

Worlds Away

Contrary to popular belief, Jonathan Feroz had little trouble adjusting to life in a secular academy. He hadn't been trained traditionally Kiros to begin with. In fact, outside of his family name, there was little Jonathan could rightfully label himself “Kiros” about.

Past his fourth birthday, he hadn't spent more than a handful of days on Kiros itself, let alone attend the academies for the nobility. Even his own mother, as close to a Kiros supremacist as a person can get without being overtly racist, didn't want her son being subjected to such poor excuses for noble learning. His own psionic and hand-to-hand combat training had been done by a Solarian – at least in body – and the style he learned, Doten Gurido, was entirely from the Solarian tradition.

His own life had been filled with enough multicultural experience that he had very few qualms about the “deviance” and “alternate lifestyles” that he potentially faced within the Glorindal Military Academy.

No, the problem was that the academy seemed to have trouble adjusting to *him*.

His fellow students walked on eggshells around him, despite all his efforts to try and make them comfortable with his presence. He often had to assure his peers at least three times that he wasn't interested in stealing their thoughts, nor was he going to judge them for whatever hobbies or behaviors they had. That wasn't the way he was... the people who raised him and trained him made sure of that.

But even worse was the faculty. Near to a man, the professors and administrators of Glorindal Military Academy had decided Jonathan was a celebrity personality they had to break, ridicule, and put in his proper place, especially after he had tested into their highest class upon admission to the academy. That he did so in spite of being forbidden to use psionics for any point of the testing, even during the martial combat sections, only made them more determined.

And among them, no one was worse than Professor Jeremiah Snead: a surly, bitter, Arcadian man with an even more grizzled and unfriendly appearance.

Jonathan honestly respected the man's experience: thirty staryears of Covert Ops for both the Arcadian Planetary Defense Corps and the Galactic Alliance's Special Assignments Force. He had served as personal protection for two Premiers and four Council members.

And he knew his wartime history. Professor Snead could, with a surgeon's precision, break down and analyze any battle, skirmish, or exchange between any number of combatants over the last two hundred and fifty staryears with unerring attention to detail and knowledge.

When the professor tried to get into Erani religious war however, he appeared relatively uninformed, much like today in his current lecture. Jonathan suspected this was intentional, an attempt to incite a disrespectful response that Snead could then exercise as a reason for severe reprimand.

Professor Snead clearly didn't realize that he wasn't even the *second* most difficult person Jonathan's ever dealt with.

Snead was taking a fairly significant deviation with his current subject, going into the details of the Second Battle of Mydor... or what few details were available, at any rate. Truth being, the entire battle devolved into near chaos quickly, and there were very few people with the foresight to record and archive exactly what had been happening as the demonic hordes rushed out of the Second Gate like a tide made of claws and teeth.

What remained were orbital outlays of where the different regiments were engaged and a mess of fragmented videos and voice recordings. Professor Snead subjected his pupils to every shred of information they had.

“The Second Battle of Mydor was, supposedly, a major battle in this galaxy's history. Putting aside the immediate flaw of racial pride that compelled the Erani sects to try and handle this force on their own rather than beseech the Galactic Alliance for help—”

From the other side of the classroom, Jonathan heard a barely discernible mumble. “Like the

Alliance would have sent assistance to fight 'fairy tales'..."

Snead's head jerked up in Jonathan's direction accusingly, his train of thought interrupted. Jonathan leaned back casually and shrugged. The young man was astonished not at the suspicion that he had spoken, but that Snead had heard anything at all. Even with Jonathan's "superior" Erani sense of hearing, he had barely overheard the comment himself.

But Jonathan was mildly curious as to who had spoken. He had not come to the secular Glorindal Military Academy expecting much support for his people, culture, and faith, and had not received much. In fact, the grudging tolerance of what he supposedly represented was a far cry better than the reception he had anticipated.

So to hear what sounded like a sympathetic voice piqued his interest. It was definitely a woman's voice, but he hadn't been able to pick up any particulars in tone or sound that would betray the speaker. He probably could have started working through the minds of the ladies in the class in the general direction of where he had heard the mumbling... but he had been told quite firmly that such things were only acceptable in situations of grave importance.

Somehow Jonathan doubted that his master would qualify this as "grave importance."

"As I was saying, removing the diplomatic blunder of not asking for Alliance aid in what was supposedly a 'galactic scale threat,' the Erani sects made several other critical strategic errors that I believe made what could have been a survivable conflict into a catastrophic disaster."

Snead paused the video feed displays that he had been running on permanent loop. "These extra-planar entities—"

The professor again was interrupted, this time by a derisive scoff. The more atheist among the galaxy stubbornly refused to call the demons from Bannor as such, when finally confronted by the fairly indisputable proof of the monsters' existence. So, rather than "demons," the creatures became "extra-planar entities" that simply *happened* to have the same motivations and behaviors that ancient Erani religious texts claimed.

It sounded like the same voice, and from the same direction, even as the professor's eyes leveled angrily on Justin. "Is there something you wish to add, Mister Feroz?"

Justin shook his head slowly, even as his lips turned upward in amusement and he put his arms comfortably behind his head. "Not at all. Do continue."

The professor was not amused, as he grunted, then resumed. "As I was saying, these extra-planar entities were of superior strength and build, as well as highly resistant to standard plasma munitions and even the psionic talents of the Erani. Common rationality and strategic sense would dictate that you would need to concentrate your forces. Instead..." Snead punctuated his point by switching the feed to the tactical layout data compiled by the Solarian Dreadnoughts upon their return to galactic space, "the Erani spread themselves into a wide perimeter around the Gate, rendering any possibility of breaking the line minimal."

