

## Chapter One

Lately, Timothy had been one to watch silently, out of sight and out of mind. In the twenty staryears since the Second Battle of Mydor and the destruction of the Second Gate, only a small handful of people had become aware that he had survived the planet's ending. He liked it that way. It had been his preferred style from a time before mortal understanding of the concept. It allowed him a freedom of action that was difficult to achieve in his days as an official member of the Solarian Knighthood.

Not that there weren't times where he wished he could prudently be more forceful and public in his dealings. The scene before him was one such time.

It wasn't that Rumil needed his help, of course. She had grown frighteningly adept at handling the various leaders of the faith, be they the Old Solarian Temple, the Orthodox Kiros Temple, or the much newer Unified Faith of the Creator. But he imagined he could handle them much more quickly and permanently.

"How many times do we have to have this discussion?" Rumil said tiredly. "I am not moving from my home of two decades; not for my supposed safety, and certainly not for some tired tradition."

"The prophets of the Erani have always lived on the Creator's Hand of Kiros," the elder of the Orthodox Temple insisted. "There, the touch of the Creator is at its strongest, where the visions are the most frequent and the most vivid."

The Creator's Hand was a narrow peninsula within the planet Kiros's tropical zone. In the days of the first two prophets, it was more a glorified campsite than anything else, a rustic retreat to be alone and sort out the visions that had been thrust into their minds. Now, it was a full-fledged manor on par with the now abandoned royal mansion.

"I have more than enough 'touch of the Creator' as it is," the blonde replied grumpily. "I certainly have no desire to get *more*."

"Even the other temples are in agreement on this, even if for your mere safety. Whether you like it or not, you are of immense value to the Erani people. We want you somewhere where we can protect you; in Erani space, not on a backwater Arcadian colony."

"Baramak might as well be a Se-Lan world at this point," Rumil corrected. "It would be, if the Alliance Parliament would get over themselves and acknowledge it. I am fine there. I am well protected there, and most importantly, am out of your circle of control." She straightened to her full height, and while she was hardly of immense stature, she towered over the much smaller Kiros male. "Let's be perfectly blunt. *That's* what you want. You don't give a damn about my safety. You want me somewhere that it's easy to filter what I see and disseminate to your believers."

"Madam Prophet... how could you suggest...?"

"Your sect officially doesn't even *acknowledge* that I have visions at all," Rumil snarled. "As far as your dogma is concerned, I'm foretold by a false prophet. You want me silenced, not protected."

Finally, the genial approach of the elder fell away. "On the contrary; I fully believe you receive the visions of the Creator. The Orthodox Temple would be foolish to try and refute the accuracy of what you had seen. *We* are not your enemy, Madam Prophet; but there are those that do wish to *truly* silence you, and they will quickly attempt to act."

"Is that a threat?"

The elder shook his head. "It is reality. You wish to know your enemy? Try the Solarians who you fraternize with. They were the ones that formed the heretical sect that opened the Second Gate."

"The Endtimers were a group of deluded fools. What few remain don't have the influence to act upon their rage," Rumil replied dismissively. "They're a theological dead end at this point. Their entire movement was predicated on completing Bryan Honore's vision."

She then pointed emphatically towards the door of the office. "Now, I have a speech to prepare for; a speech your people *insisted* I make. I suggest you leave me to it before I have Commander Feroz

escort you out by force.”

The door slid open, revealing the man to whom she referred, wearing the crimson red combat carbide of the Premier's Special Assignments Force. Jonathan Feroz had grown into a spitting image of his father over the staryears, so much so that Timothy often had to remind himself that Justin was gone.

“Can I do it anyway?” Jonathan said with a saccharine smile, cracking his knuckles through his gloves. Even Jonathan's wit and humor were almost entirely descended from his father.

“That won't be necessary, Commander,” the elder retorted with a glare, smoothing back his thin brown hair, obviously starting to gray from his age. “At the very least, Madam Prophet, be careful. There are many elements that seek to do you harm.”

The religious leader retreated, and Jonathan let him pass before stepping further into the space. “The 'protection' angle again, I assume?” he scoffed. “Erani space is in more turmoil than anywhere else in the Alliance right now. When are they going to acknowledge that you have plenty of protection as it is?”

“Hopefully never,” Timothy finally interjected, dropping the illusion that had rendered him invisible. “It would mean that I haven't been doing my duty correctly.”

Jonathan nearly jumped, hands starting to erupt with psionic energy before his brain caught up. “Creator take it all, I never know where you are half the time!” To Rumil, he asked, “Does he ever startle you like this?”

Rumil blinked, regarded Timothy with a questioning expression, then said, “No... I always know when he's around. You don't?”

Jonathan smirked as he shook his head. “I guess that shouldn't be a surprise. It's said that two psionics with intimate connections have that special link with the other.”

Rumil rolled her eyes at the implication. There had been a time where such suggestions linking herself and Timothy in such a “knowing” fashion had embarrassed, angered, or annoyed her... usually some combination of the three. Now, it was simply tiring.

Not that she *hadn't* wanted such a connection... and not that the relationship she had with the Solarian... Archangel... *person* Timothy had become was purely platonic as it was... but it was far more complicated than she felt she could adequately explain, and thus had stopped trying.

“I meant what I said, I have a speech to prepare for,” she finally snapped. “Now, get out so I can get my work done.” She narrowed a glare at Timothy and said, “You stay. Not that you'd leave if I asked anyway.”

Before the young man could retreat, Timothy called out to him, “I expect you in the training hall by 7.30 of the late ten, next cycle. You have some lessons you need touching up on.”

“Of course I do,” Jonathan grumbled. “I always do.” Then he stomped past the door and let it slide shut behind him.

“You could ease off on him,” Rumil suggested.

“Jonathan is a rare talent, possibly the greatest mortal-born psionic to walk the galaxy since the sundering of the planes,” Timothy retorted unrepentantly. “He needs to maintain discipline and perfection more than anyone else. The potential damage that someone of his power can cause by making a mistake is too great to leave to chance.”

“Do you have to have an answer for *everything*?”

Timothy shrugged. “It helps to be able to defend your actions.”

Rumil then dropped her head into her hands, then muttered, “Good, then maybe you have an answer for why I'm doing this.”

“Doing what?”

The blonde woman gestured wildly at the surrounding space, as if her arms were reaching past the walls of the small office to the larger environment outside. “This! All of this! I didn't want this! Why should I care what the Erani denominations do? They aren't even my *species*!” She dropped her head to the desk in front of her. “I never asked for any of this. I didn't ask for these visions. I don't

want to be making any stupid speech about how all of them are mindless morons that keep missing the damned point.”

“How many people actually ask for the path life gives them?” Timothy asked. “Whether you like it or not, for good or for ill, trillions of people, not just of the Erani race, look for guidance... look for *your* guidance. For the Erani especially... they are lacking leaders, and as you noted yourself, the faith isn't exactly stable itself.”

It had been a rough twenty staryears for the Erani people. The loss of nearly their entire Knighthoods and the noble houses therein, both kings, and several religious leaders, had cast their society into near chaos. While the official cold war between the two distinct branches of the species had come to an end, twenty staryears could not completely heal the wounds of eight centuries of ill will, spite, defamation, and occasional outright violence.

The racial tension was also strained by the fact that the Solarian sect was recovering much faster than the Kiros were. The Old Solarian Temple made the claim that it was just retribution for their exile from Kiros, and that the Creator was clearly demonstrating the superiority of their faith, which the other two denominations both chided the first for.

Truth being, the Solarians benefited from the raw materials that lay within their sphere of influence, that quadrant of the galaxy not being as stripped of resources as the territory the Kiros controlled. And while the Solarian people had suffered the same degree of loss of the men that had run their society, the women of the Solarian people had stepped up faster and far more effectively than the Kiros to keep together their sphere of influence – and their claim on the resources within.

Celine Honore was the most notable of the rising Solarian women; her strength of will and natural charisma had led her to a restored seat within the Galactic Alliance Primary Assembly, a station that the Kiros had not yet been able to recover due to their very fragmented leadership base.

It also didn't hurt Solarian recovery that the current Premier of the Parliament, Robert Datson, was Solarian himself, one of the few trained Knights of *either* sect to survive the Second Battle of Mydor. That was a boon for morale only however, as Datson had repeatedly proven over the twenty staryears since taking office that he was very even-handed towards all species within the Galactic Alliance, and perhaps even a bit too deferential to others over his native species.

He remained in the seat of power despite seven different Parliamentary *and* General Elections for a reason, after all.

It was the plight of the Kiros that made this appearance so important. The Prophet, the one that foresaw the destruction of the Second Gate, was to appear upon the Kiros homeworld and assure them that they were not forgotten while they struggled simply to find an even keel.

Timothy's voice then interrupted her thoughts. “Although, you do have free will. You could choose not to make this speech. You could choose to hide in your home on Baramak for the rest of your life.”

“I'm sure you'd love that,” Rumil sarcastically noted. “After all you went through to see me to this point.”

“It would make you considerably easier to protect,” Timothy retorted, his delivery thoughtfully pragmatic.

The blonde shook her head ruefully. “You're impossible.” She looked down at the mobile PCU she had been dictating into, abused both from constant file resets and occasional tosses across the room in frustration. “I don't even know why I'm bothering with this blasted thing. It's going to end just like all my other speeches; toss out whatever garbage I prepare, and freestyle something once I'm out in front of everyone.”

If there was one thing that Timothy always found impressive about Rumil, it was her remarkable adaptability. Whether she was a dancer appealing to drunken mobs, a computer hacker with little direct contact with other sentient life, or a revered prophet to an entire religion with trillions hanging on her every word whenever she opened her mouth, Rumil possessed an extraordinary talent

for fulfilling her adopted roles admirably. It was more remarkable still to consider her self-acknowledged tendency to improvise as she went along.

“How much longer until I have to appear?” Rumil asked. Even though she could have readily checked the time herself, it always amused her to test Timothy's internal clock, which had a reputation for its uncanny accuracy.

“One tenth-cycle, and seventeen ticks,” he responded.

She stood up from the desk and closed the distance between them, working the index finger of her right hand under the thick fabric of the gray cloak that he had wrapped around himself, an article that he had come to adopt near constantly, like some sort of security blanket. “I wonder what we can do in the meantime...”

Timothy's left eyebrow raised in amusement. “Nothing like what you are suggesting.”

“Oh, don't be a prude on me again.”

“Hardly. The last thing you need is to be half-undressed in front of a man who is supposed to be dead when someone from the Orthodox Kiros Temple walks in, like they are no doubt going to three more times before you appear before the masses.”

