

Worlds Apart

There were times where Jonathan could almost forget he was nobility and the son of a famous martyred hero. Living and training at Glorindal Military Academy was definitely a blessing in that regard. In fact, his life had become almost blissfully middle-class as he went into his final staryear of study.

He pulled into the driveway in his used hover, as his psionics were still restricted by the base administration, and slid out of the vehicle, admiring the on-base housing that he had been granted. Most final staryear students made the transition from the dormitories to either base apartments or housing, so he wasn't exceptional on that score.

Though his choice of housemate had raised a few eyebrows.

At this point, it was no secret that he and Cadet Talia Gronie were in a meaningful relationship, even if it wasn't broadcast as common knowledge. The base administration might not have unequivocally approved, but they tolerated it. Their peers, after some teasing and pranks common with new couples, had somewhat surprisingly come to accept it. Time had clearly broken down the walls of uncertainty toward Jonathan, at least.

Jonathan still had no idea how he was going to address the topic with his mother... an inevitable confrontation that he was dreading. He was painfully aware about the pressure he was under to continue the noble lineage and protect the direct male bloodline of Julian Feroz... a bloodline that would never include Talia by any stretch of the imagination, especially by his mother's.

Julianne Feroz acted like she was personally responsible for the preservation of the bloodline. As early as his eighth staryear, she was introducing Jonathan to prospective mates, until Rumil put her foot down and made it quite clear those games were going to stop under her roof.

Jonathan also vaguely remembered being told about an arrangement to marry a girl from the Kandor family, a pact made by his father before he was even born, although that contract was effectively null and void once the collapse of the Kiros Knighthood began the downward spiral of their society. He couldn't even remember the name of the girl he had been betrothed to, or if she was even still alive. Nonetheless, technically, the Kandor family – or what was left of it – could probably walk up to him at any point and claim they were still betrothed.

Nonsense like that made Jonathan very receptive to the uncomplicated life he currently led; he was just another officer in training on Glorindal.

Talia's hover wasn't in the driveway, which Jonathan had expected. She was working hard to meet the beyond-exemplary standard for sharpshooting, and was spending extra time at the firing range and simulators as a result. He didn't expect her back until the latter half of the Late Ten.

There were two letters in his mailbox to the right of his door, both of them hard copies of messages he had already received to his PCU earlier that cycle – that same Arcadian tendency to have everything sent twice. He tucked them under his arm, then moved to disable the security lock on his door... only to discover it was already disabled.

Anticipating another prank, Jonathan tentatively opened the door, stepping back as it slid open. When nothing happened, he gingerly advanced, eyes darting back and forth for anything out of place.

“About time you got here. I've been waiting all morning,” a voice called from the dining room, causing Jonathan to freeze.

He knew that voice well, and he found himself wishing it could have been anyone else. He stepped out of the entry and into the doorway of the dining room, as his every muscle groaned in dismay.

“Is this the hovel you are calling home?” grumbled Julianne Feroz, clearly not impressed with Jonathan's residence. “No wonder you haven't invited me over. I would be ashamed of living here myself.”

Julianne's attendant, Fiona Arthur, was behind the noblewoman, much more pleasant in her

greeting. "It is good to see you well, Master Feroz."

Jonathan regarded Fiona with a nod, and then demanded, "How did you two get in here? This is a *military installation!*"

Julianne's eyes narrowed, and her chin jutted out as she stared up at her son. "I informed the base I was arriving, and they allowed me entry into your 'house,' as they called it, to wait for you. You should have been informed of my arrival."

Jonathan's hand darted into his satchel to retrieve his PCU, remembering that he had turned it off to take an exam after mid-cycle mess, and had forgotten to turn it back on while on his other errands. Activating it, he found that he had indeed received two messages from the base customs officer: that his mother had arrived, and that the base had granted her entry into his home when he did not respond to the first message.

"What are you doing here?" Jonathan asked in exasperation.

Julianne, of course, was indignant. "When did it become a crime for a mother to visit her son? You are the only family I have left, and I haven't seen you since the Line of the Prophets celebration. That was *seventeen ten-cycles ago!*"

"I've been busy," Jonathan offered, not entirely lying. "This is my final staryear, and I have to make sure I make the standard I'm targeting."

"And that excuses not even talking to me unless I call you?" Julianne rebuked.

To be fair, Jonathan was rather avoiding his mother, mostly to avoid conversations like these where she chastised his every decision; like his decision to have a serious relationship with an Arcadian woman...

Bannor take it all.

"Hey, mother, hold that thought. I just remember I have a very important communication to make." When Jonathan saw his mother start to protest, he said, "No, I mean *really* important. I forgot about it entirely when I saw you. I promise, I'll be right back and you can keep berating me."

"I wasn't berating you!" Julianne tried to reply, growling in frustration as Jonathan ducked around the corner back into the entry before she could finish her thought.

Jonathan couldn't hit the quick connect fast enough once he was out of earshot. "Damn it, Talia, please for the love of the Creator don't have your PCU comm off."

Fortunately, she didn't. "Hello, honey," Talia answered the comm over the sound of her hover coming to a stop.

Jonathan wasted no time getting to the heart of the matter. "Beautiful, is there anywhere you can stay tonight?"

"Why?" she said suspiciously. "What is going on? I can practically hear you sweating."

"I can't say... too close. Just... don't come home, whatever you do."

There was silence on Talia's end before an admission. "Well, that's going to be a bit of a problem."

Jonathan didn't even have the time to ask why before Fiona piped up from the dining room. "Were you expecting company, Master Jonathan?"

Demiticks later, the front door opened, and Talia stuck halfway inside nervously. "I left the firing range early. Thought I'd surprise you. What's going on?"

And then it was too late. Julianne stuck her head around the corner, her eyes narrowing into suspicious slits. "Jonathan, who is this woman?"

Jonathan's every muscle groaned in defeat. This was *not* how he planned to broach this topic. To be honest, he hadn't planned to broach the topic at all until probably ten seconds before the wedding. "Mother, this is Talia Gronie. Talia, this is my mother, Julianne Feroz."

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Jonathan had to admit that he had expected worse. He had expected his mother to jump to conclusions, however correct they might be, snarling and throwing a massive fit while trying to choke Talia with her mind. Not necessarily with psionics – her spite and rage could have been enough.

The eerie silence that persisted as they sat around the dark finished wood table in the dining room, with Julianne staring them both down in unspoken interrogation, wasn't much better. But at least this way he hadn't had to physically restrain his mother.

Yet.

Finally, Julianne spoke; a drawling question dripping with suspicion and cold dismissal. “So, Talia, I take it you are a cadet as well.”

“Y... yes, ma'am,” Talia answered, stumbling over her own tongue in the process.

At her unknowing insult, Jonathan cringed and Julianne glared. “You will address me as 'my lady,' young woman. 'Madam...’” Julianne added, putting heavy stress on the “d,” “...is suitable, but still not terribly proper considering whom you are addressing.”

The blood drained out of Talia's face, and she stammered in apology, “I... I'm... yes. Of course... my lady.”

“No manners at all,” Julianne grumbled in blatant disapproval. “And Arcadian at that. I'm disappointed, Jonathan.”

