

## Head of State

Fourteen staryears ago, for the first time in his life, Robert Datson had been faced with taking responsibility for something worthwhile.

The reject of Solarian leadership had become the Premier of the Galactic Parliament.

Not to say it had been an easy road. The Arcadians put up heavy resistance to his nomination and threatened to boycott the entire selection process, their influence having enough votes to invalidate the whole thing. Only after being duly chided, with reminders of the crimes of the previous Premier Tormay, did they allowed the process to continue.

And that had been only the beginning of a longer ordeal. For three ten-cycles, he faced questions about his faith, how his morals would affect his decision making, and how he planned to assure other races that he was willing to listen to them amid fears that he was another “mindless zealot.”

Even his own kind had their reservations. Sure, he had been a Knight on Solaria, but he had often left the big decisions to his father and his older brothers. That he was alive to be in this position at all was because his own Knighthood didn't feel he was worthy of the honor of being on the field at Mydor. He was largely an unknown quantity who hadn't shown much fire as a leader, and there were concerns that he would be too easily bullied.

Some of the questions were fair. The Solarian faith, and Erani faith in general, had several racist overtones. Erani dominance of the galaxy before the Schism and rise of the Galactic Parliament hadn't been exactly fair and even-handed. Though it had been eight hundred staryears since – and the last couple Premiers of Arcadian heritage had questionable morality themselves – the Galaxy as a whole had seen considerable growth, security, and peace in that interim. People wanted assurance that the next Premier wouldn't dishevel that potentially perilous balance.

His own lack of leadership credentials were also reasonable to address. He did often defer to his elders in the past, but Robert felt that was what he was supposed to do. That was the way Knights were trained, even if they disagreed... and Robert *had* disagreed often with his superiors. Not everyone could thumb their noses at the system and get away with it like Timothy Honore had done during his life.

Other questions were patently absurd, issued by extremists who screamed with the loudest voice until those around them had no choice but to listen. Accusations that Robert would turn the Parliament into the official Solarian Temple if selected, that he was a bigot who hated anyone who wasn't Solarian, that he would declare homosexual relations illegal and require all galactic citizens to undergo genetic alteration to remove the “dirty genes” like the Erani had done to themselves, or that he was going to abandon the traditional office of the Premier in Citadel for an office in Centris.

Apparently, where the Premier kept his desk actually mattered to someone in the Parliament.

It had taken some work, and some help, but at the end of the entire drawn-out debacle, the people of the Parliament decided that it was time to end the Arcadian dominance of the political body they forged, and that Robert Datson was the man to take that mantle.

The ensuing fourteen years had been an interesting road. He hadn't always made the right decision, especially in the eyes of the Solarian leadership, and was often challenged by several of the Parliament and Council to his position, but he had survived through the issues and kept his mind and judgment as even as he could. As Celine Honore once told him, “There is always a place for a moderate mind.”

Then there were days like today that tested his mettle.

It wasn't that there weren't important issues on the docket. There were. But this was one of three annual meetings the Galactic Parliament had in person, and these meetings had a tendency to bring out the worst and the oddest in the galaxy's leaders.

It was an opportunity for the bellowing extremists to take the Premier to task, to push him to

make potentially disastrous decisions on trivial nonsense. One such bit of nonsense had managed to make itself to the top of the docket.

Since the inception of the Galactic Staryear Standard, the calendar bore the signifier AW, signifying what Erani thinkers at the time believed was the end of the Archangel War, the interstellar conflict from the pre-industrial ages of all the major races within the galaxy.

It likely wasn't the correct date. Judging from what the survivors of the Se-Lan had given them in terms of their history – difficult as it was to place the events of a people who had no real words to count the passage of time – it could be as much as a decade off, but today, that was irrelevant. The concern was with the label itself.

The story goes that the Arcadian Academic Administration decided last staryear that the AW designation was “religiously biased” and was used as validation for a “mythology” composed of “fairy tales.” They then proceeded to reject the AW suffix on all staryear notes in their official and scholarly publications, choosing instead the more “faith-based neutral” CR, for Common Record.

Someone in the Parliamentary body got wind of this and threw a fit, claiming that the AAA was violating the law set by the Galactic Staryear Standard, and sought to have the administration fined or possibly sentenced to incarceration. That set off a counter-claim that the AW designation violated the Faith Neutrality Act established by the first Galactic Parliament, and that it should supersede the Staryear Standard that was enacted by the Erani before the first Parliament ever came to order. Not only should the Galactic Alliance accept the CR suffix, it should *replace* AW as the standard for the entire galaxy.

Four separate judicial bodies on four planets visited the issue, coming up with four separate decisions, and since none of them had any authority on a galactic scale, pushed the confrontation to the Galactic Adjudicate Panel, who didn't want to touch the thing with a thirty-Tack poker. Instead, they concluded that this was not a legal issue as much as a bureaucratic one, handing off the entire mess to the Galactic Parliament. After weighing the issue – or rather, screaming and hurling insults at each other for three cycles – and being unable to reach any consensus, it was then pushed for a discussion and vote by the five-member Galactic Council in the next joint assembly.

And that was how an insignificant piece of tripe managed to make itself the hot-button issue at the top of the docket for the Galactic Parliament on one of three sessions every staryear where they all met face to face.

Robert was rather perplexed that it suddenly became an issue *now*. For eight centuries, the Arcadians ruled the governmental body in both the Council and Parliament. Historically the Council had two Arcadian representatives as well as an Arcadian Premier, as well as the Solarian and Kiros king who were nearly in open war with each other at any given time. Meanwhile, the Arcadians had nearly half of the Parliamentary votes. They could have easily passed such a measure long ago, as opposed to now, when everyone was fighting tooth and nail for their cultural identity and recognition on the galactic stage.