Then with a chuckle, he added, "Of course, an even *better* move would have been to withdraw from the field entirely, then initiate an orbital bombardment. Such a large scale assault was not impossible for the Erani... after all, they had already demonstrated that on an Alliance colony world—"

Finally, the slander was too much for the mysterious voice to remain inconspicuous. As Jonathan had expected, it was a woman on the other side of the room who jumped to her feet, hands slamming on her desktop. "I came here to learn wartime history, not a spiteful diatribe towards a people and a faith. I'm sorry that your analytical mind can't process ideals like protecting innocent lives, like the Se-Lan survivors as that Gate opened on Mydor, or that your precious Arcadian leaders you protected 'back in your day' were the ones that incited the Baramak Slaughter."

She leveled an accusing finger towards the professor. "And I am frankly tired of you, and your colleagues', attempts to demean Mister Feroz because he *dared* prove himself superior to your tests, and that his abilities are proving to be everything they were advertised. Perhaps if you stopped trying to put him in his place and rather helped him reach his full potential, you could go about helping the

rest of us do the same.”

Jonathan knew that girl... he really did. He had three different courses with her every day. She was Arcadian, not surprisingly, with dark auburn hair and a dusting of freckles across her cheeks. He remembered her having very fetching green eyes, even though he couldn't see them from his current angle. He also recalled that she was a fairly shapely young lady, from what he could discern when she was in combat armor.

Which made the fact that he couldn't remember her name somewhat embarrassing.

“Cadet Gronie, while I appreciate your zeal, I do not appreciate your tone or your presumption that you are here to lecture me,” Snead replied coldly.

Jonathan almost snapped his fingers in recollection. Talia Gronie; a name he should have remembered, considering she was frequently in his same percentile. He really didn't know all that much about her except that she routinely scored high marks in most disciplines, and frequently surpassed him in some.

He was quite surprised to see her speak up. She was normally very quiet in class, not liking to be the center of attention. She'd likely make a great secondary officer, but was probably not suited for the more vocal requirements of a command position.

“Why don't you take a trip to Administration, and talk to the Disciplinary Commander?” Professor Snead then ordered. “I will not have this sort of behavior in my class. You are dismissed, Cadet.”

Talia set her jaw, and didn't need to be asked twice. She straightened proudly and took a quick march straight out the door in the rear of the classroom, taking a sharp right in the hall.

Snead, nonetheless, was not the least bit ready to let Jonathan off the hook. “If I find out that you in any way influenced Cadet Gronie to act out, I will have your stripes and your head.”

And *that* finally crossed the line with Jonathan. He stood at attention, glared with malice born of the last two staryears, and snapped, “If you had half the expertise about Erani morals and the nature of their power that you claim, you'd know better than to level such baseless accusations.” Not even giving Professor Snead a chance to reply, Jonathan left his seat heading towards the exit. “I'll show myself out.”

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Jonathan knew the Disciplinary Commander rather well. Not because he was often sent to the commander's office; he went to great effort to avoid trouble. Rather, Commander Liran Harken sought out the young Kiros man, to introduce himself and assure Jonathan that he would be nothing but fair and even-handed.

Jonathan was about to find out if those were merely words or not.

Commander Harken's office was unusually sloppy for someone of a typical military background, with stacks of folders and open boxes along the walls, and an overflowing wastebasket next to the paper-swathed desk. Then again, the standards and expectations for the Arcadian military was far different than what Jonathan had been told of the Kiros military during his father's day, and his experience with the Solarian military was just as rigid and immaculate.

Not to say that the Arcadian methods were worse – merely *different*. Jonathan found that he liked their attitude that focused more on results instead of giving appearances equal billing, and the clutter of papers was a result of the Arcadian insistence that anything that could be electronically stored should also have a hard copy equivalent, just in case.

Talia was already seated when Jonathan's arrival was announced, Liran casually gesturing to the remaining seat with his free hand. “Cadet Feroz, sit, join us. Professor Snead wasted no time sending his reprimand... which I find mildly disturbing since his class should still be in session.”

Jonathan took his seat, keeping his focus straight ahead, rather than on the cadet next to him.

He really wanted to get a good look at her face, to try and get a read on her state, but didn't want to test customary military protocol. He wasn't about to risk even a low-energy surface scan of her thoughts... while the sensors installed throughout the base to keep Jonathan "honest" theoretically didn't have the sensitivity to detect such minor output, this really wasn't the time to test that theory.

Liran read the professor's report aloud, which – despite Snead's animosity during the lecture – was accurate to the smallest detail, including his thinly veiled threat to Jonathan after Talia had been dismissed. Neither cadet found much of worth to contest as a result. They could at least give Professor Snead credit for that.

"I'll be perfectly honest, Cadet Feroz, that it sounds like the worst thing you did was leave the classroom without being dismissed. Cadet Gronie, while openly challenging a superior is a major infraction, I think I can recommend leniency from the Academy Captain. Coming to the defense of our fellows, either through actions or words, is something we try to encourage."

"Considering she was coming to my defense, I think it's only fair that I receive whatever punitive measures Cadet Gronie receives," Jonathan requested.

"To prevent accusations that the academy is showing you favoritism, no doubt," Liran assumed.

