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Chapter 12

Kaira 9 Keda, 4412, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 23 September 2027, Terran Standard Calendar

Kaira, 9 Keda, year 1337 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Academy City (Luna Campus), Luna, Terra

Now *this* felt truly like science fiction.

For the entire life that he lived on Terra, there was one immutable constant that hung in the sky every night, and that was the moon. It didn't change in appearance outside of its phases, it was a guarantee that looking up at it at any time was going to show you the exact same thing, but it was also a place that everyone knew was distant and hostile to life. Nobody had visited the moon in Jason's lifetime before the subjugation, so it was also a distant place that one could only visit in pictures.

Not anymore.

It was almost eerie, creepy, jarring to stand on the surface of the moon in a bionoid with full biorhythmics and not look out over a gray landscape of dust on the ground with bare rock hills, like in the pictures, but a place with scorched ground, turning the ground grayish black. It was equally jarring to breathe the air, to smell the dust in it, and to feel the warmth of the sun on his skin even as he felt a faint breeze caused by solar heating.

This was not the moon he remembered, this was not the moon he knew from his life on Terra. This was a moon drastically, irrevocably changed.

The ground was scorched because of the dust. The first thing the terraformers did was melt the dusty ground of the moon to lock the dust under a crust of melted rock, to keep it from getting into the air as the atmosphere was being injected into the future biosphere. It was also critical to keep the ground in place when the water was introduced, to keep any pooled water from turning into silty mud before the organic infusion process could take place. In effect, they'd used lasers and heat rays to melt the dust over the entire surface of the moon outside the dome to form a hard crust, allowed it to slowly cool as they injected in the nitrogen/oxygen atmosphere, then cooled it the rest of the way by dropping water on it from low orbit in the form of artificial rain. The crust was just deep enough to support the weight of a person, but anything heavier than that would break through and release the dust underneath into the atmosphere. It also changed the color of the surface, going from that light gray that was iconic in every picture of the moon there was up to about three years ago to a dusky grayish black, the color of hardened lava.

Nearly four years of work had led to this moment, when the dome was officially opened, because the environment outside the dome was now life-sustaining. The temperature outside the dome was a pleasant 63 shuki, and the air pressure was exactly what was inside the dome, which caused no decompression issues on either side when the dome was opened. Radiation shields kept the harmful solar wind off the surface, and right now, it was daytime on the surface, which meant that the sun was visible high in the sky. The day-night cycle was simulated using giant orbiting mirrors, with the mirror blocking the sun for the night cycle during the two week day and

reflecting sunlight to form daylight when the city was in the night cycle, at least for now. There were plans being made to alter the rotational velocity of the moon to give it spin, with the intent to create a 24 hour day rotation.

That was technology that was devised by the Galactic Republic. They had the technology to alter the rotational velocity of a planet or moon without doing any damage to the celestial body in question, and they'd offered to do it for Luna. It was a process that had to be done before they introduced any large bodies of water onto the moon, to prevent tsunamis, so if they wanted to do it, it had to be done *now*. If they waited, then what would take about a four months now would take about six years later, because of the water and the need to change the rotation very slowly to prevent tsunamis and widespread flooding. Studies they'd done showed that introducing rotation to the moon wasn't going to affect Terra rotation, orbit, tidal forces, or ecology, so Jason had green-lighted the addition to the terraforming plan.

It was also why they hadn't taken down the dome. The rotational alteration process was going to introduce high winds on the moon's surface as the moon rotated while the atmosphere above it did not, so the dome had to stay up to protect the city from the wind while they got the atmosphere equalized to the moon's new rotational velocity. The entire process was going to take about six months, four to get the moon rotating and two more to get the atmosphere up to speed with the ground under it. But even after that, the dome would not be removed, because the water injection process was going to create about two years of constant rain...and that would get old very fast for the residents and students. But, after that six months, people would be allowed out of the dome for recreation so long as they

didn't mind playing in the rain, once the danger of high winds causing injuries was gone.

The soil infusion process would take place during the water injection process, mainly because it would need the water to do it right. Giant units would crawl over the surface, break the crust, mix in organic matter with the chewed up crust and dust to form soil, then add in water to hydrate it. The units would then deposit it back on the surface with soil-dwelling microbes, amoebas, and protozoa mixed into it and pack it down just enough to give it stability, then it would be seeded with grass and earthworms, which were important for soil sustainability and would start building a viable animal ecosystem. They were using the same kind of grass they'd used on Karis for terraforming, which would grow fast and form deep roots to help with soil retention, as well as form the floral foundation for herbivores introduced in the future. The grass was digestible for most any herbivore. The moon would be fully infused just as the water injection process ended, it was scheduled that way, so when the water sprayers and industrial-grade water replicators were finally removed, it would leave behind a surface covered in grass. That grass would form the foundation of the new custom-built ecosystem they would create here on Luna, which would consist purely of animals from Terra. It would also be slowly replaced or augmented in certain areas by trees and other kinds of plants, which would create a vibrant and diverse series of ecological biomes that would mirror the different ecosystems on Terra. Eventually, there would be grassy plains, scrubby deserts, rain forests, jungles, taiga, and even arctic tundra on Luna, but that would take time to develop as seeded plants began to reproduce and spread. Along with it would be shallow oceans, deep oceans, rivers, lakes, ponds, and weather to complement the land, and ultimately weather patterns would form once the atmosphere fully

stabilized. Eventually, Luna would become a self-sustaining living world, and Jason was looking forward to seeing it.

More immediately, in two years, Luna would be a green and blue jewel hanging in the night sky when viewed from Terra, as opposed to right now when it looked like a streaky black marble with a few large lakes holding water. It would have two small oceans, rivers, lakes, and mountains, but everywhere else it would be green from the grass. There would be some clouds, but no established weather patterns, not until the atmosphere stabilized and formed patterns based on solar heating and the moon's new rotation.

But that was in two years. Right now, the moon's surface was more like a lava flow from a volcano than anything else. But what was blowing Jason's mind was the fact that he was standing on the surface of the moon wearing his formal robes, he was breathing air, and it was warm. It was just boggling his mind that this was the same barren rock he'd looked up upon countless times when he was living on Terra. Granted, he was in a bionoid with his real body being in Ayuma's house in Norfolk, but its simsense feed gave him the same sensation as if he were really there.

This was the moon. This was the actual moon. And here he was, standing on its surface, not dying of vacuum exposure. This was real science fiction right here, standing on a moon that now had an atmosphere.

Estrella stepped up beside him and gave him a curious look, crossing her arms. She was wearing more formal clothing, which just meant that she was now wearing proper pants. She was still wearing a cleavage-framing bustier with gold chains and baubles hanging from it and flared leggings with soft, supple slippers on her feet, with a simple shawl thrown over her shoulders. Her clothing was red with gold trim, the shawl embroidered with

the standard of the Ulala in golden thread, which was a flowing geometric pattern radiating out from two stars, which represented the two planets from which the Ulala originated in their home galaxy.

Your terraforming technology is solid, she noted as she surveyed the charred landscape, sending privately. This looks ready for the soil creation phase. They can undertake that while our team induces rotation, the units should be large enough to not be affected by the wind.

I'm still surprised the Republic offered to do it, Jason responded, also sending privately. I figured they wouldn't want to bring any of their tech into outside territory.

They're invested in the idea of the Academy, Jason, and they're not too worried about security since you agreed to their terms. We'll have both sensor blockers and security forces on site to protect the units. Them offering their services to induce rotation into this moon both directly demonstrates the Republic's commitment to being part of the Academy system and indirectly aids our own students, since most of them will be on this campus. The process itself doesn't cost very much to execute. The equipment was already made, it's as simple as setting the units down on the surface at the proper locations, anchoring them, and then turning them on. It barely took us a week to survey the body and determine it can have its rotation altered safely. It's a sturdy little moon, it can handle the stress easily, she smiled over at him. Since we used your Stargate string to get the units over here, it was very easy to move the equipment. Oh, that reminds me.

What?

They sent some technical data for Myleena to look over, for the Nexus units. To help her develop a system that can be put in a gravity well, she answered. We never developed that technology, but we do have a lot of research on the general science behind it. Oh, and thank you for sharing it, she added with a slight smile. Our prototype units are working exactly as the specs say they should. We'll be studying them to improve the technology before we start mass producing them.

Outside of simsense, it was one of the few useful technologies we developed that you don't have, Jason noted dryly. At least that we're willing to share.

I'll get the secrets of your drives from you yet, you cagey man you.

Good luck, he retorted blandly, which made her laugh. I'm sure Myli will love it. She's still fixated on Nexus technology, she's bound and determined to develop a system we can install on Karis. Once she figures that out and we reduce the cost of using it, it'll become super useful.

You have to look at the big picture, Estrella told him. The cost to use the Nexus system may be offset by the savings of using ships to move people and cargo. It may be cheaper in the long run.

That's what Myli keeps saying. I have to say that it got a lot more practical once we found a way to link two Nexus gates permanently, including being the perfect way to get your people here. That way nobody sees your ships coming and going and gets overly curious.

It should work just fine, she agreed. It's a good thing that Nexus gates have the same range as Stargates.

They have more range, actually, since they're affecting a smaller volume of space, Jason corrected. But the increased range is infinitesimal compared to the distance between our galaxy and yours, so it's a moot point. It doesn't let us place Nexus Twenty any closer to you than its current location in the C2 cluster. So, what do you think of Academy City?

