

For Honor and Crown

Solarian nobility, no matter how stable it has seemed over the last eight hundred years, was anything but. The families were always in a state of flux, hidden by the fact that the turnover was often disguised by the various players tending to hold the same family name.

While the noble society gave deference to a direct male line, it was not beholden to it. A good ninety five percent of Solarians, much less the galaxy as a whole, would be surprised to know that the current primary family of the Honore clan was not a direct male descendant of Bryan Honore, the prophet of the Solarian people. In truth, *none* of the families that bore the Honore name were... but that was beside the point.

The role of primary within the Honore clan had changed several times, and was due to change again. It was a rather public secret that Niles Honore was sterile through a terrible twist of genetic fate, and thus, would have no child, much less a son, to succeed him as Supreme Commander of the Knighthood.

That's not to say Niles Honore didn't try. It was what led him to adopt an unusually gifted psionic boy from a vassal family to the King of Solaria. A boy who would take on the family name, and in life prove to be a truly gifted and noble Knight.

Of course, Craig's standing was hotly disputed as his bloodline didn't even carry the somewhat diluted line of Bryan Honore. Actions, skill, and competence only accounted for so much in Solarian noble society.

Then, came a miracle. Celine Honore, wife of Niles, became pregnant with a child... a boy.

The firestorm that arose from Timothy's birth actually put the protest over Craig to shame. Almost immediately, accusations of infidelity and of a bastard son were levied on Celine. This wasn't surprising. What was surprising was that the heaviest protests had come from Niles himself.

He had obviously come to love Craig as his own son, and knew that if Timothy was truly of Celine and himself, that Craig's status within the family, as tenuous as it was, would be completely rendered unnecessary. Yet testing did not lie; little Timothy carried the genes of both Niles and Celine. Further tests (Celine recalled twenty, and there were possibly more) all carried that same result.

The current history of the Honore family carried relevance, because Timothy suspected similar power struggles, veiled insinuations, and manipulation of people and events would come into play now that the King had passed away.

Much like the other noble houses, the line of the King was not a clean line of succession. While it, like other noble stations, gave preference to the first son, a long list of reasons, rationales, and even outright slander could be used to deny said young man the crown.

And Frederick had his fair share of enemies in the nobility; Solarians who didn't like his more down to earth personality and connection he had with the "lower" families. His interest in the "common people" apparently was a bad trait as well. Oh, and the idea that Solaria was merely one part of a much larger galaxy rather than the true center of the known universe, to say nothing of the crazy idea of cooperating with other races for the common good, even the (gasp!) Kiro!

People like Timothy's father.

Timothy had become interested in the succession of the king after overhearing a discussion his father was having with some of his more stodgy old supporters. Expressing concern over Frederick's likely ascension to the crown, Niles had expressed a complete lack thereof, and explained he had information that would more than bar Frederick from becoming king, clearing the path for the second son, Kent (a man much more suitable to the old guard, apparently), to claim the crown.

Timothy had reached the conclusion about a year back that if his father was involved in something, it was for no one's good, save a select few people who didn't need the benefits to begin with. Along with the fact that Timothy rather liked Frederick, it was clear the newly anointed Commandant of the Solarian Knighthood should act on the prince's behalf.

First, Timothy needed to learn what Niles knew, and the young Knight had a fairly good guess as to where to start.

King Edgar had not been the most faithful man on Solaria. In fact, his infidelity against the Queen had been rather renown among the noble families, and was likely to blame for the disease that Adrianna had eventually succumbed to two staryears prior. At one point, the king had seventeen different mistresses at the same time.

The question was who those mistresses were, and how Niles could make such a certain connection between one of them and Frederick. Of course, there wasn't exactly going to be records about that sort of thing Timothy could consult. He needed an expert on noble affairs... he needed someone who had intimate knowledge of who was with who, when, and where.

He needed... his mother.

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Celine Honore was your typical Solarian noblewoman; meek, submissive to her husband, serving his whims dutifully and making sure his needs were always met. She was delicate, proper, and distinguished in all things.

Timothy could occasionally get to "meek" before he was unable to keep a straight face.

To those outside the noble life of Solaria, that was the image the noblemen wanted to project. They wanted everyone to believe they were masters of all they surveyed, that their dominion over their families and their lands and the vassals underneath them were absolute.