Rumil pursed her lips in an annoyed pout. “You are no fun at times, Timmy.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonathan shifted from his position outside Rumil's office and towards the stage area. The festivities were already underway, and had been going on since the start of the cycle. That had been a bit of a sore point for Jonathan and the rest of his team, as they were not allowed on “hallowed ground” before the start of the ceremonies. He had wanted to get a feel for the surrounding area, ferret out any potential camping points or avenues for attack. But the Kiros leadership of the region had abruptly changed their mind, and refused them access since the Special Assignment Force Team 3 had “non-Kiros elements” within their number.

What had they expected out of a Galactic Alliance specialist squad? They should have known damn well that his team was going to carry people other than Kiros Erani. The whole thing smelled of a set-up on part of the Orthodox Kiros Temple, who were rapidly losing believers, and thus influence, over the last twenty staryears.

In fact, the Orthodox Kiros were increasingly showing up on Alliance intelligence briefs as a security threat and fanatical movement with the potential to perform terrorist acts in the near future. Jonathan had been ready to strongly recommend that the whole appearance be called off because of these developments, and even had Premier Datson's support until Rumil herself insisted that it would continue.

Jonathan had to admit that she legitimately had little reason to worry about her safety. If by some minor miracle an assassin managed to get past his team; there was a *slight* hurdle of an *Archangel made flesh* that would quickly move to her defense. On top of that, Rumil herself was hardly helpless; tales had been told of her own abilities when pressured into action.

None of this meant he had to like the situation in which he found himself, however.

“Commander, you wanted me to report in.” Chief Operative Talia Gronie's voice cut into the communications unit inserted into his left ear, and promptly got his full attention.

“Go ahead, CO. Have you completed your survey?”

“Yes, sir,” Talia replied. “The nearest feasible sniper nest would be to the south forest line, about five TackMets away. Someone would have to be one incredible shot.”

“Or have enough technological assistance,” Jonathan corrected. “It's still a possibility. Do your best to keep an eye on it.”

“It's not like I'd be all that welcome in the mess of revelers, anyway,” Talia noted. As an Arcadian, she was one of the reasons the Kiros denied the SAF team entry onto the grounds before the

celebration. “Might want to inform Salazar as well. Eventually, the mob is going to forget he's roughly three times their size.”

Jonathan turned his attention to the center of the mass of Kiros. It was still fairly early, so the intoxicants hadn't had a chance to be spread and imbibed in any large numbers. But Talia was right; it wouldn't take many drunks to decide the Ubek marching through them was a problem.

“Salazar, get out of there, now,” Jonathan ordered through the comm.

Yorik Salazar wasn't the son of the famed warrior, then pirate, then commanding general of the same family name – Orion was in fact a remarkably distant relative – but their attitudes and methods often led the uninformed to assume he was.

“I am scouting the crowd for potential weapons,” Yorik replied. “They have been quite forthcoming and cooperative.”

“The last thing anyone needs is you starting a riot by pushing your way through their revered celebration,” Jonathan insisted. “Get to the stage and get into position. Don't make it an order.”

“Yes, sir,” Yorik finally grumped, and even without climbing onto the stage Jonathan could easily see the large pale blue humanoid working his way towards the large wooden dais constructed in the center of the open grounds.

Jonathan liked keeping his team informal. Every member was an elite expert in their respective field, and it made Jonathan uncomfortable to pull rank and try and tell them how to best do their jobs.

His mother had told him that his father had been the same way. Even as the second-in-command of the Kiros Knighthood, and in turn the entire Kiros military, Justin had sought to run his authority with as little formality as possible, often to the point that he didn't expect or demand even the most minor of rank distinction.

“I *have* made it clear that I completely dislike this entire appearance, right?” Jonathan asked in general broadcast.

Six simultaneous and annoyed replies of “Yes” at least informed him that all of SAF 3 was alert and ready.

This day marked the twentieth anniversary of the Second Battle of Mydor, and the destruction of the Second Gate. As such, it was a date of great importance to all Erani people, not just the Orthodox Kiros. The news that this year, the Sixth Prophet herself would be speaking had turned this normally small get-together for the smallest of the three temples into a massive gathering of more than a million believers of all three temples, before the regional military finally cordoned off the area.

This was a bad thing, as far as Jonathan was concerned. Relations between the temples were not always friendly, and there were many an Orthodox Kiros that would become violent at the presence of a Solarian on the Kiros homeworld, of which there were now many. A potential riot and large-scale brawl would make it near impossible for Jonathan's small team to react quickly to any attempts on Rumil's life, even with military assistance.

No, Jonathan did not like this much at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Madam Prophet?” called the voice of a timid young girl from the other side of the office door. “I know it's slightly early, but you may address the mass whenever you are ready.”

“I told you someone would interrupt us,” Timothy said in a knowing whisper.

“You are truly insufferable at times,” Rumil replied as she adjusted her collar and made sure all the buttons of her blouse were fastened.

“Only when I'm right,” he answered, stepping back and pulling the hood of his cloak over his head. “It's not my fault I'm always right.”

“You're fortunate I know you're smart enough to not really believe that.” She patted at her hair, and asked, “How do I look?”

Granted, Timothy was probably not the best one to judge her appearance. He held tragically little interest in such things, both for himself as well as others. She could look like she had been dragged face-first through a tumbling bin and he'd say she looked fabulous.

Rumil corrected herself before Timothy could reply. "Nevermind, I'll look myself." She reached into the beaten-up, ragged satchel she had owned for almost twenty-five staryears – at this point, she wasn't about to get rid of it short of a catastrophic fire – and pulled out a small makeup mirror in which she gave herself a quick once over.

Satisfied, she put it away, and started for the door. Three steps later, she felt Timothy's hand brush her neck. About ready to chide him, she colored once she realized that he was taking several wayward strands of hair that had partially come free and tucked them firmly under the tie at the back of her head once more.

"I was about to say that your hair needed touching up," Timothy said.

"Wipe that lip color off your neck," Rumil grumbled.

"I'm not appearing in public," he answered, his grin shrouded by the cloak's cowl. But she knew it was there. Bastard.

Pulling away from him, she tapped the console to open the door while Timothy vanished behind his psionic shroud before he could be seen. The attendant on the other side was a Kiros girl, barely into her adulthood, with striking dark brown skin and night black hair.

"I'm ready, Miss..."

"Rebecca Annuis, Madam Prophet. I was the one who escorted you here, if you remember," the girl patiently replied.

Oddly enough, out of all the things Rumil disliked about her new station, what bothered her the most was how she was addressed. She wasn't married, she had no interest in being married, and she wasn't *that* damn old. Yet, every damn person she met, even those not of the Kiros, insisted on calling her "Madam," the pronoun generally reserved for a married woman or of advanced age. Whenever she voiced disapproval of that title, the typical reply was that "Miss Prophet" simply sounded disrespectful. She had eventually learned to hide that annoyance, especially towards those who didn't deserve it.

"I know, Miss Annuis. I'm just not terribly good with names. I apologize."

"It's alright, Madam Prophet. I understand," Rebecca answered diplomatically. "May I take your speech and load it into the prompter?"

Rumil shook her head. "That won't be necessary."

"Yes, of course. The Creator will guide your words as is his will. Then let us proceed, Madam Prophet. Do follow me."

Rumil complied, trying very hard to ignore Timothy's presence covering her like a blanket. While he was normally close at hand, he was rarely *that* close. *I take it you agree with Jonathan that this is a bad idea?* Rumil asked telepathically.

*Of course,* Timothy replied. *The woman in front of you intends harm upon you, in fact.*

Rumil found herself more annoyed by his statement than afraid. She had faced much greater peril before, after all. But Timothy's withholding nature, especially when it came to "worrying" her was as annoying now as it ever was. *I find it hard to believe you just discovered that now.*

*Obviously, I didn't. But I also know that she can't possibly be the only one looking to harm you. She must have assistance nearby, and until I figure out where and who, it's best to let them continue with their plan. Don't worry... I think I can handle them if it comes to a fight.*

*Worry about handling me,* Rumil warned sourly. *I'm willing to fight dirty.*

She could almost feel Timothy's mental shudder, and that minor triumph allowed her to dismiss the other annoyances for now. In a way, Rumil was as much a part of this team as everyone else. She had her part to play as well, and she had to play it right.

## Chapter Two

Even after twenty staryears, it unnerved Rumil whenever she addressed the followers of the Creator Mythos. They hung on her every word like she was their very Creator made flesh. Indeed, a small subset, who believed that the Prophets *were* a manifestation of the Creator's will and thus housed at least a portion of His soul, *literally* hung on her every word.

The look was almost uniform – a blank gaze, eyes focused directly on her, with varying degrees of smile pulled across their cheeks. She had seen that look even before being recognized as a Prophet of the Creator; she danced in front of those same expressions while trying to finish her tech training. The only difference was that the gaze shifted upwards a third of a tack.

No matter how things changed, they stayed the same.

She wondered how the believers would react to think that ninety-nine percent of the time she didn't even know what she was saying until the words were halfway out of her mouth... and that the one percent of the time she spoke of her visions, they heralded galaxy-changing destruction and apocalypse.

*Even if the layman wanted to know just what went through the mind of a Prophet... what makes you think they could understand?*

Rumil grinned to herself, pausing at the door leading outside the temporary building and to the celebration grounds. *I'm glad you do.*

Timothy's scoff echoed in her skull. *I'm painfully aware as to the deafening silence of our Creator. I'd wager he's spoken to you more in the forty-five staryears of your life than in my immeasurable time before time within Annor.*

Rumil's eyebrows twitched with curiosity. Timothy was naturally reluctant to speak of his previous existence as an Archangel of the highest planes of creation, and Rumil was reluctant to breach the topic, especially with the hint of bitterness she sensed whenever the subject emerged. This time was no different.

*I assume you're speaking in hyperbole,* she responded.

*To an extent. He didn't really need to address his host in such a personal matter very often. Our purpose within Annor was often relatively clear, our goals imbued into our very souls. But even then, even among his highest lieutenants, communication was sparse at best.*

Rumil shrugged. *I can understand why though... an interfering all-powerful entity would probably be bothersome, don't you think? Free will, and all that, right?*

Timothy's presence not only went silent, it withdrew from her sense almost entirely. *Timmy? Did I say something wrong?*

She sensed a faint hint of apology, but no precise words until he faintly issued, *The Master of Ceremonies is about to introduce you. I recommend you be ready to take the stage.*

“We are truly blessed this day, on the celebration of our greatest triumph, to have the very Prophet of our people, whose visions guided us through the troubled times and those we face today, in our attendance. May the words of the Prophet continue to guide us and may we take strength in the words we are about to hear. Blessed be our Creator!”