I think it has a lot of potential, she answered, looking behind them, towards the dome holding the city. I'm quite impressed by the dorm facilities you've set aside for my people. They'll be quite comfortable here while they're attending school.

I'm sure they'll consider it to be crude conditions compared to the Republic, but they can manage, Jason replied lightly.

There's a certain charm to roughing it, Estrella sent slyly, giving him a smile. But it won't be the Ulala complaining about that. You've been to both of our homeworlds. You know we don't rely on technology as much as the others.

One reason why I respect your people, he affirmed. Oh, and I should warn you that I think you're going to lose both your kids. I think my kids have decided to keep them, he told her.

She laughed. Oh I know that. Kirim and Leseni keep going on and on about their new friends here. Both are already hinting that they want to attend the Academy. I should speak to Rook about having him build some bionoids for them so they can come visit.

You'd better if you want to know a moment's peace, Jason warned, which made her grin. We can stow them where we keep yours and Herilu's bionoids. How did he do on his exams, by the way?

He's very optimistic so far, thank you for asking, she smiled. He's taking his final exam right now, and should be done in a few hours your time. He'll most likely merge over as soon as he's done, which might extend my stay here even longer.

I'm sure he'll do well, he noted as he glanced Sk'Vrae stalking up from the open cargo airlock that led back into the city. You're already two days off schedule, and I'm sure you'll find other reasons to slow things down. Hey Sk'Vrae. What brings you by?

Nothing momentous, Jason, she answered, coming to a stop beside him, her bionoid looming over him a little bit as she put her clawed hand on his shoulder fondly. It was times like that when Jason was reminded that the Urumi were a very big species, and Sk'Vrae's crest made her seem even taller. Sk'Vrae herself was an impressive and imposing physical specimen, and that had nothing to do with her being the Brood Queen. None of her offspring were as big as her, which was because she was older than they were. Urumi never stopped growing, so the largest Urumi were also the oldest Urumi. The others are getting quite curious about you and the Republic, Estrella. Mainly because they've learned that its your people that will be causing this moon to change its rotation.

Your own people are capable of it, she answered. It's nothing but using gravometric propulsion at strategic locations on a celestial body that can alter its rotational velocity without causing dangerous stress to the body. This moon has no liquid core, so it will be very easy to change its rotation without doing any damage to it. It's much trickier to use on a body with a liquid core or mantle, but still possible. I'm honestly surprised you haven't already developed the technique, given your level of terraforming technology. Getting to this point in just four years, that is a true testament

to your people's terraforming skills, she sent glowingly, sweeping her hand out towards the charred landscape of the lunar surface before them. I dare say that we might be able to learn a few tricks from you when it comes to terraforming.

We just hadn't really thought of it, I suppose, Jason noted. But you have, and that's what the Academy is all about. The free exchange of knowledge and ideas to better the lives of everyone.

Which is why we'll be happy to add our data on how it's done to the Academy archives once we have access to the mainframe, she smiled. You already have the technology to do it, you just need the scientific method.

For one, I'm glad you are. The mirror system works, but it's not exactly cheap, and it can be a navigation hazard. It'll be much cheaper and easier in the long run to just give Luna the same rotation as Terra, so they share the same day cycle. So on behalf of the Academy, we thank you for your contribution.

That's what friends are for, Estrella smiled. Now, Sk'Vrae, we absolutely must talk. I want to learn all about the significance of a female's crest in Urumi society, she sent eagerly, pulling her away from Jason and back towards the airlock.

And that was how Estrella was going to conquer the Milky Way...with her charm. Jason knew that she was by far one of the most charismatic people he'd ever met. She could work a room like nobody he'd ever seen, and was able to charm her way into any conversation, which allowed her to subtly dig for information from about anyone. She was a master politician and negotiator on top of that, which made her one of the most dangerous people to ever sit at a conference table. Ever since she started interacting

with the Accords rulers, she had been effortlessly insinuating herself into their inner circles, becoming everyone's good friend, and absorbing every tiny bit of information that drifted through those conversations like a sponge. Jason was often amused at how frighteningly good she was at the game, to the point where even Zaa admired her, and the only reason he wasn't seriously concerned was because the Republic was so far away. There was far too much distance between their galaxies for them to have any expansion interest here. The biggest risk she posed was the secrets they kept from each other. She wasn't kidding when she said she was after the technology behind translight drives, which the Republic saw as the one true thing they could learn from the Karinnes over and above simsense. And he had never denied that they were trying to decipher and crack Republic technology. So it was a bit of a merry game between them, one that amused Zaa and the Kimdori to no end, because it was so Kimdori to be both honest and deceptive about what was going on at the same time.

They were here for a reason, however, and that was that this was the official introduction of the Galactic Republic to the empires that participated in the Academy system, as well as the official signing of the Academy Treaty that would bring the Republic into the fold. Ayuma had scheduled the signing ceremony to take place here on Luna, mainly because Estrella wasn't a Generation, as well as having her here to tour Academy City and give any interested rulers the chance to meet her. All of the Accords rulers were here in person, mainly because they had already met Estrella and they all considered it polite to attend the ceremony. Outside of the Accords, most of the galaxy's empires were in official attendance, but only four rulers had come to witness the ceremony in person, or at least using a bionoid. Grran, Jokik, Voss, and Overmaster Birn had opted to attend the ceremony themselves rather than send a dignitary.

It wasn't very long until that official ceremony began. With Jason standing behind and to the side of the lectern, he listened as Estrella gave quite a speech about the ideals of the Academy and how her people had been so moved by the concept of it that they had decided to sign on and become an active participant. She also revealed, much to Jason's surprise, that her government had technological ability equal to the Karinnes rather than the Confederation, including having intergalactic capability, then rather glowingly declared that the Republic was willing to share their science and some of their non-military technology with the Academy because the Academy held within it knowledge and science that the Republic had not developed on their own. She referred to it as "the fairest of trades," that the Republic would not simply take from the Academy, but would also give. And the first thing she mentioned was that it was the Republic that was going to alter Luna's rotation to match the day cycle of Terra, giving both Terra and Luna the same 24 hour day. She went on to declare that any empire with access to the Academy had the technological ability to do it as well, and the process to do it as well as the science behind it was going to be shared with the Academy.

She also directly addressed the Ulala's uncanny resemblance to the Faey and Dreamers. "Our resemblance to the Faey and the Dreamers is not cosmetic," she announced, speaking Faey from the lectern. "We are, in fact, the same species. Our DNA is identical, with just minor variations dealing with cosmetic appearance, which means that the Ulala, the Dreamers, and the Faey are all descended from a common ancestor. Three virtually identical branches of the same species, each coming from different galaxies. The Faey, from this galaxy. The Dreamers, from Andromeda. And we Ulala, from a galaxy in a distant galactic cluster. How we are related but are separated by billions of light years is one of the mysteries that the Ulala

intend to solve, with the help of the brilliant minds within the Academy. That is why I am here to announce that the first major project that Ulala scholars will undertake will be a thorough investigation into this mystery. We want to know how we came to have cousins in galaxies so very distant from our own, when this happened, and most importantly, *why* it happened. This project will involve geneticists, historians, anthropologists, and biologists, with the mission to determine where our species originated, how we were moved from that home planet and spread across the entire cosmic string, and why this was done. We want to know where we came from, we want to know our cousins the Faey and the Dreamers, and establish ties of family and kinship with them that transcend political boundaries. The three of us searching for the answer as to why we were split up in the first place will help us do so, as we unite in a common interest that matters very much to all three of us.

“As our scholars endeavor to solve that mystery, our explorers will seek out answers as well. There may be other lost tribes of our people out there, forgotten in the long march of time, and we want to find them. For that reason, we are announcing an intent to form a partnership between the Republic and the empires of the Academy, to search the galaxies between here and our home galaxy, searching for other members of our species. We will search the stars for our long-lost kin, because to the Ulala, there is nothing that matters more to us than *family*. The Faey are of us. The Dreamers are of us. We are of the Faey. We are of the Dreamers. The Dreamers are of the Faey. The Faey are of the Dreamers. We are three branches of the same species, separated only by names and millennia of isolation from one another. We Ulala believe in the power of community, similar to the powerful sense of community that exists among the Generations. To the Generations, all other Generations are considered

family, cousins. That is how we Ulala see ourselves, we see the Faey and the Dreamers as Ulala, as *us*, just as we see ourselves as them. We are a single species that goes by three names. And if there are others out there, if there are other names to add to our people, we want to find them and let them know that they are not alone.”

Jason had announced to the Confederate Council that the Dreamers and Faey were the same species back when the Karinnes rescued the Dreamers from the Syndicate, but he’d never shouted it from the rooftops as Estrella had just done. He honestly had no idea what she was up to, but he was in no position to stop her.

“Needless to say, one of the driving goals of the Ulala now that we are in contact with our newfound cousins is to learn everything there is to know about each other,” she said with a smile towards Dahnai, who was sitting in the front row of the audience. “A contingent of Ulala historians, scholars, cultural experts, artists, musicians, writers, journalists, and sociologists are even as we speak traveling here to begin that process, to travel among the worlds of the Imperium, the Collective, Terra, the House of Karinne, and Tir Tairngire to learn about our relatives in this galaxy. Where our cousins dwell, no matter what empire, we wish to come visit you and learn of your life and culture there. We want to learn everything there is to know about our cousins, and teach them everything they would want to know about us in return, so we might understand each other. While we appear virtually identical to our cousins here, our culture is very different,” she smiled. “We would learn the ways of our cousins, and teach them our ways in return, to foster understanding and community between us.”