*To have forced such a trivial issue then would have likely caused both the Kiros and the Solarians to reject their seats on the Council. It would have snowballed into a collapse of the Galactic Parliament and the Alliance. It was more important to keep the peace back then, when the threat of war over the smallest slight was very real indeed.*

Robert crossed his eyes, having forgotten to shield his thoughts because he had mistakenly believed he was alone. *What impressive telepathic range you have, Councilwoman Honore*, Robert said with a hint of displeasure. *Thank you again for the reminder of where your son got his proclivity to dismiss proper etiquette when it served him.*

One thing that Robert had quickly learned after the collapse of the Solarian Knighthood was the full extent of Celine Honore's influence, and just how nimble she was at playing people, and by extension, playing politics. Within days of the news, and the return of what remained of the Knights, Celine had called in favors and negotiated business as a de facto queen, to keep the economy of Solaria

stable and the people from losing direction.

She had been just as quick to stabilize the fragments of the Knighthood, not just on Solaria, but the colony worlds as well, presenting a list of capable and promising young women that she had been monitoring in secrecy across every Solarian world. She admitted she had kept the list initially for when Timothy invariably ascended to the position of High Commander, prospects which the departed Knight Commandant apparently agreed to pursue.

Nonetheless, it had worked, more or less. The Solarian sphere of influence managed only an initial dip to their production, losing a bit of ground in relative value of their exports, before recovering nicely. Meanwhile, the first female-permitting class of Knights had graduated and accepted their duties within five staryears. The Solarian Knighthood wasn't nearly the intimidating presence that it was, but was enough to maintain stability and the general peace throughout the sphere.

It was amusing to think just how close the de facto queen had come to being the *true* queen. The surviving nobles had actually *offered* Celine the title, which she did not hesitate to refuse. Being without an heir, as her husband and two sons had died, to accept the title of Queen would have opened up a fight for succession after her death, a ploy that she spotted almost immediately. At the time, Robert had been astounded at how deftly Celine had peeled away the games being played by the other nobles, instead laying out a more stable plan for the good of Solarian influence.

Thus, the Solarian Senate was established; a two-branch governmental body inspired by the Galactic Parliament, with a House of Nobles and a House of Commons. Celine herself accepted a role as High Tenant of the Solarian People, which would be determined by a general election of the Senate rather than family lines.

The quick rebound of Solaria had garnered her enough support that she was quickly granted an additional role as the Solarian representative on the Parliamentary Council, which she then used to nominate Robert for the open Premiership, then played the Parliament like a symphony to complete her scheme.

Not bad for someone who was supposed to be obedient and unconcerned with the world of men.

Robert's trip down memory lane was jarred when Celine corrected his high opinion of her telepathic capability. *Not as far as you may think, Sir Datson. You've just dropped out of foldspace and are effectively in Glorindal's orbit.*

Robert was a bit surprised to hear that, until the shuttle's pilot informed him over the comm. The latest spacecraft advancements offered a *very* smooth transition to and from foldspace, it seemed.

*You've got plenty of people who want to catch your ear before everything goes on the record,* Celine noted.

*Of course I do,* Robert replied. Not many people outside the political arena really understood just how much politicking was done before everything was officially in session. It was part of the reason that Robert preferred cutting his arrival as close to the deadline as possible.

He collected his thoughts and perused the docket to make sure he remembered exactly what was going to be discussed and why, trying really hard to ignore that first item. He had already given it more thought than it was worth.

The shuttle jerked to a stop, and he heard the hiss of the landing gear before it thudded against the surface of the landing pad. Removing his shoulder belt, Robert stood, stowed his mono-PCU into the chest pocket of his dress suit, and prepared to exit the shuttle.

The two members of the Special Assignments Forces detail assigned to guard his person stopped him at the door. "Allow me to go first, Sir Premier," requested the first one, a bulky Arcadian comprised almost entirely of muscle and nearly as wide as his two and a half Tack frame, as he interjected himself between Robert and the door. The second, an Erani of questionable descent – he could have been either a pale Kiros or a tanned Solarian – took position behind Robert, and only then did they permit the door to open.

Robert honestly found it amusing, the lengths that his assigned detail went to ensure his

“safety,” when really the detail itself was fairly superfluous. He had to remind himself that this was all protocol, the way that the SAF had handled protection of high-profile figures for decades, if not longer. Figures that had, up until that point, been exclusively Arcadian.

And despite the concerns of his leadership capabilities, his psionic strength and skill in neutralizing threats should never have been in doubt. He was a Knight once, and his training didn't disappear just because he traded a warrior's armor for a bureaucrat's suit.

The Erani of the detail – Robert made it a point of order to remember who this man was and learn his background at first opportunity – understood. Robert didn't need protection from anything in front of him. If he needed security, it was from what could be lurking in his blind spots.

*Repeat to yourself, “it's not meant as an insult.” My security knows what I'm capable of and still dotes on me like a child.*

Robert set his jaw and replied to his persistent intruder, *Madam Honore, I allow you considerable leeway, but if you continue to probe my thoughts without my permission, I will censure you.*

He could almost feel Celine's smile in her reply. *Now that's the sort of resolute action we're going to need from our Premier. Good boy.*

Robert took a deep breath to steady himself. That woman could run this whole damn galaxy if she wanted. Instead, she seemed content merely to push his buttons on nearly a cycle's basis.

The trio was met by three more security personnel at the bottom of the exit ramp, who tried to establish a circle around the Premier as an armored hover slowly pulled up ten Tacks from the shuttle.

“If we move quickly, Sir Premier, we can make it to the Assembly before the Call to Order,” the Arcadian positioned in front of him said.