Rumil frowned and rolled her eyes. In those empty words, much more was revealed by what was *not* said. The Master of Ceremonies made no mention of her name, which would belie her Arcadian ancestry, and carefully chose his introduction to remove any implications of gender. Apparently, it was still a bit of a sore spot to acknowledge an Arcadian woman as having more sense than the whole damn lot of them.

*This should hardly be a surprise. A major reason the Orthodox Kiros, and the Kiros culture as a whole, has reached this point is because they refuse to accept that the galaxy around them has changed.*

Ignoring her companion's social commentary, Rumil emerged into the green fields of Kiros's temperate zone, to a bright sky and a bright cheer, mostly from the presence of other denominational

forces who had gathered to hear her speak. Despite the potential disaster that their presence could incite among the more conservative Kiros, Rumil shamefully had to admit the strong show of support made her feel good.

It also emboldened her approach to her address; as a major reason she had such trouble trying to compose her speech earlier was because she wasn't sure exactly how to chide the Orthodox Kiros element for their aggravating attachment to eras gone by without them charging the stage.

*Like they would have had the courage to attack you, a Prophet of the Creator.*

*Hush*, Rumil retorted, and felt Timothy's presence again retreat quietly into the periphery. She hit the first step leading up to the wooden stage, surprisingly free of the creaks she would have expected from a temporary construction.

As she approached the podium, a simple construction of dark-stained wood, almost adamantly unadorned by any seal or decoration, Rumil noted the position of the visible members of her protection detail. Yorik stood at the front of the stage at ground level, the top of his head nearly level with the podium in spite of this. Entering her view to the east, well beyond the mob, Talia slowly stalked southward, her eyes out towards the far-off forest with a hand on her rifle and a visor to enhance her vision.

Quickly glancing behind her, she nodded in appreciation to Jonathan, who had taken his position to the back of the stage on her right. From there, he could move quickly to her defense once given word from any other member of the team, be it Talia, Yorik, either of the two covert experts, or the two counterintelligence members working the communication lines and broadcasts for chatter that could imply an impending attack.

*As always, you are well protected.*

Rumil stopped at the podium and pursed her lips when it occurred to her that, yet again, it really served no use: the prompter screen was completely blank. She figured she should inform organizers in the future that she didn't need any podium... only to irrationally decide that if they listened, she would face the one time she managed to prepare a complete speech.

Rumil had gained a reputation of not waiting long to speak once she reached the podium, often starting before the applause stopped; a sign of her informal public speaking experience. The crowd almost immediately went silent the moment her first foot disappeared behind the podium in anticipation of this trait.

And the Sixth Prophet of the Erani did not disappoint. In another sign that she had no formal manner of public speech, she offered no customary opening, nor acknowledgment of previous speakers or the Master of Ceremonies. This tendency, however, was intentional. Rumil figured these people had already acknowledged themselves a hundred times before she reached the stage. It seemed a bit of overkill by that point.

Besides, if they weren't going to refer to her by name... why should she extend that courtesy?

"This has been a troubled period for many of you who stand here today in celebration," Rumil began. "There are times where I think it's all my fault. Where I see the faces of those I knew, of those that died, in my sleeping moments, staring back at me in accusation. 'Look at what you've done to my home,' 'Is this what you really wanted?' The nightmares are almost as jarring as the visions I received of the calamity that ended on Mydor twenty staryears ago."

In fact, Rumil could see Justin's face when she closed her eyes that very moment, the image overlaid with the run-down state of the capitol city of Senter; the buildings in disrepair, the roads cracking, screaming for maintenance, the homeless crowding the alleyways, lacking leadership and direction in the wake of the catastrophe that shattered their noble houses.

"But I quickly remind myself to abolish myself of blame that is not mine to bear. I followed my vision as I had to. The brave Kiros and Solarian men that gave themselves in that final battle did so willingly and without regret, driven by a higher calling. To do anything less would have meant the mutually assured destruction from a foe that many in the galaxy continue to refuse to believe."

On one hand, she was not terribly surprised by the level of blindness much of the Galactic Alliance showed. The Erani faith, while the predominant religion of the galaxy, was not exactly popular, and the idea of demonic creatures spawned from a holy conflict before recorded history didn't mesh with their structured observations of the known universe.

On the other, it's not like millions of prominent Erani killed themselves for absolutely no reason. There *was* visual record of the battle. But instead, the galaxy as a whole regarded these "extra-planar entities" as an isolated threat – and by observed trends, even assuming that the first chronicle of the Gates was accurate, it would be another eight hundred some odd staryears before such an occurrence would happen again.

But she knew better... she had seen it...

Fortunately, before her mind could slip into the nightmares again, her momentary derailing of her thought process caused a pregnant pause in her words that even concerned Jonathan, who took a hesitant step forward.

*Focus would probably be a good idea.* Timothy's telepathic voice interjected. He was likely aware of where her mind was sliding, but showed no indication of such.

*Thank you,* Rumil responded with an acerbic mental tone, hiding her embarrassment well to the crowd. Coughing once, she mentally recalled what she had already said, and continued.

"In a society which has a hard time valuing personal responsibility, I instead seek to remind you of it. Senter is not falling down because the nobles died on Mydor. The schools are not closing because I saw a vision. The farms are not withering because the demons of Bannor emerged onto this world."

"They are happening because the Kiros are letting it happen. The attempts of others to rebuild are met with the stonewalling of orthodox leaders who want these 'peasants' to remember their place. The attempts by women to try and emerge as leaders are met with the chauvinism of old men who want those of the female gender to remain in their homes and do the cooking and cleaning. The efforts of your Solarian kin to aid you are met with the hostility born of an animosity that needed to die with the noble houses."

The gasps of shock from half the attendees were drowned out by the cheers of the other half. "This is the time to embrace the poor and the women and your neighbors, not to push them away. Everyone is needed, no one can afford to be excluded if you want to restore your home to even a pale ghost of what it once was. Because that is all you are doing right now; chasing the ghosts of the past, trying to return to life that which is dead. It is time to change, if not for you, for your children that will inherit a broken world that you to this point refuse to mend."

If that didn't guarantee that the Orthodox Temple would never bother her about taking home on Kiros ever again, she didn't know what would. But just before she could start to revel in her moment of self-triumph, Timothy's telepathic voice interrupted.

*Trouble.*

The SAF Team 3 was nary a bat of an eyelash slower. Talia's rifle snapped sharply into her hands, the Arcadian woman dropping down prone and putting her eyes to the sight with such fluid motion that she barely heard the shot, much less that it was a retort to a first shot.

Jonathan had tackled Rumil to the stage surface, her shoulder ringing with pain as for a moment, she panicked that she had been hit, until the pain dulled and she realized that it was because her shoulder had struck roughly against the podium as she went down, while the sharp whistle of a high-velocity cartridge zipped past.

"Whoever that was, he wasn't a particularly good shot. Would have missed you by a Tack." Jonathan noted, nonetheless not moving from his position of keeping Rumil pinned to the stage. "But better safe than not, right?"

"Watch out! Three charging the stage!" Yorik's voice cut over the comm. "I can handle them, get Miss Bonamede to cover!"

Jonathan pulled Rumil to her feet, and sure enough, three tanned Kiros men had emerged into the “clear zone” in front of the stage, wielding makeshift weapons, likely made on site to avoid being found in the rather lax initial search upon entry to the celebration grounds.

Not that they had much chance against the highly-trained and armed Yorik Salazar. One was dropped with a low-yield “Peacekeeper” plasma round before he even fully emerged into the clear zone. The second fell from a forearm blow that likely shattered his skull, and the third was neutralized with a bone-jarring tackle from the much larger Ubek as he man tried to run past.

Jonathan in the meanwhile had escorted Rumil off the stage, in time to be interrupted by an even more frantic report from Arman Jerivous, one of the tech experts.

“Big problem, Commander! An unregistered ship just appeared in low planetary orbit! Consistent with a bombing run!”

“What?” Jonathan exclaimed. That was an awfully excessive course of action, especially for an assassination.

“Recommend that you teleport Miss Bonamede out of danger! We have a confirmed ordinance release! I repeat, we have a confirmed ordinance release!”

Jonathan cursed. While his orders in such a scenario were clear, it meant he would be leaving his entire team, and however many were present to die.

“Too late! It's an accelerated ordinance! Impact in two demiticks!”

Sure enough, the roar of an object making atmospheric entry jolted Jonathan, the boom of rushing air knocking him and Rumil down.

But at that moment, the final line of defense made himself known. The sound and onrush of air abruptly died off, leaving nothing but stunned silence and disbelief, ending any potential riot before it could even hope to start.

Five demiticks later, Arman's voice cut in again. “Commander... the ordinance...”

“What in Bannor's depths happened, Agent Jerivous?” Jonathan snarled as he helped Rumil to his feet.

“It... was displaced. It exploded two hundred TackMets into deep space.”

*You're welcome.*

Jonathan sighed in relief. *Yes, thank you, Master Honore.* Then he turned his anger on Arman again, “Care to tell me exactly how an unidentified and unregistered vessel managed to get anywhere near planetary orbit of Kiros without you telling me, Agent?”

“Sir! I don't... know...” Arman flustered. “I'm not picking up any graviton particles... so I don't think it was an impromptu fold...”

“We would have received some sort of warning from Kiros Space Command if that was the case as well,” Arman's partner, a Ruma named Resh Ravaar, said with a distinctly reptilian hiss.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Jonathan corrected. “We can't assume that anyone is exactly on our side if a ship managed to make a damned bombing run on the celebration grounds. KSC could very well have kept us in the dark intentionally. Can we still track the ship that made the drop?”

“Negative sir. It folded away the moment it cleared the planet's ionosphere. Space Command tells us that they are sending out a frigate to try and follow the fold path, and Galactic Third Fleet is thirty ticks away.”

“By the time they got here, the gravitons would have dispersed beyond tracking,” Jonathan growled. He also knew that even *if* the Kiros Space Command was being honest about sending a craft to scout the fold path that they likely didn't have the newest technology that would give such an attempt a respectable chance of success.

“CO, any status on the sniper?”

“Dead,” Talia answered unrepentantly. “I am sorry that I didn't keep him alive for questioning, but from that range, I couldn't guarantee a neutralization of the target other than a kill.”

“I have three alive here, sir,” Yorik responded, “Two are in critical state, I suspect though. The

third should live.”

“Let emergency response take the two that are critical. Whatever you have to do, keep the third in your sight until the Third Fleet can relieve you,” Jonathan ordered.

“Understood, sir,” Yorik acknowledged.