“But the Republic is not only the Ulala. We are simply the species chosen to represent the Republic to your people because of our close

kinship with the Faey, to present a familiar face to you, as it were. We are just one species in a civilization that numbers over five thousand species that have joined together to form a single government. The other species of the Republic are also coming to join the Academy system. Scholars, researchers, instructors, and trainers are coming along with our first class of students to become part of the Academy, to learn from you and teach you what we know in return, to contribute to the grand vision of the House of Karinne of a place open to all that exists to foster education, knowledge, and the free exchange of ideas, with the hope that it spreads peace and prosperity throughout the universe. That is a noble ideal, a worthy goal, and one that the Republic willingly joins to help bring it to fruition. The Republic values knowledge nearly as much as it values peace, and it is our hope that coming here, becoming part of the Academy system, will advance both goals for both my people and yours.”

She finished up her speech with some pattern platitudes and flowery praise, but Jason was more interested in the expressions of the rulers and dignitaries that listened to her speech. Some of them were openly intrigued about what she said, mainly when she mentioned forming a cooperative to explore the other galactic clusters. No doubt they’d see that as an opportunity to locate planets to colonize in the future, but that meant that very soon, they’d be demanding that he set up Stargates to other clusters so they could begin that exploration. Estrella had to know what she was doing when she mentioned that, but he didn’t quite see her angle.

She then sat down at a simple polished hardwood table beside the lectern for the official part of the ceremony. Ayuma brought out the Academy Treaty and set it before her, both the main document that everyone had signed and a stand-alone version that would only carry

Estrella's signature, and she wasted no time. With a big smile and using a Faey quill pen, the kind used for the most ancient and formal of written correspondence used by the Siann, she signed her name as a representative of the Republic to the original treaty, adding her name to the very long list of signatories, then signed the document that she would take back with her to the Republic. And with that signature, the Galactic Republic was publicly part of the Academy system, since they'd been secretly a part of it for years. There was loud applause as hoverpods took pictures and video of the moment, which caused Estrella to ham it up a tiny bit by picking up her copy of the document and showing it to the audience, with her name signed on the bottom in an elegant, crisp calligraphy, signed using the Ulalan language and alphabet.

“We are pleased beyond measure to welcome the Galactic Republic to the Academy system, our first exo-galactic signatory!” Ayuma told her with an easy smile. “Be sure your students arrive in time to begin classes on schedule. We brook no tardiness here from any of our students,” she joked, which brought some laughter.

“They will want for nothing, Dean Ayuma. The dorm facilities I toured will make them feel like they have plenty of space, as well as everything they need to excel. We thank you in advance for your generous and magnanimous hospitality.”

The official ceremony over, they moved on to the reception. It was there that Estrella really went to work, greeting the dignitaries sent by other empires in most cases, but the ruler him or herself (or itself) and working her charm magic on everyone. It didn't take long before everyone was treating her like their long lost best friend, the center of attention as august emissaries and rulers clamored around her like eager puppies, desperate for

her attention. Again, it was this aspect of her that made Estrella Nine Rings one of the most dangerous people that Jason had ever known, and proved very much that charisma, grace, and charm could be potent weapons when used properly. Dahnai made sure to keep herself right beside Estrella at all times, driving home the fact that the Faey had a special connection to the Ulala, and by extension the Galactic Republic, which intimated to them that the Faey would be getting special treatment from them. Dahnai was advertising the fact that one way to get to the bargaining table with the Republic for things outside the Academy was by having the Faey set up the meetings. Dahnai was poised to make some lucrative deals selling access to the Republic...or so she thought, if Jason was right about it.

The reception was only supposed to last about an hour, but thanks to Estrella's constant schmoozing, it ran nearly three hours long. It was long enough for the attendees to meet Leseni and Kirim, who arrived with the girls (Bethany and Siyae), the boys (Kevin and Kaelan), Lyra, Walter, Gary (Temika and Mike's younger son), Darran, and Siyara in tow, all in bionoids. They were all roughly the same age as Leseni and Kirim (though Kirim was almost too young to be considered part of it), and formed the core group with which Estrella's children had bonded since coming to Karis. Raisha and Miyai were also with them as well.

They didn't meet Leseni and Kirim today. Raisha and Miyai had bionoids at the strip, so they'd merged over and met them days ago, and had quickly become part of the Ulalan children's circle of friends. That was inevitable, because the group that they'd been running with was also Raisha and Miyai's clique on the strip, given they were all close in age. That was how the kids organized themselves, by age groups; the elder kids, the

“second wave,” and so on. Leseni and Kirim had been adopted by that group, the second wave, and Raisha and Miyai were a part of it.

Hey girls, you run out of things to see? Jason asked the twins as they joined them at the reception.

Their mom called them back, I think she’s getting ready to go, Raisha answered.

You guys have fun?

Yeah, Academy City is like huge, and there’s so much stuff to see and do, Miyai told him. *This is the first time we’ve been here.*

I thought you guys were here with your mom when she toured the city when it first opened.

Nah, we had finals, couldn’t come, Miyai answered.

Huh. Well, guess I’m wrong, Jason admitted. *You guys at the palace or Karis?*

Karis. We’re at the summer palace right now, and we talked Kirim and Leseni into coming over to meet us in person.

Yeah, that wasn’t that hard at all, was it, Jason noted, which made the girls laugh aloud.

Nope, Miyai grinned. *They’re coming over as soon as they get back to the planet, along with the others.*

And how long will you stay at the summer palace? he asked pointedly, which made both of them laugh.

Probably not long, Raisha admitted with a smile. We worked hard to get permission to be able to move freely around the planet, and we're gonna make the most of it. I guess it'd be more accurate to say that they're gonna pick us up on their way to Sarga so we can go to that new theme park just outside Sarsa.

Oh yeah, it should be open now, he answered as Estrella approached.

Why hello girls! Estrella greeted the twins warmly. Estrella knew them very well from her many visits using her bionoid over the years. *Leseni told me you're taking them to an amusement park when we get back?*

Yeah, it just opened last takir, so it'll be our first time going too, Raisha answered.

You may have an extra guest along. Jason, might I ask you to activate Herilu's bionoid? He's completed his exam and would like to merge over when we return.

Not a problem, Jason answered. *Danelle's been anxious to see him.*

I know, she smiled.

[Cybi, can you remove the lockout on Herilu's bionoid?] he asked, casting his query back to Karis.

[Of course. Do you want me to send him there or have him wait here?]

[We're done here, so waiting for us to get back would be best. Just make sure Danelle knows he's merged over or she'll tear out your hair.]

She returned pure amusement. *[I think she keeps a light touch on the bionoid's onboard computer to know when it's active,]* she speculated.

His bionoid will be available in just a moment, Estie. Let him know he can merge over whenever he wants.

Thank you, my friend, she returned with a smile. I told him to stay at the strip, that we'll be returning very soon. And since Danelle is there, I'm sure he'll be properly entertained, she added slyly.

You may wanna face the possibility that Danelle will be the one trying to buy his paper next year, Estie.

I won't exclude her from the bidding, she assured him with a slight smile. She may not be of age, but certain extenuating circumstances convince me that she can provide Herilu with everything he needs to excel.

You mean like being owned by the daughter of the richest woman in the Confederation? Raisha asked directly.

That certainly is a factor, Estrella winked. I'm sure if Danelle harasses Myli enough, she can get her mother to back her to outbid every other woman. But those aren't the circumstances I'm considering.

Oh? And what are those? Miyai asked.

Herilu coming to Karis to live would begin the process of bringing our two peoples together, she answered. He would get the chance to live among our cousins from the inside, to experience daily life in a way we can't truly understand as just visitors, to gain a perspective that no other Ulala possesses. That, and he truly loves Karis and its people.

And Danelle, Miyai nearly snickered mentally.

There's nothing wrong with knowing your heart at a young age, Estrella smiled. I knew that Dakiru was the husband for me when I met him

when we were ten. I saved for cycles and drove my parents to madness with pleas for backing to make sure I could afford to buy him when he came of age. I only see it as a good thing that Herilu has found a girl he really likes before he's even old enough to be available.

If Herilu wants to come live here, Estrella, we can talk about it, Jason told her seriously. He can attend school back home via bionoid, just reverse things from how they are now. I agree that it would only behoove both of us for there to be more interaction, and you don't get much more interactive than an Ulala moving to Karis to live. But, given that he is still considered a minor by both Karinne and Republic law, he'll need a guardian, a sponsor. He won't be able to live alone. And I think you might be able to persuade Myleena to officially sponsor him, he added lightly. She's very fond of him and would probably be fine with letting him move into her house.

Why Jason dear, you've read my mind, Estrella sent with a smile at him. And speaking of such matters, could you arrange for my husband, Herilu, and Saviri to come join us here on Karis? Now that Herilu has finished his exams, there's nothing holding Dakiru and the children there. They're able to come visit in person and spend the rest of my state visit here.

Would right now be too soon?

Not at all. I'll arrange it from our end when we return to Karis. Would you mind terribly sending a ship to pick them up? That way they'll get here much faster.

Fine with me. I'll dispatch a task force to meet your ships at the usual rendezvous point so they can transfer over, and bring them back. They should arrive very early tomorrow morning our time.

Excellent.

You should warn Herilu that he won't be able to merge over while in transit. They'll have to put him in a stasis pod until they reach the Stargate chain.

Ah, that's right. I'll make sure to warn him that his visit with Danelle via bionoid will need to be brief.

Saviri. That's your youngest boy, right? Raisha asked.

