

Special Assignments Force 3

Graduation should have been a time of celebration. Jonathan Feroz had earned the distinction of being at the top of the graduating class, which effectively gave him a free ticket to near any deployment he wanted. There were no fewer than three hundred requests on his PCU, a stack of thirty hard copy requests on the table in his apartment, and even a request from Base Admiral Jancine to entertain the possibility of an officer's post on Glorindal.

It was a lot different than what he would be facing had he trained through the Kiros Knighthood. There, his station would have already been set and waiting for him; as the Knight Commandant, he would learn from the Interim Supreme Commander for a staryear or two, then take his rightful post as his male ancestors had held for nearly two millenia.

He rather liked the opportunity to choose, and he figured he was going to spend all three ten-cycles at his disposal before his term of duty as a Cadet expired and he was dismissed from the base.

Yet at the same time, the depression from his breakup hadn't quite settled to the point where he could fully enjoy his coming future, and Talia's active avoidance of him hadn't made it any easier. The last he had any reasonable association with her was at the graduation reception, where she exchanged four sentences before finding a reason to slip away.

He knew that she had accepted a role as a special operative on Osir with the Antheria Peacekeeping Force, and finalizing all the little details for her move back home resulted in much of her recent absence. If he remembered correctly, the only reason she was still on base at this point was because Antheria hadn't been expecting her acceptance so soon, and her position wouldn't be available until her term with Glorindal had expired.

Nonetheless, with what a Cadet would reckon as a glut of free time, she always seemed to have something to do that kept Jonathan from conversing with her beyond passing greetings followed by her hasty escape.

It hurt that she was avoiding him, and it was really difficult to move on because of it... which in turn made it tough to pay attention to the massive requests for his services now piling up on his PCU memory and dining table.

Not that any of the offers had a snowflake's chance in Bannor when the Premier of the Galactic Parliament came calling with a request to meet him in person.

Jonathan had actually been to Solaria before – several times in fact, usually tagging along with Rumil during her visits to the desert world. So, he wasn't the slightest bit surprised when he left the climate-controlled Centris Exterior Starport #5 after landing and stepped into a dry, sweltering heat.

Or at least, he *thought* he wouldn't be.

The region above Centris seemed to be the middle of a minor sandstorm coupled with what the Solarians would regard as a heatwave. A blast of hot sand struck him in the face, causing him to double over and cough violently, his hand over his face to try and ward off further grit in his mouth.

When the gust died down, it gave him time to recover and regard his PCU quickly as he wiped off the sweat already forming on his forehead. The temperature read as 241.89 Cel, with gusts of wind up to 700 Tacks per tick. Sure enough, there was a Level 1 Sandstorm Advisory.

“We were going to come to you, Mister Feroz, considering the conditions,” interrupted a voice from ahead. “It *is* sandstorm season for this hemisphere, after all.”

Jonathan looked up at three men in Solarian dress carbide, along with breathing masks that covered their faces to block out the billowing sand, another of which they offered to him. As he gladly pulled it over his head, he quipped, “When is it *not* sandstorm season?”

“About two ten-cycles in what passes for the winter,” the same man replied before finally introducing himself and his companions. “Knight Harold Sanctin, at your service. These are my peers, Knight Keating Sanctin and Knight Laura Dutis.”

“Laura?” Jonathan queried, following Harold's gesture to the Solarian at his left, whose physique proved quite feminine now that he actually bothered to look. “Well, I had heard of the famed warrior women of Solaria, but never had a chance to meet one.”

“There's quite a few of us, Mister Feroz,” Laura answered. Jonathan could almost hear her roll her eyes playfully. It was apparently a line she hadn't yet heard enough to find annoying.

“Anyway, let's get out of this 'mild sandstorm,' and at least into the buggy where I can promise you we'll have some climate control,” Harold offered. Contrary to popular opinion, not even Solarians liked the conditions on the planet's surface, let alone find themselves indifferent to them.

Jonathan gladly complied with the suggestion, and settled himself into the rear of the buggy.

It wasn't until they had crossed the gates that led into the underground and emerged into the Centris cavern that he blurted out what had been on his mind since receiving Premier Datson's request. “Not to gossip, but has the Premier told you anything about why he wanted me to meet him on Solaria?”

The fact that *anyone* lived on Solaria, much less the most aristocratic families and the heart of influence for the entire sect, was a bit confounding to all but the Erani. The Solarian Sphere of influence had no fewer than thirty-three temperate worlds that were near paradise in climate and topography, yet the not-so-secret wish of every noble family within the sect was to earn the prestige of living in a cramped cavern underneath a surface scarred by heat and sandstorms.

But when your entire society was driven by a faith, and a purpose it imposes upon you, it changed what you deemed desirable. Solaria was a treasure trove of religious iconography and remnants of the ancient war that shaped the galaxy before any of the current races had even broken the bonds of planetary gravity.

One such icon stood out both physically and mentally. Rumil had told him once about the massive concrete structure that housed the remains of the First Gate. She shivered as she recalled the dark, foreboding presence of the object that stirred the nightmares of her past and present.

Jonathan felt no such things... it might as well have been a piece of stone waiting for a sculptor, as far as he could tell. Even the people of Solaria noted that the dread sensations had died away over the last fifteen staryears specifically. Yet it still had the power to draw attention, as it had done with Jonathan, until he realized Knight Dutis was answering his question.

“Our duty is to the greater good of Solaria specifically, not to the Galactic Alliance or the Premier. We were tasked only with escorting you, not the reasons why. As for why here, I am told it is simply because Premier Datson would be at this office more than anything else.”

Datson had several offices, and while he had spent most of his life on Solaria, his station as Galactic Premier had demonstrated to him just how brutal life there could be. That he still had an office in Centris at all was more to appease elements that accused him of turning away from his own people than any particular attachment to the desert world and its underground civilization. He toed a very fine line to try and keep several political elements from issuing open accusations that he was favoring one over the others.

It was a wonder Premier Datson got *anything* done.

“Once you are at the Alliance Embassy, we will hand you over to the Premier's guard detail, and they will escort you the rest of the way,” Harold explained.

“Well, that's unfortunate, because I was looking forward to getting to know Knight Dutis better,” Jonathan replied, with a playful wink and a smile.

“My father would never approve,” Laura retorted, any humor gone from her voice, “nor would my husband, I suspect.”

Jonathan cringed. He had been around Arcadians so long that he had forgotten how Erani nobility tended to marry young, even among the Solarians, where arranged marriages were far less frequent than on Kiros. He was quite likely the only unmarried person in the buggy.

Finally, Laura broke the tension and laughed, letting Jonathan in on the unspoken joke as the

three men joined her. Jonathan didn't say anything further, intending to complete the ride to the Alliance Embassy without any additional social discomfort.