Jonathan denied, "No, sir. I may be attending a secular academy, but I have a code of honor among my people that I am compelled to follow, no matter where I am. It would not be proper to that code to allow myself to take a lesser burden for those who came to my aid."

Liran shook his head bemusedly. "I do not pretend to understand your faith, or even the Erani in general, but very well. I will extend that recommendation. You are both dismissed until your next period class. I suspect final judgment will be rendered no later than morning call of next cycle."

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The judgment was handed down before evening meal call, in fact; both Talia and Jonathan receiving three cycles of kitchen duty. It really was a very light punishment, even though the Glorindal Military Academy still did much of the kitchen work by hand.

It actually gave him the opportunity to get to talk to this woman whom he really had no excuse to know so little about, given the lax protocols of dish washing duty after morning meal calls.

Talia however, seemed not quite as forthcoming.

Attempts at small talk were met either with no acknowledgment at best, or a scathing glare at worst. It was starting to scare him a little. And it didn't help matters that she was taller than him, so she could add an intimidating stare down her nose to the silent dismissal, before diving to her elbows in soap suds and water, nearly throwing scrubbed plates, pans, and other dishes at Jonathan for him to rinse, sanitize, and set to dry.

"I've been trying to be nice," Jonathan noted, keeping his voice conversational. "You could at least say you have no interest talking to me."

Talia barely turned her head, grunted in displeasure, and went back to work.

It would be so easy just to reach into her head and find out what was churning in there... but to do so would only confirm a great number of the negative stereotypes held against the Erani. Stupid morals, always getting in the way.

"Are you upset that I insisted on being punished for what happened? Did it ring as somehow chauvinist or insulting to you?" Jonathan guessed, giving a moment to set a tray to dry before looking back to see if his guess was on the mark.

If the angry scowl was any indication, he was not. Fortunately, Talia chose that time to break her silence and help the poor fellow out.

"I'm angry because I had to defend your people and beliefs for you," she hissed. "Professor Snead had been besmirching you and everything you stood for for damn near two staryears now, and you've just been taking it without a fight!"

“And what good would have bickering about it done?” Jonathan said in defense. “Prove that I'm a smug, arrogant, elitist that you all thought I was the moment I stepped onto the base? They're going to have their attitudes, and there's little I can do to change them.”

“Why should you care what anyone else thinks?” she retorted. “You're going to leave here and return to what amounts to monarchy on Kiros.”

“I *have* to care, Cadet Gronie,” he answered. “I pretty much represent the Erani to everyone in this academy and on this base. I *have* to be aware as to how I present myself and how I am viewed. It's not particularly fair, but I accepted that the moment I signed my academy orders.” With a defeated exhale of breath, Jonathan added, “Besides, this 'monarchy' on Kiros is a disaster I want no part of. That's why I'm here and not learning from the Knighthood like my father and grandfathers for the last fifteen hundred staryears had. It's a mess on Kiros.”

Talia knew that Kiros was in bad shape, of course, but hearing it from one of the culture's most prominent family members made it a bit more real. “Well, I guess I figured you'd want to return home to help fix the problems,” she sheepishly admitted.

“The problems with my people are far beyond what one man can fix,” Jonathan explained. “I can't make stodgy old relics accept that things have to change. I can't force people to do work that is 'beneath them.' I can't make people accept that, just maybe, the Kiros people aren't the greatest culture to ever emerge from the primordial muck and that perhaps they can take cues from other races as to how to progress in this new way of life.”

“I'm going to focus on what is best for me, and that isn't on Kiros, and probably won't be for as long as I live. I plan on joining the SAF upon graduation. Wherever I go from there will be for the Admiralty Board to decide. I figure I'll rise through the ranks quickly once I'm allowed to show everything I'm capable of.”

The Special Assignment Force was a specialist unit under the auspices of the Galactic Parliament rather than any single racial or planetary body. It was not easy to get accepted into their number, which usually came by nomination from a current or former Commander within the SAF and final approval of a member of the Parliament Council. To become a Commander in the SAF needed the approval of the Joint Admiralty Board and the Premier himself.

On average, only the top one tenth of one percent of the cadets at the Glorindal Academy were even considered for those orders, going up against elite cadets from other academies and service veterans who distinguished themselves over the years. Jonathan had definitely set a high goal for himself... not that Talia could think of any reason he shouldn't. He had spent his entire life preparing himself to be the best at whatever he chose to do. His family no doubt gave him the best education and training the galaxy could offer.

And it's not like he didn't have the academy rankings to back that up. When she considered he was among the top three Cadets in every discipline and every class in spite of being forbidden to use the one talent that *defined* his people... why shouldn't he set his sights to the very top?

“I'm sure you'll get there, and sooner rather than later,” Talia affirmed.

Pausing when the kitchen boss stared them down to make sure the two were still working and not just chatting, Jonathan eventually asked, “What about you? What's your goal?”

“Everyone wants to be a sniper and scout specialist nowadays,” Talia said with a shrug. “I probably won't have much say in where I go. I suspect Antheria would take me on as a Special Ops Peacekeeper... at least I hope.”

“Antheria... that's on the planet Osir, right? Is that your home city?”

“Not, exactly. I lived in a much smaller community about three tenth-cycles away by hover,” Talia explained. “Easier to just tell people that I come from Antheria than to say I'm from Rapids Ferry. My family was mostly farmers and craftsmen... it wasn't a life I particularly was interested in. I enlisted in the Junior Peacekeeper Corps at fourteen, and by the time I was eighteen, I had impressed enough people that they pushed to get me into this academy.”