Opening the comm to the full team channel. “Convene at the temp base in one tenth-cycle for a full debriefing. Hopefully we'll have something from our prisoner that can help us make some sense of what these assassins were hoping to accomplish.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was actually three tenth-cycles, and the temp base turned into the Peacekeeper Primary Station in Senter. The extra time, however, didn't generate any extra answers.

Jonathan stepped into the conference room, filled almost entirely with a black fiberwall rectangular table with ten chairs. Six of them, three to a side, were occupied by his team. Talia, Yorik, and Arman were to his left. Resh, along with the two covert specialists, the Solarian Garret Crosser, and another Arcadian, Koris Calel, took their positions on the right.

Jonathan took his place at the head of the table. “Sorry about the delay, ladies and gentlemen, but Second Fleet decided that the temp base and the celebration grounds weren't secure. Crosser, Calel: you two didn't see anything groundside?”

“I'm Solarian,” Garret answered with a shrug. “The Orthodox wouldn't let me get within five Tacks before they got defensive. Agent Calel wasn't even allowed on the grounds until the celebration day when 'aliens' were finally allowed entry. We were largely limited on the information we could gather.”

“Your initial suspicion was confirmed however. The weapons from the three were constructed on-site,” Koris added. “The blades were likely hidden in, or part of, a prayer altar. The other pieces could have carried on their person; likely handles of a cooler crate or luggage pack.”

“Unfortunately, that doesn't tell us anything we don't already know. All these things could have been purchased or constructed by the three themselves, nothing tying them to a central conspirator,” Garret concluded.

“Which they deny, anyway,” Jonathan answered, rubbing his forehead. Part of the two tenth-cycle delay was Jonathan “interrogating” the non-critical attacker. A mental probe had confirmed the man's statement; that they had acted alone without any outside influence.

Not that Jonathan wanted to dismiss that the confluence of events were anything but related. There were ways for a central conspirator to detach him or herself both in record and even in the memory of his or her underlings. But he had to admit that to have a three pronged attack coordinated in such a fashion, was unlikely.

“What about the sniper, CO? Any details there?” Jonathan asked.

Talia slid her PCU across the table with her findings on display. “Nathan Brass... Orthodox Kiros man. His wife divorced him after fifteen years of marriage, citing abuse of her and their children. Had some militia training before the collapse of the noble houses. Deemed too unstable to be reservist and was dismissed in basic training. Likely blamed Miss Bonamede for ruining his life.”

“So another layman, basically,” Jonathan remarked, scrolling the dossier down as Talia dictated. “Well, I think it's a fair assumption to say that the spacecraft wasn't being operated by the common man. Did we get any information on that?”

Resh spoke up. “From what we can tell, the craft used a registry wipe. It *was* registered at some point when it entered Kiros orbit, but Space Command was hacked, all information regarding the craft wiped, and then it made its run.”

“Registered long enough to not draw attention, then dropped to prevent being traced,” Arman supplied. “It's also possible that they used a decaying tag, that automatically deleted itself at a

predetermined time. No need to hack that way, and with the antiquated systems with KSC, they might not have the sophistication to catch it.”

“Of course,” Jonathan grouched.

“We do have one potentially important clue, however,” Resh offered. “Second Fleet was able to determine the bomb that the craft attempted to drop on the celebration field. They claim with 99.9% certainty that the ordinance was a Final Judgment 3.”

Jonathan's eyebrows raised. “That's a Solarian ordinance.”

“Yes, sir,” Garret interjected. “In those early ten-cycles after the Second Battle of Mydor, the Interim Government attempted to secure as much of their heavy ordinance fusion bombs as they could to prevent the weapons from being sold on the black market. They were able to secure their heaviest ordinance, the 4 and 5 lines... but some of the 3's and lower were able to slip the net. With any luck, the ejected shell might have some identification that we can use to eventually identify the exact weapon and hopefully its ownership path.”

*What about you?* Jonathan asked of his mentor and combat training master.

*Believe it or not, I'm not all seeing or all knowing,* Timothy replied. *I do think it's fairly safe to say that we are looking at a confluence of circumstance though. The group responsible for the attack from the freighter bombing wouldn't have needed a distraction, and among the Orthodox believers, Rumil has plenty of potential enemies.*

*But not impossible,* Jonathan insisted. He couldn't shake that feeling, and Timothy himself had taught him that such “gut feelings” shouldn't simply be ignored.

*No, of course not.*

Justin became apologetic. *Sorry that I likely won't be able to make your training session.*

*You have a job to do. Life happens. Somehow we will both cope,* Timothy said with an understanding that he was not particularly known for. *There will be other opportunities and legitimate excuses. This is one of them.*

*I trust Rumil is in safe hands?*

*She will not leave my sight. In fact, she is trying to work her own little investigation into the freighter that attempted to bomb us. Wait a moment... incoming...*

Timothy retreated from Jonathan's mind, just in time to cede to the considerably weaker telepathic communication from Rumil herself.

*Jonathan, can you link my comm to yours? It's still rather difficult for me to communicate this way,* the prophet asked. While she had become accustomed to her visions, actively using her psionic power was still a struggle.

*Of course, madam,* Jonathan declared, pulling his comm out of its holder on the forearm of his combat armor, plugging in the necessary link command, then putting it on the table. From that small device, a holographic image of Rumil's face projected to life.

“Thank you, Commander Feroz,” Rumil said. “I was prying your tech operatives' minds a little, and thought they might be onto something. So I took some liberties and started working my way through the Kiros Space Command's logs.”

“I trust you had the proper authorization to do so,” Jonathan queried, even as he was nearly certain of the true answer. Rumil had been known as one of the best hackers in the galaxy twenty staryears ago, perhaps *the* best. Not many knew that she had maintained her talents over that timespan.

“As far as you need to know,” she said with a smile. “Regardless, unlike those bumbling fools that call themselves computing experts among the Space Command, it took me roughly seven ticks to reconstruct our unregistered spacecraft's information once I found what I was looking for.”

That caused the team to straighten slightly in their chairs. “You... you did?” Resh boggled.

“It wasn't a hack *or* a decaying registry,” Rumil noted. “The registry was deleted planetside, within Space Command.”

That was information Jonathan was expecting, and perhaps hoping, to find. “I knew there was

an inside job somewhere.”

Rumil, surprisingly, was more cautious in that estimation. “Maybe. But the KSC has some really poor equipment and some very lax procedures, I’m discovering. They have no operational secondary registry record, for example. All it would take is for a ship to transmit registry information, then report in later that the information is either outdated or incorrect. The orbit controller would purge the information completely innocently and never be the wiser.”

“I still want to question this controller none the same,” Jonathan grumbled. “CO, find out who this person is and have the Senter Peacekeepers bring him in for questioning.”

“Yes, Commander,” Talia said with a bow, sliding her chair out and standing up.

As she moved out of the conference room, Jonathan turned his attention back to Rumil. “So, let’s see this reconstructed information.”

“It’s not of much use yet,” Rumil said as she transferred the information to Jonathan’s PCU. “No one was able to follow their fold path... but at least we will know what to look for when it eventually pops back up on the grid.”

## Chapter Three

- > *The attempt failed, and now the Prophet will surely have her guard up.*
- > ***The prophet always had her guard up. We were hardly the first to attempt her life, nor will we be the last. Creator as my witness, we weren't even the only ones that day.***
- > *You anticipated and expected failure? Then what was the purpose of this very risky and dare I say very expensive maneuver?*
- > ***Now we know exactly the defenses she has. Now we know that the Archangel did survive the Second Battle of Mydor.***
- > *More religious banter. Just what I need. To think that I have been reduced to working with you half-mindless zealots.*
- > ***I couldn't care less what you think of it. Do you think a Final Judgment 3 blinked itself into deep space and exploded? Do you think any mortal psionic is capable of such a feat?***
- > *Whatever. If this being of truly universe-shattering power does exist, and is in the defense of the Prophet, what chance do we have of toppling her and her little temple of faith?*
- > ***The Archangel is but one man, and while powerful, is limited to a fleshy body. He can only be in one place at a time. We draw him away from the Prophet, and leave her vulnerable.***
- > *And how do you propose to do that exactly?*
- > ***One step at a time. You haven't told me all your secrets, you shouldn't expect me to tell you all of mine.***
- > *So be it. Do not fail me.*
- > ***No, do not fail me. How bad would it look if a "half mindless zealot" held up his end of the bargain while a full-minded, free-thinking man of sophistication like yourself faltered?***

\* \* \* \* \*

Talia smiled thinly as she stepped into the office procured by her commanding officer for the remainder of the case. It was barely a closet, really... the hideaway of some junior investigator who was currently on vacation.

"Have we found the orbit controller yet?" Jonathan asked grumpily as he stared down at his PCU's display, showing three dossiers from one of the multiple attempts on Rumil's life that previous cycle.

A Galnet console in the northwest corner, to the left of the door, was playing the Alliance Late Ten News Report. The disparity between the different planetary times and Galactic Standard Time – as it was dreadfully early in the morning for Kiros – always threw her for a loop, forcing a quick double-take before she realized her mistake.

The volume was set quite low, but floating subtitles were provided, whether programmed by Jonathan to do so or as a default setting. The channel was running a roundtable discussion between four men about the events of the prior cycle, and the discussion was not exactly flattering.

"Isn't this rather convenient though?" the Arcadian man farthest to the right began, the subtitles identifying him as Frior Harrus, had she not recognized the face to begin with. He was a rather droll, ultra-liberal talking head, noted for his furious anger at anything and everything religious. "The moment it looks like her pretty blonde face is finally and graciously going to fall off the general news

cycle, and goodness, there is an 'attempt on her life.' And lo and behold, here we are, talking about her and her silly fairy tales again.”

Another one of the men hadn't even managed to open his mouth to retort before Harrus was still in his froth. “It just goes to show how desperate this 'community of believers' is to find someone, *anyone*, who will make them feel relevant; even an academy dropout, exotic dancing, attention whore. A sniper who missed? Goons with makeshift homemade weapons? A fusion bomb that detonated outside the planet's ionosphere? Either these were the worst assassins of all time, or it was a poorly staged publicity stunt. I think I'm going to believe the latter, thank you very much.”

“Sounds like we've got quite the media storm brewing,” Talia commented.

“Be a lot quieter storm if you could tell me we've found the orbit controller that deleted the flight registry for the *Gracebearer*,” Jonathan grumbled.

Finally, Talia's smile cracked into a full, smarmy grin. “Room E, if I remember correctly. The baliff can point us in the right direction if I'm wrong.”

Jonathan was out of his chair, and out the door with a hand grasped around Talia's arm before the Chief Operative could even turn about to follow him.