The group was met just outside the gated fence of the embassy, rather than inside, and not by Rolan Snadi – commander of SAF 5 and chief of Premier Datson's protection detail – but by the highest political figure in the Solarian sphere of influence.

“Madam High Tenant,” Harold said, unable to hide his surprise. All four Erani saluted respectfully, then Harold added, “What brings you here?”

“I will escort Mister Feroz from this point,” Celine Honore declared before turning her head in Jonathan's direction and saying, “I trust that won't be a problem, Mister Feroz?”

Jonathan had met Celine enough to know perfectly well how she loved to interject herself into the plans of others, often for reasons known only to her. He also knew that, for the most part, she did so with noble intentions.

“None at all, Madam High Tenant,” Jonathan answered, saluting to his escorts before stepping out from behind them and joining Celine in front of the black fence gate.

Celine then ordered the other three away. “Dismissed, Knights. I'm sure Supreme Commander Honore will have things for you to do.”

Celine was referring to Nathan Honore, a rather distant relative of Timothy's, if Jonathan remembered correctly. Nathan was a capable administrator at the very least, if not the dynamic personality that had emerged from the observed direct male line that spawned Niles and Timothy. As one of the few noblemen of either sect to have emerged alive from the Second Battle of Mydor, he had a keen understanding of what was expected of Knights both past and present, yet was at least superficially in step with Celine, believing changes were required to move forward.

“At the risk of being too bold, why *are* you here, Madam Honore?” Jonathan wondered as they approached the security checkpoint and were cleared to enter.

“I have business with Premier Datson that is tied with yours. That, and I would rather avoid the palace for the time being. I've had reporters trying to hound me for the last ten-cycle ever since someone managed to piece together my background and spread the story to the GalNet.”

It was a public secret that Celine Honore was a Princess of Solaria by blood, the youngest of six children from King Quentin, and sister to the late King Edgar. It was not a family tie that Celine was terribly proud of, as the debauchery of that particular family had been quite scandalous in its severity and scope. She went so far as to forbid the last King of Solaria to even acknowledge her as his aunt in either private or public, and embraced marrying Niles Honore as a way to finally sever her ties with that family, taking it to its fullest extreme.

Celine hoped that with the supposed end of the royal line – as King Fredrick had died with no heirs – no one would think to put that backstory together, but in a rare moment of underestimation, she failed to appreciate the prying nature of the media. It did nothing short of parse her life history to the first cycle, as the nobles clamored to find a legitimate heir to provide the smoothest possible transition of power. At any rate, the nightmare had happened, and Celine was not exactly in a hurry to address the questions that were brewing.

Commander Snadi was waiting for them both just past the security checkpoint. “I've informed the Premier of your impending arrival, Madam Councilor,” he said with a somewhat mocking bow.

“Now, why would you do that, Commander?” Celine answered slyly. “You know I like surprising him.”

“I have to work under him, my lady, not you,” Rolan retorted, rising to Celine's playfulness.

The Solarian High Tenant shook her head. “You, Commander Snadi, are no fun. At any rate, let us proceed, Mister Feroz. I trust you will escort us, Commander?”

Rolan shrugged, and said, “If you don't think either of you are trustworthy, then I must, I suppose. Right this way.”

The SAF commander took the lead, stepping around Celine and into the embassy, where he lead

them to the lift, then turned right towards the south wing. Having spent so much time in an Arcadian-dominated city, Jonathan had rather forgotten that Premier Datson would have the Erani proclivity to keep his office as near to the ground floor as possible.

Jonathan contemplated that tendency. Erani buildings were short, sprawling compounds that exchanged height for breadth as much as they could manage, with the most important personnel on the lowest floors. In the rare cases that high-rise buildings were necessary, it was a general rule that the most expendable or unimportant people would be assigned to the top. The Erani logic was that the people vital to leadership and operations should be the easiest to evacuate in a state of emergency. Naturally, they found the tendency of other cultures to raise their most essential personnel onto inaccessible perches quite odd, just as the rest of the galaxy found the Erani method of keeping their top people on the bottom.

It was yet another example of the cultural quirks every species had. Jonathan supposed that those differences were what made the galaxy interesting.

Premier Datson was indeed expecting them. He already had two chairs pulled towards his desk, and gestured to them as Celine and Jonathan arrived. “Madam High Tenant, Mister Feroz, please be seated.”

As they did so, Datson was already transmitting information on his desktop using the data panels on its meticulously clean surface, nary a scrap of physical hard copy in sight. Jonathan startled himself by how *strange* that appeared to him. He had lived in Moor way too long.

“I suspect you already have a vague idea as to why I asked to meet you, Mister Feroz, but for the sake of total transparency, I shall lay out the entire framework of events,” the Premier began, the pertinent data flashing up over his desk. “As you may know, Commander Havner Ovelia of Special Assignments Force Team Three is set to retire at the end of the staryear. His team has decided not to promote one of their own into his position, and thus will be dissolved to go their separate ways. Due to these decisions, that has opened a command and team billet within the Special Assignments Force.”

Jonathan nodded in understanding. Even though he knew where this line of conversation was going, that didn't stop his heart rate from increasing rapidly.

“After careful consideration, I agreed with the assessment of the Glorindal Military Academy and its administration, and would offer you the command post for SAF 3,” Datson declared. “I understand that you likely feel you have obligations to the Kiros Knighthood, and I would not fault you for declining this post in deference to said obligations. The Solarians aren't *that* much different from the Kiros that we don't understand duty to our homeworld.”

Jonathan actually didn't feel such obligation to Kiros; it was something that distressed his mother and Fiona more than often. To be honest, it bothered him on occasion as well. Maybe being detached from that culture for so long had severed those bonds. Maybe seeing from a distance what Kiros and its sphere of influence had become was why.

Whatever the reason, returning to Kiros hadn't been more than a peripheral consideration, one of many offers that might as well have never been made. The Special Assignments Force had been his goal from the moment he had been accepted to the Glorindal Military Academy, and he wasn't going to waste any time.

“I am honored by the faith put in me, Sir Premier, and I will do everything within my power to prove worthy of the honor and the esteem I am held in,” Jonathan answered. “I gladly accept this station.”

“Excellent,” Datson said, smiling. “I will schedule your swearing in on 3438 AW, 37th ten-cycle, 6th cycle, at 4.25 LT. It won't be required that you have your team in place at that time, but doing so would allow all of you to be officially be sworn into your duties at the same time, saving the Galactic Alliance time and money.”

Datson wasted no time reaching into one of the drawers at his desk, handing over a data card for his PCU. “Those are the credentials I need you to install into your PCU for identification purposes.

