractiveness. She was built like a brick house, and could probably punch like a bull, from the ripple in her biceps when she moved her arms.

Jason knew Faey, and he knew he had to both take her preening seriously, and also not read too much into it. She wasn't baiting him or luring him, she was just showing off, and that was something Faey girls loved to do for men. She wanted him to look at her because she wanted to hear him say that he thought she looked sexy. That was all it was about. Even if she had absolutely no interest in him at all, just knowing that he thought she was sexy would make her feel good about herself.

"I'm impressed," he said honestly. "You did a really good job. You're drop dead sexy, Empress."

"You're so sweet," she gushed, belting her robe. "So, now that you've finished everything up, I had a few things I wanted to ask you," she said in a more serious tone. "Come on, let's go sit down. Did you eat?"

"Yeah, I picked up something when I went through the kitchen."

"Good. I told them to accommodate you. I'm not sure where your ride home is, so I'll arrange a room for you over in the guest wing. But before you turn in for the night, I want to talk to you a little."

She took him to the living room, and sat him down on the couch. She sat down beside him, sliding her legs up daintily and putting an arm over the back, getting into a comfortable position half facing him. "Now then, Jason, I have to ask," she began, reaching out towards him. He didn't pull away when she put her fingers on his gestalt, but he did have the presence of mind to make it shut down when she started pulling. She pulled it off his head gently, raising it over his ear, then she took it in her hands and turned it over, then looked at him. "Is this a *real* gestalt, or just something you replicated to look the part?"

"What do you mean?" he asked carefully.

She chuckled. "I see it is. Jason, honey, there's three versions of things around here. There's what I *officially* know, there's what the *Siann* *thinks* I know, and there's what I *really* know. You saw an example of that today with the Trillanes, seeing all three versions at once. I'm not just a pretty face. I'm a history nut. It's my hobby, I love it. I've read my history, and what's more important, I have access to a more accurate version of history than most other people. The Karinnes had been running some pretty crazy experiments for years, trying to develop computers that could send, trying to break the machine-Faey telepathic barrier. They were fuckin' obsessed by it. They did have some successes, but they never worked exactly right. One of those near-misses was developed into the gestalts, machines that could understand very basic sending, you know, focused, basic thoughts of a couple of words, and translate it into commands. So, this is a real gestalt, isn't it? Too bad nothing in this room is set up for remote operation, I woulda loved to try it out," she mused, putting it on her own ear bravely, snuggling it down. "How do I look?"

"Like you're wearing something that belongs to me," he answered before he really thought about what he was saying.

"Oooo, an impertinant snap! How wonderful!" she said with a giggle. "Keep it up, honey, you're almost there!"

"Almost where?"

"Almost treating me like *Dahnai* instead of the *Empress*," she answered with a wink. She took the gestalt off and handed it back to him, and it made Jason a little wary. Clearly, the Imperium knew more about the Karinnes than the Karinnes knew, but they also didn't know everything. He was going to have to be very careful here. He was growing fond of this woman, but he wasn't going to tell her *anything* about the Karinnes. "So, you know about these, that's good. Did you find anything else interesting in the ship? The Karinnes had their own technology, you know. It was different from the Imperium at that time. Some historians think it was more advanced, that the Karinnes didn't share everything they discovered. I think they're right. That little fighter sitting out on the lawn was pretty

amazing, and it has to be, what, fifteen hundred years old?”

“The scout ship was stripped out when we found it,” he answered with complete honesty. “When the Karinnes abandoned it, they took everything, even some of the wall-mounted equipment. We had to put some of it back together to get it to where it would work.”

“You did? How did you fix it?”

“Well, Myleena’s pretty gifted,” he blurted. “With her help, we got it working again.”

“Ah, so *you’re* the one who kidnapped her!” she laughed. “She’s been missing for days!”

“I guess she has been,” Jason mused. “Can you kinda pull some strings? She didn’t come with us willingly at first. It wasn’t her fault.”

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t get into trouble,” Dahnai assured him with a grin. “So, does your Karinne ship run using these? Does it have any manual controls at all?” she asked, pointing at the gestalt he was putting back on his ear. “The histories that only the Empress can access, the old intelligence files, say that the Karinnes converted their entire system to run on the gestalts, that you couldn’t even open a door on Karis outside of the Academy without one. I must say, it’s one hell of a security measure,” she chuckled. “As long as they kept tight control of the gestalts, anyone snooping around couldn’t so much as get into a building without inside help.”

“I...I don’t think I’m going to answer that, Dahnai,” he said, after weighing the situation. He was sure that she knew that he knew a great deal about the truth of the Karinnes, so pretending ignorance about them wasn’t going to work. But, she didn’t know how much he knew, so he was going to have to walk a fine line, admitting to a small truth and hiding the much larger one. “When I found the ring, I also found some orders from the one who left it where I found it. She ordered whoever found it to silence, to never reveal what we discovered about the Karinnes, and I’m going to honor that wish. I’m very sorry, but I can’t tell you anything.”

“Not even if I order it?”

He shook his head. “I like you, I really do, but this is a matter of principle. I haven’t even told my *wife* about some of what I’ve found, because the woman who held this ring before me commanded me not to. I may have consigned myself to live in your system, but I’m not betraying my honor or my values, even if you order me to.”

She gave him a stern look, then she laughed. “Fair enough,” she told him. “I think you were a good choice as the new Grand Duke Karinne. I think you really understand things, better than I thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think you know what I mean,” she winked.

How much did she know? If she was really as well versed in *real* history as she claimed, she probably knew a lot more than most others about the Karinnes, but clearly, she didn’t know everything. And he could see some lively times in his future dealing with her, because she clearly knew that he *did* know more than he let on, before he had made that declaration, and she wanted to know herself. He just hoped she wouldn’t be as tenacious as Jyslin was. Good God, Jyslin had been a pit bull, sinking her teeth into him and refusing to let go once he piqued her curiosity.

She just gave him that same mysterious smile, raising her hand from the back of the couch and waving it towards him. A handpanel appeared in his vision, floating in the air, and it floated over to him. He took it, again in wonder at Empress Dahnai’s amazing ability. She made it look so easy, and he remembered how hard it had been for him! “Read that.”

He did so. It was a schedule, the schedule of the Empress At Court, the times when she held open court. There was one every five days, held for at least three hours, which was by custom. But she also held other courts, usually to debate matters of policy or law with the *Siann*, or for official functions.

“That’s my schedule for the next two months. I expect you to be here for every one of those courts.”

“Be here? But I have—“

“I know you have a lot to do, but you’re not going to get yourself situated as someone who knows

what's going on and someone the others better not fuck with if you're not here to show them," she told him. "Consider this an order, honey. You *will* be here for every open court. You don't have to say a word, just stand in the corner like you did earlier today. Just lose that look, like you were a *tabaxi* caught in the headlights of a hovercar," she said with a smile and a wink. "You're gonna need to rent a house or something in town, though. It can get tiring traveling back and forth. The others in the *Siann* keep a residence in Dracora, you should too. Oh, and keep your schedule loose. I'm gonna teach you how to use your *other* little trick."

"You are?"

She nodded. "You already know my dirty little secret, and it'll give me all sorts of private time to wear you down and find out the truth," she winked.

Nope. She was just as bad as Jyslin. Probably even worse. He could see some real barnburners in his future dealing with this woman.

"I meant to ask. If it's a secret, why did you do it, you know," he hedged, his eyes glancing at the guard in the corner, who quietly and inobtrusively defended the Empress, even in her own apartment.

"The guards know more about me than anyone," she chuckled. "And their silence and loyalty are beyond reproach. After all, they're around me all the time. Sometimes I forget they're even there, and that's the way they like it. If I don't know they're there, then they're doing their job by defending my person without interfering with me or my personal life. They're with me all the time, except for one thing."

"What?"

"I refuse to have sex with an audience watching," she stated, looking at the guards. "When I bring a man in here to get some, they leave. It's the biggest thing I feel I should have the privacy to do without guards watching. We've had that little argument in the past, and it's the only thing I've ever been able to win on," she said with a grunt. "If I wasn't so much larger and stronger than most men, I doubt they'd even have given over on that. I think they feel that if I'm one on one against a naked man, I'll win. Not only is my talent stronger, but the guards have taught me how to throw a mean right hook. They trained me to fight hand to hand. These muscles do more than make me look hot."

That guard over in the corner. Jason was looking at her while Dahnai was talking, and her stony, sober face cracked a slight smile.

"Show him, Ynara," Dahnai called, looking at the guard that had smiled.

The woman in the corner, she stepped forward to the couch, then she raised her chin. Under her chin, across her throat, was a dark scar.

"That's the commitment the Imperial Guards take, Jason. They have their vocal chords surgically removed. That is the vow of silence, the oath to keep the privacy and secrets of the Empress to themselves. I know it doesn't mean much to a Faey, since she can always send, but it's a tradition that goes back to the formation of the Imperium. And it's a *lifetime* commitment. When a woman becomes an Imperial Guard, the only way out of the order is death. They serve as long as they think they're fit for the duty, and when they're ready to retire, they take up residence here in the palace, in their own wing, known as the Pensioner's Wing. I go visit them from time to time. Real funny group of old ladies."

"Hold on, one of those guards spoke to me when they brought me here."

"That was a trainee," she answered. "They don't have the same duties as the other guards. If she passes her training, she takes the vow."

"Oh."

Ynara nodded, then returned to her place in the corner.

"You get used to them. You really have no choice," Dahnai chuckled, tousling her shimmering gold-copper hair. "When I was first on the throne, I was a little intimidated by them. They don't obey me like everyone else, following their own rules, and they're all really focused, you know? I thought they were all brainwashed or something. It took me a while to get over that and start talking to them."

A woman has to be graduate of an accredited Academy before she can even apply. Outside of their degree, they take courses on all kinds of things, like musical instruments and etiquette, even stuff like sciences and philosophy, so they know how to treat visitors from other nations, and so they can entertain me if I'm bored, and carry on an intelligent conversation. They can't sing, of course," she chuckled, "but Ynara there, she plays a mean *sinar*. She's really good."

The guard, Ynara, she smiled and bowed slightly.

"So, the next question, Jason," she said, leaning against the back of the couch more. "The one you never answered."

"About what?"

"Will you come work for me?"

He gave her a strange look.

"Who do you think gave you that master key?" she told him. "Or the exomech? I did. The master key was your escape rope in case things went sour on you, and the exomech, well, I wanted to see if you really were as smart as some of my advisors said. So, I sent you something that had tech you'd never seen in school, and I wanted to see if you could puzzle it out and fix it. I've had my eye on you for a long time. Before the Kimdori derailed my plans for you, I had you right on course to land you in a lab somewhere, a place you could use those brains of yours. I was having some of my people interfere with Trillane to keep them from finding you, and I was about to start putting more of a hand in to get you where I wanted you, but then you started your rebellion and kinda messed that up. But, since I know now that you're a Karinne, well, I can see where it comes from. You're from a long line of Faey who had science in their blood. Your technical skill is fucking *genetic* or something. So, wanna come work for me?"

"I don't have time for that," Jason snorted. "I'm gonna have my hands full with everything else, and you want me to come work in research?"

She chuckled. "I know, but I just wanted to hear the answer," she winked.

"No."

"Fair enough," she told him, tousling her bronze hair. She was silent a long moment, just looking at him, and he wondered what she was thinking. She was a dangerous, dangerous woman, this Dahnai Merrane, but he had to admit that he did rather like her. She was nothing like what he expected the Empress of the Imperium to be. And as far as he was concerned, it was a *good* thing. This Empress was witty, warm, compassionate, and had a sense of humor he could appreciate. That was much better than the cold, aloof woman he'd imagined before meeting her. "Have you considered how you're going to handle Terra? I know all of this is new to you. You're not a noble, you're a builder, and now you have to build a working government."

"I've had some idea. I'm not quite ready to put anything in stone, though."

"Good. If you want to talk about it, I'm here, and I'm not busy now that I've kicked Maeri's ass. I'd be happy to help."

"Well, I might ask you some questions about some general things, but I'll be honest, Empress. You'd just tell me to do things in a way that just won't work. My people won't operate under a house system very well. It's not *us*. If I want to make things work smoothly, it has to be done the *Terran* way."

"Very good!" she said brightly. "I wasn't sure if you understood that, but you do. You really do. I think you're gonna be one *damn* fine Grand Duke, Jason. You already understand, and you see the holes and traps that woulda made things nasty for you if you tried to do things any way but your *Terran* way. The Makati don't use a system like any other noble house either, but for them, it works, and it works well. So, build what you know the Terrans will be able to work under, hon. It's your planet, they're your people. You understand them better than we do. Give them what works for them, and they'll work for you."

"I'm going to," he nodded. "It won't be easy, and I'm gonna have gray hair before it's all over, but

I think we can build something that works.”

“That’s all I wanted to hear. I’m feeling better and better about going out on a limb and handing Terra over to you. I wasn’t sure if you were up to the pressure, but now I see that you’ll be able to handle it. Oh, and keep an eye on Anya. She means well, but she’ll try to bully you whenever she thinks you’re not doing things right.”

“I can handle that. I’m not afraid of Faey.”

“Good. But you better be afraid of me, or I’ll punch you in the nose,” she winked.

“You could try,” he said evenly.

“Ooooooooo, that sounds like a *challenge*,” she said, reaching over and slapping him on the leg.

“Care to get up and put your money where your mouth is?”

“Dahnai,” he said carefully. “I’m not about to become the first man murdered in your bedroom by your guards because I punched out the Empress. I can *guarantee* you, I have way more training in hand to hand combat than you. I grew up learning it. You just learned what the guards thought you should know. I know much more than those basics.”

“Ynara, Brini, Zai, don’t interfere,” she announced uncoiling her legs and standing up. “If he does hit me, you will *not* intervene. Do you understand?”

The three guards in the room nodded to her.

“And I promise you, Jason, I won’t do a thing if you do hit me, even if you bruise me or give me a black eye. I’m not that petty. So, get up, Jason. I can’t let a challenge like that just slide by, the Imperial honor is at stake now. Get up, and let’s see if you can hit me.”

Jason sighed. “Alright, alright, but let it be known right now that this is a stupid idea, and you’re gonna regret it.”

“Bah. I got ten credits says I can punch you in the nose.”

“It’s your money,” he shrugged.

Two guards moved the coffee table to give them room, and Jason cracked his knuckles with an unpleasant look, his disapproval of this all over his face. Dahnai stretched her arms, then spread her feet and assumed a rather practical fighting stance, facing her left side to him with her left arm out defensively and her right in a good position to strike. It almost looked like the *karate* ready stance. They did train her pretty well.

But that’s about as far as it got. Dahnai clearly thought this was some kind of fun game, because her first—and only—attempt to punch him got her ass kicked. Much as Jyslin had done years before, she badly underestimated Jason’s physical prowess. His hand whipped out in a blur to catch that well-formed punch, a punch using her shoulders and hips, a punch that was well taught to pack some power. It was a very fast, very strong punch, but it wasn’t fast enough. His hand locked around her wrist, and it was over. He whipped her towards him, using her own momentum against her, stepped around her, then took her down in a shoulder throw. Assurances or no assurances that he wouldn’t be held responsible for anything he did,, he was *not* going to punch the Empress and leave any bruises on her. She slammed into the floor, hard, and he twisted her arm and put a foot on her belly to hold her down. She gasped, her eyes wild, and then to his surprise, one of those long, long legs tried to whip up and kick him in the face. He caught her ankle with his other hand, let go of her hand, kicked the back of her leg with the foot that been on her belly, and then wrenched her around so she was on her stomach. Still holding her ankle, he stepped through her legs and grabbed the blue leg in his grip with both hands and torqued her knee against his own, just enough to make it hurt but not hard enough to injure her.

“Aaaiiyaah!” she hissed. “I give, I give, I give!”

The three guards looked *shocked*. They gave him wide-eyed looks, and then all three of them started to nod. They could see that he really did know what the hell he was doing in a fight.

“What was that?” Dahnai asked from the floor as Jason let her go and stepped over her legs, releasing her. She rolled over to sit on her hip, one hand down to steady her on the floor as the other rubbed her knee, and then she looked back up at him. “I’ve never seen a move like that before!”

“Akido,” he answered. “It’s a martial art that uses the energy of the opponent against her. It’s a form of locks, holds, and throws. It’s a martial art designed to immobilize or incapacitate. I learned it with my father, we were both students. It was when I was a child.”

“It’s pretty damn effective,” Dahnai admitted. “Guess I owe you ten credits,” she laughed, holding her hand out to him. He took it, and helped her up. She tugged at her robe to get it back into place. “Guess next time I try something else, something better.”

“It was a good punch,” he told her. “You were trained well. It just wasn’t fast enough,” he chuckled.

“Pft, next time, I’ll take you on naked. I think you’ll have a hard time keeping your eyes on my hands if my tits are wagging around for you.”

“Part of my training is to ignore distractions and focus on the fight,” he said conversationally. “You have a sexy body, Dahnai, but my old master would fight wearing all kinds of really weird things, even fight naked, but the worst was a girl’s school dress, all done to try to distract us. Ever seen a sixty year, scrawny, ugly little old man about yea big,” he said, holding his hand at his chest, “dancing around wearing a high school girl’s skirt and blouse? If you can focus yourself when facing *that* nightmare of a vision, you can keep your focus through *anything*, even a pair of swinging tits.”

She gave him a look, then laughed.

“He was an eccentric old man, but I gotta admit, some of the oddball crap he used to do made a hell of a lot of sense later on.”

[Contact. KES Scimitar. Communication request. Open channel?]

[No, tell the computer to warn the pilot to hold position. I can’t leave here until I’m dismissed.]

[Opening link to Scimitar mainframe.] There was a very quick pause. *[KES Scimitar mainframe. Command?]*

[Tell whoever’s at the conn to hold position and do nothing right now. I’m in conference with the Empress and I can’t leave until it’s done.]

[Relaying.]

A servant came into the room and bowed. “You wished to be informed when the Grand Duke’s ship arrived, your Majesty,” the teenage girl said. “It has just appeared about twenty minutes out from the planet.”

“Guess your ride’s here, Jason,” she told him. “I’ll arrange to have a ship take you there, and I’ll have your little fighter taken up to your cruiser with you too, okay?”

“I guess that’s alright,” Jason reasoned. “I have to get up there somehow.” *[Tell them that I’ll be coming up shortly, and they’re bringing my Nova with me. So just have Zora approach the planet and park the ship in orbit until I arrive.]*

[Relaying.]

[Oh, and tell them don’t try to contact me. I’m kinda busy.]

[Relaying.]

“I already have a dropship there waiting for you, Jason, and I’ll have a cargo ship over in just a minute to pick up your fighter. It’ll follow you up to your ship.”

“Alright.”

“It was good to meet you, Jason. I really enjoyed it, and I *really* enjoyed kicking Maeri’s ass today.”

“I want to thank you one more time, Empress. What you did for my people today, I hope someday I can repay you.”

“Oh, you will, Jason,” she winked. “I call in my debts. Don’t ever doubt that. Remember, I want you here tomorrow, noon standard time, at court.”

“I won’t like it, but I’ll be here,” he sighed.

“I don’t like it either. We can suffer through it together. After court, you and me are gonna have another talk with Anya, and flesh things out a little more, then you and me are gonna have another little

chat like the one we just had. So don't make any plans. Oh, and you *must* bring your wife tomorrow. I *really* want to meet her."

"I will, your Majesty," he promised with a nod. "I'm not sure she has anything to wear to the palace, but we'll figure something out."

"Then just come a little early, and I'll have a chamberlain get her something appropriate."

"Alright, we will. Do I need to give these robes back?"

She looked at him, then laughed delightedly. "No, keep them. We have plenty of spares, and they *do* look rather handsome on you." She reached out her hand to him, and he took it and impulsively kissed the back of it, like he'd seen people do in old movies. She looked a little surprised, then she gave him a wolfish grin and crossed her arms under her breasts. "Now get home, you. You had a long day, and you need a good night's sleep so you'll be ready for tomorrow."

"I haven't had any private time with my wife since I was captured, Empress. I can assure you, she's *not* going to let me sleep."

Dahnai laughed, and the little servant girl giggled. "Chini, take the Grand Duke to the landing pad," the Empress told the girl.

"Yes, your Majesty," the girl said with a bobbing bow. "This way please, your Grace."

In all, it was an eventful day. But it was a good day.

Trillane was gone. His people were safe. He had done it, he had won. But there were more challenges ahead, more problems, more things that had to be done. Earth had to be transitioned back to self-governance. Cybi needed him on Karis, and there, they needed to breathe life back into a dead planet. He saw that he was going to have some interesting times on Draconis, fencing with the delightful, disarming, and thoroughly dangerous Dahnai Merrane, as she tried to find out what he knew.

But those were worries for tomorrow. For today, for the rest of today, there was just enough time to sigh and smile and know that if only for this moment, all was right in the universe, and the day could only get better. There were old friends on the *Scimitar* he hadn't seen for months to be reunited with. Tim, Temika, Kiaari, Kumi, the survivors of the Legion, they were waiting to see him again. And then, there was beautiful, beautiful Jyslin, the light of his life, who was waiting for him to come home.

God, what a wonderful thing that was.

Tomorrow was tomorrow, but today...today had been perfect.

Chapter 20

*Vesta, 4 Kedaa, 4395 Orthodox Calendar
Tuesday, 30 November, 2008, Native Regional Reckoning
CNN Headquarters, Atlanta, Georgia, USA, Terra*

Every television screen on Earth shared the same image. It was a handsome young man, with green eyes and blond hair, dressed in a black Faey formal robe, sitting behind a glass desk.

“Good evening. I am Jason Karinne, Grand Duke of the House of Karinne, and effective immediately, I have operational control of the planet Earth.

“As most of you realize, I’m a human being. But, for reasons I’ll explain in more detail in a press release tomorrow, I’ve been installed as the leader of the Faey noble house of Karinne. The short of it is that one of my ancestors was a Faey, and that Faey was a member of the ruling family of the House of Karinne. Since I’m the last known survivor of that family, the house comes to me. And since I *am* a human, I’ve claimed the right of first option for Earth. Effectively immediately, House Trillane no longer has control of this planet. I do.

“As I’m sure many of you who live in areas where Faey work have noticed, there’s a sudden influx of Faey soldiers wearing black armor. These soldiers are Imperial Marines sent by the Empress Dahnai Merrane to ensure that the withdraw of Trillane from Earth is orderly and complete. While Trillane withdraws from the planet, these Marines will be assuming temporary control of all governments and law enforcement agencies. For the next few days, Earth will be under a state of martial law while Trillane evacuates. But don’t worry, my friends, this is a *good* kind of martial law, because the Marines are here to protect us from any attempts by Trillane to sabotage our planet or do any kind of damage while they are evicted from Earth. For the next week, I ask that everyone please stay home, limit your trips outside to going to the store for needed supplies, and to keep close to your vidlinks and keep yourself updated on the current news.

“Once Trillane has left our planet, we will be partially returning to our original system of government, at least up to a point. Every living former leader of the old nations of Earth either has been or is currently being contacted by emissaries of House Karinne, and it will fall upon your former leaders to reinstate their original governments. But I’ll make this very clear, right now. Neither the Marines nor House Karinne will tolerate *any* dispute over these governments by elements within the nations. If you were in a nation that was in the middle of a civil war, you are stuck with the government that had official recognition from the United Nations when the Subjugation began. And *there will be no more civil wars*. Humans will *never* fight humans again, not over something as silly as who controls a country. If you don’t like the government your nation had when the Subjugation began, you are more than welcome to try to effect change in a *peaceful* and *non-violent* manner. Armed insurrections against these governments will be stamped out quickly and *forcibly* by Imperial Marines. The Marines are the law, ladies and gentlemen, and they answer to *me*.

“Each nation will be sending a delegate to the United Nations, and it is the United Nations that will be assuming the responsibility of governing this planet. Each nation will be partially independent, allowed to set its own rules and guidelines within its own borders, but it will also be subject to the rules and regulations set forth by the United Nations. Where the U.N. law contradicts the laws of a nation, the U.N. law will supersede local law. This will allow each nation to restore its culture, customs, and national pride, but will still make it a part of the collective whole, part of a united Earth.

“There’s going to be some hard work ahead of us. Though Trillane is gone, the Imperium will remain, and now it falls upon *me* to honor the agreements that Trillane made with the Imperium when they won control of our planet. That’s the price we have to pay to regain a portion of our independence. The Imperium is hungry, people of Earth. They are starving, and our planet is a

farming powerhouse. They need us to help feed them, and it pains me to say this, but we need them too. We need their technology and their skill, and we need their protection from the other governments out in space that would fall on us like a pack of wolves and conquer us if we broke away from the Faey. But we have won something here, people of Earth. We aren't a subject race to the Imperium any more. We are *equals* to the Faey now. A *human* now sits in the halls of power in the Imperium, and I will do my best to fight tooth and nail for the betterment and welfare of the human race, and I'll make sure that the human race is given all the rights and privileges as the other races of the Imperium, something we were denied under the rule of Trillane. We are now *partners* with the Faey, not *slaves*. Now we will show them the kindness and good hearts of the human race. We will put the past behind us and move forward hand in hand with the Faey instead of being pushed ahead by the barrel of a gun.

"Why are we going to do this, you ask? Because the Faey *need* us. They desperately need us. Their people will starve without us. And we would be sorry excuses for human beings if we turned our backs on those who need us. We will continue to produce food for the Imperium, food they desperately need, but now we will do it because we *want* to do it, not because we are *forced* to do it. A new noble house, the house of Suralle, will be arriving soon to replace the Trillanes on the farms, but they will *not* be our overlords. They are here to help us, and *only* to help us. They have no voice here. They have no authority here. They are here only to supply us with the infrastructure and technical skill we need to continue our farming efforts, and that is *it*. I will say this right now. If anyone has any negative experience with a worker or noble from the house of Suralle, I want you to report this incident to a Marine barracks or your local government *immediately*. I will not tolerate any mistreatment of our planet or our people by the Suralles, and it will fall upon you, the people of Earth, to help the Imperial Marines to watch the Suralles and make sure they keep their word.

"Naturally, because we will continue to farm, that will necessitate a certain amount of continuation of the Faey's ways. There will still be mandatory farm work, but that work will not be *forever*. A summons to a farm will not be a ticket into slavery, and the farm lotteries are hereby forever abolished. A plan is being worked out now so nobody works on a farm for more than two months out of any year, and no more than a year total farm work in a span of ten. And you will be *paid* for this service, people. You will be paid very well, a salary that will probably be more than or equal to what you make now at your current job. People may also volunteer to work on a farm if that is their desire, and those people will be receive a larger salary for that voluntary service. There are more than enough people on Earth to allow us to continue to produce food in the quantity the Faey need to help keep their people fed but not condemn us to a life of forced farm labor. We will spread the burden out as wide as possible, so everyone does just a little, instead of some doing it all.

"There is one more matter, a matter I regret to have to bring forward, but something that needs to be done. The Trillanes were engaged in wholesale illegal kidnapping of human beings for illegal purposes, and the House Karinne will need your help to try to get them back. If anyone you know has disappeared or has been forcibly taken by the Trillanes, you need to report this fact. Contact numbers are going to be set up by tomorrow afternoon, you can file a report in person at any Marine barracks, and a Civnet site will also be opened where you can report this online. Please, we need your help. We have to know *who* was taken so we can try to find them and bring them home. Empress Dahnai herself has pledged Imperial support in this effort to find and recover our missing people. So please, we need you to report anyone you know is missing. When you do, give as much information you can, and if you have any pictures of the abducted people, those would really help.

"But I promise you, people of Earth, it will *never* happen again. As long as we continue to meet the quotas of food production the Empress has set, we will be allowed to look after ourselves. Remember that. As long as we fulfill the obligation Trillane made when they won the right to farm Terra, we can keep ourselves out from under the heel of another Faey noble house. I know it's not much of an improvement to go from the control of one house to another, from the Trillanes to the Karinnes, but at least with me, you *know* you're getting someone who cares about what happens to you. I am a *human*,

and I will do my best to make sure that we will be both respected and treated with dignity by the Faey. That is my solemn promise.

“In closing, I have just one more thing to say. I am no noble, and I’m no politician. I will make mistakes, and I’m sure some of them will be real whoppers. So please, have some patience with me. I’ll be working my butt off for you, and if you give me a little leeway, I promise I’ll be the best Grand Duke I can be, a Grand Duke that works for the people, not a Grand Duke that expects the people to work for him. This too is my solemn promise to you. This is *not* my planet. I am *not* a ruler. It’s just my bad luck that I’ve been thrust into this unwanted position, but I’m here, so I have to do my best to make sure it’s done right. I’ll do everything I can to help Earth and the human race regain its dignity, and together, if we all work hard, we can build something that our children will be proud of.

“Thank you, good day, and good luck. May God bless us and watch over us, because we’re going to need it.”

Raira, 33 Kedaa, 4395 Orthodox Calendar
Saturday, 25 December, 2008, Native Regional Reckoning
The Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York, New York, USA, Terra

Christmas was supposed to be a day of family, good cheer, and rejoicing.

This Christmas was the most special Christmas ever, for the entire planet was celebrating. For on this day, the United Nations had reopened. It only had three officials there in any real capacity, but it was open for business and ready for when the nations reorganized themselves and sent their ambassadors. Right now, only three nations had seated ambassadors: the United States, China, and Great Britain. Those three nations had been fastest in reseating their old governments after Trillane was kicked off, though it certainly wasn't complete. Jason had ordered that each government's original governmental structure would be reinstated, and that was still a work in progress just about everywhere else.

America had been the first to get back into operation. The entire government that had been seated when the Faey arrived was recalled to Washington and simply picked up right where they left off. The President, the Congress, and seven of the nine members of the Supreme Court were back, and they were already getting things back into operation...or at least mostly. Now, they knew, they were like a state government, for they now answered to the United Nations, and it was that entity that would allot them their yearly budget amount for them to spend, and any laws they passed couldn't contradict U.N. law. But the U.N. would be relatively inobtrusive, and that was by intentional design. It would interfere with the member nations as little as possible, letting the old nations look after themselves with only the lightest of touches to ensure that things were being done to the satisfaction of House Karinne, and the biggest concern for House Karinne was that the food continued to be produced at the set quotas. As long as the food was being shipped out, the people of Earth could do anything they wanted short of start wars with each other.

Jason had been there of course, the Grand Duke Jason Karinne and his wife, the Duchess Jyslin Karinne, opening the doors of the United Nations building as cameras took pictures and video cameras caught the event live. There was even a pair of INN crews there to do stories on the event.

But that was over now, and Jason was taking a breather in the room they were renting. He didn't want to stay in the Waldorf, but he *was* the Grand Duke, and the mayor of New York had been scandalized when he asked for just some room in a hotel near the U.N. building. He got thrown here basically against his will, but he didn't take the penthouse, as a determined sign to everyone that he did not think he was above them.

It was really strange. They were actually homeless. They had no house of their own. For the last month, he'd been moving from hotel to hotel, running all over the *fucking* planet trying to iron out all the problems and talking to the leaders of the old countries. It sure wasn't easy, on him or anyone else.

It had been so nice and quiet when they first got back. The first thing he did was invite the entire Legion into the house, and they all agreed. Everyone was a Count or Countess now, except for Kumi. When Jason offered her a place in his house, she demanded a higher rank, since she was already a Countess, and besides, he needed her. That was true enough, and he had to bow to her blackmail. So instead of being the Countess Eleri Trillane, she was now the Duchess Eleri Karinne. And it was her expertise in how noble houses worked, and education in house operations and her knowledge of business, that let them get where they were now. Thanks to her, House Karinne already had a house bank account on Moridon, she had worked out a financial plan with Anya Suralle, and a material deployment schedule had been worked out. Kumi had worked fast, and he'd be lost without her. If Jason was the face of House Karinne, Kumi was its brain.

Quiet...well, up to a point. After two days sequestered with Jyslin, interrupted only by visits to court, time she demanded and time he was more than happy to give her, he caught up with the others,

and saw that things had moved along since he was captured. There were only 21 surviving members of the Legion; the rest had been killed in action, and Sheila Hart had been killed in an accident in the mountain. Ian had expressed while he was gone, and Jason had learned that Temika had started dating Mike Colbert, which was a very good thing. She was finally overcoming her phobia about being touched. And in a rather curious turn of events, within days of getting back, Songa had taken up with Luke. This surprised Jason, but then he stepped back and looked at it a little more closely. Both of them had lost the focus of their lives, Luke his family and Songa her husband, and they seemed to sense the melancholy emptiness in each other. And since both of them were compassionate, good people, they wanted to help each other, fill that void with something that could never replace what was lost, but something that would at least ease that pain and make life bearable again. In just three days, Songa had become quite attached to Luke, and by the end of the week, they were living together. It was a good match, as far as Jason was concerned. Luke would treat Songa like a queen, and Songa would treasure Luke's gentle attention.

Myra wasn't too happy about it. It seemed that Myra had designs on Luke.

The House of Karinne went from 12 to 33 members, but none of them really did all that much right now. Myri had taken over as the commander of the *Scimitar*, and she kept most of the Marines with her, keeping the ship manned at all times. Myleena was in heaven up there, tearing the ship apart one little piece at a time and learning how it all worked, then putting it back together. The others were basically working as gophers, running back and forth between various countries as Jason's representatives, just seeing how things were going and getting status reports on when each country hoped to be back up to the self-governing level and when they'd be sending ambassadors to the U.N.

If only he could spend more than two days in a row on Earth. Every other day, it seemed, he had to rush off to Draconis to attend court, and when he was there, it was like another war. The *Siann* didn't know what to make of him, but they certainly didn't like him. It was nothing but arrogant looks when he was there, and the only nobles that would talk to him were members of house Suralle. The new representative of Trillane in court since Maeri was banished, the Duchess Myana Trillane, Maeri's eldest daughter, couldn't take her eyes off him, and those eyes promised a horrid, painful death if she could ever catch him alone. The fine that Dahnai blackmailed out of Trillane had been *crushing*. It nearly bankrupted the house, and obviously, they were blaming Jason for it. They couldn't do much to avenge themselves against Dahnai, but Jason was a *very* available target. After the first court, where Jason introduced Jyslin to the Empress, Dahnai ordered her guards to escort Jason around, because she was worried that someone from Trillane might actually attack him. Attacks within the palace were not unheard of.

The only relief came *after* court, but it wasn't much relief. After court, without fail, Dahnai summoned him to her quarters. There, three things happened. She taught him how to use his telekinetic abilities, he began training her in the forms of Akido so she could better defend herself, and she missed no chance to try to trick him or push him into saying something about the Karinnes that would give his knowledge away. Every damn session was a chess match of caution with Dahnai, for she was relentless. He really had to push the line between subject and friend with her, because she *knew* he knew the secrets of the Karinnes, and she wanted to know those secrets. She would alternate between trying to trick him into saying too much, trying to catch him off guard, and there was the occasional outright orders for him to tell her the truth. But, to her credit, she had not used her talent to try to find out. She was as bad as Jyslin, a fucking pit bull that had latched onto his leg and would not let go. She used her status as Empress as a club against him, for he could not deny any summons she made. That was the law. If she summoned him to her presence, he was legally obligated to show up.

She did seem to establish some rules in her mind. She wouldn't threaten him with retaliation if he didn't tell her. She didn't use her talent, or have someone else do it for her. And while she was a typical Faey with a few modesty issues because she was accustomed to having someone watching her at all times, she kept her hands off him, not trying to seduce the answer out of him, despite him getting

the feeling that she *did* want to put her hands on him. He knew that if she had any kind of sexual attraction to him, she'd act on those impulses without batting an eye. She was the *Empress*, she could have any man she wanted and they could not, by law or by custom, deny her advances. Sometimes, though, when she looked at him, he could tell that she *did* have those impulses. He could tell when he was being undressed by her eyes. But she refused to bow to those impulses, wouldn't even admit to him that she had them, which was what a Faey would do. Kumi was the perfect example...from the first meeting, she made her attraction to him abundantly clear, as well as her intent to bed him. He wasn't sure why Dahnai was doing what she was doing, and that made her very mysterious.

But, he couldn't deny that he liked her. When she wasn't trying to dig what he knew out of him, she was an intelligent, witty, charming young lady with a razor wit and an almost supernatural ability to see the smallest detail. She also learned fast, he had to admit. As he learned the basics of telekinesis, she learned the basics of Akido. And after they shared their knowledge, they would talk, about anything and everything. Jason learned a hell of a lot from Dahnai on the basics of leadership, learned quite a bit about the various houses of the *Siann* and the current alliances and enmities, and learned quite a bit about Dahnai herself. She was unmarried but had two children, sired by a Merrane male chosen by the house, a five year old son and a three year old daughter...which she only saw once every ten days. By custom, the Empress didn't care for her own children, couldn't be burdened with that responsibility when she had an empire to oversee. They were being raised by foster parents from Merrane until they were ten, when they would be allowed to live with their mother. That seemed cruel to Jason, but to Dahnai, it was just the way it was. She loved her children very much, and was already counting down the months until her son, Maer, would come live with his mommy. Then her daughter, the Crown Princess Sirri, would come live with her two years later, and they'd be a family.

It was custom for the Empress to produce the heir before marrying, since the Empress didn't marry at the behest of the house. She'd already produced her heir with the chosen male, carefully selected for his lineage and pedigree, so now she was free to marry. Empresses often married for political gain, but did not always do so. Unlike other high-ranking noble women, Dahnai was free to marry anyone she wanted, not who was chosen for her for maximum political gain. Being the Empress, no one could *make* her marry anyone.

It didn't take long until Jason saw Dahnai as a close friend. Despite the tension between them concerning his silence, she really liked him, and he really liked her. He was as close to her as he was to Kumi...probably even closer. And what was just a bonus was that Jyslin and Dahnai really hit it off. There was a great deal of discomfort on Jyslin's part at first, because she was *the Empress*, but after the shock of that wore off and Jyslin started seeing Dahnai for who she was instead of her title, they started getting to know each other.

The *Siann* took note of this personal attention, as did INN, and that was probably half the problem. Jason found it impossible to get back to Karis and see how things were going with Cybi because several Faey media organization followed him around *everywhere* he went. INN had to be the worst of them, but that god damned tabloid Civnet site *The Examiner* was horrific because they resorted to paparazzi-style tactics to get pictures of him and Jyslin, of the other members of Karinne, and everyone they associated with. He was hoping that they'd lose interest in him, but the combination of his unusual rise to status and the Empress' personal, intimate interest in him made him like a fucking rock star to the Faey. Everywhere he went, there was a camera and a reporter, people asking him questions, and annoying the hell out of him. As the days moved on, it got worse and worse out in the world, but things within court got...weird. Nobles began cautiously approaching him, saying nothing of importance, just trying to engage him in smalltalk. He seemed to be in favor with the Empress, and he realized they were testing the waters, seeing if he might be amenable to them, and through him gain the Empress' ear.