It took her a couple of strides for her feet to catch up and walk on her own. Once she did, she unveiled more of the information on the fellow who was now the object of her commanding officer's single-minded attention. “You're going to love this. This man's bio lists him as Frasier Aucoin; part of the 'controversial' Solarian Assistance Program.”

Jonathan stopped, and said, “He's Solarian?”

Talia nodded. “You might have something after all about an inside job.”

Jonathan resumed his pace until he reached their destination, nodding deferentially to the peacekeepers who were maintaining watch outside the room assigned to holding him. Scowling, yet giving a respectful salute, the officer to the right of the door said, “His advocate is with him. I wouldn't recommend being aggressive.”

“Wouldn't dream of it,” Jonathan replied. “Carry on, officers.”

Another pair of salutes, and then the right peacekeeper keyed in the command to open the door for Jonathan and Talia.

The room inside was nearly a replica of the room Jonathan used for his debriefing. Frasier sat next to a man in a suit that had seen better days, patched at both elbows and a replaced collar. “Advocate Linus Broigan. I trust you have adequate reason to drag my client from his home on his rest day?”

“Commander Jonathan Feroz. This is my second, Chief Operative Talia Gronie, with the Special Assignments Force,” Jonathan introduced politely, offering a hand in greeting. “We right now just have a few questions to ask, because there's a few concerns we have that we're hoping your client can address.”

Frasier dropped a hand on his advocate's shoulder, and said, “It's okay.”

Talia was astonished that Jonathan could hold such tension, anticipating that this orbit controller was part of a vast conspiracy to kill the woman under his protection, yet keep his emotions and suspicions in check so effectively. Then again, he was the commanding officer for a reason, and not just for his psionic skills.

“What can you tell us about the *Gracebearer*?” Jonathan asked.

Frasier crossed his eyes in thought. “That was yesterday, wasn't it? I don't remember too much about it, sir.”

“Really? You manually delete registry information of ships in orbit on a regular basis?”

The orbit controller rolled his eyes. “At least five times a day.” With a tired sigh, he continued, “The servers and software I work with haven't been updated in more than twenty staryears, and by the time any of us were allowed to help, the lack of or poor maintenance had degraded the systems to the point where it was a half proposition that it worked as designed.”

“So, who told you to delete the registry of the *Gracebearer*?”

“Well... they did.”

Jonathan cocked an eyebrow. “They told you to delete their registry.”

“I got a communication from the *Gracebearer*, they had said they had left orbit three cycles ago, and were being denied dock at their destination because their registry was still in the system. So I deleted it.”

“You didn't bother to confirm their story?” Jonathan asked with a great deal of expected skepticism.

“The entire automated system was freezing up. I had over thirty craft that I had to personally, and manually I may add, clear for either docking or orbital presence,” Frasier said in annoyance.

“If cutting corners is a crime deserving the Premier's specialist ops, then the galaxy is in better shape than I thought,” the advocate cut in. “Is there any particular point you're trying to get at?”

Finally, the gentle commander facade dropped, and Jonathan slammed both hands down on the desk. “You know what's a *crime*? Try a Solarian orbit controller that deleted the registry of a Solarian frigate that attempted to drop a Solarian *fusion bomb* on the grounds that the Sixth Prophet was speaking at!”

While it was possible that Frasier Aucoin was one of the next great undiscovered actors on the GalNet, it was unlikely that his astonishment was feigned. “Wait... you mean... the *Gracebearer*... was the one who attacked?”

“Yes. The craft you decided to just take their word for it. Now, if you want me to believe that this was all some crazy coincidence, you better cooperate with me here.”

“What are you suggesting?” Advocate Broigan demanded.

“Your client lets me probe his memory.”

Not surprisingly, the advocate was strongly against a very frowned upon practice. “You cannot seriously be suggesting such a... vile... despicable... taboo over hundreds of generations...”

But Frasier apparently wasn't quite so turned off at a prospect that could prove his innocence. “Do it.”

“Mr. Aucoin, may I remind you that if you allow him in your mind, he could uncover any information unrelated to this investigation, and it would be his word against yours,” the advocate reminded.

“This isn't the old ways. There's due process involved now,” Frasier replied. “I'm not scared of family names anymore. If he thinks I have information about the attack on the Prophet, then he's welcome to try and find it.”

Jonathan actually didn't expect for the man to agree. “Alright... give me one moment to prepare myself. CO, come with me.”

Talia nodded and opened the door for Jonathan, falling in step behind him as he took an unusually long walk down the hall, slumping down against an exterior wall with a wide panoramic window.

“Okay, I was not expecting that.”

Talia shrugged, “I don't understand. Can't you find out once and for all if he's involved? I'll admit I don't know much about this psionic power stuff.”

“Sure...” Jonathan said warily, “and who knows what else? Imagine a living man's mind is like a super-massive market, where you can literally find *anything* in the galaxy. Only you're looking for one thing... and you have no idea where it is. It could be hours, and I'd never find what I'm looking for, but who knows what else.”

“So it was a bluff that backfired?”

Jonathan steeled his features. “Bannor no. I'm going in that clown's head if that's what it takes. But I am *not* looking forward to it.”

Resolute once again, Jonathan returned to the room, focused on the task ahead. “Alright, Mister

Aucoin... it's going to be instinct to resist, try not to resist too hard. This isn't going to be pleasant for either of us.”

Gingerly, Frasier turned his chair to allow Jonathan easier access. With equal nervousness, Jonathan framed the sides of his target's temples with his fingers and closed his eyes, focusing his energy through his hands and into the mind of the orbit operator.

Talia wasn't sure what to expect, but whatever it was, it didn't look particularly impressive. As the ticks passed, the pair were largely motionless, like a surreal GalNet image. The Arcadian found herself staring down at her timepiece. “Most exciting investigation I've ever been on. Yep. Nothing like watching two men standing close enough to kiss each other and do nothing. At least if they *were* kissing I might enjoy it...”

“Must you be so vulgar?” Broigan said sourly.

“Can't help it, I'm a godless Arcadian,” she replied. “Hedonism, vulgarity, and deviance are all I have.”

The advocate's grunt implied he wasn't interested in talking any further, which ended another potential time-killer. Even if he would have attempted to cure her “empty existence,” it would have been infinitely better than nothing.

And after the most boring tenth-cycle of her relatively short life – she wasn't that old, no matter what anyone said – Jonathan finally pulled away, his face suddenly contorted in pain and horror.

Frasier was not much better, if at all. “No... no... offense, sir... but I am *never* doing that again.”

Jonathan was hardly insulted by the man's boldness. “None taken.” He rubbed his eyes with his right hand, and muttered, “Have the baliff check you out, and you can go. I'll clear you.”

“Thank you, sir,” Frasier said, standing up and bowing, and extending the courtesy to Talia before following his advocate out of the room.

Meanwhile Talia had turned her full attention to her commanding officer. “Do you need some water or something?” she asked as he pulled himself into a chair and dropped his head into his hands.

“No, but if you could find some bleach to dip my brain in, I'd appreciate it,” Jonathan replied. “That man had thoughts involving ropes, chains, and fecal matter that not even Zaal would want to claim credit for.”

“But nothing that linked him to the *Gracebearer* or knowingly acted in any way to the assassination plot,” Talia finished.

“No. He's clean. I didn't even find anything that suggested he's on the take from anyone.” Jonathan sighed. “But it just doesn't make any sense. The crew on that craft would be asking for a hell of a confluence of events. Hoping that there's an automated system freeze and an overworked operator on the one day they're looking to make a bombing run?”

“Maybe you're right,” Talia remarked. “But maybe we're thinking too small. What if the system freezing itself was the trigger?”

“That would be common enough to not be unexpected... detached enough to not be an immediate clue to investigators... but that would take a bit of expert computing work to pull off.”

“And possibly some administrative access as well, if they weren't top hackers,” Talia agreed.

“Let's not eliminate any possibilities at this time,” Jonathan said. “Secure the administrative structure of Kiros Space Command and have Garret and Koris start putting together psych profiles for potential suspects. If they find anyone promising, pass it on to me.”

Talia nodded, her fingers already on her mobile PCU to relay the orders.

“And have Resh and Arman working on analyzing the automated system freeze yesterday: find out when it started, when it ended, and how.” Jonathan paused for a moment, then added, “Have them recruit some... high-profile assistance. They'll probably need it.”

“If she can't find anything in a computing unit, there's nothing there, right?” Talia remarked as she continued forwarding orders, reciting Rumil's oft-stated boast.

“Exactly.” He rubbed his chin, weighing his options as to how he should proceed personally,

and didn't particularly like any of them. It eventually came down to which one he disliked least, and to the answer of his next question. "Did Second Fleet secure anything from the bomb after it detonated?"

Talia nodded. "Yes. The casing from the bomb ejected properly, and was rocketed off into empty space when it didn't impact anything. Second Fleet did eventually track it down, and were holding it for analysis."

"Send Yorik to procure a piece from the bomb. Doesn't have to be any particular size or shape, just something tangible for us to use."

Talia was understandably confused by this order, "Whatever for?"

"Because the expert I'm going to be bringing in is going to need it."

"What expert?"

He turned to face Talia, and said, "You're going to think I'm crazy if I tell you. Bannor, I think I'm crazy just thinking about it. But we need to find the *Gracebearer*, and I don't think anything in any computer is going to tell us where. So I'm taking some... unconventional methods."

## Chapter Four

“Oh, Johnny Boy! I am so glad to see you!”

Jonathan cringed at the sound of the approaching voice. Taesha had the sort of bubbly personality that you sensed was only bubbly *because* it grated on nerves.

“Johnny Boy?” Talia asked with amusement. “That's a new one.”

Jonathan ignored the CO's statements, and turned to face the sound of the voice as the Diviner of Villium temple strode through the double doors separating the reception area from the heart of the Senter Peacekeeper Main Station.

“Taesha, glad you could make it,” he said, deftly turning her attempt at an embarrassing hug into a swift shoulder pat and a handshake. “You are already acquainted with Chief Operative Talia Gronie.”

“I am,” Taesha replied, refusing to be denied a hug, which Talia decided would be more trouble resisting than it was worth. “Good to see ya, Tal! I trust you're making sure Johnny's behaving?”

“Quite.” Over the Demodian woman's shoulder, Talia glared at Jonathan, her silent accusation as clear as if she had made it with telepathy: why did you call this woman again?

*I told you I was going to make a unconventional decision. You should know damned well what that means by now.* Jonathan answered, the mental message promising to give Talia a most unpleasant headache next cycle. As if she needed another reason to be angry at him.

“I have to admit that I'm curious why you called me,” Taesha said. “You know anything I divine is not approved as evidence in any court of law outside of Demod, and even then only with mutual agreement of both sides.”