“This is your first mission assigned to me, isn't it, Operative...” Robert cut in, with a teasing grin. The man was clearly assigned to Glorindal rather than to Robert's typical operatives.

“Holis. Kurdin Holis,” the officer answered. “And yes.”

“Is my usual detail in position per my orders?” Robert queried to the Erani behind him, who Robert noted had also allowed a slight smirk to escape.

“Of course, Sir Premier.”

Robert straightened the sleeves of his suit and gestured for the guards to give him some space. “Then you can take as much time as you wish, Operative Holis. I, however, will be present with more than enough time to spare.”

The mental image was one he could recall vividly with minimal effort at this point, and so it took him very little time to vanish with a flash from his circle of guards. Kurdin panicked momentarily before the station operative was assured that he had not lost the Premier of the Galactic Parliament, and that he wasn't going to be skinned alive.

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“Good morning, Sir Premier,” greeted Rolan Snadi, the Demodian who usually lead Robert's security detail, as Robert popped up in the designated place outside the side entry of the Assembly Building.

“Morning, Rolan,” Robert replied with a slight bow, unconcerned that Rolan didn't promptly salute as is customary. The two had been working together for almost all of Robert's fourteen staryears as Premier... a little casual familiarity was acceptable.

*Tsk tsk, Sir Premier. Unnecessary teleportation... and just after chiding me for my lack of proper conduct.*

*Councilwoman Honore, I cordially invite you to shut it.*

Celine's amused chuckle was the last thing he heard before she finally vacated herself from Robert's presence.

“You have seven people who wish to exchange thoughts with you before the assembly begins,” Rolan said, tapping his PCU to call up the names in question. “I figure you can spare five ticks a piece to let them rant.”

“Five ticks each?” Robert asked. “We've got a good tenth-cycle.”

“Yes, but there is one independent party that wishes to have a chat with you privately, and I am understood that you are to make this man a priority. Kyle Forde, head of Solarian Trust and Banking?”

Forde had been a donor and supporter to the effort in making Robert the Premier in the first place, likely assuming that Robert would fall in line to advance Solarian influence and dominance in the galaxy. It hadn't turned out that way, obviously, but Robert and Kyle still made an effort to remain peaceable, and frequently talked through their differences on what Robert's responsibilities should be and where his loyalties should lie.

“I know who he is, and yes, I'll make some time,” Robert answered. “I trust he already has a location in mind?”

Rolan nodded. “He's apparently already waiting in your office within the Assembly Hall. He figured it would be easier on you.”

“I appreciate the courtesy.” Robert then gestured for his guards to fall in behind him as he manually pushed open the side entrance of the Assembly Building, and quickly turned left.

Normally reserved for service personnel, these halls were sparsely decorated and sparingly maintained. The flat, cream colored walls showed chipping paint, and a hint of rust and water damage along the trim on the floor. Several panels were cracked, potted, or missing outright, reminding Robert that the money being reserved to maintaining the Assembly Building probably wasn't being spent properly.

It was actually moments like this that reminded him of Timothy Honore, the man who had drilled into his head that the only difference between noble and commoner was entirely within the minds of nobles and commoners. It was a lesson Robert fought not to forget, and the ideals Timothy held were ones that Robert tried his hardest every cycle to emulate... while mixing in some social decorum and tact.

The service halls ran parallel to the main ones until an abrupt right turn emptied them out thirty Tacks from where Robert's Glorindal office was located. He remembered exactly *why* the halls were arranged like that: having service access any closer to the office was deemed a security risk. Why it was a security risk – or at least, more of a security risk than the main hall – was a question never answered to Robert's satisfaction.

Nonetheless, he had bigger issues to address within his office, and he wasted no time moving as fast as decorum could allow towards his office door, again pushing it open manually rather than spend the fraction of a second waiting for the sensor to trigger. He gestured for Rolan to join him while the rest of his detail stood outside.

Kyle Forde was a rare example of a particularly rotund Erani, with a waist that gave him the resemblance of an egg, a largesse that Robert often found disquieting. For Erani, it almost took *more* effort to be overweight than it took to remain trim: the energy required to generate even a small psionic aura helped maintain the svelte figures characteristic of their race, while more powerful individuals such as Robert often required toulet supplements to avoid chronic undernourishment. The level of obesity Kyle displayed could only be the result of either permanent Psionic Shock or shameless gluttony... and Robert could clearly sense Kyle's minute aura.

Robert shook hands with the Solarian's top authority on money management, then took his seat behind his desk, sorting out files while asking, “It's a bit unusual for you to request a meeting before an Assembly, Sir Forde. So what is of such importance that you have stopped in?”

“I wanted to make sure you understood what was at stake here with the After War designation,” Kyle replied, sitting down at the leftmost of three chairs on the other side of Robert's desk, warily eying Rolan as the Demodian took position at the window behind Robert, looking outside as if analyzing

potential dangers.

The Premier groaned in dismay. “You too? Seriously? Am I missing an item in this discussion that is making this roughly ten thousand times more important than it sounds?”

“It is of more importance than you clearly realize, yes,” Kyle answered grimly. “Since the Schism, the Arcadians have been steadily destroying our dominance in the galaxy, ripping away what is rightfully our control.”

“We clearly have a difference of opinion on that score,” Robert answered. “And the Schism has been resolved, has it not? Theoretically we are stronger as a people and a faith, aren't we?”

“So you trust the Kiros? The ancestral homeworld is in shambles. They can't even keep their own people in line. Us Solarians are the last bastion of the Creator!” Kyle said insistently. “This entire debate is a symbol of that struggle. Why can't you see that? It's another step the Arcadians are taking to abolish our faith's influence within the galaxy.”