In reality, once you stepped across the threshold into the family manor, you entered the Lady's domain. The smart noblewomen controlled manor life so well that even the noblemen didn't realize who was really in control until a fight emerged. The *very* smart noblewomen did all that, and managed to defeat their husbands so deftly that the men didn't even realize there had been a fight.

In the seventeen staryears since Timothy's birth, Celine Honore had become the smartest of them all.

It had been amusing to watch her masterful work at times. The most notable in Timothy's mind had been when Celine had convinced Niles that she should receive some "rudimentary psionic training," a significant cultural taboo. By the time their "discussion" was done, Niles swore it was his idea, agreed to train her in several advanced techniques personally, thanked his wife for the support, and wondered what he would ever do without her.

It was for that very reason that Timothy avoided his mother's advice about settling down and marrying a "nice Solarian girl like the ones that occasionally visited her for lunch." There were some establishments not even Timothy had the courage to face.

There was no avoiding it this time, however.

Timothy wasn't so much accepted on the Honore family grounds as he was tolerated, and that much was only because he would surely be the next owner of the manor once Niles passed on. Nonetheless, the order from his father that he was not to feel welcome also had to be obeyed.

The exception was with his mother and her attendants; an exception that Niles had tried to address once, and never again. They graciously announced his presence and led him to the interior courtyard where Celine was having lunch with another of her "guests" at a patio table.

"Timothy!" the older declared, standing and moving swiftly to embrace her son as he stepped onto the cobblestones. He could feel her warmth even through his dress armor, and he had to admit that he probably didn't visit her enough, regardless of how his father might feel.

That warmth disappeared when her grin turned near predatory, and she introduced her guest. "Timmy, surely you remember Allisette Dutis."

"Knight Commander Slaton's daughter, if I'm not mistaken," Timothy said with guarded etiquette. If he wasn't careful, he could very easily wind up engaged before the tenth-cycle turned.

“My father speaks glowingly of him, although I cannot say I’ve had the privilege to work with him yet.”

“You flatter my family, sir,” the very demure woman replied with a hint of a blush.

“The Dutis family is quite honored among the Knighthood families, Timothy,” Celine saw fit to mention, although Timothy really didn’t understand why. The eight primary families hadn’t changed for over a century since the Francisca family earned duty from their colony planet to a station on Solaria.

Timothy decided it was important to get to business now rather than have the small talk continue. He dropped the decorum and said, “Mother, I am afraid I am here on business, and really do not have time to entertain any prospects you have garnered since my last visit. I need to speak with you on an urgent manner.”

“With me? I can’t imagine what I would offer that would be of such importance,” Celine said, her tone drifting towards icy. Timothy knew this was also part of her style... to make it seem like you are imposing on her so that she could control future conversation.

“You will find out once your guest has been given her leave and we convene in your study. Our business should not be burdened upon her.” Timothy said, starting to become stern before softening his tone for Allisette. “I do apologize, miss, for interrupting your dining. I am sure my mother will make good on your get-together at a later date.”

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Celine’s study was “meager” by her estimation... which is a very relative term among Solarian nobles. It was only one room.

She sat down in the larger, tanned leather chair reserved for herself, and leaned back into the smooth, comfortable surface. “Okay, Timothy, now you can tell me what was so important that you felt the need to dismiss a lady of the Dutis family.”

“I need to know who King Edgar was fraternizing with, and when,” Timothy answered, refusing to sit down, as it implied a willingness to enter her world, where she would no doubt be in control.

“Have a staryear?” she asked rhetorically. “I’m not sure anyone with male equipment fully knows just how many mistresses the old king had. He was... knowing... the wife of Knight Tate Edermon up until a week before he died. A sixty-seven staryear man, adulterating with a woman half his age...” She shook her head disparagingly.

“I’m more interested in who he was dallying with at around the time Frederick was born.”

Celine straightened, as if she was starting to put together details herself. “I see... so *that’s* what your father was giggling about some cycles ago. The man thinks he has insider information that will put his ‘good friend’ Kent on the throne.”

“You doubt his information?” Timothy asked.

“I see I need to catch you up before we can continue,” Celine said. “Sit. This could take a while.”

“I’m fine,” Timothy assured.

“Timmy, you have been able to resist my influence like no other man in our family. Sitting down isn’t going to change that.”

“All said, I’m fine.”

Celine sighed with a mother’s reluctant understanding. “You know Craig’s birthmother, Kari Farren, right?”

“Of course I do,” Timothy replied. “Craig would take me to meet her every ten-cycle. She was a member of a vassal family to the King...” Timothy quickly started to put things together. “No...”