The Diviners had rebounded considerably since the approval and ascension of Dewin Rio – now just Dewin, discarding his family name as the tradition of the faith – as a true Diviner. His work with Taesha had rebuilt the prestige of the Demodians native religion, but not enough to regain the legal clout their kind once had. Jonathan *could* feel for that: the legal limitations imposed on him and his talents could fill a small data drive.

“I'm not terribly worried about bringing these people to justice,” Jonathan said grimly. “I just want to find them. I have other means to nail them to the wall.”

“Presuming they haven't destroyed the evidence,” Talia noted as they went past the conference rooms, turning left at the end of the long hall, and towards the forensic bays.

Like most Kiro's buildings, the station sprawled, with few levels and covering a great amount of surface area. The halls along the outside perimeter featured large windows to provide a scenic view, and even many interior rooms looked inward toward expansive courtyards and gardens. It was a small hike to move from one section to another, and in earlier days, it would have been a refreshing walk across arguably the most structured and well managed cityscape in the known galaxy.

But today, the trek showed the trials and tribulations that had befallen Senter, and of Kiro's space as a whole. The windows were streaked, showing signs of stain. The sight outside was even worse; sparse traffic moving slowly and roughly across abandoned or damaged buildings, squatters filling the now motionless walkways while pedestrians trudged around them.

Reaching the magnetically sealed double doors to the forensics bays was a blessing, an escape from the depressing panorama back into the heart of the complex. Just inside was a short passage much like an airlock, where they were sanitized and scanned for hidden weapons. To their right, a one-way window shrouded the security technicians on the other end. For all Jonathan knew, and he cynically acknowledged the possibility, there was only one person manning the station. “Thank you for your patience, Commander, CO... and...”

“She's a consultant, officer,” Jonathan remarked crossly. He knew that Taesha's bio was currently on a screen before the technician, who didn't know exactly how to address the Diviner. “She

won't be casting any bad magic on anything here, I can assure you.”

“Of course, sir. I meant no disrespect.”

Taesha smiled broadly, despite Jonathan sensing a deep insult within the Demodian woman. “It's okay, just call me Taesha!” the Diviner chirped happily.

“Operative Salazar is with your evidence in Lab Seven. He can confirm that it has not been tampered with in any way,” the tech finished, and the interior door slid open with a hiss. With a gesture, Jonathan took the lead, the two women following in step behind him, a triangle swiftly moving across the smooth concrete floor and the carefully partitioned labs of the forensics bay.

Despite the constant activity that had to run through the bay – the central and most sophisticated facility of its type anywhere on Kiros – there was surprisingly little noise. It implied high-quality soundproofing, and demonstrated that not *everything* in Senter was suffering from lack of funding.

Lab Seven was not hard to find, despite the faded numbers on the walls, and the lights on the signs so dimmed that they were barely visible through the bay's normal illumination. The Ubek in dress reds standing vigil was a distinct enough landmark.

He saluted crisply, and nodded in deference to his commanding officers and Taesha. “Yorry!” the Diviner squealed, “Come here, ya brute!” She threw her arms around the massive specimen of a humanoid... or as far as she could, which was about a third around the pale skinned giant's back.

Yorik remained unmoved, eyes pleading with Jonathan, until the Commander finally smiled, and said, “To ease, Operative Salazar.”

At that point, the Ubek's smile cracked, and he embraced the much smaller Demodian, hugging her off the ground to Taesha's squeal of delight. Yorik had always gotten along well with this member of SAF 3's “unofficial team.”

“Alright, you two... try not to embarrass yourselves,” Jonathan finally interrupted. “We have work to do.”

“Yes, sir,” Yorik responded. His stoicism returned so suddenly that he dropped Taesha back down to the ground, the woman stumbling and falling onto her backside. She accepted Jonathan's hand up as Yorik stood aside to allow entry into the lab.

Compared to the dark walls and feel of the hall, the lab was bright white fiberwall and well-lit with pure white light from the upper trim bulbs of the wall. Talia slipped inside first and was pulling out a sliding table from the sealed evidence compartment on the farthest wall.

On the table was nothing but a small scrap of thick iron, charred black from what would have significant heat, either from re-entry or the explosion of the fusion component of the bomb. Taesha clicked her teeth disapprovingly, her cheery disposition gone in the bat of an eyelash, and said, “You *do* understand how difficult it is to track an inanimate object via a connection with *another* inanimate object, right?”

“All things in the universe are connected, right?” Jonathan said with a smile. “I have full faith in your abilities.”

Taesha shook her head disparagingly, and replied, “You've *never* had faith in my abilities Johnny Boy. You never call me unless you have no other options.” She examined the mangled clump of metal, took a deep breath, and exhaled it in a huff. “Give me a tenth-cycle; I'll see what I can find. If I need more time, I'll let you know.”

“I'm in no hurry,” Jonathan answered, leaning back against the wall. “I want to see you work.”

“Scared of the dark?”

“Not in the slightest.”

Taesha grinned broadly, and said, “Alright, kill the lights if you could. Anyone who wants to watch the most boring show in the galaxy can stick around.”

“I just watched Johnny Boy stare into another man's mind for a tenth-cycle,” Talia said with a shrug. “Trust me, you're not half as boring as that.”

“I am never bored to watch your gifts,” Yorik answered. “But I shall maintain watch outside

anyway to make sure you are not interrupted.” The large Ubek ducked through the doorway, turning out the lights and closing the door behind him.

Through the faint illumination slipping through the cracks of the door, Taesha's slim fingers extended like claws towards the piece of shrapnel, her fingertips brushing across the scarred surface. Upon the contact, her eyes rolled up into the back of her head, and her body went completely still.

“There are life threads... faint... but they are there,” Taesha narrated, either out of reflex or in desire to keep her audience up to speed. “It is... odd...”

“That there are threads?” Jonathan asked.

“No. Someone would have had to have touched and instilled their touch on the bomb... it's the threads themselves. They feel... unusual. It's a presence that I've never felt before; it's familiar but it's not. I... don't know how else to describe it.”

“Don't worry about who they are. Tell me where they went,” Jonathan interjected, hoping to get the Diviner back on task. She had a tendency to drift off on tangents when “reading,” and sometimes needed to be reminded of what she was supposed to be doing.

Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. Fortunately for the Erani, it did this time. Taesha's head jerked, and even Talia swore she could hear the entranced Diviner mentally change gears. There was silence... then silence... then more silence.

“Okay, I stand corrected,” Talia finally mumbled after a painfully long silence. “This *is* more boring than watching you probe a guy's mind. I'm getting out of here.”

“The threads have left this system. It takes time to follow the path over the expanse of the stars,” Taesha mumbled, her voice sounding distracted. “I'm not Dewin, who can do this stuff as naturally as we breathe. If you open that door, the light might just break my concentration and I'll have to start all over.”

“You heard the girl, CO,” Jonathan teased. “You're in it for the long haul.”

“Cursed religion,” Talia grouched, but whether she was speaking in a general Arcadian curse or specifically referring to Taesha's belief was not readily clear, nor did Jonathan feel terribly inclined to find out.

The Diviner's fingers twitched, and her nails scratched across the black metal. “I think I have found it. Fourth system moving across our galactic parallel. They have likely moved since, the presence doesn't feel recent... oh...”

Jonathan heard Taesha's voice drop in sorrow. “What? Taesha, what is it?”

“The threads aren't looping back... they aren't linking to anything else... and now I know why,” She said morosely. “The ship took a course into the system's primary.”

“That's an awfully extreme way to eliminate the evidence,” Talia said, “especially with crew on board. You're sure the crew was on board as this happened?”

The Diviner had pulled away from the shrapnel and nodded. “As sure as I can be. It's difficult to say that there was no survivors; the life threads were unusual and eerily similar between each person I managed to sense, and the threads were hard to sense at all through the mediums I used. But all those that I sensed all follow the ship's path into the star.”

“CO, get in touch with Second Fleet... have them determine the system in question and see if they can't confirm what Taesha claims. Send Salazar in while you're at it.”

“Finally, sweet, blessed freedom,” Talia deadpanned, moving as quickly as she could without jogging out of the lab, turning on the lights as she disappeared and relayed Jonathan's orders. Yorik ducked inside and instantly turned his concern to the pale faced Diviner.

“Taesha?” the Ubek asked with a tender concern that his kind rarely exhibited. “What happened? Are you well?”

Jonathan had to admit that the Demodian Diviner looked like she was ill. “Do you need anything?”

She waved off the concern, and shrugged away from Yorik's hand as it attempted to drop on her

shoulder. "I'm fine, really, I am. It's not easy to witness a scene of mass death. You all might be used to it, I'm not."

Jonathan could sense the displeasure she began directing toward him, and he threw his hands up in defense, knowing what was on her mind. "Don't even start that. You said it yourself that your readings mean next to nothing for covering my bases legally. I can't dismiss the search for the *Gracebearer* on your say so. You know that."

"It has nothing to do with that. You still don't believe in my gifts."

Jonathan turned about swiftly, ending his side of the discussion. "I don't have time to soothe your wounded pride, and I'm not going to have this argument with you again. Salazar, keep her company until I have further orders for you."

He stomped out of the lab, leaving the pair. Taesha kicked at the table, and Yorik quickly jumped to keep it stable. "I am sorry, Tae," Yorik said in apology. "It is still evidence after all."

"I know," the Diviner grumped, her eyes staring out towards the door, that had apparently locked up halfway open.

"He does believe in your gifts," Yorik said. "If he didn't, he wouldn't call you."

"He believes I have *a* gift," Taesha corrected. "He doesn't think my faith has any merit. It's insulting. It's like someone telling you that you have great strength, but that it doesn't come from your training or the work you do."

Yorik shrugged, "I know it's not true. Why should it bother me?"

Taesha dipped the left side of her head into the large humanoid's abdomen. "I really wish I could think like you."

"What else is bothering you?"

The Diviner stared out into space, through the wall of the lab, the entire building, following whatever strand of life caught her attention at that moment. Nonetheless, she kept part of her attention on her physical location. "I sometimes... I think this is my last life."

It had taken Yorik some time to grasp the belief that Taesha had lived many lives, and that it was supposedly a trait that all Diviners had. "You really think so?"

Taesha nodded. "Diviners like myself claimed they could feel they were ending their cycle, and were ready to ascend. I... think I understand what they mean. I can just... feel it."

"And that worries you?"

"Because I don't feel that I'm ready. Pure enlightenment, my people call it. I certainly don't feel it."

Yorik bumped her gently, or as gently as an Ubek gets, which was still enough to nearly knock Taesha completely off the table. "Well, you still have this life to figure it out, right?"