“Faith is not something that can be abolished by mere letters,” Robert answered. “Other faiths have faced tougher odds and have survived. Our faith *itself* has faced greater perils than this to its hegemony. I'm not even certain that being the sole word of belief in the galaxy is all that good of an idea *anyway*.”

“Words that border on heresy!” Kyle said, his face growing red and flustered. “I supported you and gave you the financial backing to *protect* the Solarian dominance, a protection that you have not offered at any point in these fourteen staryears!”

“And I took the position to guide the progress and advancement of the galaxy as a whole. That includes the Arcadians, the Kiros, the Ubeks, the Ferian, Demodians, Ruma, the Se-Lan survivors, and any other race that advances into interstellar travel in the future. Sometimes that won't serve the immediate interests of Solaria, one planet out of many, but I believe will benefit in the long term.”

“So you're going to let them change the articles that we have used to tell our staryears after all, without even a word?”

Robert leveled a narrow glare. “You know *nothing* of my plans other than this entire debacle isn't worth the Council's time.”

There was a handful of demiticks of silence before Kyle snarled bitterly, “Your idol, Timothy Honore, wouldn't have stood for this.”

And that finally cracked the delicate composure Robert had been trying to maintain since he had left Solaria for the Assembly. Lunging out of his chair, slamming both hands on his desk, he leaned forward then snarled with annoyance, “You're right. Honore would not have stood for this. He would have thrown you out of this office *long ago*, and told you *not to bother him with trivial waste!*”

The Premier set his jaw, adjusted his collar, then demanded, “Bannor take you, it wouldn't have even gotten this far, as Timothy Honore would have likely boiled your mind the first time you tried to tell him what he should do. Our meeting is *done*. I think you know the way out.”

Kyle stood, reigning in his own anger at being dismissed. “You will regret this. The Solarian people will regret this. I will make sure you regret it more.”

That meager threat compelled Rolan to silently move towards the pistol at his hip, but was stopped by a calming hand from Robert. “I invite you to try. Even if you successfully push me from this delicate perch, I do not think you would have much hope pushing forward someone more in line with your thinking.” Robert was not posturing on this. It had been a narrow measure just for the Galactic Parliament to accept *him*, as moderate in his stance as he was. He was fairly certain that no matter the results of his leadership, he would not be succeeded by another Solarian.

With a huff, Kyle parted ways with the Premier, and Robert had no trouble wishing that it would be for the last time. Dealing with Forde had become increasingly impossible... this was merely their loudest disagreement yet.

*Trouble?*

Robert extended his thoughts in the negative. *Not really. Just Sir Forde of Solarian Trust and*

*Banking preaching doom and damnation and despair if I let the godless Arcadians change two letters. He could feel Celine's resigned sigh. If only we hadn't needed his bankroll to fund your rise to Premier. Now he has it in his head that he made you and can destroy you just as easily. He would never have entertained such thoughts twenty staryears ago.*

*Now isn't twenty staryears ago, and perhaps that is for the better.*

*Quite. Now, I'd recommend sparing a few ticks for the others who want to make sure you understand what they think is desperately important to the galaxy before we are called to order. If you have any further questions, you know where to find me.*

*Robert had a slight chuckle. He tried to guilt me into his way of thinking by invoking your son.*

*That drew an earnest laugh from the Councilwoman. Forde obviously had never met my Timmy. You are far more tolerant than my son ever was.*

*A tolerance that I have no doubt will be tested in these coming tenth-cycles.*

Robert collected all the pertinent information he felt he'd need onto his mobile PCU, tucked it back into his pocket, and said, "Ready to move, Rolan?"

The Demodian nodded in confirmation. "Whenever you are, Sir Premier."

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There was a reason the Galactic Parliament only met in person three times a staryear, leaving all their other votes and issues to be discussed and voted upon over GalNet. At nearly seventy-five thousand members, the logistical and economic ordeal of getting them all together at once was so daunting that more frequent meetings were hardly feasible.

On top of that, there were people who complained that seventy-five thousand was not nearly representative enough of the trillions of sentient beings who lived in the galaxy. The most representatives any planet had were the twenty-three from Arcadia. Even that was a lot of people to try and be a spokesperson for.

As if the Parliament wasn't a nightmare already.

Robert couldn't even *see* the farthest rows of representatives as he took his seat in front of the dais in the center of the Assembly Hall. The massive structure had initially been a stadium, until the owner of the team decided he needed a new arena. Robert, seeing an opportunity to give the Parliament some more space, arranged for the Galactic Alliance to purchase and renovate the stadium at a remarkably low cost. It was a move that had rather endeared him to some of the less-wealthy planets, who were taxed enough by the local governments whose decisions actually affected them. They certainly didn't need a heavier burden with a political body that only issued general policies and arbitrated interplanetary disputes.

The representatives were aligned by race, then by planet, then by political affiliation. Ten staryears ago, Robert had attempted to mix them at random in the hopes that it would inspire a bit more cooperation, but the attempt had failed so miserably that he conceded the effort in order to fight bigger battles. At the front were the Council, the most startling example of what could change in twenty staryears.

The Kiros no longer had a council seat, most notably. On that score, Kyle Forde had not been lying or exaggerating: the Kiros had lost a lot of ground and stability since the Second Battle of Mydor. More than six out of every ten planets within their sphere of influence were no longer able to meet the standards for Parliamentary representation, and with that loss of seats, they were unable to garner enough votes to defend their position within the Council. Most outside the Erani contended that with Celine and Robert, the Erani were still well-represented within the Council, even if the Kiros weren't convinced of that.