“Yes,” Celine affirmed. “Kari was one of King Edgar’s mistresses. It is more than likely that your adopted brother is a bastard son of the king himself. A psionic of your brother’s magnitude

doesn't sprout from a vassal line."

"Was that ever tested?"

"And admit publicly that the king was being unfaithful?" Celine asked. "Of course not. If I didn't know you were largely oblivious to the noble appearances, I would think living away from the manor for the last two staryears had banished that knowledge from your brain."

"Do not start that again, mother." Timothy's decision to leave the manor upon becoming a Knight was a topic Celine tried to reverse on occasion.

Celine clicked her tongue in annoyance. "This is far too serious for me to waste with pithy arguments, Timmy. The point is that they would never test that sort of thing unless there was good reason. As long as the King's infidelity was never suggested publicly, it never happened, understand?"

"Thus giving my father the questionable parentage to levy on Frederick," Timothy noted. "But couldn't that be tested as well? Do you think..."

Celine answered her son's unspoken concern. "No. I knew Kari quite well... and she was not at any point pregnant with any child of the King's other than Craig. But... I wouldn't doubt for one second that Kent fellow would find a way to make it appear so."

"Not a fan of the idea of a King Kent?" Timothy queried. His mother rarely showed distaste in people, preferring to simply not say anything at all about them. To visibly show dislike was a tell that she wanted Timothy to pry.

"Kent says all the right things to all the right people. Your father, as well as most of his ilk are convinced he's a traditional, conservative, young man grounded in the 'proper ways.'" Celine explained. "Of course he is going to appeal to those stodgy men longing for an era that never really existed since our people could break the gravitational grasp of Kiros."

"But..." Timothy offered in encouragement; not that it was needed.

"There's a different side to him that he doesn't think anyone knows. A part of him I don't like. A part of him that he leaves unguarded around us ladies, thinking us blind to the powers you men possess."

"He let his guard down, and you probed his mind," Timothy groaned, dropping his hand to his head. Mind-reading, while a power all psionics had, was a rather taboo thing, only granted in situations such as critical interrogation or intelligence gathering. If the Adjucates were to learn Celine had trained psionic abilities to *begin with* would be bad enough. To learn she had been reading the mind of a man in line to the crown... well... execution would probably sound like a preferable punishment once they were done.

"Like you wouldn't have done the same," his mother retorted unrepentantly.

"I will pretend I didn't hear about your mind-reading, and instead ask just what it was you learned."

For the first time Timothy could ever remember, his mother looked genuinely perturbed. "The ideas in his head... he didn't want to lead the Solarian people... he wanted to remake us in some image that I couldn't fully grasp. I know there's more like him, and they don't mean anyone in the world, or maybe even the galaxy, any good."

"As we end the world to usher a new beginning," Timothy recited to himself, coming to grasps with how serious the succession of King Edgar could potentially be.

"Pardon?" Celine asked.

"Nothing, mother," Timothy said dismissively, shaking his head. "It seems like I need to do a bit more information gathering on Kent. Do you know where he tends to spend his time?"

His mother smiled devilishly. "Does a sandscrub need the breeze? Let me get my shawl."

Timothy paused. "Wait... why?"

"Well, obviously, a lady needs her shawl if she's going to leave the manor."

While that was an answer, that wasn't the answer he wanted. "Why?"

"I could use the time outside. It'll do me good."

“Mother...”

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“Remind me how you convinced me this was a good idea,” Timothy muttered as he nodded to the long procession of royal guard stationed at the entrance to the establishment, confirming rather conclusively that either Frederick or Kent was indeed present.

Celine smirked, and said, “Because I didn’t give you much choice in the matter.” She then looked up at the attendant at the podium in the entry of the restaurant, and said, “I do apologize, but would you happen to have seating available for me and my son?”

“Ah, Lady Honore!” the attendant replied with over-the-top familiarity. “And this is Timothy, I presume? It has been so long since he’s been here, barely a young man!”

“Well, you understand the life of a Knight... not even on planet half the time anymore,” Celine chatted. “If it wasn’t for me, I sometimes think he wouldn’t eat for a ten-cycle.”

“Such is a mother’s burden, is it not?” the attendant said, gesturing for the pair to follow. “For you, my lady, there is always a seat. Come with me.”