That's right, Raisha. By your calendar, he's six. My oldest, Kirikim, is an adult in our society and no longer lives with us. She's currently in her last year of Academy and will be graduating at the end of this academic term.

What major is she? Miyai asked.

She's gone into finance, like Kumi, Rahne, and Temika, she answered. She's wanted to be a banker since she understood what money was, she added with a laugh. But she's well suited for the profession, she has a mind for math and a keen sense of how the markets will turn.

Jason let the girls keep Estrella busy as he turned slightly and put a finger to his interface. *[Myri.]*

[Yes, Jason?]

[Estrella wants to bring the rest of her family back here now that her son has finished exams. Dispatch a fleet flagship and escorting task force to our usual rendezvous point with Ulalan ships just outside C6D. Estrella's family will be boarding our ship for the trip back, so have them warm up the stasis pods.]

[No problem. The Saiva is already at C5 on a picket rotation, so I'll send it and a task force, and send the Kinai to replace it on picket duty until he can deliver Estrella's family and get back.]

[Good deal. I'll warn Estrella.] The Saiva is already at C5, so it'll be there in about five hours our time, Estie. Warn your husband.

Excellent. That will give Herilu a few hours to visit Danelle before he has to go into stasis.

Jason was looking forward to meeting the rest of Estrella's family in person. While Estrella's husband didn't have a permanent bionoid, he'd merged over in generic bionoids several times over the last few years, so Jason knew him passingly well. Dakiru was a good example that Ulalan men were nothing like Faey men, even though both were from female-dominated societies. That was because that when it came to matters of the home, Dakiru was unquestionably *in charge*. Estrella may be a member of the Supreme Council and part of the Republic's governmental structure, but the instant she crossed the threshold of the hatch leading into her private apartment aboard the ship, she was no longer the boss. Dakiru ruled his household with an iron fist, keeping the children in line, managing Estrella's home life so she was always in top form to tackle her duties, and mainly just keeping everything running smoothly. He was a vastly intelligent, very well educated, organized, confident man that was in his own way just as formidable as Estrella, to the point where he served as an advisor to her. In many ways, he was like the Denfather Grun, and Jason had the feeling that the two of them would get along smashingly if they were to meet. In Ulalan society, a married man was the one that managed the household, and Dakiru was one hell of an efficient manager. He was also a great example of how Ulalan men were very different from Faey

men, because no one who met Dakiru would believe in a million years that he was the submissive gender in his society. He was a powerful, commanding, occasionally bossy man who also happened to be ridiculously tall. Judging from when he'd seen him on holo with Estrella, he was nearly a head taller than Jason, eye to eye with Salira, and like Mike and Zach, he was very, very muscular. He was physically intimidating, and his personality was just as formidable as his appearance.

Jason was almost glad he was in a generic male Dreamer bionoid when he merged over. If he had his normal height and size to add to his personality, the man would be running the entire strip inside a takir. And would probably run it just as well as Captain Kaera.

The reception over, Jason escorted Estrella to her passenger dropship, then he and the others stowed their bionoids in a cargo dropship to be returned to their usual storage, which wasn't all in the same place. Jason's bionoid was his Terran bionoid, but the children's bionoids were from Karis. He was on the deck chatting with Temika, Mike, Piri, and Iriko when they landed on the pad near the barracks. Piri and Iriko were in armor, doing a shift on the strip, which was part of their training regimen. They were both doing escorts of Jason when Kaera required it and doing shifts at static posts like the strip and the vacation house, all part of their training. They were certainly a study in opposites, given Piri was Strath and thus was as tall as Salira and Iriko was a bit on the petite side, so the height difference between the two of them was pretty substantial. Jason was confident that both of them were going to make it, because they were both *extremely* good, and each had unique skills that they brought to the Dukal Guard. Piri was a Marine from a special ops unit before she applied, and she was probably one of the most skilled combat specialists they had. Iriko had

a technical background, had been one of the engineers at MRDD before applying, and had become one of the Guard's go-to tech specialists. Virtually anything technical, from computers to drones to mecha to other specialized equipment the Guard used, she could fix it all, and her background meant that she had experience with the cutting edge tech the Guard used. That made her an invaluable asset when in the field, giving them a highly skilled technical specialist that was one of them, and thus someone they could trust with their deepest secrets. They also happened to be quite lovely ladies, both of them bright and personable. Piri was an impish scamp, a prankster and a rogue with a gregarious personality, where Iriko was reserved, subtle, sly, and wickedly funny. Estrella knew his guards—she knew everyone on the strip period—so she it was no surprise that she took Piri's hands when she reached the deck, looking up at her with a darling smile. *Is Jason about to go out?*

No, we're pulling a shift on the strip right now, she answered. *How did the ceremony go?*

Very well, I met quite a few dignitaries from the other Academy signatories, she answered.

And wrapped them around her little finger, Jason added blandly.

That's what I'm here to do, you silly man, Estrella grinned at him, which made Piri laugh. *Now then, is Herilu merged over?*

He's with Danelle, getting as much time in as possible before he has to delink, Jason answered. *They're on their way over to the summer palace, Raisha and Miyai invited everyone over. Including you.*

Then why don't we go visit Dahnai and her daughters? she asked with a smile.

They spent a nice evening over at the summer palace, just hanging out with Dahnai and her family, and spent the night there. Jason was awoken by Myri as she informed him that the *Saiva* had arrived, and he was up and at the pad in time to greet the rest of Estrella's family as their dropship landed. The first one out was Herilu, who was a tall, gangly young man who happened to be devastatingly handsome, with shimmering silver hair he wore well down his shoulders and vibrant deep blue eyes. Jason knew Herilu very well since he was so involved with Danelle, and he liked the boy a great deal. He was intelligent, kind, observant, and very capable. Herilu came up to him and took his hands with a smile. "It's so good to finally see you in person, Jason," he said in his rich baritone voice, a much deeper voice than one would expect for a young man his age and size. Herilu also happened to be quite an exceptional singer. "I know bionoids are as good as the same thing, but there's much to be said for shaking someone's hand in the flesh."

"It is indeed, Heri," Jason said with a smile, patting him on the shoulder. "How was the trip over?"

"Those stasis pods are something else," he said. "They put me in it and next thing I knew they were helping me out of it five hours later."

"That's what they're designed to do," he said as what could only be Dakiru emerged from the hatch, looking around curiously as he came down the steps, and the man was just as gigantic as Jason expected. He wore only a shawl-like wrap draped over his wide, wide shoulders with a pair of simple knicker-like pants, which bared thick, corded arms and a massive barrel chest. The man was *ripped*. He was definitely a head taller than Jason, looming over him as he reached him. "Jason, this is my father, Dakiru," Herilu introduced.

“We know each other fairly well, Heri,” Dakiru said in an even deeper voice, which nearly vibrated the air around it from its power. “How did that recipe I sent Ayama turn out?”

“Very well, actually,” Jason answered, taking his hands as Dahnai, Jyslin, Myleena, Symone, and Estrella scurried out towards the landing pad. “She had to substitute a few of the ingredients, but she made it work. How was the trip over?”

“They had to take me to a different room, I was too big for the stasis pod in the first stateroom,” he chuckled.

“Yeah, they probably put you in one of the ones we use for the Skaa or the Jobodi,” he said ruefully, looking up at him. “You’re definitely outside the norm for your people, Dak.”

“I’m the tallest man on the *Setrai*,” he said modestly, but he was grinning a bit.

“My husband,” Estrella said richly in Ulalan as she reached them, and Jason was a bit amused when Dakiru picked her up off the ground as he embraced her and gave her a lingering kiss. “Was your journey comfortable?”

“Quite, my wife, the crew were gracious hosts,” he replied, keeping her feet well off the ground, which she seemed to quite enjoy. “We’re sorry to wake you. There’s quite a time difference between here and standard time.”

“It is of no moment,” she smiled, rubbing her nose against his lovingly. Jason knew that Estrella was deeply in love with him, but seeing them together in the flesh rammed that home. She turned to look at the other

ladies with a gentle smile. “My friends, may I present my husband Dakiru, this time as the real him rather than a bionoid.”

“You’re definitely nothing like the bionoids you’ve been using,” Symone said in a speculative voice, speaking Ulalan because Estrella was. “I had no idea you were so tall, Dak.”

“You’ve seen holos of him with Estie, you silly girl,” Jyslin chided as she advanced while Dakiru put Estrella down, then took his hands. “It’s so nice to meet the real you, Dak!”

“And you as well, Jys,” he smiled down at her. One of Estrella’s guards escorted a young boy out of the dropship, who was yawning widely.

“Mama!” he called, ambling down the stairs.

“Hello there my little pup!” she said brightly, picking him up as he reached them. “Everyone, this is Saviri, my youngest. Savi, these are our friends from far away,” she told him. “This is Jason, and my good friends Jyslin, Symone, Myleena, and Dahnai.”

“They’re the robot people?”

“That’s us, pippy,” Dahnai said with a smile as she took his hand as Estrella held her, speaking flawless Ulalan. “I’m sure your mother told you there were real people using the robots to come visit your mom.”

“It seems weird,” he said.

“It took me a while to get used to the idea of it too,” she winked, showing off her very motherly side. Dahnai was actually great with kids.

“So this is the summer palace, eh? I’ve only seen images of it,” Dakiru said, looking around.

“You just lost an hour of your life, Dahnai’s gonna show you around now,” Jason warned, and Dakiru rumbled a chuckle when she slapped him in the belly irritably.