He dreaded going there now. Not because of Dahnai or the *Siann*, but for an entirely different reason. He noticed it about two weeks ago, when he and Dahnai had spent an afternoon outside. He'd

gotten sunburned, and after applying some burn-heal to it, he ran to Songa immediately, going all the way back home to do so, for his skin had taken on an unpleasant grayish pall. He feared he'd had some kind of allergic reaction to the burn-heal. She gave him a thorough examination, then laughed and told him that it wasn't a medical problem.

Jason was part Faey, and exposure to Draconis' sun was triggering his hybrid melanin to protect itself.

And it was turning him *blue*.

The blue tint in his skin was noticable now, and it merged with his beige skin to produce a dusky, almost grayish hue. It was like any tan, it would darken with more exposure and fade if he stayed out of the sun, which would allow the blue to fade completely. Jyslin thought the idea of him turning blue was entirely proper, but she was terribly biased. Jason hated the idea of it, and now he didn't go to Draconis without wearing long sleeves and carrying an umbrella to shield him from the sun. He didn't *want* to turn blue. He wanted this blue tint to fade and go back to his normal coloring, and it had been doing so. It was very faint now, and after a couple more days, it would be gone entirely. He'd just have to be careful from now on to limit his exposure to the sun while he was on Draconis, or he'd turn as blue as a Faey.

It wasn't just him either. Tim and Ian had gone with him to Draconis last week, and both of them had come home sunburned. And just like him, their skin started taking on a bluish undertone. Temika had laughed at them, but when *she* went to Draconis the last time Jason had to go to court, spending all day outside, she came back looking like an Aborigine, her creamy brown skin turning almost purple because her melanin too tried to turn blue once it was exposed to the Draconis sun. She didn't laugh at them anymore.

He was glad Karis' sun wouldn't do that to him. He hadn't been back since leaving with the *Scimitar* because of all the attention, but he was keeping abreast of things. Cybi could communicate with him using the *Scimitar* as a transceiver, and she contacted him at least twice a day to give him status reports, and also just to talk. The Kimdori remained on Karis, continuing to repair everything they could find. They had restored operations on all but two of the reclamation robots, and those robots were again working to restart the planet's ecosystem. And to his surprise, the Kimdori were starting to rebuild. They seemed to have this notion that the entire planet would be repopulated, so their civil engineers had gone in, brought along old maps and plans of the old cities of Karis, and had every intention of rebuilding every single one of them, putting the planet right back the way it was. Jason had to intervene at that point. He did agree with Zaa that rebuilding some of Karis was necessary, but not that kind of large-scale restoration was required. He allowed Zaa's people to begin to rebuild *one* city, the capitol city of Karsa, which was on the coast of the small central continent about 1,000 miles west of the island where Cybi was. And that was the continent that Jason told Cybi to concentrate on restoring first. They would start there, on the continent of Dacha, and work their way across the planet.

The Kimdori hadn't just been fixing machines. Zaa had called personally two days ago and told him that the KMS *Defiant*, or Karinne Military Starship, the cruiser that had been docked in the lunar base, had been fully repaired and was ready for service. This was not a scout ship. This was a *warship*, and it was fully armed and armored. And holy shit, was it ever fucking armed. It had weapons on it that Jason had never seen before, but they seemed absolutely devastating. Its main weapon was a striated particle beam projector, a stream of subatomic particles that ripped matter apart. The Imperium had weapons nastier than this, until one saw that this weapon was fired as a *sustained beam*. The beam lasted for nearly six seconds until the projector had to stop to cool off, but during that six seconds, the focusing lens could shift, moving the beam. The result was a shearing beam that could rake across an enemy ship and literally cut it in half. The *Defiant* had three of these particle beam weapons in it, and all three could fire at once. It also was armed with teryon cannons, weapons similar in behavior to MPAC projectiles, explosive energy blasts that penetrated before detonating. But the most dangerous weapon on board was actually a defensive system called a *torsion wave generator*. It created a spatial

shockwave around the ship, kind of like a space earthquake, that did tremendous stress damage to anything caught in the wave. It was primarily an anti-fighter and anti-missile shield, a defensive system that destroyed anything small that got close to it, but it couldn't fire if other weapons were being used, because the torsion wave altered the trajectory of any energy beams that passed through it while it was operating.

Zaa had told him that the two destroyers, the KMS *Resolute* and the KMS *Sora's Pride* would be repaired and ready within two weeks. The Kimdori had been focusing on the cruiser.

That was good to know, but right now, the *Defiant* was just an oversized toy. He had no crew to man it.

While Jason was running around the planet like a maniac getting in touch with nation leaders, Suralle had arrived and got to work. Their first order of business was saving the crops that were currently in the ground, and this they did quickly, taking over seamlessly from the Trillanes. Those people who had been on the farms like the Suralle way better, for they were nice and helpful, they started working to upgrade the living conditions of the workers, and what was most important, they started handing out hard currency payments to the workers, *paying* them for their work. The Trillanes had never paid them; working on a farm was like being in a prison camp, where the borders were fenced in and guarded, everyone worked every day, and nobody got a single credit for their labor. But the Suralles charged in and started tearing down the fences, started fixing up the dorms, started giving everyone a cash advance on their future pay, and brought in shuttle service so the workers could get to towns and have a night off, have a little fun, and buy what they needed. The workers were still stuck on the farms and had to do their jobs, but they were all told that they'd only be there until they could get a new personnel system in place, and those who had been on farms under Trillane would *never* have to work on a farm involuntarily again once they were relieved. They had a lifetime exemption from compulsory farm duty. They were welcome to stay on as voluntary workers and receive a healthy salary for their work, but they didn't have to stay if they didn't want to.

Anya Suralle had come to Earth personally and was overseeing this transition, and he often caught rides to Draconis to attend court on her ship, since Anya didn't miss open court. He felt like a carpooler. He did like Anya, though. She had a shrill, unpleasant voice, but she knew she did and actually preferred to send. She was an earthy middle-aged Faey woman who had the Faey equivalent of doctorates in chemistry and political science, a very well educated woman who happened to be very nice, and he became friends with her rather quickly. Anya had been continuing his education in Faey politics, and it was from her that he saw the ugly side of it. She confided in him—dragging a promise that he wouldn't tell Dahnai out of him—that both House Dorrane and House Trillane had tried to approach her to form an alliance against Merrane. Anya could smell an approaching war, and she wanted no part of it. Suralle was prospering right now, and they had nothing to gain from a civil war that would ravage the Imperium, so she kept her loyalties to Dahnai very public and very known. The largest four Highborn houses were maybe *too* large, *too* powerful, and now they had revolution on their minds. The Trillane scandal was just the proof that her suspicions were correct, in her mind. Trillane had started executing a plan to take the throne of the Imperium away from Dahnai, and she knew that Dorrane and Shovalle couldn't be far behind. She predicted some rough times ahead for Dahnai, since she was the target of these plots, but Anya confided to him that Dahnai was a very smart young lady. She was only 40, which was about 28 in human years, but she'd been on the throne since she was 14, and she was well settled into it. She was a formidable Empress, and the other houses would be hard pressed to outfox her.

They had a court date tomorrow, and after the ceremony, Anya had arranged to pick him up from the hotel tomorrow afternoon so they could get there.

But that was tomorrow. The ceremony was over, and for the rest of the day at least, they had no obligations. This was part of his Christmas present to himself, a little free time where he wasn't running to the next shuttle that would ferry him to another part of the world, dragging his wife in tow

and forcing messages to try to chase him down from country to country.

Jyslin was taking it well enough. She shared his discomfort for being in the public eye, for she wasn't a noble, she was a Marine. Some of the little soundbites they'd picked up from her, Jyslin being Jyslin, had made it onto a few INN newscasts, and that had embarrassed her to no end. Of course, it was Symone that the cameras really liked to follow, because of her natural charisma, her ease in front of a camera, and her downright naughty demeanor, making her a real media darling, and driving Tim up the wall. They followed Jason around because he was the Grand Duke, but they loved following Symone around because of what she might say or do next. She did look a little haggard, though, he noticed as she took off her earrings and put them on the table near the door. She was wearing a formal robe, a very pleasing cream color that went well with her hair, simple and unadorned, since they hadn't had the time to really buy any good ones. They were still wearing the robes that Dahnai had given them when they visited the palace when they dressed formally, clothes from the "rent-a-robe" inventory the chamberlains kept to dress visitors so they could attend the Empress. They'd both amassed quite the wardrobe of them, for they were given new robes when they attended court for the first couple of weeks, until both of them had 6 or 7 robes to choose from, and they'd just been wearing those ever since. The other nobles laughed about it, since their generic robes made them look like beggars, but Jason really didn't give a shit what they thought. He sure as hell didn't dress up to impress *them*, he did it because it was custom to appear before the Empress in formal robes, and that was what he did.

Help me with this, Jyslin called, strating to undo the ties of her robe. *I swear, it takes a fucking maid to get this thing off me. I feel like a dork that I can't dress myself.*

I can't do it either, he reminded her. Boy, was that ever true. Anya always spent ten minutes fussing with his robes every time she picked him up, fixing them for him cause he still hadn't quite got the hang of how they were put on to make it look right. He dragged her over to the bed and sat down on it, and started working on the complicated series of ties, snaps, and buttons that kept the robes in place. *Anya dragged me into a corner and fixed my robes this morning, before the ceremony.*

I saw that. So, what do you want to do with the rest of the day?

Sleep, he sent immediately, but she slapped him on the top of the head, which made him laugh. *I don't care what we do, hon, as long as we do it together.*

That's better, she purred mentally, putting her hands on his shoulders. *Wanna get some movies and just snuggle in for the day?*

That sounds wonderful, he agreed.

Did you send out those gifts for your Christmas holiday?

Yeah, I got them all out yesterday morning. I just hope they got there in time. We need to send some thank-you cards out to the guys, too, thanking them for the gifts.

Curious custom, this Christmas of yours. We don't have anything like it.

Yah well, I'd be surprised if you did, since it's basicly a religious holiday. It's evolved to take on a non-religious aspect as well, but at its core it's based in religion. It celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, who is the Messiah in Christianity.

Leave it there, she warned. One of the rules of the Fox Shaddale household was that religion was not a topic of discussion. Jason was a Methodist, and while Jyslin wasn't very pious, she did at least acknowledge her religious roots in the Trinity. Neither of them wanted to start a holy war, so religion was a forbidden subject.

I'm not gonna go any further, goof, he chided her, getting the last tie undone that would let her take off the upper garment of the robe. He stood up and took it from her after she took it off, leaving her bare from the waist up.

Thanks, love, she sent, patting him on the shoulder. She sat down and started unlacing her slippers, and Jason started working on the laces of his own robe. There was a fast knock on the door, and the door opened partially. "I beg your pardon for the intrusion, your Grace, but—"

The door burst open, and the uniformed hotel worker was pushed aside as Tim and Symone got past him. “Bugger off, Charlie,” Symone told him, pushing him out of the door when he gawked at Jyslin’s bare breasts, then shut the door behind him. “I swear, what a jackass,” she growled, looking back at them. Both of them had changed since the ceremony. Symone and Tim both were wearing tee shirts and faded jeans. Symone’s tee shirt was a Washington Redskins football logo tee shirt, and Tim’s tee shirt was a plain white unadorned shirt. *Hey guys, what’s up?*

Just getting undressed from the ceremony, girl, Jyslin answered, pulling a slipper off.

Here, lemme, Symone told him, coming up to Jason and starting to work on the laces. *You’re a total klutz at this, ya know?*

I didn’t grow up wearing this crap, Jason protested as Symone started working her way down.

Tim-Tim, help Jyslin with her shoes, dink! she ordered.

Sure.

Thanks, Tim, Jyslin sent as he knelt down and started untying the complicated laces around her calf, and she started on the ties of the waist of her breeches. She got those undone just as Tim finished taking off her shoe, and she wiggled out of her breeches and panties boldly; the panties Jyslin wore under the robes could be called boxer briefs by some, because the trousers chafed her thighs. She didn’t like wearing them any time other than when she wore the formal robes. *What are you two up to?* she asked as she sat back down and pulled the garments off her legs, then got up and went to the dresser, digging for a new pair of panties.

Eh, we dunno yet, we wanted to see if you two wanted to do something. We didn’t want to leave you out, Symone answered, finishing her unlacing and helping Jason take the robe off.

That’s sweet of you, but we weren’t planning on doing anything. Just curling up on the couch and watching a movie. You’re welcome to hang around if you want.

Sounds good to me, Tim sent. *If you two don’t mind company.*

We never mind your company, Tim, Jason told him.

The door opened again, and Temika walked in, wearing a heavy overcoat to protect her from the New York winter cold. One look in the room would have sent her running two months ago, but now, she had a much better understanding of the relationship between these four people. After all, it would be easy to read into things seeing Jyslin stark naked, leaning over the dresser drawer with Tim sitting on the bed, while Symone was undressing Jason by the couch. Two months ago, Temika would have immediately jumped to the conclusion that something kinky was about to happen, but she knew better now. The relationship between these two couples was almost like they were intermarried, and this kind of intimate social interaction was entirely normal for them. Jyslin had no qualms about parading around naked in front of Tim and Symone, since Symone was her best friend and she’d already had sex with Tim, quite a few times, so there was nothing about her Tim hadn’t seen, touched, or probably kissed, before. Just as Symone had filled Jyslin’s shoes when she was with Jason and he was separated from Jyslin, Symone had shared her husband with Jyslin while Jason was in Faey custody, providing her with physical comfort and release. Jyslin had joked that if Tim hadn’t have been there to pop her cork, she’d have been ten times the bitch, and she probably could have run the entire house of Trillane into the ground. In that time after Jason was captured, poor Tim didn’t sleep in the same bed two nights in a row. Symone had literally handed him over to her best friend every other day, to give her someone to yell at when she was angry, a shoulder to cry on when she was emotional, and a man to just fuck senseless when she needed it.

And it didn’t bother Jason at all. He completely accepted the unusual situation between the four of them, and he was honestly happy that Tim had been there for Jyslin when she needed him.

“Hey, y’all, what’s up?” she called, closing the door. “Or should Ah just turn around and go?”

Jyslin laughed. “No, no foursome today, we’re just changing,” Jyslin told her with a wink and a grin. “What are you up to, Mika?”

“That’s not a bad idea, though,” Symone giggled. “We’ve never done it *together*. We should try

it.”

Temika pointedly ignored Symone. “Ah was gonna go down to Times Square and look around. They setting it up for New Year’s Eve, and Ah wanted to take a look. Wanna go?”

“No thanks, hon, me and Jayce just wanna relax today. Thanks for the necklace, by the way. It was lovely.”

“Ah was hopin’ you’d like it, sugah,” she said with a smile.

“I love it. It’ll go really nice with those blue robes the Empress gave me last time I was at court.”

“Oooh, Mika gave you jewelry? Show it off!” Symone said excitedly.

Jyslin opened a small box on the dresser and turned around, showing a blue crystal necklace to Symone.

“Wow, nice!”

“Ah remembered you talkin’ about how all the nobles have jewelry, and how you didn’t have none, so Ah thought it would help you out. Ah just wish Ah could afford real jewels, but Ah thought it was pretty,” Temika said with a flush.

“Push off, Mika, it’s gorgeous,” Jyslin told her. “I’d be much prouder to wear your necklace than a whole torque filled with rubies and sapphires. At least your present came from the heart. That makes it worth more than jewels.”

“You better keep it quiet,” Symone told her with a grin. “If word got out you’re giving Jyslin jewelry, people might think you want between her legs.”

“Eww!” Temika gasped, then she stalked over and smacked Symone on the shoulder. “That’s *nasty*, Symone! Ah ain’t no lesbo!”

Symone lurched forward and grabbed Temika’s head, then kissed her full on the lips. Temika shuddered, then she pushed Symone away, *hard*. Temika looked outraged, but Symone just gave her a rogueish grin. “Yup, you’re right, you don’t like girls. There was nothing in that kiss at all.”

“Why you little blue bitch!” Temika shouted, but then she laughed helplessly. “Ah swear, Ah should kill you, Symone!”

“Pft, I’m too cute to kill.”

“You better thank God above for that too, sugah,” she snapped. “Ah’m leavin’, before Ah *do* kill Symone. We’ll bring y’all back some tee shirts, ‘kay?”

“We?” Tim asked.

“Me an’ Mike,” she answered. “Think Ah’d go out there alone, with all those reporters camping the hotel? They all scared of Mike, they ain’t never seen no man as huge as he is,” she said with an unconscious little trill in her voice. Temika was highly attracted to heavily developed men. Mike was a bodybuilder, and his massive frame really appealed to her. “He chases them away.”

“Well, have fun Mika. This time, I expect you to get more than a kiss goodnight!” Symone challenged. “He’s never gonna make the first move, girl. Just grab his dick and blow in his ear, that’ll show him what you want!”

“That’s just too damn *forward*,” Temika grunted, not blushing at all. “It ain’t the way a lady behaves. He might think Ah’m a tramp.”

“He’s still unsure about you, Mika, he’s not going to do anything you don’t initiate,” Jyslin told her evenly. “He really wants to be with you, but he knows you’re still dealing with those other issues. When you’re ready, you have to *tell* him. He won’t take the initiative. We kinda warned him not to.”

“You really think he won’t think Ah’m a slut?” she asked sincerely.

“Honey, he wouldn’t care if you were the biggest whore in the Gamia province,” Symone told her. “So go pull his pants down and show him how much you care.” She put her finger on her chin. “And remember it good enough to share an image of it. I wanna see his dick.”

“Not *my* boyfriend, you won’t,” Temika growled, marching out quickly.

Think she’ll get up enough courage this time? Symone sent, looking at Jyslin.

I hope so. She just needs to conquer it once, and that should do it.

Symone laughed. *I'm sure the instant she gets Mike's dick in her, she'll be cured*, she sent with a lustful taint running through her thoughts. *A girl can't take a dick that looks as big as his without wanting more of it.*

I think I'm gonna have to take your word for that, honey, Tim sent dryly.

You better. I'll share you with Jys, but no way am I letting you go to the sheets with a man.

I'm so glad, he sent dryly. *So, what movie should we get?*

Something new, Symone said as Jyslin stepped into a pair of silky black bikini-style panties and pulled them up. *Wow, nice panties, Jys, they really make you look hot. New?*

Yeah, I bought them last time we went to Draconis, she answered. *Help me find my black shorts.*

While Symone helped Jyslin root through the drawers to find her shorts, Jason hung up his robe, then he sat down on the couch and took off the boots. At least for him, it was much easier to take off the shoes. Men wore soft calf boots by tradition, while women wore long-laced slippers that wrapped around the ankles and lower calves and then tied off. He took them off and pulled off the trousers, then caught the sweatpants and tee shirt that Jyslin tossed him and put them on. She put on a pair of short, slinky black shorts and a rather skimpy black half-tank top that barely managed to cover her breasts, and both Jason and Tim had to stop a second to admire how sexy it made her look.

They decided on watching the new *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie first, and settled in for a rare afternoon of simple domesticity, quiet time that Jason had been craving and desperately needed. They watched three movies that afternoon, with Jyslin curled up on one side, and then he had Symone leaning up against the other with her legs thrown over Tim's lap. He put an arm around each of them, playing with Jyslin's gorgeous red hair absently with his fingers as his other arm draped comfortably on Symone's upper chest, his hand lightly resting on her shoulder, just happy to *be*.

He and Jyslin had no home...and he guessed it was about time to address that, he realized as they started watching the *Fantastic Four* sequel that didn't interest Jason very much, but Jyslin and Symone had wanted to see it.

Clearly, negotiation would be required. Jason hated heat, and Jyslin hated cold, so he figured they would have to split the difference. Since he could fly his skimmer or Nova wherever he wanted, it meant he could live virtually anywhere and still get around the planet to do his job. But he would kinda like to live near New York, since he'd have duties as the head of the U.N., which was his official position. There would still be a Secretary General to handle the day to day stuff, Jason would just be the guy over him.

Long Island. There were some houses out there, they could find something close to the ocean and also something fenced in, to give them some space from those maniacal reporters. It'd be expensive, but Jason still had some money stashed away on Moridon.

Yeah, they had estates and crap like that out on Long Island. There had to be one for sale out there, somewhere.

We need a place to live, he announced. *Something more permanent than this.*

Ya think? Symone sent archly. *Me and Tim haven't looked at anything yet, cause we wanna be close to you guys.*

Well, what about Long Island? he offered. *It's warm in the summer, cool in the winter, and they have to have some fenced-in estates out there up for sale, so we can get some space from the reporters. It's close to the U.N., too.*

Sounds perfect, Jyslin told him, leaning her head against his shoulder. *Let's start looking tomorrow.*

You can, love, I have court tomorrow, he sent sourly. *Wanna come?*

And watch you flirt with Empress Dahnai? *No thanks.*

I do not flirt! he protested.

You flirt with her every time you tell her no, love. That drives Faey women crazy, she told him, raising her head and looking him the eyes, smiling knowingly.

Well, this no is not up for negotiation. She keeps trying to find out what I know of the Karinnes, and I won't tell her.

I know. Just be careful. Eventually, she'll get tired of playing this game and come after you much more seriously.

Yeah, don't remind me, he sighed.

Me and Symone can help Jyslin look, Jayce, Tim offered.

Sounds great.

And the matter dropped. They returned to silent togetherness through the movie.

When it was over, Symone rubbed her foot against Jason's leg meaningfully. "Let's do it," she said.

Do what? Jyslin asked.

Together. Let's do it. We've never been all together before. I want to be in the same bed with my husband and my best friends. I want to be able to reach out and touch the two sexiest men alive at the same time.

I'd love to. I've been wanting to myself, Jyslin said. *What about it, guys? Wanna be kinky?*

A few months ago, I'd have thought that was a crazy idea, but not anymore, Jason sent, running his hand up Symone's leg. *I can't think of anything better than making love to my wife with my best friends there to share our joy, and I think making love to Symone while Jyslin watches would be interesting. I want to try it.*

I seem to have been outvoted, Tim sent with a laugh. *But I'll admit, I've been thinking of it myself. We trade off often enough, we should just cut out the middle man.*

Damn right. Now get naked, lover, I'm horny, Symone told him as Jason started unbuttoning her jeans, and as Jyslin pulled her half-shirt over her head. *Ooh, Jason, take charge, baby,* she sent with a wink.

It didn't take them long to find a place of their own.

Jason had been right. There were quite a few estates for sale on Long Island, and some of them were selling dirt cheap, being sold off by people who had been rich before the Subjugation, but then lost their fortunes after the Faey arrived. The big, ultra-luxurious estates had been bought, but there were quite a few walled estates on the market, enough to allow them to basically take their pick.

Jason mentioned the house search to Dahnai at court the next day. She scoffed and gave him a dirty look, and told him she'd take care of it. He had no idea what she intended to take care of, since she ended court immediately after that and also told him to go home, that she had something to do.

That made him nervous.

By the time Jason returned from Draconis a few hours after court, waiting for Anya to deal with some Suralle business, Dahnai had already acted. Anya's shuttle was diverted, and landed at a large walled estate on Cape Cod, in Massechussets, that overlooked the ocean. Waiting for them there was a member of Merrane, who handed him a set of keys. "Her Majesty owns this planet, your Grace, and all unclaimed or destitute property is, by law, property of the Crown, which she can sell on the open market. This is one such property. She told me to tell you that this is *your* house now, but it's also not free. She expects you to pay her fifty thousand credits for this property."

Fifty thousand? It's worth five hundred thousand, at least. Maybe a million, Anya scoffed.

"It'd take me a week just to dust something this big," Jason said uncertainly. "It's too big for me and Jys. I'd be spending my whole life just cleaning."

"Jason. You are the Grand Duke Karinne. You do *not* clean," Anya said, scandalized by the thought of it.

"I wasn't born a noble, I don't think like you do, Anya."

Well, get over it, she sniffed. *And you'd be a maniac for turning this down. Not only is it perfect for you, but you'd really offend her Majesty. One does not turn down a gift from her.*

She's charging me, Anya. That means this isn't a gift.

Charging you one tenth of its value? Yeah, she is, Anya snorted.

That about settled that. Jason accepted the terms, reluctantly, and found himself in possession of an estate, ironically enough, named Foxwood. And it was rather nice, almost perfect. It had a pool and a tennis court on the grounds, a cavernous garage with lined spots for twenty cars, and a stone wall fenced in nearly 30 acres that isolated the mansion from the road. It had a large fifty room mansion with all the amenities one would expect from a place like this, already furnished, and what was most important, it had a concrete slab out behind the house that was originally a helicopter landing pad, but would serve him well as landing spot for his skimmer and Nova.

Jyslin loved it, but Jason, well, he felt it was too *big*. He felt lost in the place, it was so damn big, and it didn't feel cozy. It didn't feel like *home*. But, he guessed, he'd be expected to live in a place like this, and all the spare bedrooms would certainly be useful. He left Jyslin to deal with the other issues, like hiring a staff to man the place, because he had to go back to court the next day.

It was during the training session after court that Dahnai broached the subject. "So, what did you think of the house?" she asked.

"It's too big," he answered immediately. "Raise your right hand more. Good."

"It's befitting a Grand Duke."

"I'll be sure to tell the Grand Duke the next time I see him," he said dryly. "But Jason doesn't like it quite that much. It may be a house, but it doesn't feel like *home*, you know?"

"I can understand that. Look where I live, after all, the most ostentatious, gaudy building on Draconis. Just do what I do, hon, pick the part of the place you like the best and *make* it your home. The rest of the place can just be the window dressing for the visitors."

"That's not a bad idea."

"Of course it's not. I suggested it."

"My, that title certainly makes you think you know everything, doesn't it?"

She gave him a look, then laughed. Then she got her butt thrown to the ground because she wasn't paying attention.

But it was a good idea. Jason and Jyslin selected a series of three connected rooms in the north wing, and declared it to be their apartment. They tossed out all the furniture, refurnished it, redecorated it, converted one room into a living room, one into an office and study for Jason, and the other into a bedroom, and moved in. Tim and Symone couldn't find anything available near the estate, so Jason and Jyslin just solved that problem by moving them into the manor. Tim didn't want to live in the manor house, so they instead moved into a guest house on the other side of the pool. After taking a look at the six room house, Jason was kicking himself that *he* didn't think of moving in there first. The cozy little house would have been perfect.

They weren't alone long, that was for sure. Miaari and Kiaari almost had a cow when they saw the place, and saw that Jason and Jyslin were living in the cavernous manor *alone*, since Jyslin hadn't started hiring a staff and Jason had been too busy fussing with the apartment to think about things. Miaari placed a call to Zaa, Zaa called Dahnai, and Dahnai got on the gravband almost immediately to the Marines. Dahnai had no idea that Jason had moved in without telling anyone, without hiring a staff, without even bringing any *security* for crying out loud, and she was angry with him over it. She moved swiftly to deploy a Marine detachment to the manor, and they quickly secured the place. The detachment commander, a bulldog-jawed Faey Major, Major Zhara Ulinne, was both efficient and discreet, posting guards all through the grounds and in the house itself, but making sure they were never ostentatious. Kiaari almost scornfully took over from Jyslin the task of finding and hiring a staff to man the house, telling her a Kimdori was best suited to dealing with matters of security...and the workers that would be caring for the private residence of the Grand Duke Karinne was *most certainly* a matter of security. Kiaari was both fast and effective. Jason had to go to court again, but when he got back early in the morning of the next day, Kiaari had a full staff of maids, cooks, butlers, maintenance

personnel, and groundskeepers already hired. And she was training them *personally*. It seemed that she and Zhara had got together and worked out a security plan for the manor, and Kiaari was training these new workers in their duties as the private house staff of the Grand Duke Karinne.

“Uh, Kiaari, why are you still here, anyway?” he asked as she came into their apartment one early afternoon as Jyslin helped him dress in the formal robes for court. “Shouldn’t you have gone home by now? We’re done with what you came here to do, after all.”

“You still need me, Jason. You hired me to help you, and just because you’re the Grand Duke now, you still need me. If I’m not here to help keep you alive, who’s going to? Don’t ever think that Trillane has forgotten about you, my friend. They haven’t. They’ll eventually try to get revenge on you for what you did to them. Major Zhara and the Marines are here to handle the obvious threats and to keep the riffraff out of your hair and let you have some peace and quiet. Well, I’m here to handle the not-so-obvious threats. Kimdori know how to play the game, hon, and that includes playing defense. No assassin is going to sneak into this manor and threaten you or Jyslin so long as I’m here keeping watch over it. And now that we have a permanent place, I can set up a more effective intelligence operation, and bring in some of my people to help me,” she said, rubbing her furry hands together. “Miaari may be your ambassador to my people, but I’m still your intelligence chief,” she winked.

“I can’t afford that kind of an operation,” he warned.

“Who said you were paying for it? The Kimdori have always performed this service for the Karinnes, Jayce. It’s tradition, and you know how Kimdori are about tradition. I’m just lucky that sister Handmaiden talked Denmother into giving me this assignment. It’s a real chance to prove myself. I get to *run* the operation, not be *part* of it. For someone as young as me, it’s really rare. If I do a good job, I’ll bring even more prestige to the clan. Why, our father would almost burst from pride if he had a Handmaiden for a daughter *and* the youngest gamekeeper among the Kimdori for another daughter.”

“Gamekeeper?”

“It’s all nothing but a game, after all,” she winked. “The Gamekeeper controls the game. And Terra will be my playing field. I am the Gamekeeper of Terra. This planet’s intelligence is my responsibility.”

“And Miaari’s gonna be there looking over your shoulder,” Jason realized.

Kiaari winced and gave him a hard look. “You just had to remind me,” she growled. “Of *course* she’s gonna be looking over my shoulder.”

“Look at it as always having someone around to give you advice when you need it,” Jyslin told her.

“And someone to harp on me when she thinks I’m not doing things the way she wants them,” she added.

“That woulda happened no matter what,” Jyslin chuckled.

The manor house was entirely too big, but at least it filled up quickly. Jason brought in the rest of the house and gave them a permanent place to stay while they found homes of their own. Everyone had a room, and for a while, the place was lively and felt like home. But one by one, the ex-Marines and the former members of the Legion found houses, and moved out. But, thankfully, they all decided to live very close to Foxwood, so everyone found houses in Massechussets, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, a quick and easy commute to both Foxwood and New York, which made the Marines Dahnai sent to Earth very happy, since it put all the Karinnes in the same region, a region that they really saturated with troops to keep things safe and orderly. And they didn’t have to pay for them, either. Jason bought them their houses, using old leftover Legion funds, making sure they had a good head start.

Not everyone decided to go that route, though. Myleena decided that the action would be at Foxwood, so she went the same route as Tim and Symone and claimed the second guest lodging on the estate, which was a studio apartment over the garage originally meant for the estate mechanic. It also kept her right there on hand to tinker with the two Novas, both the one Jason had nearly trashed, which

the Kimdori had repaired, and the spare one. The Karinne dropship was also brought to Foxwood for safe keeping, and Myleena—and Jason for that matter, when he had time—was quite content to putter around on the ships at hand when she wasn't studying the *Scimitar*. In reality, Jason and Kiaari both preferred it if Myleena lived on the grounds. Given she was the only other Generation in the house, Kiaari wanted to keep them both under her watchful eye.

But, it made it more like *home* to him. Myleena was an interesting young woman, and he both liked her for who she was and admired her for her technical expertise. He liked learning from her, tearing things apart with her, and he just liked her. Having her nearby to basically chew the fat when he needed a distraction was a good thing.

And then there were Tim and Symone. They lived on the grounds, and they probably spent more time in Jason's apartment than they did in their own home...but that was the way all of them wanted it. Tim and Symone were his best friends, and Symone was almost like a second wife to him, not just someone to share a bed with when they were both in the mood, but someone to whom he felt he could talk on a level reserved for someone very special in his life, someone he trusted just as much as he trusted Jyslin and Tim. She knew less about the truth than Jyslin, but she never pushed to know more, and was content in what he was willing to divulge. But what made what existed between them go to another level was that they didn't just share when the other spouse wasn't available anymore. It was broken the night he admitted to Jyslin that he'd been wanting to make love with Symone again, despite the fact that Jyslin was there. Jyslin just laughed and summoned Symone to their apartment that very second, and sent them into the bedroom so Jason could explore his awakening desires for Symone. Then she went to go find Tim.

It was probably the last barrier that had been broken in him, and had allowed him to fully embrace the relationships he had with these two Faey women. Jyslin was the love of his life, and the woman he wanted to spend his life with, but Symone, well, Symone was a fun, entertaining woman who had squirmed her way into his libido if nothing else, and he found sex with her to be both different from sex with Jyslin and also exciting and fulfilling in its own ways. It was what Jyslin considered to be a thoroughly natural *Faey* response, two friends who had the hots for each other exploring that attraction, but in a way that didn't threaten either of their marriages. Jyslin felt the same way about Tim, finding him to be a really sexy man and a thoroughly satisfying and vigorous lover (the second best lover on Earth, Jysin had told Jason), and the four of them formed what in Faey terms was called the *amu dozei*, the *harmonious love*, a term closely related to the *amu donai*, the *courtly love*, where a single spouse shared a deep "platonic" love affair with someone outside the marriage that did not involve the spouse. What existed between the four of them involved both pairs of spouses, a combination of friendship and mutual sexual attraction that brought them together as more than just two sets of married friends.

And it sure as hell was no secret. The Faey considered such arrangements to be entirely proper, even practical, but the humans Jason governed, who were just as curious about their Grand Duke as the rest of the Imperium were, well, it took them a little while to wrap their minds around the idea of him having a mistress, who happened to be a married woman, and to whom neither his wife or her husband didn't object. There was the certain "scandal" when it came out that Jason was cheating on his wife with the wife of his best friend, but Jason didn't address it, knowing it would just fade as soon as Jyslin was asked about it. And boy, did it fade fast. When a CNN reporter threw that question at the pair when they were attending a formal dinner with the delegates of the U.N., trying to startle a juicy response out of the Duchess, Jyslin just laughed and loudly shouted back that he'd damn well *better* be screwing Symone on the side, seeing as how Jyslin had worked so hard to set it up, and how *she* was screwing *her* husband at the same time.

That shocked the reporter into absolute silence. And that was probably the moment when the people of Earth learned a valuable lesson: *never try to embarrass a Faey woman on live national television, for she will destroy you.*

It even reached all the way back to Draconis. Two days after that dinner, Dahnai decided she

wanted to have her training out on the grounds, since it was such a pretty day. In reality, she did it *only* because of the sunlight. She knew that the Draconian sun caused his skin to turn blue, and she was taking almost devilish delight in trying to accelerate that process as much as she possibly could. Any time he was at court and it was both warm and sunny outside, Dahnai demanded outdoor exercise, had even taken court outside to the lawn on three occasions.

It was a pretty day, he had to admit. The air was sweet and warm, but not hot, and that damned sun shone down on them with invigorating energy. She *knew* he couldn't shield himself from the sun and train her at the same time. She was wearing what Jason would call a spandex training suit, a skin-tight pair of thigh-length shorts and a bra-like halter, both glossy black, while Jason wore a traditional Aikido *gi*, with the loose shirt and flared, pleated leggings, whose baggy, flowing volume would deceive the eye and hide his motions from her senses. The back of his *gi* showed the crest of Karinne, but had also been altered with the Legion Phoenix rising from between the two waves, under the single star. Luke had doodled the design a couple of weeks ago, and Jason liked it so much he was having a new signet ring made with the design, and had it embroidered on the back of his training *gi*. When that ring was complete, he'd present it and a new banner to Dahnai, informing her that the House of Karinne was adopting a new crest.

"You're looking a bit dusty, old man," she teased as they reached the sand-covered training field, where the Imperial Guards practiced hand to hand combat. There were guards in attendance that day, as there usually was when he trained, ten guards wearing tank tops and workout shorts, standing in a wide ring around the Empress and her mentor. The guards were officially defending the Imperial person, but unofficially, they were watching Jason and learning. His non-lethal martial techniques that would immobilize a foe without killing were of great interest to the guards, for they could perform those movements while in armor. Jason didn't mind their observation, and had even been approached by the Captain of the Guard, a middle-aged woman with her blond hair done in a crew cut, about who she could contact on Terra to find someone that could teach her guards some of what Jason knew, since Jason didn't have time to be training the guards himself. He was happy to give her some names of several respected *sensei*, any of which would probably be happy to move to Draconis to become a tutor.

"You do this on purpose, don't you?" he accused as he put his hands together. She mirrored him, and they bowed in respect to one another. Dahnai had been scandalized when he demanded this, and it almost got him executed when the *Siann* learned that he was demanding the Empress *bow* to him, but he had been absolutely adamant. She was not bowing to him as a subjugant in political power, she was bowing to him as her *teacher*, and it was a tradition so deeply ingrained into both Jason and the art that he flatly refused to teach her a *damn* thing without the bow. She was paying her respects not to him, but to the *art*, and she'd better damn well respect it. If she had no respect for the knowledge he was willing to impart upon her, he *would not* teach her.

"Of course I do," she winked. "I think you'd be devastatingly handsome with blue skin. It's the only part of you that I'd care to change. And since I *can* change it, well, here we are."

"Bitch."

"Bet on it," she teased. "What are we doing first?"

"You realize that I look utterly ridiculous at home," he pressed. "*Only* my face and hands are turning blue. Look!" He pulled his sleeve up, showing a rough boundary between his bluish-tinged skin and his beige skin. "It makes me look like I'm diseased!"

"Well, if you don't want a two-tone color scheme, I suggest you take off your shirt so you can tan out to a uniform color," she winked.

"Sometimes I hate you, Dahnai."

"Then I'm doing my job as your Empress," she teased. "Are we practicing forms, or are you teaching me something new?"

"Forms, of course."

They practiced the base forms with flowing grace, as the Imperial guards watched on, as well as quite a few of the *Siann*, watching from windows in the palace behind them. “I saw an interesting little blurb on INN this morning,” Dahnai noted as she turned with grace, sweeping the right arm out wide. “I didn’t know you had an *amu dozei*.”

“Symone,” he answered, taking a single step forward. “She’s married to my best friend, and she’s my wife’s best friend.”

“The human telepath?”

“Yah.”

“I’m surprised you got into that kind of a relationship. You seem to resist your Faey heritage and embrace your human one.”

“It’s hard to resist Symone,” he said dryly.

“How does your friend see it?”

“Same as I do. He’s much more adapted to Faey customs than me,” he answered honestly. “I had trouble with it at first, when Symone and Tim came to live with me, and I was separated from Jyslin. Symone wanted to fill Jyslin’s shoes while we were apart.”

“An entirely proper thing,” Dahnai noted.

“That’s how she saw it,” Jason agreed. “I didn’t see it quite that way, at first. It took Symone time to wear me down, but I guess over time, it wore me down far enough. I like Symone. She’s fun, she’s funny, and she’s a great person to be around. When I admitted to Jyslin I’d been having fantasies about her, but wouldn’t do anything about it because, you know, Jyslin was home, she just laughed and sent Symone to me. Ever since then, whenever I feel like sleeping with Symone, or she wants to sleep with me, we do, and whenever Tim and Jyslin wanna do it, they do. It’s been kinda fun, really.”