Of course, Celine “happened” to see a familiar face, all the way on the other end of the candlelit dining area. “Oh, goodness me, Timothy! It is Prince Kent and I think Lord Adjuicate Sumner, if I don’t miss my guest! I simply must say hello. You’d accompany me, wouldn’t you, dear?”

Timothy followed his mother’s line of sight, confirmed the pair, and instantly confirmed his fears. He knew the now Lord Adjuicate Sumner from Glorindal two staryears ago.

Kent was one of the Endtimers.

“Lady Celine!” Prince Kent welcomed with convincing warmth. “What a pleasant surprise... and I see... yes... the Knight Commandant himself! I take it you’re here for a spot of sustenance as well?”

“Oh, indeed, and I glanced over and saw you, your highness,” Celine replied with a gentle, demure smile. “I so rarely see the royal family, that I felt it proper to pay my respects.”

“Consider them paid, my lady.” Kent then properly introduced his companion. “I’m sure you are both familiar with Lord Adjuicate Nathan Sumner, yes?”

“We are,” Timothy replied, also able to keep up appearances. “Been a long time since Glorindal, Adjuicate.”

“Seems like it, hasn’t it?” Sumner answered cheerily. “Good to see you haven’t kept out of trouble. I remember you as a bold, headstrong initiate... now you’re second in command of the entire Knighthood. Don’t let the success get to your head.”

“Hardly a chance of that,” Celine interjected. “Or do you doubt my abilities to properly raise my son?”

“Perish the thought, my lady,” Sumner replied. “You’ve raised a fine gentleman and a true nobleman. I would not worry of your son’s upbringing.”

Timothy fought back the derisive scoff, instead settling on a thankful bow and smile. At that point the attendant gently cut in. “Lady Honore, your table is ready.”

Timothy then clued in on what his mother had done. Noble decency required that Kent and Sumner would have to offer for Timothy and his mother join them for lunch; which her proper decency would demand she accept of the prince.

What a clever little witch.

“Goodness, where are my manners?” Kent predictably said. “I insist you join us, Knight Commandant, my Lady.”

“I would be honored, your highness,” Celine replied as if flattered. “Do pull out a chair for me, Timothy.”

Once seated and their orders placed, Celine continued the small talk, which Timothy knew was

setting them up for more difficult line of conversation once the food arrived. Again, a true nobleman never leaves a meal unfinished, nor can they ever seem rushed. Once they began eating, Celine could really apply the screws to her victims.

So, Timothy was ready once their meals were set out. Celine took one bite, and said casually, “I am sorry for bringing this up now, but I am curious what brings the prince and a lord adjucate into dining together? Or is that business beyond what a lady should know?”

She sounded so disarming that noble etiquette would certainly require at least a passing explanation. “Oh, nothing serious, my lady,” Kent responded. “I was merely making sure I had full understanding of the laws and protocols for succession.”

“But wouldn’t Frederick be in line to take the throne?” Celine asked with a perfect fabrication of naïve confusion.

“Oh, well yes...” Kent stumbled momentarily. “But it never hurts to be prepared just in case. One would never know what might happen.”

“Oh, of course!” Celine smiled happily.

Kent and Adjucate Sumner had kept their thoughts heavily guarded from Timothy’s prying senses the moment they knew of his presence, and once again, Timothy saw what his mother was doing. They were so intent on shielding their innermost thoughts from him that they were giving no concern whatsoever to his mother, whom he could clearly sense deftly probing through the “unguarded flank.” After all, a lady (who most assuredly had no psionic training) couldn’t be a threat to their designs.

As long as she went at it, picking their brains as she coyly pretended to be uninformed, Timothy wouldn’t be surprised if she came out with the codes for the Solarian Fusion Arsenal. They finished their meals as quickly as propriety would allow, and wasted no time with their partings.

“And?” Timothy asked.

Celine looked innocent. “Whatever do you mean?”

“I’m not interested in your games. What did you learn?”

If it helps any, your father is an innocent party in all this... they’re merely using him to accelerate their plans, Celine said telepathically to keep from other parties overhearing. But it is as we expected. They plan on making a link between Kari and Frederick, alter the evidence if need be, and have Frederick removed from the line of succession.

And then Kent becomes king, and along with Sumner as a Lord Adjucate, they will have at least two wings of Solarian society at their command, Timothy expressed. I have a hard time believing Kent is the mastermind though. He’s never struck me as the diabolical planning sort.

He’s not... neither of them know the identity of the true leader of their group, Celine confirmed. I’d be merely guessing, but I think they’d at least have suspicions if it was someone in their circles of influence.