Jonathan occasionally forgot that he was three staryears younger than the average third-year academy student. It was surprising that such a detail could slip his mind, considering that many of the more... insipid... students tried, with little subtlety, to remind him of that on a cycle's basis.

“Doesn't the rules the academy puts on you bother you though? The double standard they created and then decided to enforce?” Talia asked, something that had been eating at her for some time. “If I had a gift, and someone told me that I couldn't use it, I can't imagine putting up with it.”

“If it makes them sleep better at night thinking they're proving something, so be it,” Jonathan said. “My master suggested I think of the psionic restriction as manufactured adversity. I'm going to face adversity all my life, and I can't let it frustrate me. This is good practice, I guess.”

“Is maintaining composure at all times part of the training you had before coming here?”

Jonathan laughed at the understatement of the cycle. “You have no idea how much emphasis was put on control and composure. It was drilled in my head from the time I was old enough to remember. My psionic potential is higher than damn near any mortal either the Solarians or the Kiros has ever seen. I have to be diligently disciplined with it, as I could cause serious harm if I acted carelessly.”

Talia's mind wrapped around this. “I guess I never thought of it that way. I guess it's not all wonderful and easy for you, is it?”

“Easier than most,” Jonathan admitted. “I'm not going to pretend I'm disadvantaged or have it rougher than anyone else.” He paused for a moment, careful about dropping people's names at the academy. “A... mentor of mine... liked to say that no one has a clear path through life; there's no reason to make it rougher with how you view the road. I'm going to do what it takes to reach my full potential, and let others deal with that however they will. I'm not afraid of the obstacles and I'm not going to run from them.”

Talia grinned in spite of herself. “Do you actually *believe* that load of backwash?”

Jonathan's shoulders slumped in resignation. “No. I think it's ridiculous that I'm being handicapped, and I'd be a lot more vocal about it if I wouldn't literally be flayed alive by my mother and my master.”

“Now, that finally sounds honest,” she said with a genuine smile, deciding it was time to really focus on dishes with the way the kitchen boss was now openly glaring at both of them.

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It was 2.33 of the Early Ten when Jonathan heard the knock on his door. As a military man, early morning wake-up calls were not unusual... but not quite this early, and not by a knock on the door to his quarters.

Not to mention this was one of the two off-cycles in every ten-cycle that cadets were afforded in the academy. Being stirred at this early morning hour was not high on his list of favorite things.

His mind, wrapped around who and why, became more confused as he opened the door to no one, only an envelope tucked into the door frame that dropped to the floor. In an age where messages could be sent over the GalNet in the blink of an eye, to try and deliver a message covertly in hard copy was a bit on the peculiar side.

Then again, if you were trying to remain inconspicuous, doing so in the form of a physical letter was the way to go, at least in the short term. Analysis of hard copy took time as the letter changed hands, as opposed to the hundreds of tech experts that can begin breaking down a GalNet transmission within the tick of it being sent.

Which nonetheless left the fairly important detail of what exactly was *in* the message he had just acquired.

It was likely another attempt at a “camaraderie-building prank,” as the academy staff liked to call it. There was a more malicious element among the cadets that found pleasure in tormenting their

peers, a difference in the Arcadian military methods that Jonathan found to be distinctly inferior to the Erani style. In his experience, the Kiros and the Solarians had very little tolerance for this foolishness, expecting their initiates to have grown up and behaved like adults by the time they were in the Knighthood Academy.

Moments like these were also the rare circumstance where Jonathan tested the sensitivity of the psionic sensors on the base, allowing his mind to drift towards any sentient beings nearby, merely to get a hint of the mood around him. It wasn't difficult to glean malice or mischievousness and prepare himself accordingly.

There was no such sentiment he could sense, which didn't help at all, and left him with only one real option to proceed.

To throw the letter away and go back to sleep.

But he hadn't even reached the wastebasket before his curiosity got the better of him. In resignation, he lifted the unsealed flap and reached inside, pulling out a hastily typeset note, judging from the three spelling errors and a run-on word. Nevertheless, it wasn't difficult to decipher its meaning.

“We would like you to attend the First Joint Faith of the Creator service today at 9.00 ET. We hold temple at the basement level of the Moor Community Activities Complex on the corner of 40th North and 7th East,” Jonathan read, his eyebrows lifting in curiosity.

Moor wasn't exactly a city for the faithful. Jonathan had to pretend he spent every cycle of worship in Yaral, the Solarian-controlled city in Glorindal, because his mother wouldn't have believed him otherwise.

Truth being, he had no need to share within the “community of believers.” Jonathan could not recall attending a temple service unless his mother had forced him. If he was being totally honest with himself, a significant reason he chose to attend this academy was that he wasn't required to attend services like he would have in the Erani Knighthood academies.

It wasn't that he didn't believe. He did... it was rather hard *not* to when you're surrounded with the people Jonathan had in his life. Yet they didn't hold much sanctity in temple attendance themselves. Rumil, the prophet an entire damn sect was built around, attends such services all of four times a staryear, and only because it keeps the peace between the three major temples. Jonathan's master, one of the Archangels that served as a *foundation* for the entire faith, had attended services only out of obligation during his time as a Solarian Knight.