“So, you can bend that towering human morality with enough motivation,” Dahnai chuckled.

“More like with the right people,” he corrected her. “I think I’d be jealous if my wife were sleeping with anyone other than Tim. I understand their relationship. I know that they knew where the line is, and Jyslin knows that me and Symone are the same way.”

“Well,” she said as they finished the first exercise. “That makes sense. You have to bring Symone and Tim to court some day. I’d like to meet them.”

“Bringing Symone to court would be a *bad* idea,” he said immediately. “If she didn’t mortally offend some Grand Duchess, she’d have them all dancing in a congo line.”

Dahnai laughed. “I have no idea what that is, but it sounds...interesting.”

“Symone’s a unique girl, with a lot of natural charisma and a happy-go-lucky attitude that makes people relax around her. It’s part of what attracts me to her. And I’d never be insane enough to bring her here. Symone would not gel with the *Siann*. They take themselves *way* too seriously to be ready for Symone.”

“Now I *really* have to meet her,” Dahnai laughed. “Sounds like my kinda person.”

“She wouldn’t be afraid of you at all, Empress,” he warned.

“That’s why I want to meet her.”

He practiced with her through what he’d taught her, then taught her new techniques of locking an arm of an adversary. “Always remember that the momentum of your enemy can be your ally, if you use it correctly,” he instructed. “An arm in motion will remain in motion. That’s energy your opponent has expended that he can’t change without effort. You use that against him. Attack me,” he instructed.

She did so. He never told her *how* to attack, or what to try. He always allowed her to do whatever she wanted to do, which really annoyed her. She *really* tried to hit him or knock him down, but he never failed to conquer her attempt and put her into whatever lock, hold, or throw he intended to teach her. It was the way he was taught, and it was the way he taught her. She hovered back a moment, her feet tamping, and then she lunged forward with an open hand, trying to grab him and perform the armlock he taught her last week. He intercepted her and twisted her around, then snapped her arm

straight out and bent her wrist, which sent her to one knee in a hiss of pain. “This is the straight arm wristlock,” he instructed, applying more pressure, which made her gasp. “With this hold, you incapacitate your foe by forcing them break their own wrist or dislocating their own shoulder to return to the vertical base. With a little nudging,” he said, torquing her arm, which literally put her on the ground to avoid either a broken wrist or a dislocated shoulder, “you can take someone off her feet. This hold is about leverage, Dahnai. If you can’t gain the leverage on your opponent’s wrist with the initial hold, it can be safely broken.”

“I see, if you didn’t hold my arm the right way, I coulda bent my elbow and got inside.”

“Exactly,” he said, letting go. “Always remember to bend the wrist *away* from the elbow, and get the foe’s arm straight with a good snap before you apply the hold. If you bend into the elbow or try to apply the force on a bent arm, your foe can just curl in the arm and retaliate.” She regained her feet, and he stepped up and waved in a guard. The guard would be their practice partner, someone Jason could use as basically a practice dummy to demonstrate the moves where Dahnai could see it from the outside. This guard was one he’d never met before, a tall, willowy woman with dark green hair tied back in a ponytail, just like Dahnai’s bronze hair was, wearing a Marine tank top undershirt and a pair of workout shorts. Just like Jason and Dahnai, she was barefoot. He put the guard in the lock, showing Dahnai the form without applying any force, explaining it in more detail. “And always remember the basic focus of the art, Dahnai.”

“Flowing movements that complement the momentum of the enemy, using it against her,” she recited.

“Exactly. Just like any hold, it can be broken if your foe moves the right way. Understand this, move with your foe, keep your leverage. Thank you,” he told the guard.

My pleasure, she sent in reply, bowing to them both and stepping back to the outside.

Jason let Dahnai practice the lock on him for the next hour, letting her learn the nuances of the hold and the necessary ways to move to maintain it, for he broke the hold on her several times to show her how it could be done. When their time was up, Jason and Dahnai bowed to each other, and she caught a towel a guard threw to her. “Nice workout. What’s on your schedule tomorrow?”

“I’m meeting with the president of Russia tomorrow,” he answered as he took a drink from a water bottle. “Er, well, in about nine hours,” he corrected, looking at his watch. “This time difference is driving me nuts. Dracora time is ten hours ahead of local time for me now. It’ll nearly be dawn by the time I get home. It makes me tired.”

“I can relate, believe me,” she grunted. “Want a room? You can take a nap and then just go straight to your appointment.”

“Nah, Anya’s going back to Earth, and I’m catching a ride with her. Besides, they’re expecting me back home. Jyslin worries when I don’t come home when I say I will.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

He and Anya rode a Suralle shuttle up to a large personal ship, Anya’s personal yacht, that then started out for the stargate. But it didn’t reach it without incident. Klaxons started blaring in the passenger cabin, where he, Anya, and two of her aides were seated in what looked like a living room, albeit a small, cozy one, and the windows sealed over with armored plates. “What’s going on?” Jason asked in surprise.

Strap in, your Graces, we’re under attack! came a frenzied sending from the bridge. Fearfully, Jason helped Anya to one of the foldaway chairs attached to the bulkhead and strapped her in, but then he was thrown to the deck with her aides when the entire ship rocked violently, sending him flying. They were being fired on! Anya’s yacht had been hit!

It was a terrible feeling, being helpless like that. Jason was a passenger here, and all he could do was climb into a seat beside Anya after helping Anya’s young aides strap in, wait, and worry. He could feel the ship lurch this way and that, as the pilots of the yacht executed evasive maneuvers, and felt the

ship shake when it was hit. The klaxons continued to blare, and Jason could hear the roar of rushing air behind the door to Anya's compartment, telling him the hull had been compromised and the yacht was venting atmosphere into space. A second, heavier door came down over the first one, a bulkhead door to isolate their compartment from the hull breach.

Where is the Navy? Anya sent in fear. *Why aren't they helping us?*

We were far out from the planet, halfway between the planet and the stargate, it's gonna take them a couple of minutes to get here, Jason answered. *I just hope your pilots are good enough to keep us alive until they get here.*

I hope so too, she sent in fear, grabbing Jason's hand in a crushing grip.

[Contact. KMS Defiant mainframe. Establishing link.]

What the *fuck*? His gestalt wouldn't be establishing that kind of link unless the *Defiant*—

Holy Trelle! the pilot sent. *What the hell kind of ship is that?*

What's going on? Jason sent.

A cruiser just jumped in out of nowhere, it's getting between us and the cargo ship firing at us! It's shielding us from enemy fire! The pilot sent an image of what she was seeing, and Jason gasped in surprise.

It was the *Defiant*!

Through the pilot's eyes, he saw what happened next. The cargo ship tried to come in underneath the battle cruiser, and then a sustained streak of angry white light erupted from the port wing of the cruiser, raking across the blocky cargo ship. The beam sliced it in half like paper, shearing through the hull, which caused the ship's atmosphere to explosively decompress, pushing the two halves apart. Plasma vented aggressively into space, and then the stern half of the dead ship exploded violently of its own volition, sending the bow section spinning off into space. Who was manning that warship?

[Are you alright, Jason?] a voice came, relayed to him by communion with the gestalt

He gasped. It was *Miaari*! She was using the *Defiant*'s mainframe to communicate with him by communion!

[Miaari? What the hell is going on?]

[I'm aboard the Defiant. When our scanners detected the attack, Jinaami warned Denmother, and she sent us. I was on board, overseeing while my people ran a shakedown cruise to make sure it's operational, when she ordered the Defiant to immediately jump out and assist. Are you okay?]

[We're fine now. Thanks for the help.]

[Your ship has been hit. Is it in danger?]

[It seems alright. The hull was breached, but we seem to be alright. The pilots aren't telling us to use the escape pods.]

[Naval ships are coming. We'll let them assist you, my friend. We'll jump back out and let them wonder just what happened and who we are. Faey love mysteries, so we may as well give them one they'll never solve.]

[Miaari, that's mean,] Jason had to tell her with an audible chuckle.

Two things happened after that.

First, the mystery of the *Defiant* swept through the Imperium like wildfire. Nobody had ever seen a ship of that design before, and it was an absolute mystery where it had come from and where it had gone. Video of it firing on the cargo ship was analyzed eight ways to Sunday by both the government and the media, showing the Imperium a weapon that they'd never seen before, some kind of cutting beam so powerful it sliced through the hull of the cargo ship like a hot knife through butter. The video angles they had at first only showed the strike on the cargo ship and then the ship jumping out almost immediately after the ship was destroyed, but later, the media got their hands on surveillance video showing the cargo ship attacking a Suralle personal yacht with almost reckless disregard, in plain view of the entire planet. It was such a maniacal thing to do! It showed the Suralle yacht being hit, and then

the mysterious triangular warship jumps in like an avenging angel, destroys the ship attacking the Suralle yacht, and then jumps out, almost like a ghost.

That was the public reaction. The reaction in the *Siann* was much more reflexive. They all knew that someone had ordered that attack, had tried to kill either Anya Suralle or Jason Karinne, but the sheer nerve of it, to attack in the open at the home planet...that took some *balls*. Nobody knew who did it, because the destruction of the independent cargo ship, privately owned, had killed the crew and destroyed the computer. They searched the remains of the bow section, but found no evidence of who had hired the ship to try to kill members of the *Siann*. That made them all nervous, unsure if they were talking to someone who had just done something one just did not *do* out in the open.

The second thing that happened was that Dahnai was utterly *pissed*. She had a much more thorough education in history, and had recognized the triangular design of the mystery warship that had saved the Suralle yacht immediately. The *Defiant* was simply a much larger version of the *Scimitar* with a flatter bow and narrower stern, and Dahnai had not missed that comparison. She called Jason back to Draconis before he even got back to Earth, making them change ships and turn around and come back, and she *grilled* him in her private quarters. She knew that ship was a Karinne ship, and it had shown up to defend him from attack. She was through playing games. She wanted the truth, and she wanted it *fucking now*.

This was not the light probing and entertaining game that Dahnai usually made of it. This was the Empress of the Imperium making adamant demands of one of her subjects, but Jason stood silent. He would not answer her. He would not betray his word. He stood in silent vigil for nearly three hours, eyes forward and unmoving as she yelled at him, threatened him, waved an order to yank Karinne's charter in his face awaiting her signature, even summoned a mindbender to stand at the door, waiting for her order to drag him out to be interrogated, but he would not move from his position, nor would he even give Dahnai the tiny victory of saying a single word.

In the end, he wore her out. She leaned back on her desk and crossed her arms under her breasts, giving him an ugly look. "Look at me," she demanded. He had been standing there with his eyes forward the entire time, and when he refused, she bent to him by marching into his field of vision. He felt her mind brush against his, but she found nothing but emptiness when she tried to look inside him. He had been using the same trick he had used against Jyslin so long ago, entering a meditative state that suspended all outward thought, giving him the same sense of telepathic presence as a toaster. "I *know* that was your ship, Jason," she told him flatly. "You salvaged more than just your *Scimitar*. And you are going to *answer* me. You're going to tell me what you know of the Karinnes, and you're going to bring that ship out and let me board it and look at it. It may not be today, but you will. That's a *promise*. If you thought I was bad before, honey, that was just play. I was amusing myself. But now it's not a game anymore. The Shovalle Empresses that sat on this throne before me always ignored the Karinnes, had let them play their games on their own, as long as they kept doing their research and feeding new ideas and new technology to the Imperium. They *knew* the Karinnes weren't releasing everything, and that was one reason why they were destroyed. When war was declared, the first thing the Shovalles did was order the immediate and total destruction of Karis, even going so far as to leave their own territory undefended to muster a battle fleet big enough to do it. If Merrane hadn't have gotten there first, the Shovalles would have been the ones to destroy Karis. But the Merranes did it because they couldn't afford to let the Karinnes side with the Shovalles. Even then we knew that the Karinnes were *much* more dangerous than they pretended to be. We knew that whichever side they took was going to win the war because that side would have the Karinne telepaths and the Karinne technology, so they had to either be brought over or destroyed. If they weren't going to side with the Seditionists, they were too dangerous to be allowed to survive. If you read history, you know that the first thing that happened at Karis was the destruction of the planet. After that, when the Shovalles showed up, the largest naval battle in Faey history that took place over the planet. Both sides had brought huge fleets to destroy the Karinnes, and they met head to head right there. That battle actually

decided the war, because it seriously crippled the Loyalist fleet. The Loyalists won the battle, but they lost too many ships, and in the long run it cost them the war.

“I’m not going to make the same mistake my predecessors made, Jason. I’m not going to just smile and look away as the new house of Karinne picks up where the old one left off, and plays its own little games. The Karinnes will either be a part of the Imperium, or they *will not* be a part of the Imperium,” she said with intensity.

Jason looked at her. “The Imperium isn’t *ready* for the Karinnes to be part of it,” he told her evenly, in a low tone. “When the Karinnes can *trust* the Imperium, then the Karinnes will be a part of it. If I handed that ship over to you, what would you do with it? You’d take it apart, learn how it works, and build more of them. Then you’d use them to make war on anyone and everyone around you. The Karinnes vowed to never allow that to happen, and *I am a Karinne*. They withheld their true technology from the Imperium because the Imperium would have done nothing with it but make war. I will honor the sacred traditions of my ancestors, because I agree with them completely. The truth is, Empress, you aren’t *ready* for what I know. Faey are violent and aggressive, and though I love the Faey people very much, I detest their negative aspects. You have so much technology, so much culture, so much advancement, and all you do is make war, even on each other. I’m not going to indulge the worst parts of the Faey, Dahnai. I’m not going to help you become better killers. We will not give you new tools to use to make war on others and each other. Until then, until the Faey evolve past their need to conquer and dominate everyone around them, the Karinnes will *never* be a willing part of your system. Remember that, Dahnai. If you can’t accept that, then you’d better kill me right here, right now, because I would rather die than betray the duties I accepted when I took the title of Grand Duke Karinne, duties to *more* than just you.”

She was silent, for a *long* time, just looking at him, her fingers tousling her long bronze hair around and around and around her fingers. Then she sighed. “Go home, Jason,” she ordered. “Just go home. And don’t come back until I summon you.”

Jason nodded and walked to the door. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” he told her over his shoulder. “I only wanted to be your friend, and I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

“I’m sure you mean that,” she answered.

That really depressed Jason. He liked Dahnai, he liked her a lot. It had hurt him to tell her that, had been forced to tell her the truth, but he’d had no choice. If he didn’t tell her *why* he wouldn’t tell her what she wanted to know, she would never stop. But at least now she understood his position. She knew he took his word very seriously, and that he was dead serious that he would take those secrets to the grave with him.

It didn’t stop her from trying someone else, though. She summoned Myleena to Draconis, *alone*, and Jason paced the entire time she was gone. She returned almost two days later, pale and shaking, and she clung to Jason for almost an hour after returning. She told him that Dahnai interrogated her *personally*, trying to force her to reveal what she knew of Karinne technology, but Myleena refused. Dahnai hadn’t used mindbenders, she had only used her own authority, trying to make Myleena obey her Empress. “It was the hardest thing I ever did in my life,” she said weakly from Jason’s arms, after crying herself out. “Since I was a little girl, I was trained to obey my Empress, and there she was, in the flesh, asking me questions I knew I couldn’t answer. It was a nightmare! I almost had a nervous breakdown. That’s when she finally showed me some mercy and let me come home. Oh, Jason! I was so scared!” she said, then she started crying all over again.

Jason expected some kind of Imperial retaliation for Karinne’s defiance, like taking Foxwood from him or recalling the Marines, but nothing like that materialized. Jason was banished from the *Siann* for now, no longer in the Empress’ favor, and it gave him time to quietly reflect on how hard it was going to be to be the gatekeeper of the secrets of the Karinnes from a woman so hell-bent on breaking that gate down and taking what was inside. He realized that it might even cost him his life.

So be it. He meant it. He would take those secrets to his grave. He would never turn them over to

Dahnai. *Never.*

He buried himself in other matters for a few weeks, riding shotgun as the United Nations finally seated its delegates then opened for business as the Earth's governmental entity. Jason introduced the Terran Charter to the legislative body, the constitution of Earth that was basically patterned after the American constitution, and it was passed. Each country then had to ratify it; once three quarters of them ratified the charter, it would become the law of the land. It established two separate parliamentary houses, and the Secretary General would act as the main executive, but with Jason over him as the Grand Duke Karinne, who could overrule the Secretary General and act with the same executive power if necessary. The Secretary General would be like a Prime Minister, with Jason being the royal figure above him, like the British system. But unlike the British system, Jason's position was not ceremonial. He held real power.

The ratification took about two weeks. And it passed.

And so, the United Nations then reorganized itself. Selected delegates would sit on the Security Council, like the Senate, while elected officials would serve in the General Council, which was like the House of Representatives. The World Court was installed as the judiciary in planetary matters, and the Secretary General was installed as the direct executive, with Jason sitting as the ultimate executive, holding the same title of Grand Duke in the charter as he did in the Imperium. The United Nations took over the responsibilities of diplomacy, defense, and the oversight of the farming effort on their side, working closely with the Suralles to ensure that food was produced at the required quotas. The new Farm Worker Act was passed that limited the amount of time a single person could work on a farm, paid them for their work using the portion of the profits that went to Earth from the farming, putting all that money back into the farming effort, and instituted mandatory classes in agriculture for every child and working-age adult on Earth. Everyone, from the richest to the poorest, would learn about the farming business, so they'd have an understanding of what they'd be doing when their turn came up to serve on a farm.

The new system was quite satisfactory, to both the Terrans and to the Suralles, because it protected the productivity of the planet while boosting the morale of the people that would be doing the work. The law made a farmer an important, prestigious occupation, and an occupation that may be hard work, was also a certain path to prosperity with its high financial returns for the effort given. It made everyone happy.

Jason was quite happy himself, because now that Kim Duk Moon, the Secretary General of the United Nations, was in place and on the job, Jason could take a break and relax a while. Kim could just call him and send over anything he wanted him to read. And since he was exiled from Draconis, which let his skin return to normal without exposure to the Draconian sun, he really didn't have that much to do for a while.

So, he snuck out in the middle of the night, and visited Karis. He had a good visit with Cybi, caught up with the Kimdori on their repairs, which were almost complete, and saw that the floral reclamation project that Cybi had started on the island was already taking root on the small continent of Benja, where the old capitol of Karsa was at. The capitol was already 40% rebuilt, and all sixteen of the reclamation robots were on Benja, planting grass and trees to restart the ecosystem. They'd already carpeted nearly a quarter of the small continent with green, and Cybi projected that the continent would be revitalized in 1.3 years.

They'd really done a good job. All three of the warships were now fully operational, and since there were no Karinnes to man them, Zaa had commanded that Kimdori would man those ships, and keep them on constant standby. The attack on Jason, which the Kimdori admitted they couldn't track back to the house that ordered it, had spooked the Denmother, and she ordered those warships ready to jump out of the system at a moment's notice to defend the Grand Duke Karinne if he was attacked again.

He returned home to Foxwood to find a sashed member of the Empress' personal staff waiting for

him, sitting sedately in a chair in a receiving room, chatting with one of the maids who had brought her a cup of tea. She stood up when Jason came into the room, bowed to him, and gave him a small, rather elaborately carved wooden box. She then bowed to him again and waited for him to open it.

He did so.

What was inside made him drop the box like it was a live snake and back away from it. He put his hand over his heart as he tried to remember how to breathe, staring at the object that was inside, almost expecting it to jump up and attack him.

“Are you alright, your Grace?” the maid, Patty, asked.

The emissary said nothing. She just bowed her head and looked, then she shook her head and sighed.

Within the box was a single white flower, looking like a small rose. It was a *mey*, a rare flower, and its significance was not lost on Jason. It was an ancient tradition, practiced by the Empress and the Highborn Grand Duchesses.

By sending him that flower, Empress Dahnai was informing him that she was taking his hand in marriage.

He didn’t bother changing out of the work clothes he was in. He didn’t call for a skimmer or yacht to come get him. He jumped in a Nova and took off, and he flew at breakneck speeds into space, past the moon, through the gate, and down to the Imperial Palace. He had no clearance to land, and that nearly got him blown out of the sky. He stalked past everyone, even pushed guards out of his way, until he was standing in front of Dahnai’s door to her quarters. It opened before he could knock, and he found himself staring at her, wearing one of her thigh-length robes, splayed across her couch watching the vidlink. “Have *you lost your fucking mind?!* ” he demanded in a thunderous shout. “Are you insane? You have to be insane, Dahnai! What hair got up your ass to do that!”

She gave him a slow look. “Come in. Shut the door,” she said, then she looked at one of the guards. “Leave us. *Now,*” she ordered in a tone that would brook none of the usual objections when she ordered the guards out of a position to protect her, especially right now, when Jason looked of half a mind to charge across the room and strangle her. The three guards filed past Jason and out the door, and the two guards who had been flanking it closed it, but not without worried looks into the room.

“Sit down,” she told him, wagging a foot at the chair facing her couch.

“Answer me, girl,” Jason said hotly. “Are you *nuts*? Do you have any idea how much trouble *both* of us are going to get into if people find out what you did?”

“I gave it a lot of serious thought, Jason,” she told him evenly. “And I told you to *sit.*”

He blew out his breath, then decided to obey. She was being very calm, very rational. Clearly, she had a reason for this insanity, and he wanted to hear it. So he sat down. “Tea?”

“Skip the pleasantries and get to the point,” he demanded.

“Alright, the point. The point, Jason, is the very trouble that will start because of it. You think I don’t know how the *Siann* will react when they find out I’m engaged to a Terran? They’ll have a conniption. There’s gonna be angry shouting, protests that I’m disgracing the throne, sneers that I’m introducing the wrong blood into the royal line, the whole pod of *chaba* nuts. And that’s *the point*, Jason. Who I marry shouldn’t matter, but it does. It’s probably going to start a war,” she admitted evenly. “The Shovalles and Dorranees will use it as a pretext to try to take the throne. Hell, even the Trillanes might take a shot at it, Maeri will say that I’ve gone insane and she didn’t deserve the punishment I laid down on her.

“Clearly, I’m dragging you right into the middle of it. You’re the perfect catalyst, the handsome alien that sweeps in to steal a noble house, then woos the young Empress and makes her so smitten that she risks war to take his hand in marriage. Quite the story, isn’t it? I’m sure there’ll be literature in the libraries a thousand years from now about the doomed, tragic love between Dahnai Merrane and Jason Karinne, a love that ignited the Fourth Civil War.”

“You *are* insane,” Jason breathed in disbelief. She was going to start a war *on purpose*!

“No, I’m not insane, Jason,” she said evenly. “Did you ever wonder why I’ve been so hot about finding out what you know? Well, the simple answer is, hon, that Merrane is in a *bad* position. The other Highborn houses have grown past us, and they can see our weakness. They’re building alliances to try to overthrow us. The seeds of this war were sown over twenty years ago, Jason. I’m just pouring water on the garden and making it grow faster. This war will happen no matter what. Whether it happens now, or happens in ten years, it *will* happen. At this point, it is unavoidable. What was happening on Terra should make that very clear to you. The Trillanes were in the first stage of a plan to *start* that war. If I hadn’t have intervened, the Imperium would have been in the thick of it inside a year. It was that close. When I remembered my history and the lore about the Karinnes, I was hoping that I might be able to lure or woo or maybe even seduce something out of you that would solidify the Merrane position, some lost technology that might even the playing field and make the other houses think twice about a war. But, your little speech has made it clear that my hope was a hollow one. You are a man of great convictions, and I have no doubt you would have fallen on your own sword before giving me what I needed from you. So, if you want to blame anyone for me sending you a white *mey*, look in the mirror. You forced my hand.

“Remember what you said to me? That the Karinnes would never be a part of the Imperium as long as we are who we are? Well, that made me think. It *really* made me think. I realized that there was two ways you could approach that vow, Jason. You could stand back and do nothing, or you *do something about it*.

“So, here are your choices, my betrothed. You can do nothing, and watch the Imperium slowly kill itself, and watch the Faey who you love, but whose tendencies you hate, succumb to those tendencies and destroy each other. Or you can use those mysterious, secret Karinne technologies to stand up and say *no, you will not do this again*. The Karinnes were destroyed in the Third Civil War, Jason. I should know, my house was the one who destroyed them. Do you want to see more banners taken down from the audience chamber? Do you want to stand back and watch millions die, and then live the rest of your life knowing you did nothing to try to stop it?

“So, keep your secrets, Jason Karinne. I’ll never ask you about them again. But for Trelle’s sake, don’t stand back and do nothing. We can’t help being who we are. We can’t help but make war. The Dorranes and Shovalles can’t help but try to overthrow Merrane any more than Merrane can help fighting to retain the power it possesses. We’re like little children, fighting over the best toys in the toybox. So, be our responsible father, Jason Karinne. *Stop us* from making a terrible mistake.”

Holy *shit*. She really did think this through. She’d been ready for him, and she explained it all with an awful clarity that made her decision a coldly logical one. And part of her logic was trying to make Jason take a stand, either to side with Merrane or to rise up and decry what was coming.

It was a horrific thought. Yes, the Trillanes had been on the verge of declaring war on the Imperium, trying to overthrow Merrane. Was it truly so far gone? Were the other houses so set in their intent that it really was unavoidable?

Yes. They were. Dahnai was right. If they thought that Merrane was weak enough to defeat, they’d fall on Merrane like a pack of wolves.

He leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. Damn her. Dahnai really was smart. If she couldn’t secure his help, she was going to put him in this terrible position, pitting his morals against his desire to stay out of it, gambling that his morality meant more to him than his word, that his *humanity* mattered more than his *duty*. Jason would be destroyed if he stood back and watched the entire Imperium disintegrate into a civil war, and knew that he might have been able to stop it...but had done nothing. It went against his concepts of common decency.

But what could he really do? All he had were three warships and a dead planet, and the knowledge of the Karinnes that he could not share with anyone. Even if it did destroy the Imperium, he couldn’t give them the tools to destroy. It would be a crime greater than the extermination of the entire Faey race in a suicidal civil war. He would not, he *could not*, facilitate the means by which the destroyed

everything around them.

"I...I don't know what to say. I can't answer you right now, Dahnai. I have to think."

"That's fine," she told him calmly. "I didn't really expect an answer right now. But I want you to know, Jason, I didn't send you the *mey just* to use you. It was necessary, and I don't think you'll believe me, though. I like you. You're intelligent, funny, warm, caring, and very strong. I admire you, very much. I think I could even come to love you, if we had more time and circumstances were different. To me, you're the only *real* man I've ever met, I've ever known. You've shown me who you are, not what you wanted me to see, and you've never asked anything from me or my position. You've been interested in *me*, not in the *Empress*. When I'm with you, I feel like *Dahnai*, not Empress Merrane, and you've been a very good friend to me. I can't tell you what that means to me. I could marry a man like that without batting an eye, and be content with the *friendship*, even if I couldn't have the *love*."

"I'm flattered you think so highly of me," he told her honestly.

"I'm not trying to flatter you," she told him. "I just wanted you to know that. I didn't just decide to do this off the cuff, hon. I knew it might destroy our relationship, and yet I did it anyway. Please, remember that, and remember how much I like you. Let that tell you how deadly serious I think this situation is to do something like this, to risk the wrath of the only *real* friend I've ever had. And please, even if you do hate me, know I made this decision because I couldn't see any other way. This was my last resort, Jason. Please understand that."

She looked away. He was startled; she was on the verge of tears. He had to believe her, at least about that. This wasn't she did out of spite for his defiance of her. This was something she only decided to after heavy thought, and felt that she had no other real choice. He could hate what she did, but he couldn't deny that it wasn't easy for her to do.

He had to do something. In that regard, he realized, she won. She'd made her point, proving it to him beyond a shadow of a doubt. But, she didn't need to be so rash. With some time to consider the problem, maybe they could come up with a solution to prevent a war without having to actually start one.

Besides, she was his *friend*. He had to help her, to honor that friendship, if for no other reason.

He got up and walked over to her. She looked up at him, and almost flinched when he reached his hand down. But he took her hand, turned it over, and kissed the back of it. "Take back the *mey*, and I'll do what I can," he told her. "I can't promise anything, though. I don't have half as much as you think I do, and I'll need time to come up with anything...if I can, anyway. I told you once before that I owed you, Dahnai. I'll honor that debt, as much as my duty to the memory of the Karinnes will allow. But we need more time than we'd have if the *Siann* caught wind of what you did."

"Well, then consider us un-engaged," she told him with a shiny-eyed smile. "And I'm *sorry*. I didn't want to take it there, Jason. I didn't want to risk our friendship. But I'm in a bad position, here, and I had to risk it. I don't have much choice."

"Actually, that was the only way you were gonna move me," he admitted wryly. "Because it did make me see how serious you are. But, no harm done. As long as you cancel your crazy idea about marriage."

"A girl wouldn't be crazy to want to marry *you*, Jason Karinne," she told him with a smile, taking hold of his hand and patting it fondly. "So, I can count on you?"

"You can count on the fact that I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise how much help it'll be," he told her.

"Fair enough," she told him with a smile. He moved to return to his seat, but her hand grabbed hold of his and pulled, stopping him. "No. Don't leave. I want you to stay."

"I was just going to sit back down."

Stay with me, she sent, her eyes pleading. *I'm anxious, and I'm worried, and I'm lonely, and I just nearly destroyed the only true friendship that I've ever treasured. I need you right now. Please.* She

looked longingly up into his eyes. *Please. Stay with me tonight. Show me you forgive me. Don't leave me alone. Not now. I have to know you forgive me. Show me you forgive me. Please, show me you forgive me.*

He couldn't really say no. She was the Empress. Besides, she was *gorgeous*, she wanted him, and he felt true compassion for her. He could see that she was offering sex as an apology for her actions, and though it wasn't necessary, he also saw that the weeks of suppressed attraction to him had boiled up to the surface. She wanted to sleep with him to prove that she was sorry, to make sure he forgave her, and to more deeply cement their friendship, to take that next step that Faey friends of the opposite sexes eventually took, a step she had resisted taking for weeks. He saw it for what it was, both an apology and a test, to see if he wanted to take their friendship to that next step.

He sat down beside her, leaned over, and kissed her, giving her her answer.

God, what a *woman*. He'd had sexual relations with three Faey women in his life, Jyslin, Symone, and Songa, and two of those were platonic partners...but those two platonic partners didn't prepare him for a night with Dahnai. Hell, the all-giving intimacy he shared with Jyslin almost didn't prepare him for Dahnai.

She didn't cross the boundary and threaten his marriage vows with Jyslin, but she came *damn* close. She was a very prolific sender when she was having intercourse, very "vocal," very strong, and Jason found himself having to remind her there was a line she couldn't cross with him while they were having sex. Repeatedly. She kept pushing it, pushing the boundary, seeing how far she could go. Symone was a sender too, but she respected that line. Dahnai, so used to taking anything she wanted from her sexual partner, wasn't used to being rebuffed, and couldn't quite get herself to back off. After all, no man, not even a married man, had the balls to refuse the Empress anything she wanted...except for Jason.

There was that, and there was the raw, elemental, pure *sensuality* of her, a responsiveness and indulgence of the senses he only experienced with Jyslin, that made their night very intense. She was a heavy sender, sharing her pleasure, her sensations, her desires, and while that pushed the boundary of mental joining that was the sole realm reserved for Jyslin, it did make it much more intense than the casual sex he enjoyed with Symone, who didn't do so with half the power or clarity. Dahnai was a very powerful telepath, that had to be part of it. She could send stronger and with a more detailed transmission of the myriad sensations and textures that made up her senses and her pleasure than Symone could. Dahnai's sending had almost crossed the line, but Jason couldn't deny the intense pleasure it brought to their lovemaking.

And there was her body. Jason felt Jyslin was still the perfect woman, but Dahnai gave her a serious run for her money, with her height, and her long, long legs, and smooth, soft skin, and her perfect blend of delightful female softness and muscular strength. She had the sexiest body in Dracora, and Holy Lord above, did she know how to *use* that body.

It had been a memorable night for him. It was morning now, the guards were back in the room, and he was tangled up with Dahnai under the covers, in her bed. She had a firm grip on him even in slumber, a leg thrown over his and a hand draped over his chest, fingers curled around his shoulder as her head rested against his other shoulder. He could feel every inch of her skin that was touching his, taking special note of the breasts pushing up against his side and the tickle of her pubic hair against his hip and upper thigh, feeling her with a surprising focus of sensuality awakened in him from the night before. He yawned and blinked, then lifted his head to see a guard in three of the corners, all of whom were looking at him with mischievous eyes.

Shut up, he sent in a surly manner, which made all three laugh silently, for they had no voices.

"Stop harassing my guards," Dahnai whispered from his shoulder, "and go back to sleep."

"I'd rather you sent them back out," he whispered.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him, biting her lip as her hand slid down his chest to fondle

him, and then grinned at what she was feeling. She lunged up and gave him a hungry kiss. *Out*, she commanded mentally, since she was too busy kissing him to speak.

Your Majesty, you have court in an hour, one of them reminded her.

Who gives a shit? Now get out, his cock is hard, and I'm not gonna insult him by doing nothing about it, she snapped, pushing Jason's head down to the pillow as she threw the covers off and slid on top of him. That embarrassed Jason a little bit. She may not be willing to have sex in front of her guards, but she sure didn't seem to mind exposing his erect penis and deliberately mounting him, her lips never leaving his as she kissed him with hungry passion. *Hurry up, for Trelle's sake! You're wasting my sex time!*

Yes, your Majesty, came the amused reply.

After two very pleasureable hours, the guards were finally allowed to return to the room. In with them came a small army of maids, standing near the bed waiting to help the Empress dress while she laid splayed on top of him, kissing him absently on the neck. "Time to go back to reality," she whispered, then giggled. "I'm so glad you forgive me. Want to come back tonight and forgive me again?"

"I think I'll be spending tonight apologizing to my wife for vanishing."

She laughed. *Fair enough. But we gotta do that again, hon, that was some awesome sex. Some of the best I've had.*

It was fantastic, he told her. *And I'd love to do it again.*

It's a date then, she grinned, licking him on the nose. *Let's get dressed. I'm already late for court. I just want to know one thing.*

What?

Why now? I've been sensing your interest for a while, and you've kept your distance. Why act on it now?

Because of your amu dozei, she answered as a maid started drawing her a bath. *That showed me that you're okay with some Faey customs. I decided before I met you that I'd honor your Terran traditions, so I considered you out of bounds. But then I find out you're sharing with a friend. So, I figured, if you're willing to have buddy sex with your amu dozei, you wouldn't have an issue having buddy sex with me. I am your friend, after all, and you're right, I've been wanting you for a few weeks now.*

Well, I have to say thank you for considering me before yourself. That was very thoughtful.

You're welcome. I'm glad you didn't mind, or I'd have missed out on some hot sex. I almost can't wait for the next time.

The first thing he did when he got home was apologize to Jyslin. He told her what happened, telling her everything. She was a bit shocked that Dahnai would do that, but when he explained her reasoning, she actually nodded. *Yeah, I could see that. She was trying to pull you into it on her side. I'm not too surprised that she thinks it's gotten so bad. After what Trillane did here, it was like a big warning sign.*

I know, and she more or less blackmailed me into taking sides, he sighed. *I'm really torn up over it, love. I have to honor my duties as the Grand Duke Karinne concerning what I know and the responsibility it represents, but I love the Faey, despite your shortcomings. I can't just stand back and let this happen. The Karinnes must do something this time. I just don't know how, or what to do.*

So, why did you stay so long?

She, uh, wanted to apologize.

Oh. Was she any good?

Jyslin!

Seriously. She's one of the sexiest women I've ever seen, lover, with her great tits and her long legs, and she really works out a lot. Does she fuck as good as she looks?

I refuse to answer that, on account of I might get smacked, he sent defensively.

She laughed. *So she was that good. Tell me. All the lurid details,* she giggled, worming herself into his arms, resting her elbows on his shoulders. *Every pant, moan, thrust, and position.*

Now you sound like Symone, or the twins.

When some other woman can make my husband's knees weak, I want to know how it was done, Jyslin sent with a grin. *I have to keep competitive, you know.*

Like anyone could compete with you.

Mmmm, say that again, she sent, leaning in and kissing him.

After apologizing to Jyslin, enthusiastically, Jason paced the manor for many hours, considering the problem.

It was a very complicated one. He had duties to the Karinnes that had to be upheld, the utmost of them to remain as the keeper of secrets. But, he had to admit, he would be a terrible human being if he could find a way to either stop or delay what was coming, and did nothing about it. Dahnai had threatened to trap him into that position to force him to make a decision, and though it was pretty drastic, her action showed him how desperate she was and how serious she felt her vulnerability was.

Dahnai didn't seem like a weak monarch, but that was his personal sense of her. She was a strong woman, but that's not what this was really about. This was about the top houses of the Highborns getting so powerful that they had the military and political clout to challenge the Merranes for the throne, and that would lead to civil war. If the Dorrans and Shovalles allied, they could do it, but both houses wanted the throne for itself, so they were as much enemies with each other as they were with Merrane. Trillane proved that. They had been on the brink of making a gambit for the throne all by themselves, without any alliances or help from any other house. Trillane wouldn't just be facing the Imperial military, but the militaries of all the houses loyal to the throne. That was *very* gutsy, but it proved Dahnai wasn't being overly silly or cautious. A single house was going to take on the entire Imperium, and Maeri may be ambitious, but she wasn't stupid. She had to believe she had a viable chance at victory. She probably believed that the Dorrans and Shovalles would capitalize on the Trillane rebellion to try to take the throne themselves, which was why they'd been working on hamstringing the other two houses, getting them out of the way.

Any way you looked at the Trillane scenario, they all ended the same way: civil war.

Any way you looked at the situation with the Dorrans or Shovalles, it always ended at the same result: civil war.

The political infighting between those three houses was probably the only reason there wasn't already a civil war being waged right now. Each house knew it had to eliminate the competition for the throne once they took Dahnai off of it, so they were busy fighting each other. This was giving Dahnai precious time to get ready for it, to try to muster the Merranes, build the Imperial fleet, and get as many houses as possible to commit to stay on her side.

And he promised to try to help. He really couldn't see what he could do. He had no military, just the technology of the Karinnes...which he had solemnly vowed never to hand over to the Imperium. He had to keep that promise.

The more he thought about it, the fewer ideas he had. He eventually had to admit that he was stumped, and needed some advice. And there was only one person he could trust enough to ask for that kind of advice.

He didn't know how to go about contacting Denmother Zaa, so he asked Kiaari to try to get in touch with her and let her know that Jason needed to talk to her. Kiaari told him she'd take care of it, and boy, did she. Two hours later, an Imperial Marine shuttle secured permission to land, and a lone Faey woman wearing the uniform of the Marines disembarked. Jason only had to take one look at her to know it was a Kimdori. She was brought to him immediately, and when she spoke, it was with Zaa's voice. "I bring a message to you by courier, your Grace," she told him with a graceful bow.

“And instructions to deliver it to you only in private.”

Naturally, Zaa would know how to play the game.