Timothy pondered this. So, it’s likely someone in the Priesthood. But that’s a secondary matter... the immediate concern is how to thwart their plans with Frederick.

Celine locked eyes with her son. *Have any ideas?*

In fact... I do...

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“You want... what?”

Timothy shook his head in dismissal, and replied, “You heard me.”

The holographic projection of Emmitt Francisca rolled his eyes. “Oh, I heard you. What I didn’t hear was the part where you admitted you were *clinically insane!* This could be deemed obstructing the line of succession, and interfering with the divine right of the crown! Creator preserve me... do you just want me to execute myself now, or wait for the trial?”

“Could you be a little more dramatic?” Timothy said gruffly.

“Dramatic? Dramatic? You want dramatic? How about asking your friend to secure an unmarked transport ship, which is a violation of several interstellar laws to begin with, then use that aforementioned illegal transport to take a woman suspected of mothering a child that is in line to become King of Solaria off the planet so that she cannot be tested for maternal evidence. And if that isn't enough, this illegal transport will be taking this potential mother of a bastard child to a location that isn't even recognized as a developed world by the Galactic Alliance standard of living.”

“Noth is deemed an undeveloped world simply because there is not a sufficient population to warrant a seat on the Galactic Parliament,” Timothy refuted.

“And because it doesn't even have GalNet links connected because it is a world that doesn't believe in technological advancement past space exploration,” Emmitt added. “A person who went there would disappear off the face of the galaxy. Just the sort of place you'd hide a woman who you didn't want to be tested for maternal genetic code.”

“Remember those Endtimers I told you about while on Glorindal?”

Emmitt crossed his eyes, then nodded. “Sure. What about them?”

“Kent is one of their number, and I have it on good authority that they would fabricate evidence to implicate Frederick to discredit his right to the throne.”

Emmitt sighed. “So you plan to simply remove the option entirely. I... have a few contacts, I can see what I can do. When are you planning on evacuate Madam Farren?”

“9.50 of this late ten.”

Emmitt's face went slack. “You're serious. Of course you are. Alright... alright... I'll have your shuttle. I'd recommend the Kaffey Centris Public Starport. I can swing an unauthorized and untracked launch from there easily enough.... provided you can arrange for Space Fleet Defense to look the other way.”

“Already done.”

Emmitt took a deep breath, and exhaled it slowly. “Then I suppose they'll be meeting you at 9.50 LT.”

Timothy lounged back as the communication ended. He figured he really should treat Emmitt better, the man being one of the few that Timothy could count on to always deliver, no matter the circumstances or stipulations.

But it was also very amusing to watch him panic over nothing. There was not a soul outside the Knighthood that would question anything he did. It was something Emmitt, and the entire Fransisca clan for that matter, still had to get used to, Timothy supposed. The Fransisca family was rather new on Solaria as these things went, there was a nervousness in that family that feared that they could get replaced just as quickly as they ascended.

It was a project.

But it was a project he couldn't afford time on at the moment. Timothy had a bit of convincing to do before 9.50 LT, and figured it would be best to start now. Something told him Madam Kari was not going to leave her home and all she knew willingly.

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Kari had known Timothy from before he could walk... her son, Craig, had adored the birth son of Celine and Niles, despite the fact that the child's birth had ended even the slim chance Craig had towards assuming Niles' position as Supreme Commander.

Craig would take young Timothy with him whenever he visited Kari, initially to Kari's horror. Her home was modest and humble, and certainly not suitable to attend the child of the most prominent noble family within the Knighthood. But time and understanding dispelled that fear, as it became clear that it was within her home that the child could really enjoy himself; free from the weight of burdens

on his shoulders. Even after Craig had passed on, Timothy would still arrive on her threshold every ten-cycle, keeping her company as much as having fun himself. It had been so lonely once her children left home.

Of course, Timothy's arrivals weren't always harbingers of joy. She remembered thirteen staryears ago, when Timothy made the trip from the primary Honore family manor and across the noble grounds to the King's land where her homestead stood in the lots assigned to the vassal families.

Kari had known something was wrong the moment she didn't see her son. The tears in little Timothy's eyes only confirmed that fear. Craig had died in combat, but Timothy didn't know how, because the details were "top secret."

Timothy had grown up since then; he was strong and vital, the Knight Commandant, second in command of the entire noble Knighthood. Not a tear was staining his cheeks, but Kari could tell that whatever Timothy had to share was going to change her life just as much as the news thirteen staryears before.