The Diviner more let herself be cheered than anything else. "You're right. Might as well make the most of it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Commander Feroz?"

Jonathan looked up from his meal in the station's mess hall, and up at the Senter Peacekeeper that had interrupted him. "May I help you...?"

"Bailiff Hardin Kriss, sir," the peacekeeper said with a salute. "I was told to find you and inform you that you have a request for a secured channel as soon as possible."

Jonathan looked across the table where Talia, Garret and Koris looked back at him knowingly. Not many people had the authority and security level to make such a request, and by this point only one of them had yet to check in on the situation.

Premier Robert Datson tended to be hands-off in regards to his SAF teams; a trait that Jonathan, and his older colleagues who had experienced more meddling leaders, appreciated. That didn't mean

the Premier didn't occasionally want to be appraised of the actions of his teams.

Jonathan stood, picked up his tray and took it towards the disposal belt. "Very well. What comm station is available?"

"The Station Captain has said you can use his office, sir," the bailiff answered, then with a nervous frown added, "It's the only comm in the station that we can promise total privacy and security. The Captain figured you'd want both for this communication."

"Extend my appreciation to the Captain if I don't see him," Jonathan said pleasantly, even though he thought with some amusement, knowing the people he knew, that there was no such thing as total privacy *or* total security at this level of civilization if someone desired to deny either. He dismissed the Bailiff, nodded to his team, and left the mess hall.

The Station Captain's office was in the direct center of the complex, looking out into the central courtyard, much like most governmental buildings of Erani design. Because of this, he had to pull the blinds closed to get the level of seclusion he wanted.

Taking a seat at the Captain's desk, he located the comm unit on a panel on the right side of the desktop. From the center of the room, the holographic display lit up in a rainbow hued circle, and formed the image of Premier Datson, sitting at a desk himself.

"Sorry for the delay, Sir Premier," Jonathan said in apology. "Apparently, security on Kiros is suspect at best."

Datson shrugged. "It was hardly like I was amiss of things to occupy my time." The Premier looked down at his own desk, and added, "I've been kept abreast of your investigation, but I'd like a more current report if I may, Commander."

"The Second Fleet is currently en route to confirm information that I received that suggests the *Gracebearer* was destroyed by taking itself into a star. I expect confirmation of that within tenth-cycles."

Robert's eyes narrowed. "And where did you acquire this information, Commander?"

Jonathan never knew exactly what the Premier thought about some of his contacts and unconventional sources. "I consulted Taesha of Villium Temple."

The Premier's face stayed neutral. "I see."

Trying to turn the topic back to his report, Jonathan continued, "I also haven't been able to find anything outside of negligence within Kiros Space Command, but there are still other leads I wish to pursue on that score. I have Agents Jerivous and Ravaar poring through their system logs. I refuse to believe that such a delicious opening with such perfect timing occurred by nothing more than chance."

"Agreed," Datson confirmed. "I am sure you understand the importance of this investigation and that you find the people responsible for this attack. Rumil is a figure of great importance in this galaxy... the first guiding light to the Erani faith in over eight hundred staryears."

"I am painfully aware," Jonathan grumbled.

Datson smiled in understanding. "I am sure you are. Oh, I do have something to offer you. It probably doesn't mean much to you right now, but you never know."

Jonathan narrowed his eyes warily. "And what is that?"

"The *Gracebearer* was eventually backtracked to have originated from Solaria. Councilor Honore has assured me that she will quickly round up everyone who might have so much as given the freighter even a passing glance while on Solaria. She has also vowed any and all resources of Solarian influence to your investigation."

Abruptly, a woman's voice cut into the conversation, a bit cross and annoyed. "If that's the case, then perhaps you can explain exactly why she is sitting in my parlor trying to talk to me about my lack of stable male companionship?"

There was no hologram to accompany the voice, but it was undeniably Rumil's, causing Jonathan to grin and barely fight back a laugh. True to his estimation, there really *was* no such thing as a secure and private channel in this galaxy.

“I see your skills at poking where it shouldn't be haven't waned, Madam Prophet,” Robert sighed, both annoyed and yet not the slightest bit surprised. “And I see that you returned to Baramak safely. Worry not, madam, I will not keep SAF 3 off your protection much longer.”

“I am hardly worried about that,” Rumil answered, “but the longer this woman keeps trying to talk my ear off with inane pratter, the less time I have helping the Commander's agents try and piece together this mess of a system Kiros Space Command has been failing to use.”

Jonathan bit his lower lip, desperately trying to keep from laughing. “With your permission, Sir Premier, I'd like to gather up my team and return to Baramak. There's not much else we can do here that we can't do in more comfortable quarters.”

Robert nodded. “Permission granted. Report to me once you receive word from Second Fleet.”

“Yes, sir,” Jonathan acknowledged, and gave due partings to both parties in the channel before terminating his end of the comm, opening back up the windows, leaving the office, and informing the two peacekeepers guarding the door that the Station Captain could have his office back.

## Chapter Five

Celine Honore had steadily lost many of the “youthful” features that had startled Rumil twenty staryears ago. The matriarch of the Honore clan no longer looked like a girl in her teens with a son in his twenties. There were wrinkles in her cheeks and forehead, her hands thin and slightly gnarled. There were lines at the corners of her eyes and Rumil could see the slightest bit of uncooperative joints in the older woman's movements.

Through a total social upheaval, the pressure of being thrust into a leadership role – both among the Solarians and the galaxy as a whole in the Galactic Parliament Council – fighting thousands of staryears of chauvinism to accomplish even the smallest thing, and of course the passing of time, a toll had finally been taken upon the woman in front of Rumil. She still didn't look like a woman nearing sixty staryears, but Rumil felt at ease with the universe now that Celine could age, and not look younger than her with little effort.

But one thing that time had not dulled was Celine's personality. Rumil had yet to decide if that was good or bad.

“Oh, Rumil dearie!” Celine crooned, hugging the prophet and patting her back gingerly. “I had heard about the assassination attempt. Extremists just won't leave you alone after all this time, will they?”

“I'd wager everyone on Noth heard about the assassination attempt,” Rumil wanly replied, returning the older woman's hug. “I'm amazed this sort of thing is still news. Someone attempts to kill me twice a year by this point.”

“But not like this, and you know it,” Celine replied, the faux concern dropping off into serious discussion. “I've been appraised on the rough details to this point. Please, I want to assure you that the Solarian people do not represent or approve of the actions of whatever presence of my race was involved.”

Rumil smiled at Celine's rather heavy-handed attempt at diplomacy. She knew Celine's game by now: the blatant statement was to prepare her for something more subtle. “I know, Celine. So, what really brings you here?”

Celine could fake indignation better than anyone, Rumil had learned.

“How could you suggest that I would have ulterior motives?”

Rumil grinned sardonically, and dropped her left hand on her hip. “Because I've known you for twenty staryears.”

“I've come to see my son,” Celine relented.

The younger woman gestured out toward the monument for the Battle of Mydor. Rumil had to admit it was a common ritual for the Solarian councilwoman. Timothy had been her only son, and to this very day, lived under the belief that he died along with the vast majority of the noble houses of the Erani race, the culmination of a prophecy nearly a millennium in the making. Rumil had wanted to tell her of the truth countless times, but Timothy had insisted that he remain dead to the eyes of the galaxy, even to his own mother.

“Come with me, dear,” Celine requested. “It's warm enough that you shouldn't need a jacket. Although I have to wonder why in the Creator's holy name you live in such a chilled climate. It's barely passable weather even in the full of summer.”

“I'm not Erani. I don't look at 300 Cel and think it's a wee bit too cold for short sleeves,” the blond answered, taking stride behind the older woman.

This was hardly the first time that the climate of her home had come up in conversation. Baramak had been a rather cool planet to begin with when the Arcadians first settled it. The Baramak Slaughter had altered the climate considerably towards the warm, but there still remained a permafrost line along the northern continent, a line roughly 50 TackMets north of Rumil's manor. During the

winter season, the could easily drop under 140 Cel, well below water's freezing point.

The Erani people were used to warmer temperatures, as the planet of Kiros was definitely on the warm side for most carbon-based life, right on the innermost edge of the "habitable band" of its primary star. Solaria was even worse, having lost a considerable portion of its upper atmosphere during the planetary upheaval that had eradicated its ancient native civilization. While it was true the majority of Solarian life was spent in the slightly less harsh and controlled underground, Rumil had been reminded that the comfort zone for an Erani was a bit higher than any of the other major races of the Galactic Alliance.

"While that is true, I have been to Arcadia, don't you forget. And I spend about a third of an average staryear in what your people would consider 'comfortable.' This is not that," Celine said knowingly.

To be honest, the major reason she liked this place was *because* most Erani did not like how cold it was, and as a result either limited themselves to G-band communication, which she could ignore if she felt so inclined, or left her alone entirely. It made the bitterly cold months tolerable. Of course, it helped that the one Erani that she had no problems with seeing every cycle was not the slightest bit bothered by the cold.

*For what its worth, I find that winter is quite irksome here. But I have nigh countless means to deal with it.*

The comment, completely innocuous on the surface, caused Rumil to think of several potential avenues in which it could be interpreted, not all of them decent. Nor were they constructs of her treasonous thoughts alone, as the statement came accompanied by several less than innocent images injected into her mind by the telepathic speaker.

"And I know it's not nearly hot enough to cause you to flush like that." Celine noted, her voice now concerned. "Are you not feeling well?"

"Just some... old embarrassing memories," Rumil replied, waving off the query. "They always come to me when I take this walk."

Celine made a thoughtful sound in reply before asking. "Involving my son, I assume?"

Rumil attempted the coy, half-truthful route. "Am I that transparent?"

Celine was not baited. "No. I had always suspected the two of you were doing things that the old ways would have found abhorrent. Oh, do not blush any further, dear. I for one fully approved, you know this!"

"It's still not something I'm entirely comfortable talking to said man's *mother* about."

Meanwhile, she added in a tight telepathic communication to that same man, *I swear, if my reputation suffers because of incidents like these, I will never forgive you!*

*Since when have you been concerned with your reputation?* was the dismissive reply.

Any response Rumil might have had was cut off by her instinct telling her that she had reached their destination. The government of Baramak had maintained the grounds near immaculately, as the monument to the battle that changed everything, as far as the Erani were concerned, looked as clean and sharp as if it had been constructed last cycle.

Celine wasted no time with any of the sights, her eyes turning left with a very practiced process. Rumil had made sure that the name "Timothy Honore" had been mixed in rather inconspicuously with the other notable names that were deemed exceptionally valorous during the Second Battle of Mydor. It's how Timothy would have wanted it... had he actually expired, at any rate.