But even if the Kiros felt slighted, the Arcadians had suffered a greater setback. Used to two seats and the Premiership, the guilt by association to the crimes of Francis Tormay had cut their

Parliamentary seats – at least for the time being – and lost them both the position of Premier and one of the Council seats, as Arcadian representatives sought to distance themselves from Tormay's leadership by voting for anyone who wasn't Arcadian.

Which brought a Demodian and an Ubek to the Parliamentary Council.

Hendrick Knarsin had once led a secondary Diviner temple on one of the Demodian colony worlds they had shared with the Kiros. Other Diviners, including a man trusted by the Prophet Rumil, claimed he had a minor gift, and Robert had decided to take their word for it.

Even though Kiros influence had severely waned, the shared trust Hendrick had garnered with his planet's constituents was enough to get the remaining Kiros representation to prop him up into a nomination. Along with the Demodian votes and aforementioned Arcadians looking for any viable candidate that was not Arcadian, he was confirmed.

Robert personally thought Hendrick to be a bit of a weasel, using his supposed Diviner gifts to claim he had special insights into the nature of people and the galaxy, and that his words should thusly carry more weight. They had butted heads on a handful of occasions, and yet Robert acknowledged Hendrick to be a reasonably rational and level-headed person, whenever he could get over himself. He may have sought to pull a larger share than he and his supporters deserved, but *that* trait was hardly uncommon or unexpected among the Parliament.

The Ubek representative, however, was a bit surprising. Grodin Hamar of the Blueblood Caste had been selected by the people of Ub pretty much for the sole reason that he could kick the stuffing out of anyone on the planet, and the Pales, who were now the leading caste, felt it was for the best that he be somewhere other than the homeworld.

How Grodin garnered the votes necessary to win an appointment to the Council was something Robert was certain he would never figure out. His best guess was that the people who supported Grodin's nomination and secured the votes felt he was an unknown quantity that they could control, but if so, those people learned quickly that the dimwitted Ubek stereotype was anything but true. In fact, Grodin demonstrated a keen intellect and sharp wit, as well as a remarkably uncanny way of judging people's true intentions. He even surprised Celine on two separate occasions with his foresight and understanding of the situation in front of him.

Outside of his penchant to suggest settling disputes with an overwhelming display of force, Grodin was an honorable and stable personality that served the Council well. Normally those types didn't last in the Parliament, but Robert didn't think too many people would be willing to vote against him in any challenges for his seat, out of fear that he would learn who they were.

Finally, there was the sole remaining Arcadian, and the senior member of the Council, Ramses Ido. He had served in his seat for almost forty staryears, and was a man that Robert had come to respect for his experience and willingness to help Robert understand his role, the limitations he had, and just what to expect from the position. And, Annor bless his heart, *Rumil* liked him. To earn the endorsement of the Sixth Prophet was no small feat. It was likely because of his rationality, tenure, and simple affable nature, as well as a long history of disagreements on policy with Tormay, that he alone survived the veritable purge of the Council.

Of course, no one with that squeaky clean an image is so in real life. He had multiple affairs – leading to multiple wives – in his younger days, which did not reflect well on his personal behavior and would have provided considerable blackmail fodder, had they been discovered while he tried to keep an image of good moral standing. By the time those indiscretions finally came to light, he no longer cared about that image, and age had tempered his libido, so it wasn't an issue that played out much anymore except by old politicians who thought they could get to him with such tactics.

Ramses also played politics as well as they could be played, and had several connections with less than savory interests that he tried to keep sated. The marked difference that Robert could sense, however, was that Ramses felt them to be more a necessary evil, rather than an element he reveled associating with. When it was a matter of dire importance, Robert could trust Ramses to make the right

decision... which was more than he could say for a good three-quarters of the Parliament.

Along with Celine, they made for a reasonably effective Council with a broad range of backgrounds and input. Robert could have been left dealing with far worse: the issues he had to deal with were difficult enough without a troublesome Council.

A bell chimed three times, signifying the Call to Order. Unlike most planetary assemblies that would then be followed by some benediction or anthem, there were so many different faiths and creeds and anthems that the Galactic Parliament Assembly long ago decided to do away with all of it and get right to business.

Robert was announced by the Master of Ceremonies, who was Creator knew where, with a link to the speakers in the Assembly Hall. Ascending to the dais amid a respectful applause and taking his place at the podium, he called the Parliament to order.

He gave a momentary glance towards Celine, who on the surface was smiling quite proudly at the man she sometimes referred to as her “lump of clay.” Underneath, her thoughts were being closely guarded, not wanting to give Robert any clues as to how she felt he should proceed.

“The first order of business is one that apparently has to be decided by the Council,” the Premier began, his voice letting slip just the barest hint of disdain.

“It is a topic that I, in the purpose of succinctness, find beneath the Council, and not worth our time. So I am not going to have a debate from the Parliament on this score,” he continued, his voice becoming stern and uncompromising. “This is the proposal that the Council will vote on: Firstly, individual organizations and political bodies will determine what their official staryear designation will be, and no legal ramifications will be allowed against the aforementioned bodies and organizations for what designation they choose. However they wish to make that determination will be their business. As for official interplanetary documents and those accepted in Parliamentary business, either designation will be deemed as legal and acceptable as if they carried the After War/Before War designation.”

“If this proposal does not pass, the current standard will remain in place until the next Assembly, where there again will be no debate, and I will present another proposal to be voted on, however many times it takes, until the proposal is passed. I will not waste any more of the Council's time on this as is absolutely necessary. That is all. Make your votes, Council members.”

Robert was the first to make his, although technically his vote would not count unless the other four Council members were deadlocked. The results flashed to him on a screen mounted into the podium on the dais, and to the assembled representatives by a holographic display at the center of the Assembly Hall roughly forty Tacks above Robert's head. It was broadcast anonymously, but any member of the Parliament could quickly determine who made which votes by simply tabbing on their PCUs – or in Robert's case, the screen on the podium – to a pane that listed each voter's record.