The young man patiently explained the situation: how Frederick, the same young boy she cared for as her duty as attendant to the royal children, was accused of being a bastard son – *her* bastard son, specifically – and how she needed to leave the planet before the Solarian Inquisition Agency brought her in for "testing."

"But... Frederick isn't my son!" Kari protested. "Why would I have anything to fear?"

"I know he isn't... you know he isn't... I suspect the people wanting Frederick removed from the line of succession know he isn't. But that is irrelevant to them. They will *make* the evidence say what they want it to say if they have to."

"But why would Kent do such a thing? He was such a sweet boy... a bit distant perhaps... I know the two of you never got along, but he was a good child! Perhaps he just hasn't completely forgiven you two for... when you all were children."

That was how Kari rationalized it; as the spats of childhood not quite abolished upon adulthood. Timothy and Frederick were the odd ones everywhere else, and so whenever the two of them were together, they took advantage of being the majority for once, often at Kent's expense.

"Kent isn't the same young boy you remember," Timothy said in disagreement. "He will stop at nothing to become king, even if it means sullyng your name, his brother's name, or even his father's name, in the process."

"But..."

Timothy stood... trying to reason with her without explaining the entire plot was wasting unnecessary time. "If you care at all about Frederick and the Solarian people, you will follow my instructions without further delay."

"But..."

"Do not make me drag you out of this house and teleport you to the shuttle by force," Timothy sternly threatened. "You have two tenth-cycles to pack your personal items. Everything else will be provided for you at your destination. Now go."

Finally, Kari acquiesced to his request, although Timothy did not like himself for having to get quite so boorish. He did not particularly like playing the part of a nobleman.

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The morning after, Timothy knew that Knight Central Command was going to be a very interesting place, a thought confirmed when he was given word that his father wanted to meet him immediately before he had even checked in at the security gate. It appeared his father had issued that desire quite loudly, as the people in Timothy's vicinity would promptly go deathly quiet as he walked past, sensing some very vocal disagreements soon to occur.

They were about to be disappointed, as Niles didn't even stand up in outrage like he normally

did when Timothy would enter his office for a lecture. Instead, the Supreme Commander of the Solarian Knighthood kept his hands folded in front of his face, and said as if in conversation, “Madam Kari Farren left Solaria.”

“Did she?” Timothy asked. Two could play this game.

“Not that it was wrong. She had full rights upon the death of her husband, and with the King passed on, she was free of that duty as well. I do find it interesting that she left on an unregistered shuttle in the middle of the night with orders to the Space Fleet to let her pass on 'top secret business.' I also find it interesting that the order to the Space Fleet came with your signature.”

“Really... how inconvenient.”

Niles chuckled bitterly. “I'm not mad, believe it or not. I'm actually rather proud. You played my game and beat me at it. Now your friend Frederick will most likely be King, whether I like it or not.”

“Kari Farren wasn't the mother of Frederick,” Timothy asserted.

“Oh? Then why go to the trouble of shipping her off planet and off the galactic radar? I presume you sent her to Noth... outside our jurisdiction, outside of the Galactic Network, a nice place to disappear.”

Timothy's left hand twitched, ready to go to his sword or sidearm at a moment's notice. What was about to transpire could become quite ugly, quite quickly. “There are outside influences that I suspect would *make* her Frederick's mother, whether it was true or not.”

Niles cocked an eyebrow questioningly. “Really? Like a group of 'old folks' who are 'stuck' in the 'old ways' and got a little uneasy about a progressive young man like Frederick becoming King?”

“No,” Timothy answered coldly.

“Then who?”

“Kent is a member of a heretical sect that seeks to remake Solarian, and possibly galactic, culture in their image to suit them and their lust for power. One of them includes Lord Adjudicate Nathan Sumner, who I suspect would be the judge in determining Frederick's legitimacy. They also counted in their number a Tenant Jamison Argole.”

Niles let this information sink in. “You... you had information on a heretical sect for two *staryears*, and said *nothing* until now? Not to the Adjudicates... well, not if you count Sumner in their number, I suppose... but not even to...” He paused, and looked up at his son with increased understanding. “You thought I was in their group as well, didn't you?”