You will be an effective acting SAF Commander until your swearing in, for all purposes pertaining to the recruitment of your team. Glorindal Military Academy has already given permission to extend your term of stay within the base past your final dismissal for as long as it takes for your team to be fully assembled.”

“I appreciate the gesture. Hopefully it doesn't take me that long,” Jonathan said.

“That's precisely the reason I am here, Commander,” Celine interjected, putting playful stress on the title. “To offer you some assistance in building your team. You should be getting a rather large file to your PCU containing the dossiers of several candidates I have personally vetted and reviewed. As tempting as I am sure it would be, however, I would recommend not filling your team with Solarians, even as every one of them would be qualified.”

“Yes, we wouldn't want anyone to accuse you of bias or siding with us,” Robert said, glaring down the obnoxiously cheery High Tenant.

Jonathan had noted from his mother – who was usually sobbing at the time – that he had visited Solaria more than the planet of his birth. Knowing intimately how far elements of his people would go in response to a perceived slight, Jonathan had no doubt some Kiroos somewhere felt insulted by Jonathan's presence and connections with their sister sect.

“Nonetheless, there is a point the High Tenant is getting at, Commander,” Robert elaborated. “There are a lot of elements that are going to be watching who you select closely. As much as I hate making something like this political, it would be to everyone's benefit to try and make a balanced, multicultural squad; if anything, to avoid further accusations of favoritism that I no doubt am already going to get.”

“I am quite used to, and expect, politics to come into play, I assure you,” Jonathan answered. “And it really shouldn't be much of a problem. There's more than a handful of highly capable talent in this galaxy that I won't have to 'settle' just because of species.”

Celine sounded duly impressed. “Goodness, Robert, it seems you *can* make good choices now and again.”

“More than you'd like to admit, *Celine*,” the Premier shot back.

The woman's jaw dropped in mock indignity. “Such disrespect to refer to an elder by her given name. For shame...”

“I prescribe in the belief that age is but a state of mind, my lady. When the subject frequently behaves like she is ten staryears old... well...”

Jonathan slowly stood, drawing the attention of both Solarians. “I think I'll just get onto business then. I can show myself out if you two want to taunt each other a bit longer.”

“Shall you be leaving Solaria?” Celine asked curiously.

“While I'm here, I figure I can save myself some time and make some preliminary interviews of some of the candidates you listed for me, Madam High Tenant.” Turning back towards the Premier, he then added, “Although... I do have one question, if I can be so bold to ask it.”

“You can ask anything you want,” Datson replied candidly. “I merely can't promise a complete answer.”

“SAF Commanders have to be nominated according to Alliance Code before they are even considered, either by another Commander or a member of the Galactic Council, correct?”

Datson nodded, but said nothing.

Jonathan smiled deviously as he asked, “Which one of you got the nomination in first?”

Celine and Robert looked at each other knowingly before Datson answered, “Actually... neither of us. We were beaten to the honor by someone else.” He quickly called up the file in question to make sure he had the name right. “Ah yes, retired Commander Jeremiah Snead.”

Of all the names Jonathan would have even contemplated as a possibility, that was not one of them.

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The wind hadn't kicked up any further once he reached the Solarian surface, which was a minor blessing as he reached the transport rail line connecting to the city of Nathis, within the Northwestern Cavern Structure. It would be a bit of a trip, but one of Celine's dossiers really interested him, and Jonathan wanted to at least plant the seed of possibly recruiting the man.

Fortunately, the rail station was climate controlled. It would make the wait considerably more bearable. Judging from the schedule projected from the clear glass ceiling of the station, it was going to be 20 ticks. "Must be non-peak hours," he surmised, considering the time interval and largely empty station interior.

But there was one other occupant within the station that kept looking at him oddly, and it quickly drew his attention. She was a slight Solarian woman; couldn't have been much older than he was, if at all. Her hair, long enough to actually spill over the seat she was sitting in, was curled at the tips, but that was the most distinguishing feature he could discern from the distance. The girl seemed shy, as she would abruptly look away the moment he even glanced in her direction.

She had taken the farthest seat possible away from him, which he found rather amusing considering the two of them were the only sentient beings within the station. Not even the attendant was at the counter of the ticket queue, likely taking a break between departures.

Jonathan quickly had enough with the coy appraisals, and called out with as welcoming a voice as he could, "I don't bite. You can come on over here."

The girl didn't comply. Not terribly surprising, considering she was most likely a commoner, and old habits of custom would not simply vanish, even over two decades. "I am sorry, my lord. I should not stare."

"Oh, please don't call me that," Jonathan coaxed. "Even if I did consider myself of a noble house, it certainly wouldn't hold any authority over you."

"Again, my apologies... I am merely confused as to why you are here," she replied. "You are Jonathan Feroz of the Kiros, are you not?"

"I see my name precedes me."

There was a meek, barely discernable shrug. "There aren't many Kiros that visit Solaria. All of you rather stand out. Your visits especially are not what could be called secret."

"Well, I am merely here on business," Jonathan explained, "the details of which I'm not at liberty to divulge, I fear."

She shook her head. "No, I mean I am confused why you are at this station."

Jonathan blinked. "I'm taking the rail to the Nathis. I know I'm a bit early, but it's not like I have anything else to do."

The girl had finally resorted to an empty stare, all shyness forgotten, her expression one of silent contemplation; the sort that you give a person when you wonder if they are merely playing dumb, or are truly stupid. "I... mean... why are you here when you could no doubt teleport the distance yourself without having to wait?"

Jonathan's brain came to a screeching halt as he processed the question. He slapped his forehead and groaned in dismay as he realized that he could quite easily have been to Nathis and back by now.

He had lived in Moor way, way, way too long...

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The first thing he did upon returning to base, before even going to his apartment and sorting out the interviews he had made, was to hunt down an old teacher.

While the term had ended for final year cadets, it was still in full swing for other students.

Thus, Professor Snead was in the process of ending one of those classes when Jonathan arrived at the lecture hall. Jonathan stayed to the back, just at the door, alerting Snead to his presence silently. The professor acknowledged Jonathan with nothing but his eyes, not even breaking the line of thought he was presenting.

The cadets might have wondered why Snead dismissed them three ticks sooner than normal, many of them even looking at the time display at the rear of the class in confusion to make sure that it matched what their PCUs were saying. Many of them promptly caught sight of Jonathan, but the thrill of being let out early overwhelmed their desire to talk to the new base celebrity, settling for hurried congratulations as they filtered out of class.

Snead remained impassive as Jonathan stood after the room was empty. "Commander Feroz, I was rather hoping you would hunt me down. Saves me the trouble of finding you. We have business to discuss."