Jonathan honestly felt that was one of the reasons Timothy wanted people to think he had ascended to Annor after the Second Battle of Mydor... and Jonathan couldn't blame him.

But the idea that there was a service, even a small one, trying to advertise in the almost oppressively atheistic Arcadian culture was something so unique that it might be worth exploring. At best, it would prove to be entertaining. At worst, he'd uncover a potentially dangerous heretical sect, as a fair number of unconventional services would be. Or this could simply be a preposterously elaborate joke.

It wouldn't take him long to get to the address in question, knowing the CAC building quite well due to occasional volunteer time for whatever cause sounded good enough to fulfill his mandatory allotment by the academy... which meant he had a good five tenth-cycles to kill.

He spent them going back to sleep.

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The invitation gained a bit of legitimacy when Jonathan arrived at the center shortly past 9.00 ET, and met with the receptionist inside the lobby of the CAC.

She was an older woman, probably about his mother's age, only without the benefits of health and appearance that wealth and noble standing would bring. Plain shoulder-length brown hair slowly

being commanded by gray and the first signs of wrinkles were the more noticeable features. Closer inspection revealed the beginnings of stress in her joints as they started to protest the repeated movements of decades.

Due to repeated robbery attempts over the staryears, the lady was now secure behind clear ballistic- and heat-resistant panels, looking through the reinforced glass in confusion as he approached. His name, the publicity following him, and the fact that he was an Erani in a majority Arcadian city made him easy to identify.

“Mister Feroz! Are you scheduled for work today? Haven't you done your duty for the period?” she said in astonishment, turning quickly to her duty roster.

“I have,” Jonathan said, waving his hand to grab her attention before she became engrossed in checking to make sure she was correct. “I am here for the Joint Faith service that's taking place downstairs. Do I still need to sign in for that?”

An annoyed frown appeared on the receptionist's face. Clearly, the service wasn't a joke; the disdain in the woman's voice was nothing but genuine. “No, and I'd rather you didn't even if you were supposed to.”

The implication was clear to Jonathan's ears. While the general law of Glorindal required tolerance of all religious and philosophical thought within the world station, that didn't mean that anyone had to *like* it. The CAC would likely not want to advertise the fact they were hosting such gatherings; they had enough trouble with robberies without adding religious backlash to the list of problems.

It was also fairly obvious that due to the racial composition of Moor, the chances that this particular service would have Arcadian worshipers was extremely high. These people would likely not want their attendance to be a matter of public record, hence why there was no sign-in customary to people using the facilities of the CAC.

Arcadian believers – what few there were – had probably one of the worst paths to acceptance of any sentient being. Centuries of open disdain from the typical Arcadian made the Erani extremely distrustful of any Arcadians trying to join their number, fearing attempts at subversion, even in the Joint Faith temples that were *founded* on the teachings of an Arcadian woman. While such foolhardy attempts to destroy the faith from within had been made, they were far less frequent than the Erani wanted to believe, and were caught long before anyone could attain the authority necessary to even hope to inject such poison into the faith.

There was no damage atheists could do to the community of believers that said believers could not do more efficiently, and more effectively, by themselves.

Meanwhile, Arcadians that were discovered to be members of an Erani temple were openly mocked, reviled, and discriminated for their choice. Little was done legally on Arcadian-dominated worlds to stop such bullying, despite being violations of galactic law.

“Well, I shall get out of your way then. Don't worry, I'll be quiet,” Jonathan said, winking in an effort to disarm while hiding his own disdain for the attitudes around him in this city.

The receptionist made no such effort herself. “The gathering will be at the end of the hall to your left when you reach the basement level. It's normally a storage room, so occasionally it smells like cleaning chemicals. There's nothing we can do about it, so don't bother complaining.”

The elevator was on the south side of the reception area, across from the desk. It had seen better days, Jonathan figured... at least he hoped so. He couldn't imagine a building planner saying, “Yeah, for the lift, I want something like looked like it was fashioned from rust, and swayed on its guides while making a perilous creaking noise anytime it moved half a Tack.”

Then again, the Erani never had anything quite like the Arcadian's “Decaying Period,” an artistic movement that thought the deconstruction and collapse of civilization was beautiful, and sought to capture it in their art. Perhaps the building designer happened to be a fan of the movement, and Jonathan's nervous tension and building psionic presence was simply because this silly Erani just didn't

“get it.”

That didn't change the fact that, like always, Jonathan wasted no time getting off that potential safety hazard.

He had never been to the basement level of the Community Activities Complex, having no reason to go there before. It was mostly what he expected: bare walls with layers of paint attempting to hide slight water staining, using concrete as the primary building material rather than more expensive but easier to maintain fiberwall. Underneath his feet, a beaten-down and stiff brown carpeting crunched underneath his shoes as he followed the receptionist's directions and took a quick left.

A pair of steel double doors painted dark blue didn't quite silence the sounds of solemn and unpracticed singing from the other side.

Erani were not particularly known for their artistic expression: singing, literature, art, dance... you name it, the Erani had only dabbled in it in a historical sense. The sentiment was that people only pursued such things as careers when they were either unwilling or unable to make a meaningful contribution to society.

Their religious services demonstrated this: singing during worship was a very recent development, influenced by believers from different racial backgrounds. The new Joint Faith Temple reflected this change best, so Jonathan figured he shouldn't be surprised this particular service would have as well.

He knew he was late, having intended it to avoid mingling. Nonetheless, entering in the middle of a hymn would be in even poorer taste than Jonathan was willing to engage in. He waited until the singing was completed before he slowly pushed open the right side door, and slipped inside.