“I’d be quite interested to take that tour, I’ve always been quite fond of architecture,” he replied easily. “A hobby hard to indulge when one lives on a starship.”

Why didn’t someone tell me Herilu arrived! Danelle demanded from somewhere inside the main house. Herilu! Herilu, I’m coming! Are you still at the pad?

Yes we are, hurry up! Empress Dahnai’s going to give us a tour of the palace!

“Ah, and that’s the one I want to meet most,” Dakiru said with a growing smile. “I would come to know the young lady that has caught Herilu’s fancy so.”

“Your mother said you’re entertaining the idea of coming to live on Karis for a while,” Jason noted.

He nodded. “I thought it might be a good learning experience. I’ll have six of our months between graduating from finishing school and starting academy, and I thought to spend those months here, learning more about our Faey and Dreamer cousins.”

“I think it’s a good idea,” Dakiru said with an approving nod. “Horizons should ever be expanded. After all, that is what the time off before starting academy is all about. It gives newly graduated young women and men a chance to experience what life has to offer before they begin the next phase of their education. It is our way to encourage our kids to leave

the home and seek out new experiences, learn new things, and spending time here would definitely do that.”

“My only stipulation is you have to live with a sponsor,” Jason said. “You *are* still a minor, Heri, by both Karinne and Republic law. But I think Myleena won’t mind the job all that much,” he said, glancing at her.

“Of course not!” she said immediately. “I’d be overjoyed to host you, Heri!”

“Well then, I guess you have my blessing,” Jason declared.

Danelle came out of the main house, literally running towards the pad. She was wearing nothing but a pair of skimpy panties...but Herilu was used to that particular aspect of Karinne culture from his many visits using his bionoid. Besides, Ulalan culture wasn’t too far off from it, there were no laws against nudity in Ulalan society. Where they differed was that Ulalans commonly wore clothing because it gave them places to attach the chains and bells they favored, on top of the fact that women dancing topless tended to waggle excessively, so a bra or other garment to contain the breasts was heavily favored in Ulalan society. She slid to a stop and took Herilu’s hands, gazing up at him with a glorious smile, sending privately to him, then she dared throw herself against him and give him a nowhere near chaste kiss. *I’m so glad you made it!* she gushed openly. *You’re taller than your bionoid!*

I’ve grown a bit since it was built, he grinned foolishly, putting his hand on her cheek. *I must say, I much prefer looking at you with my own eyes, Dani. The simsense just doesn’t do you justice.*

She blushed, her cheeks staining lavender. “Danelle, this is my father, Dakiru, in the flesh this time rather than in a bionoid,” he introduced aloud,

motioning towards the bear of an Ulala standing beside Estrella.

“Now I know why he’s getting so tall!” Danelle declared with a laugh as she stepped away from Herilu and took Dakiru’s hands. “The bionoids you’ve used are nowhere as tall as the real you, Dakiru!”

He rumbled a soft chuckle as he looked down at her. “Herilu certainly seems to be following in my footsteps,” he agreed. “But he’s still far too scrawny to be a son of mine!”

“Not going there, Dad,” Herilu stated firmly, which made the huge man smile down at him.

“And Herilu is right. You are far more lovely to my own eyes than to a bionoid’s,” he added, daring to cup her chin between his thumb and finger. “You are quite the lovely flower, my young Danelle.”

“Aww, thank you, Dakiru!” she said modestly. She then turned and took Herilu’s hand, then started pulling him towards the compound. “Let me show you around!” she invited with a bright smile. Without waiting for the others, she pulled Herilu away from them and all but dragged him towards the main house. The others watched the pair, Myleena stepping up between Dakiru and Estrella.

I think we may need to talk about a few things, Estie, she sent somewhat privately, excluding Danelle and Herilu as she crossed her arms and turned her head enough to watch the pair head towards the entrance.

I rather think that Herilu may be moving her permanently, Estrella agreed sagely. *Danelle has her heart set on him, and for one, I am quite pleased about it. Not only will she provide him everything he needs to achieve his full potential, she will give him a rich life filled with love, and I*

dare say, many children. She will be good for our son, and our son will be good for her.

It's a good thing he's been properly educated in the management of the household, Dakiru injected. He will make a good husband. He'd better, he added ominously.

I think he'd be too afraid of you to be anything but, Symone noted slyly, giving Dakiru a not entirely chaste look as she dared slide her fingertips along his corded forearm. "Owwww oww ow oww owww!!!!" she hissed as Jason grabbed her by the ear and pulled her away.

"Bad Symone," he chided, which caused quite a bit of giggling.

Dahnai indulged in one of her more favorite hobbies, showing people around her summer palace, and she took long enough for dawn to start staining the eastern horizon. The cooks got up early so they could prepare a sunrise breakfast for the Empress and her guests, which was laid out on the outside table just as the tour was complete. After breakfast, the kids split into three groups, one being Sirri, Aria, Yuri, one of Danelle and Herilu, and the other being everyone else, and they left the island to go sightseeing around the planet. Dahnai's guards would shadow the groups holding Dahnai's children from a discreet distance, which was their policy on Karis, to give the kids a chance to feel like they weren't being hovered over. Jason spent the morning chatting with Dakiru, something he'd done many times through bionoids but never in person, even as he kept Symone more or less leashed so she wouldn't get too outrageous, and was impressed anew by his intelligence, education, and forceful personality.

And as the morning went on, the ways things had changed for both Dahnai and the Confederation as a whole were displayed as guests arrived

from outside the Imperium. Enva was a nearly constant companion for Dahnai, given how deep their friendship was, the two of them together literally any time their schedules allowed...and Enva could finagle her schedule to allow it a lot more than Dahnai could, so more often than not it was Enva coming to Draconis or Karis rather than Dahnai going to Homeworld. But Dahnai also shared strong relationships with Kreel and Mrri. Krirara also came over, since it was her day off, who was also one of Dahnai's strong friends...even though she wasn't the Moderator anymore. They were the core of Dahnai's inner circle of friends as the Empress, but also as Dahnai the person.

Mrri was the newest addition to Dahnai's entourage. The tiny Pai spent a lot of time on Karis for both official and personal reasons—she and Jason were very close friends—and much like as it had happened with Kreel, Mrri's presence brought her into Dahnai's inner circle as well. That was no shock to Jason, since Mrri was a very charismatic female, affable and charming personally. Professionally and politically, she was very cunning and exceedingly dangerous, which caused the like-minded Enva and Estrella to really take a shine to her. The four of them were some of the most prolific schemers around, so it was no surprise that they'd come together to form an alliance of ultimate intrigue. So, as the Grand Duchesses started to arrive for court, they found Dahnai surrounded by her closest friends from outside the Imperium and had the chance to meet Estrella's family.

The Grand Duchesses did know about Estrella, but not the truth of her. Since she looked identical to a Dreamer, Dahnai had passed her off as one in those times when they met her. About a month ago, however, she'd come clean to them as plans to reveal the Republic were finalized, so at least the

members of the Siann wouldn't be blindsided by it. And today's court would be about the Ulala, a more or less formal introduction between the two branch races, as well as a discussion about Estrella's speech and her intent to search the galaxies for more of their kind.

He was about to join them for a little informal chatting when he was contacted by Cybi. *[Jason, the shaman wants to talk to you,]* she told him.

[Whenever, or right now?]

[Right now,] she answered. *[And she asked to see Songa as well.]*

[Okay, that's a little weird. Tell Songa to drop what she's doing and go to the village. I'm on my way now.] Afraid work just called ladies, he sent apologetically after joining a group holding Estrella, Callista, Semoya, Emae, and Anya. *I hope this doesn't take very long.*

What's the matter? Anya asked.

The Parri asked to see me. So I have no idea what this is about, he answered. It could be something important, or something only important to them. I'll find out when I get there.

He flew over in his personal skimmer and landed on the pad outside the village, and found Songa standing on the pad beside her own skimmer holding her personal medkit, looking a little confused. *[What's going on, dear?]* she asked. *[I thought I was summoned for a medical emergency. The Parri told me there's no one hurt.]*

[The shaman asked to see you. Didn't she greet you?]

[No, she's in her hut and the others told me she's not to be disturbed.]

[She must be waiting for both of us, then,] he said as he opened the hatch and came down. One of the *shaman's* apprentices padded up to them and rose up on his hind legs when he reached them. "She asked to see us. Is she done with her meditations?"

"She said to inform her when both of you arrived," he answered, the two of them looking up at the Parri. This one was particularly large for a Parri, so he absolutely towered over them. "If it would please you, Jason Karinne, Songa Karinne, come with me."

"Of course," he replied politely.

They were escorted to her hut, and she came out of it just as they arrived. "It is good to see you, Jason Karinne, Songa Karinne," she said in her gentle voice, rising up on her legs and looking down at them with a gentle smile. "If it would please you, come inside. There is a matter we must discuss. Tea for our guests," she said to her apprentice in that mellow yet strong voice she used to give orders.

"At once," he replied, turning and dropping down to all fours and padding off quickly.

She brought them into her large but spartan hut, with what few things she possessed stored along the walls and with her small, personal firepit dominating the center, which she used mainly for light. She had them sit by her firepit, then she settled on the other side of it from them. "There is a rather...complicated matter that we must discuss, my friends," she told them. "It is a matter that will bring conflict, but one that must be explained so you understand the danger."

That got Jason's attention immediately. "What manner of conflict?" he asked.