The Solarian woman ran her fingers across the etched name, just as she always did. Without looking away from the stone, she then said, "Well, that was nice. I'd like to see my son now, if I may."

Finally, Celine turned her head towards Rumil, the councilwoman's face stern and accusing. She didn't even give Rumil a chance to play dumb. "Do not try to con me this time, young lady. I didn't even fully believe it the first time you told me he was dead, but I was patient. I didn't expect to wait twenty years to find evidence of your little white lie, but I was patient."

Again, Celine cut in before Rumil could even utter a word. “You can try to tell me that SAF Commander Feroz nobly intercepted the fusion bomb that was dropped on top of you, and folded it safely beyond orbit, like Premier Datson did. And then I could remind you that I am old enough to have changed your padded pants, and that it will be a freezing day in Bannor before I believe some half-baked story from children.”

Finally, the older woman said with a remarkably dignified glower, “Or Timmy can show himself right this instant because I have little doubt he is hovering over your shoulder right now, like he has for the last twenty staryears.”

“Or you can stop browbeating people acting upon my wishes,” Timothy's physical voice cut in, his invisibility dropping out of both ladies' vision and stepping into the entry to the monument circle. “Now, since you've no doubt been saving this lecture for two decades, let's get it over with now so that I can get about on business that is actually important.”

Celine pointed angrily at Timothy. “You may be an Archangel of Annor, but you are still my son, young man. And yes, I do have a mind to speak, but we will table that discussion until we are in some warmer environs.” She shivered upon finishing that statement, and then shooed Rumil back towards the manor.

Not that the manor was all that much warmer, as Rumil had all the climate control disabled due to the reasonably decent late spring day, but it gave a more private venue for Celine to lay into the secretive couple.

It wasn't Celine's way to yell. She was, at her core, a consummate noblewoman, even if the status held little meaning in this day and age. She had other ways to express her displeasure without having to raise her voice.

“I can understand not wanting most Solarians to know you two have been living in sin for two decades,” Celine said morosely, “but you should have known I would not be so insipid and judgmental.”

Rumil and Timothy regarded the woman without expression. The guilt gambit wasn't working – they knew her too well. So she took another point of attack. “And worse, to hide my grandchildren from me for this long as well?”

Timothy remained unflappable, but Rumil did cock an eyebrow and reply incredulously, “Grandchildren?”

Celine grinned, suspecting she had found the chink in the impassive continence Rumil and Timothy had been giving her. “Well, surely, after all this time, able bodied and active, you'd have happened into motherhood if by nothing but accident!”

“Mother seems to forget that I am Erani and you are Arcadian, and that the chances of our genetic material mingling in a compatible fashion is nil to impossible,” Timothy added, even as the barest hint of a smile crept across his features.

The sounds of footsteps on the north stairwell drew the attention of the trio, and the waif-like Se-Lan woman called Micha took a slow, deliberate path down each step. “Considering that excepting the Ferian and the Ruma, all the other races that have attained interstellar contact were constructed from the same base template, that being my people, it's not as impossible as you make it sound.”

Rumil found the opportunity to shift the conversation from the current, uncomfortable topic with Micha's entrance. “How is Ghadri? Have you heard anything new?”

“Still in decline,” Micha answered with a shrug. “I would honestly be more surprised to hear she was recovering. She has lived a great long time... and all things must eventually die.”

To someone not familiar with the Se-Lan, that attitude would have likely sounded callous and perhaps cold-hearted. But to those present, they had eventually come to learn what the Se-Lan had known for the last two millenia.

The Se-Lan were a doomed race, their numbers steadily dwindling since the Archangel War, as they traditionally had a very slow birthrate due to their originally ageless stature before the planar

energies were sealed away.

Micha would occasionally surmise that back at the height of their civilization, they should have had the sophistication and genetic knowledge to correct that problem, but also admitted she had no idea why they didn't, and instead let that knowledge atrophy and eventually disappear. While their people found they still had that natural inclination to such knowledge, Se-Lan geneticists having quickly met and surpassed those of other races, they still had a considerable way to go before they had rebuilt the knowledge that had been lost.

At any rate, that inevitable finality lent the Se-Lan as a rule to have a much more cavalier and passive view towards life and death.

Then Micha, using the same gambit Rumil had used, turned the topic back to the Prophet and away from her. "As I was going to say before Rumil interrupted, I had offered to assist my expertise discreetly in conjunction of offspring, but Rumil has declined on all occasions."

Celine's smile broadened, and Rumil rolled her eyes, "How exactly was I supposed to explain a pregnancy, hmm? No wonder the previous Prophets didn't have a single child after their station was realized... dealing with vultures like you two."

Her mobile PCU buckled to her hip vibrated twice, and she looked down at the display even though she didn't need to. She had programmed it to signal once Jonathan tried to contact Premier Datson, and she wanted to be there for that discussion.

"Pardon me ladies, but I have work to do," Rumil said, standing up and smoothing out her pants. "I'm not going to sit and wait for my assassins to try again."

"Tell the Premier I said hello," Celine quipped with a wave and a smile.

Truth be told, this was the opportunity Celine had been waiting for. While it was no end of fun teasing Rumil – Celine would have figured a woman who had danced before aroused men for money wouldn't be so modest – it was actually her son that she wanted to pin down one on one. He had a lot of explaining to do.

"Micha? Could you, to be perfectly blunt and perhaps mean, quickly find somewhere else to be?" Celine asked as she kept her eyes locked on the man who had retreated to leaning in the southwest corner.

The Se-Lan woman did not hesitate in complying, partially because she really didn't have any reason to remain in the room, and partially because she could sense the cold, predatory feelings lingering in the Solarian Councilor's mind, and wanted *nothing* to do with them.

"So... two decades... and not so much as a word," she said with disappointment in her voice and a glower on her face. "I had thought we were closer than that. Or did you think me an extension of your father?"

Timothy figured he could silence her with a curt reply along the lines of not having to answer to her for anything, but... despite his near omniscient power and station... he rather did owe her more than what amounted to slapping away a pesky insect.

"I was supposed to be dead," he instead answered simply, allowing a hint of dismissal in his voice.

"Yet you weren't, and you let me grieve and sleep restlessly..."

"You said yourself you didn't buy the official story. I doubt you slept all that poorly."

Celine then erupted, "Then you don't know a third of what you think you do, Archangel!"

The outburst was so unlike the seemingly unflappable matriarch of the Honore clan that Timothy actually jerked in surprise. The woman who had given him the mortal birth he had sought was trembling in a mix of sadness and anger, her face contorted in rage even as her eyes flowed with tears she had held back for twenty staryears.

"I suspected you might be alive... but I *knew* nothing. I didn't know where you were... I didn't know what you were doing. I... I began to think after the silence for so long that maybe... you *were* expired, or worse, that you *hated* me." She snarled bitterly, "Do you not comprehend that *not* knowing

can be worse than knowing?”

Timothy was so startled that he actually stumbled over his reply. “I... I couldn't possibly...”

Celine interrupted him with a wave of her hand. “I'm sure you didn't mean to hurt me. Even after all this time, after your ascension to the station of your immortal life, you are *still* my son. I know you. I know how you are. You've always never said more than absolutely necessary. Easing my mind wouldn't have been necessary in the greater mission you assigned to yourself.”

She dropped her head to compose herself, and when she did, her face reflected her same, teasing half grin. “Were you like this before the beginning of time? Always this damn quiet and reserved?”

“Worse, I suspect,” Timothy answered. “There was little need for talk before the shaping on the material plane.”

A nervous silence fell on the room, broken only when Timothy finally admitted, “In truth... I had kept quiet because I really did not want to have the coming conversation with you.”

Celine's slight broke out into a full grin. “I'm not exactly hiding what's on my mind very well am I? So the two of you *have* been intimate.”

“Not that it is any of your business... but yes.”

“I take it you've been intentionally *avoiding* getting her with child then?”

“On top of the endless scandal it would create for Rumil, scandal she frankly doesn't need, my kin were much less cautious with their dalliances. It did more harm than good when all is considered.” His features became rather grim as he added, “Not only did the Se-Lan, and the Erani by extension, not always use their extra-planar gifts in the best way, demonkind got the idea to spread their seed among the mortal born somewhere... they didn't think it up on their own.”

Celine straightened. He was speaking of the Democs, half-demonic scourges of the material plane, presumably wiped out in the Archangel War. Then again, the Se-Lan were recently believed lost to antiquity as well. “Are you implying the Democs still exist somewhere?”

“‘Somewhere’ being the key word,” Timothy answered. “Whenever I could spare the time, I've tried to divine their location... without success. But make no mistake: they're still out there, and unlike the Se-Lan, they are growing stronger.”

“Should the Galactic Alliance be preparing for war?” Celine asked, her teasing interrogation now completely forgotten. She was back to politician and leader now.

“The Alliance as a whole doesn't even want to admit the Second Battle of Mydor happened, at least not the way it's been reported. Good luck getting them to mobilize over a phantom threat that supposedly went extinct millenia before,” Timothy answered matter-of-factly. “Good luck even getting your people on board with such a warning.”

“Does Rumil know?” Celine asked.

“If she has had a prophecy about it, she has not told me,” Timothy replied. “I'd rather not tell her if she hasn't. Her gift has given her enough nightmares.”

Rumil emerged back into the meeting room, ending the conversation. She crossed the distance towards Timothy, and with a glance back at Celine said, “Suppose there's no point hiding it anymore.” She then pecked Timothy on the cheek chastely, and asked, “Did she make you spill our deepest and most lurid secrets yet?”

“Something like that.”

With a silent chuckle, the prophet sat back down, patting for Timothy to join her on the couch. “Commander Feroz should return shortly. He has deemed that they can continue piecing together what happened on Kiros from here, and where they can resume their duties as my bodyguard.”

“Does Datson know you're alive, Timmy?” Celine asked.

Timothy shrugged at the question. “No one has ever told him. I'm sure he suspected much like you did, and he probably is certain of it now.”

“Well, regardless, as I promised, my every available resource I can spare is going into helping

with this investigation. I will keep both you and Commander Feroz apprised if or when we find anything.”

She rose from her seat, and Rumil, perhaps to her peril, said, “You don't have to leave right away. You could stay for lunch if you wish.”

“I must decline, Rumil dear,” Celine said with a shake of her head. “I simply do not like this climate at all, and I'm sure my own detail outside don't like it all that much, even if they are Arcadian. Besides, I'll leave you two alone to get about whatever business you wish to have before your bodyguards return. I can't imagine you get too many opportunities, do you?”

She took her leave without escort, and with a groan, Rumil threw her head back against the rest of the couch. “Now I understand why you didn't want to talk to her.”