Fortunately, it appeared the service-goers had anticipated late arrivals, as it turned out that he had walked into a partition-created entry room with an opening leading to the main worship space. Thus, his entry didn't disturb the service outside of a handful of people in the rear who turned to see who their visitor was.

It certainly wasn't the elaborate setup that he had experienced in his childhood. Brightly illuminated from the open lights above, several rows of metal chairs in a semi-circle surrounded the minister, an Arcadian man with a surprisingly casual tan suit, black tie, and a brown mono-PCU that Jonathan figured contained the information he was using for the service.

More conservative elements would consider this a service in name only, if not open heresy. Using a PCU to deliver the wisdom of the Prophets rather than a hard copy book was a taboo even Jonathan was aware of. Some would even find the use of artificial lighting to be an insult to the divine natural fire of the Creator.

The minister didn't even give Jonathan a passing glance, dedicated on proceeding with the next phase of the service, which was essentially a meet and greet. This segue gave Jonathan an opportunity to find a seat without disturbing the proceedings any more than necessary.

And the young Kiros man found the perfect place very quickly. An unexpected spot... but perfect nonetheless.

Talia Gronie nearly jumped out of her skin when Jonathan snuck up behind her and said, “Well, now I understand why you jumped to 'my defense' so readily against the slander of Professor Snead. And here I had thought your intentions were entirely altruistic.”

She spun about, completely forgetting the person she had been chatting with, her entire face blushing vividly. “You... you came,” she mumbled.

“I did,” Jonathan answered, relishing Talia's embarrassment. “Am I right in guessing that you were the one who slipped the invitation in my door at 2.30 ET?”

Talia nodded in confirmation. “I... I didn't want to be rejected to my face. I know how some... of your people are towards Arcadian believers.”

“And what had led you to the conclusion I was like that?” Jonathan queried, now legitimately concerned that he had come across as somehow judgmental.

Talia quickly waved off that potential implication. “No! Nothing! Trust me! I'm just... used to being careful about my faith and the expression of it. It's a habit, I guess.”

Jonathan was probably taking far too much enjoyment out of seeing Talia so flustered. It ran so contrary to her normally reserved and professional manner that she usually exercised anywhere else. Her blush brought out the color of her eyes, a hue that Jonathan had not been used to seeing until he had come to Glorindal.

Arcadians had a wonderful panorama of eye colors, as opposed to Erani which were near monochrome in comparison. Blue, brown, or gray were the vast majority for his people – any other colors implied a substandard genetic background, and that simply wasn't acceptable for association with someone of Jonathan's family. The variation had been bled out of the Erani gene pool over the generations to the point where only a mutation created anything outside the norm.

Jonathan loved the variety, personally. It intrigued him.

Sadly, he was unable to corner Talia any further as he acquired a small audience, and Talia used their interference to slip off into the background. But Jonathan wasn't about to let his quarry escape. After the minister ceased the greeting portion, he allowed Jonathan to introduce himself to the congregation.

Unsurprisingly, the fellow members of the service turned nervous upon the invocation of his family name, but the minister managed to restore order, warmly welcoming Jonathan. When Jonathan returned the greeting with all the familiarity afforded equals, the tension in the room broke and Jonathan was invited to take a seat.

The young Kiros man located Talia again, seated in the farthest row in the corner of the circle to the right of the center, and sat down comfortably in the chair next to her. Again, the girl jerked apprehensively, her shoulder bumping his in the process and earning her an amused grin and chuckle.

“Stop picking on me,” she hissed in a whisper.

“I'm not doing anything other than be here, like you wanted,” he teased, turning his attention back towards the minister, who was preparing to start his sermon.

Let no one say that preachers of the Erani temples were not vain, as Jonathan could clearly see the minister had dyed his hair blond, judging from the gray roots that had snuck out of the man's scalp.

“Yeah, isn't his hair terrible?” Talia noted, correctly determining Jonathan's focus. “He's not even naturally blond, as I'm told. He dyes his hair to honor the Sixth Prophet. Most Arcadian ministers do.”

He shushed her with a smile, causing her to blush again, this time in annoyance.

At that same time, the minister pressed into the meat of his sermon. “Pride in our faith is not a lesson that any of us here probably feels they need to learn, but it is a lesson that should occasionally be reinforced. As Trashal wrote, 'Pride is the opening shot of the Defiler in the war for our souls. Our path is not one of glory, it is one of necessity. All things start and end with the Creator, we are merely the instruments of his greater design.' That design might not take you down the road you expect, but it is a design that you must trust in.”

Jonathan fought not to roll his eyes. For a man supposedly trying to honor the Sixth Prophet by dyeing his hair yellow, he completely missed her entire message. *There is no design. This material world is ours*, she would often say. *Even my prophecies are not inevitable, they are merely a warning. I wish I had understood that sooner... perhaps your father would still be alive.*

“My mentor is a great example of this. He was a missionary in training, and had never expected that his path would take him to Glorindal. His pride had led him down the path to enlighten the masses... he told me that at that time, he felt he was pursuing his work for the Creator, not doing the Creator's work. Up until his final days as a student, he had assumed his path would lead to a colony world working four-tenth-cycle days providing counseling for potential heretics. His path was revealed in a chance meeting with the Sixth Prophet herself.”