"Yes we do, sir," Jonathan agreed, keeping as composed as he could manage.

"You are under no obligation to call me 'sir' anymore, Jonathan," Snead informed, extending the olive branch with his former cadet's given name. "We're both the same rank now, and I hold no concern for the subtext of seniority."

"Very well... Jeremiah," Jonathan responded. "I learned you were the one who nominated me for the Commander post in SAF 3."

Jeremiah sounded confused, as if this was knowledge that should not be surprising. "Of course I did. The post was going to be open, and you were the best candidate I knew. Why wouldn't I?"

"I had the impression that you didn't like me much."

The old professor shook his head. "That's not at all true. I don't like what your people are capable of. I don't like the society that your people constructed. I don't like what your people stand for. I don't like what your people are doing to the galaxy around them, and I don't like one damn word that comes out of the mouths of your precious 'prophets.' But that has nothing to do with you as a person."

Jeremiah coughed derisively. "Even if I *didn't* like you as an individual, it wouldn't mean one whit to my decision to nominate you. The Special Assignments Force is a collection of the best, brightest, and bravest the galaxy has to offer. There's no room for personal feelings or bias or grudges when it comes to the unit I served with honor and distinction. There can't be. There can only be the best, and you, Jonathan, are the finest cadet I have ever taught in my four decades as a professor on this base, barring none."

He rapped his knuckles on his desk, his lips pursed in thought, before his eyes brightened and he remembered what he was going to do. "Speaking of the best, that brings me to why I wanted to hunt you down. I'm sure you're getting inundated with all sorts of offers by everybody who can catch your ear, but I'd strongly recommend this fellow."

Just as Jonathan was getting used to having information transmitted to his PCU, he found a hard copy folder pushed in front of his face. Wherever he went, whatever he did, Jonathan was going to make it clear that he was to be given information in one form... whichever form that would be. He was just tired of trying to remember where he was.

Jonathan took a cursory glance at the information while Jeremiah continued to state his case. "You need a covert specialist. Probably two, honestly. This fellow is one of the best when it comes to ground-level intelligence gathering. He's been passed over promotions for the last six staryears over political games, and I'm really tired of seeing it happen."

"I'll certainly give it due consideration," Jonathan promised. "I hope this fellow doesn't mind an interview over the GalNet though. Solaria was not exactly a short hop away, and I'm frankly a little travel lagged because of it."

Any further discussion was interrupted by the buzz from Jonathan's PCU, and the audio from one of the base's administrative assistants. "Commander Feroz? You have... guests that have requested to meet you from the Galactic Parliament. I am sorry, but they claimed it was urgent. They will be

waiting in Conference Room Five in the Administration Offices. Again, I apologize for any inconvenience.”

Jonathan exhaled tiredly. “I will be there in as prompt a manner as I can.” With a sigh towards his former professor, he said with a wan smile, “Duty calls, Jeremiah.”

“As it always does,” Jeremiah replied. “One more thing, before you go rub elbows with Parliamentary guests.”

Jonathan nodded in acceptance of any further advice.

“Your secondary officer is supposed to be the most capable person you can trust in damn near this entire galaxy. It is a person you have to feel completely confident can fulfill your goals in the circumstance that you cannot lead the team yourself. Someone who you know and understand in the same way he or she understands you. They are your support as well as the foundation that your entire leadership is built on. There's a *reason* that the second to damn near *every* SAF Commander was or is either a long-serving teammate... or a fellow academy cadet.”

There were some thoughts that didn't need psionics to be clearly conveyed. “I have to admit I had noticed that tendency, and I'll also admit it's an idea I entertained, but I'm not sure that it would be terribly prudent to...”

“Cadet Gronie's talents would be wasted in Antheria. You know it. I know it. And I'm going to be damned if I let her waste them. You wouldn't be the first Commander to have dated your future secondary officer. You wouldn't be the first if you dated your secondary officer *while* she was your secondary officer... although *that* is something that I wouldn't recommend doing. The Parliament is willing to look the other way for the former, but they *do* tend to frown a bit on the latter.”

“Talia's been rather avoiding me, Jeremiah. I'm not sure she'll even give me the opportunity...”

“You leave that to me. Now get going before those Parliament paper pushers start getting impatient.”

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It turned out the guests weren't paper pushers.

It's possible they *could* have been, Jonathan supposed... if the Galactic Parliament made 250 Humm reams of paper and needed them pushed around.

Command General Orion Salazar barely fit in the conference room. Had he possessed any hair of appreciable length at the top of his head, he would have no clearance between him and the ceiling.

Councilor Grodin Hamar didn't stand and bow like Orion when Jonathan entered the room, and Jonathan perfectly understood why. As it was, Jonathan wondered how the towering Blueblood even got in the building in the first place.

Jonathan almost addressed the Councilor first, as was typical for usual introduction in the Arcadian tradition, but he caught himself just before he opened his mouth. Orion was of the Utmost Caste within Ubek culture, and to have greeted the Blueblood before the Pale would have been a grave insult, even if Orion would have likely forgiven him. “General Salazar, Councilor Hamar, had I been informed at your arrival, I would have arranged for a more suitable meeting environment.”

“Not that your base would have been accommodating,” Grodin grouched. “I suspect this room was chosen because it was the smallest.”

“No doubt to make us unwelcome and make us feel small. We understand that we are... intimidating simply in our presence, and that reactions by small people against us can be strong,” Orion added. “We're used to such childish antics, and adapt accordingly.”

Jonathan shrugged, his lips curling up smugly. “They just don't know either of you. Perhaps they should talk to my master. He'd most certainly tell them a story of how both of you were huddled underneath a 'small person,' crying like two lost babes.”

Orion and Grodin glanced nervously at each other before Orion sheepishly admitted. “The

Ubek demeanor is staunch against all matter of threats and dangers. Ground Zero of a fusion bomb detonation is one that our people don't prepare ourselves for.”

Jonathan couldn't help but laugh. “At any rate, I won't force you two to remain packed in here any longer than is necessary. What can I do for you two gentlemen today?”

“Were you aware that there are seven thousand, two hundred, and sixteen active operatives currently in the Special Assignments Force?” Grodin asked.

Jonathan nodded, “Well, I didn't know the *exact* number, but that sounds about right.”

“Do you know how many Ubeks are among that number?” Grodin said, not giving Jonathan the chance to answer. “Three. I find that to be disappointing and distressing considering the capabilities of my people.”

Jonathan rubbed the back of his head. “I sure hope you don't expect me to appoint a team of Ubeks to try and correct the balance.” Premier Datson wasn't kidding when he had warned Jonathan about elements wanting to wedge in on the selection of his team.

