

Weavers' Revelation

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Part I
The One

Chapter 1

They call us worldweavers. We are their saviours and their scapegoats; their allies and their enemies. Part of them, yet apart. Their own children fill our numbers but our children are not accepted by them. Nobody trusts a weaver's child, even one without talent.

The very nature of our talent is greatly misunderstood. I myself have spent many years attempting to correct the misconceptions surrounding it, its use and its capabilities. It is not magic or sorcery of the kind depicted in childrens' tales. We cannot cause earthquakes or make volcanoes erupt in the middle of populated cities — convenient as that might sometimes be.

No; our talent is a personal one. For the most part subtle, we influence things we touch, spinning the threads of reality around our will to create change. For the better or for the worse is irrelevant. Our power knows no morals. That, we must supply ourselves.

We are neither new nor old. We have been as long as there have been Aeldar; and we will continue to be as long as there are Aeldar. Our talent is genetic, but the genes which cause it to express are so many and varied that a true understanding of their manifestations continues to elude the finest geneticists in the galaxy. Some children may be identified as talented from their genetics, but many are found only when their abilities begin to manifest and they come to us for training. Once we were accepted; once we were persecuted.

Now, we are used.

Chapter 2

It was a cold day. Located as it is in the far northern reaches of Aeldora, the Academy receives harsh winters and indifferent summers. Within its walls the temperature is constant, the air heated, cooled or circulated as necessary by the planet's oldest functioning environmental system.

The Academy itself is old. So old that the details of its founding are lost in the haze of myth and legend. Its own records date back a mere one thousand years, give or take a few decades. Its buildings have stood for more than twice that long, and many of them can only have been designed for the purposes of teaching students to exercise their talent.

On this cold day, the air was as clear as it could ever be, and the sky an almost blueish shade of violet. With the environmental system doing its silent task as it had for centuries, my study near the top of the Academy's second-tallest tower was warm and comfortable, so that I almost regretted leaving it to return home. I concluded a response to several reports of unruly behaviour sent by some of the Academy's instructors, deactivated my terminal and fetched my coat. The door opened at my touch, and I passed into the hallways.

They were quiet, but the tower hallways are almost always quiet. Few have reason to spend much time walking them, as much of any journey to a tower room is usually conducted in the lift. Some particularly energetic people have been observed using the stairs, but my office was on the sixty-eighth floor. I was no sloucher by any means, but I see no reason to climb sixty-eight storeys' worth of stairs without good reason.

A lift was waiting for me as always. Equipped with simple learning control systems, they were able to analyse usage patterns to position themselves so that, when idle, they would be most likely to be on the floor where people would wish to board at any given time.

The lift took me down sixty-eight floors to the ground floor atrium, where sunlight streamed through the giant transparent dome and fountains chattered between the plants. Students and staff were present here, and some noticed me as I made my way through the planting and the meeting areas to the station. Most nodded, or raised a hand, or smiled. Some, as always, wished to talk to me.

"Excuse me, sir," began the first, a tall young man wearing the colours of a third-level apprentice. I stopped and nodded to him to continue. "I am Ishin, sir, of house Ti Mon." The name sounded familiar. Where had I heard it before? "Professor Ircoya said—" that was it.

"Professor Ircoya has explained your situation to me, Ishin," I said. "You

will not be penalised by missing the scheduled exam period to attend your sister's wedding. I am surprised that she did not tell you that immediately herself."

"She said that she did not think it would be a problem, but since the exams are so important..."

"Do not be concerned," I reassured him. "You may take your exams when you return."

"Thankyou, sir."

I continued on, resisting the urge to shake my head. Ishin would take his exams, but from what I had read of his files, would not become a fourth-level student for some time yet, if at all. Not all who come to the Academy have the potential to become fully-fledged worldweavers of title and position. I doubted Ishin would, and made a mental note to ensure he was aware of the alternatives for someone of his particular talents.