“My mentor was... practicing his craft on Kiros, as he called it with more than due chagrin,

when he was approached by a blond Arcadian and her Kiros Knight escort. Actually, I do believe it was your father, Mr. Feroz.”

“Knight Commandant Justin Feroz?” Jonathan asked. “If that was the name, then yes, it was.” Jonathan now had a very clear understanding of the tale being told, and he was rather curious to see how far different this second hand re-telling would be from his first hand account.

“He had assumed he could dazzle this young woman with his knowledge of the Prophets' texts, and encourage them to add to his offering purse. Instead, this Arcadian woman flummoxed his words, turned them on himself, shamed his prideful knowledge, then took his ill-gotten gains while her noble escort sent him away to contemplate his actions.”

“Rather than do so, the missionary followed the pair... his pride refusing to accept that he had been trumped by an Arcadian woman. Their path led to a homeless camp, where the golden-haired woman summarily granted the credits she had taken with those less fortunate.”

Jonathan barely held back his derisive laughter. Rumil's own admission was that she was effectively trying to humiliate the missionary, then for all intents and purposes robbed him blind. As for his father, Justin had dismissed the missionary with callous disinterest, figuring the man had it coming. The bit of handing the money to the homeless had been only one child, thrown through the links of the fence effectively holding the girl prisoner because she was too afraid to come closer.

The minister continued on with his exaggerated story. “Humbled by this 'lesser being', he momentarily lost his will to serve... and sometimes he wondered if he ever even had it to begin with. It began a downward spiral where he fell out of favor with the Kiros Temple, lost his status as a missionary, and turned to drugs, hedonism, and despair. He described himself as the most despicable excuse of a sentient being.”

“It was not until three staryears later, seemingly by chance, that this now wretched man stumbled across an open GalNet console portraying an address by that same blond Arcadian woman to what was the first meeting of the Joint Faith believers on Baramak. The woman who had humiliated him had been trying to *teach* him. The Sixth had shown him the way to serve the Creator... through action; with charity, kindness, tolerance, and then acceptance. His road was not to follow what had already been done... but to spread this new word, this better word, to where it had not traveled before.”

“It was not a path for the prideful... it was a path for the honest and pure-hearted. It's a road my mentor still travels, having crossed this galaxy twice now, telling all who are willing to hear his story, so that we all may learn from the lessons taught him those decades ago.”

As the minister then began to extrapolate on identifying pride within themselves and how to fight its “insidious pull,” Jonathan felt Talia's shoulder again bump his, but this time it felt deliberate, an attempt to grab his attention.

Looking over to her proved this to be true, as Talia was almost hovering over his shoulder, trying to whisper into his ear. “Is that true?”

Jonathan's lips tightened. “For the most part... at least, from what I know. Some of the minor details are exaggerated, I suspect.”

“Did your father really know the Sixth Prophet? Have you met her?”

Jonathan composed his answer carefully. “My father knew Rumil Bonamede. He died before she came to be regarded as the Sixth Prophet. There's a distinction... I'll tell you later about it if you're still interested. As for me... I've come across her once or twice.”

Perhaps that was a bit of an understatement. Or maybe he was leaving out the “every tenth-cycle” part at the end of “once or twice.” Rumil's name wasn't something he liked to drop, mostly because she hated it when people did. So, his association with her – namely, living in her manor for nearly twelve staryears – was not something that he openly shared with others.

“So is she anything like what I'm told about her? I guess not, judging from the distinction you claim there is.”

Jonathan answered, “No, she actually is... but her development into what she became and her

keen observations on mortal nature didn't happen exactly the way believers want to think it happened. I'll talk to you later about it if you want... but it *is* very rude to chat during a sermon.”

He was beginning to realize that he did indeed enjoy it far too much when Talia blushed. She looked unbearably adorable when she did.

* * * * *

There was public transit they could have taken from the CAC on 40th North and the Glorindal Military Academy on 80th South. Or Jonathan could have teleported there, and taken Talia along for the ride, had he so desired.

But for highly conditioned military kids, a twelve-TackMet walk through the middle of Moor wasn't as daunting as it would have been for most. Besides, it was their rest day... the last thing either of them wanted was to hurry back to the dormitory.

It also gave Talia time to ask Jonathan to expand more on what he had said about Rumil during the sermon.

“That's what happened?” Talia boggled as Jonathan related Rumil's version of the minister's tale. “Talk about glorifying after the fact.” Her lips turned down in a frown. “I suppose that I shouldn't be surprised. No one is ever as wonderful as the tales told of them are.”

“Rumil Bonamede, by my experience, is a perfectly wonderful person in her own right. But it was a path that took many staryears and considerable experience to reach. To hear her story as she tells it is *more* remarkable and awe-inspiring than the exaggerations constructed by her fanatical worshipers. Her biggest irritation is everyone who seems to forget she's a person first, a prophet second... and she barely tolerates being the second on the best of days.”

His voice turned conspiratorial as he leaned in to mutter, “For example, I have reason to believe Madam Bonamede is having a very sexual relationship with my psionics master.”

Talia's eyes bulged. “And he's Kiros?”

“Solarian, actually,” Jonathan replied. “I haven't walked in on them mid-coitus or anything, but... whenever they're together, even someone without psionic senses can feel the raw energy jumping between them. I feel embarrassed whenever they're five Tacks from each other.”

Talia laughed coyly. “That's terrible.” Then with a panic, added, “That you're embarrassed! Not that she... you know...”