Orion laughed. “Of course not, Commander. But we would like you to give more consideration to our people than most SAF Commanders have. We can be every bit as capable handling delicate operations and working with finesse, with the added bonus of being capable of taking on the depths of Bannor if everything goes wrong.”

Jonathan knew this was little exaggeration, as Orion was speaking from experience. At the Second Battle of Mydor, he helped clear a path through the demon horde for Jonathan's father and his master.

“I can see this means a lot to you if you were to deliver the dossiers in person,” Jonathan said earnestly. “And I will promise I will give the candidates all due consideration. Will you be transferring them to my PCU?” he gestured to the chest pocket of his shirt, where the unit was tucked.

Orion and Grodin again gave each other a curious glance; this time in confusion, as if Jonathan had abruptly started talking in an entirely foreign tongue. They both then burst into raucous laughter, before Orion slapped Jonathan on the shoulder so hard the young Kiros man had to physically brace himself to keep from being knocked over.

“How could some mere file tell you the quality of the men and women suitable for service under your command?” Orion said, still chuckling. “No, no, Commander, there is only one way for you to know!”

Grodin declared, “The candidates have gathered on the sacred war grounds for a grand tournament on Ub. There, they will engage each other with their wits, their weapons, and their skill, and you shall judge them by their merit on the field. That is how the best is decided!”

Of course. Jonathan ran his right hand over his face, realizing now what he had unwittingly honor-bound himself to. “I understand. When should I be prepared to leave for Ub?”

Both Ubeks grinned like maniacs.

Jonathan sighed. “Immediately. I shouldn't be surprised, really.”

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Jonathan had probably insulted the Ubeks by how quickly he left after the combat exhibition had been finished. To be fair, there was nothing particularly wrong with Ub... it had a rustic charm, and certainly wasn't void of technological comforts. In fact, the accommodations he had been given during the three-day exhibition were every bit the equal of the most posh hotels anywhere in the galaxy.

But the moment it was over, the first thing he wanted was to go back to Glorindal and get to spend a few tenth-cycles in his own bed for the first time in five cycles. Command General Salazar had informed him that they understood he was busy, and that no slight was taken by his swift departure. Jonathan hoped this was true, even as a part of him didn't believe it.

The war grounds on Ub had been in its summer season, making the steady climate on Glorindal

feel even colder than it already was. He shivered as he left the much warmer interior of his hover, and into the open lot outside the apartment complex he lived in.

Home was only a quarter-TackMet away. He could almost feel the familiar contours of his bed and the thick down comforter that he was going to cocoon himself in for a good night's sleep. It was so close he could taste it, his mind already moving into a dream state. The blinds blocking all light as he pulled them close... the gentle fluff of his pillow as his head hit the pliant, feathery surface... the insistent buzz of his PCU as it demanded his attention immediately...

Jonathan's mind jarred to a halt, mercilessly yanked from his blissful thoughts of sleep towards the PCU in his chest pocket, thrumming against his pectoral muscles. His first impulse was to grab the meddlesome device and throw it with all his physical and mental power as far as he could.

Fortunately, his second impulse kicked in before he created a potential interplanetary incident with whomever on the other end of the communication, especially once he discovered his caller was Rumil.

Upsetting her was never a good idea, for any number of reasons.

"Good mid-day, Rumil," Jonathan said as pleasantly as he could manage. "What can I do for you?"

"Remember when you asked me to look around for a computing expert with illicit hacking background but the ability to work with a team and take orders?" Rumil asked, then added, in a quieter grumble that sounded like she was talking to someone else, "Stop it."

Jonathan ignored the alternate conversation, only replying to what was directed at him. "Yes, I do."

"Good, well I think I've found a very suitable candidate. I'm sending you the personnel file now." Then again, she was turned away, "Okay, now you're just doing it to distract me. It's not going to... oh... don't you dare!"

Jonathan didn't want to know. He really didn't. "Great. I'll give it a look in the morning. I'm rather exhausted."

Rumil then released a strained hiss. Initially thinking that she was still regarding her unseen tormentor, instead Rumil said, "Morning isn't going to cut it. I've gleaned that peacekeepers on Tathos are going to sting the company she works for in five tenth-cycles. You're going to want to strike a deal with this person before it gets to that. Probably best to go there in person to ease any tension with the peacekeepers."

Jonathan groaned in dismay. Of course he'd have to go in person... because otherwise the universe wouldn't be conspiring against him getting a good night's sleep.

Meanwhile, Rumil had again switched her focus to her other company. "You think you're real cute, don't you? Do that one more time and we'll see who the cute one is."

Jonathan closed his eyes tightly, stirring up his mental and physical fortitude, then opened a second line to issue a high-priority travel request to the Moor Starport. The base administration probably wasn't going to like the charge, but would accept it. "Thank you, Rumil, I am on my way now. Oh, and tell Timothy to stop molesting you while you're on the GalNet."

"What?" Rumil gasped. "Oh, no! He was intentionally corrupting the program I'm working with on my dual PCU on my desk. Your time at Glorindal has given you a dirty mind, Commander Feroz."

Jonathan suspected Rumil was being intentionally obtuse, but he had neither the energy nor will to care. He slid back into his hover, pulled out of the lot, and reversed his original path back to the starport.

* * * * *

For a developed world that still did not have a unified central government, Tathos had been a

remarkably sophisticated place... at least, the nation he had visited. Officials had cooperated with him without much fuss, the peacekeepers didn't behave like their authority was being undermined, and they were even appreciative of his efforts to secure the candidate's testimony to help in their case.

He had been warned by elements of said country that they weren't necessarily indicative of other countries' interactions with the greater galaxy, but all in all, much like Ub, his stay on Tathos had not been unpleasant.

Jonathan had turned off his PCU completely after he left Tathos, and had no plans to turn it back on until he had spent an entire cycle in bed. Any vitally important information that had to be addressed immediately could stew for a few tenth-cycles.

Never had Jonathan's front door been such a wonderful sight. Within lay sanctuary. Within lay a comfortable bed and a long needed respite.

"Professor Snead left seventeen messages on my PCU telling me that you had to talk to me, and it was of vital importance. You then promptly disappeared for six cycles: cycles that I could have spent in Antheria getting ready to settle in. Now, I know you're a Kiros man, so perhaps 'vital importance' has a slightly different connotation to you... but I do wish to make it clear that this is not what my people consider it."

Jonathan froze; on one hand, elated that Talia had finally approached him... on the other, infuriated that this had to happen now.

As he turned to address her, her annoyance turned to aghast horror. "Oh Creator, Jonathan! You look like Bannor-spawn! What happened?"