In his apartment, Zaa resumed her normal form, sat down with him, and they talked. He told her about what happened, and ruefully tried to convey the way he felt about the situation. “I’m trapped, Denmother,” he said helplessly. “I want to help, but I can’t go back on my word, and I really don’t want to arm the Imperium and let them loose. That would be a crime of cataclysmic proportions. But I can’t just let them destroy each other. That’s something I couldn’t live with. I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t. What do I do?”

She just smiled at him. “Every day, I am more certain that we could not have found a better man to place on the seat of Karinne,” she told him with a warm, toothy smile and a pat on his shoulder. “Your compassion is as much a credit to you as your resolve, and your adherence to duty. But this is not a hopeless situation, my friend. The Kimdori have seen the very same thing as Dahnai, who is a clever and capable woman whom I respect. We have had many debates on the matter, and have come to the conclusion that it is impossible to change the Faey. They are an immature, arrogant, violent species. They have their bright spots, but they are also too dangerous to be left unattended. That is why we interact with them. The Kimdori work to keep them under control, to prevent them from boiling forth from their borders and waging war on everyone around them. By keeping them focused inward, it keeps the rest of the galaxy safe from them. It may seem cruel, but understand that as we keep them focused on each other, we also try to mitigate their activities, preventing them from warring with each other, holding a shifting peace within their species. Since the failure we suffered that was the Third Civil War, and the loss of our Karinne cousins, we have debated our methods and have decided to take a more active hand, should this situation rise again.

“And it is about to rise. There is much you can do to help without betraying your duties to the house, Jason. The first of which is to know that the Karinnes *can* take sides. Always before, their obsession with the Program blinded them to the realities of the Imperium. *You* are not so blind as they. If you do not want to give them Karinne technology, then *use* Karinne technology *for* them, but also keep it *away* from them.”

“The warships.”

“The warships,” she nodded. “The *Defiant* himself is more than a match for any Faey battle cruiser. He could probably battle an entire squadron and have an even chance of victory. Karinne armor technology was *highly* advanced, they utilized automated damage control in the form of roaming robotic repair units that could respond quickly to any battle damage, and they developed shields using Teryon technology, which are resistant to metaphased weaponry. And of course, his weaponry, even by today’s standards, is highly advanced, beyond the Imperium. His particle beam projector will penetrate any armor the Faey possesses, and that is but the strongest of his weapon systems. If those who wish to plunge the Imperium into civil war understand that the Karinnes will side against them, and bring to bear the ancient secrets entrusted to the line to aid the Empress, they will be much less inclined to make an attempt. It will require you acknowledging that you hold those secrets, and will require you to take a stand that will put you in personal danger, but it would frighten the other Highborns into thinking twice about declaring war. We have learned over the years that one of the few stimuli to which the Faey will respond is overwhelming force. That is how Dahnai maintains her position, with the threat of force. But her force no longer frightens the Dorranses, Shovalles, and Trillanes. You must add to her force, Jason. Only then will the other houses back down.”

“So, I should make an open declaration of support?”

“At the very least. Then make it clear that the mystery ship that saved you from the attack was *yours*, and hint that you have more that will join the Imperium to combat any challenge to Imperial authority.”

He had to laugh. “I’ve hated the Imperium ever since the subjugation, and here I am, about to openly support it. What a fucked up world.”

Zaa smiled. "Reality is often a living paradox," she told him. "I would also make another suggestion."

"What?"

"If you are to openly support the Empress, you make all those who hate her your enemy. You must not follow the path of your ancestors and ignore that threat, Jason. You need an army, and a navy. Build more ships," she told him. "Build a house fleet. Three ships may be enough to cow the Highborns for a few months, perhaps a year, but it will require *real* force to maintain that fear."

"We don't have any money or facilities for that, Denmother. And I don't have anyone to put in them."

"Silly boy, the Kimdori will help you," she smiled. "The Kosigi lunar base includes a shipyard facility, and my technicians are restoring it even as we speak. That is where the ships you have were built. The Kimdori can help you build those ships. Merely say the word, and we will retrieve the plans for the cruiser and destroyer class ships, and begin construction as soon as the base is restored. It *will* require that a new biogenic plant be built, though. We lack the ability to build biogenic systems. But we can get the ships on their way to completion and refit them with biogenic systems once a new biogenic manufacturing facility is operating."

"Okay, where do I find the people?"

"Right here," she told him. "This planet might be owned by the Imperium, Jason, but these are *your* people. They will support you. Teach them. Train them. They can be just as effective as a Faey military so long as they aren't close enough for the Faey to attack them telepathically. Put them in a ship, and they are both safe and effective."

"I never thought of that."

"They are not your only option, my friend. You are a charismatic and capable leader, both of humans and of the Faey. You should not overlook the *Faey* as a potential military force. Commoners have no allegiances, my friend, only to themselves and the pay they are given for their service. Loyalty is the issue for you, but I am sure you could find ways to secure their loyalty. One of your most endearing traits is your ability to instill faith into others, my friend. Use that gift. Lure Faey commoners to come work for your house, using whatever means you can. Hire mercenaries to serve as your house army until you can build a true army of your own. It would only benefit you, for you will be hiring trained workers that can immediately benefit the house."

"I'll try."

"Very good. And there's one more thing, Jason, something that will help you in many ways."

"What is that?"

"You are the resurrection of the Karinnes, and that name still echoes through this galaxy, Jason. It is the legend of science and the memory of harmonious advancement, where races from all over the galaxy could find a place to come together and learn, a place where there were no factions, no enemies, only students of science. Reopen the Academy. Build it here, on Terra. If a Karinne builds it, the scientists from civilizations you've never heard of will flock here, to restore that legendary place of learning. With a new Academy, you gain access to new ideas, new technologies, you become a major player in intergalactic politics, and you become a *powerful* voice within the *Siann*. And believe me, after what happened after the Karis Academy was destroyed, *no one* would attack this planet without being ready to become hated and reviled for thousands of years. Even to this day, the Merranes have blood enemies in many races and governments for what they did to Karis."

"Like the Urumi."

"Like the Urumi," she nodded. "I think if they had it to do over again, they would not have been the ones forever attached to that stigma. They would have let some other house take on that infamy. Rebuilding the Academy restores the Karinne name in the galaxy, it brings you many new ideas and options, it opens new diplomatic channels for you as you deal with other governments, and it gives you a place where you can train *your own* people to support the house."

Jason scratched his chin, pondering her words. It certainly would be advantageous. “Will the Kindori help?”

“My friend, we won’t *have* to help. Simply announce that the Karinnes wish to rebuild the Academy, but lack the funding to get the project underway. You will have money *pouring* in to help you. The Merranes have lived with the dark taint of their actions for over a thousand years. Give Dahnai a chance to atone, and she will jump on it.”

“But I don’t want to be tied to anyone, like I owe them for it.”

“She would not expect it,” she sniffed. “Jason, everyone in the galaxy understood that the Karinnes kept strict neutrality. Financing the Academy would bring them no favors from the Karinnes. It did not in the past, it will not in the present. Though you will publicly take sides in the Imperium, and the Imperium financed the rebuilding of the Academy, to them, that is an *internal* matter. As far as the rest of the galaxy would be concerned, it would be restitution, atonement by the Merranes for past sins. And besides, after what happened to your ancestors, they will understand that the *new* House of Karinne will not make the same mistakes as its foremothers. They will not care. Trust me.”

“I do, Denmother. I may need your help with the plans, and finding someone to run it.”

“I know of a Faey that would make an outstanding High Dean of the Academy,” Zaa told him. “Her name is Ayuma Indarre, and she is one of *you*. She is one of the ones we considered for the task, but declined in favor of you. She was a Major in the Imperial Marines who specialized in the administration of the Corps, but she currently is employed by the Makati, administering one of their smaller universities on Makan. She is a bureaucrat, but she is a *good* bureaucrat. She knows how to run a research operation due to her experience in her current position, and she is a Generation, so she is someone in whom you can confide about the true nature of the Karinnes and the Academy. I will give you her contact information, and you can extend to her an invitation to apply to operate the Academy.

“That does remind me, my friend. I will be sending the order to quietly make contact with the other survivors of Karinne, and bringing them to you. I will wait until after you get the Academy project under way, and then we will be bringing them to you. It is time to restore the House of Karinne, and that can only be done by reforming the house from its survivors. And you should institute a policy here to gather up the human descendents of the non-Generational Faey and fold them into your house. A swelling of house members will help put you in a position of strength.

“But for the other matters, I will make some inquiries and find you some people to advise you. Clearly, you will need a builder, and to consult the scientific community to find out what the Academy needs to function. I will see to it.”

And boy, did she. Jason had to agree with Zaa on every point. The only way to discourage the Highborns from civil war was to basically scare the piss out of them, make them see that they were going to have a major fight on their hands if they tried it. So, Jason decided to accept Zaa’s advice and do what she suggested.

Firstly, after Dahnai sent him a message telling him he was permitted to return to court, he offered her a tour of the *Defiant*. He did so privately, but when the Empress went anywhere, everyone knew, and knew where she was going. So, the *Siann* was watching and INN had cameras going to catch the Empress and the Grand Duke Karinne departing in an escorted dropship, and then it rendezvoused with the sleek, mysterious ship that had been fueling a firestorm of controversy for weeks since it appeared.

That was his public declaration. Now the *Siann* knew that the mystery ship belonged to him, and his offer to let the Empress board it was telling them all exactly where his loyalties lay.

That was the public display. But the reality was different from the public image, and that reality affirmed itself as soon as the dropship was out of public view.

Dahnai was bitterly disappointed when she found out he wasn’t even going to let her off the dropship. So, they sat in the landing bay for three hours, playing Queen’s Swords with Dahnai’s guards.

That was his private declaration to Dahnai. He would help her, but he would not give her *anything*, not even a *look* at forbidden Karinne technology.

The dropship returned to Dracora, and Dahnai publicly thanked Jason for a wonderful tour of his amazing ship. She played it perfectly, and Jason could see the uncertainty in the eyes of the Highborn leaders. Now they knew, knew that that mystery ship with its formidable weaponry was a salvaged Karinne warship, and it was at Dahnai's beck and call. The mystery of the Karinnes wasn't something that most people knew, but the Highborns would know just enough to know that that ship was a wild card, know enough of their history to know that the Karinnes had technology they didn't share with the rest of the Imperium. Being in the highest ranks of the Imperium's power structure, they would have access to that information, and he was sure that if they didn't know, the Kimdori they would hire to seek out the truth would tell them just that.

It was played with a subtle hand, but the message certainly was not lost. They now knew that Jason had access to more of the lost Karinnes than a single research vessel, and he would use those resources in support of the Empress. They had no idea what else he had, what other technology or equipment he had managed to recover, but now he had to be taken into account in any plan they might hatch to take the throne.

After court, Dahnai invited him out onto the practice field, to return to training her in Aikido. He hadn't packed his training *gi*, so he was forced to wear a pair of shorts that Dahnai had had scrounged up for him, and nothing else. She wouldn't *let* him wear anything else. She wore her skin-tight spandex workout suit, and after their last meeting, he had to take a moment to really admire her toned body. While he taught her, he told her about Zaa's idea of reopening the Academy, but passed it off as his own idea. Dahnai didn't know about the personal relationship between him and the Kimdori outside of his public friendships with Miaari and Kiaari.

Wow, that's a great idea, she told him honestly. It would go a long way to healing some old scars between the Imperium and some other governments, too. How far have you gone with it?

I asked, uh, Miaari if she could look into gathering some people to talk about it. Engineers and scientists, you know, to see what we'd need to put into the Academy to make it workable, and the engineers who may build it there to work out the details. She's working on it right now. I'm not sure where I'm going to find the money for it, but it's something that I have to do. It's important, both for the present and to carry out my duties to the house. Restoring the Academy is a task I was given by my ancestors, and now that I've got Terra basicly up and running, I can get to work on it.

Well, I think it's wonderful. What will you need?

What do you mean?

Name it, and it's there for you, honey. Money, experts, materials, you name it.

Well, I'm not going to commit myself to one backer, Dahnai. I've got a press release all ready to go out when I get home, making my intentions public. I want more than just the Imperium to know what's going on. Before it was destroyed, the Academy was a place where scientists from all over could come to research, and students from any race or government could come to learn. That's what it's going to be again. I want it to be a community effort to rebuild it.

Well, count this part of the community in, she told him immediately. I'll talk to your Miaari, and have the best engineering firm on Makaan put on retainer. When you have your summit, you'll have the best damn engineers in the galaxy there to work up a plan to make it happen.

Wow, thanks, Dahnai.

I'm not just doing it for you. If Merrane helps restore what they destroyed, maybe some people will get off our backs, she sent with a frown. And I can see a light hand in there, Jayce. If you restart the Academy, hell, you're basicly wrapping yourself in a a suit of armor. People would think real hard about going after you.

Yeah, I thought of that too.

She grinned at him. You're maturing real fast, babe. I think in a few more months, you'll be as

feared in the Siann as Semoya Dorrane.

I don't have much choice. It's learn fast or go down in flames.

It's the best learning tool, she sent sagely as they bowed to each other. I'm gonna look forward to this now.

Why? It's no different than before.

The hell it's not. After you beat the hell out of me out here, I'm taking you back to my room so you can make it up to me. I already ordered the guards out of my bedroom, she purred, giving him an open leer.

And so you get to learn the first lesson all over again, he sent dryly. Keeping your mind on what you're doing. Every time I catch you daydreaming, you're gonna regret it.

Bring it on, sexy, she taunted, crooking a finger at him.

Zaa had not been wrong yet to Jason's recollection, and in her advice to him, she maintained her perfect record. She had been beyond right in how people were going to respond when he went public with his plans to rebuild the Academy on Earth. Almost immediately, the Empress herself released a statement saying that the Imperium considered the restoration of the Academy to be a top priority for both the Imperium and House Merrane, and was funding the operation...and they would spare no expense. Though there was no outright apology in that statement, the contriteness of the wording made it clear that House Merrane was accepting responsibility, and wanted to make it right.

It got some attention from *outside* the Imperium as well. Jason received messages from four different outside governments, the Alliance, the Skaa, the Bari-Bari, and a species on the other side of the Alliance called the Veruta. All of them said in their messages that they supported the idea of the rebuilding of the Academy.

With Kumi's help, they formulated responses and sent them off, but another one came in while they were doing so.

"Demir's sword, this one's from, shit, I have no idea who it's from," Kumi complained, reading the message. "It's from some government I've never heard of before. The Confederation of the Nine Colonies? Who the hell are they?"

Don't ask me, Jason answered, taking it from her and reading it. I'm kinda surprised, really. I didn't think so many would remember something that was destroyed fifteen hundred years ago.

Well, hand me that handpanel.

He did so, and she hauled off and smacked him on the back of the head. "Ow!" *What was that for?*

For fucking every Trelle-damned woman in the Imperium but me! she snapped. *Really, Songa? And the Empress? Shit, babes, I was in line first! Where's my chance?*

Songa needed me, and you don't say no to the Empress. Besides, you're still in the doghouse, girl, he told her. *I'm not done with you yet over that naked picture.*

You can really hold a grudge, she growled.

I have not yet begun to hold a grudge, he answered. Now, where are we gonna find tables?

I hate you.

Fine. Tables. Find. Go.

Bastard.

Count on it.

The third issue, well, that was an issue, and it ran him afoul of Kumi, and also caused some unexpected problems within the *Siann*...and it gave him his first taste of dealing with the dark side of another house.

That house was Trefani, who basically owned a stranglehold on Faey mercenary contracts due to their deep involvement in organized crime.

It was a rather interesting situation. When Jason started looking for mercenaries to hire, again and again, he ran into this union of sorts known as the Soldier's Guild. It was an agency of sorts that pushed contracts out to mercenary companies, and Jason found out very quickly that mercs were a bit wary of taking contracts that the guild didn't touch in some way. Jason saw how this worked pretty quickly, and saw that Trefani was using a kickback scheme to make money off anyone who wanted to hire mercenaries, and were making sure that any mercs that didn't want to play their game had too many hassles to make a living out of it. They either joined the guild, or they got boned. And once they were in the guild, the Trefanis earned their percentage off their mercenary contracts.

Kumi had almost rebelled when he started looking at ways to get around Trefani and hire soldiers directly. "Babes, that's a *bad* idea," she told him flatly. "You might do alright fencing with Dahnai, but she's civil. You're opening an entirely different *kaba* nut when you start fucking with the Trefanis. They will put the hurt on you, and they won't care that you're the current favorite of the Empress in the *Siann*."

Jason blew Kumi off, but after a little more time, he realized that she was basically right. It was affirmed when Yila Trefani took him aside in open court and mentioned that she'd heard that he was trying to hire unguilded mercenaries, and she did not even *pretend* to be delicate about the matter. "You won't find a single merc willing to take on a contract outside the guild, Karinne," she told him in an ugly tone. "And if you keep trying, someone might decide to offer out contracts *on* you rather than *for* you. Understand?"

"Why, Yila, are you threatening me?" he asked mildly.

"Keep doing what you're doing, and you'll find the answer to that question, Terran," she told him icily, then she stalked off.

"What was that about?" Weia Saenne asked curiously, walking over to him and watching Yila stalk off in a snit.

"I do believe I just did the one thing that you're not supposed to do."

"What is that?"

"Threaten to cost the Trefanis money."

She laughed. "That's usually not a good idea. They're one of the largest Minor houses, Jason. Nobody crosses them, because they find ways to make you pay without ever firing a shot. They have their hands into so many things, you'd be amazed how deeply they can fuck you when you piss them off."

"So, Yila has decided to do the one thing she shouldn't have done," Jason said with a narrow-eyed look at her retreating back.

"What's that?"

"Piss me off. If she wants to play a game of *chicken*, I'll be more than happy to take her on."

"What is this game, *chicken*?"

"It's a game Terran children play. The first one to flinch in the face of rapidly approaching danger loses. If she wants to put the screws on me because I'm threatening to get around her little monopoly on the mercenaries, well, I'll just go get my box of toys," he said, flexing his fingers in an ominous manner. "We'll see who flinches first."

Weia laughed. "Sounds like I need to get a seat and watch this one. It sounds very entertaining."

"It won't last long. I must ask you something, Weia."

"What?"

"I noticed Yila wears a pretty expensive dress. Is she one of the stuck up types? You know, one of the Highborn wannabes?"

"If you're asking if she would be very angry if you embarrassed her, the answer is yes, Jason," she answered.

"Oh, I don't *do* embarrassment, Weia. That's kid stuff. My area of expertise is *humiliation*. Yila Trefani is about to get both barrels of it, right in her face."

Weia gave him a startled look, and laughed so hard she almost fell over.

The Trefanis were basically the mob, and Jason knew enough about the mob from movies, documentaries, and books to know that they were a combination of a light touch and a heavy fist. They moved with subtlety, but when it came time to get their money, the enforcers showed up with baseball bats. But it was also about *appearances*. The Trefanis had to keep up the appearance that they were above-board, and that was where Jason decided to attack them. They had legitimate businesses and legitimate interests, and those fronts for their real activities could only function so long as they maintained their appearance of respectability.

The day after court, Jason did three things. First, he called in Myleena and they spent an entire day and night building some new toys. Second, he called in the Kimdori to deliver them. Then, thirdly, he put up an open advertisement for professional soldiers to interview with House Karinne, and he *specifically* stated that any mercenary company that was affiliated with the guild would not be considered for the jobs. And on that open posting, he offered a *very* appealing salary, almost half again as much as a mercenary might make with another house. And without the guild there to take its cut, the mercenary would get to keep it all for herself.

The money burned Kumi up. “We’re riding the border between black and red ink here, Jayce! We can’t *afford* to hire mercs at the salaries you’ve promised! We’re almost broke!”

“Sure we can, Kumi. Part of the Academy budget appropriations includes security and defense. I can’t defend the Academy without an army, can I? It’s a valid expense. I’ve already asked Dahnai, and she said it was. We’ll just attach the mercs’ salaries to that blank check that the Imperium wrote for the Academy. The *Imperium* will be paying them, not us.”

Kumi was about to say something, but then she laughed. “Holy shit, you’re right. Let me go fill out some contracts!”

Yila Trefani, naturally, heard about this almost immediately, and orders were issued. Trefani enforcers were out and about making sure no merc even *thought* of going against the guild and trying to hire on, even going so far as to put people in the spaceports, watching for anyone going to Terra that wasn’t a Suralle.

Yila never knew what hit her.

The Kimdori did their part perfectly. Their job was to deliver the packages in a way that made it impossible for them to be traced back to Earth, and make them appear to be real packages sent to real businesses for real reasons. They weren’t, of course, they were all sent to the various front organizations the Trefanis used to hide their activities, fronts the Kimdori knew about and willingly disclosed to Jason. Going after businesses on Trefani-controlled planets was useless, so instead, Jason had the Kimdori target the most important front companies to Trefani illegal activities on Draconis, including the home office of the Soldier’s Guild.

Every one of them got to meet the Friendly Puppy.

The Friendly Puppy was a rather fiendish little robotic animal, built like a puppy, with a big, floppy tongue, large ears, and an insufferably cute face and demeanor, covered in fake yellow fur. Jason had intentionally made them look like Odie from the *Garfield* comics. All the people who opened the packages thought they were adorable, taking them out and putting them on desks or tables. None of them had any idea just exactly what it was or who sent it, but they really didn’t care, for it was so *cute*. Each Friendly Puppy also came with a little remote control that was a small black box with nothing but a single red button on it, a button that had an internal blinking red light, and *Push Me!* scribed around it in flowing, cheerful letters.

Faey, being the intensely curious species that they were, could not resist pushing the button.

Doing so activated the Friendly Puppy. The first thing it did was fire off a striated tetrayon wave that fried all moleculartronic memory in a 500 meter radius, wiping it by aligning all molecules in the boards in the same direction. Those who had panels or vidlinks on when pressing the button saw them freeze up, crash, and then die. But the Friendly Puppy wasn’t *only* about wiping the computers of the

opposition. The robots engaged then, jumping down and running in circles in the rooms in which they were activated, barking with a high-pitched *yap-yap-yap!*, and then their programming activated to make them emulate the behavior of a puppy, doing all the annoying things that puppies did. They barked at small objects fiercely. They chased their own tails. They chewed on shoes and any paper they could reach. And they followed anyone around who moved, yapping incessantly for attention, though the Friendly Puppy was programmed not to leave the room in which it had been activated. But nobody was around a Friendly Puppy for long, for while they did all these adorable things, a booming speaker in the robot's back fired off a message so loud that it made anyone within fifty feet of the puppy's ears bleed. That message, over and over again, was "THIS IS A FRONT COMPANY FOR AN ILLEGAL TREFANI OPERATION!" It repeated itself over and over endlessly, announcing to the world the secret within.

Attempts to silence the Friendly Puppy were in vain. The little robots were equipped with a Neutronium outer hull and were shock-resistant, which made it impossible to smack it with a heavy object to make it shut up. Attempts to shoot the Friendly Puppy with an MPAC or any other weapon caused it to emit a sudden high-pitched whine, like the building up of a power generator building to a crescendo, and then the Friendly Puppy fired a harmonic energy wave from both of its eyes and various emitters around its body, concealed by its fur, that gave it a 360 degree field of impact. It was one of Jason's unused ideas to use against Trillane. The harmonic energy wave caused ionic bonds in metallic elements to destabilize and come unglued; it was a design that Jason had seen in the Research and Development archives called a *metal gun*, a weapon that only attacked metal, leaving all other materials undamaged, but had never been pursued because it wouldn't work on Vanidrium and Neutronium, the two main metals of which modern Faey armor were made. The result was the metallic elements of the MPAC literally melting in the hands of the wielder, making the weapon useless, as well as any metal the wielder was wearing. And any metal around the room, too.

In the end, the Trefanis could not figure out how to stop the Friendly Puppies from generating their ear-splitting warnings, nor could they destroy them. So they were forced to bring in sound-absorbing shields and set them up around the buildings; they couldn't get the shields set up in the room, for the Friendly Puppy was equipped with sensors and would fire its metal gun whenever any plasma signature was brought within 20 meters of it, destroying its metal and rendering any equipment it contained unusable. That was how it was programmed. That made it impossible to silence the Friendly Puppy without sacrificing the building in which it was located by setting up the sound-absorbing shield from a distance.

In the end, that was what they had to do.

Yila Trefani stormed right over to him the next day, in court, as the Friendly Puppies were out there doing their jobs, and gave him a cold, evil look. "I *know* you did it," she hissed.

"Did what? I've been too busy trying to hire soldiers for my house to get involved in anything, Yila. But, if I *did* do anything, well, it certainly wouldn't be limited to just one thing. You can go talk to Maeri about that, Yila. Ask her what it was like when I was rebelling against Trillane and they had to deal with me. I have *lots* of toys, and I've had nowhere to use them. I guess if I can't find soldiers to defend my house, well, I'll have to abandon that idea, and I'll have *plenty of free time on my hands*," he said in an intense, low voice, looking her right in the eyes.

She glared at him a long moment, sighed, blew out her breath while looking at the floor, then looked at him with a grim kind of smile. "Alright, you've made your point. Call off your little pets, and I'll look the other way, this time."

"You'll look the other way any time I damn well feel like it, Yila," Jason told her in a growling voice. "I do *not* take threats lightly or kindly. When it comes to Karinne, you'd better tell all your house that we are *hands off*. You won't try to bribe us, blackmail us, or play us, because I'll come back at you so hard you'll think you were fucked by a battle cruiser. If you *ever* threaten me or my house again, you will find out how deep my toy box really is. You're not the only house that fights its wars

without using guns, and I'm a hell of a lot meaner than you. Don't *ever* forget that."

"You'd better rethink that statement," she said icily.

"Should I? You got a taste of my Friendly Puppies. How'd you like to meet my Hello Kitties tomorrow? I'm sure you'll find them *very* entertaining, at least until they start shaking your buildings apart with their torsion shockwave generators. And if the kitties don't do it for you, I'm sure you'll just *love* My Little Pony. Would you like to ride my pony, Yila? I can guarantee you, it will be a once in a lifetime experience."

She glared at him, then she actually *laughed*! "I don't think I have the ovaries to go that far. You win this round, Karinne. But you'd better keep an eye over your shoulder, because I think I found someone to keep my mind occupied."

"It's your hair, Yila," he shrugged. "You're going to look awful funny once you've torn it all out. And no hard feelings. You of all people should understand that it's only business."

Despite Yila Trefani's declarations, she actually didn't have the nerve to play chicken with Jason Karinne. Unlike House Karinne, House Trefani had much more to lose, and Yila wasn't willing to risk it. It was much more profitable to simply let the Karinnes go and stay out of the very dangerous Grand Duke Karinne's way than it was to try to milk their cut out of him. The resistance holding mercenaries from hiring on with House Karinne stopped, and things returned to some semblance of normalcy.

If only just. The brief spat between Yila Trefani and Jason Karinne showed the *Siann* that the Terran who had seemed so frightened and looked a promising target when he arrived was not afraid anymore, and what was more, he was an intelligent, cunning man who could take the nobles of the *Siann* on head to head. He knew how to play the game. He had locked horns with one of the most dangerous women in the *Siann* without even batting an eye, and he had beaten her.

After the incident with the Friendly Puppies, the *Siann* took Jason Karinne *very* seriously.

The fourth issue wasn't that hard to do. Thanks to the late Rann, God rest his soul, they already had a way to find the human telepaths, and that became the task of just about everyone else in the house. The Marines, Songa, Yohne, Myra, Meya, Fure, Temika, Ian, and Molly were given the task of finding all the human telepaths and bringing them to Foxwood, where Jason could induct them into the house, and also start them in their new school, a school run by the Marines on telepathy. The humans, Myra, Meya, Fure, Songa, and Yohne's job was to find them. The Marines and Jyslin's job was to train them.

Kumi did her part. She bought Cape Cod Community College, which was only about twenty miles from Foxwood. The school grounds were defunct and empty, so she bought it all, and that was where the new Karinne Telepath Academy was going to be until the real Academy was up and running. Human telepaths would be brought there and given a crash course in telepathy, and they'd have outstanding instructors in Jyslin and the Marines, who were all first-order telepaths. Once they were trained up to competency, they would take positions within the house, being awarded the title of Baron or Baroness.

Of course, the very first human contacted and brought back to Foxwood was Seamus, the man they'd been in Scotland to meet, and where Jason had been captured. He was a burly, short man, very stocky, with red hair and a sunny disposition. He was intrigued to find out he was both a telepath and a descendent of the Faey, and he was quite enthusiastic about the idea of learning about this other side of himself. He became the first student, and got quite a bit of attention.

But he wasn't the first for long. Fure and Songa were highly efficient using Rann's idea to find telepaths and were able to place their screeners anywhere they pleased. They also knew now where to look to have the best chance to find telepaths, so they concentrated their search in Great Britain and segments of America and Canada with large numbers of British descendents. And it worked. They were finding, on average, a human telepath a day, and Jason was meeting an optimistically endless line of nervous men, women, and teenagers, explaining to them why they were there, telling them who and

what they were, and then telling them they were going to “telepath school.” Once they graduated from the school and became competent telepaths, they’d earn their title and be placed in House Karinne as nobles, where they’d have good jobs and perks and make decent money.

And to Jason’s surprise, very few of them resisted the idea of it. Those that did resist were gently told that they really didn’t have much choice, that they *had* to go to the school and learn how to control their abilities, but they didn’t have to join the house. After finishing at school, they could go home and return to their former jobs and former lives, but they’d never get a chance to join the house again. It was a one-time offer. And they had until graduation to make that decision.

By the time of the summit, the Karinne Telepath Academy had 27 students. Five had already expressed, and were already on their way to being trained telepaths.

And Zaa did not disappoint. Before the summit, Miaari had brought to Foxwood a young Faey male with green hair and gold colored eyes, bringing him into Jason’s study as he went over some paperwork Kumi had sent him. The young man, about twenty, was very nervous, and kept staring at Miaari like she was a live snake. “Your Grace, may I introduce Erinn Heyalle, subject of House Trefani,” Miaari said.

Jason looked at him, and felt the shiver that told him that this was the first of the Generations that Zaa said she would bring to Earth. “It’s good to meet you, Erinn,” he said.

“Y-Your Grace,” he said with a nervous bow. “Can you tell me what I did wrong?”

Jason laughed. “Nothing at all,” he said. “Did the Kimdori explain anything to you?”

“They said they were bringing me here because I was a long-lost Karinne,” he said. “Am I really?”

“You are. Don’t I feel a little strange to you?”

“Well, yes, you do. I get this strange shiver when I look at you, same as when I look at Kimdori.”

“That proves you’re a Karinne,” he said. “And since the house has been restored, that means that all the lost children of Karinne need to be brought back together. So, that’s why you’re here. Erinn, I’m offering you a title and a position in House Karinne,” he stated. “You will be the Baron Erinn Karinne, and your immediate duties are going to be to learn, about your heritage and where you came from. I’ll be sending you to a school where you’ll be with the human descendents of the Karinnes that are from Terra. There, you’ll learn about the house of Karinne, and you’ll be trained in telepathy by some of the best in the business. *Real* training, not what you learned in high school,” he said pointedly. “You’ll also be trained how to use your telekinetic ability.”

“I don’t have any.”

“Yes, you do. You’re part of a, special, branch of the Karinne family line, same as me. All of us have telekinetic ability. I’m being trained in it myself, so I can’t train you. You’ll be trained by your cousin, Myleena Karinne. Once you’re fully trained, then you’ll help train others, and so on. Once we gather up all the lost members of the house and get everyone trained, then we’ll get back to the business of the house.”

“What business is that?”

“Education,” he said. “The Karinnes ran the Karis Academy, a very famous school of higher learning.”

“I remember it from my history class.”

“Well, we’re building a new one here on Terra. And that’s what we’ll be doing, running the Academy. So, what do you say? Wanna be a noble?” he asked lightly.

Erinn laughed nervously. “What commoner doesn’t wanna be a noble, your Grace? I accept.”

“Welcome to the house, Count Erinn,” Jason told him with a nod, getting up and walking over, then shaking his hand. “Miaari, could you please take him to Kumi? She can get him settled in.”

“Of course, your Grace,” she said, patting Erinn on the shoulder. “Come with me, youngling. We’re going to go talk to the girl that really runs this place.”

“His Grace doesn’t?”

“He’s just the figurehead,” Miaari said with a grin at him. “Kumi’s the real hand that controls the

house business.”

“Thanks,” Jason said sourly, giving Miaari a rude look.

Miaari laughed, a growling sound, then leaned over and licked his cheek. “I know you still love me.”

“You better be glad I do, or I’d boot your furry butt right outa here.”

The summit went very well. Seventeen scientists and research specialists huddled together with a team of ten senior project engineers from Makan Special Engineering and explained to the Makati what would be required to build a school with the same potential as the original Karis Academy. To fund the construction, Empress Dahnai had basically given the engineering firm a blank check.

For Jason, it was a Xeno class come to life. Some of those seventeen visitors were of different species. Not all of them were Faey. There was a small Beryan, several beautiful Faey, a horrific silicon-based rock-like creature that looked like a petrified treestump with arms and a head called a Stavak, a feather-winged, aviooid Shurai, and a bipedal wolverine-like creature called a Zyagya. All but the Zyagya were part of the five races of the Alliance with the Bari-Bari and the Jakkans, while the Zyagyas were an independent planet that nobody bothered to try to conquer or invite into their government because of the vicious natures of the species...very much the wolverines they resembled. They all looked different, they all spoke different languages while using translator devices, but the one thing they could all agree upon was that rebuilding the Academy was a wonderful idea. The only one that could possibly pull it off was a Karinne, a name from history whose neutrality would be honored, and a name that still, even after so long, was associated with science.

The Makati had come prepared. They’d dug up some images of the original Karis Academy, and had proposed rebuilding it in the same style. It would be impossible to perfectly duplicate the original Academy because the original had been built on a sub-tropical island. The reason it was there had been to isolate the foreigners from the Karinnes, and that wasn’t necessary here. They had researched Earth, and had put up a presentation to build the new Terra Academy, in the likeness of the original, in a similar warm climate. They had looked at several sites, and had settled on proposing building the Academy in the most geologically and meteorologically stable environment they could find on the planet that would be both beautiful and temperate, but would have enough room to grow. Given that they wanted to keep the Academy near the center of activity for the planet, which was near the planetary capitol and the base of the Grand Duke Karinne, the Makati proposed building the Academy in Norfolk, Virginia. It was a temperate location with minimal weather hazards and geological stability, ready access to existing infrastructure, a functional seaport, and was a short shuttle hop from New York and Boston, the closest large city to Jason’s manor.

When Jason asked how much it would cost, the Makati just laughed. “I have an open-ended budget,” he answered. “The project is being backed by the Faey Imperium and House Merrane. It won’t cost the Karinnes a credit, your Grace. Empress Dahnai is paying for everything.”

That went over rather well with the delegates, and it caused the summit to end later that evening on a hopeful note. The Makati had an exhaustive list and quite a few sticks of data concerning what the Academy would need construction wise, and they promised to have a first series of blueprints and design plans ready in two weeks.

Cybi and Zaa both had told him that the Karinnes were much like a separate government to themselves back in their time, and meeting with races other than the Faey reinforced that to him. The ranking member of the Alliance and one of the Zyagya approached him and asked if they could post an ambassador to Earth. When he asked why, since they had diplomats to the Imperium on Draconis, they blinked and told him that their histories told them that they had had separate ambassadors to Karinne, basically there to oversee their students in the Academy and ensure they obeyed the rules. With the rebuilding of the Academy in planning, they wanted to get their emissaries there early, so they could set up and establish the rules by which their students would operate, and also get to know the Terrans,

who were an unknown species to them. By getting familiar with the customs and behavior of the Terrans, they could better prepare their people for coming here.

Jason didn't think that was a bad idea. He asked Kumi to see into finding them some room to set up in Norfolk.

Meeting Ayuma Indarre for the first time was an interesting experience. For one, Ayuma was a mature woman, already pensioned from the Marines, with some of the lightest blue skin he'd ever seen, almost chalky, large violet eyes, and she was remarkably short, only about five feet tall. Faey were very tall by human standards on the average, and to see a Faey so short was almost unheard of. But she was a jovial woman, full of vim and vigor, and had an honest enthusiasm about the business of running things. She was a born administrator, a micro-manager with a voice that could crack like a whip and marvelous memory and attention to detail.

Zaa had arranged this meeting, and to his surprise, the Kimdori had contacted her *before* meeting him and explained a few things to her. They didn't tell her the entire truth, but they *did* tell her that she a descendent of the long-lost Karinnes, and it was a special aspect of the house that they could sense both Kimdori and each other. So, when she came to Foxwood to meet Jason, the very first thing she mentioned was that he felt just like the Kimdori did.

She was also the most *flamboyant* telekinetic he'd ever seen. Telekinetics were rare in the Imperium; only about 12% of Faey had any kind of telekinetic ability, and half of those could barely move a feather across a smooth surface without fainting. Those that had any decent ability kept it quiet, since telekinetics usually ended up in Imperial service. People who didn't want to be working for the Imperium all their lives kept it to themselves. Ayuma had no such reservations. She was a proud telekinetic, and she used her power whenever it pleased her to do so. She wasn't garish about it or flaunt it, but if she wanted to use her ability, she did. And that was that.

And it was more proof that telekinesis was truly an aspect of the Generations. He wondered if Myleena had ever thought to try.

He rather liked Ayuma. From the first word, she was totally focused on the project. She asked many questions he hadn't even considered, like how they were going to engineer and place the dorms for those who needed artificial life support to live here, what kind of disciplines the Academy would offer, how the Academy was going to manage its finances, where it was going to get its starting capital, teacher's salaries, and so on. She was also rather personable and friendly, seeming to be very demure, but he could see the resilience in her eyes when she looked at things. This was a woman with a soft voice but a steel rod for a spine, who knew when to be eloquent and knew when to be blunt. The more he talked to her, the more he realized that Zaa had carefully chosen this woman to do this job. She really was the perfect woman to run the school. By the end of the interview, he and Ayuma were laughing and talking about their personal lives.

"Well, I hope you're as engaging with the other applicants as you were with me," she said honestly as they wrapped up. "It's important for you to see how your potentials are outside the office."

"There are no other applicants," he shrugged. "You came with the a recommendation that I could not ignore. When you were recommended by that person, I knew you were the only applicant I needed to interview. And she was more than right. Congratulations, Ayuma. The job's yours."

"And who was this woman?" she asked curiously.

"Someone you might meet someday," he said in reply, giving her a slight smile from behind his desk.

"Alright, I can take a hint," she smiled. She stood up and fetched her hat by making it float from the stand by the door over to her. "Since I have the job, I'll be returning to Makan to get my affairs in order. When do you want me to report?"

"As soon as you can," he answered. "I want you here next week when the Makati present their first draft of their design plans. I think your input will be useful."

“Very well. I’ll get the date from your secretary and—“

“I don’t have a secretary,” he said, scribbling a date on a Post-It and handing it to her.