“Alright, enough about me,” Jonathan said, deflecting the conversation. He really didn't want to think about what Rumil and Timothy were doing with their private time. “Now you have to tell me how you got mixed up in the Erani faith.”

Talia colored again. “You... really want to know about that? It's nothing all that incredible.”

“A religious Arcadian is unique enough that it has to be a rather remarkable story.”

Talia sighed. “It really isn't. My family has *always* been a spiritual lot. One of our hobbies that we used to have when I was a small girl was to try and piece together the 'forbidden knowledge' of what had been Arcadian religions. My uncle was a semi-famous history professor on Arcadia... he sent us all sorts of 'fun and interesting stuff' to piece together.”

“Is that right?” Jonathan asked. The religion of the Arcadians from the before the Year of Freedom was a racial secret as tightly held as the Erani genome. Jonathan had to admit he found the topic interesting, even if from an amateur archaeologist's angle. “What did you discover?”

Talia cringed at the memory. “Some of it was truly horrible and frightening. Ritual sacrifices to hideous gods was used to some extent. My uncle talked about what they called “bleeding pits,” where two Arcadians fought to the death in worship to their gods. Frightening stuff, to be sure. Granted, there's no way of knowing how prevalent those practices were, or exactly who practiced them, but considering that of the scraps we *have* found, that damn near all of them reflect hideous atrocities...”

“Chances are such practices were the rule rather than the exception,” Jonathan finished as Talia

trailed off. "I'm assuming this ties into your conversion to the Joint Faith Temple?"

Talia nodded. "My uncle was quite proud of one relic he had, a stone carving that he believes was the head of a larger carving. He led us to believe it was one of our gods."

The girl shivered, like a chill had passed through only she could feel. "It was scary enough to look at, really. Fangs and ten black eyes and a forked tongue. Hideous-looking thing. It was something that would haunt me on occasion. It got worse when the videos of the Second Battle of Mydor started spreading around."

With that, the picture clicked. "The demons of Bannor looked pretty much exactly like the carving of an Arcadian god," Jonathan concluded.

"I was so unnerved by the similarities... I tried reaching out to various temples for guidance, mostly Kiro's ones, to my mistake..." she stopped and flushed before adding in apology, "I mean, not that the Kiro's temple was bad or anything."

"No, they are. You forget who you're talking to."

Talia grinned slightly. "Right. Of course. The Solarian Temple wasn't much more accepting, honestly, but they were the ones that pointed me to the Joint Faith Temple if I was serious about coming into the 'glory of the Creator.' I learned more about it, about the Sixth Prophet, and... well, it just felt right for me. It fit. I guess... I'm looking more for a sense of safety and security. If those demons are truly out there... I want to believe that their opposites are out there as well and are watching over us when we need them."

"Well, I sometimes wonder if they're watching out for us..." Jonathan said in assurance, "but I know they're out there. A lot of people I know saw an Archangel firsthand."

"What was that like?" Talia queried.

Jonathan shrugged. "The reaction was... varied. Rumil thought it was beautiful to behold. Another one of her friends, the Diviner Dewin, was terrified."

"And what's your opinion?"

"Since I wasn't there, it's really hard for me to say for sure. Personally, if the stories I hear are true, perhaps it's a *good* thing that the denizens of the higher planes mostly keep out of our business."

Talia accepted this reasoning silently, before deciding it was time to change the topic to something slightly more lighthearted.

* * * * *

They had nearly run out of things to talk about by the time they finally reached the base grounds, then to the academy section, and eventually the dormitory. Jonathan's mother had been aghast at the very concept of young men and young women being dormed in the same building, much less the same floor, or even *next door* to each other in some cases.

Not that it applied in Jonathan and Talia's case, as she was two floors down and in a different wing. Jonathan insisted on escorting her to her door, one of those Erani standards that he didn't feel compelled to shake.

"Well, thank you for coming to the service," Talia said, blushing again. "It... it meant a lot to see you there."

"Your faith is your own. You shouldn't need validation from anyone, especially me," he replied, then regarded Talia's narrow-lipped frown. "Don't worry, even Rumil thought that was a steaming pile of feces when she said it. If my presence helps buoy your own faith, I am honored to be that support."

"I was so scared that you'd reject us... and me. I'll admit that when you came to this academy, others... and myself... had this idea about who you were and what you would be like. You've not been anything like what I expected."

"Oh, I'm sure I'll have my moments," Jonathan answered.

Her final parting was a swift peck on his cheek, her face flaming red as she did so. "I'll see you

next ten-cycle at the service?”

“I think I can swing the time. Good day, Cadet Gronie.”

“You too, Cadet Feroz.”

* * * * *

The new pattern that emerged from Jonathan and Talia attending that cramped service in the basement of the Community Activities Center did not go unnoticed by their fellow cadets, or by the officers in command.

The base administration might have disapproved of any relationship between the two, but since they were not projected to be in the same chain of command, nor were there any other regulations against it, the officers had not pressed any further than a cursory interview of the pair, in which they both readily denied any relationship anyway.

Their peers weren't so easily dissuaded.

Jonathan watched from a distance as Talia had become the popular girl on base, as all the other young ladies hoped she might let slip something scandalous. Not that she could have, even if she had a propensity for a loose tongue. Beyond their meetings for service and tendency to study together lately, they actually *hadn't* done anything that could be remotely construed as improper, let alone affectionate.

That would come in time, Jonathan figured... once he figured out how to broach the topic with his mother.