“I didn't know anyone outside of Sumner and Argole. I didn't want to risk it until I knew more. The only person I spoke of this to was Knight Emmitt Francisca. I bring it up now because this group seeks the throne, and I suspect will try and take it at any cost. They will know that Kari Farren left the planet, and I suspect will be preparing their next plan, if they don't already have it in motion.”

“And you expect me to act based on nothing more than your say?” Niles asked suspiciously, even as he knew his son was speaking what the younger Knight felt to be the truth. Timothy had left his mind unshielded for Niles to freely confirm that Timothy wasn't lying to his knowledge.

“No, I am informing you of my intentions...” Timothy then stopped when he felt the communicator attached to his belt vibrate. He examined the message given, and replied, “Kent is moving, and I suspect I know where. I need to cut this meeting short.”

Niles motioned to the side exit of his office that led to the courtyard. Knights occasionally used that courtyard as a quick and easy entrance and exit to the Command Center. It was open to the exterior, allowing Knights to teleport in and out at relative leisure... to the dismay of the standard Army security. “Be my guest. We are not done with this discussion, however.”

“I don't doubt it,” Timothy answered, and made his leave.

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Frederick was understandably a bit surprised when Timothy burst into his chambers within the palace. "Timothy... what are you doing here? Awfully early to be dashing about on your daily business, isn't it?"

"Your brother is coming, and I suspect he's not bearing good tidings," Timothy answered, taking Frederick by the forearm. "We need to meet him somewhere a little more open, like your living room."

"Why... isn't my brother here?" the man who would be King asked, then grew angry at Timothy insistent tugging. "I refuse to move another Tack until you tell me exactly what in Bannor is going on!"

"I'll explain in more detail once we're ready. I don't want to be in such close quarters when your brother arrives."

Frederick would not get such an explanation... as the moment they stepped out of his bedchambers, Kent slammed through the door, his face twisted in fury, and brandishing a plasma pistol usually reserved for the royal guard.

"So... you think to summon me here to gloat, dear *brother*..." the younger prince sneered. "You think you've won? The crown *will not* be yours, one way or the other."

"Have you gone mad, Kent?" Frederick said, aghast.

Timothy then interjected, "And do you think you can assassinate your brother and walk away with me standing here?"

"Ah yes, the noble and upright Knight Commandant," Kent laughed. "Do you think you have powerful friends, Freddie? I have powerful friends too... friends that will give me the crown, and ruin you, Timmy."

"Friends? Where do you... you listened to those freaks, didn't you?" Frederick deduced.

"Wait..." Timothy said, startled. "You *both* were approached by... who?"

Frederick didn't take his eyes off Kent, but answered Timothy's question. "It was about five staryears ago. It started with a plain text message sent over the GalNet. Curious, I pursued it for a short while... a group of heretics, as far as I can tell. Wanting some nonsense about reshaping all creation back to the Creator's grand design. I wasn't aware they had contacted Kent as well. I assume they promised you the crown if you accepted their mission?"

"I told them you wouldn't listen," Kent spat. "Just like I told them not to waste their time with you, Honore. Yes, Timmy... they were actually going to approach you as well, offer you command of the Knighthood whenever you decided you wanted it. Would *that* have been a mistake..."

Kent laughed. "They didn't trust me. They didn't think I was devoted enough to the cause. That's why they pursued honorable folk like you two in the first place. I'll show them how devoted to the cause I am. For your information, Mister Honore, I don't plan to walk out of here. I'm going to kill you both then..."

His final words were cut off with the crash of a plasma round to his head, incinerating the mad prince's skull and prompting his headless body to collapse to the floor, the cauterized stump of a neck barely leaking any blood.

Timothy and Frederick were then greeted by the visage of Niles Honore, standing in the doorway, lowering his sidearm back to its holster, members of the Royal Guard filtering in behind him as he stepped forward.

"It's rather funny," The old Knight commented casually. "The S.I.A. had been watching High Priest Clement for some time, suspecting that he might be harboring heretical views. So, I can't say I was all that surprised when they reported to me ten ticks ago that said High Priest had issued a message to Prince Kent saying it was time to prove he 'was one of them.'"

Timothy made a note to himself to commend his mother for her instincts... she had it pegged that the leader of the heretics was assuredly within the Priesthood, although even she probably hadn't expected it to be the man at the head of the faith.

Niles turned over the corpse carefully, and reached into the breast pocket, pulling out a black

prayer book that Timothy knew quite intimately. “The Knighthood is already in route to arrest Clement, but I suspect he won't go peacefully.” With a depressed sigh, he added, “I think that makes your friend Hightower the High Priest now, doesn't it?”