Jonathan went with the only possible route that might not result in him getting disowned, nor Talia killed by a rampaging Kiro's noblewoman. “Talia and I aren't dating, mother,” he said. It was a carefully worded half-truth... the couple had moved long past that particular phase in the relationship. “We happen to have many of the same classes, similar percentiles, and it seemed easier to share the costs of living here.”

It was fortunate that Julianne had decided not to refine her psionic talents when the opportunity had been offered to her, because Talia would not have put up much of a fight to resist any mind-reading. In fact, Talia wasn't even putting up convincing body language. “Is that right, young woman?”

Julianne's refusal to use Talia's name was a blatant attempt at intimidation, clearly telling Talia how little Julianne thought of her; a lesser being not even worth referring to as an individual. Talia, while a capable soldier and soon to be officer, really was not suited to handling a Kiro's noblewoman. “Y... yes. We... aren't... doing anything like that.”

That probably wouldn't have convinced a comatose deaf woman, much less Jonathan's mother. “Just friends, is it?”

“Yes!” Jonathan and Talia replied in unison.

“Jonathan, may I speak with you?” Julianne requested in a tone of voice that did not suggest a request. “Fiona, keep the young woman company while I remind my son of what is expected of him.”

Julianne stood, and pointed towards the far hall leading to the bedrooms. Jonathan complied, albeit reluctantly, following his mother to the relative seclusion of the hall. Nonetheless, they kept their voices down to avoid making too much of a scene.

“You don't expect me to believe that you and Talia live together and are just friends, do you?” she asked knowingly.

“Mother! Her bedroom is right there!” he hissed, gesturing behind her. This also was true, since Talia had taken her own bedroom when they moved into the house. Occasionally, she still used it... rarely... barely ever.

Julianne refused to be placated. “That means absolutely nothing, and you know it. Jonathan, I'm really not concerned who you dally with before you find a proper Kiro's girl to marry and have children with. Just be careful. You know what Fiona has had to go through. I'd think you'd know better than to subject that on someone else.”

While rather haughtily and condescendingly, Julianne made a point. Half-breeds were a mess of moral and scientific problems all thrown into one. The rare times that two different species managed

to successfully have offspring, it was several ten-cycles and sometimes millions of credits' worth of corrective genetic procedures just for the child to live past its fourth staryear. No procedure could correct the inherent sterility of the child however, or the immediate scorn it often earned from both parent species.

This was much worse among half-breed Erani. Fiona had lived to adulthood only by her father and his family becoming slaves to the Feroz name, otherwise hardcore conservative elements would have had her and her parents slaughtered in the name of "racial purity." Mercifully, Fiona had never shown even the barest hint of psionic ability... otherwise not even his family's protection would have saved her.

"Father was a half-breed. Funny how that didn't bother anyone," Jonathan grumbled, even as he knew the comparison was not apt at all.

The arrival of the Se-Lan survivors led to the discovery that the genome between the Se-Lan and the Erani was identical. The cosmetic differences between the two people were akin to the variances between different breeds of animal than a different species. The Erani were the end result of manipulating the Se-Lan genome, as opposed to the later seeded races which used the Se-Lan genetics as a base template, but were distinctly different species with different chromosome counts and genetic markers.

This explained why Justin Feroz had been a perfectly fertile male who produced offspring with no disastrous genetic flaws, unlike the rare circumstances that a half-breed managed to have viable reproductive material.

Besides, no one would have known of Justin's lineage even if he had been a true half-breed. Not that it particularly changed Jonathan's point. His father would have been accepted just fine because the Se-Lan were a "pure" race, unlike the "lesser beings" elsewhere in the galaxy.

Julianne did not catch the point, or at least not the point Jonathan was trying to make. "Do *not* slander your father or his line. I will *not* tolerate it. This is not the same no matter how much you wish it was."

Jonathan finally put his foot down... somewhat. "Again, I am not intimate with Talia. And even if I was, that is frankly none of your business, and especially none of the Kiros' business. I am here *because* I am tired of what is expected of me. I will pursue my life as I see fit, and if that means I am sleeping with an Arcadian, a Solarian, a Demodian, an Ubek, a Ferian... hell, I don't care if I decide to have sex with a *Ruma*... that will be my choice and no one else's. Am I clear on this?"

Julianne often tried to encourage Jonathan to take a strong stand and follow his belief wherever that would lead him, regardless of criticism. It was a sign of the capable leader he needed to be, both for the command position he would inevitably find waiting for him, and for the Kiros themselves.

Even if she might not like the stands he took, she could not rightfully demand him to stand up and be accountable while also following her whims. As would be expected of a true Kiros noblewoman, she stood down from the authority of the alpha male of the family. "Understood."

That still didn't mean she believed his denials for one demitick, however.

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Talia honestly knew very little about Kiros customs, but she doubted that this was how they kept people company. Fiona hadn't addressed Talia since she walked in the door, and now she was left looking over her shoulder toward where Jonathan and his mother were talking in hushed tones.

She knew a bit about Fiona, the attendant to Jonathan's family, at least what Jonathan had told her. Talia expected Fiona to be a compassionate, understanding person. No doubt Fiona was concerned about the man that she had helped raise since birth.

"You do understand why Lady Feroz behaves in such a fashion? Why she is so suspicious and protective of her son?" the Kiros-Demodian woman said, finally breaking the silence.

Talia shrugged. "Jonathan really doesn't talk about the pressure his family name puts on him. I think he'd rather pretend they aren't there. I know that the Kiros are going through some rough times, and I guess I know about the general details, but that's all stuff from the GalNet rather from Jonathan himself."

"Jonathan is expected to do great things, and bring a stable central family to the Knighthood of the Kiros. He is the greatest hope for the return of a normal life to the entire sect. Julianne is carrying more than the burden of raising a son, she's carrying the burden of guiding the future of Kiros."

"And what if that's not the life he wants to lead?" Talia argued. "That doesn't matter?"

Fiona smiled wanly, and shook her head. "I don't expect you to understand the differences between our cultures. Jonathan was born with this responsibility, it is not something he can choose to dismiss. It wouldn't be right for the people who are relying on him."

"How can you expect...? He's one man! And you're burdening him with the stability of an entire *race*!"

"Even when the royal line was strong, it was the Knighthoods that were the foundation of Kiros society. Now, with the monarchy in a deadlock of succession, the noble lines are looked to even more for a guiding presence. Even if Jonathan was to live without distinction, his mere presence in Kiros society would be calming."

Finally, Julianne rescued Talia from Fiona's lecture. "That is enough, Fiona. Jonathan has informed me that our concerns are noted, but are unnecessary. We will respect his wishes on that score."

Fiona stood swiftly, betraying her somewhat rotund shape, bowing respectfully. "Of course, my lady. My pardons, Master Feroz."

Jonathan was much quicker to mollify Fiona than he was his mother. The attendant had always been more approachable. "It's alright, Fiona. I know you both are only doing what you think best. With all this nonsense set aside, how about we make good on your visit and catch up? I know I haven't spoken to anyone at home in a long time."

Talia had initially wanted to make herself scarce when it was resolved that there would be family time, but Julianne had insisted she stay, even as they left the base for evening meal, then returned home for a night cap. It was almost 9.00 in the Late Ten when Julianne and Fiona finally made their leave, and even then only because Jonathan informed them that both he and Talia were expected to fall in at 3.25 ET the following cycle.