She tutted. “You need an assistant, your Grace. “Trust me. It may seem easy now, but it won’t be long before you’re buried in paperwork. A good administrator has a damn good support staff there to back her up. That’s why I’m going to try to woo my staff from Bzerr Technical to come work for me here,” she giggled. “They’re good.”

“That’s within your discretion,” he told her. “It’s *your* Academy, Ayuma. Take it and make something out of it we can all be proud of.”

“That’s a guarantee, your Grace,” she told him with a solemn nod.

Myleena, it turned out, had been keeping a secret from him. He found her in the garage, half submerged under the Karinne dropship’s drive unit, taking something apart to see how it worked. When he told her about Ayuma, and how she was telekinetic, Myleena blushed from her hoverslide she was laying on and reached out to her toolbox. The box lifted up from the ground and floated over to her. “I keep it a secret,” she confided, looking up at him with her lovely, unusual, exotic rose-colored eyes. “It’s considered rude in Faey society to be garish about it if you can do it, and if you’re *too* strong, the secret police usually draft you to work for them.” She gave him a look. “So, I take it all of *us* are telekinetics?”

“It seems so,” he nodded. “I guess they engineered it into our line.”

“Eh, makes sense to me,” she shrugged, then slid back into the maintenance panel, leaving only her bare legs visible. She was wearing a pair of khaki shorts, and he saw her legs were scratched up and scabbed. *If they could engineer us, it only makes sense that they’d add something like that.*

What are you doing, anyway?

The Karinnes used spatial engines, but their design is way different from what I’ve seen, she answered. Most spatial drives create a highly warped interior field that overcomes outside force and makes the ship move. This drive, well, translates space, kinda moves it along like a woman pulling on a rope. Where a standard ship kinda falls in the direction the engines want it to go, this design kinda pushes the ship in the direction it’s oriented. They’re more maneuverable than standard engines, but not as efficient. This ship uses more power than a standard dropship the same size. I think with a little work, I could redesign the translation engines to be better, adapt some modern standard tech and integrate it into the Karinne systems to make them less of a power hog.

Interesting.

Yah. There’s another hoverslide over there, she sent, wagging a foot off to her right a little. Come look. It’s really cool. I’ll download the specs into your gestalt from mine. Give me access.

Myleena managed to thoroughly distract him with the lure of learning more about Karinne technology for the rest of the day. Together, they completely took apart the dropship’s engines and studied them, then put them back together. Jyslin and Symone came looking for him when he missed dinner, and found him and Myleena waist deep in the top access panel of the dropship, reinstalling engine components. *So this is where you vanished to!* Symone sent up to him. *You gonna eat or what?*

We missed dinner? Myleena asked, looking at Jason. *What time is it anyway?*

Almost nine, Jyslin told her.

Jason looked at her curiously. She seemed...*anxious*. *What’s wrong, love?* he sent privately to her.

Come home, I need to tell you something.

Sure, lemme clean up and I’ll be right there.

He cleaned up quickly and returned to the apartment. He barely got in the door when Jyslin literally tackled him, bouncing him off the door and to the floor, kissing him exuberantly. *Try not to give me a concussion—*

I’m pregnant! she sent powerfully, charged with wild emotion. *Songa told me today. We’re going to have a baby, my love! A baby!*

Really? A baby? he asked, then he laughed and opened his range to send all over Foxwood. *We're gonna have a baby!* he telepathically shouted all over the area, so happy and excited that he wanted the whole world to share in the joy of the news. *Jyslin's pregnant!*

Congratulations flooded in from all over the compound, from friends and family down to the Marines stationed there to guard them. He sat up and put Jyslin in his lap, kissing her tenderly, putting the flat of his palm against her belly. *Oh, Jyslin, you just made me the happiest man in the world,* he told her with total honesty, holding her close.

Songa screened the baby, love. He's yours. I was afraid Tim might have got me pregnant in the time you were being held on Draconis, so I had her check. It would have been a scandal if I'd had a baby by Tim before having your baby. It's grounds for divorce, and I can't ever give you a chance to get away from me

That was true enough. Because of the casual attitude towards sex, the issue of the parentage of children did sometimes come up in Faey society. Babies were always considered the sole scope and responsibility of the mother, and the "father" was always the husband of the woman, even if the baby wasn't his. It was a serious insult to a husband and a major social scandal for the wife, though, for a woman to get pregnant by another man before getting pregnant by her husband; it was one of only three conditions by which the Faey granted a divorce. Fraud and adultery were the other two conditions, a marriage formed by deception, and the joining of minds with someone outside the union by one of the offenders. To Jason, it was a curious parallel between human and Faey mentalities, even if their customs were quite different. Though the Faey were remarkably casual about sex, the issue of parenting of children still mattered to them. Though a wife might have children by more than one man, her *first* child was almost always sired by her husband.

He?

Yeah, she told me it's a boy. A healthy bundle of unidentifiable cells about a month old, she sent with a grin. *She showed me a picture of it, it looks like a mutant football. But, in about eight months or so, he'll look much better.*

Well, Duchess, it looks like the family line is secured.

I want more babies, she told him immediately. *At least five, but I'll take as many as I can get. I want as many children as you can put in me.*

I don't think we have to take on the job of repopulating the house of Karinne single-handedly, love.

Who cares about Karinne? Every baby we have is another testament of our love, Jason. I want our house filled with love. I want to have your children, my love, she sent tenderly, sliding her hand along his face, over his gestalt. *I want to feel the lives we create grow inside me, again and again and again. I want to be a part of you forever.*

You already are, he answered, kissing her lingeringly.

News of Jyslin's blessing didn't stay on Earth for long. Both Dahnai and Zaa sent presents congratulating the Duchess Karinne, Dahnai sending a lovely crystal statue and Zaa sending a binding board, a ritual wooden board with the likenesses of Jason and Jyslin engraved into it, a present a Kimdori sent to a friend who was pregnant. Dahnai absolutely insisted that Jyslin make a very rare appearance at court, and showered praise and complements on her in open court as Jyslin blushed furiously at all the attention from these people she did not know...and didn't entirely like. After court, though, Jyslin and Jason were invited to Dahnai's quarters, so Jyslin could meet her in a more intimate setting. She was a little nervous; she knew much of Dahnai from Jason's descriptions and stories, but still, being invited to the Empress' private apartment wasn't something most Faey could easily accept without a few butterflies. Dahnai laughed at Jyslin's nervous demeanor after they got to her room, leading them into her bedroom so she could change out of her court robes and into something more comfortable. Two maids attended the Empress to help with the task. Jason saw that she'd had a sofa brought into her room, facing the bed, and she had them sit on it while she changed. "So, now that I

have you here, let me say congratulations again,” Dahnai said. “We don’t talk nearly enough, Duchess. Seeing as how I’ve kinda stolen your husband as my *amu dorai*, I really think we should get to know each other.”

“*Amu*—Jason!” Jyslin gasped.

“First I’ve heard of this,” he said defensively, putting up his hand.

“Well, we have enough sex to at least acknowledge the relationship openly,” Dahnai shrugged as one of her maids helped her remove her robe, leaving her with nothing but a pair of laced sandals, showing off her fantastically toned body. “The fact I fuck the Grand Duke Karinne just about every time he comes to court is common knowledge. He’s the best lay in Dracora. You really trained him well.”

Jason blushed.

“That’s all natural talent, your Majesty,” Jyslin told her, giving Jason a slight sidelong smile. “I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“It’s not just about the sex, though,” Dahnai said as she took a robe from the other maid, one of her little thigh-length affairs, and slid it over her shoulders, then she walked over and sat down on the bed facing them. “I really like him. He’s just about the only honest friend I have here. At least with him, I know I can expect an honest opinion and an outlook not clouded by what he can get out of me, and I know he’ll treat me like *me*, not like the Empress. He’s *real* to me, not just a false persona and a face he shows to me. It’s hard for me to explain.”

“I think I understand, your Majesty. He doesn’t want anything from you, and he’s not afraid of you, so he treats you like he’d treat me, for example. And you get to see him for who he is, not what he wants you to see.”

“Yeah. With him, I’m a *woman*, not the *Empress*. He’s not like anyone else I know. Does he talk about me much?”

“That’s a nice thing to ask with me right here, Dahnai,” Jason snorted.

“Some,” Jyslin answered. “He does like you, your Majesty, and he looks forward to seeing you, even if he does bitch about having to attend court. He *hates* court. He considers you a friend, but his duties as the Grand Duke means he can’t be entirely honest, so sometimes he’s worried that you’ll get angry with him. He’s still got this idea I might be jealous of you two, but he should know better than that. He always comes home.”

“That he does,” Dahnai chuckled. “I never really planned to have sex with him, actually, because I read that humans have much different attitudes about it than we do, but then I heard about your *amu dozei* friends and figured what the hell. Besides, I did something really awful to him, and I had to apologize,” she admitted with a slight blush. “Giving him some Imperial pussy seemed like the proper apology at the time. I meant it to be a one night deal, but he’s such a good lay I decided to make it more long-term. So. Now that I’ve established the groundwork, on to business.”

“Business?”

“Yes, business,” she said, sitting down. “My sources say you’re having a son. Well, I’m taking on a contract for him.”

“A *contract*?” Jason gasped.

“Yeah. I’m pregnant, Jayce,” she told them, patting her stomach. “A month and a half gone, by Rivin, the male sire the house chose to sire my children. I found out when I realized I missed my period and had myself checked out. He’s sent in here during my window of fertility every month and tries to get me pregnant, and he succeeded. It hasn’t been announced yet, but I’ll start thickening around the waist pretty soon. I’m going to have another girl, and I want her betrothed to your son.”

“They’re not even born!”

“So? This is quite normal for nobles, hon. I want a solid alliance between our houses, and a betrothal is that kind of alliance.”

“I, I’m not sure about that.”

"You don't have a choice," she told him evenly. "I'm the *Empress*. I can arrange betrothals and annul them by choice. I'm not *asking* you for the betrothal. I'm *telling* you. Your house benefits, and my house gains a *critical* alliance that might help stabilize the *Siann*. The others know we're friends and you support me, but there's always that chance you might get pissed off at me and back out. But a betrothal between our houses is rock solid, and they'll have no doubt where things stand."

"You're going too far, Dahnai," Jason said stiffly. "This is *our son*, not Imperial property!"

She grimaced. "Okay, I knew I'd fuck that up, no matter how I tried to break it to you. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to hit you over the head with my title, I promise. But I *need* this, Jason. And your son isn't going to be kidnapped and never seen again. I'm not going to steal him away the instant Jyslin gives birth to him. It's a *political* thing, honey. You *know* the the *Siann* does this. Did you think we'd pass you over? The son of the Grand Duke Karinne is as much a political entity as *you* are, and your marital status is a matter of political importance. And if you don't recall, I came *this* close to marrying you myself to get the political alliance I need," she said, holding her thumb and forefinger slightly apart.

"I don't like it," Jason said hotly, but Jyslin put a hand on his leg.

"Calm down, love. At least hear her out."

"Thank you," she said with a nod to Jyslin. "You know our society, honey. Your son's marriage to my daughter will be paper, that's it. They'll both have their own lives, the only stipulations are really gonna be that he lives in her house and he can't have an official marriage to another woman. Hell, they may actually love each other and be happy, it has been known to happen. But, if he doesn't find love with my daughter, he can still have an *amu dorai* and find true love, he'll just already have a wife, that's all. He won't be marrying until he's 25, when he's already an adult, and by then he'll understand things."

"Alright," Jason said, calming down a little. That explanation did calm things down a little in his mind, but he was still against the idea. He couldn't see marrying off his son before he was even born, without giving him a choice. But, he could see the adamance in Dahnai's eyes. He knew her well, and he could see that she was *not* going to back down this time. This was something she thought was so important that she wasn't going to give in, let him talk her out of it. He looked to Jyslin, frowning. *She's not going to back down. I think we're stuck here, love. What do we do?*

Jason, I'm not half as opposed to it as you are, she told him gently. I see things a little differently. If our son can help slow down the coming war by betrothing him to Dahnai's daughter, then I say let's do it. You told me you had to help, had to stop what was coming. Our son can help. And we will have twenty-five years to make her change her mind, she reminded him. She said she can annul a betrothal too. So, let's give her what she wants for now, and see where it goes. We'll have plenty of time to do something about it if we don't like what we see.

I'm so glad I married you.

So am I, she sent with a wink.

"I'll agree to it *only* on one condition," he said to Dahnai.

"What's that?"

"My son remains in the House of Karinne."

"What? I'm not sending my daughter to Karinne! That's a *scandal*!"

"You have to, because my son is the heir apparent," he told her evenly. "My son can't be the Grand Duke Karinne if he's in House Merrane."

Dahnai opened her mouth, then she laughed ruefully. "You're putting a *man* as heir. I shoulda guessed, *you're* a man, after all. I didn't even consider it," she admitted, tousling her hair. "I thought you'd put your first daughter at your right hand."

"Call me colloquial," he said dryly.

"Well. I guess I could see fit to having my second daughter as the High Princess Duchess Consort Shya Karinne. It'll give her an even longer, more impressive title. Second daughters always feel

cheated, because they're one place short of the throne. She can always lord that over my first born. And it'll show the *Siann* how committed I am to the alliance, if I'm willing to send my *daughter* to the house of her husband."

"Shya?"

"That's going to be her name," she said in a dreamy way, rubbing her belly tenderly. "Shya. It's a lovely name, isn't it?"

"It's very nice," Jyslin agreed.

"What's your son's name?"

"We haven't decided yet," Jyslin told her.

"Well, decide. I have to have a name for the contract."

They looked at each other. "Well?" Jason asked.

"What?"

"I want you to name him, love."

"Aww," she said, blushing. "If I get to choose, then I say we name him Rann, in honor of Songa's husband."

"Songa will be touched," Jason said, patting her hand.

"I know. I hope she likes it."

"Alright then," Dahnai said, clapping her hands. "I'll draw up the marriage contract between Shya and Rann, and announce it tomorrow afternoon. Right after I announce my pregnancy," she chuckled. "I'm glad I didn't have to fight you over this, Jayce. I was expecting one."

"If Jyslin wasn't here, you'd have gotten one."

"Yeah, that's why she's here," she chuckled. "So, that's business. Now it's time for the making it up to you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just a little something I had made up for you, baby," she said with a smile, getting up and going over to her small desk by the bed. She came up with a small box and walked back over to them, handing it to Jason. "Here."

"What's this?" he asked suspiciously. "There *better* not be another *mey* in here."

She laughed delightedly. "I wouldn't do that to you," she told him with a grin. "Open it."

He did so. Inside were rings, two golden rings. One was engraved on its flat top with the new design he'd created for the House of Karinne, with the Legion Phoenix added to the Karinne crest. The other, smaller one, had the crest inset into its top in small glittering jewels, diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, rubies, and opals. "For you and Jyslin," she told him. "I heard that humans use rings to symbolize marriage, and I thought these would be nice ones. Oh, and your ring is your new dukal signet. I've already ordered a new banner with your new crest, it should be up by tomorrow morning."

"It's beautiful," Jyslin said quietly, holding her ring out and admiring it. She slipped it onto her finger, and found it fit perfectly. "Thank you, your Majesty. It's lovely."

"Call me Dahnai in here," she told him. "You're the wife of my *amu dorai*, you can be informal with me," she winked.

"That's not very easy for me, your Majesty. I'm a commoner, I grew up with parents who'd slap me on the back of the head if I *didn't* call you 'Empress Dahnai' around them."

"You *were* a commoner. You're Duchess Jyslin Karinne now," she said pointedly. "And trust me, honey, I may be the Empress, but I'm also a *person*. That's why I like your husband so much, he *treats* me like a person. Sure, he knows when he has to be formal, but here, in private, he treats me just the way I like it. He even beats me up," she grimaced.

"You're the one who wanted to learn Aikido," he laughed.

"You don't have to be so rough!"

"Pain is the best motivation to learn," Jason said bluntly. "If you want to avoid the pain, learn. It's how I was taught, and it's how I'm teaching you."

“Well, I’m getting there.” She sat back down, leaning on one hand and looking at them. “So. I have you two here, and my schedule is clear for the rest of the day. Want to do something?”

“Usually we’d jump at the chance, Dahnai, but I have to get home,” he told her. “I have another meeting with Ayuma tomorrow, and I have to go to the *U.N.*,” he said in English, “to handle some planetary business. And I promised Myleena to help her with a few things.”

“Ah, yes, Myleena. Can I have her back now?”

“I’m afraid she’s mine now, Dahnai. She accepted a position in House Karinne. She’s Duchess Myleena Karinne now.”

“Hmph,” Dahnai snorted. “I don’t mind you handing titles out to others, but did you really have to take one of my best research engineers?”

“Talk to her about it, she’s the one that decided.”

“Yes, I should. I did mean to ask one thing. I noticed that she wears a gestalt too,” she noted, pointing at the gestalt on Jason’s face. Jason forbade the wearing of them by anyone but him off the ships, where they were necessary, but Myleena also wore one almost all the time. Like him, she was now so used to it that she forgot it was there. He’d feel almost naked without his gestalt. “I know there’s a significance there. What is it?”

Jason just smiled. “She uses it,” he said simply.

“How?”

“Well, this is Myleena here, Dahnai. She found a way.”

Dahnai chuckled. “She is clever, that’s why I put her in Black Ops. But why do you wear it? You don’t have to club people over the head with your identity anymore.”

“Because it’s my heritage. It’s who I am, Dahnai. Wearing this honors those who came before me.”

“Right. Now, that’s a good explanation, but perhaps you can tell me the truth now?” she asked, leaning on her side on the bed.

“What do you mean?”

“I know you well enough now, Jason. I can see it now when you’re lying. That’s not the *real* reason Myleena wears hers, and you’re not being *entirely* truthful with me about why you wear it. So, why don’t you be honest with me? I’d have hoped that we’d be past deceptive stances by now.”

“The truth? I told you before, Dahnai, that’s something I can’t give you.”

“How about an explanation then?”

“You’d have to ask Myleena,” he told her.

“They’re more than what my intelligence reports say they are, aren’t they?” she asked intuitively. “They do more for you because you’re a *Karinne*. And Myleena has a Karinne ancestor. When you told me she was with you last week, I had her family line researched. She’s a Karinne too. And your Ayuma Indarre, she’s a first-rate telekinetic, a trait well documented in the Karinnes. *She’s* a Karinne too, isn’t she? You’re gathering up all the descendents of the Karinne line, aren’t you?”

“It’s one of the tasks I was given by my predecessor,” he said honestly. “I can’t restore the House of Karinne without the Karinnes.”

“My question, though, is how do you know where they are?”

“That’s something I can’t tell you. And I think you’re getting too curious for your own good, Dahnai,” he said, deliberately standing up.

“Fair enough,” she shrugged, getting to her feet. She stepped up and kissed Jason, not very chastely, then took Jyslin’s hand and kissed her on the cheek after she stood up. “Come see me again, soon, alright? I really want to get to know you, Jyslin. Jason doesn’t bring you to court.”

“I don’t want to come to court,” she laughed. “He doesn’t make me.”

“Lucky you. I wish *I* didn’t have to come to court,” she snorted. “I want you here tomorrow,” she told Jason. “We have another training session.”

“Tomorrow might be hard,” he said with a wince. “I’ve got a few appointments I’ll have trouble

rescheduling.”

“The day after?”

“Now that’s workable. I might be a little late, though. I won’t be able to get here until after four your time.”

“That’s fine,” she told him. “Have you been practicing?”

“Of course I’ve been practicing. Have you?”

“It’s not easy,” she laughed. “The guards are afraid of hurting me, so it’s not easy to get them to be serious about it.”

Jason glanced at one of the guards, who blushed slightly and gave him a shy look. “Girls, you’re not going to hurt her *that* much. And if there’s no pain, there’s no motivation to learn how to avoid it. Be more aggressive. She needs partners who will help her learn, not ones that’ll just knuckle under and give her bad habits I’ll have to break later. The *hard* way.”

We are tasked to protecting her. It’s hard to try to beat her up, the guard sent contritely.

“By beating her up, you’re teaching her how to protect herself, in case something disastrous happens and she finds herself in a position where she *has* to.”

True. We’ll try harder, but it’s not easy.

They made their way home on the *Scimitar*, which was now the personal vessel of Jason Karinne, his personal yacht of sorts. After the attack on Anya Suralle’s yacht, it was decided that Jason couldn’t go around unprotected, and though the *Scimitar* had no weapons, it had powerful defensive systems and could hold out until the *Defiant* arrived to wipe out any attackers. It was now Myri’s ship, and she commanded it, where the Kimdori manned it for now. They’d even converted some of the labs into a comfortable apartment-style personal area for Jason and whoever was with him, so they spent the hour or so they’d be in transit sitting on a couch watching INN while the *Scimitar* traveled to the stargate, and then would make its way home.

That went pretty well, Jason noted. *So, what did you think of Dahnai?*

I think I need to work out more, she sent, her thought tinged with envy. *I’ve never seen her naked in person before, just seen pictures of that statue of her. Holy Trelle, is that woman built. I felt like a titless teenager looking at her. No wonder you like fucking her.*

Well, I could say that’s not the reason, but that wouldn’t be the whole truth, he admitted. *She is very sexy. She’s very intense in bed, makes every time with her an incredible experience, and she’s definitely the second hottest woman I’ve ever slept with. Now if I could just get her to back off with the sending, it’d be alright. Every single time, she tries to invade your domain, and I have to push her back. She’s very pushy that way.*

If she does, I’ll have to go smack her, Jyslin sent, bristling. *You’re my husband. She has no right trying to take from you what is mine and mine alone, even if she is the Empress.*

Well, don’t worry, love, I won’t let her. And even if you think she’s hotter than you, she’s not. You are the hottest, sexiest, most beautiful, most desirable woman in the whole universe. I’ll pick you over Dahnai every single time. What I do with Dahnai is because Dahnai wants it. I’ll admit I enjoy it, but it’s more for her than for me, because she doesn’t have anyone in her life she trusts enough to be so open with as she is with me. I also like the occasional tryst with Symone, I can’t deny that either, because I love Symone like a friend, and I understand that that’s what good friends do in Faey society. That’s what she expects, and I can admit now that I enjoy it too. I even initiate it. And I’m never jealous when you want to explore your friendship with Tim and sleep with him, because I know you like him, and you like the way he has sex. But you’re still the hottest Faey in the Imperium, and you’re always first in my heart.

Trelle’s garland, I love you, she sent with a sincere smile, leaning over and kissing him. *You know, we haven’t initiated this ship properly*, she sent, her desire tainting her thought openly.

We should do something about that, he said, reaching for the ties of her robes. *If I can get you out of this robe before we get home, anyway.*

Tear them if you have to, lover, she sent ardently. We can just get a tailor to fix it tomorrow.

Jason should learn to listen to Zaa, for she was never wrong.

The very next day, Miaari relayed the news to him.

The Trillanes were about to attack Earth.

Maeri Trillane had already issued the orders and dispatched her attack ships, and had managed to keep her plans a secret from the Kimdori until the very end, when they intercepted the orders issued to the squadron of 17 ships.

Zaa had warned him that his public stance supporting Dahnai might make him a target, and besides, the Trillanes held him *personally* responsible for their loss of Earth and the heavy punishment that Dahnai had levelled on the house. They had probably been planning this from the beginning, hours after Maeri was expelled from the palace.

The details the Kimdori had acquired weren't exact, but they had enough. The squadron had orders to attack and destroy the stargate first, severing all communications with Earth. That seemed stupid to Jason, since the gate personnel would see Faey ships attacking them...until Miaari told him that they had some intelligence that the Trillanes had procured two Skaa warships. The assumption was that the Skaa ships were part of the attack fleet, and those would be the ships that would jump out of hyperspace and attack the stargate. After that was done, they were to target Foxwood, the United Nations, and the main hubs of the farm transportation system, to cripple food production. The fleet had specific orders to find and kill Jason Karinne, turn Foxwood and the United Nations into a smoking crater, and to capture the *Scimitar* for analysis.

Those damn Trillanes. Their plan to try to take over the Imperium was exposed and thwarted, so now they were acting out of spite, trying to kill the one they felt was responsible for that failure and also to deny the Imperium the food that it needed. Or perhaps this was part of a new plan, to sow seeds of dissent in the *Siann* by starving the Imperium or making them buy food from other governments.

But the reasons for it didn't matter. The fleet had left Arctus by hyperspace, unable to use stargates else they'd be given away, and would arrive in the Terran system in a little over two days.

He had to sit down after hearing that. "Shit," he growled. *[Open a link with the Scimitar and have it contact Cybi.]*

The *Scimitar*, which was sitting in the Atlantic just off the coast, picked up his gestalt's signal and opened a relayed channel back to Karis, being the bridge by which Jason and Cybi could communicate with each other. *[I am receiving. It is good to hear from you, Jason.]*

[I wish this was a social call, Cybi. I need the Defiant, Resolute, and Sora's Pride in Terran space as soon as they can be launched. The Trillanes have sent a fleet to attack us, and we'll need them to help protect the planet.]

[I will issue the necessary orders at once.]

Jason stood up. *Kumi.*

Yah?

Get in touch with Anya. Tell her to evacuate all her people from Earth, now. Tell all Faey civilians to go back to Draconis, now. Have Orbital One evacuated. And I'll call Dahnai and tell her to pull her fleet back to the far side of the planet, so they're out of sight, and not to interfere. This is a private matter.

What the hell's going on?

Your old house has sent a squadron of battle cruisers to flatten Earth, that's what, he told her. I want everyone out from under our feet. I'm calling in our ships. If they want a war, they're about to find out just who the hell they're dealing with. Zaa warned me that I might have to show my hand.

Well, that's about to happen. They're about to find out just what the Karinnes were capable of.

Just our ships against a task force? That's a little nuts.

It's not nuts at all, girl, Myri sent from across the compound. I've read the specs on the Defiant,

and he'll kick the piss out of ships three times his size. He may only be a medium cruiser, but he's heavily armed and armored. Add in the destroyers, and that's enough to handle a Trillane task force.

Alright, alright, don't gang up on me. I'll get right on it.

Myri, get everyone assembled in the ballroom. We have to figure out who's going to be doing what.

I can command one of the destroyers, no prob, Jayce. But the Defiant is your flag. You're the Grand Duke. I'll take the Resolute, and Jyslin can command Sora's Pride.

Let's talk about that when we gather.

That turned out to be the way it was going to be. Jason did *not* want his pregnant wife taking command of a ship about to go into combat, but Jyslin was going to be absolutely immovable on the idea. The Kimdori manning those ships wouldn't fight unless a Karinne was sitting in the command chair, and Jyslin and Myri were the only ones with any tactical training. The Marines were split up among the three ships; Jason would have Zora and Yana with him, for they would be observing and training with the Kimdori to operate bridge positions. Myri would have Min, Sheleese, and Ilia with her, and Jyslin would have Maya, Lyn, and Bryn. Myleena would be on the *Defiant* as well, and Erinn, the newest Karinne, would be with Jyslin.

But the Marines wouldn't be the only ones there. Luke was a good pilot, and he demanded to go too, to learn how to pilot the big ships. Jyslin offered him a spot with her, which he took immediately. Tim and Symone were going to be with Myri, and Ian then cried foul, and was placed with Jason. The other members of the Legion started clamoring for their chance to fight as well, and Jason realized that everyone in the house was demanding a place on the ships, demanding a chance to defend what they had worked so hard to attain. So the entire House Karinne was divided up and placed on the house's only three warships, which arrived during their conference, three sleek, tapered ships that hung in the sky near Orbital One like deadly ghosts, the crest of Karinne emblazoned on their gray hulls in red.

The *new* crest of Karinne.

Those damn Kimdori, they were always prepared.

After finishing up, Jason went up to the *Defiant* in a large dropship with his complement of Karinnes, just one of many ships suddenly rising up from the surface, as the Karinne call for all Faey non-combatants to evacuate the planet was starting to be carried out. It was his first time on the big ship, and from the spacious, well appointed landing bay, he knew the ship would be very capable. Kimdori met him in the bay, and escorted them all to the bridge.

It was much different from the bridge of the *Scimitar*. The scout ship's bridge only had room for four people, but this bridge was more like a tactical command center. This wasn't just where the ship was navigated, it was also where all ship operations and combat aspects were controlled, a large, long chamber deep in the ship that held stations and consoles for 23 people. Some were ship control officers, like the navigator and assistant navigator, some were sensor officers, tracking tactical movements of a battle on a three dimensional hologram projects at the front of the bridge, to the right of the hologram showing the outside view, and to the left was the hologram of the ship itself, showing its status. It was the same setup as the *Scimitar*, and one he actually found was quite logical, putting everything one needed to see right there together and in an organized format. The captain's chair was near the middle of the bridge, with the pilot and copilot's chairs in front of him, and the engineering and tactical to each side. The captain did not control the ship via gestalt like on the *Scimitar*. Here, the captain relayed orders, which were then carried out. But, since this was a Faey ship, those orders were usually conveyed via telepathy. But the captain, being a Generation, would be in communion with the *Defiant* mainframe, a computer so sophisticated that it *almost* felt like it had a personality. It wasn't quite as sterile as the *Scimitar* mainframe, capable of more complex responses, but it was still a computer. It wasn't self-aware the way Cybi was.

The lead Kimdori bowed him, a massive, eight-foot tall black-furred Kimdori male. "I am Shevak," he said, putting his hand on Jason's neck. Jason felt that feeling of *expansion* that came when

a Kimdori was sharing, seeing what Jason knew. In an instant, the entire functional details of the *Defiant* and the two destroyers flooded into him. In that instant, he knew *everything* about the ships; their maneuverability, their firepower, their defensive systems, their capabilities and limitations. And what was more, Shevak was an Elder of martial history, one of the Kimdori living libraries dealing with tactical ship combat, just as Kerreth had been a living history of medical knowledge. In that touch came an education in the aspects of space based combat, a lesson in vectors, firing angles, angles of attack, ship movements, and fleet deployment. In that second of contact, Jason was given *centuries* of education about the arts of naval warfare. In that instant, Jason became as seasoned as any Naval admiral.

Combining those two different things told Jason everything he needed to know to command the *Defiant* and her two escort ships capably and well.

“Are you ready?” Shevak asked.

Jason nodded, and stepped up to the captain’s chair and sat down. He knew how it all worked. He knew what the commands were to use to bring up anything he wanted. He had the computer open the ship’s intercom, a curious device on a ship that was usually staffed by telepaths. But Kimdori weren’t like humans, he couldn’t send in a way that they could hear. He had to rely on the intercom. “This is Grand Duke Jason Karinne,” he called. “Shevak has passed the flag to me, and I am now assuming command of this squadron. We’ll be deploying around the stargate in a few minutes, as soon as the others are set up in the destroyers. That is all for now.” He turned and looked behind him. “All of you behind me, take on the Faey appearance,” he commanded. “Nobody can know that the Kimdori are doing this.”

They all nodded, and in unison, every Kimdori on the bridge shapeshifted into Faey, even appearing to wear the uniforms. “Zora, take the co-pilot’s chair. Yana, go to communications. Your sending will make that your best station.”

“Show me where to go please,” Yana asked as Zora scurried over to the right console in front of him, that a Faey-appearing Kimdori vacated, and as Jason got in touch with stargate control, informed them of the issue, and ordered them to cut all communications between Earth and Draconis effective immediately. The stargate was the bridge between the two worlds, and without it relaying communications through the gate and back to Draconis, Earth was cut off from the rest of the Imperium. Only local Civnet could be accessed, and what was more important, any Trillane spies on Earth now could not warn the house that Earth knew their attack was coming. The ships couldn’t be recalled anyway no matter what, because no ship could be reached in hyperspace, but it at least kept Trillane from trying to distance themselves from the attack before it even happened.

Once that was done, once Trillane was sealed off from knowing what was going on on Earth, Jason had the computer make a call to CNN. It took them all of ten minutes to patch his feed in and record it, with explicit orders not to broadcast it until all Faey were evacuated back to Draconis. “This is Grand Duke Jason Karinne, aboard the military starship *Defiant*. It has been brought to my attention that a hostile force has launched a task force to attack our planet. As I’m sure some of you have noticed, the Faey tourists and our Suralle partners have already left the planet,” he began. “I have ordered them evacuated for their protection.

“We will soon be facing an armed attack against our planet. If things go as planned, no one on Earth will ever see anything amiss, and we hope to keep it that way. Since we know it’s coming, we’re already moving into a position to repel the attackers before they can approach the planet. They can’t jump directly within striking distance of the planet, because of the limitations of the type of travel they are using. They have to jump in a distance away, and we’ll have time to see them coming and intercept them. However, in the interest in safety, the Orbital One space station has been ordered evacuated, and the Imperial warships garrisoned here has been ordered to stay close to Earth and protect it if the interceptors fail to repel the invaders.

“We know who did this, and we will *definitely* be doing something about it once we repel this

attack. But we not be engaging in war. Earth has had just about enough of war. Our retaliation will be more...subtle, than war, but no less damaging to the offending party.

"When the danger has passed, then the planet will reopen for business, and we'll be doing something about those who sent this attack against us. That is all. Good day to you."

They had two days to get ready, and that was more than enough time. Shevak had prepared Jason for this in about half a second, and Myleena had been similarly educated in the way only a Kimdori could about the both the ships and military tactics. But where Jason was given information about operations and tactics, Myleena was taught mostly about how the ships worked. She was the house's best engineer, and that was the focus of her Kimdori education. But the others could not be taught this way without exposing the Kimdori, and that was not something that either Jason or the Kimdori wanted. So, they were here to watch and learn while the Kimdori did all the work.

The only one that came close to being able to work at her chosen position was Zora. The cruiser was piloted the same way as the *Scimitar*, and Zora had already learned how that was done. So all she needed to learn was the layout of the navigation console and the handling characteristics of a ship the size of the *Defiant*. Everyone else had to be trained, and one didn't get that kind of training in just two days.

They worked at it very hard. It was hardest for Myri and Jyslin, for they were the ones in command of the destroyers, and they would be expected to issue commands when the time came; the Kimdori had fired on the unmarked cargo ship to save Jason, but they wouldn't command an attack on the military forces of another house. They would take orders to do it, but not give them. Myri and Jyslin received crash courses in ship command, but they honored their Marine backgrounds by acclimating to the jobs quickly.

And time ran out for them very quickly. At 5 o'clock in the afternoon by Foxwood time, sensors picked up two large ships outside the orbit of the moon. Cameras got images of the ships, long affairs with large horizontal wings at the stern, and what looked like a semicircle cut in half and split apart then attached to the ship's fuselage to serve as the bow. Within seconds of coming out of hyperspace, the two ships turned and started towards the stargate at high speed. The ship's computer could not identify the ships, tagging them as [Unknown] on the tactical display, but Jason's Kimdori first officer, Shevak, told him the ships were of Skaa design. When Jason learned this, the computer updated that tag to [Skaa], picking it up from Jason's communion.

The ships moved from their defensive position at the stargate. The *Defiant* moved towards the ships while the destroyers took up a new formation flanking the gate. Jason broadcast on all frequencies and in all known common transmission emulations, so those ships couldn't miss it. "Attention Skaa cruisers, you have entered sovereign Terran space without permission. You must jump back into hyperspace immediately."

There was no response.

"If you do not turn from your approach to Terra in ten seconds, you will be considered a hostile force and will be fired upon," Jason warned.

They didn't reply.

Jason ordered task force communications to open, which would also broadcast to the stargate, using a local threaded gravband frequency for tactical commands. "Here they come," Jason called. "Battle stations, people! Gunports open, bring up the weapons and shields! Myri, Jyslin, move to firing arcs, the *Defiant* will play nose tackle."

"Aye, Jason," Myri responded.

"Moving to a firing position," Jyslin acknowledged.

The two destroyers moved above the stargate and to the sides, so their weapons could see an arc of fire against the Skaa cruisers that was more than just the leading edges, while the *Defiant* placed herself solidly between the Skaa ships and the stargate, turning broadside and then rotating so the ship's belly

was exposed to the Skaa, to completely cover the gate and also to allow all three of the primary particle beam weapons to have an open firing arc. Those weapons could rotate from their firing positions, providing a full field of fire on the side of the ship where they were located. With her belly turned towards the attackers, the *Defiant* could fire all three particle beams at them. "Gunnery crews, open fire as soon as they come into range!" Jason barked, and that command was relayed to each individual weapon team that operated each weapon platform.

But the *Defiant* never got to fire a shot. The two destroyers were ahead of the cruiser, and so they came into firing range first. The *Sora's Pride* was the first to open fire, as a stream of white-hot light erupted from the sleek bow of the vessel, searing across space to strike the Skaa cruiser on the left on his display, going right through the attacker's shields. Their higher position caused the beam to strike the Skaa ship high on the bow at an angle, and that beam appeared under the ship, lancing off into deep space. The beam then raked across the attacker, shearing right through it, severing a large section of the quarter-circle pie wedge of the bow from the ship. Explosive decompression pushed the two pieces apart, and then it was hit again, a new beam hitting the ship almost dead amidships, slicing through its hull and raking across its slender middle, effectively cutting the ship in half. The *Resolute* opened fire on the other ship seconds afterward, as the ship tried to turn away, and the particle beam struck the vessel dead center in the bow, between the quarter circles, and then ripped down almost along the keel line, trying to cut the ship into two perfect halves. The beam hit something important, though, for the entire ship detonated in a fiery explosion when the beam cut halfway towards the stern, sending debris and shrapnel in every direction.

"Well done," Jason called over local tactical. "Pull back to formation and—"

"Your Grace, multiple contacts on the far side of the planet!" one of the Kimdori called. "It's a Faey battle group, 15 ships and a command ship, they just came out of hyperspace 500,000 *kathra* from the planet!"

"Well, there they are," Jason grunted. "Contact the Imperium ships and tell them to get out of the way. They are not to engage unless the attackers get past us and threaten the planet. Medaa, get us over there!"

"Course already plotted, your Grace," the Kimdori navigator answered, and the ship began to turn.

"Jyslin, Myri, follow us, the rest of the attack jumped in on the other side of the planet.

"Open the Faey parlay channel," he ordered his comm officer, and when the Kimdori male nodded to him, Jason began. "Attention Faey warships, you have entered sovereign Terran space, and you have no authorization to be here. Turn around and jump back into hyperspace or you will be considered hostile and will be met with force. Acknowledge."

"Sovereign Terran space? This is Trillane territory. The Trillanes do not recognize any spurious claim made by a defunct house over this planet! You will stand down your vessels and be boarded!"

"The hell I will!" Jason snapped. "If you want a war, little missy, you're about to be obliged. Oh, and by the way, your Skaa ships didn't even get into firing range of the stargate," he added. "We picked them off before they knew what hit them. I hope they didn't cost Trillane too much, cause they were kinda pathetic. They didn't even shoot back."

The channel was killed immediately. Evidently, that hit a nerve.