Timothy shrugged. “He's not exactly my friend, but yes, I suppose so.”

Niles huffed. “You both want to hear the really funny part now? Turns out Kent never got the message from Clement. He received a message from you first, Prince Frederick, wanting to discuss your succession with him. I must say, your highness, I was surprised at how carefully chosen your words were... almost like you were trying to goad him into a fight.”

Frederick boggled, “I sent no such thing!”

Niles smiled knowingly. “I figured as much. Turns out there was a splice committed to your messaging account. Pretty cleverly done too... had it not been for some of the best network analysts on the planet, it might not have ever been discovered. Sadly for us, the hacker used a scraper to format the messaging service's molecular drive so that we couldn't trace the contact logs.”

At this point, Niles was looking directly and triumphantly at his son. “I wonder who could have done that? He would have had to have been really sharp with computing systems... I know quite a few people who had high marks for that at the Academy.”

“We'll never really know, will we?” Timothy replied flatly.

“Timothy, you and I have a discussion we have to finish, as I recall. So why don't you return to Central while I help clean up here?” Niles ordered. Then to Frederick, he said, “We'll be out of your way quickly, your highness. Rather obvious what happened here, after all.”

Timothy complied, stepping past the Royal Guard on his way to the nearest exit. Contrary to appearances, whenever Niles got that nice, it meant he was in reality rather upset, and merely waiting for a relatively private place to explode.

Like his office, and at a son he didn't particularly like.

* * * * *

Emmitt Francisca was honestly surprised when he got the note that he was expected in the usual place. He had figured their movement had collapsed with Clement's death. The High Priest had killed himself rather than be taken prisoner, to preserve the rest of the movement's structure. Emmitt hadn't held that high a hope. No matter what anyone thought, not many things survived losing its head.

A mechanically disguised voice then said, “You have much to answer for, Francisca.”

Emmitt raised his eyebrows. A figure covered in black, a cowl covering his face became visible under a flash of dim lighting from above. Behind said figure was no doubt several lines of people, also cloaked to protect their identities. It was in fact meant to be a sign of shame and weakness for Emmitt to appear unshielded before the rest of the group. It meant he could be identified and eliminated easily by anyone within the order if he made another mistake.

“I see rumors of your demise were unfounded,” Emmitt noted, although for all he knew, the person assuming the head of the order could change by the tenth-cycle. He was always covered, his voice always masked, and always had left their meeting place first and was long departed before anyone else was even allowed to exit the building.

“High Priest Clement was a prominent member of the order, but not the highest one. Do not assume rank and file within the thin veneer called Solarian society to correctly emulate where *true* power lies,” The Chief of the Order declared. “And do not assume your standing and power will save you from my judgment.”

“Wouldn't dream of it,” Emmitt answered.

“Then why, on the verge of everything we sought coming to pass, did you defy me?” the automated voice accused. “Why did you assist in thwarting the ascension of your brother Kent? And why would you implicate brother Clement in the message *you* sent?”

It was clearly time to get serious about this, Emmitt decided. “You are a fool. You think too little of the 'veneer' you call it to the point where you ignore the true flow of power. The monarchy is weak. The crown is barely a pillar of Solarian society, much less the pillar that will cause it to topple.”

“Is that so?” the Chief said, Emmitt was fairly certain despite the monotone automation it was meant to be mocking. “Then inform us on what you would do.”

“What I am already doing, you mean,” Emmitt replied. “You missed the second message I sent, from Frederick to Kent, which I promptly led Supreme Commander Niles Honore to believe came from his son.”

Then, the Knight revealed his grand plan. “The power to collapse Solarian Society is through the Knighthood, the pillar you felt you could not corrupt. Already, I have sown the seeds of discord, and have accelerated the animosity between father and son. I can feel it forming already, two separate armies forming within the army itself. A grand rebellion that will shake the noble houses to their core, and lead to the collapse of the society you wish to claim.”

“I do not approve of you acting on your own accord, even for the Order's benefit,” the Chief declared. “But... you have bought yourself a stay of execution, Knight Francisca. I will study your progress, and evaluate what you believe to be true. You play a dangerous game. Succeed, and you will earn your place as my highest hand. If you fail, death will become a welcome escape.”

“I'm used to playing all or nothing, sir,” Emmitt responded. “My entire life has been lived on a blade's edge. I'm hardly afraid of this.”