It was only when Jonathan watched the hover pull away towards the security gate that he let himself relax. Talia, on the other hand, seemed much more at ease. "When your mother isn't trying to be overbearing, she's actually a very nice woman."

"Oh please," Jonathan groaned. "She was spying you down the entire time, hoping to get you to relax, off your guard, and reveal something scandalous. It's all part of the game she likes to play."

"You think so?"

"I *know* so. That's how my mother is. She thinks she's real clever."

Talia leaned into him, smiling as his arms wrapped around her. She kissed him playfully on the nose, and said, "How about I give you something to take your mind off your mother?"

Jonathan smiled, but gave her a gentle nudge away. "As appealing as the idea might sound, we do have morning call at 3.25 ET. We really should just try to get some sleep for tomorrow. I know you have some final simulations to run."

"Don't remind me," Talia groaned. "I'm expected to team lead. I'm not looking forward to it." Talia was a capable commander when she had to be, but she really didn't like being the one at the top of the command structure.

Jonathan kissed her forehead. "You'll do exceptionally, like you always do. And while we really can't afford to be fooling around, I wouldn't object to you wearing that lovely red nightgown tonight."

She rolled her eyes. She almost regretted buying the thing. It was so thin and nigh transparent that she might as well not even be wearing it. "I thought you wanted to sleep."

"You don't think I can restrain myself?"

"No," Talia answered flatly, before the smile returned to her face. "But I will do as you request, *if* you promise to not be a perfectly good boy."

"Yes, ma'am," Jonathan answered with a smile and salute, watching intently as Talia sashayed to their bedroom, then following when she beckoned with a welcoming finger.

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The couple didn't get a full night's sleep, but fatigue would prove only the second biggest problem that would come to fruition the following morning.

Being late for fall-in was never a good idea for final-staryear cadets, which was why Talia's ever increasing panic was fully warranted. "I can't find my PCU. Do you remember where I left it?" she asked as Jonathan stepped out of the washroom, his uniform jacket half-buttoned.

He swallowed his dental rinse, and started thinking about where he might have seen it. "Weren't you and my mother chumming it up comparing your units last night? You might have left it on the living room center table."

A single clap was followed Talia's happy chirp of, "Thank you!" She scrambled over to the living room, squealed in delight, then the cheer turned dour. "Damn it!"

Jonathan had caught up to his lover to check up on her when he heard her cry of dismay. "What's the matter?"

Talia was holding a PCU, but it wasn't hers. "This is your mother's unit. She must have left it here."

"She might have taken yours by mistake," Jonathan replied. "You both have very similar models."

Talia stamped her foot. "That doesn't help me right now! Your mother is half the galaxy away!"

Jonathan gave Talia a swift hug and a kiss on the cheek. "If she has your PCU, let me assure you that she has the means to return it within ticks if necessary. Let me give Fiona a call quickly, and we'll get to the bottom of this, okay?"

Talia permitted herself be mollified, rather than have any real confidence that her cycle and future career wasn't already ruined. She nodded slowly, and with one more comforting kiss, Jonathan dashed into the bedroom, grabbed his PCU, returned to the living room and opened the communications link.

Fiona answered a bit too quickly for Jonathan's sense of reason. Her opening even suggested that she had been anticipating the call. "Master Jonathan. My lady told me to be expecting your communication. One moment, and I will give this to her."

Red warning flags started flashing all about within Jonathan's brain as within ten demiticks, his mother had assumed her place at the other end of the communication link. "Good morning, my dear. I believe it's 'morning' for you, isn't it?"

"Yes, mother," Jonathan droned. He did not particularly like her triumphant tone, but had little time to wonder why she seemed so smug. Might as well get right to the point. "Talia and I think you might have taken Talia's PCU by mistake last night. If you have, it's rather important that she get it back, and very quickly."

Julianne's reply was smug and confident. "Jonathan, dear. Talia's PCU is underneath the blankets of her bed. Had she slept there last night, she would have found it."

Jonathan cringed, and Talia blushed bright red, quickly dashing to her bedroom to confirm Julianne's claim. She emerged five demiticks later, still bright red and brandishing said PCU. When

had his mother the opportunity to make that sort of bait and switch?

Then he remembered Julianne never acted alone. Fiona had taken what Jonathan had assumed was his mother's PCU just before going to the washroom to relieve herself. With Talia's room the next door on the left, it wouldn't have been difficult to slip inside and plant the evidence.

And since neither Talia or Jonathan went in that room at any point last night, neither of them would have noticed anything amiss.

"Now, is there something you want to tell me?" Julianne teased, her voice dripping with disapproval.

"I'm sending your PCU back to you by general post," Jonathan grumbled. "We'll talk later, but both Talia and I have to make morning fall-in." He ended the communication, and with defeat said to Talia, "What did I tell you? She is *always* playing games."

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His mother had not pressed the issue beyond the argument they had the following evening. Jonathan made it perfectly clear that Talia was not some dalliance or a toy he was playing with, but a serious relationship he had every intent of pursuing as far as they decided to take it, and that he was not going to tolerate his mother's antics on that score.

Seven cycles passed without even a peep from his mother, or much of any conversation from *anyone* back home. Rumil made a brief communication to ask why Julianne had been so dour recently, but Jonathan had respectfully told her that it was an issue between himself and his mother, and not to interfere. It seemed that Jonathan had managed to assert his will on the issue: his mother could grump and brood over it, but the decision had been made. Or so he had thought.

Perhaps his mother was put in her place, but there were several other elements that felt they had a vested interest in Jonathan's future, and they weren't so easily dissuaded.

Jonathan had just finished the pre-exam for his first class when his PCU buzzed with an incoming communication. Figuring it was a call from Talia, he was instead surprised to discover it was from Base Patrol. Confounded as to why they would be calling him, he immediately asked upon answering, "Is there something I can do for you, Sergeant?"

"Cadet Feroz?" the woman on the other end asked. "There has been an incident at your residence. We need you to report and identify any damages and potential losses."

"Damages? What happened?"

The sergeant looked down, sorting through the data on her desk. "At 9.37 ET, there was an unauthorized base entry. Psionic detectors picked up significant activity focused on your residence. Upon BP's arrival, your residence was found with significant damage and vandalism. We have yet to be able to reach Cadet Gronie, but if you could report and help begin the loss analysis, it would be appreciated."

"There goes my mid-cycle mess," Jonathan mumbled, before saying, "I will be as prompt as possible, Sergeant."

"Thank you, cadet. Officer Keddins is the investigator in charge. Report to him once you arrive. I have been informed you are permitted to use psionic teleportation for your transit. Inform us as you are about to teleport so that we can identify your activity on the detection grid."

"Understood, Sergeant," Jonathan complied, and terminated the connection.

That told Jonathan that whatever had happened, it was serious; serious enough that the base police and administration agreed they needed him to report *immediately*. His mind racing as to what possibly could have happened, he nodded in parting to the professor at the other side of the classroom, and moved out of the building as quickly as decorum allowed. Delivering a quick text message to BP that he was prepared for teleport, he got confirmation demiticks later, and flashed back home.

He was greeted at the end of the driveway by a uniformed BP officer and a plainclothes officer.

The casually dressed man identified himself as Officer Hiro Keddins, likely called to duty on an off-cycle. “Cadet Feroz, I am a member of the Hate Crimes Unit of the Moor Peacekeeper Force.”