The Imperial ships were in the best position to watch what could only be called a slugfest in space. The three Karinne ships came hurtling around the planet, towards a task force of 6 destroyers, 3 light cruisers, 3 heavy cruisers, 2 battleships, and a command battleship. The three Karinne ships kept a tight formation as they lanced right towards the center of the Trillane formation, aiming right at the command ship. When the two sides got in range, they opened fire on each other. A curtain of plasma torpedos and plasma bolts rained in on the three ships, but the ships did not change course. There were spectacular explosions and flashes of light as the weapon fire impacted the ships, but zooming in showed that the weapons were hitting the *shields* of the opposing ships. Those ships had shields that could stop metaphased plasma! But those shields didn't seem to be invincible. After just seconds, the

visible flares as their energy matrices became unstable as the shields began to buckle against the attack, but then the Karinne ships returned fire. Streaks of brilliant white light erupted from the wing edges and bows of the Karinne battle cruiser and the bows of the destroyers, sustained beams of energy that struck Trillane ships and ripped through them like an MPAC round through ice. In just that initial exchange, four Trillane ships were either sliced into pieces or had crippling gashes through them reaching halfway through the ship, fatal wounds that were venting atmosphere into space. The cruiser and two destroyers pushed right through the Trillane formation, their shields failing as they were hammered in a raking crossfire between the enemy ships, but their hulls withstood the pounding, refusing to be breached. Ghostly white balls of light peppered away from the Karinne ships, some kind of short-range weapon, which punched through the hulls of the Trillane ships and exploded violently, blowing huge gaping wounds into the hulls of the enemy ships.

It wasn't all Karinne, though. The left destroyer listed in its formation as it was pounded by plasma fire, and nearly rammed a Trillane cruiser as it seemed to lose helm control, falling out of formation. The hull of the destroyer had not been breached, but the sheer pounding it had taken must have dealt shock damage to its internal systems. It continued to fire, though, its bow-mounted cutting weapon blasting into the cruiser it nearly rammed as it passed under it, then the destroyer nosed almost vertically down and started a spinning dive as it seemed to lose all control. The remaining destroyer and cruiser maintained course, punching through the Trillane formation and getting into a position to open fire on the Trillane command ship.

That was when the Imperial captains and admiral understood the Karinne battle plan, and nodded in appreciation. If those ships could stand up to that kind of beating, then pushing through and taking out the enemy's command ship, breaking the chain of command, was a smart idea. Without the task admiral to direct the formation, the remaining ships would be in disarray.

And that's exactly what happened. The cruiser opened fire on the command ship with *three* of those cutting beams, and the destroyer did so as well with its single beam, shearing massive gashes into the behemoth, a behemoth so large that the beams could not penetrate all the way through the ship. But they penetrated deep enough, and what made those beams so deadly was the fact that they were sustained. All four of them then raked through the enemy ship, tearing long, deadly lines of destruction across the hull, leaving ugly black surgical incisions in the hull that gouted flame and internal atmosphere into space. Those beams carved deeply into the huge battle cruiser, again and again, until all the command ship's lights went out, all its weapons stopped firing, and the vessel began to list. The attack had crippled it, and it was now out of the battle.

The cruiser and destroyer then broke off and dove, towards their wounded companion, as they continued to fire at the ships behind them. Six Trillane ships were either destroyed or fatally crippled, and the nine that were left continued to fire at the two ships, but did not move to pursue. Another Trillane ship was struck by one of those white beams dead in the stern, and before the beam even began to rake through the ship, the entire stern section of the destroyer exploded violently, sending the jagged remnant of the bow spinning off towards the planet. When the Karinne ships were clear of the Trillanes, zoomed camera angles showed that the ships had not come out of it unscathed. They were peppered with ugly burns, and though the hull had not been breached, it was clear that both ships had suffered damage from the head-on assault. The cruiser was no longer using weapons on its starboard side, probably knocked out, and the destroyer's movements were jerky, as it seemed to be trying to overcome damage to its engines.

The Trillane ships finally moved to pursue, sending fire raining down on their opponents, but they learned quickly that they were still in range of the enemy ship's primary weapon. The two battleships were now the primary targets, and the new angle of the Karinne ships gave them the ability to fire at any ship in the formation. Three angry white bars of energy erupted from the two Karinne ships and struck one of the remaining battleships, two striking near the bow and one in the port stern, and then they raked across, slicing deeply into the ships, shearing datalines and plasma conduits, cutting through

bulkheads, slicing across compartments, destroying equipment. An explosion near the surface of the bow near the edge on the battleship ejected debris into space when the beam erupted from the top of the hull, as the beam hit a thin enough area of the battleship to cut all the way through. That battleship immediately went dead, and it began to list as it lost engines and its ability to retain its position. The other battleship turned, tried to present the smallest aspect to the Karinne ships, but it was too late for that. The beams fired again, slamming into it, all three beams hitting the ship sternward of amidships, and they cut deeply into the bowels of the ship. It lost all power forward of the impact area.

That was when the Karinne commander broadcast again. "Attention Trillane commanders! Surrender immediately or we will turn around and finish all of you off! And if you don't think we can do it, just take a look at your command ship and battleships! You have fifteen seconds to disengage your weapons! Any ship with live weapons after that will be destroyed, because *I will call in the Imperial fleet parked by the planet to engage you!*"

They didn't surrender, but they also didn't continue to fight. The remaining ships, seven of them, turned and started running, trying to get far enough away so they could jump out. The Karinne cruiser left the two destroyers behind, as the crippled destroyer was captured in tractor beams by the other destroyer to arrest its descent towards deep space, and moved to pursue. The Trillane ships continued to fire at the Karinne cruiser, but the cruiser fired back. And where the Trillane impacted that hull and exploded, doing little damage, the return fire from the cruiser was deadly, cutting deeply into the enemy ships if not completely through them. Every ship that beam struck either exploded or careened out of formation, its inertia carrying it forward as the cutting beam disabled the ship.

In the end, only two Trillane ships managed to escape, a medium cruiser and a destroyer. The other five ships that had fled had been crippled or destroyed. And behind them, they left thirteen ships either destroyed or in grave condition.

Those Imperial ships then received a communication. Jason Karinne's face appeared on their monitors. The bridge of his ship was filled with smoke, and there was a damage control team putting out a fire behind him. "Move in and assist the survivors," he ordered. "You will secure them and rescue the crews, and tow the crippled ships back to the planet. Park them in orbit near Orbital One. They're the property of House Karinne now, and the crews of those ships are now Karinne captives, by the forms of war of the *Siann*. We claim them as the spoils of war."

"Are you in need of assistance?" the admiral of the Imperial task force, a grizzled veteran named Aniya Shevenne, asked.

"We got pretty banged up, but we're alright. We're still under our own power, and nothing happened that a day or two in space dock can't fix. You can send a ship to help tow the *Resolute* back to the planet, though. The *Sora's Pride's* engines are damaged, and it's having problems towing."

"I must say, that was a daring strategy. Almost crazy."

"Sometimes crazy works," the human said, and then he cut communications.

Aniya laughed and looked at her first officer. "Sometimes it does indeed!" she said, then laughed again.

But it wasn't as crazy as it looked, Aniya understood. That human knew that his ship's armor was enough to stand up to the Trillane weapons. He used those amazing shields to take the bite off of the initial salvo, the most concentrated of the fire, and then relied on the tough armor of his ships to let them ram right through the enemy formation and take out their command ship, breaking the chain of command. He then went after the next two logical ships that would assume command. Once those were disabled, the remaining ships had no real idea who was in charge, and their nerve broke and they ran. It was a classic military strategy, and the human had used it well.

And Aniya had gotten some great footage of it all, for the Imperial Command to study, so they could better analyze the tactical capabilities of those mysterious Karinne ships, who seemed to have armor and weapons superior to current Imperial technology, but didn't make those ships invincible, as that battle had proved. They'd lost one of their destroyers on the initial assault, the second had been

knocked out soon after, and the main cruiser itself had suffered much more damage than it looked to have taken, judging from the condition of the bridge she'd seen.

But still, it would make for some great study.

Myleena was *pissed* at him. She was still getting an idea of the damage, and though it was bad, it could have been worse.

The *Resolute's* main power was knocked out in the initial attack, and it was going to take at least a week to get it back online. The *Sora's Pride* had suffered engine damage, and the ship's engines had to be stripped down and rebuilt. The *Defiant* had taken the most damage, with power failures, blown systems, and vibration and shock damage all over the ship, where the ship's structure was exposed to the damaging jarring and vibration of the impacts on the hull. The entire starboard section had lost power, and the main sensors had been blown out during the attack. It wasn't crippling damage, but all three ships had to be put in space dock to effect repairs. And since only the *Defiant* was capable of jumping back to Karis, that meant that they had to do the repairs there, at Earth, using substandard equipment and basically having to jerry-rig everything to get it working enough to get it back to Kosigi, where it could be repaired properly.

Myleena had a lot of work ahead of her, but she was also the kind that considered the upcoming tasks heavenly. She could really get into the guts of the ships now and satisfy her need to take things apart.

The fire on the bridge had been the scariest part of the whole thing, really. It had erupted from Yana's console, and sent her down to the infirmary with some nasty burns on her face and left hand. But there were no fatalities on any of the Karinne ships, and that was a blessing. The Kimdori were too tough to injure in this kind of a situation, since they could simply shapeshift away any superficial wounds to their bodies.

Jason had the ships dock at Orbital One as the Imperial Navy towed the Trillane ships into orbit near the space station and after he checked up on both Jyslin and Myri to make sure they were alright, and started ferrying over the survivors of those ships, bringing them to Orbital One as well. They were now the property of Karinne, by the forms of *Siann*. That was the commoner's fate in a war. They were not prisoners of war, they were *property*. Commoners served the house, and commoners captured in war were like other forms of spoils, assets to be used, abused, or discarded by the victor house. All of these sailors were now the property of House Karinne. Usually, they were sold back to the house that lost them, since they had all been raised to be loyal to their original house and might be a security risk, but Jason wasn't so quick to jump on that idea. He had *planned* for this. Like any Faey, odds are these sailors were jaded in their outlook, and had no real loyalties. Sure, some of them would be loyal to Trillane, but not all of them. They would serve whoever gave them a paycheck, and here was a ready pool of trained talent that could be put to good use.

They had *no faith*.

If Jason could convince just a fraction of them to join his house, serve him, then he'd have access to technically skilled Faey that would significantly bolster his position.

All he had to do was give them something to believe in, and he would have at his fingertips a pool of *trained* Faey to work for him. And that was an asset far beyond the ships he'd captured.

He left his skimmer and saw them sitting on the landing bay deck, being watched by two squads of Imperial Marines, the first wave of survivors plucked off their wounded ships. There were about a hundred of them, Faey women wearing the jumpsuit uniform of ship's crew, and a few in the Class A of command staff, who were mostly all nobles in the house. Odds were, all the officers were Trillanes, and all the enlisted were commoners.

Now the Trillane nobles were to be treated a bit differently, he recalled. They *were* prisoners of war, and he had to put them in a prison somewhere and hold them until Trillane ransomed their release, Trillane conquered Earth and freed them, or Jason simply let them go. He also had the option of

handing them over to the Empress, but if he did that, he wouldn't see a credit of any monetary settlement the Trillanes offered to get their nobles back.

Some people were being unloaded on stretchers, and those were being taken to the station's hospital. A quick word with one of the Marines guarding these healthy prisoners told him that the Imperial Navy had already dispatched doctors to the hospital to care for the wounded.

"Lieutenant," Jason called audibly. "Separate the officers and confine them to the brig."

"Aye, your Grace," one of the helmeted Marines called. *All officers, stand up!* she sent in command. *Fall in to be taken to the brig!*

The officers, most of them in Class A's but a few in jumpsuits, stood up, gathered by a squad of six Marines, and then were marched off, leaving a bunch of frightened-looking Faey women. Most of them were young, almost all of them in conscription, serving their mandatory military service in their house Navy. He looked over about seventy scared faces, and had to sigh. He hated that they had been the ones who had had to pay for the anger of the nobles who commanded them. They probably had wanted nothing to do with this fight, but they were stuck. And some of them had died because of it. Jason felt a small measure of responsibility for those deaths, but he also understood that had he not fought, had he not killed some on the ships, then a great many more would have died. It was raw that some of them had to pay that price...but sometimes life just was not fair. Shevak, in the guise of a Faey male, handed him a moist towel to scrub the smoke and soot from his face, and he did so. "Don't any of you worry now," he told the crew members, using a calm, reassuring voice, smiling at them. He saw more than a few eyelashes flutter. Jason was *very* handsome to Faey women, and he was using that now as a weapon, to put them at ease, to listen to the handsome man as he talked to them. "We're not like other noble houses. As soon as we can find rooms, you'll be billeted here on the station while we figure out what to do with you. But, since I have you here and there's no officers around," he said, squatting down to be more on a level with them, who were all seated on the floor, "I guess I'll tell you now.

"Your officers, well, they're going back to Trillane because I can't trust them, but *you*, the diligent backbone of a ship's crew, you're just serving out your conscriptions, aren't you?" A few of them nodded. "You know, all of you are *older* than me," he mused with a chuckle. "You certainly don't look it. Anyway, are any of you familiar with the rules of *Siann* about things like this?"

One young girl with pink hair raised her hand, and after he nodded at her in recognition, she stood and bowed to him. "We're your property now, your Grace," she told him, blushing. "Chattal of your house. We have to serve you, if you make us."

"Well, I'd rather not *make* you," he said with a snort. "But I *am* offering to take all of you into my house. I'd love to have you come work for me. You can come serve your conscription with *me*, where your time counts towards your conscription as far as the Imperium is concerned. I'd rather you come work for me because that's what you want, not because I have an MPAC pointed at you. Work for me, and I'll give you a good paycheck, job security, and as you saw from the fight, you'll be learning about things you've never even *seen* on a Trillane battle cruiser. At first you'll be manning your old ships, at least once they're fixed. You'll be doing that, but at the same time, you'll start learning about *our* ships. And once you're trained, you'll be taking positions on *Karinne* ships, ships like the badasses you saw out there today, and you'll be a part of the meanest, toughest, most kick-ass house Navy in the Imperium. But just because I'll be keeping you where you've been trained, please don't believe that it's because I want you to fight. That's the *last* thing I want. Fighting is pointless and a waste of time and energy. The main hope I have from bringing you to my house, is that it scares the other houses to where they *don't* want to fight with us. My people, the Terrans, we had a saying for it; 'peace through superior firepower.' I'm not sure if there's a similar saying among the Faey, but that's basically how the Empress keeps the peace. It's certainly not because the houses under her accept her rules, it's because she'll blow them halfway across the universe if they go against her. That's my objective for *our* house," he told them. "To be strong enough that the other houses won't bother trying to fight us. The

one thing I can promise all of you ladies, though, is that I will *never* send you into battle without a *damn* good reason. I'm not like the other Grand Duchesses, ladies. I *was* a commoner, I know how it felt to be in that yoke, and that's not something I'm going to forget now that I'm in this seat. With me, you'll always know that your Grand Duke *cares* about the common woman, because he was a commoner himself.

"But that's just part of it. If you come work for me, I'll allow you to attend the new Academy we're going to build here on Terra, free. Any of you who want to think about leadership training can apply to become an officer. If you prove you have the skill and ability, you'll be promoted to a *warrant officer*, a middle rank between enlisted and officer, and you'll be trained to be a leader. And no, you don't have to be a noble in my house to be an officer," he smiled. "I reward ability and loyalty, not who your parents were. But, if you *do* want to join the ranks of the nobility, to become a Karinne, that option is there too. Anyone who reaches the rank of Commander as an officer or Deck Petty Officer as an enlisted can petition to join the house as a noble. So, in *this* house, if you work hard and show you want it, you can be more than a subject of House Karinne, you can *be* a Karinne.

"That's the offer, girls. Come work for me, not because I'm *making* you, but because you *want* to. You'll be well cared for with me, believe me. I'm not like your Grand Duchess. I know you exist, I care about you and your well being, and your welfare means much to me. If you serve me well, I'll be good to you in return. And if you don't want to serve me, then I'll send you back to Draconis under care of the Empress, which means you'll be serving the remainder of your conscription wherever the Imperium decides to send you. I *will not* send you back to serve your conscription with Trillane. Even if you don't want to be part of Karinne, I still care about you, and I want you to be okay. I'm sure you've watched *Court Exposed* on the vidy and know all about my little, relationship, with Empress Dahnai," he said with a chuckle, which caused several of them to giggle. "So if I ask her to treat you well, she'll honor my request." He stood up and looked at the Marine. "Billet these ladies down in the guest section," he told her. "Get them some dinner, and see if you can dig up some clothes for them, will you?"

"At once, your Grace," the Marine said with a bow. "Stand up please, ladies, and follow me. We'll get you settled in."

That was the routine. Jason went through it again and again, each time they had enough crew gathered to make the speech worth giving. The Marines kept count for him, and by the time that the last of the survivors were brought in, they had 4,107 women, 611 of them brought in wounded, and 387 officers of various ranks, from ensign all the way to Vice Admiral Countess Sheva Trillane. He blinked when he realized he'd tried to woo over 3,000 women over the hours, in groups from 50 to over 400.

Jason love, are you done in the landing bay? Jyslin sent to him. Judging from the distance and sense of her thought, she had to be on one of the ships near the station.

I think so. I've gone over this so many times, it's all blurring together. How is the ship?

We've just about got the engines to where they'll hold together. These Kimdori are amazing technicians. But they still say we need to put into the dock at Kosigi for real repairs. What they've done is a patch job, nothing more. They just want the engines to hold together long enough to get back to the base.

That's good. Sec hon, gonna get Myleena. Jason altered his sending to find her. *Myleena, how is the Defiant?*

Two more hours and we'll have auxiliary power to the starbord wing, and then we can get the ship to Kosigi. From what I've been told, the Resolute needs six more hours before they get power stable enough for a jump, but the Sora's Pride's engines are patched enough to make one jump. We've decided to jump the ships together, so if one fails somehow, the other two can latch onto it and carry it the rest of the way.

Jason love, I hope you don't mind, but I'm going to go with the ship back to the base, Jyslin sent.

You put me in command here, and I feel like I need to get him home. It's only right.

I don't mind at all love. I'm happy you found something that interests you. How did you find command?

Challenging. Scary! But it was exciting! Can I have this ship, Jayce?

Love, it's all yours.

I love you baby! she sent girlishly, then broke the connection.

Jason's idea was simple, and it was *damned* effective.

The conscript crews, all of them young females, found the offer almost as attractive as the handsome man who delivered it. Of the 3,111 enlisted who had been rescued, 2,037 had decided to take Jason's offer and work for House Karinne. It really was a win-win situation for everyone. Jason recruited naval personnel who had practical experience, were Faey telepaths, and who would both help train new naval personnel and fill the ranks of the house with new officers and nobles.

At least after they were screened. He wasn't naïve enough to just welcome them aboard without some assurances they were coming to him honestly. The ex-Marines from Jyslin's squad were taking care of that, weeding out the sincere from the fakers, who would take a position only to sabotage Karinne. Jason didn't see too much of an issue with that, though. The terms Jason was offering the conscripted women were *much* more attractive than what they'd get anywhere else. Nowhere else would a commoner get a chance to be an officer, or join a house as a *noble*, unless they were in the Marines...and the Marines didn't let just anyone into their ranks.

Some of it was the offer, but some of it had been the salesman. Jason *knew* Faey. He knew them well, he understood them, and he knew how to appeal to both sides of their brain, occasionally at the same time. Had Myleena got up and made that offer, not even half as many would have signed up. But Jason, a young, handsome, charming man who smiled at them and made them feel *important* got up there and made them an offer that seemed entirely fair, even generous. There was a little hesitation on behalf of some, but Jason was told by some of the Marines guarding the station that every time someone said "I don't know," someone else would look at her and say "are you nuts, he was *gorgeous!*" Sure, it was a little manipulative to be using himself as bait of sorts to lure them into the idea of it, but he was still solidly convinced that he'd be a much better Grand Duke to them than Maeri ever was a Grand Duchess. To Maeri, those girls were numbers in a column...they were *statistics*. To Jason, they were *people*. And he would never forget that, never forget the responsibility he had to them, both as their Grand Duke and as the one who employed them. They were his employees, his subjects, and he would do his best to make sure they were treated well and had a chance to be happy.

To him, that was what being a Grand Duke was all about. It wasn't about his personal glory, it was about helping those who served him by serving them.

As he waited for his Karinne dropship to arrive in the landing bay, which would take him to the *Scimitar* and get him to Draconis to tell Dahnai what had happened, the commoners who had passed the screening had been put to work helping the Faey who were returning from the evacuation get the station back into operation. They all pointed at Jason and sent excitedly among themselves, and they didn't fail to stop what they were doing and bow to him when he walked by, giving him broad, open smiles. Two of them, looking as young as Kumi, ran up to him, bowed, then kissed him boldly, catching him off guard, then they ran back to their duties, sending excitedly with their companions, who all looked at him adoringly.

Oh yeah, this was going to be interesting.

When he got to the palace, he was taken straight to Dahnai's private gym, where she was doing her daily workout. She didn't stop, even for him, and he told her about the fight, and about his dispensation of the remains of Trillane's attack fleet, including the crew.

She laughed when she heard that. "What kind of terms did you offer them?" she asked. When he told her, she whistled, then laughed again as she mounted an exercise bike and began peddling. Jason

noticed that the bike was *Terran*. She had had it shipped in from Earth so she could use it. Very clever, Jason! You probably bagged them all with terms like that!

Pretty much well near all of them, he answered. You told me that my lack of forces was an issue, so I started addressing it.

That was great thinking! she praised. This way you're getting pre-trained troops! If you can be sure they'll be loyal, that is.

I have some of the strongest telepaths in the Imperium in my house, Dahnai. They're checking the girls out. If someone's lying, they'll know.

Well done! she complemented again. How many ships did you destroy?

Seven, and two escaped, he answered. But we captured the Trillane command ship and two of their battleships. And, uh, one medium cruiser and one destroyer, he said, digging the figures out of his pocket and reading them. Those we can salvage and put back into service. All of them have some extensive damage, though. But they can be repaired. Once they are, I'll use them for my house.

And you did that with just three ships?

He nodded. Two destroyers and a cruiser. But my ships got pretty banged up in the fight, and all three are down right now for repairs. But nobody else knows that, he sent dryly. Then again, they have no idea how many ships I have. Myleena is pissed at me that I got her babies beat up. Does Trillane know what happened?

They know something bad happened. They don't know what yet. When you sealed off the system and evacuated all foreign houses, they knew they were made, but what could they do? Their ships were in hyperspace. All they could do was hope you couldn't repel their task force, since you banned travel into the system which would have allowed them to leave a beacon buoy to warn off the task force when they jumped in. But now they know something bad happened, since Suralle is going back to Terra, and you've come to the palace. They know the attack failed, but they won't know how bad it was until their ships get back. Did you capture the Skaa ships?

He shook his head. They were the first ships destroyed.

Damn. I'd have loved to get my hands on those.

What's the Imperial position?

Officially? None. I frown on inter-house fighting, you know that, but I can't officially stop it. About all I can do is summon you and Maeri to my study and give you a bitching out. Unofficially, though, I don't think I really need to do anything else. Maeri tried to destabilize the Imperium by cutting off Terran food production, and usually I'd come down on her for something like that. But this time, I think I'm just gonna step back and let her squirm a little. She got her ass kicked, and when what's left of her task force gets back, she's going to know just how badly she got spanked. I know Maeri, Jason. She's ambitious, cunning, and dangerous, but she's not an idiot. She'll take that pasting as a sign that she'd better not try something like that again, because she knows that now I've seen that trick, and I'll be coming after her with a task force of my own if some other government's ships mysteriously appear in Terran space and attack the stargate. I'll make sure to tell her that, too.

That's all you're going to do?

Jayce, baby, she just lost about a hundred billion credits' worth of military hardware to you. Trust me, I can't do anything more to her that you haven't done already. You didn't just destroy a Trillane command ship, you captured it. A command ship! Trillane only had seven of those, Jayce. Well, six now. Do you know how much one of those costs to build? She lost a major piece of Trillane property to you. Between what you destroyed and what you captured, you punched a big hole in her military budget. It's going to take them years to replace those ships.

If they're that expensive, why did she send one to attack Terra?

Because they are that expensive, baby. A command ship is a serious warship. I guess Maeri thought that not even your Defiant would be able to fight off a command ship. If I were in her place, I'd have made the same assumption. I'd have been afraid enough of the Defiant to send a command

ship to destroy it, but confident a command ship would be capable of the job. Boy, would I have been wrong, she sent with a chuckle, continuing her steady, rhythmic pedalling. So, are you sending her your ring?

No, I'm not starting a fight that might send the Imperium spiralling into a civil war, he answered.

Good, because I've have stopped you. I'm glad you see that too. What are you doing with the Trillane nobles you captured?

Tossing them in jail for now, he answered. I don't want to keep them, though. I'm not petty like Maeri is, I'm not gonna kill Trillanes or torture them just to get back at them for what they've done, or hold those nobles prisoner and make their families suffer with fear and anxiety over what may happen to them or what I might do to them. I will not become my enemy. As soon as things calm down, in a few days maybe, I'll be shipping them to Draconis and letting them go. Trillane can pick them up here and take them home, or whatever the hell they wanna do. I don't really care.

Not the way I'd do it, but at least your reasoning makes a kind of sense, given how well I know you, she sent with a nod. You sending those nobles to me, or just letting them go?

Letting them go.

Aww, come on, send them to me, so I can make Maeri pay through the nose, Dahnai winked.

Usually I'd say yes Dahnai, but I'm not going to hold the families of those women hostage because of a power game between the leaders of the Siann. So no, you can't have them. I'm letting them go.

Fair enough, she sent, slowing to a stop on her exercise bike. She put her elbows down on the handle bars and looked at him. I have to say it, Jayce, you've come a long way in a short time. I'm very impressed.

Well, thanks Dahnai, I appreciate it, he sent modestly.

Beh, can the modesty. Now, you've done me a favor by pissing off Maeri, so what can I do for you?

Well, my wife's busy and I'm a little tired. Can I stay over tonight?

Sure. I'll have a steward find you a room.

A room? he sent, giving her a thorough look.

Her expression was like sunshine as she beamed at him. I thought you said you were tired.

I'm not that tired.

Ooohhh, now?

Not now. After a meal, a bath, and some rest, sure. We can do what me and my wife and our friends do, sit on the couch and watch the vidy til we're in the mood.

Deal, she grinned, looking to one of the pages who stood near the door. What do you feel like for dinner tonight?

Lobster.

"Subin, go to the kitchen and tell the chefs to prepare a lobster dinner for two, and have it sent to my room as soon as it's ready."

"At once, your Majesty," the young boy said with a whiplike bow, and he ran from the room.

*Dahnai looked almost giddy. She usually had to initiate their interludes, but this was the first time Jason had done the inviting. It was a combination of pure lust and living up to a name. He was starting to get the itch, and Jyslin and Symone were busy, so Dahnai was an eminently acceptable alternative. After all, she was a very good time in bed. But, he also knew that Dahnai had officially had him recognized as her *amu dorai*, and she was going to expect him to show the same interest in her that she showed him him. Jason liked Dahnai, liked her a lot, and he couldn't deny that he looked forward to spending time alone with her, even if he did have to suffer through court for the privilege. It was about time he at least start treating her with a little consideration, especially since she'd soon be showing signs of her pregnancy and she'd be lamenting the fun they had before she got fat and ugly...in her own mind. She liked it when he spent time with her in an informal setting, like a date, or just vegging out in front of the vidlink, so he would give her some quality time. Then they'd have some very*

satisfying sex, and both of them would be happy.

That was the plan. And it went very well, up to a point, but reality certainly decided to interfere with their evening. It managed to go well enough; a nice dinner, a few good hours doing absolutely nothing of importance while Jason and Dahnai bathed together (but she kept her hands to herself, enjoying the game of anticipation) and watched the vidlink, first catching a *batchi* game on the Imperial Sports and Games Network, then watching *Terra TV* when Jason started telling her about shows he used to like to watch before the Subjugation.

Dahnai was a sucker for *Family Guy*.

And just about the time Jason was starting to feel it was about time to retire to the bedroom with Dahnai, so much so he was untying the belt of the thigh-length robe she commonly wore around her apartment as she giggled and kissed his neck, the vidlink cut off and came back up to show one of Dahnai's staff. "I *really* beg your pardon, Your Majesty, but a priority missive just came in that demands your immediate attention."

Jason sighed and put his forehead on her bare shoulder, but Dahnai sat up without bothering to close the robe that Jason had *just* opened to get at the delights within, giving the young woman a truly *ugly* glare. "Mitti, if this doesn't involve the explosion of a planet or the Coming of Trelle, I'm gonna scalp you," she threatened the vidlink monitor, which made the young lady on the other side flinch visibly. "Well? What is it?"

"Uh, Grand Duchess Maeri Trillane has used the call of council," she said. "I know you know I'm required to warn you of that. Shall I patch her through, or do you wish, uh, to make yourself presentable, your Majesty?"

"Oh, get that bitch on the line *right now*," she said hotly, standing up.

The girl's face vanished, and the mature face of Maeri Trillane appeared. She took in the scene with a single glance and seemed slightly amused. "I beg your pardon for interrupting," she said with complete insincerity. "But I felt this important."

"What do you want, Maeri?" Dahnai snapped. "I'm fucking *busy*, and if not for you, I could be busy fucking!"

"Yes, your infatuation with the Terran is well known," she said disdainfully. "But it's been brought to my attention that you're holding a number of my nobles. I called to bargain the terms of their return."

Dahnai grinned evilly. "They're not under my banner, Maeri. They're under *his*," she said, pointing at Jason, who was still sitting on the couch. "I'm surprised that got back to you so fast."

"Well, when a number of my ships came up missing, I had them tracked down, and found out they'd initiated an unapproved attack on Terra. I want them back so I can put them on trial for insubordination and disobeying orders."

"Since you acknowledge they're your ships, maybe you can explain why the Trillanes are using *Skaa* vessels," Jason asked bluntly, standing up. "Seems that two of them jumped into my system and tried to attack the stargate."

"Vice Admiral Sheva Trillane clearly had put some thought into this unsupported action," Maeri said smoothly.

"You can drop the semantics, Maeri," Dahnai told her. "You wanna talk terms, then start talking."

"There are no terms," Jason told Maeri simply. "Tomorrow when I get home, I'll be shipping all your nobles to Draconis and letting them go. No terms, no ransoms. They're free to go."

"How, generous of you," she murmured.

"You won't think that for long, when the only two ships that got away from me get back to your territory and tell you what happened," Jason told her, sitting back down and crossing his legs, taking a very casual comfortable pose. "I destroyed or captured the rest of them, including your command ship. In three weeks, when we get it repaired, I'm gonna jump it to Arctus and drive it by the planet so you can see the Karinne crest painted on it," he told her, holding up his hand and ticking off his fingers with

the list. “I got your command ship, both your battleships, three cruisers, and a destroyer. The rest were destroyed. I hope you weren’t too attached to them.” He put his arm around Dahnai when she sat back down. “Oh, and you’re only getting the *nobles* back, Maeri. I’m exercising my rights as the victor house and I’m keeping them as spoils. They work for House Karinne now. Since they were manning those ships, that gives me experienced crews to put right back on them once I get them repaired. I’ve even arranged it so their indentured service to me counts against their conscription time.”

“I can’t believe that,” she snorted. “How could you *capture* a command ship?”

“Easy when you knock out all its power and leave it dead in space,” Jason answered. “Crews aren’t too worried about repelling borders when they have no life support. They surrendered *very* quickly.”

“I don’t believe you!”

“I don’t care what you believe,” Jason said, rather flippantly. “When your ships get home, they’ll tell you all about it. By the rules of the *Siann*, ships and crews captured by rival houses become property of the victor house. Your ships are mine now. So are the crews that manned them, all the fighters in them, even the underwear in the panty drawer of the Vice Admiral. All mine. I’d have kept the Vice Admiral too, she was kinda cute and had a sexy ass, but I don’t have to look very far to find gorgeous women,” he said, brazenly reaching down and fondling Dahnai’s breast, letting Maeri watch him pawing the Empress’ person. “And between Dahnai and my wife, I’m kept pretty much well exhausted. All you’re getting back is two ships and a shitload of scared noble officers who can tell you all about it. So have your people at the Miga Spaceport tomorrow at noon standard time so you can collect up your nobles. And Maeri. *Never* try that again. If you *ever* jump an attack force into Terran space, I’ll turn around and jump everything I have to Arctus, and I’ll blow your planet out of the sky. And if you don’t think I can do it, then *try me*,” he finished with an ominous hiss. “You have *no idea* what I’ve managed to recover my my ancestors, Maeri. They left me clues to recover everything they left behind, and I have to say, it’s *damn* impressive. I have toys squirreled away that would make you feel like your house is still using swords and spears. You’ll get to see some of it in action when your ships get back and you can access their visual logs, and *see* what my ships are capable of. But, to spoil the surprise, I brought in only three ships to take on your attack force. Three, and the largest of them isn’t even the size of your heavy cruisers. And they kicked the piss out of your task force without a single casualty. My crews didn’t even so much as break a nail. But I know you don’t believe a word I’m telling you, so I’ll just let the logs you get back from those two ships that got away do all my talking for me.

“I’ve put up with you so far because I abhor violence and I want to see the Imperium at peace, but if you push me again, I *will* send you my ring. And I’ll make sure I take it back out of your cold, dead hand.

“Remember that, bitch. Stay away from me, my house, and my planet, and we can coexist just fine. But push me one more time, and I’ll hit you so hard, so fast, you won’t have a clue what the fuck just happened to you.”

“Oh, and Maeri. If you ever try to disrupt food production again, I won’t even bother revoking your charter,” Dahnai told her in a sober, adamant voice. “I’ll just take your banner down from the hall, then have the *entire* Imperium hunt your house down and slaughter them to the last child. Do I make myself clear?”

“I have no idea—“

“That was not an offer to respond with anything other than *yes* or *no*,” Dahnai cut her off, scowling at the monitory. “*Do you understand what I have just said to you?*” Dahnai asked in a voice that startled Jason with its outright hostility and promise for graphic, ruthless violence.

“I understand,” she said in an arrogant tone. Jason had to give Maeri Trillane one thing; she did not scare easily. Not even an angry Empress was enough to frighten her.

“Now push off. I don’t have time to deal with you. I have better things to do,” Dahnai told Maeri, pointedly turning to Jason and grabbing the ties of his robe.

The image on the monitor winked out, replaced with the show they'd been watching. "Mmmm, sounds like we're alone," she purred in his ear, undoing his robe and opening it. "Now where were we?"

"Right about here, I think," he answered, leaning in and kissing her.

Mmmmmmmmmmm, but don't think we're not going to talk about that little speech, she warned as she pushed herself into his arms. *Later,* she added, melting against him.

He had done everything Zaa had suggested.

He had openly given his support to the Empress. He had showed the *Siann* his hand, since now the video logs from the Trillane vessels were now in the public venue, and the rest of the noble houses had seen Jason's deadly ships in action against Faey warships. He had started working on building the forces of his house, and was rebuilding the Academy.

This was the final step.

Jason and Miaari walked along the beach of the Teyan Sea on Karis, as she showed him the work that her people had been doing. The first structures of the reclaimed city of Karga had already been put up by the Kimdori, and in about a year, the entire city would be rebuilt. But those other structures weren't what they were there to see. What they were there to see was just down the beach.

It was a glittering glass and steel compound enclosed in a defense screen, a force field of a fence that was the first line of defense to protect what was inside. This was the building that an army of nearly ten thousand Kimdori had labored every moment to build, and it was completely, both outside and inside.

It was the new biogenic manufacturing facility.

There had only been one of them, even back then. The compound was huge, the size of a small town back home on Earth, all enclosed in a force shield. Within were the various buildings necessary to grow the biogenic crystals that formed the heart of a biogenic system, as well as the manufacturing facilities to build the computers that would surround them, build new gestalts and memory bands, and begin construction on the components for a new CBIM. Cybi had asked that that be their first priority. She was the last of her kind, the last CBIM, and no other computer could store the information she contained. If she were to malfunction or go offline, then the knowledge of the Karinnes would be forever lost. Cybi wanted another CBIM online to serve as a backup, or serve as the primary and allow her to return to her assigned role as emergency backup herself. Before the fall of Karis, that was Cybi's function, to be the last line of defense to protect the knowledge of the Karinnes. When another CBIM was complete and online, she could return to that role, but Jason would rather not see that. Another CBIM would not be Cybi. Cybi wasn't just a computer to him. She was a friend, and he wanted her to continue to be the voice and the face of that which was.

Jason had been surprised they got it up so fast...and not just from the construction aspect. When he asked Miaari about it when she told him of the nearing completion, she responded that the Kimdori had already built all the equipment that would go into that facility, and had had it on hand for *years*, just waiting for the chance to use it. They had really thought ahead, building the delicate technology that would grow the crystals and waiting for a place to install it to be built. It reminded Jason yet again of the towering discipline and respect the Kimdori had for their word. They had promised not to make biogenic crystals, and despite building all the equipment they'd need to do it, they had never done it. They had built those machines, that equipment, and simply left it in some warehouse somewhere, having it on hand and ready in case they could use it.

"There it is, my friend," she told him. "The Biogenics lab facility, which we had always called the Shimmer Dome due to the everpresent shield. It was brought up and operational yesterday, while you were, entertaining, the Empress Dahnai."

"Go ahead and laugh," he snorted.

She did laugh then. "No, no, we actually approve. You are a moderating influence on Dahnai."

You were exactly what she needed, friend Jason, a man who sees her for who she is and likes her for no other reason. Now she knows that she *can* find a man that can look past her title, and she will look for him. When she finds him, she will marry him, she will love him, and she will be happy. She will always treasure you and the joy you brought to her, you will always be her *amu dorai*, for you opened her eyes and her heart and showed her that there is more to life than the power that comes from sitting on her throne. And for that, we thank you. An Empress who cares about more than power is an Empress that is less likely to wage war. This is what we hoped would come to pass, and you have helped make it so.

“You are everything we hoped you would be, my friend,” she said as they stopped on a sand dune and looked down on the compound. “You are a strong, wise, cunning man who can play the Grand Duchesses hand for hand, yet you retain your dignity and honor, and your compassion. You are an anathema to the others in the *Siann*, but as time will show them, you are not weak, as they believe you to be. They mistake your devotion to your people as weakness. In time, they will see that it is the greatest strength you possess.”

“Faith.”

“Faith,” she said with a nod. “You give others *faith*, my friend. You help them believe that there is something better, and with hard work and devotion, they may attain it. It has shown Dahnai that there is love out there for her, if she only opens her eyes to find it. Your commoner crews see a real future ahead of them, and the Terrans see hope that they will return to the lives they once held, with only minimal intrusion from the Imperium. You have learned the one thing I hoped that you would learn from me, my friend, and that is your faith was your greatest asset. You held onto it, and now you pass it to others. You make the lives of those under you better, for that is what you see as your duty, and in return, they give to you a powerful devotion and loyalty.”

“I’m glad it helped you out too, Miaari,” he said, reaching over and touching the white band of fur on her upper chest, between her collarbones.