“I will address that presently,” she said. “First, you must understand something that is of equal importance. It is nearly time for things to change,” she began. “It will begin here, on Karis, but will spread across the stars. This change will be caused by the Kirri, but it won’t be them directly. There is something that surrounds the Kirri, a living force, with which they are one.”

“You mean the symbiotes?” Songa asked.

“I believe that is what you call them,” she nodded. “They are ready to evolve, to reach a new state, which will start here. This world, it is special. In some ways, Karis is the center of the universe,” she declared in a sober voice. “It is the conditions here on this world that has triggered this evolution. The force that lives in union with the Kirri is beginning to stir, to *understand*, in ways more akin to you and me than the tiny beings that they are. They are becoming a single awareness constituted by the uncountable number of tiny parts that exist throughout the world, in ways curiously similar to how the soul of a world is made up of the life that exists upon it.”

“Wait, wait, hold on. You mean the symbiotes are about to become *sentient*?” Jason asked quickly.

“Yes. And no. It is difficult to explain,” she answered. “They will become more than what they are now, but what they are, what they become, depends on those around them. That is how they do things, Jason Karinne. What they are and what they become depends on those around with which they share their lives. That is why I asked to speak to you, Songa Karinne. You are the healer of hurts, and you may mistake what they do as this begins as some kind of ill intent. It is not. It is them simply trying to understand how they have changed, and while doing so they may cause some measure of mischief around them. As they learn, as they grow, they

will understand when they go too far, and these problems will cease on their own. All you must do is mitigate their inadvertent mischief until they learn the rules, as it were.”

“Please back up a little, *shaman*,” Jason said intently. “I’m having trouble understanding. You mean that the symbiotes will become aware?”

“Aware. That is a good word to use,” she nodded. “But this awareness will be based on what they do, Jason Karinne. To exist in symbiotic harmony with their hosts. What this means is that the symbiotes will begin seeing *all* as Kirri, but also come to understand who they are and where they fit in the scheme of things. Each individual symbiote will be unaware, but as a *group*, as a collective, they will. They are like the wood ants, Jason Karinne. One alone is dumb. But together, they are smart. Each symbiote will become part of a greater whole, and this greater whole will be what matters here.”

“You mean they’re going to form a collective consciousness?” Songa asked.

“I...think so. I’m not sure what meaning that holds,” she answered. “I would ask most keenly, Songa Karinne, Jason Karinne, that you *do not stop* this process from happening. It is important.”

“And why is that?”

“Because of what is coming,” she answered. “It will be attracted by this process, and it will not be friendly,” she warned. “It will see them, and you, as a threat, and eliminate it. That is what this darkness does, Jason Karinne. It immediately destroys anything that it believes threatens its supremacy, like an avenging god smiting mortals that have become so

arrogant as to believe that they stand equal to them. And you have seen how they do it,” she said directly, in a grim tone.

He gasped. “It was *them*?” he asked quickly.

“Yes,” she replied, which made Songa look a little confused. He hadn’t told her about that yet. “You have seen how they respond to those who they see as a threat to them. And as the symbiotes become aware, it will attract their attention. You must be ready.”

“Well...couldn’t we prevent that by stopping the symbiotes?”

“Yes, but that would require you to all but purge Karis of all life,” she told him simply. “You told me that it was the symbiotes that spread the things that made people Generations. Do you not remember how it was impossible to stop them? To do so here, it would require you to do something truly ghastly, Jason Karinne. And that would break your vow to Karis. You promised to protect and nurture him, and wiping away the life that has returned to him would be a grave sin against him. Besides, it would be a moot point. You have *already* attracted their attention, Jason Karinne. Stopping the symbiotes would only slow their response, it would not prevent it.”

“Exactly how have we attracted this attention?” Songa asked.

“What you have become,” she answered. “The darkness coming does not use technology, Songa Karinne. They are beings of psychic prowess, their entire society is based on the powers of the mind. They have learned to use the force of the mind to do most anything that your science can do, and *that* is what they fear when it comes to you. The Generations have become numerous and powerful, Jason Karinne. They spread across the galaxy, they learn and they grow. And such a large concentration of psychic force is

stirring the darkness, attracting its attention to you. It senses a rival emerging, and it will soon come to eradicate it before you can gain sufficient skill and power to challenge it. In some ways, they are like us, Jason Karinne, but they have turned their backs to the gentle illumination of love and use what they know to maintain their power. They arrogantly believe they rule the entirety of all, and brook no upstarts challenging their supremacy.”

“So they wiped out that species over in the B string because they were telepaths?”

“They were far more than telepaths,” she answered. “They must have learned skills beyond those basics. And the instant they did, they attracted the attention of the darkness, who came and wiped them out before they could learn any more.”

“Please indulge me, *shaman*, but why would the symbiotes scare them so?” Songa asked.

“Because of what they are, Songa Karinne,” she answered, looking to her. “They exist in a state of symbiosis. As they evolve, they will learn how to join others together with themselves to form a collective whole. This collective group will be more than the sum of their parts. To use words you favor, they will become Generations themselves, and learn how to merge with others, just as you merge to your biogenic machines. They will learn how to join multiple Generations together, forming the bridge between them, and while so joined, the Generations will be able to augment their power beyond how they can now. That is because the symbiotes will be able to join to the biogenic crystals as well as the Generations. They will serve as a focus that amplifies the combined abilities of both Generation and machine, increasing the effect biogenic crystals have on Generations.”

Jason gave her a stunned look, then shook his head. “So you’re saying that the symbiotes will allow multiple Generations to merge to the same gestalt, and each one adds to its overall power?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “Now, Jason Karinne, imagine the entirety of Karis merged to Cybi, with you serving as the guiding hand. Imagine what you could do when every soul on this planet is working together to perform a task. *That* is what the darkness fears. They have not yet foreseen the true extent of your potential, but when they do, the *instant* they do, they will come. *All* of them will come. And they will seek nothing less than the utter destruction of every living soul in this entire galactic cluster, as well as to track down and destroy any and all that share your lineage. They will purge you from the universe, Jason Karinne, you, everyone related to you, and everyone around you to ensure that the threat you pose can never rise again. And since there are others of you who live in other galaxies, they too will be eradicated. The Iri, the Ulala, others you have yet to meet, they are all in terrible danger,” she warned.

“Why would they go after them?” Jason asked.

“Because they are *you*,” she answered. “Your peoples, you Terrans, you Faey, you are not different. You are the same,” she declared. “You are the same people. One. You began on the same world, but those who would become the Faey were removed from it to protect them from extinction.”

Jason and Songa both gave her a long, *long* look. “That’s impossible,” Songa finally said. “We’re from Draconis!”

“Were the Ulala not placed on their two home planets?” she asked simply. “Were the Dreamers not placed in Andromeda? The Faey are just like them, Songa Karinne. They were seeds planted in the garden of

Draconis, just as the Dreamers and Ulala were seeds planted in other gardens. It is not where you began. It was where you were transplanted from your home.”

Jason tried to wrap his mind around that, but it was nearly impossible. He just stared at her for over a minute, the silence becoming pregnant, because Songa seemed equally shocked. “Then where did we begin?” Jason asked in a near whisper.

“Where you began is where all began, Jason Karinne,” she answered. “There were three groups of children of Terra. One became dominant over the other two and threatened them with extermination by pushing them out of the lifegiving places. The wanderers came and saw the predicament, and removed them from the world to place them in a place where they would flourish without competition. Terra is where you began. Both of you. And while the Faey are now children of Draconis, they were transplants that were welcomed by that world much as the Dreamers were welcomed by Tir Tairngire. Draconis took them unto her bosom and nurtured them as her own, and there, they flourished. But Draconis was but one world that accepted these homeless children. The wanderers scattered them across the stars because they saw the potential in them, and wanted to give them best chance to survive and grow. Placing all of them on one world would have jeopardized them, for one disaster could wipe them all out. The wanderers instead seeded them on multiple worlds to maximize their chance to survive.”

That...made a weird kind of sense. He turned it over in his mind, and he found it logical. Far-fetched, but logical. It did make sense to put the Faey on multiple planets to give them the best chance to survive, it was

something he considered himself when the puzzle of the Dreamers asserted itself into things.

“Who is the third?” Songa asked.

“Jason Karinne would know them by the name Neanderthal,” she answered. “There were only but few of them remaining when the wanderers came, so they were only placed on one planet. The name you would know them by is the Imxi.”

“*What?* They have four arms!” Jason barked in surprise.

“Life evolves, Jason Karinne,” she said simply. “They changed under the tender care of their homeworld, just as the Faey have done so, exhibiting that curious penchant of your people to adapt to your surroundings, something that is quite unusual among the life of the universe. After all, you did not begin with blue skin. That is the mark of Draconis’ effect upon you,” she noted, glancing at Songa. “Jason Karinne’s people and the Imxi share this ability with the Faey, to adapt to a world, to become a part of it. It is much less in them than the Faey, but it is there.”

“Where did you learn this? *How* did you learn this?” Jason asked.

“I have been to both Terra and Draconis, Jason Karinne. They spoke to me while I was there, to reveal this secret to me. They remember. I did not speak of this to you until now because both Terra and Draconis bade me keep the secret myself until the time came that it must be revealed. Why, I did not understand at the time, but now I do,” she said simply.

Jason leaned back on his hands, chaos swirling through his mind, but it did make sense. In a strange way, it made sense! And it answered all the questions they’d been asking since they discovered the Dreamers, in a way

that made all the pieces snap into place! It explained how it happened, and *why* it happened! Jason looked at Songa, who looked back at him, astoundment stamped all over her face, and he could understand it. They had long sought to answer the question of just which planet was the original home of the Faey and their sister races, but they'd always thought that it was Draconis. He'd never have guessed in a million years that *Terra* was their origin planet!