“Hate Crimes Unit?” Jonathan repeated. “Why is a civilian peacekeeper investigating on a military base?”

“Come around back, and you'll see why, Cadet,” Hiro answered, gesturing with an arm for Jonathan to follow him around to the far side of the house.

The image that greeted him was the vandalism that he had been told to expect. Jonathan hadn't been sure just what he had been anticipating, but it certainly wasn't what he saw now.

The windows had been smashed out of Talia's bedroom, typical for vandals. The red paint scrawling racial slurs and death threats onto the white exterior fiberwall were considerably more extreme.

“Piddin filth,” one message said. Another had a crude stick figure of an Arcadian woman dismembered with the caption, “Piddins die when taking pure seed.” Yet another had an image of a grave and “A dead piddin is a good piddin.”

The term “piddin” was a derogatory slur created by the Erani after first contact with the Arcadian people, supposedly their interpretation of the old Arcadian tongue for “hello.” In reality, there's little evidence as to how the slur originated – *no* Arcadian greeting resembles that word either in text or phonetically – only that that it is meant to be very derogatory and insulting.

“Explains the Hate Crimes Unit,” Jonathan agreed, trying very, very hard not to be cynical as to how the unit would respond if they were aware of Talia's professed faith. “Any suspects?”

“Except that they are Erani?” Hiro replied. “Not yet. They 'ported in, scrawled their message, and 'ported out just as Base Patrol responded to the invasion.”

“This is a lot of work to do in a matter of four ticks,” Jonathan replied. “Even as rough as this scrawl is... the fact that they were teleporting in and out tells me this was the act of some reasonably talented psionics, possibly or most likely of an Erani Knighthood.”

“The Solarians have a Knighthood training academy in Yaral,” Hiro suggested, “but it will be tough getting that information from them.”

“I... have connections that can get that information, Officer. Leave me your contact code, and I can have it sent to your PCU by the end of the cycle. Nonetheless, I strongly doubt that Solarian Knight Initiates are responsible. While the bridges between the two sects have been mended somewhat, they still wouldn't be terribly concerned with the Feroz bloodline, which is what these threats are no doubt about.”

“You think we should be focusing our attention on Kiros Knights or prospects? Think you can get that information on possible subjects we can match with arrival logs?”

Jonathan wasn't nearly as confident about that. “Maybe. The Kiros records on psionics haven't been nearly as dutiful. I've been told a lot of talented people have been going unregistered, even among the most prominent families. I'll help you however I can, but I can't promise any list will be even remotely close to complete.”

“Thank you, Cadet Feroz. I know this is probably tough to accept coming from your own kind.”

“Not tough at all for me. I know quite well how petty the Kiros can get. I'm worried about Cadet Gronie. Is there any way we can cover this up before she sees it?”

That suggestion likely would have been impossible, even if it hadn't been too late. “Jonathan! I heard something happened! What did they...”

Her question died off in a distressed gasp, and Jonathan rushed to Talia, pulling her into a hug and pushing her head into his shoulder as she fought back a sob of horror. “Hey, it's alright, no one's hurt.”

“Who did this?” Talia asked, showing her military composure by refusing to blather like a damsel in distress, and pushing herself away from Jonathan's efforts to console her.

“We don't know yet, but we're working on every lead we can,” Hiro interjected.

The BP officer then added, “I've been informed that Admiral Jancine has authorized that Cadet Feroz personally escort Cadet Gronie until the investigation and apprehension has been deemed completed. The academy will accommodate both of your exams and final simulations as much as possible.”

Jonathan nodded, understanding why such orders were given. While the Arcadian academy had technology that could detect psionic usage, they had few tangible defenses against such future invasions, and they could not assume that whoever was responsible would settle with mere threats. Having Jonathan nearby at all times was the best defense they readily had.

The BP officer continued, “We can also request security from the Yaral military once any of them have been removed from suspicion. In the meantime, the base is securing alternate housing for the both of you.”

“Thank you, Officer... and Officer...” Jonathan stumbled, as they both carried the same title but from two different sectors. “Come on, Tal. I haven't had my mid-cycle meal yet, and I doubt you have either.”

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An apartment on base had been leased out to Jonathan and Talia, and while it was rather close quarters, they were assured it would be as short-term a solution as possible. It was also where, within two cycles, any hopes that the vandalism would be an isolated incident was dashed.

Talia had emerged from the shower, still drying her hair, when her attempt to discuss the quality of her cleaning was cut off before she could even say a word, with Jonathan throwing up a silencing finger. She followed his attention to the distressingly small GalNet projection – having to adjust the hologram's size to fit comfortably within the small confines of the living area – and immediately her hands flew to her mouth in shock.

Talia recognized that area, even from the aerial view provided. She visited that area one cycle every ten for going on three staryears, particularly the building that was now mostly rubble, save for one tenuously standing west wall and part of the south.

“Again, these are images from the scene of a horrific attack on the Community Activities Center at the corner of 40th North and 7th East here in Moor,” the anchorman narrated grimly. “It is suspected that the blast originated in the basement level of the building, near the northeast corner, bringing down the supporting columns.”

Neither Talia or Jonathan needed to hear the speculation that came afterward by the “expert panel.” It didn't seem a likely coincidence that the blast occurred right where the First Joint Faith of the Creator in Moor held its services.

It became even less likely ten ticks later, when Jonathan got a communications request from Officer Hiro Keddins of the Moor Peacekeeper Force. “Good evening, Officer. I get the sinking feeling I already know why you're calling.”

“Wouldn't take mind-reading for that. Can you and Cadet Gronie meet me at the MPF Main Station? It's on 515 North-West. The station bailiff will escort you once you arrive. Psionic travel is recommended if possible.”

“Understood, Officer. We will be there promptly,” Johnathan answered, taking Talia's hand and giving it a squeeze. “I assume you heard all that?”

She nodded, even accepting the idea of being teleported to their destination. As much as she really did not like the form of travel – she was barely able to keep her composure during foldspace in a spacecraft – she found it preferable to conventional travel after the villains who defaced her home had struck again.

The next few ticks felt like a blur to Talia, probably because she had her eyes closed for much

of it. Even if it didn't help her discomfort at the teleportation, she found herself doing it anyway. For Jonathan however, everything seemed to flow in slow motion.

Even the teleportation itself, which didn't even take a fraction of a fraction of a demitick, felt like a hundred times that. He barely understood the bailiff at the front desk, and only comprehended the order to follow him to Officer Keddins by context. Everything moved at half speed while his mind tried to process why and how these people could have gotten such personal information about himself and Talia.

Time only returned to normal when Hiro stood up and ushered them into his office, garnering Jonathan's full, undivided attention. As he sat, he tapped the corner of a typed note on the desk. "As I'm sure you're aware, the CAC building was bombed this cycle. I get the feeling you both suspect that the attack was tied to the two of you. You're right. This was intercepted by your base security sent to you early in the Late Ten, addressed to you, Cadet Feroz."

At that point, Hiro handed over the note he had been playing with. Before reading the contents, Jonathan asked, "The people responsible sent this *before* the attack?"