Officially, the Council's tally was 3-1, with Celine being the only dissenting vote. He stared her down in annoyance, to which the disturbingly youthful Solarian woman responded with merely a wink and a teasing poke of her tongue.

It was a clever play, really. She likely made a discreet scan of the minds of the other council members, and once certain it would pass regardless of her vote, made hers in dissent. She could tease Robert by pretending she was against the vote, and keep the support of the more hardline Solarians by placing a dissenting opinion as matter of record.

She could run the entire damn galaxy if she wanted, and no one would have a chance. Not even him.

“The proposal has passed, and will be enacted upon the dismissal of the assembly,” Robert concluded, inwardly relieved that he was able to end this debacle with little time wasted. Perhaps there was always room for a moderate mind, but occasionally a firm stand was required to get things done. “Now, perhaps we can proceed to *legitimate* Council measures...”

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Robert had said on many an occasion, and not very secretly, that he hated the Galactic Parliament Assemblies. There was absolutely nothing that could be done in them that couldn't be done from the privacy of their offices in far more comfort and at much less cost.

He liked to think he kept himself in good condition, but over the last three or four staryears, standing for tenth-cycles on end made his knees ache horribly. He supposed it was a consequence of getting older.

He had agreed, if anything but to soothe the nerves of Operative Holis, to let himself be transported in the traditional manner of a hover vehicle back to the landing pad in the Arcadian-controlled city of Moor where his shuttle was in dock. It served as a soothing, relaxing ride, he had to admit... having decided he would parse the details of the Parliament minutes later.

It turned out to be a good thing too, as had he teleported himself, he likely wouldn't have felt a particular and distinct aura that could only belong to one person.

"Stop here for a moment," Robert ordered, following his senses towards a street cafe. He couldn't quite accurately place where she was from his position, but he would be able to narrow it down once he got closer. "Unlock the door. Holis, you're with me."

"Yes, Sir Premier," the Arcadian answered, his eyes narrowed warily with this unscheduled stop. He slipped out the rear driver's side door, and circled around the armored hover to open the passenger's side for Robert.

"Just stay behind me, Operative, and watch behind me. That's where I need help," the Premier explained. This would be good training for Holis, to get a better idea as to what was expected of him.

Robert bowed to the attendant at the gate of the cafe, who immediately recognized the Premier of the Galactic Parliament, nonetheless maintaining his composure admirably. "Sir Premier, it is an honor that you grace us with your presence. We can have a private table ready for you immediately."

"No need, sir," Robert answered with a refusing hand. "I am merely meeting someone who is already here."

"Very well then, Sir Premier," the attendant said with such a low bow that he about bumped his head on the stand in front of him. "Please, take your seat and a waiter or waitress will be with you promptly."

With a parting nod, Robert crossed the wicket gate, and into the open air dining area. He could now sense her presence quite keenly, but as his eyes drifted into her direction, he couldn't identify his quarry. Finally, in frustration, he issued a telepathic question. *Where are you?*

She didn't seem nearly as surprised as she should have. *I'm literally in front of you, two Tacks away.*

Robert's eyes bulged in recognition, as his gaze centered on the back of a slender Arcadian woman, with moderately long blond hair that draped a third of the way down her back. With a smile, he closed the distance, circled around the table to look into the eyes of the Sixth Prophet as she turned her head up towards him.

"I might have put on a few Humms since we last spoke in person, but I don't think I look *that* much different," Rumil said testily.

Robert scoffed at the suggestion. "I simply have not seen you with your hair down terribly often. You are not the slightest bit heavier than you were even in the prime of your youth. "

"So, I'm old now, am I?" Rumil's expression darkened.

Robert, however, refused to be intimidated by what he knew was posturing. Rumil was good, but she was hardly Celine. "Yes. We both are. It's a consequence of the passing of time, I'm afraid."

That managed to draw a laugh from Rumil, and she gestured to the seat across from her. "Sit, since you obviously came for a reason."

Robert complied, and within five demiticks he was approached by a waitress clad in brown

slacks and a light blue dress shirt. He ordered a soft alcohol, enough to remove the tension in his mind but not enough to inxoticate, then transferred a generous tip from his PCU to hers.

The Premier sighed wistfully as she walked away. Perhaps it was chauvinist of him, but he missed the days when female service workers could actually dress like women.

"I don't need to read your mind to know what you're thinking," Rumil grinned. "You're a married man with four children."

Robert was unapologetic. "Doesn't mean I can't admire from afar. I see you've refined your psionic talent still further. Has it really been that long since we last met face to face?"

"Just over a staryear," the blonde answered. "Not surprising, considering how busy you are and that I rarely leave Baramak nowadays."

"Clearly, as it seems you have little understanding of the target you would make to those with old grudges," Robert noted. "I'm surprised no one insisted on guarding you."

"They... don't exactly know I'm not who my travel ID says I am," Rumil answered. "Besides, I'm hardly helpless if push came to shove. I'm quite confident that I am more than safe."

For the briefest moment, Robert felt a psionic presence that nearly crippled his mind's senses. It wasn't coming from Rumil... it couldn't possibly have... but it certainly seemed focused around her. The Premier had some theories, but none that he wanted to express out loud, especially if he was right.

"Nonetheless, it might not be a bad idea to have the *appearance* of protection when you're out in public, even if you *can* hack every damn system in the galaxy to change your identity on a whim." At that point, Robert became truly aware of the prophet's presence on the station. She herself had just admitted she rarely left Baramak anymore. "Why *are* you here, exactly?"

