

“Goddamn unit social functions,” I groused to myself under my breath.

I stood off to the side of the hall, my hand clutching a sweating glass. Glaring down at said hand, I very deliberately relaxed my grip somewhat from the white knuckled, any-tighter-and-the-damn-thing-will-shatter grip that my traitorous hand had worked into. Finger by finger, muscle by muscle, I relaxed my hand and glanced around to make sure there was nobody paying too much attention to me.

To be clear, it wasn't nerves. It couldn't possibly have been nerves. I've been in more firefights than I can count. I've disarmed (or armed, as the case was) highly-sensitive high yield bombs while under heavy fire. I've spent more than my fair share of times in high-stress situations. I knew how to handle stress. That sort of thing is part of why military training is so notoriously rough on trainees - it's not because militaries select sadists to train new recruits. Or at least not *just* because of that.

And yet here I was, dressed in my Arconan Expeditionary Force dress uniform, my black jacket sealed to my neck, black dress pants tucked into my mirror-shined boots, rank insignia and a handful of awards glittering on my chest. I stood in a hall where nobody was shooting at me, no bombs needed to be worked on, no threats at all were present. And my damn hand kept gripping tighter and tighter on my water glass until I relaxed it, then it started the cycle over again.

These sorts of events happened in any military organization. It was supposed to provide an opportunity to honor unit traditions with families, relax in the presence of the people who would decide if you lived or died in the field, and build the sense of *esprit de corps* that was so very vital to any unit. And this was certainly a social event; AEF officers went around with their significant others, and without looking I knew for a fact that Shadow Lady Atyiru Caesura Entar Arconae, in her public guise as Principal Trustee of the Keadean Confederacy, which was Clan Arcona's political and public face, was here to build her relationship with her military forces. Given that, I knew other members of the Arconae and the clan in general were in attendance, and that with that many Force users around I would have plenty of warning if something were to go wrong.

And yet here I was, still trying to control my damned fight-or-flight instincts because I really, *really* hated social events and wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of this place and my Force-damned dress uniform. I sipped at my ice water, and kept praying that the night would end much, much sooner than I expected it would. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from grousing to myself again as I reminded myself quite sternly that it could have been much, much worse.

It could have been mandatory to bring a date. Force knows how that would have ended. Beyond being an utter and complete disaster for me, that is,