He put that out of his mind enough to focus on the other revelation she dropped on him. "So the Iri, the others, they're also in danger?"

She nodded. "The dark ones will find them, and they will purge them," she answered. "This was coming regardless, but with the symbiotes beginning to awaken, it became seemly to warn you earlier than we planned."

"How long have you known about this? About the others, this darkness, all of it?"

"We have always known, Jason Karinne, which is why we have been quietly preparing you to protect yourself from them," she told him evenly, looking him in the eyes. "But we did not expect it to come this soon. We thought there were centuries, millennia, before they took notice of you. We would have had more time to prepare you for what is to come. But events have changed our plans," she said, a bit ruefully. "It has been our presence that has hidden you from them, but that protection is reaching its end. The light you emit will very soon become more than we can conceal, and they will take notice of it. And they will come to extinguish it."

He mulled that over for a long time, then sighed and leaned forward to put his elbows on his knees. "What do we need to do?" he asked, almost

woodenly.

“Prepare,” she answered. “The only defense against beings with powers of the mind is with the powers of the mind. Prepare your people, Jason Karinne, prepare them to face a foe that wants nothing more than their total destruction. But do not turn your back on your machines,” she told him. “They serve a purpose, one that the dark ones will not respect until it hits them fully in the face. The Karinnes have done well to merge the truth of the mind within with the world without in ways that even those who walk the path of truth must respect. Your machines give you a means to resist the dark ones, Jason Karinne, one they will not consider until it is used against them. Even those well versed in the power that the truth gives them would be hard pressed to defend against some of your machines and the wonders they create. Their sheer power must be respected.”

“So, you’re saying that their ships are just as vulnerable to a GRAF cannon as everyone else,” he surmised.

“I do not know what that is, but I would suspect it so,” she nodded. “Your machines also give you the power to bring your biogenic crystals to the fight. The gestalts, I think you call them. They will allow you to get within reach of the dark ones. While their powers of the mind are formidable, they still have physical bodies that can be attacked. And as you know, there is a range to how far the mind can reach when exerting itself into the physical world. That can be used in your favor. They must come within reach of you and your machines to attack you, which allows you to strike back at them.

“But that is not your strongest weapon. This is the time for you to embrace your true power, Jason Karinne, and protect your people from their darkness. Not the power of your machines, not the power of your title, but

the power that makes you who you are,” she said, reaching over the firepit and putting her hand-paws on his *jaingi*. “It is the light of your love that is your most potent weapon, Jason Karinne. Now you must use it. Of all the beings in this galaxy, only *you* can bring the many together to unite as one to oppose the dark ones. That is your strength, Jason Karinne. When you speak the truth, when you speak from your heart, people will believe you. They will rally to you. Call to them, Jason Karinne, call to them with the purity of your love, and they will come. They may fuss over it, grouse about it, but they...will...come,” she said in a slow, stately pace to drive her point home. “Call to any who can hear your voice, both within this galaxy and beyond. Even the loveless ones of Andromeda will come,” she stressed. “Because they have seen the light of your love and they are moved by it, they begin to yearn for the light that they have cast aside and you represent what they have lost. They will take far more convincing than the others, but still, they will come. Protect the people you love, Jason Karinne, in the way that only you can.”

“Why did you keep this secret for so long?” he demanded.

“We were bade to by the souls of the worlds,” she answered. “The why of it, that we do not entirely understand. They exist on a different level of being, they see things in ways that we do not, and they considered this important for reasons that only they seem to understand. But they asked it of us, and it has ever been our place to obey their wishes. If you seek an answer to that question, Jason Karinne, you must ask them. We have done what we could to help prepare you for what is coming without violating the trust the souls have placed in us. It was a difficult path to walk, Jason Karinne, I will not deny it. It caused me pain to keep this from you. With glad relief do I tell you now, not over what I have said, but because I no

longer have to keep that secret from you. That is a position I believe you can understand.”

He could. He’d felt any number of variations of that weight on him keeping the secrets of the Generations from Jyslin, Symone, and Dahnai, the women he loved. He knew what it was like to keep a secret, to feel like he had to keep a certain distance from people he loved because of the secrets he had to protect. He could understand why she would feel that way. “What else do I need to do?”

“That is up to you,” she replied. “The only advice I can give you is what I have said. Call out to any who can hear you, then prepare them for the coming of the dark ones. Only together can we withstand their assault and turn them away.”

“We?” he asked with a wan smile.

“The Parri will also answer your call, Jason Karinne,” she answered. “When the time comes, we will stand with you. We may not oppose the dark ones in the ways you do, but we will help where we can in our own ways. We are here for you.”

“That brings me comfort, *shaman*,” he told her, putting his hands over hers that were still on his shoulders. “The Parri have been one of the foundations of my life since you came to live on Karis. I’ll feel much better knowing that you stand with me.”

“You have ever been a friend of the Parri, Jason Karinne,” she smiled, letting go of his shoulders. “The only other advice I can give you is to not forget to *live* while you prepare. Do not let the coming of the dark ones consume you, else you may lose sight of what is most important. Love, friends, and family,” she smiled. “They have not yet begun to move, so you

have time. Time to prepare, and time to *live*. Do both to the best of your ability.”

He blew out his breath, leaning back again and looking up at the thatched ceiling. *[You okay, dear?]* he asked Songa.

[That’s a loaded question, dear. I feel like I’ve been raked over the coals.]

[Welcome to my world,] he answered in a dry mental tone. *[This isn’t the first time I’ve been bowled over by someone dropping a bomb like this on me. Zaa did it more than once. Do you believe her, though?]*

[I have to say I do. She has no reason to lie, and what she said about our species makes sense. It explains why the Terrans and Faey are so similar. I’m not so sure about the Imxi, though. I’ve never really studied them, but I guess it would be theoretically possible.]

[I may have scoffed at her before I met the Pai and Muri, and we found the tabis,] he returned. *[They prove that psionic power, psychic ability, can manifest in more ways than one. These dark ones must be like the Pai and Faey, races that evolved with abilities, but this race is so old that they’ve evolved their powers to godlike levels. And from the sound of it, they destroy any other species they find that start to manifest the same powers. That, too, I can believe. Terra’s bloody history is rife with examples of pre-emptive attacks like that, destroying someone before they become a threat.]*

[The Third Civil War. That was what the Merranes did to the original Karinnes,] she agreed. *[They saw them as a threat because of how strong the Karinnes were with their telepathy, and wiped them out.]*

[That's a much better comparison. It never fails, just when I think things are settling down, it starts all over again. First the Syndicate, then the Consortium, now this. I feel almost dizzy.]

[Look at the bright side, dear. After this, what more could there be?]

[Ever the optimist,] he communed sourly. "Alright, *shaman*, let's go over it again. Tell me everything that you can about these dark ones. If we're gonna do this, then let's do it right. And the first step is me learning everything I can about the people trying to kill us."

She smiled and put her hands on her knees. "There is little more I can really say. We know of them, but do not know much *about* them. That would require us to get close enough for them to see us, and as I have said, we conceal ourselves from them. What we do know is that they destroy anyone who they see as a threat, and they don't restrict themselves to just the threat. They have absolutely no respect for life beyond themselves. To them, we are insects, and they feel no remorse over crushing us. They would purge this entire galaxy of all life to end the threat that we pose, and think not one whit about what they have done."

"If you're aware of them but have to hide from them, that means they have similar abilities to yours?"

"Some," she nodded. "They have learned how to release their souls from their bodies and roam the universe in spirit, much as we do. It is there that we must be most careful."

"Wait, wait, you can astrally project?" Songa gasped.

She tilted her head a little. "I suppose that is one way to describe it," she answered. "I thought you knew we could do that, dear Songa Karinne. It

is one of the skills that a *shaman* learns on her journey down the path of truth. Your surprise surprises me.”

She levelled a nearly accusatory glare at Jason. “Hey, don’t look at me, I’m nowhere near able to do that,” he said defensively.

“You never said they could!”

“You never asked,” he replied.

She slapped his shoulder, which made the *shaman* smile. “They have learned some of the secrets of the path of truth on their own, but they don’t share our moral compass,” she continued. “They achieved this enlightenment through their study of the powers of the mind, not the contemplation of the truth of the universe. So some of their skills resemble what we have learned, just employed using a different method. So their abilities are varied and formidable. But what you have to remember, Jason Karinne, is that while they understand that the universe is not in truth what we see, what we see *can* be used against them. They must obey the illusions of the laws of the universe that it presents to those that do not understand its true nature when confronted with a force that brings that illusion into truth itself. This is a weakness that you can exploit with your machines. Force them to obey the laws of physics as your people perceive them, and you can fight them on that level.”

“What does that mean?” Songa asked.

“I know what she means,” Jason said calmly. “The world we see isn’t how everything actually works, Songa. I’ve told you that. But you can *make* it reality just by believing in it hard enough, to use a rather bad metaphor. In reality, the laws of physics can be bent, even broken, by our perception of them. If you can force your perception of reality into an area, anyone that

enters it has to obey the laws as you perceive them. It's an actual mechanic of quantum physics known as Sekri's Paradox, named for the Faey physicist that discovered it, one we exploit for a few of our weapons and devices. What she's talking about isn't some mystical mumbo-jumbo, it's solid, proven quantum physics. One of the ways her world and our world intersects. We can exploit Sekri's Paradox to build a trap that would allow our mecha and ships to take it to any dark ones that enter it. Their ability to reach into the very foundation of reality and twist it to serve their will would be neutralized within the trap, since they won't have control of the space within it."