She gave a growling laugh, touching the white band herself. “I still find myself staring at it in mirrors,” she admitted to him. “I almost can’t believe it. A Handmaiden, me. Kimdori children dream of the honor of the white band from as soon as they learn its meaning. When my father found out, he ordered a feast that lasted for nine days without respite.”

“Did Kiaari take it well?”

Miaari laughed again. “She wasn’t *too* jealous,” she told him. “And Denmother gave the others that helped me their own measure of honor and respect. Kiaari’s efforts were definitely noticed, my friend. It is why she is entrusted with your safety, despite her being so young. For a Kimdori her age to be given such an assignment is almost unheard of.”

“Well, I’m glad of that,” he said. “And I’m glad you’re my ambassador, Miaari. I wouldn’t want anyone else.”

“Which is why you have me,” she told him, patting him on the shoulder. “So, Jason Karinne, what next?”

“Next we build more ships,” he told her. “As fast as your people can build them.”

“The first ship of the same class as the *Defiant* will be ready for launch in three months,” she told him. “There is another cruiser two weeks behind it, and we will have the first destroyer class ship out of space dock in three weeks, with two more only weeks behind it. We have every bay in the shipyard on Kosigi filled, my friend, and we are working hard to get those ships out so we can start anew. There are even more Kimdori at Kosigi engaged in the construction effort than there are here building the Shimmer Dome. The cruiser and destroyers will be built before the crystals are grown to build the computers. Have you had your first meeting with the Makati?”

He shook his head, looking up as a dropship came down into view, landing near the compound. The tickling sense of Jyslin was all over that ship. She had come down from Kosigi. “Next week,” he said. “Ayuma is scheduled to return to Terra tomorrow with her staff, and we have our first meeting

with the builders on, uh, Wednesday I think.”

“It will not take them long. Six months maybe.”

“Seriously?”

“Jason, the Makati are as quick as they are thorough. I can guarantee you that they will give you a time frame of about six months. Maybe more, maybe less, depending on the complexity of their blueprints and the number of workers they assign to the project. What the Kimdori build fast using sheer numbers, the Makati build fast using skill and experience. They are some of the best civil engineers in the galaxy. Building is genetic for them. They evolved from burrowers who made elaborate home systems underground. The need to build is coded into their DNA.”

“Huh.”

Jason! Jason, where are you?

We're up on the dune near the sea. He sent her an image of what he could see, the compound and the dropship near it, now on the ground, and then he saw her come out of it. She pushed out a sweep to find his mind, locked onto it, turned and waved to him, then started running up to him. Tim and Symone climbed out behind him, and to Jason's surprise, so did Ian and Erinn. Jason thought it was a bit early to reveal Karis to Erinn, but it was too late now. Jason should have thought that through more. He should have realized that when he told Jyslin she could bring the ship back, she'd be bringing her crew with her. With all three ships here, that put just about all of the House Karinne on Karis.

“I see you are introducing your house to Karis,” Miaari noted. “How are they taking it?”

“I really don't know, those ones are here because I wasn't thinking,” he said honestly. “Let's go meet them.”

They met Jyslin about a quarter of the way. She threw herself into his arms and kissed him, excited and breathless. *You should see Kosigi, my love! It's huge, it takes up almost the entire inside of the moon! The moon is hollow, Jason! It's nothing but a big base! There are Kimdori everywhere, and they're building more ships! One of them looks like it's almost done!*

I haven't been to Kosigi yet, he told her. *I think I want to tour it before we go home.*

“It's good to see you again, Duchess,” Miaari told her.

“Miaari! Your people are helping us! Thank you!” she said, pushing out of Jason's arms and actually hugging the Kimdori. Miaari looked a little startled, but she put her hands on Jyslin's shoulders and patted them fondly.

“Yes, we are helping you, as much as we can. The success and prosperity of the Karinnes is a very important matter to us. We have entered an agreement with your husband to work with him while he rebuilds the house. Until you have the hands to work the necessary jobs, Kimdori hands will fill in. As your house grows in size and training, we will pull back and allow you to handle your own affairs.”

“Well, thank you. Thank you very much.”

“You are more than welcome, Duchess,” Miaari said with a toothy smile.

“Did you have to take off like that, Jys!” Symone complained as they reached them. “Really, that baby in your belly is going to your head! Jason, did you know that the moon is *hollow*, and it's got like a million Kimdori in it building ships?”

Jason laughed. “Yes, I know, Symone,” he smiled. “How was the trip back?”

“Scary,” Tim said. “The *Resolute's* power failed in mid-jump, and the other ships had to pull it through. They told me that if it had tried to jump by itself, it would have been trapped in hyperspace forever. That didn't sound very pleasant.”

“No, it would not be,” Miaari mused.

“Anyway, we got all three ships back, and they're on that moon being fixed by an *army* of Kimdori. But I think you knew that.”

“Yeah, I knew that. I didn't know you guys were still here, though. I thought you'd have gone home.”

“Nah, there was too much to see!” he said excitedly. “The moon's hollow, Jayce, and it's huge! It

took us almost a whole day just to look around. And when we were told you'd come, they allowed us to leave the base and come down to the planet to join you. Seems they don't allow anyone down here unless you're here or you approve it."

"Yeah, security," he said, looking at Miaari, who nodded. "This is what they're protecting, guys," he said, waving his hand at the compound as Erinn reached them. "That's the new biogenics manufacturing compound, and I'm told it just started up yesterday. You okay, Erinn?" he asked, switching to Faey.

"I'm a little overwhelmed, your Grace," he said honestly. "I just get out of secondary school four weeks ago, and now I'm a Karinne noble, I just had a battle with another house the other day, and I'm standing on *Karis*! They said in school that this planet is dead!"

Jason laughed. "That's what we want everyone to think, Erinn," he told the green-haired male. "So consider this your first test as a Karinne noble. The Karinnes were all about keeping secrets, Erinn. If you're going to be a Karinne noble, then get into the habit. What you've seen here, what you know, you can never discuss it with anyone off of this planet. Not even with people who *do* know about it. A secret unspoken remains a secret," he cited, using a Kimdori saying.

"Truly," Miaari said with a nod.

"It'll be hard, but I think I can do it," he said with a nod. "Your Grace."

"Can it with the titles, or I'll start calling you Count Erinn," Jason told him. "Call me Jason, or Jayce."

"Sure, uh, Jason."

"I guess this is as good a time as any to tell you guys some of the things I haven't explained yet," he told them. "Now that you've seen Kosigi, I'm sure you know that there's much more to this place than meets the eye. I think I need to take you to Kosiningi and meet Cybi. I think it's time for you to see the true legacy of the Karinnes, and it's about time for Erinn to receive his gestalt."

"Ohh, I've heard about this mysterious Cybi from the Marines," Symone breathed.

"And when I find out who was talking about her, I'm gonna kick her ass," Jason grunted. "They *know* they're not supposed to be talking about things like that off this planet. Who was it?"

"Uh," she said, then she looked him in the eyes and tapped her temple.

Oh yeah. Symone could hear private sending. "Alright. I'll deal with her later," he said, pretending Symone had sent the answer.

Miaari gave them a tour of the biogenic facility, which was conducted by the Kimdori scientist who was in charge of it. They showed them the vast liquid tanks where the crystals were grown, and the huge facilities where those crystals would be cut and shaped into both processing crystals and the board on which all the components would be installed. The computers used cybernetic components rather than moleculartronic and were actually less powerful than modern Faey moleculartronic computers, but the site commander also showed them a research building where they were already at work adapting biogenic components to the new standard in computer science, moleculartronic systems. He was quite confident they would have their first moleculartronic-based biogenic system by the end of the year, since they'd already done a great deal of research and preparatory work for this project, they had just lacked the biogenic crystals to test their theories and designs. When they managed to do it, they would refit every biogenic system currently in operation to moleculartronics, and would build new gestalts and memory bands using the more powerful system. For Jason and the other gestalt wearers, it would be like having the power of a panel at his disposal rather than the current computer, which wasn't half as powerful.

Introducing those new to Karis to Cybi was an experience. Jason flew them to the island of Kosiningi and took them down to meet Cybi. She seemed quite interested in them all, but was particularly interested in Erinn, who wasn't quite sure how to take it. He *really* didn't know how to take it when Cybi told him the truth about the Karinnes, that he was the result of a thousand years of genetic engineering and careful selective breeding, which gave him the ability to commune with

biogenic computers. It was also the moment when the others learned the truth about Jason. The truth he wouldn't tell Jyslin, Tim, or Symone was revealed by Cybi, and now they knew the full extent of how different he was from the others, that he, Myleena, and Erinn were the descendents of genetically engineered beings who had been carefully produced through a millenia of selective breeding after that initial engineering.

After the revelation of the Karinnes was dropped on them all, Erinn was presented with his first gestalt. Erinn had seemed almost disbelieving of the tale...until he put on that gestalt. There was no denying that he could commune with biogenic systems once a gestalt imprinted to him. He was a bit scattered, trying to wrap his mind around it for a while, but seemed to take it well enough.

"Since I have you here, let me say two things," Cybi told them. "First, Duchess Jyslin, my warmest congratulations. My sensors detect you are pregnant."

"Yeah, and thanks," Jyslin told the hologram, putting her hand on her belly.

"This leads me to the other matter. Jason, when are you bringing the others back to the house?"

"The Kimdori are bringing them to me, Cybi," he told her. "Me and Miaari talked about that the other day, and we felt that bringing one back at a time would be prudent. Now that Erinn's been fully inducted, the Kimdori are going to be bringing another."

"I see. Jason, I cannot stress enough how precarious the situation is with the Generations. The program will be halted, but the fruits of that labor are very small in number. You are an endangered species, my friend. Ensuring the continuation of the lines should be your top priority."

"What do you mean?"

"Jason, there are too few of you. You must increase your numbers."

"We'll do that as the Kimdori bring more back to the house."

"No, beyond that. There are only two hundred fifty-four of you if you count your unborn child, my friend. That is not enough. Each Generation should produce at least four children, each by a different partner, to broaden the gene pool and protect the lines. And you and Erinn, being males, should try to produce those children as quickly as possible, since you do not have to carry the child."

"I'm not sure we have to go that far."

"I am, my friend. I know your personality and know you would not see it in a kind light. So understand that I only speak out of my concern for the Generations. It would be too easy to lose all of you when there are so few of you. You should produce at a bare minimum three more children by different mothers. I know you frown on the idea of selective breeding, but I would be gravely irresponsible if I did not suggest Yana as one of your partners. Her raw power merged with the abilities of a Generation would produce an amazing child."

"Cybi!" Jason gasped.

Well, Yana certainly wouldn't mind that idea, Jyslin mused privately to him.

"Yana and the other Marines would be prime partners, Jason, for they are members of the house."

"I just don't know about that, Cybi."

"I know, my friend, but it is something that I had to tell you. It is a matter of the survival of the Karinnes."

It was a preposterous idea. The only problem was, he was the *only* one who thought it was preposterous. Miaari just shrugged and told him it seemed entirely logical to her, and was only smart. Jyslin laughed at him and told him that Cybi was just looking out for Jason's family, and she was right. Erinn seemed enthusiastic about the idea, but then again, he was a boy, and he'd be having all the fun without having to carry any the children. And the one person Jason thought would be on his side against it, Myleena, solidly shocked him by telling him she was already working on it."

I knew we'd have to do this, Jayce. There aren't many of us, and just one outbreak of some new disease could wipe us out forever. We may have been created out of cold science, but we are here, and we have a duty to protect our line. Cybi said it best, babes, we're an endangered species. We have to increase our numbers, and do it fast. I've been at it hot and heavy with a friend of mine from Dracora.

He's cute, and he's also a pretty strong telepath for a man, which I consider a necessary quality given that my kids will be nobles, and have to be strong. So, I've been trying to get pregnant. Once I do and have my baby, I'll go find another man that has attractive qualities and strong talent, and have him get me pregnant. I already realized that to enrich our gene pool as much as we can and prevent inbreeding, my children couldn't have the same father. I'm aiming for six kids. Most Faey women can produce six kids in her lifetime, so I'm shooting for the average. I'd be overjoyed with nine, but I'll take three.

I'm, shocked, you're okay with this idea.

This isn't about us, Jason, she sent seriously to him. This is about way more than just us. This is about protecting the Karinne family line, on both sides. The human telepaths should be doing the same thing we're doing on their side, breeding to increase their numbers, because they are the last identifiable members of the other side of the house. Every human telepath should be required to have at least three children by different partners.

But, it's like I'm cheating on Jyslin. She already has to share me with Dahnai. It's not fair to her.

Jason, I talked about this with Jyslin a while ago, but I didn't go into specifics, just talked with her about me having kids to bolster the numbers of House Karinne. Just ask her. See what she says.

He did so, after they got home, so he could ask in the privacy of their home, and when he did so, she just laughed at him. Love, Cybi didn't say anything that's all that shocking. She's right. There's so few of you, you have to protect your legacy. If all of you vanished from the universe, it would be nearly as much a crime as it was when your ancestors were created. Cybi was being both practical and prudent. Now that I know the truth about you and the Karinnes, I'm siding with Cybi.

Wow, I'm surprised you would.

Why? Jason, you let your personal feelings interfere too much when you need to put them aside and look at things from the cold logic of a Grand Duke. Your emotions do you credit, but there comes a time when you have to look past what you want or need and look at what the house wants or needs. The house needs more, what did she call you? Generations? There aren't enough of you. It wouldn't take much to wipe all of you out, since there are so few of you. That's a problem that must be addressed.

It just seems....

I know, but I'm sure you won't mind that dreadful chore too much. Just think, you'll be forced to have sex with girls that will certainly be horny about the idea of getting you in bed. Such a terrible thing, she sent with a sly smile. I can imagine the torture you'd feel sliding your dick into a willing wet pussy. I don't know how you'll stand it. I never realized I was being so mean to you all this time, she sent airily, waving a hand noncommittally in the air. I guess all that moaning when you come in me really is pain.

Don't be nasty.

You tell me not to be nasty? she sent with a laugh. That's like telling me not to be Faey.

Jyslin was a woman of wise words, but, when the situation demanded it, she was also a woman of action. She had stated her case to Jason, and that was that. He knew where she stood. But she also knew her husband, and knew that since he wasn't too keen on Cybi's suggestion, that when he would say "I'll think about it," that usually meant "I'll just ignore it til everyone forgets about it and it goes away." Where Jason was concerned, about some things, some action would have to be taken.

That action was Yana.

Jason found her in their bedroom that night, laying on the bed, wearing nothing but combat boots. Jyslin told him she wanted to go out with Myleena and girl around New York for a while that night, so he hadn't expected anyone to be home when he got back from a trip to New York himself to meet with Kim, his Secretary General.

"Yana! What are you doing in here?" he demanded.

"Jyslin sent me," she purred, rolling over on her side. "She told me to wear these. She said it

would mean something to you,” she said, pointing at her boots.

He saw those boots, and he just had to laugh. “Yes, they mean something. Now get up and get dressed.”

“Nuh-uh,” she told him. “Jyslin gave me orders. And I have to say, they’re the hottest orders I ever got from Sarge.”

“Orders?”

“A while ago, before Jys went to Karis, we had a squad meeting, Jayce. It was right after you brought us into the house, when we talked about what we could do to help. I mean, none of us really have any skills, you know. We’re Marines. We’re trained to fight, we can operate ships when we have to, and we’re all strong telepaths. We’re not scientists, or engineers like you and Myleena and Jyslin. There wasn’t really much we could do but do what you asked of us and try to find ways to contribute.

“Well, that was when Maya brought something up that I think all of us knew. We have one thing, Jayce, one thing we can bring to the house, and that’s that all of us but Maya are unmarried and in our sexual prime, just coming into peak for childbearing. The one thing all of us could do for the house would be to have kids. That was something all of us thought about, but Maya pointed out that you’re the *only* one of your kind, Jayce. You’re the only *human* descendent of the Karinne nobles, you’re the only human Generation. Just one accident, and poof, everything that you had to offer is gone from the universe. The same danger went for Jyslin and your kids. One accident involving all of you, like a skimmer crash, and that’s it. Your whole splinter race is gone. We decided then that someone had to convince you and Jys to spread your line across more than one woman. It was needed to continue the human Generations, and it was needed for the house. That was when we decided that at *least* one of us had to be a second mother to your children. One at the minimum, all of us at maximum, and anywhere in between. We did decide that it was only right and proper to not say anything until after Jyslin had her first child. But after she got comfortably pregnant, we were going to approach her and tell her that at a bare minimum, one of us *had* to bear another child, to protect your line.

“When you guys came back yesterday, Jys called us all together this morning and held a squad meeting and told us what Cybi said, that the Karinnes need more people, she was a little surprised to find out that we’d already had this discussion. We told her our plan, but she blew that off and told us hers. She told us about Cybi’s call for four children from each of the Generations by different partners, and well, there’s two male Generations here. So, we decided to take one for the house,” she chuckled. “Each of us promised to have two children. One by you, and one by Erinn. Maya already has kids by Vell, and Jys is married to you, so it’s gonna be four and four for now. Vell doesn’t know about this yet, and Maya won’t agree to it without talking to him. But I’ll tell you this, when we had our own plan, she volunteered to be the mother,” she told him. “She had a damn good argument. She’s already married and has two daughters, so the baby would grow up in a family setting with two parents and sisters to play with. *That* plan, Vell agreed to. But the new plan, he has to agree to it first before she’ll take part.”

“I don’t fuckin’ believe it,” Jason breathed. “You really thought the only use you were to house was to have babies? Yana, that’s just *stupid*!”

“I didn’t say that was the *only* thing we felt we could do, we felt it was the *best* thing we could do,” she told him. “And Jys agrees with us. She believes that Cybi is right, and that it’s very important for the Generations to increase their numbers. And there’s only one way you can do that,” she told him, sliding her hand along her leg sensually. “So get over here.”

“I’m gonna kill Jyslin,” Jason growled.

“That’s between you and her,” Yana told him. “But in the meantime, I promised Jys I’d help, and I’ll be honest, Jayce, the idea of having your baby is very appealing to me. You’ve been so good to us, you’ve given us so much, it would make me overjoyed to give birth to one of your children and feel that I’ve given back to you something too. It may be a duty, but we all *did* agree to it willingly, and I have to say, enthusiastically. And Trelle’s garland, is it gonna be a sweet duty.” She patted the bed.

“Right now, Sheleese has her legs wrapped around Erinn in the other wing, doing the same thing we’re about to do. Protect the Karinne family line. So this isn’t just about *you*. This is about the *Karinnes*.”

“Get dressed, Yana.”

“No. Jys told me not to leave this room until we fuck, and not just a quickie. Specifically, Jys told me to have you come in me three times, since I’m close to my period and I should be either in my fertile phase or right about to enter it. Besides, I thought we were *friends*, Jason. I know you know that in Faey society, it’s perfectly acceptable for friends to fuck as long as the wife allows it. Well, Jys is allowing it. Hell, baby, she *ordered* it. She wants her son to have four half-brothers and sisters as quick as possible, and it just reinforces the bonds of the squad. By the time this is over, each of us will be tied to you through the baby you gave us. That’s true comraderie. We’ll all be the mothers of your children, and what’s most important, the Karinne name will be protected, and the human side of the Generations will live on.”

“I’m not okay with this.”

“Jyslin told me you might not be, so here,” she said, picking up a remote that was by her on the bed and pointing it at the vidlink monitor on the wall. Jason realized that it was his infamous one-button remote. She pressed the button, and a recorded image of Jyslin appeared. “*Jason, get over it,*” the image said. “*Remember what we talked about? That sometimes what you need to do as Grand Duke matters more than what you feel as a person? Well, this is one of those times. Cybi is right. I don’t care if you refuse to admit it, but she is. And I’m not going to let your stubbornness threaten your family name. So, I’m telling you this right here and now. One way or another, you’re gonna end up in that bed with Yana. I’ve given her permission to use any means necessary, even if it means she has to use sending, even if she has to join your minds to do it. And if for some reason she doesn’t manage it tonight, she’s going to call me, I’m going to come home and use all my arsenal on you, even if I have to get in that bed with the two of you and get you hard, then sit her on your cock. And that’s probably gonna rightly piss Yana off, since she’s your friend and you’re so resistant to the idea of proving it to her. She’ll think you’re not the friend she thought you were.*”

“*This isn’t going to be the same game we played when we met, lover,*” she said with a wink.

“*Because this isn’t just about us anymore. This is about the house. You will lose this battle, because no matter how much you can say no to Yana, you can’t say no to me. So admit defeat with grace right now and climb into that bed with Yana and do your duty.*” She held up three fingers. “*Three times, Jason. That’s what you need to do tonight. This isn’t about having fun, though I’m sure it will be. This is about getting Yana pregnant. She’s close to her period, so she should be fertile. That means it’s your job to give her the best chance possible to conceive, and one way to do that is to fill her with lots of semen. So you have to come in her three times. I’m sure Yana’s going to enjoy the effort of getting you up and getting you off three times.*”

“You bet your ass I will,” Yana purred.

“*And it’s not just going to be tonight. Tomorrow you two are going to be having sex again. You’re going to have sex with her at least three times, once in the morning, once in the middle of the day, and again at night. Each time you have to come in her at least once, but you have to come in her five times over the course of the day, so two of those sessions are going to be double-ups. Songa told me that that kind of constant infusion of fresh semen, spread out over time, gives her a very good chance at conception. After tomorrow, you two are done, though you might be having sex one more time the day after tomorrow, depending on what Songa says. So there’s your schedule, love. And time’s wasting, so get busy.*”

The recording winked out, and Jason sighed. Jyslin was right on two counts. First, Yana would be really insulted if he said no, and second, he could not say no to Jyslin. If he resisted now, he knew she’d take much more direct, *personal* action when she got home, and the idea of having Jyslin in bed while she basically watched to make sure he did the deed with Yana was not something he would want. He was comfortable having her in bed when he was with Symone, but it’d feel weird and unsettling to

have her in the same bed while he was with some other woman.

“Alright, alright, I know when I’m beaten,” he sighed.

“Don’t make it sound like I’m twisting your arm!” Yana said indignantly. “I *agreed* to this, Jason! I *want* this! Show a little fucking courtesy, will ya?”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Yana, I really am. This isn’t about you and me, really. Yes, you’re very sexy and you’re very appealing, and if the circumstances hadn’t been like, this, well, I wouldn’t be reacting the way I am now. I hope you can understand that.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“It’s just that even though I know I’m in the Faey world, some part of me likes to keep myself for Jyslin, you know? Jyslin’s so considerate and understanding. She doesn’t mind sharing me with Symone, and she doesn’t mind sharing me with Dahnai. Now she’s going off on this tangent, basically sharing me with half her squad. It’s just not fair to her.”

Yana laughed. “Jason, she loves you, and she also loves the House Karinne. She’s being like this because she wants to see the house flourish, and so do I, and we both can see that steps have to be taken to protect the Generations from extinction. And I’d be honored to help continue your line, Jason. I wouldn’t be agreeing to have your baby if you weren’t a Karinne, and you weren’t who you are, the *only* Terran Generation. But I’m a Karinne, you’re the last Terran Generation, I’m a woman, you’re a man, and I know that we need *more* Terran Generations to protect your bloodline. One way to get more Karinnes is to induct new members, but the only way to ensure the survival of your line is to make little baby Karinnes, the more the better and the faster the better. And even on the Faey side, there aren’t many of *you* left, only what, like two hundred and fifty, and that’s way too small a number. This isn’t just about you, Jayce, you need make sure to protect the other lines in the Generations. All of the Generations’ main priority should be having kids, to protect your lines and also to increase the numbers of the house. And here’s a news flash for you, but she *trusts* you, hon. She knows that you always come back to her, and no matter where you stick your dick, your heart is hers. You’re her husband.”

“That’s true.”

“And you’re not picking up a harem here, hon. This is about one thing, and that’s getting me pregnant. That’s why Jys was so fuckin’ anal about how many times you come, because we only have maybe three days to get me pregnant. We’re not gonna keep fucking after I get pregnant. Well, if you don’t want to, that is,” she added, licking her lips. “But I dunno about that. Jys would have to approve, and you already have an *amu dozei* to fill in for Jyslin for when her pregnancy makes sex with her impractical. Maybe I can talk her into it. I’ve always been attracted to you, I was just too shy to admit it.”

“You’re certainly not being shy now,” he said, looking at her in a way that made her blush a lovely shade of violet.

“I almost *died* when we talked on the dropship going to Karis,” she admitted with a laugh. “I didn’t think about who was in the ship after I took my armor off, but then I realized you were there, and it was all I could do to keep from blushing. But then you started talking to me, and I realized I was being silly for being so shy with you. You were so nice. Then when you touched me, you were so kind and considerate when you saw my little, problem,” she said with another blush.

“You *were* very demure. Not like now.”

“I was so scared. I didn’t know what to talk about, and I kinda blurted out asking you about Jyslin. That was when I got comfortable with you, you know? You were willing to talk about that with me, and you could tell I was serious when I asked. It really made me feel comfortable.” She patted the bed. “So, could you *please* come here? I promise, I’ll be careful. Jyslin told me to keep myself out of your head, but she did say we could go about halfway,” she told him. “She told me to tell you to let me take it as far as you let Dahnai go. She said that’s okay with her.”

He laughed ruefully and came over to sit on the bed. She propped herself up on an arm, looking at

him, and he could feel her warm breath on his neck and face. “I’m not too enthusiastic about the *idea* of this, Yana,” he admitted. “But it’s not personal. It’s not about you. It’s about the situation.”

“That’s fine, Jason. But look at me, and tell me that I’m not sexy, and if you were single and I asked you out on a date, you wouldn’t make love to me.”

“That would be a lie.”

“Then that’s all that matters to me,” she said in a throaty whisper, putting her hand on his shoulder and pulling him down into a kiss.

Yana did in two days what Jyslin took nearly a year.

Get pregnant.

Songa announced the news about a week later, after Jason had had his first meeting with Ayuma and the Makati about the Academy. Jason was glad to hear it, but it had put a sincere strain on his relationship with Jyslin. They’d had an actual fight about it after it was over, because Jason didn’t approve of how she had basically twisted his arm into it, where she told him that it had been necessary because she knew him and knew he would be very resistant to the solution, the only solution that was available to them. It had been the first fight they’d ever had like that, and it had surprised Jason quite a bit.

It wasn’t that they fought, Jason had expected to have fights with Jyslin eventually, it was how intense it got. He never thought he’d be screaming at his wife, and it had honestly scared him that he could get so worked up to the point where he’d be shouting at the woman he loved. He didn’t say anything hateful to her, but he was very vocal about how she had made up her mind on the matter and refused to listen to any alternatives.

That was basically the point of it, really. Jason thought there had to be another way, and Jyslin didn’t. Jason couldn’t deny the underlying problem, that there were very few Generations, and something had to be done to increase their numbers. And in Jason’s case, he was a unique being in the universe, the *only* human Generation, and he and Myleena were the last of the Dukal family, the last two direct descendents of Sora Karinne. The line had to be protected, and that could only be done with children. Both Jason and Myleena’s primary focus should be with producing children, and while Jason had already gotten his wife pregnant, Myleena was still trying. But the point was, they *were* trying.

Jason didn’t feel that him being tossed about like a stud bull on a cattle ranch was the answer, but Jyslin did. It was an impasse that made her take direct action and got them into a fight, which lasted nearly two days. Jason slept on the couch over at Tim and Symone’s place after his little tryst with Yana, because he was that angry.

After things calmed down enough between them to talk, the matter basically revealed itself. When Jason told her about alternative methods like artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization, she almost laughed herself off the couch. “Jason, if you even suggested that to any of the squad, they’d beat you!” she told him. “You don’t understand Faey women, hon. To ask one to conceive a child *artificially* is a *huge* insult! You’re telling her she’s not woman enough to get pregnant the normal way!” She laughed and patted her chest. “Oh, Trelle’s garland, I’m glad you *didn’t* say anything, or I’d have been trying to mend some fences. Really, Jason, that’s about the *worst* insult you could have laid down. Faey women don’t do it any way but the natural way. If you want to have children with a Faey woman, you have to do it the way Trelle intended, having sex with her. Any other way is a huge insult to her womanhood, and if you even broached the subject with one, she’d either beat you or never talk to you again.”

Things smoothed over at that point, they apologized to each other, and things got back to normal between Jason and Jyslin.

Songa came to him after the meeting, which went very well, and handed him a little pink ribbon.

“What’s this?”

“For your coming daughter,” she said with a smile. “Yana is pregnant. That high-intensity

regimen you did with her really worked.”

“Really? Already?”

“Already. Her fertilized egg is already secured to her uterus and has started a normal, healthy pregnancy. I’ll be keeping a close eye on her for you, hon. Congratulations!”

He felt a little silly, hugging her when she leaned down and kissing her on the cheek. “Thank you, hon.”

“She won’t be the only one having a baby,” Songa told him. “I’m pregnant too!”

“Really? That’s wonderful, Songa! Have you told Luke yet?”

“No, not yet,” she told him. “I want to marry him first. If I asked him, do you think he’d say yes?”

“He worships you, Songa. If you asked, he’d say yes before you could even get past the word *marry*.”

Songa laughed, sitting on his lap. “What is it about you Terran males that get us Faey girls knocked up so fast, Jayce? You get Jyslin pregnant just a few months after you marry, and Yana pregnant on the first try, and Luke gets me pregnant after only two months! What do they feed you in high school?”

Jason laughed, patting her on the leg. “I have no idea, Songa. But the question is, does it make you happy that we can?”

“Yes!” she said immediately. “I’m going to have a baby, Jason! I can’t tell you how wonderful that is!”

“Even knowing it’s not a full-blooded Faey baby?”

Like that ever mattered! she sent with sudden heat, slapping him on the shoulder. And she wasn’t gentle. Sometimes, only sending could truly convey the emotion within a statement, and she was outraged at the idea he had put forth. *How dare you even suggest such a thing!*

“Easy, easy,” he said placatingly, putting his hands up. “To *Terrans*, it would matter, Songa. Some Terrans are very racist. I wanted to make sure it *didn’t* matter to you.”

“Some Faey are too,” she admitted. “But Jason, a Faey woman would never sleep with any man she wasn’t willing to have a baby with. Even on a first date, when you sleep with your date, you know there’s a chance he might get you pregnant. That’s a responsibility you accept before you ever undo the first button on your blouse. When I finally lured Luke into bed, I knew that I might have his child. And that thought made me feel almost *ecstatic*. He’s been so lonely since his wife and daughter died, and I knew I might have a chance to give him something new in his life. And he might bring me something my dear Rann didn’t have the time to manage,” she said with a sigh. “Oh, and Jason? Thank you.”

“For?”

“For naming your first child after him. I was very touched, and he would have been honored.”

“Hon, Jyslin was responsible for that, though I’m glad she did it. And Rann’s name will never fade away,” he told her, turning in the chair and accessing the data stick holding the plans for the Academy. He bought them up and zoomed in on the northern quadrant. There in big red letters, was the words *Rann Berylle Biological Sciences Academy*. “I had them name the new medical school and bioresearch center for him. Rann will always be part of House Karinne, Songa. I wouldn’t have it any other way. Our son’s name was Jyslin’s gift to you. Naming part of the Academy after him was mine.”

Songa looked at the blueprint, and her eyes misted over with tears. “Oh, Jason!” she said with a sob, throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly.

“I’m glad you liked it. Now, would you like to come to Karis with me today? Cybi would like to see you. She asked about you the last time she talked to me.”

“Me? Of course I’ll come, why are we going?” she said, sniffing as she rose back up to look at him.

“Ayuma needs to be introduced to Cybi and inducted into the house,” he told her. “She’s a Generation, and the Kimdori told me they won’t bring another until she’s seated in the house. One at a

time, they said, to keep things controlled. I'm inclined to agree with that idea, that way Kiaari only has to keep an eye on one potential security risk at a time. When Kiaari signs off on the newcomer, the Kimdori will bring a new one. I've decided that that's how new Generations the Kimdori bring to me will be inducted into the house, to go to Karis and meet Cybi, and receive their gestalt, where they are forever sealed to the house by learning its deepest secret."

"Why reveal that before you induct them into the house?"

"So they fully appreciate where they came from, who they are, and the stakes of the game," he answered. "To hear that you're a long-lost Karinne doesn't have the same impact as meeting Cybi and putting on a gestalt. That's when you *know* what you are, because you can't deny it."

"Ah. Well, put that way, it makes sense. Show me more of the Academy, Jason, please?"

"Sure, I'll show you everything that the Makati showed me. They did an *awesome* job on it. Ayuma was so impressed she almost kissed Prekt, the lead engineer on the team. She had no complaints at all. They patterned it after the original Academy, but made it a little bigger. It's circular, like the original one, and it's split into six main sections. One section is the medical school and bio-research facilities. There's a physical sciences section, a sociological sciences section, an engineering, computer, and technological research section, a history and general studies section, and an arts section."

"Arts?"

Jason nodded. "The original Academy's largest campus was the campus of the arts. Music, literature, sculpture, painting, and so on. The Karinnes grouped literature and language in with arts rather than history or general studies, so the Faey Language school will be on that campus rather than the general studies campus."

"And an English language school."

"Of course, and however many languages I can get for it. The Makati already have a Makati language teaching staff ready to take a spot, and Kumi told me that the five races of the Alliance have already offered to send language professors, but only if we guarantee they get to teach the *right* way. No implantation," he chuckled.

"That sounds *boring*. Why spend five years learning what I can pick up in five minutes?"

"Because when you learn it that way, it stays with you longer," he answered. "I'm kinda curious about the Bari-Bari. I wonder what their language sounds like, since they're ten feet tall simians."

"I've heard it. It's weird. What's this area?"

"The living quarters. It's sectioned off by the environmental needs of the inhabitants. Not everyone breathes oxygen and can tolerate our gravity, so each section will have different environmental conditions. We'll even have some classrooms in these environment blocks, both for the students to take remote classes outside their environment when they either can't or don't want to use an E-suit, and also to teach about alternate environments. I'm kinda looking forward to going into a couple of them."

"How long will it take for them to build it?"

"Five months," he answered. "They're going to basically take over the entire city of Norfolk with like thirty thousand Makati workers. They said they'll have the whole place up and all the equipment installed in five months. I don't believe them, but we'll see if they can live up to that claim. Ayuma says they can, so we made a little bet."

"A bet?"

"Yeah. I put a Duchess title up against her ancient Jakkan war mask that the Makati are late on their deadline."

Songa laughed. "You'd better be ready to give Ayuma a new title," she told him. "The Makati *never* miss a deadline, Jason. They're always very conservative. If they come in on deadline, they're actually late. They always pad their estimate to deal with unforeseen problems."

"Practical. Damn, though, I was really hoping to get that mask. It was really cool."

“Is Ayuma handling the courses?”

He nodded. “She’s done pretty well. Before she even got here to set up her offices, she already had quite a few professors under contract, and she’s already written out an operational guideline. She ran a university on Makan, so she has lots of experience with it. She set up a four term year. Here, she put it all on a handpanel for me.” He reached out to the handpanel with both his hand and his mind, enacting the telekinetic abilities which Dahnai had trained very well, causing the handpanel on the shelf to float over to him steadily and quickly. He took it from the air and offered it to her, which made Songa laugh.

“I’ve never seen you do that before!” she told him in surprise. “I knew you could do it, but seeing it is something else!”

“I know, and I get scolded for not practicing,” he chuckled. “My telekinesis is common knowledge in the *Siann*. It’s a family trait of the Karinne ruling family. It’s how I proved who I am.”

“I read about that in *Court Daily*,” Songa told him. “It said you had to use telekinesis to prove you were descended from the last Grand Duchess.”

“Yeah, I had to take the signet ring out of Empress Dahnai’s hand,” he told her. “Anyway, that’s the report Ayuma gave me, outlining all her organization plans for the school. Read it if you want. Tell me what you think of it, I’d like your opinion.”

“Sure, I’d love to,” she said, taking the panel. “Did Yohne talk to you about the school?”

“What do you mean?”

“We were talking the other day, and Kumi told her that she needed to open up and be more than her personal doctor. Be a house doctor. You know how she’s resisted that.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, she was kicking around the idea of asking you if she could take a post at the Academy, as either a teacher or in the campus hospital.”

“If that’s what she’d like, sure. I’ll talk to Ayuma about it tomorrow.”

“I’ll tell her to come talk to you then.”

“Works for me.”

Luke and Songa were married the very next day, in a private, quiet, intimate ceremony that involved both a Baptist minister and a Templar of Trelle. The two clergymen seemed to get along, chatting amiably after the ceremony, and after they chatted they both approached Jason directly. “We’ve heard that you’re rebuilding the Academy, your Grace. Have you thought to include shrines and chapels on the grounds for the spiritual well being of your students?” the white-haired Templar asked him.

“Actually, we did,” he answered them. “And we have a Religious Studies branch too, part of the History and General Studies college.”

“Very good! What faiths will be represented?”

“Any faith that wants to send representatives,” he answered. “I understand the council of the Templars has already dispatched the monks and Templars to start an abbey there, and some of them are going to teach Faey religious history and open a seminary school. And the Catholic Church is going to have a chapel there, too, and they’re sending some teachers to teach Terran religions at the school. I’m sure they’ll be biased, but they promised to teach about all of them, and not just Catholicism.” Jason laughed. “They’ll be running a Catholic seminary at the Academy too. All the chapels and shrines are going to be in the same block of the grounds, near the dormitories for the students so they don’t have to go far to attend services. I hope we don’t have any holy wars starting down there. There are going to be churches and shrines of different faiths literally across the streets from each other. From looking at the plans, there’s going to be a Jewish synagogue and an Islamic mosque standing side by side. I hope they behave. Those two religions have had some issues in Terra’s past, and I was kinda worried I might have a pitched battle in the street between them.”

Both of them laughed. “Oh, I doubt that you’ll have any fights, your Grace,” the minister said. “My Templar companion here may be a heathen, but at least he’s a personable fellow.”

The Templar laughed, clapping the minister on the back. “I was about to say the same thing about you.”

“Would you care if I asked the Baptists if they want to send a pastor?” the Baptist minister asked.

“Sure, I’ll give you a vidlink number so you can talk to Dean Ayuma’s staff about it,” Jason answered. “I want the Academy to be inclusive, not exclusive. The more viewpoints are represented there, the better. Maybe if we understand each other better, we won’t fight.”

“Well said, your Grace,” the Templar nodded.

“I’m just glad you didn’t forget about the spiritual well being of the students, your Grace,” the Templar said with an approving nod.

“Don’t thank me. The need for chapels was brought up in the summit we held when we started work on designing the Academy.”

“Ah, good.”

No matter how much he hated it, Jyslin was quite adamant and would not budge. Though he understood a little better, he still wasn’t quite happy about it. But as in all things, usually, what Jyslin wanted, Jyslin got. She knew him too well, and at least in this issue, he had absolutely no one on his side. Everyone, even Tim, sided with Jyslin on the matter, and he found himself roped into schedule of forced interludes with the women of the squad at peak times in their monthly fertility cycles, where their trysts were not for fun or enjoyment, but solely for the purpose of impregnating the woman.