"Jonathan Feroz is attending the Galactic Military Academy here. He's asked for my counsel and support in a... delicate... situation," Rumil answered.

"Delicate situation?" Robert repeated.

The blonde woman shrugged. "That's all he would say, and that he didn't want to have this meeting over the GalNet. He wanted to talk in person, so here I am." She then turned halfway about, obviously sensing the presence of said young man. "And there *he* is, and... I think I now understand the delicate situation in question."

Robert had only met Jonathan a handful of times, and then only in passing when he had visited Rumil's manor on Baramak. Regardless, it wasn't hard for Robert to figure out who he was; the Kiros man at the gate with a profound psionic aura, fitting of a member of the once prominent Feroz family.

It also wasn't hard for him to figure out Jonathan's "delicate situation" either. The auburn-haired and obviously Arcadian woman nervously hanging onto his arm was unusual, far beyond the fact that she was probably a handful of Tackels taller than Jonathan was.

Rumil looked back down at the drink in front of her, eyes focused on it like it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. "Julianne is *not* going to like this. Not one bit," she mumbled.

The Kiros had become more desperate to salvage their noble bloodlines than the Solarians had been, but while the Solarians had managed to stabilize their Knighthood through identifying and training women to pick up the slack, the Kiros had remained staunchly patriarchal in preserving their psionic talents. The small number of surviving talented men had created a feeding frenzy from families trying to marry their women off, followed in turn by chaos, fraud, and even the kidnapping of potential males. One of the many crimes against sentient life that had caused the Kiros to lose power and influence in the Galactic Parliament.

Jonathan Feroz had managed to stay out of that mess due to the protection and sanctuary provided by the Sixth Prophet, but it still would create a near riot if his brethren were to learn he was in a relationship with an Arcadian woman. There had been enough of an uproar that he had declined entering what remained of the Kiros Knighthood to attend a secular military academy.

Robert did not try to put on a bright face as the young couple approached Rumil's table. Jonathan was naturally surprised by the Premier's presence, until Rumil assured the young Kiros man,

“Premier Datson was just passing through. I did not request his presence.”

“I can leave if I would be too much of a bother,” Robert interjected.

Jonathan's voice had deepened considerably since the last time he had crossed paths with the older Solarian. “No, it's quite all right. I meant no disrespect, Sir Premier.”

With that acceptance, Robert stood and gave a slight bow to the woman with Jonathan. “May I have the honor of your name, young lady?”

The woman's eyes looked like they were about to pop out of her skull. Robert could sense that Jonathan had not told her exactly *who* they were supposed to meet at this dinner; the girl was just as flustered at the Premier's presence as she was the presence of Rumil. The auburn-haired woman gulped before managing to choke out, “Tal... Talia. Talia Gronie.”

Rumil was out of her seat, providing a voice and a hug as disarming as anyone could possibly deliver. “Oh, dear girl. Don't stammer or boggle. I'm just an Arcadian woman like yourself. And Robert here holds no airs either, I promise.”

“Please, you two, have a seat,” Robert added, surrendering his chair to Jonathan so Talia could sit on his left. Seeing that the poor girl was near catatonic, Robert felt he should show her some mercy. “I really should be going anyway. As it is, I have no doubt the rest of my security detail is starting to wonder where I am and why it's taking me so long.”

He gestured for Holis while finishing the remainder of his drink. Setting the empty glass down, he took his leave, pausing only momentarily at the gate to complete his purchase and take one last glance at the “delicate situation” Rumil was trying to address.

There were some things that no political power in the galaxy could fix.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyle Forde often found reason to drink, but his encounter with the Premier was one of those legitimate reasons that would drive any “normal” Solarian to alcohol. This was also one of the good reasons to drink alone. He returned to his hotel suite, left orders to refuse all visitors, then unlocked the bar to drown his sorrows.

The famed banker slouched into the cushions of the couch, pulling straight from the bottle... he was too melancholy to even stir the energy to get a glass.

Ever since the Second Battle of Mydor, those few who remembered how damn near perfect the old ways were had been fighting a losing battle with the “progressives,” who thought those ways were unfair to all the people that didn't matter.

Wasn't it Groel who taught that the layman and the commoner and the meager talent should remember their place and be submissive to those with power? Allowing *women* to train as Knights when they should be caring for the home? That would have been a dire crime during the proper times of Solarian culture.

Kyle had *earned* his standing with his family, even with his limited psionic potential. The Forde family had helped preserve the financial strength of the Knighthood for centuries. It was not something that should have been discarded so easily by those who weren't worthy of the noble blood. Robert Datson was supposed to have understood... he was a nobleman... like the Forde family, the Datson family was one of the eight highest Solarian Knighthood lines.

But it turned out that Datson too had been poisoned by the corruption of the Sixth Prophet and her lapdog, the once-Knight Commandant Timothy Honore. If Solarians couldn't even hold their staryears sacred, truly nothing could be preserved. All that was great of Solarian culture and society was doomed to die within twenty staryears.

“Now, now... you've fought the brave fight for so long, and you're going to quit *now*?”

Kyle nearly jumped out of his seat at the sound of the voice, whirling around to see a man standing in front of the decorative fireplace, his back to Kyle, hands linked behind him.

“I told the barrister that I was not to have any visitors!” Kyle demanded indignantly. “Who are you?”

“A kindred spirit,” His uninvited guest said. “One who also doesn't wish for the old way, the right way, to perish.”

If that had meant to disarm the banker, it failed. “*Who are you?*”

Finally, the visitor turned around, revealing a face that was not easily forgotten by anyone with a long memory, or familiar with those listed as Most Wanted by the Galactic Alliance.

Emmitt Francisca, the traitor of the Second Battle of Mydor.