"It would seem that way. Base Patrol worked with us all they could, but it was hard pinning down the location of a service that isn't officially on any planner with any official meeting time. When we called the CAC a tenth-cycle before the bombing, they denied any such service was taking place within their grounds."

Jonathan fought back the snarky comment that the First Joint Faith of the Creator service kept their gatherings secret because of the attitude of the Arcadian-dominated city. It wasn't a battle that needed to be fought at that time, especially towards someone genuinely trying to help. Instead, he turned to the message, and its chilling contents. Rather than handwritten, it was typed and then printed, making it more difficult to trace the author.

*We know where you and the piddin live, against the honor of your lawfully betrothed.
We know where you and the piddin sleep, souring your seed in your sinful behavior.
We know where you and the piddin pray, mocking the divine with your heresy.
We know your friends. We know your enemies. We know your favorite GalNet channels.
We even know when and where you had your last meal.
You can not fight us. You cannot win against us. For we are anonymous and we are many.
We also will not hesitate to end your life and the stain against our pure race unless you cease your sin with the piddin filth.
This is your final warning. Next time, we come after you and the piddin.*

Jonathan initially didn't even want Talia to read it, but relented when she rather silently insisted on him to stop being so chauvinistically honorable, and that she was capable of being aware of the dire nature of the threat.

In other words, she stomped on his foot after he ignored her attempts to take the note. Hard.

Talia absorbed the note's contents, and bravely kept a level face as she handed it back to Hiro, even if her hand trembled slightly and her eyes misted over. "Are there any leads yet?" she nonetheless asked without even a waver to her voice.

"Not many. As Cadet Feroz promised, the Yaral Knighthood Academy released the dossiers of what they claimed was their entire staff and Initiates. A sizable amount of the information was tagged as classified, but they have been cooperative and we've eliminated most of them as suspects, and the rest are merely waiting for interviews or for their alibis to be confirmed."

"Meanwhile, forensic teams analyzed the vandalism, and judging from the 'handwriting' styles involved, that we are looking for at least ten perpetrators, perhaps even more. This, of course, has us looking for much stronger protection for the both of you. Yaral is dragging their feet on offering assistance, but we're negotiating still."

Jonathan finally cut in. "You're looking for someone of the Kandor family. At least one of them, probably more, and likely the ringleader."

Hiro quickly jotted down the family name. "That could help considerably. As you had expected, information from Kiros was frequently incomplete or even incorrect entirely. This will narrow down our search. Care to tell me where this suspicion stirs?"

"The first line," Jonathan answered. "Before I was born, my father made an arrangement with a friend of his in the Kandor family: my father's first son would marry his first daughter. Unfortunately, I don't remember any of the names involved, not even the girl I was supposed to marry. I don't even think I ever met her."

"Would your mother know?" Talia asked.

Jonathan blanched, and nervously swallowed a breath. "Maybe. I can ask her and find out." Left unsaid was Jonathan's deep-seated suspicion that his mother might be involved in this mayhem. This entire debacle began within a ten-cycle after his mother's visit. He didn't want to even entertain the idea that perhaps she had been the one to start it, or even *mastermind* it... but the suspicion was still there nevertheless.

Hiro looked like he wanted to say something about Jonathan's obvious discomfort at Talia's question, but decided against it for now. "I suppose we've scared you two enough. Let me know if your mother has anything to say, will you?"

"Absolutely. Come on Tal, let's go home and try to live something resembling a normal life." Not even he bought the lie. "Normal" was a word that might as well have been in a foreign language at that point.

The return to the apartment indeed led to a communication, but not to his mother. This was something that needed the attention of a considerably more important figure. "I'm going to make that call. I'll be right outside, okay?" he said to Talia, who was in the process of getting ready for another shower. Some people ate when stressed. Some found solace in the embrace of alcohol. Talia washed herself.

"Don't be too long," she answered as water cascaded onto the tiled stall.

Jonathan stepped into the hall, and closed the door behind him. Checking the comm code, he placed the call, and hoped that she would answer promptly.

Fortunately, she did before Jonathan lost his nerve. "Jonathan, well isn't this a surprise. Your mother has been grumbling about you for the last ten-cycle, but won't tell me what is going on. Is this why you're calling?"

"Is there any way you can stop by Glorindal for a couple cycles?" Jonathan asked, almost ashamed at how timid he sounded. "I have a bit of a... delicate situation that I could really use your counsel on. It's something I really don't want to talk about over the GalNet."

* * * * *

Jonathan had expected Rumil to be there for the evening meal. After all, Rumil had messaged him with the time and the place. He had *not* been expecting the Premier of the Galactic Alliance to be with her.

Talia hadn't been expecting *either* public figure, Jonathan merely telling her that they were going to meet a friend that had some influence in the religious sects, and might be able to help them deal with the extremists targeting them.

"Your 'friend' is the *Sixth Prophet*?" Talia accused, even as her eyes narrowed to dots, transfixed on the sight at the table they were approaching. She'd have glared at him if she weren't bordering on catatonic. "And is that...?"

"Premier Robert Datson. He and Rumil have a somewhat passing acquaintance. I promise, I did not invite him."

The Premier excused himself fairly quickly after introductions were made, which was probably a good thing, as Talia was so overcome by the celebrity presence that she could barely squeak out her name. Not that the two of them with Rumil was all that much better.

“So, this is your 'delicate situation,' I am guessing?” Rumil queried after the young couple settled down and placed their order.

Talia then erupted into speech, as though every word she had struggled to say before was now coming out all at once. “Madam Prophet, I am so sorry that Jonathan drug you into this. Had I even an inkling that he was meaning to drag someone as important as you into our troubles, I would have put a stop to it immediately. You must have many, many more important duties to attend to than the trials of a young couple of cadets. We will let you get to them. Come on Jonathan, we have bothered the Prophet enough.”

Talia had actually begun to stand when Rumil finally got a word in edgewise. “It's not often I have an Arcadian refer to me with such titles,” the blond woman remarked.

Jonathan had started to push Talia back into her seat as he said, “Talia is a member of the Joint Faith Temple. They... had... a service they held here in Moor. We would attend it whenever time and studies allowed.”

“I see. Well, that's... good that the word... is spreading, I suppose,” Rumil said warily, and Jonathan couldn't help but chuckle at the prophet's discomfort at the idea. “Well, Miss Gronie, let me assure you that I let others handle the 'important duties' of Temple management, dogma, and faith, so it is no trouble on my account to be here.” She then caught on a tense that Jonathan had used earlier. “Now, what do you mean the First Joint Temple *had* a service here?”

“The building that the service took place in was bombed damn near out of existence,” Jonathan explained. “By the same people that defaced Talia and my home.”

Jonathan passed across his PCU, with images and text of the vandalism and threats that had been given. Rumil remained impassive as she examined the evidence, if only for the fact that she knew intimately the hatred capable within sentient beings. It still depressed her that two people so young would be exposed to it in such a terrible manner.

“We were hoping, considering that these people are most likely remnants of the Kiros Knighthood, that there was something you could do to dissuade them from escalating this madness.”

“Because they are most assuredly followers of the Kiros Temple,” Rumil said with a sigh. She hated what was about to pass her lips. “Unfortunately, the Kiros Temple barely recognizes my status as a prophet at all, much less gives much heed to what I have to say. I can issue a reprimand to the leaders of the temple, and tell them to pass the word down the chain, but I can't promise that it would even *get* to the people doing this, much less that they'd listen.”