Not that it wasn’t fun. None of them were reluctant about it at all, and he made a specific point to talk to them before hand to make sure where they stood. But they had the same outlook as Yana. Jason had to protect his line, and it wasn’t just a duty to them. It was a privilege, an honor, both a way to pay him back for his kindness and a chance to be part of his life by having children with him. And they were quite affectionate with him. They knew he wasn’t too keen on the idea of it, so they made it easy for him, making it seem less like he was being forced and more like the fun it was supposed to be.

They didn’t tell him when it was time, one of them just showed up, to make it seem as spontaneous as possible for him, to take the pressure off him. After Yana, and to his eternal shock, it was Maya that was sitting on the sofa in their bedroom, wearing nothing but a fedora. “Maya!” he gasped. “You’re married!”

“Yes, but Vell fully supports this, and has given his blessing,” she told him. “And my daughters would love a new playmate. So come here, Jason,” she said, crooking a finger at him. “It’s my turn to see if Jyslin was just bragging. And after a few days of fun, I get to carry part of you under my heart and know that I’m forever part of your family.”

Songa may have joked about the virility of human men, but it proved true a second time. Jason got Maya pregnant on the first try, just as he had with Yana. And it wasn’t just his side; Sheleese had become pregnant by Erinn, and Myleena came running into his apartment just the other day, ecstatic because *she* was pregnant. And after Ayuma was told what was going on, she called on an old friend of hers and invited him to Earth, trying to get pregnant, agreeing that increasing the numbers of the house was the primary objective of the house at this time.

Everywhere he looked, Karinne women were getting pregnant. And he wasn’t the only one to notice. Several of the *Siann* mentioned all these blessings the next time he was called to court, and Dahnai made a special note to ask him about it after practice. “So, you must be one tired guy,” she giggled. “Jemaari says you’ve got three girls pregnant. What’s going on over there?”

“It wasn’t entirely my idea,” he said. “It was decided that since there’s so few of us, we had to have children. Four each, by four different mothers for me. Each of the women have to have four babies by four different fathers.”

“Enriching the gene pool,” she noted with a nod. “That’s actually not a bad idea. With only like

fifteen Faey Karinnes, you have to establish a viable base.”

“Well, it wasn’t *my* idea,” he growled. “I was against it, but I got overruled.”

“Who could overrule you?”

“Jyslin,” he snorted. “She’s decided that it’s necessary, and I can’t say no to her. Not after what she threatened to do. It was blackmail of the highest order.”

Dahnai laughed. “Sounds like you’ve got your hands full over there. But hey, I agree with Jyslin. You need to spread out the genes some, baby, and at the same time, you need more members. Inducting people is one way, but you can never be absolutely sure you can trust them. But having kids guarantees you have Karinnes, since you can raise them to be loyal.” They walked into her apartment, and she immediately shed her practice clothes, standing there in her glorious nudity. He looked at her belly, and saw that she was still flat as a board from her ribs to her hips. “I’m not showing yet,” she said with a giggle when she saw where he was looking. “The docs already told me to stop doing abdominal exercises. They don’t want the kid to have to push against rock-hard abs for space. “I got one coming, and you’ve got, what, three?”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Hey, for men, it’s all fun and games. You don’t have to push a baby out. I’ve done it twice, hon, and trust me, it’s no picnic. That’s the pain we suffer, the price we pay, for the joy and privilege of being a mother.”

“I sometimes find it hard to believe you have two kids.”

“Yeah, I know, I don’t look it, do I?” she asked, putting a hand on her hip and strutting a bit for him, showing off. “Well, I was gonna take you into the bedroom and fuck you, but it sounds like they’ve got you pretty much well worn out. You still have one to go, by my count, so far be it from me to drain out your seed for no reason other than a little fun.”

“That’s so considerate of you,” he drawled dryly.

She laughed. “What, you wanna? Hey, if you wanna, I’m all for it.”

“I’m exhausted, Dahnai. I was so glad you sent a call to court I could kiss you, because it got me out of sight. They pushed another of the women on me, Ilia, and now they’re waiting to see if she gets pregnant. But that’s no guarantee that they won’t decide to send another. Can I beg off this time?”

“Sure, hon, sure. I’m not used to being rebuffed, but I can see you could use a break. After telekinesis practice, wanna catch a movie or something? Maybe some dinner?”

“Now that sounds nice. I’d like a nice quiet evening that *doesn’t* involve sex.”

“How can an evening be that nice that doesn’t involve sex?” she asked in sincere confusion.

“You’re about to find out.”

They had a nice dinner after practice and sacked out on the couch to watch the vidlink, and he had to ask. “You know, I heard a rumor that you’re going out with another guy.”

She laughed. “Jealous?”

“No, no, just wondering if it’s true.”

“Well, I *did* meet someone,” she said. “He’s a minor noble from Saenne, Zarinen Kellin Saenne. He’s barely an adult, but he’s really interesting. I met him in the hall about two weeks ago when I was running down to the kitchen for something to eat, and he didn’t bow to me. One of the guards kicked his feet out from under him as he went by, and he seemed really surprised. He never *saw* us. Seems he had his nose in a handpanel, reading some old books. He wants to be a historical scholar, but his house sent him here to court so he could learn about politics. He was cute, so I invited him down to the kitchens and we talked a while over a sandwich. He was really funny, and didn’t seem to be afraid of me at all! That was *so* refreshing!”

Miaari did tell him that Dahnai would find someone she could love. Maybe this Saenne noble could be the one.

“So, what happened next?”

She laughed. “Well, I was feeling a bit horny, and he’s *really* cute. Let’s say that he filled your

shoes. And he did a great job! He's young, but since he's handsome, he's had enough laps around a bed to know what he's doing. Felt weird looking up at the guy banging me so good and seeing blue skin. For a minute I thought he was you. His dick isn't quite as big as yours, but he knew how to make up for it. And those young guys can go *all* night," she said in a purring voice.

"Uh, Dahnai, I *am* young. I'm only twenty three."

She laughed. "It's easy to forget that sometimes. Guess it explains why you can go all night," she said with a laugh, slapping his shoulder.

"How old are you?"

"I'm forty-one," she told him. "Still considered in my youth, but I'll be seeing middle age coming up on the horizon in about ten years."

"To humans, you'd *be* middle aged."

"Yeah, well, Faey live to a hundred and fifty or so on the average, so I'm not even halfway there yet."

"Wow, human only live to like seventy."

"Faey women can still have babies at seventy," she told him. "Well, technically, anyway. There's been cases of it, but it's not normal." She turned on the couch and looked at him. "I would say be careful and live as long as you can, but you're part Faey too, so hopefully you'll live longer than seventy."

"I hope so too," Jason agreed. "So, back to the topic. What happened *after* the sex?"

"We talked. You know I'm a history nut, and Kellin is into history too, big-time. We had an actual *argument* about the originating species of the Alliance. Can you believe it? An *argument*! That guy had some balls, I'll give him that! I never dreamed someone from such a small house would have the nerve to argue with me!"

"Sounds like someone you need to get to know."

"Yeah, I already called him back to court," she nodded. "He went back to Orion, the Saenne home planet, that's why he's not here. I've called him back. He was told he'd better be here at court tomorrow. Stay over tonight and meet him, okay?"

"Sure, lemme just call home and tell Jyslin I'll be here."

"You can stay with me tonight. I'll keep my hands off, promise," she grinned.

"I'm gonna hold you to that."

"No problem, hon. I can see you're tired. I may love a good fuck with you, but I'm also enough of your friend to know when to give you a little space."

"I really appreciate that, hon," he told her, patting her on the leg and kissing her cheek. "Lemme go call Jys, and then I'm gonna go ahead and turn in early. I'm really tired."

"Go on ahead. I'm gonna take a bath, and I'll be there after I dry off."

Jason met Kellin Saenne before court the next morning, and was impressed. He was the tallest Faey male Jason had ever seen in his life, a bit over six feet tall, almost as tall as Jason's six feet four inches. That explained why Dahnai, who was so tall herself at six-three, just a shade shorter than Jason, was attracted to him. Kellin was taller than any other male Jason had seen, but still shorter than Dahnai, who would probably feel a touch threatened by a male taller than her. He also wasn't willowy like other Faey males. Kellin wasn't buff, but he was definitely not a couch potato. His was an athletic build, not what Jason expected from a man who wanted to teach history. He had reddish-blond hair and green eyes, and was indeed handsome in the way Faey women were pretty.

"It's good to meet you, your Grace," Kellin said, bowing to Jason in Dahnai's apartment before court, as Dahnai was dressed by her maids. "Empress Dahnai spoke very highly of you, and I've heard some interesting things about you and your house. When will the new Academy be built?"

"About four months, but I don't think it'll be open for six," he answered as Dahnai fussed at her maid, slapping her lightly on the top of her head as she knelt and did some of the ties at the Empress' waist.

"I'm waiting for that," Dahnai said from where she was being dressed. "I want to attend the opening ceremony."

"You're welcome to come," Jason told her.

"I was hoping to attend the Academy as a student," Kellin told Jason. "I've always been fascinated by the Karinnes. Attending the new Academy would be like living in history. I'd love that."

"Enrollment is open to anyone really," Jason shrugged. "I think you'd have to talk to Ayuma though. I'm not sure what enrollment standards she's going to set."

"Well, I graduated from my prep school at the top of my class," he said proudly. "And I've already taken some Academy-level courses at my prep school in history."

"That might be enough. I'll ask Ayuma about it for you."

"Really? Thank you, your Grace! That's very kind of you!"

"Any friend of Dahnai's is a friend of mine," he told the young man easily.

"I don't know about calling her Majesty a *friend* just yet," he whispered.

"I heard that! And I do like you, Kellin. That's why you're here, dipshit! I want to get to know you better. After court we're gonna go talk a while."

"I thought, uh," he started, then trailed off, looking at Jason.

Dahnai laughed. "That was fun too," she winked. "*Real* fun. With a little more experience, you'll be as good a lay as the Grand Duke, and I'm looking *forward* to giving you that kind of education. I have to get my sessions in with you before my pregnancy makes me fat and unattractive."

Kellin actually blushed. "Your Grace, did you learn much of your house after reclaiming it? I did a paper on the Karinnes, and they had a rich and somewhat controversial history. Have you learned it?"

"Oh, he knows his house history," Dahnai said sourly from where she was. "He knows so much he won't even tell me!"

"The ship I found had the records of the house on it, as well as certain instructions and orders from the last of the old house," he told Kellin. "Part and parcel of those records was the commands issued to me by my predecessor, commands I decided to obey, because I agree with them. Reopening the Academy was one of those commands. Keeping Karinne separate from the Imperium was another."

"Separate?"

"We're part of the Imperium, but only up to a point," he answered. "If you did a paper on us, you know that the Karinnes were very seclusive."

"Yes."

"There was a reason for it, and I have to continue the practice."

"He's defending the knowledge of the Karinnes," Dahnai said, giving him a mean look. "They left more than just commands, Kellin. They left some of their research behind, and he won't share it."

Jason wouldn't answer that, so they talked about something else. Turned out that Kellin had the body he had because he loved to play batchi, a game that was like a cross between basketball, lacrosse, and hockey, which was rather physical and not often played by men, given players tended to hit each other with the batchi sticks. But given how tall Kellin was, he'd make a good striker, able to reach over the other strikers for the ball. That led to a discussion about the professional batchi league, where Jason was educated quickly about the nuances of batchi. Dahnai liked batchi.

"Where do you play batchi?" Dahnai asked.

"Just a local fun league. My team is called the Rakers, but the other teams call us the Tubers because of me," he chuckled. "But we're nine and three, and one more win puts us in the fun league playoffs. I play center striker."

"Wow, rough spot. You must get banged around a lot."

He laughed. "Yeah, at first, the other players seemed to take offense to a man playing batchi, so I got fouled a lot. That's why I'm the best penalty shooter on Orion III. Ninety six percent score rate on penalties. The other coaches don't let them foul me anymore," he laughed.

"You any good outside of penalty shots?"

"I'd like to say I am, but it's not very seemly to brag."

"Eh, I'd have to see you play. Meezi, where's my crown!"

Dahnai finished getting ready for court, and she tugged at her robes. "I only have a couple of things to do today, and you're not dressed for court Kellin, so stay here. You going home, Jayce?"

"Yeah, I have some paperwork, and I have an appointment with Miaari today."

"An appointment? She just walks into your office whenever she pleases," Dahnai accused.

"Yeah, well, that's the friend. This has something to do with official Kimdori business, so she's following the protocols."

"The other houses *hate* you for that," Dahnai laughed. "You have a Handmaiden for an ambassador, and she's your personal friend. That gives you the mother of all inside tracks straight to Denmother Zaa. Alright, time to go to work. Stay here, Kellin, and don't touch anything! Keep him out of trouble," she told one of the guards, who nodded to her as four other guards formed up to escort Dahnai to court.

"That was...odd," Kellin confided in Jason after she left. "She calls me back here from Orion, and I'm not attending court? What does she want from me?"

"She wants to get to know you, and she can't do that in court," he answered.

"She's interested in me that way? I never knew. I mean, I thought she brought me back to her apartment last week because she was looking for a quick score, you know? She certainly didn't seem that interested the morning after. Well, she did at first, but then we started arguing about who started the Alliance. I thought I offended her, so I went back home *real* quick."

"The arguing was what got her interested in you," Jason chuckled. "She wants to date men who aren't afraid of her title, who'll take her for who she is, not what she is. When you argued with her over history, you were arguing with *Dahnai*, not *the Empress*. They're two very different people. That you seemed to realize that got her very interested in you."

"I didn't realize anything, I just kinda lost my head because her conclusions were so utterly wrong," he laughed ruefully. "Like I said, I left in a hurry after the argument, and she didn't seem all that interested in having me stay."

"Oh, she's *very* interested in you, Kellin, trust me. Are you interested in her?"

"Of course, she's the *Empress*!"

"No, Kellin. Are you interested in *Dahnai*?"

The young Fay looked at him, then seemed to understand. He nodded slowly. "Yeah, I am. Empress Dahnai is smart and funny, and she really likes history, just like me. I could get to know a woman like her."

"Then you just passed your first test, Kellin. Always remember that there's a *woman* under that crown and those robes, a living, breathing woman with hopes, dreams, and a personality. I can assure you, she puts her pants on one leg at a time in the morning, the same way you do. Don't let her title blind you to the woman, but you'd better not forget that she has that title when you're in public, and treat her with the respect she's due."

"Wow. You think she really—I mean, do you really think she'd go out with me? I'd really like it. She was so *fun*, nothing what I expected, and I thought I blew it when I started arguing with her."

"The argument is what earned you a second date, kid," Jason laughed. "If you had the guts to stand your ground with her, she knew you'd treat her like the lady she is, and not the Empress. Just be honest with her, that's all. Be honest about who you are, show her who you are, not what you think she wants to see. If she wanted that, there's a whole room full of shallow images in the audience chamber for her to choose from. She wants someone *real*. Show her *Kellin Saenne*, not *Zarinen Saenne*. Show her who you are, and if she likes what she sees, expect to be a regular visitor here."

"Wow. You think I have a chance with her? I mean, you're her *amu dorai*. You know what she likes."

"I think you do, as long as you remember the three rules for dealing with Dahnai. First, be

yourself. Second, remember that in private, she's not a title, she's a person, so treat her like one. Trust me, she's one of the most interesting and wonderful people around, and it's enriched my life to be with her. But remember that there's a time to treat her like a person, and a time to treat her like the Empress. Don't disrespect her in public, but once the doors are closed and you're in private, she's not the Empress anymore, she's just Dahnai. Third, don't try too hard. It's not a competition, kid. Just because you know she's interested, don't *try* to win her favor. If you do that, you're gonna lose it quick. Just be yourself and let her make up her own mind. If you force the issue, you'll force her to decide against you. Until she does, just enjoy it. Dahnai is a wonderful person, both in and out of that bed. I look forward to the visits just to be with her way more than the sex. But the sex is good too," he admitted with a rueful chuckle. "You'll have a great time with her, no matter what you do. That's a promise."

"Wow," he breathed, scratching his cheek. "I'll try, your Grace."

"Jason, my name is Jason. I don't like titles in private, friend. Trust me, I'm probably the most uncomfortable noble in the *Siann* with his title. If we're in private, don't call me that."

"Alright, Jason. Are you staying?"

"No, I have things to do. But we'll see each other again. That's a guarantee."

It was the beginning of the change in his relationship with Dahnai, for Kellin Saenne did not waste any time, in the eyes of the public, worming his way into Dahnai's personal life. Their official first date was a major event for the Imperium, but that official first date came about three weeks after they started seeing each other, privately...but that wasn't exactly a secret either. The tabloids always kept up to date on Dahnai's lovers and conquests, so it was already public knowledge that Dahnai had chanced to meet Kellin in the halls of the palace, and then took him back to her apartment to have sex with him. It was also noticed when Kellin hurriedly left Dracora just afterwards, hinting he'd insulted the Empress, but then there was curiosity when he was recalled, not immediately, which would have been the action of an angry Empress, but days later, which was more the act of a curious Empress. After the second time Kellin spent the night with Dahnai, the tabloids started looking into this unusual young man, who was as tall as a woman and played batchi, yet was very scholarly and studious, very admirable male traits in Faey society. The tabloids kept the Imperium informed as the two of them privately met, unofficial dates that weren't unusual for Dahnai, given her relationship with Jason.

Those visits basically sealed the deal. Dahnai had confided to Jason just before she officially asked him out for a public date that she was of a mind to either make him her *amu dorai* or marry him, either or. She wasn't sure yet which she was going to do.

Sometimes, Jason was there. Sometimes, he wasn't, but Dahnai kept him abreast of everything. Simply put, Dahnai was *smitten* by Kellin Saenne. He was the perfect man for her, and she could barely do anything else but talk about him when he visited her. She told him about all their dates and rendezvous, all their conversations, and she couldn't find a bad word to say about him. She found him to be quiet, reserved, kind, thoughtful, but had a strong will and wasn't intimidated by Dahnai's title. He was very open and honest with her, willing to be himself around her, and treating her like a woman he was very interested in for who she was, not the political advantages she could bring to his house.

Which was exactly what Jason told him to do.

Three months after that first date, the news was broken in a first storm that swept through every major media center in the Imperium: without ceremony or warning, a robed member of the Imperial house delivered to the Grand Duchess Jayi Saenne a box to be given to Kellin Saenne, and everyone knew what was inside it.

A white *mey*.

As was Imperial form and custom, Imperial guards arrived at the Saenne compound one day after the delivery of the *mey*, and Kellin was basically abducted, taken from his house with nothing but the clothes on his back and taken to the Imperial palace. There, in a grand ceremony which the entire

Siann attended, he was stripped naked and presented to Dahnai, who sat on her throne, as he was ceremonially stripped of all prior ties and obligations and handed over to Dahnai as a baby was to its mother. She accepted him into her house and then officially proclaimed that she would take his hand in marriage.

In that instant, he became the Duke Kellin Merrane.

There was no lengthy preparations or long ceremonies. In typical Faey mentality, when a woman got her hands on a man and got a marriage promise out of him, she moved fast to secure that promise, and it was no different for the Empress. Most Faey couples were married within hours of becoming engaged, except for noble arranged marriages, but Dahnai's marriage to Kellin wasn't considered noble, it was considered personal. And because of that, the marriage ceremony took place the next day.

The entire house Karinne attended the ceremony, which was so small, where other houses could only bring 100 members to attend the ceremony; every house was given 100 tickets to the ceremony. Jason even made a little money and a few friends by selling his unused tickets to other houses so they could allow more than 100 to attend. It was a surprisingly intimate ceremony, not the four hour long formal ordeal Jason expected. The High Templar of Trelle presided in a one hour ceremony where he talked of love and devotion, of being good to each other, and then he had the two intended exchange vows. Once that was done, the High Priestess of Aris and the Archprelate of Demir then had them exchange vows again, basically marrying them under all three of the gods of the Faey Trinity. Once the Archprelate of Demir gave them his benediction, Dahnai affixed a glittering platinum marriage bracer on Kellin's wrist, a piece of jewelry that had to cost a million credits. She then put a small crown on his head and named him her Prince Consort, and that was it.

They were married.

The Imperium celebrated for two weeks, which was custom, but Jason didn't engage in most of the ceremonies and celebrations. The Karinnes quietly picked up their people and returned to Terra, keeping their traditional distance from the goings-on of the rest of the *Siann*.

And it was a much larger house than when Dahnai started her courtship of Kellin. In the three months of their courting, the Kimdori had brought to him 47 of the long-lost descendents of the Generations. They were young on the average; the youngest was 22, the oldest was 42, and 22 were male, 25 female. Each one was given some idea of what was going on before they were brought to Jason, and after some discussion with them, they were taken to Karis and presented to Cybi. The Faey the Kimdori brought were carefully chosen, not for their age, but for their idealism. These were the ones that the Kimdori felt would embrace the ideals of the house of Karinne and be true members, and Jason had to agree with their assessments. They all understood the needs of the house, and the need to keep it secret. To a man and woman, Jason knew he could trust them, because *Kiaari* told him he could trust them. No one could hide anything from a Kimdori, and *Kiaari* was right there to check them after a few days to see where they stood. In three months, the ranks of the house swelled to 82 members, and what was more, Jyslin, Yana, Maya, and Ilia were all pregnant by him, while Sheleese and Min were pregnant by Erinn. Jason didn't like the idea of fathering children outside of his marriage, but everyone had ganged up on him and forced it of him, and at last it was over. He had fathered his required four children. He just hoped he could be a good father to them. He was scared enough about the idea of being a father to Jyslin's child, and now he was going to have three more, from different mothers.

Those three months saw more than the house of Karinne grow. In an amount of time that defied rational explanation, the Academy of Terra went from a scarred hole in the middle of Norfolk to a glistening tower of steel and glass surrounded by an armada of buildings of all shapes and sizes. The Makati were *unbelievable*! They had brought literally tens of thousands of workers on site, and they worked with a speed that made the most diligent human contracting firm look like kids with Lego blocks. The main building in the center, a sixty story high circular tower, rose a floor a day after they got the foundation set, and the other buildings sprouted up almost overnight. They went from set

foundations to frames to walled buildings in the span of a week, and it took only one to two weeks to fill in the buildings with their plumbing, power, datalines, and infrastructure. By the time of Dahnai's wedding, the main tower only had three more floors until it was completed, and 80% of the school's buildings were built and ready. The school would be totally built, all equipment installed, and ready for students two weeks earlier than scheduled.

He wouldn't have believed it was possible had he not seen them do it.

In all, Jason was pleased. The planet was running itself now, with Secretary Kim doing most of the work. Ayuma had things well in hand. Dahnai still called and asked him to court, but she had a husband now, and her calls for him to visit were much fewer and further between. Suralle was being fair and dutiful with moving food, meeting the quotas, and Kumi had set it up so the Earth's take went to U.N. control, to pay for things.

Things were good. Earth, the humans...they didn't need him as much now.

By the opening ceremony of the Academy, attended by emissaries and nobles and even heads of state of governments other than the Imperium. Dahnai was there with her new husband, showing signs of her pregnancy now. One of the Supreme Councilmen that ruled the Alliance attended the opening ceremonies, as did ambassadors from the Nine Colonies, the Urumi, even an ambassador of the Skaa, who looked *very* uncomfortable and got quite a few nasty looks. But Jason had already warned *everyone* that though Terra might be a planet controlled by the Imperium, the Academy was a free zone, where any race or government could come. The Imperium and the Skaa may be at war, but on the grounds of the Academy, they were not allowed to fight, and Skaa vessels were permitted rite of passage to reach Terra...within certain reasonable restrictions. A fleet of Skaa vessels would be attacked, but a single unarmed civilian ship was more than welcome to arrive and transport students.

The ceremony was brief and to the point. A ribbon spread across the central building was cut by the Grand Duke Karinne, and inside, in the main auditorium, speeches talking about a new age of cooperation and learning dawning were given by Dahnai and several other governmental emissaries, including the Skaa. INN made sure to keep a camera locked on Jason at all times, and many cameras were careful to catch any interaction between the Grand Duke and the Empress. Some of the tabloids were running stories that the Grand Duke was trying to poison the marriage between Dahnai and Kellin, and they wanted to see how they acted together.

They were mightily disappointed. Jason, Jyslin, Dahnai, and Kellin stayed together, talking and laughing, and it was very clear that the two couples were quite happy to be in each other's company. And when the four expanded to six, with Tim and Symone, there was nothing but sickening friendship and comfortable closeness.

After the ceremony, The Empress and her husband paid a visit to Foxwood, the manor of the Grand Duke. There outside of cameras, she spent the night, leaving everyone to only ponder and imagine what might be happening inside. In the morning, the Imperial retinue left to return to Draconis.

That day, the Academy officially opened its doors and began accepting students for a term that would begin in two weeks. Professors were already in place, already knew how the Academy was going to operate. Students flocked in on a continuous line of transports from Draconis, and exotic ships from other races, other governments, appeared outside the moon's orbit, jumping in from hyperspace and having left before the ceremony had even taken place, carrying professors, students, and research material to the new hub of science to replace the lost Karis Academy.

The Terra Academy was more than just a school. It was insurance. Now, Earth was totally safe, from the Trillanes, from the Shovalles, from anyone that would exploit the planet or the human race. With the Academy there, Earth was now off limits, a place to be left alone, where the planet and its people could produce food for the Imperium and host the Terra Academy to provide educational benefits for any who could manage to enroll, as well as centralize research to advance the cause of science. It was a place where there was any number of plots and intrigue, but that intrigue would be intragalactic in scope. Since many governments had students and ambassadors in Norfolk, it would

become a new hotspot for the brokerage of information, all carefully watched over and controlled by the young Terran Gamemaster, Kiaari.

And that was what it would be. There would be no second school behind the first where the Karinnes pursued their own research. Not now. Not yet, anyway. The school would run of its own volition under the careful ministration of Ayuma Karinne. It would be given time to settle in, mature, and then, maybe in a few years, the knowledge of the Karinnes would slowly be funneled to the Academy, kept in a secret building that would house the first of the new CBIMs, and from there, they'd have to see how it would go.

One week after the opening of the Academy, a note was delivered to both Secretary Kim of the United Nations and Empress Dahnai Merrane of the Imperium. It was from the Grand Duke Karinne, who stated that due to the rigors of office, he was taking an extended vacation and would be unavailable except in the most dire emergency. The note told them that in such an emergency, Kiaari could contact him.

When Dahnai sent a message to the Marines guarding Foxwood, they replied that they had heard no such plans to take a vacation. They went to go confront Jason about the note.

But he was gone.

Jyslin was gone.

Kumi, Meya, Myra, and Fure were gone.

Tim and Symone were gone.

Songa and Yohne were gone.

Maya and Vell and their two daughters, Yana, Zora, all of the ex-Marine Countesses were gone.

Erinn and the new Faey members of House Karinne were gone.

Ian, Temika and her boyfriend, and all the human telepaths, even the ones still in training in Boston, were gone.

How they had all vanished over the night was a mystery, a mystery that raged through the Marines and the upper echelons of the Imperium for years. Nobody had seen them leave. Nobody knew where they went. Nobody knew how to reach them, or when they would return.

Ayuma Karinne, the only Karinne left on Terra, she knew where they were. Everyone was sure of it. But when she was asked about it, she would only smile and tell them that Jason was on vacation, and would speak not a single word more on the matter, politely and forcefully changing the subject.

Kiaari wouldn't even smile. She just gave one a cold stare until they felt uncomfortable enough to change the subject themselves.

It was a mystery that remained so, for a long time. Jason Karinne was out there. They all knew he was out there, for over the months after his disappearance, he did surface two times. The first time, he mysteriously appeared at the United Nations after Secretary Kim relayed an urgent message to Kiaari that African rebels were about to try to declare war on South Africa. Jason simply showed up at the United Nations, ordered a very public mobilization of Marines and Karinne regulars to crush the invasion by force, and then he vanished. After Faey army units and exomechs began to muster in Cape Town, the rebellion quickly dispersed.

The second time he surfaced was at the birth of Dahnai's third child, Shya Merrane. He and Jyslin, who was *very* pregnant, appeared at the Imperial Palace the day before the scheduled birth of Shya, and were immediately invited in. Everyone wondered what had been said, what they'd talked about, if the Empress had throttled the Grand Duke for his absence, but by the next day no one cared, for Shya Merrane was born right on schedule, in a natural childbirth.

Nobody saw Jason and Jyslin Karinne leave, and people were *watching* for it. They simply vanished, and it too was a raging mystery that went on for years, since the Imperial Palace was the most watched building in the Imperium. For two people, and one heavily pregnant, to vanish without a trace from that building was almost impossible.

But in time, even those curious events faded into the tedium of day to day life. Things continued in

the Imperium. A new civil war didn't surface, though there was always maneuverings and schemes by the Highborn houses. The crushing of Trillane had sent a sharp lesson through the Highborns that Dahnai was watching them, and though Merrane wasn't the power it once was, the threat of her calling in the deadly warships of House Karinne, which was related directly to the throne by means of the betrothal of Shya Merrane and Rann Karinne, was a threat they could not ignore. The Karinne ships always simply appeared like ghosts, then vanished like smoke, and their fearsome firepower and powerful armor and shields were afforded the utmost respect by military women. And though never more than three were seen, it was very clear that there was more than three. They would appear on separate sides of the Imperium, seeming to patrol, to make themselves be seen, and then vanish. They always moved in a triad of two destroyers and a cruiser, and they were an eternal reminder to the Highborn houses that Dahnai Merrane had a *powerful* ally to call upon if they got any bright ideas.

But oh, were there schemes. A day didn't go by without some new plot being hatched in the *Siann*, but now, they weren't nearly as dangerous. The ascendance of Karinne had tipped the scales back to the center, where the weakness of Merrane was covered by their alliance to the enigmatic, mysterious, dangerous House Karinne and their cunning and fear-invoking Grand Duke Jason Karinne. The House Karinne had brought equilibrium back to the Imperium, and Dahnai's position as Empress and House Merrane's place as the ruling house were secured.

It wasn't a perfect system, but so long as the threat of the mysterious House Karinne kept the Highborn houses in check, quelled their lust for the throne, the system wouldn't fly apart at the seams.

And that made nearly everyone happy.

Epilogue

Brista, 4 Kedaa, 4396 Orthodox Calendar
Monday, 15 November, 2009, Adjusted Calendar
Foxwood East Manor, the Capitol city Karsa, Karis

Perfect.

It was a beautiful summer day. It wasn't too hot, and a nice breeze blew in from the ocean which was visible from the patio of the house. Karis had no insects, so they never had to worry about bugs interfering with their barbecue, a barbecue that took up the entire patio and spread out to the concrete around the pool.

This was a day to celebrate, for Jyslin had given birth the night before, to a beautiful baby boy.

She was there now, sitting in the seat of honor near the grill, holding her newborn boy in her arms while people gathered around her, congratulating her, getting a look at the newest Karinne.

His name was the Duke Heir Apparent Rann Brian Fox Shaddale Karinne, and he was Jason and Jyslin's first child.

He looked like his mother, though. He'd been born with pink skin like his father, but he had his mother's pointed ears and her facial structure. His eyes were a beautiful blue, like his father, and his hair was a carrot-colored orange. He had been born weighing nine pounds two ounces, and was twenty inches long, a fairly big baby, but Jyslin had only laughed and said that of course he would be big, since he had such big shoes to fill.

The moment had been miraculous. They were at the new Karsa Medical Center, and Jyslin was its first ever patient, since Kimdori didn't really need medical treatment. They were attended during the birth by Symone and Tim, and while Kimdori medical specialists helped Jyslin through her labor and kept watch of her vital signs, Jason held her hand and gave her support and comfort as she endured the pain of childbirth. But then the moment came, and it was magical. Hours of pain culminated in a four minute delivery, and it seemed that before Jason could blink, a wet, splotchy infant was being cradled

in large Kimdori hands. The baby began to cry immediately, and he was wrapped in a towel and placed on Jyslin's naked breast. "Hello there, Rann," Jyslin said in a weary voice, but her face was radiant and her expression was one of the most tender love. "I'm your mommy. Welcome to the family."

The family. They were all here, and it moved him to see so many fat Faey. Six of the nine Marines were pregnant, and four of them were his. Yana, Maya, Ilia, and Zora were all *very* pregnant, with due dates a few weeks apart, with Yana being next up for birth in about three weeks. Four women, four women not his wife, all carrying his babies, doing their duty to the house by carrying his children to protect the line and to broaden the gene pool of the Generations. Two more boys and two girls. Sheleese and Min were also pregnant, but they were pregnant by Erinn. And many of the new Generations that had been brought into the house were pregnant as well. Myleena was due in two months, 16 of the 22 Generation males had brought girlfriends or had found women among the workers and impregnated them, and 18 of the 25 Generation females were pregnant now, impregnated by the boyfriends or husbands they had brought with them or finding men among the workers...but not among the male Generations. Jason had already ordered that the Generations couldn't interbreed yet, because Cybi said it could cause problems with inbreeding later. For two generations, Generation Karinnes couldn't produce children with each other. It was a virtual baby boom, and Jyslin was only the harbinger.

They would be born here, on their ancestral home planet. Karis. That was why the House Karinne basically vanished *en masse* from the Imperium. There were 1477 non-Kimdori on Karis now, and they were all here, in Karsa. They were the families of the Generations, boyfriends and girlfriends and extended families, including Generation parents of the ones that had been inducted first. There were also human telepaths and their families here, the descendents of the non-Generation Karinnes, brought here to learn about who they were and master their telepathic powers in an environment of complete acceptance and inclusion. They were not scary telepaths here, they were just like everyone else. But there were more here. There were certain Faey that the Kimdori had selected to bring here that could be trusted, hardy souls that had accepted a secret mission to help restore the planet of Karis to life. They were terraformers, technicians, workers, scientists, adventurers, and homesteaders, willing to get their hands dirty, and all of them had been inducted into the house as Zarinas and Zarinens. They were all Karinne nobles now, and this was their home as much as it was Jason's.

Slowly but surely, Karis was going to be brought back to life.

Rann was the omen of things to come, for he was the first person born on Karis since its destruction. This was his home planet, this was his birthright, this was a part of him. This was where all Karinnes would be born, from now on. This was their home planet. And in time, maybe in Jason's lifetime, Karis would be revealed to the Imperium, revealed as a planet restored from destruction and again inhabited.

But that would be much later. For now, Jason was quite content to live here in peace and solitude and focus himself on the last great task that laid before him, the restoration of Karis.

Rann was the first step down a very long road. Hopefully, in a hundred years, the plant life of Karis would be restored, animals would be brought here from other worlds to start an ecosystem, and this planet would be truly alive once again. But until then, there was a lot of hard work ahead for all of them. There were eleven other continents to restore after this small one was complete, and there were ancient cities to explore, old equipment to salvage, and artifacts to find and secure to be put in museums to honor the memory of those who had lived and died here.

But that was later. Right now, it was time to celebrate. Jason had been kicked off the grill by Temika, who cooked hamburgers and hot dogs with practiced ease as everyone sat on patio furniture or stood, moving from group to group as they talked animatedly and happily, but everyone took a turn coming to Jyslin and seeing their new baby. Jason took a seat by Jyslin and put his arm around her, which caused her to lean over and kiss him. "Well, my Duke, it seems we have a very sleepy heir," she

said aloud as she looked down with soft eyes at their son, one of the few times they spoke, because right now, she didn't want to exclude anyone.

"It seems so," he answered. "We should tell Dahnai that Rann was born."

"Only if you warn her she can't see him. He's not leaving Karis yet, love. Not for a while."

I agree. Let's give him time to get used to his new home.

Rann's eyes opened, and he looked at Jason quizzically, then he closed his eyes again.

"That's why I'm not sending, love," she giggled. "Rann's gonna be like his mommy, walking through Trelle's hair. I was the same way when I was born, so my parents say. I was sensitive to sending at birth, but then my sensitivity faded, and my power didn't fully wake up til I was seven. I think our son's gonna be a strong telepath."

"With parents like you two, Ah'd put money on it, sugah," Temika chuckled.

"And when are you going to join the fat club, Mika?"

Temika laughed. "Me an' Mike are workin' on it as fast as we can, sugah," she assured Jyslin.

"Did Ah show you the ring?"

She held up her left hand, showing off a diamond ring.

"Only about fifty times," Jyslin teased. "When are you sealing the deal?"

"We dunno, maybe next time we go back to Earth. We're both Baptists, we want a Baptist minister to marry us."

"I have to go back next week, Mika. Want to tag along?"

"What you goin' back for?"

"Some paperwork that Kim and Kiaari don't want to send here. I'm not sure what it's about. I'll probably take that opportunity to publicly announce Rann, and then we'll have to leave again to present him to the Empress so she can validate the contract."

"Ah still don't believe you betrothed him befo' he was even born."

"It's the way they do things in the *Siann*, and we have to keep the ties between Merrane and Karinne very public, to keep the Highborns from getting any bright ideas. As long as the threat of a squadron of Karinne ships jumping in is there, the Highborns are kept leashed."

"Yah. They got those other ships workin' now?"

Jason nodded. "They installed the new biogenic computers in them a few days ago. They're doing the shakedown now, and if they pass, we have seven more ships in the fleet, five destroyers and two cruisers. They're starting to build Gladiator e-mechs now too, since they have the Shimmer Dome running at full capacity."

"Good deal."

"Enough shop talk, love. Just look at that sunset. Isn't it beautiful?"

Jason looked out over the sea, and saw the blue star of the Karis system setting over the ocean, the normally blue sun taking on a lovely shade of violet as it neared the horizon, but it still painted the sky red, due to the physics of light that reached the planet's surface. Fluffy clouds turned pink as they neared the horizon, and it was one of the loveliest sunsets he had seen in his life.

"It's very beautiful," he agreed. "Jyslin?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For never giving up. For being a tenacious bulldog, and for falling in love with me. Without you, I think I'd never have found true happiness."

She gave him a heart-melting look, and put her head on his shoulder. "I love you, Jason Karinne. I love you with all my heart, and I will love you until time ends and Trelle cuts this existence away from her hair. You are my greatest treasure."

He couldn't say anything to that. She handed Rann over to him, and he cradled his son to his chest, feeling his warmth and his tiny body against him, and he knew that he had finally found his place. He

was the Grand Duke Karinne, ruler of a planet and a feared power player in the Faey Imperium, but that title shrivelled to nothing when compared to the greatest titles ever created.

Husband.

And Father.

Here, on Karis, with Jyslin at his side and Rann in the nursery, Jason could finally look out at that sunset and know that he had reached the end of a long, difficult road, with a new long, difficult road before him.

But both roads led to the same destination.

Home.

*Thus ends the tale of Jason
Fox and the Subjugation.*

*But the universe is a
vast and wondrous place,
filled with all manner of
wonderful sights, rich history,
and intriguing stories.*

*And there will be other
stories to tell.*