"I've been on a bit of a cross-galaxy trip. From Solaria to Ub to Tathos in six cycles. Fun times," he answered, trying and failing to keep his sarcasm in check. "I got to make a fool of myself to a Solarian girl, to watching Ubeks beat each other to something resembling raw meat for the honor of serving under me, to negotiating another candidate out of the hacker hive she was working in damn near *during* a peacekeeper sting. Enjoyable experiences, all."

"Damn it, I had a good long tirade ready for you and everything," Talia admitted, rubbing the back of her head sheepishly. "So much for that. Go... get some sleep. I can stick around one more cycle."

"No!" Jonathan asserted. "If I don't talk to you now, I might not ever get the chance with the way this damn thing has been buzzing non-stop." He jerked a thumb towards the PCU in his chest pocket. "Just bear with me if it takes me a few seconds to remember what we're talking about."

He unlocked the door, allowed Talia to enter first, then followed her in. "Go ahead and grab something to drink. The kitchen is..."

"I think I remember, Jonathan," Talia quipped.

Jonathan winced. "Right." He sat down in the leather single reclining chair at one end of the snack table before he said anything else stupid.

She shook her head, and said, "Was I really *that* unmemorable that you had forgotten that I lived here too?"

He was ready to vehemently deny that, when her teasing grin and the twinkle in her eyes sank into his brain as she handed him a canned beverage, then sat herself down at the sofa to Jonathan's right.

"I probably shouldn't give you this," she added. "You really need to sleep, not get stimulants running through your system."

"I am so tired they won't do a whit of good," Jonathan retorted.

Talia seemed willing to take the lead in the discussion, which was a good thing, as Jonathan wasn't completely convinced he'd be able to hold a thought longer than ten demiticks. "So... what does the SAF's newest commander need to talk to me about?"

Jonathan finished a swallow before commenting, "That's not official yet, for the record."

"You getting selected as an SAF Commander was the worst kept secret in the history of

Glorindal Military Academy. Not that it wasn't blatantly obvious you'd be getting the post, the moment news that one opened became public knowledge. Well... that and Professor Snead's 'Commander Jonathan Feroz of the Special Assignments Force wishes to speak to you pertaining urgent matters' leading his every message.”

She played with her thumbs for a moment before adding, “I knew you'd do it.”

“I know. You had more faith in me than I did at times,” Jonathan acknowledged. “That's actually what our business is about.”

He turned on his PCU – ignoring the message from his mother – then made sure the right file was loaded up onto the screen before sliding it across the snack table. “Probably be better for you to just read the proposal rather than have me explain it to you.”

Talia did as requested, her eyes slowly growing larger with each line she read. “You... you can't be serious.”

“Professor Snead and I both think you can do a lot better than a peacekeeper. You were damn near the top cadet in this academy, and the position you take for your career should reflect that success,” Jonathan said.

“Jon... we... I can't... we can't work, especially if I'm your second.”

Jonathan shook his head. “I'm not trying to get back together, Talia. That... that has passed. Maybe it *was* doomed from the start, like my mother thinks. But that doesn't matter. It's over, and we're not getting it back. This has nothing to do with that.”

“People are going to think...”

“Talia!” Jonathan snapped, catching her eyes with his. “I don't *care* what people think. I don't *care* what they say. I don't even care what they *do*. If some lunatic fringe of the Kiros thinks that it would be a good idea to attack a Special Assignments Force team because they think we're still together, than I invite them to *try*.”

“The problem is they aren't going to be wrong,” Talia said shamefully. “There's a part of me... that still cares for you.”

“And I, you. And that part of me always will,” Jonathan replied. “That's what friends are.” He dropped his right hand onto her left, and said, “Talia, regardless of my feelings, I wouldn't be offering you this position if I didn't think you weren't one of the best and brightest people I've ever associated with. On top of that, I trust you more than any person I know. I need you in this position if this team is going to move forward quickly. There isn't going to be a single person in this team that will have even *met* anyone else in it before they sign their commissions. I need to at least be on the same page with my Chief Operative.”

Two tears betrayed her. “You're sure about this?”

“This post is *made* for you, Talia, and it's certainly not one where you'll ever have to worry about being downsized due to budget cuts.”

The tears turned to a chuckle. “Antheria's not in *that* bad of a recession.” She sighed, and skimmed over the offer again. “But you are right... this is an opportunity that barely anyone ever gets. I'd have to be stupid to pass it up, and I'm not stupid.”

She drew the stylus from where it was resting within the PCU unit, and deliberately signed her name on the screen, following up with a finger print and retinal scan to validate her identity. “Should I inform Antheria Peacekeepers Corps that I won't be able to take their position after all, or there there still some hoops I have to jump through?”

“The Premier or one of the Parliamentary Council has to sign in approving the team, but I think its safe to say that won't be a problem,” Jonathan answered.

“How many people have already accepted the commission?” she asked.

“No one yet. I've only finished interviewing my short list. I was hoping that my Chief Operative could help me make the final decisions. I'll send you all the work I've done to this point before I call it a cycle.”

The chuckle from earlier turned into a laugh. “I suppose I will, *but...* only after you get some sleep. You look about ready to fall over in your chair. Besides, I have to go back to my apartment and inform APC that I won't be working for them after all. Not a conversation I'm looking forward to.” She watched Jonathan waver, then asked, “Do you need me to tuck you in... Commander?”

“That probably wouldn't be prudent, CO,” Jonathan said with a tired smile. “See you next cycle... say 5 ET?”

“Let's make it after morning mess. That way we'll have a nice public venue that people can see we're doing work and not trying to sex each other on Parliament's credit.”

“That'll work too.”

* * * * *

The pair had to move their work from the mess hall to the academy library, as the number of people trying to look over their shoulder had quickly become bothersome, but the point had been made: Jonathan Feroz and Talia Gronie were working, not fooling around.

Jonathan's “short list” had still been thirty-three candidates, with nearly a hundred more on a tertiary list that he or Talia could interview if, for one reason or another, they couldn't compose a team from the current pool.

Talia had observed in the mess hall that Jonathan was looking for a more “backline-heavy” team, with more manpower invested towards tech and covert operatives than combat specialists. Jonathan reasoned that his psionic skills, along with Talia and one of the Ubek candidates that caught his eye, would be as effective as any combat frontline within the SAF.

He had also decided on having a seven-man team initially, as opposed to the maximum twelve he could have commissioned. A smaller team could gel quicker, and leave room for him to expand the roster later, based on what the squad felt they needed as they got some experience together. It was a building plan that was not without precedent; most first-time Commanders took that route, in fact.

“What did you think about this one?” Talia said, sliding over one of the hard copies covering the table top they were sitting at. Printing out all the dossiers on the short list had proven to be a boon in that regard, as opposed to constantly swapping the display on their PCUs – one of the rare cases where hard copy proved to make faster work.