Upon seeing Jonathan's face turn downward dejectedly, she added, “That doesn't mean I won't do everything I can. I suspect I can stir up proper protection for you a lot faster than the peacekeepers here can, for example, and I will most certainly lean with all the weight I can on the Kiros Temple. They should know damn well by now that you are under *my* influence, not theirs.”

Jonathan nearly jumped out of his seat when a telepathic voice injected into his mind. *I hope these fools try to go after you. I haven't broken a soul in some time. Could be fun.*

Nearly ten years of tutelage, and Jonathan *still* was taken by surprise whenever his master slid into a conversation. He also supposed that he should be a bit disturbed at the casual tone with which his master talked about breaking souls, but such talk was so within the norm when it came to Timothy Honore that it no longer even tittered his moral compass.

Besides, Jonathan had it on good authority that the archangel made flesh had only invoked such power on those who really, truly deserved it.

Maybe.

But it did make him feel a lot better about Talia's safety.

At that point, their meals arrived, and Rumil took the opportunity to turn the direction towards

more positive things. “So, from what I can sense, Premier Datson has taken some interest in you, Cadet Feroz.”

“See that in a vision, did you?” Jonathan asked.

Rumil shook her head, “It's something that's been on his mind on some occasions recently. I'm not exactly sure what he plans to have you do... I'm not even sure he knows exactly what plans he has yet. But I wouldn't be surprised if he has a special task for you once you've graduated.”

Talia bumped his shoulder, and said proudly, “I told you that you were on your way to top.”

Rumil hated there really wasn't much more that she could do for the pair. The affection between them was genuine, even if there were many more obstacles they would face beyond this current trial. She had to admit that she was a bit biased when it came to inter-species relationships, and rather hoped this one would succeed.

* * * * *

Even if the meeting with Rumil didn't accomplish anything tangible, at least it *felt* like it did to Jonathan. He found he could concentrate fully on his final exams, even though he had exemplary scores on the ones he already finished.

He even met Professor Snead for the first time since the vandalism of his home – the professor having been away the ten-cycle before exams on the order of the base captain to join a symposium on the future of military education – and was warmly welcomed when Jonathan entered the classroom for the exam.

“I heard about what happened while I was away, and it makes me sick,” Snead had said, “Regardless of how hard I have been on you, you're a cadet of this academy, and an attack on one of us is an attack on all of us.”

After that, how could he *possibly* be concerned about some Kiro's terrorists?

Talia was feeding off his confidence, even though she felt she had no rightful reason to. The protection that the Sixth Prophet promised seemed not to have materialized, even though Jonathan assured her repeatedly that it most certainly had, even if they couldn't see it.

So she let herself believe it, let herself start enjoying her life again. They were so close to graduation. Talia had a letter from the Antheria Peacekeeper Force letting her know that her application had been approved and she could consider herself hired the moment she got her discharge orders from the academy.

It was a job that Talia began to think she wasn't going to accept. All the visions of her future had herself in a much more demure role, doing stereotypical housewife things that she would have vomited at the mere mention of three staryears ago. And she found she didn't mind in the slightest. Good thing Past Talia wasn't in front of her. She'd have punched her.

Talia let thoughts of being a pretty little housewife dominate her mind when she wasn't in exams. It made sense really: Jonathan would make three times the credits as an SAF commander – Talia was certain that was what the Premier had in mind for him – than she would as a specialist peacekeeper, not to mention whatever residual fortune he had in trust from his family.

She didn't want to be one of those couples that worked on different planets for two-thirds of the cycle and barely ever saw each other, much less if or when children came into the picture. She wanted someone to be there at all times, and it was a role she was more than willing to take.

Jonathan allowed himself to brush the surface of such thoughts, much like he was now as they walked back to their hover after a pleasant dinner off base. If anything, these trying times had convinced the base administration to lift the restriction on his psionic talents, allowing him to do such things without fear of being detected.

He found himself partially amused, and yet contented, by the direction of Talia's thoughts. As much as he had been taught that the traditional gender roles of Kiro's society didn't apply, that didn't

mean that he was going to refuse someone who was willing to accept such roles.

It was late, just past 8.40 of the Late Ten at this point... part of the plan, really. It was time to end this nonsense, and so he had set up the most enticing opportunity for their still-unknown terrorists: a long walk across a poorly lit public parking lot, with nary another soul within a quarter of a TackMet.

His thoughts were interrupted by Timothy's mental voice. *You've got company.*

Of course, Jonathan had known that. Despite the attempts of the responsible parties to hide their psionic presence, they had been fairly easy to detect. Jonathan had picked up thirteen distinct people, although gauging their level of ability wasn't as easy.

Seventeen, actually, Timothy corrected. *Minor talent, mostly secondary families, I would wager. Probably hoping to earn good favor with the Kandor clan. None of them are the mastermind of the whole scheme. I sense he is long gone at this point.*

Jonathan didn't doubt that. The man pulling the strings was setting up his patsies to take the fall, most likely. *So, you're saying I could handle them?*

If it was just you? Most assuredly. But their numbers would make things difficult, and I'm not sure if Talia could hold her own if they try to rush her. She's not exactly trained for high competency in hand to hand combat.

Jonathan had to agree with that assessment. That was no offense intended for Talia, but even a minor psionic talent one-on-one would be a handful for even the most trained martial experts. *Then what is our plan?*

You keep an eye on Talia. The two of you should be able to handle any straggler that might slip by me. Allow me to handle the rest of the debris.

Jonathan really wished that his master wouldn't refer to living beings with words like "debris," especially in the context of a likely lethal conflict. It was unnerving to hear Timothy regard life with such casual unconcern.

But at that point, he sensed the attempted shrouds of their to-be-assailants drop, and that they were about to make their move.

"Talia, on your guard. We might have to fight our way out of here," Jonathan said, his jaw setting sternly as he pushed her between him and their hover, spinning to confront the seventeen Kiro men that had teleported into position.

They had clearly been hoping for the element of surprise, judging from the strain in many of their auras from the short distance they had traveled. That they didn't take their quarry by surprise left them scrambling with what to do next.

They settled for an attempt at intimidation. "This doesn't have to get ugly, Mister Feroz. Leave the piddin, and you don't have to get hurt," offered the man at the center of the tightening semi-circle, a distressingly average Kiro man with short-cut black hair, brown eyes and blue unmarked Kiro light combat armor.

"You have no idea what you're getting yourselves into," Jonathan answered. "You either surrender and let me turn you all into the proper authorities, or you aren't leaving this lot alive."

"Are you threatening us?" the speaker for the group asked.

Normally, Jonathan would have allowed someone else the first blow in a coming conflict, but this was a circumstance with a group of people that had shown no qualms defacing his property and attacking a place of worship.

Fortunately, Timothy Honore felt the same way. The mortal archangel probably would not have been terribly intimidating as he rendered himself visible to his surrounding. Timothy wasn't even armored, wearing only an off-white button-down shirt and light brown slacks; clothing designed for comfort, not combat. It was a potential misconception he corrected quickly.

He imposed himself into the coming fray behind the spokesman for the assailants, his arm cinched around the Kiro man's neck with enough force to turn the victim's face red within a demitick. "No, I'm promising," Timothy then answered, snapping the attacker's neck with a quick jerk of the

forearm and a gruesome cracking and ripping sound.