"Already your mind works to solve this problem," the *shaman* smiled. "This pleases us greatly."

"I've had a bad feeling since the day we saw the result of the dark ones' attack over in the B string," he told her. "It shook me to the core, *shaman*. And now I know why. It's like...I *knew* this was coming."

She regarded him in an odd way. "You drift close to a truth, Jason Karinne," she said seriously. "One you may not want to hear."

"I want to hear it now," he told her. "Let's get all the shocks out of the way at the outset, my friend."

She gave him a slight smile. "Very well. You very well *may* have known they were coming, my friend," she told him. "You are...different from everyone else. In all the universe we Parri have seen, there are an uncountable number of living souls, but there is only *one* like you. For all others, the future is a boundless sea of unlimited potential. There is no path set before them, they are free to pursue anything and everything they desire. But not you. You, Jason Karinne, have a *destiny*. There is a path set before

you, one you have walked since the day you were born, and you have stayed faithful to it as if some inner instinct within you guides you to your destination. Long have we studied this curious aspect of you, for you should not exist. There is no future. There is no fate. And yet, despite such things not existing, here you are, a being who has one foot set in the present and the other set in the future. The Dreamers see what may be, but you, some part of you has seen what *will be*, and that hidden knowledge guides your steps in the present. We have aided you on this unusual journey because we believe that the place you strive to reach is a place of peace and love. You journey towards something beautiful, Jason Karinne, and we Parri wish to walk that path with you to its destination.”

“Are you calling me some kind of messiah, *shaman*?” he balked.

“No. But in your own way, Jason Karinne, you are enlightened in ways we are not. In your own way, you are as a Dreamer Oracle, but you don’t see what may be, you have seen what *will be*. That is the only thing you can see. You do not see it with your conscious mind, it is a part of you that lurks deep inside, and works to guide you to it. In the coming troubled times, you should trust that inner voice that seeks to guide you. That instinct. It will serve you well,” she told him soberly. “It knows things that your conscious mind does not, and if you allow it to guide you, it will help you achieve your goal.”

“So that’s why you’ve been teaching me,” he nearly whispered.

“We teach you because you are *shaman*. That has nothing to do with it. But we have tried to help you connect with that inner part of you so that it may guide your steps much more surely. The lesson of the mirror is the first thing I taught you, Jason Karinne, and I did so for a *reason*. So you can see

into that part of you and give it the chance to show you the way. It will guide you to peace and prosperity, if you allow it.”

“If the Dreamers really are related to Terrans, that could be possible,” Songa injected. “Maybe you are the Terran version of an Oracle, Jason, and it works differently for you than it does for them. Unlike Faey procogs, it didn’t drive you insane, because it seems your ability is focused down to a single point. And from the sound of it, you’re the *only* one. The Parri only proved what we already know, dear. You are truly special.”

He looked at Songa. “You will not repeat what you just heard, Songa. To anyone. *Ever*,” he said intensely. “The last thing I need is for people to start treating me like I’m some kind of religious figure. I get enough of that silliness from the Dreamers, I don’t need it from anyone else. I am *not* some kind of messiah, and with all due respect, I don’t believe I’m special in any way. I’m just an average guy. I always have been. I always will be. I was put on a throne I didn’t want, and have the done the best I could with the hand I was dealt. In a thousand years, I’ll be forgotten. It will be those who come after me who will be remembered.”

Songa said nothing, but she did put her hand on his cheek, pull him closer, and kiss the other gently. “*That*, my dear Jason, is why we all believe in you,” she told him with a warm smile.

“Now enough tangents. Let’s go over everything you know, *shaman*. I’m going to have Cybi record everything I see and hear so we can go over it, word for word. Hear that, Cybi?”

“*Recording is on*,” her voice came from his gestalt. “*I’ve warned the others, and shared what I’ve picked up from your gestalt with them. We’re*

already starting to analyze everything you've been told. We'll have some ideas for you by the time you finish your meeting with the Parri."

"Good girl. So, let's begin, my friend. Tell me everything you can, no matter how obscure you think it may be. Every scrap of knowledge you can give to me matters."

She nodded, an approving look on her face.

They were there for nearly three hours, and the picture she painted was not a pretty one. These dark ones were a race of ancient beings that had developed their psionic powers to the point where they could mimic virtually any technology. It was how they traveled between stars, how they fought, how they did *everything*. They didn't use technology at all, it was *all* psychic ability. They ignored any life that they saw as no threat to them, more engaged in whatever matters were important to beings that existed in a society beyond anything he could imagine, but the one and only way they interacted with the "lesser beings" was to eradicate anyone that they perceived could pose even the most miniscule threat to their supremacy. They believed they were gods, and they kept the mortals in their place by wiping out anyone that tried to climb the hill to reach the pinnacle upon which they stood. And the Generations posed a threat, because of their power and their numbers. The symbiotes amplified that threat to the point where they would move *immediately* when they realized what was going on, because it would drastically increase the raw power that a CBIM could unleash when merged to a collective of Generations instead of just one. That was a threat that they could not ignore, and they would come and wipe out all life in *the entire galactic cluster* to ensure that such a threat never arose again.

To combat this, the Generations were going to need help. Allies. Anyone. *Everyone*. To protect all life in the cluster, all life in the cluster had to rise up to resist the dark ones. Their sheer numbers would even the odds against these god-like beings, the veritable uncountable swarm of army ants bringing down a mighty lion through a million stings. At the spearhead of this defense would be the Generations and every other psychically gifted species they could find. Telepaths, empaths, telekinetics, finders, precogs, anyone with psychic or psionic ability would be needed to resist the power of the dark ones, because the dark ones could do everything that the different races could do and much more. They would be outmatched by the dark ones, but not outnumbered, and it was those numbers that would turn the tide and drive them back. And it would go beyond that. Estrella's people, her government, they could help in this, if only he could convince them that the threat was so dire that it would jeopardize *them*, due to the presence of the Ulala, and try to bring them into the alliance.

But technology would have its place. There were tools they had that others did not, thanks to Myleena and 3D, which would give them real weapons against the dark ones to help even the field against them. Their ships, their mecha, they would be a real threat to the dark ones in ways that other civilizations they wiped out had not, because they had never come up against a civilization like the Karinnes, who had progressed in both psychic ability *and* technology, and had learned how to merge them together so that each amplified the potency of the other. Gestalts were one side of it, but their highly advanced weapons and systems that could work around or ignore physical law would also have a place in the battles to come. The KMS, the CCM, their Republic and Syndicate allies, even the *Consortium*, they would have the ability to strike back at the dark ones in ways that their psychic powers couldn't stop, and that was because the gestalts in KMS

ships could tie them up in psychic combat and prevent them from being able to repel assaults by technology. A dark one ship couldn't warp space to turn aside a GRAF cannon blast if KMS ships with gestalts were working in concert to *unwarp* that space to allow the blast to hit.

The dark ones had fallen into the same trap that the Syndicate had, they had developed in ways that if someone could counter their only real weapons, then they were defenseless. They believed their psychic powers could protect them from anything, and they were *wrong*. The Confederation utilized a two-pronged strategy that used both technology and psychic ability, a strategy employed by the Faey over their thousands of years of infighting and refined by the CCM to turn it into the most formidable military force in the cluster. KMS assets with their gestalts and Faey-trained telepaths attacking on the psychic side while the others attacked on the physical side had been a strategy that no foe that had faced it could stop.

And with the Pai now being part of the Confederation, that gave them the knowledge and wisdom of the Masters to add to their arsenal of psychic-based weapons to use against the dark ones.

It was a grim picture that the *shaman* painted, but he knew she was telling the truth...and he knew she was right. Their only hope of survival was to gather the forces of the entire cluster and present a wall of defiance to the dark ones, so many, so many, that even they would be intimidated by what they found when they came to attack the cluster. But the one thing the *shaman* stressed was that while the struggle to survive would be hard, it was not a lost cause. She believed that they could defeat the dark ones and end the threat they posed, and her belief, her faith in that belief, gave Jason hope. The *shaman* was not one to pin her hopes to lost causes. She was far

too wise and intelligent. If she truly believed they had a chance, then he believed it too.

If anything, he *had* to believe. If there was no hope, then there was no chance of victory.

By the end of the discussion, Jason knew what he had to do. He had had four years of peace, but that was now done. The greatest struggle of his life was before him, a threat far greater than the Consortium or the Syndicate, and he had to prepare for it. There was much to do, many people to talk to, and places he had to go. They had time, but he would act as if that time was short. His first stop would be Andromeda, to speak to the Board, and then he would travel to the distant galaxy where the Consortium had settled, to speak to the energy beings to gain their support. Their clairvoyance would be vital to the cause, and Jason felt he could secure that cooperation because he wouldn't ask them to fight. They weren't in a position to do so. But their energy beings could keep watch for them and alert them to the movements of the dark ones. After that, he would go wherever he needed to go to warn everyone of what was coming, and try to rally them to their cause.

War was coming once again, lurking on the horizon for the House of Karinne. And again, as always, they would rise up and stand against that threat. They would protect themselves, they would protect their friends, they would protect those who had never and would never know of them. They would do it because it was necessary, but also because it was the right thing to do.

They would be ready. When the dark ones came, they would find one hell of a shock waiting for them.