“Garret Crosser... yeah, I took the time to interview him in person while I was on Solaria. Remarkably polite and devoted man as far as I could tell. Highly commended, the Wraiths consider him one of their finest. He's projected as a remarkable covert operative considering his SIA background. I like that he had enough of a conscience to back out of SIA, honestly. Councilor Honore told me it wouldn't be a problem, but he's intensely loyal to the Solarian people, so I'm not entirely sold he'll accept a commission offer. I hope that the Special Assignments Force would be enough of a prestige post that he'd at least consider it.”

“What about Koris Calel?”

Jonathan tapped his head to recall where he acquired that dossier. “Right... Jeremiah recommended him to me.” He grinned as Talia's jaw dropped in shock at the use of the grumpy professor's given name. “He lets me call him that now. Anyway... *Professor Snead* thinks highly of the fellow, even if his career arc on Nos doesn't show high competence.”

“What is his story then?” Talia wondered. “Because you're right, he got to Undercover Investigations, made Lieutenant, and it stalled from there.”

“He got on the wrong side of an Adjucate who happens to be the brother of the Commandant of Peacekeeping Forces for the planet. As I understand it, said Adjucate didn't appreciate Calel calling him out on a judgment he made, dismissing certain evidence Calel had gathered. Personally, from the incident report I was given, I'd have sided with Calel, but at any rate, the Adjucate and Commandant have been making an example of Calel since, blocking transfer requests and promotions for a good six

staryears.”

“Think it reflects poorly on Calel's ability to work as a team?” Talia asked

Jonathan shook his head. “Might speak to an obsessive perfectionism. Everyone he works with says he's more than cooperative, as long as he doesn't think you're cutting corners. I rather like the idea of having one person who is dedicated to making sure every bit is in place.”

“Alright, he'll make the cut for now,” Talia announced, putting his dossier on top of Crosser's to her left, at the one clean corner of the table.

Jonathan presented the next candidate. “Here's one that interested me. Got to see him firsthand during the tournament on Ub. Big-bodied fellow. Probably could take a plasma cartridge unarmored if it came to that,” Jonathan offered.

Talia glanced it over, then countered, “I was actually looking at some of the other Ubeks judging from your assessments. I have to say I rather liked this one.”

“Yorik Salazar,” Jonathan recited. “He got a lot of complaints from other competitors for hanging back too much rather than engaging, and working the field too subtly for a proper Ubek. Apparently, it was a blot on his honor. Command General Salazar and Councilor Hamar both cited him as a bit too invisible for their tastes.”

“I like it, to be honest. It tells me that he knows how to use his strength at the right times. An SAF team, especially combat specialists, need to be able to know when to best use their might. By necessity, small units like ours need to be more finesse than brawn.”

“I didn't get a chance to interview him in person outside of parting words after the tournament. I'm not even sure why I would have put him in my short list other than he was one of the finalists.”

Talia grinned, “Oh, you didn't. I skimmed over your tertiary listing last evening while you were no doubt enjoying your first good sleep in a ten-cycle. His stood out.”

“Well then, I suppose we should give him a more thorough vetting. Do you want the honor of interviewing him?”

Talia nodded. “Yes. I know some Ubeks can have a bit of a... low opinion of non-Ubek women. Would be pretty important to find out if he can take orders from me if it came to it.”

She took both Ubek files, and put them onto the stack as well. “And we want two tech operatives then?”

“Initially, yes. My plan is to have one with a hardware background, and one with a software emphasis. I'd prefer one of them to have some hacking experience, as well. Hacking requires a more delicate touch than most conventional programmers have, and I think it will be experience that will serve the team well.”

“I assume this is how Resh Ravaar found his way to your short list?” Talia smirked.

Jonathan sighed recalling the debacle on Tathos. “Rumil knew her... one of the hackers that had been on Gregor Krennan's radar before he got on the wrong side of Rumil and her friends. She's definitely the oldest candidate, but she's got more real-time experience than just about all the others on the short list put together. Have to admit, she was a very cooperative fellow when she learned I wasn't trying to railroad her to incarceration. Loyal, intelligent... I got to see some of the CPUs she pretty much built from scrap parts that were every bit the equal of the most top-of-the-line systems. I honestly think her biggest problem is that she hasn't had a proper channel for her talents.”

“Not to mention you probably don't want to explain to the Vassi government that the man you plucked from one of their stings really doesn't fit what you're looking for, and that they gave him a pardon for nothing,” Talia noted.

Jonathan bit his lip nervously, “That may be part of it.”

She shrugged as she added the dossier to the pile, “Good of a reason as any. What did you take out of your interview with Arman Jerivous?”

“Brilliant programmer. Prodigious even. The Diviner Dewin was astonished how he was able to design an operating system that allowed all the temples on Demod to have near Top Tier G-Band

transmission speeds out of Third Tier receivers. The fellow was able to streamline the decoding process *that much*. And he works like lightning... I could never imagine someone with four fingers being able to code that fast without even an error. His biggest problem is that he's just out of academy. Really inexperienced and thinks he knows everything. While he very well might, it can be a bit off-putting.”

“Resh known to have patience? Because it sounds like patience would be required to work with this young man.” She paused for a moment, and then observed, “It just occurred to me, all of these candidates are male. Not a single woman among them.”

“Resh is female, I'll have you know.”

Talia blinked rapidly, then rushed back to Resh's dossier to confirm that, apparently missing the multiple times Jonathan had referred to Resh as “she” or “her.” “Oh. You really *can't* tell just from looking, can you? Well... if you were a Ruma, I suppose you could, at least I'd hope you could. That would probably be an uncomfortable night cap if you couldn't...”

“Talia, you're rambling.”

She groaned. “I know... I just don't want to be the only girl in what becomes an all boys' club. Although I suppose it's a good thing that neither of us were thinking about species or gender as we were assembling this team.”

“I told Datson that the best would probably provide a pretty good mixed team. And as we expand the team more, we can give some more weight to female candidates so you don't get lonely.”

“Do not start patronizing me, Commander Feroz. If our time as a couple helped me in any way, it's that I know how I can make you hurt.”

Jonathan narrowed his eyes in challenge. “Oh really?”

“Yes. For example, I can comm your mother.”

The gleam in Jonathan's eye turned to concern. “You wouldn't dare.”

“Just try me, Feroz.”

It was fortunate that the two had managed to narrow the prospects down considerably, because once the teasing started, all hope of getting more work done was lost.

* * * * *

Jonathan returned to Solaria, his team fully assembled, at least in theory. It was a matter of getting Premier Datson to okay the roster, and contrary to what he had proudly said to Talia earlier... he wasn't entirely certain it would fly.