The first body hadn't even collapsed to the ground before Timothy had already selected his next target, the man directly to the left of the first. A quick psionic-enhanced punch to the abdomen jerked the victim off the smooth surface of the lot, where a sweeping downward left leg kick crunched him back to solid ground with instantly fatal force, cracking the lot surface with the severity of the impact.

By that point, the remainder of the group had reacted, but when the two Kiro to the right of their fallen "leader" had turned to confront their attacker nervously, it was obvious even to their limited senses that they were trying to stop a hurricane gale with their bare hands. As they moved to the attack, their final thoughts would be to regret their instincts as Timothy grabbed each one by the face. His hands crushed bone like he was crumpling scrap paper, reducing their features into something resembling ground meat before exploding their craniums from the inside.

A fifth met his end with a flat hand jab, literally through his throat. The force of the blow ripped the flesh and bone in his neck, severing his head, save for loosely connected strands of skin and torn muscle.

Three others had made their break towards Jonathan and Talia, thinking they had an opening. Timothy let them go, figuring the pair would grant them some mercy, giving Timothy the freedom to trample the rest without having to let them live.

That turned out not to be the case. Jonathan had dropped one of them with a very ill-intentioned and fatal electrical charge that ripped right through his target's hasty and feeble defenses. The man collapsed in a heap, wrenched into violent involuntary spasms before finally going still aside from the occasional twitch.

The second of the three wasn't even that lucky. He made the mistake of getting within Jonathan's reach, grappled into a shoulder lock, then driven face first into the front of Jonathan's hover, pulverizing his nose and left cheekbone. As the man recoiled back upwards, a driving forearm, crackling with psionic power, slammed into the back of his skull, a mortal blow that left the victim unconscious and certain to die from hemorrhaging.

The third managed to get a hold of Talia's shoulder, but before Jonathan could address the contact, Talia had demonstrated that Timothy's concerns about her fighting skills were unwarranted. She shrugged out of the grasp – aided by the advantage that she actually outsized her attacker – ducked under an attempt at a burst of flame from the attacker's off-hand, and in one fluid motion had drawn her reserve sidearm from its concealment under her dress at the ankle, and fired a single round under the man's chin and through his brain.

Timothy sighed in resignation. That meant he was going to have to spare some of the wretched for the authorities to question. He chose the five who had now decided that running for their lives was the most appealing option. "Get back here," the archangel growled, stopping them cold, their feet jerking out from under them as they fell on their backsides unceremoniously.

He then dragged them back while summarily disposing of number seventeen, the last of the insects. His hand tightened painfully around the neck of the doomed man, lifting him off the ground so that Timothy could level his gaze eye to eye. Saving the worst for last, Timothy pronounced the fate of the condemned:

"Burn in the origin flame."

With a flash, white-hot energy erupted from Timothy's eyes, and for that brief demitick of remaining consciousness, the victim saw but a flicker of the fires that began the material universe; an incinerating radiance that ripped his soul to pieces and reduced his body to ash.

Talia witnessed the execution and froze, her sidearm dropping lifelessly from her hand. The face had struck her as vaguely familiar, but seeing the results of his power finally triggered the epiphany. "Is... is that...?" she stammered, awestruck.

"Timothy Honore, my psionic master."

"The Archangel Mican..." Talia rasped. "He... he taught you?"

“And now you know why Rumil wants him to keep to himself mostly,” Jonathan commented ruefully.

Timothy incapacitated the survivors designated for the authorities, rendering them into a deep sleep as gently as he could manage, then with a flick of a wrist swept away the ash of the final victim.

With that, he then turned to address the pair. “I would recommend contacting Moor Peacekeepers promptly, if they aren't already on their way. I'm sure they will have a good many questions for the spared,” he said. “I'd probe their minds myself, but they have already been distressingly strained, and with my power it would be like clearing underbrush with a fusion bomb.”

Jonathan nodded. “And I assume if anyone is to ask, I am responsible for those you killed?”

“Would make for a more believable story than a man supposed dead for twenty staryears appeared and performed the killings. As far as the world needs to know, there were sixteen attackers.”

Jonathan again agreed. He hadn't intended that to sound like a complaint or a protest, but even if Timothy had sensed that, he likely wouldn't have cared.

The sound of sirens informed them that contacting the peacekeepers wouldn't be necessary, Timothy vanishing without parting, his task now complete.

Tell Rumil 'thank you' for sending you to keep watch over us, Jonathan projected.

Am I not allowed to be concerned for my student on my own? was the initial reply, followed by a beat of silence, and an added acknowledgment. *I will extend your appreciation.*

Timothy's presence finally faded, just in time for Jonathan to turn his full attention to the peacekeepers that had finally arrived on the scene.

* * * * *

It was near “dawn” on Glorindal by the time Talia and Jonathan were released from the peacekeeper main station. They were understandably exhausted, but that was nothing that a good long sleep wouldn't fix. Both of them, in light of current events, had been exempted from the coming exam cycle, and could make up those exams at a later date.

Jonathan had finally thought the worst was over... instead, it was yet to come.

“There you are!” he called out to Talia when she finally emerged from the interior of the station, and into the lobby. “What took you so long?”

Talia's expression was flat, and her voice equally so as she replied, “I'll tell you when we're outside.”

Curiosity started to gnaw at him as the exterior doors slid open for them, and they rounded the station towards the visitor's lot where their hover was waiting. It wasn't until he was at the driver's side door that she asked him to wait.

She was right behind him, her satchel over her shoulder, rather than on the passenger's side where he expected her to go. “Talia... what are you doing?”

Talia took a deep breath, then let it out. “I was late leaving because I was calling the base to have them secure my belongings and move them to a separate apartment.”

“What?” Jonathan asked. What was she saying? “Tal... why?”

“Because I can't do this anymore, Jon. I... just can't. I can't do... this,” she said, gesturing wildly in random directions. “I can't be with you. I... I... just can't.”

“Why now?” he pleaded. “Those goons aren't going to bother us again! It's over!”

“*This* incident is over, but what about the next one?” she answered in frustration. “And the one after that? And the one after that? Do you think all the harassment and the threats and the malice is going to *stop* just because a handful of them were kicked around?”

Jonathan began to compose a response, but Talia cut him off.

“Of course it's not going to stop! It's never going to stop! Your mother is going to disown you if this goes any further... hell, for all I know, she was the one that started this entire mess!”

Jonathan tried to explain that he had the same suspicion, but again Talia silenced him, this time with an outstretched hand, palm forward.

“I... I really do love you... I do... but it isn't enough, Jon. We're from two totally different worlds, and I don't mean simply being born on different planets. Maybe you can casually call up your 'old friend' the Sixth Prophet, rub elbows with the Galactic Premier... hell, you were trained by a damned *archangel*. You can do those things, but I can't. That's not my world, and I'm not fit for that world.”

She sobbed, “I just can't handle it. It's all too much for me. I... just can't.”

“Talia...” Jonathan began, his mind stumbling over itself. “I won't talk to any of them again if it will help you cope. Bannor take it, we can be on the first shuttle to Noth tonight if that's what it takes! I can walk away from every last bit of it for you!”