“*You!*” Kyle screeched. “Leave at once before I am branded a traitor simply by being in your presence!”

Emmitt chuckled bitterly at the label. “Traitor? Is that what they're calling me now? If anything, the 'Sixth Prophet' and her rejection of everything that Solarian life is supposed to be about is the traitor, along with the mindless sheep who follow her. They branded me a pariah because I learned the truth about their scheme.”

Kyle's features softened as Emmitt's words hit on a suspicion he had since the decline of Solarian morals had begun. “What scheme?”

“This 'unedited' book of Bryan Honore's prophecy? Complete slander. It was all a sham created by Timothy Honore and his supporters... Robert Datson being one of them. They then murdered Timothy, along with the majority of the nobles of both sects, creating a power vacuum that those elements were more than willing to fill. I only survived because I finally put together the whole scheme just in time to escape.”

Kyle offered Emmitt the chair across from him, that the fallen Knight gladly took. “Who is all in on this circle of usurpers? Councilwoman Honore, perhaps?” Kyle queried.

Emmitt shrugged. “Hard to say. The list that I have is a short one. I find it hard to believe that Councilwoman Honore would have allowed for the murder of her only son, but...” He finished that thought with a shrug. “I just know that the conspiracy is vast, their resources are bountiful, and that they are now firmly entrenched not just in Solarian society, but the galaxy as a whole.”

That thought had also lingered in Kyle's head for some time. “I assume you are here to enlighten me of an alternative.”

“I am part of a resistance movement,” Emmitt explained with a nod. “Our goal is nothing short of an upheaval to remove the usurpers from power, and restore Solaria to its position of primacy within the galaxy.”

“And I take it you need me for financial backing.”

Emmitt made a finger gun point in confirmation. “I always knew you were a smart one, Forde. A lot smarter than the rest of your kin.” The fallen Knight then added, “I get that you're uncertain. Yes, if you were to get caught associating with me, your life and your wealth would effectively be forfeit. But I think you realize those things are forfeit already. To keep things as they are will be a slow bleed out. With me, you can make your own destiny, to go down fighting with the chance of success rather than a slow, assured destruction of everything that matters.”

Kyle regarded the offer presented to him carefully. Contrary to what more powerful members of his family might have said about him, you didn't succeed in money investment and management without that willingness. Kyle was more than willing to take risks, provided that the return would be worth the potential failure.

The “failure” in this case was severe capital punishment... but did he want to live in a galaxy that had brought everything he believed in down into dust? There were some things more important than money, even to a banker. The rightful dominance of his faith and people was one of those things.

“What do you need me to do?” Kyle asked, the question implying his acceptance of what Emmitt offered.

“Nothing right at this moment. But I will be in touch with directions as to what I need from

you,” the fallen Knight replied, standing up and moving towards the balcony. Emmitt paused before opening the door, quickly scanning to make sure no one in the vicinity would be able to detect his next move. “You are doing the right thing, Sir Forde... even if the blind cannot see it.”

Emmitt let the automatic door slide open, stepped out onto the lavish balcony, and teleported to parts unknown, leaving Kyle to assess this new development. He didn't have much hope as to Francisca's resistance movement, but at least he wasn't completely hopeless anymore.

Kyle regarded the bottle still in his hand, then set it down. He was inebriated enough.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emmitt had not teleported far... merely down to a secluded back alley at ground level. He had to be careful about where, when, and how long he used his psionic abilities as a fugitive. Conventional travel wasn't nearly as efficient or time-saving, but it was a necessary evil he had to subject himself to.

Fortunately, he wasn't alone in this struggle.

A covered hover with deep-tinted windows was waiting at the street side of the alley, the open door allowing him to slide right inside and minimize his time out in the open. The door then closed automatically, and the hover was on its way.

A mounted terminal and display waited on the armrest to his left, open to a text communications link, with one line already waiting for him.

> *Well?*

Emmitt grinned. His primary partner in this scheme was far too high strung in Emmitt's opinion. How was he able to function living in such a constant state of tension?

> ***Forde is on board. I'll have him funneling credits by the next cycle.***

> *Another one of your zealot friends. I did not agree to be overwhelmed by religious masses when we started this.*

> ***Oh, do be quiet. You need money to continue research into the construction of your grand army, don't you? And you have precious little resources left to tap. With the first generation of your army soon to be of age to release, this would be a hard time to have to quit, right? So it's either abandon your dreams, or you start accepting money from my “zealot friends.” Which is it going to be?***

There was a long silence on the other end of the communications link.

> *Fine. I'll play your game... for now.*

> ***I knew you'd see it my way.***

> *I'd recommend speaking to me with respect. No matter what you might think; psionics like you will soon be obsolete.*

Emmitt supposed it was fortunate that his partner couldn't hear his derisive laughter. It was an odd partnership, to be sure... as both of them held the other with open contempt. But desperation brought such relationships together. Right now, the enemy of Emmitt's enemies were his friends, and the same was true for the man on the other end.

> ***We shall see, won't we? Meanwhile, tell your gene cooks that their salaries will be paid after all. Wouldn't want them revolting on you at this critical juncture, right?***

There was no reply save the termination of the link. With a cocky grin, Emmitt looked up from the display, and asked, "How much longer to the starport?"

"Not long, but we have to keep our distance for the moment. The Premier was delayed in his departure, and we don't want him possibly sensing you. They were just given the clear to depart, so I wouldn't say any longer than another forty ticks."

"Understood," Emmitt grumped. As irritating as the delay was, taking out his frustration on his driver would accomplish nothing, other than engender bad blood he couldn't afford to stir. It was sad that he actually had to consider such feelings now... it was beneath him.

But such was the life of a fugitive from the law.