“I don't know *how* you convinced me to tag along with you,” Talia grumbled as they waited outside the Premier's office to be announced. “Why do I have to be here anyway?”

“You're an SAF officer now, CO,” Jonathan said with a saccharine smile. “You're going to have to get used to dealing with high-profile figures. Might as well start now.”

“Commander Feroz, Miss Gronie, the Premier will see you now,” the receptionist beckoned. “The Premier apologizes for the delay.”

“Why were you were greeted by your title, and not me?” Talia groused in insult.

“Because technically, you're not a Chief Operative yet.”

“Technically, you're not a Commander yet.”

“My station is quite a bit more concrete than yours.”

The voice of Premier Datson cut into their banter. “When you two are done discussing your employment status, feel free to come in. It's not like my time is valuable or anything.”

The pair started, their heads turning to where the Premier was leaning against the doorframe leading to his office, his expression blank and unreadable.

Duly chastised, Jonathan took the lead into the office with Talia behind, Justin taking the right seat and Talia the left. Datson didn't immediately sit down, instead taking a good long look outside his

office. "My daughter's mid-day meal ran a bit longer than I had anticipated, again my apologies for making you wait."

The Premier then finally took his seat. "I received the roster request and the included dossiers, as well as their tentative agreements to their commissions pending my approval." He then eyed them both questioningly as he continued, "I have no issues with any of the prospective Operatives. I do, however, want to make sure that your prospective secondary officer is a choice made of sound mind and not sound libido."

Jonathan knew this line of questioning was coming. It didn't make it any easier on his temper to face. "Talia and I..."

Talia put her hand on his arm. What Jonathan thought was initially a calming gesture was in reality an interruption. "Clearly, you have not studied my dossier as well as you think, because if you had, you would know that my marks stand for themselves, *regardless* of my relationship to Commander Feroz. But, just to ease your sensibilities, I can assure you my relationship with the Commander is not intimate, and I have no designs to change that at any point in the future."

Jonathan couldn't fight back the astonished boggle that formed on his face. Where did *this* Talia come from? When and where did the girl that could barely speak her name to the Premier turn into one that could dress him down in his own office?

Premier Datson grinned knowingly. "That's what I wanted to hear. Consider me justly rebuked. You think you can handle the duty as a Chief Operative, Miss Gronie?"

"If I had been a bit more assertive earlier in my academy days, I could be *commanding* one of these teams," Talia retorted.

"I wouldn't doubt that, CO," Datson agreed, and made a very deliberate gesture to his desktop, signing and confirming the new duty roster for SAF 3. "Make sure your team is assembled and ready for their swearing in, Commander. Your first orders will become active the instant the ceremony is complete."

"I trust we'll be getting those first orders before the ceremony then?"

Datson held up a finger to hold them a moment, then tapped a button on his desktop to open a vocal channel. "Madam Depris, you can send them in." Looking up at Jonathan and Talia, he grinned and said, "Actually, you'll be getting those orders now."

From behind the door, the voice of the Sixth Prophet became audible, her annoyance apparent. "Good, maybe now someone will tell me why I've been sitting in that damned conference room with you for the last tenth-cycle."

The door opened to Rumil and Celine Honore, the former ready to unleash her rage. "Robert, what is the meaning of... oh. Hello, Jonathan."

"Hello, Rumil," Jonathan replied, turning back to the Premier.

Robert smirked with triumph. "Commander, Chief Operative: the orders for SAF 3 are to be the personal protection detail for the Prophet Rumil Bonamede. I suspect your acquaintance with the Prophet will be quite useful in this service, Commander."

Rumil's eyes narrowed. "Oh, I get it now. You know damn well I won't tell Jonathan to take his 'protection' and shove it lengthwise up his anal cavity."

"I told you that it would be a good idea to have some visible protection, even if you don't think you need it," Datson retorted, leaning back with his hands behind his head. "Work with me here, Rumil. I don't get many victories. Let me have this one."

Rumil's eyes narrowed. "If only for the fact that I've been stuck here for over a tenth-cycle with Celine asking me if I'm ever going to be 'over' her son, I'll accept it. I suppose it will be good to have Jonathan back home as well." She then asked in curiosity, "Will the entire team need lodging?"

"Might not be a bad idea," Robert noted. "It's a rather varied group."

"Including an Ubek." Jonathan grinned.

"I'm going to have to widen the doorways after all," Rumil grumbled. "At least the ceilings

should be high enough. It'll suit for now until I can have some secondary housing built on the manor grounds."

"Commander Feroz, why don't you help the Madam Prophet with some the particulars? You know your coming team a lot better than I would. Chief Operative Gronie, I will request you stay behind for a moment. There are additional matters I need to discuss with you."

The courage of Talia Gronie momentarily wavered, but she regained her composure as Jonathan stood up, and gave her an encouraging pat on the shoulder, taking to Rumil's side as they vacated the now rather cramped office.

Once alone, Datson explained, "To be totally honest, Chief Operative, I'm not the one that wants to speak with you. Councilor Honore is the one that actually wants to address this topic. Madam?"

Talia whirled about to discover that the Councilor and High Tenant of Solaria hadn't left with Rumil and Jonathan. "Madam..." Talia began, choking up not necessarily out of discomfort, but of uncertainty at how to address Celine. The memory of the offense she had once caused to Jonathan's mother was suddenly fresh in her mind.

"Since we're technically on Galactic Alliance ground, Councilor is *supposed* to be the proper title, child," Celine said. "Although I've been referred to as High Tenant within the embassy, and those not of Solarian blood call me Councilor anywhere, so honestly either title is suitable to me."

"Very well... Councilor Honore... what can I do for you? I must say I'm a bit surprised that I'm on your detection grid at all, to be honest."

"You actually have been for some time, Chief Operative," Celine drawled slowly. "I've been watching a handful of promising Arcadians that could suit the purposes I'm seeking. That you have taken a position among an elite operations unit makes you even more suitable."

"What 'purposes' are those?"

Celine had pulled out her PCU, but hadn't done anything with it. "Before we proceed, I have to alert you that this information pertains to highly sensitive information and Highest Secrecy protocols among Solarian intelligence, in conjunction with the Premier's office of the Galactic Alliance. If you are to accept this information, it can only be shared with anyone in this room and Commander Feroz. Do you understand?"

Talia nodded. "Yes."

"Do you accept?"

"Yes, I do."

"Very well. I will transfer the information to your PCU, but I ask you do not read it until you can brief Commander Feroz," Celine said, beginning the file transfer while beginning her own briefing. "I have many theories on psionic energy, Chief Operative, and you will be of immense use in helping me prove or disprove them..."