Talia shook her head, flattered at the lengths he thought he was willing to go. “No, you can't, nor should you. You are destined for great things, and I won't let you throw that away for me.” A horn blaring caught her attention, and Jonathan followed the sound towards the street where a hover from Glorindal Academy had been waiting. “Maybe, one cycle, we can be friends again. I hope we can... but right now, this has to end. I'm sorry. Don't hate me.”

“I could never hate you,” Jonathan said, letting the resignation settle in. “Take care of yourself, Talia.”

“You too, Jonathan,” she answered, turning about on her heel, and towards the base hover, climbing into the back seat, disappearing from view within demiticks.

Jonathan stood, leaning against the driver side door of his hover for another three ticks, gathering up the courage to drive towards a home that was going to feel a lot more empty.

He was an autopilot on the drive back to the base, fortunate to have a brain adept at true multi-tasking, because he was mentally in two places. One focused on the roadway, the other slowly built up a seething fury towards the person he deemed responsible.

That fury was at a boiling point by the time he slammed the door of his apartment shut. Fortunately, this comm code was quick-saved to his PCU, because Jonathan wasn't sure he'd be able to enter it without breaking the keypad.

“Jonathan?” Julianne said, surprised by the call. “I understand military life leads to some early mornings, but this is a little bit early even for you.”

“You've won!” Jonathan spat angrily.

“Pardon?”

“You've won!” he yelled, unable to hold back his rage. “Talia left! You can call off your angry legions now! Leave her alone!”

Julianne sounded legitimately confused, “What... are you going on about?”

But Jonathan knew she could be a good actor. “Don't even pretend you don't know! The vandalizing of my home... the bombing where Talia and I worship... getting some Knighthood rejects to attack us... you don't need to do it anymore! Talia's gone, she left, so call off the hordes and leave her alone!”

Finally, Julianne reached her son's fury. “How *dare* you! How *dare* you imply that I would behave in such an unsavory manner! I had heard *nothing* of the crimes you speak of!” The anger fell from her voice, to be replaced with dismay. “Is... that what you really think of me? Do you truly have such a horrible opinion of your own mother that you earnestly believe I would stoop so low?”

Jonathan's anger struck a wall, and his progression of thought stalled. Of course his mother wasn't capable of such an atrocity. She certainly had her faults, one of them being that she had bigoted inclinations, but she wouldn't act out in such a criminal manner. That's not her. “No. No, you wouldn't. I'm... sorry.”

“It's all right, dear. This was your first real romantic relationship, it's hard to take when it falls apart. As cold as it may sound, you get used to it. Not everything is going to work out the way you

hope it would.” She chuckled in spite of yourself, “Sorry, remembering the cycle I was told I was betrothed to your father. I was not happy.”

“I’m sure you weren’t.”

“I had dreams of marrying Kevin Nurset at the time. Thought we’d be together forever. It hurt for a long time to know that it would never be, that it couldn’t be.”

“When was that?” Jonathan wondered out loud. His mother didn’t talk about her past with his father much, and he had to admit the curiosity overcame him.

“When I was seven.”

The heartfelt moment took a rather jarring blow as Jonathan was reminded of the traditions of the Kiro. Julianne shrugged it off quickly, and turned the conversation back to Jonathan. “I am sorry for the strange tangent, dear. And I am sorry those despicable things happened to you and Talia. For what it’s worth, I never hated Talia. I knew your relationship wasn’t going to survive, but I didn’t hate her. I think she was very good for you. You needed that companion, someone who understood you in a way that I or Fiona or Rumil or Timothy or anyone here never could. Was she hurt at all?”

“Beyond emotionally? No,” Jonathan replied. “Timothy helped us make sure that it didn’t go beyond that.”

“I thought he seemed awfully pleased with himself when he popped up this mid-cycle,” Julianne mused. “I can’t say for certain, since he likes to hide, but I swear he’s been coming and going with alarming frequency. I wonder if he’s been keeping an eye on you all this time.”

“Possibly,” Jonathan acknowledged, even though he seriously doubted that was the case.

“Thank you, mother. I guess... I needed that.”

“We all need to vent on occasion. Ask poor Fiona how much I have unloaded on her sometime... assuming you ever come *home*.”

“I think I’ll have some time between the end of exams and before I receive my first official orders,” Jonathan said. “I’ll contact you when I learn exactly when that will be.”

“You better, dear. I worry about you sometimes, but it’s a good worry.”

Jonathan smiled. “Good evening, mother.”

“Creator guide you, dear.” The communication closed, and Jonathan stretched, as if the tension in his muscles was also working out the tension in his mind. The smell from his underarms reminded him that he had not washed up since the night before, and he had been through a particularly stressful run of tenth-cycles.

He retreated to the washroom and activated the shower panel. After cleaning up, he decided the next best course of action would be to sleep the cycle away.

* * * * *

Matthew Kandor straightened in his chair when the dual-PCU at the desk to his left flashed to life with a text message.

> *I learned that Jonathan Feroz no longer is in a relationship with that Arcadian woman. You have done as you promised. Thank you.*

Matthew grinned. Personally, he didn’t care one way or another who the Feroz boy was having sex with, but his superiors felt that they needed this contact within the prophet’s inner circle. Losing a handful of weak-blooded zealots was worth the end result.

> ***I told you we would be successful. Now, I trust we can count on you to fulfill whatever promises we require of you?***

> *Certainly. It is the least I can do. You truly have Jonathan’s best future at heart.*

> *He should be a king, not a soldier. We will make sure your dear boy attains the heights that he was destined for.*

Another lie. The Feroz family had already cast their lot with the traitors to Kiros society, and were to be erased because of it, even the woman on the other end of the communication... *especially* that woman, in fact. But if that false hope kept her willing and ready to act on their behalf, he'd tell her that they planned to make Jonathan Feroz a *god*.

> *It heartens me to know that there are others who still feel that way. Creator's blessings to you.*

> *And Creator's blessings to you.*

The voice of Emmitt Fransisca cut in behind him, and Matthew turned about to the Solarian. "That was good news, I am hoping?"

At first, Matthew had been wary of associating with such a heathen, but time had demonstrated that Emmitt was one of the few that understood how things should rightly be. Besides, if Emmitt went too far into Solarian heresy, he could bleed and die like any other heathen.

"Indeed," Matthew answered. "The woman is firmly in our influence now."

"It's almost pathetic how easy it is to manipulate a female by using their emotions," Emmitt chuckled. "And we might not even have to use her, but one never knows. Casting a wide net is rather vital if we are going to rip down this false temple and their false prophet. Good work. I appreciate people who can make things happen, even if they only have one hand."

Matthew found his attention drawn to the stump that was once his right hand, a painful reminder of the sort of power they were fighting against. Emmitt often teasingly suggested that Matthew have the hand regrown, but it was something the former Kiros Knight had declined to do. The reminder was necessary, so that he wouldn't underestimate the false prophet or the allies she had again.

Not to mention the effort it had taken Matthew to become as proficient with his left hand that he had been with his right. That ordeal had given him the mental strength to face this present challenge. *That* was what following the Creator was truly about: to suffer the trials, and emerge from them stronger. To fight the nature of mortal kind that sought the easy solution, rather than surrender to those base desires.

It was a lesson Matthew Kandor had to deliver to the galaxy, one way or another.