Most of the other matters were similarly trivial to deal with and I was soon at the station where I found several small cars waiting. A single-person unit was at the front of the line and ready to go, so I got in, touched my hand to the scanner and instructed it to take me home. The door slid silently shut.

"Estimated journey time, ten minutes," the car's computer pilot said. A fraction of a second later it accelerated smoothly out of the station, descending on its guide track into the deep tunnels linking the Academy to the main transport network.

My house stood on a hillside with four others. My wife and I were the oldest family in the group and as such the only one without children, for our son Karo had already left home. At the time, he was studying on Interchange Station at the faster-than-light engineering laboratories.

The car slid me smoothly to a halt at the dock behind our house and opened its door.

"The operator hopes you had a pleasant journey," it said. I barely heard it, for as I stepped out of the car I noticed something wrong. The dock door was open; a door that we never left open. Indeed, an automatic door which should be impossible to leave open without an explicit command. I looked around and saw no reason for the door to be open.

Cautiously, I went to the threshold. My senses hummed, an aspect of my gift which has occasionally been useful to alert me when something was not right. Since that day, and indeed before it, that feeling has never come to me as strongly. Wrongness. The air seemed to reek of it, and everything shimmered under the knowledge that the world was disrupted and incorrect.

I stepped into the house. Something clicked under my foot.

Motionless, I looked down and saw it — almost perfectly blended with the floor covering, a pressure plate, and I'd put my entire weight on it without realising. Slowly and carefully I crouched down, looking around — *feeling* around — for what it might control.

I sensed nothing except a second pressure pad slightly further down the hall. That, I could avoid. Since the one I was standing on didn't appear to have set anything off, it was either a silent monitor or would trigger when the pressure was released. Crouched as I was, it was no difficulty to touch it with a finger and make sure that it didn't come up when I took my weight off it.

I stepped over the second pressure plate and entered the living room, my heart pounding in my chest. There was a foot visible behind the sofa. A

woman's foot. I knew it was hers before I saw her face, but something inside me said no, it must be someone else, someone with a similar foot, the same shoes... but not Elya. Never Elya.

But it was Elya. She lay on the carpet, her eyes fixed on the view out of the window wall, the view she had fallen in love with the moment she had set eyes on it. Her face was set in a grimace, her fair skin marred by bruises. One arm stretched toward the window, her fingers mangled and broken. The other lay next to her, bent in too many places.

Blood soaked the carpet under her.

How long I stood there I could not say. When I recovered something of my senses again, night had fallen and the room was dark. Perhaps not being able to see my wife's body had brought me out of my horror. Numbly, I fumbled my way into the bedroom. The screen activated as I entered, showing a news report with a timestamp for the following morning. What was this?

"Early this morning, police were called to the home of Taewyn De Ko Altos, the Worldweaver Prime, by concerned neighbours. Officers found the beaten body of Elya Daleele, the Worldweaver Prime's wife. Of the Prime himself, there has been no sign, and the police say they would like to speak to him about the matter immediately. Shortly before this broadcast, we received word that an all-planets arrest warrant has been issued for the Worldweaver Prime."

The report stopped. Before I consciously thought what I was doing, I was moving. Wardrobe. Clothes. Bag. Almost all of my clothes were ceremonial in some way or other. I picked the plainest, even though the colours were still those of my rank — my former rank, I realised. Colours could be changed when I had the time. Right now, I had to leave. I had been set up, my wife was dead, and I had to leave the planet as soon as possible.

Taking the public transit system was out of the question. I took some food from the kitchen and went to the safe, from which I took a handgun, a combat knife and all the cash. Electronic credit would be a beacon to my location. Cash survived largely because of the anonymity it offered.

No more than ten minutes after the news report had finished, I was powering up the engines on my shuttle, a small but sturdy craft. I would need to change to another one as soon as possible, as mine was registered and could be tracked, but I assumed for the moment I had a headstart. I did not think about why I had been given such a warning; such thoughts were for later. Immediate concerns took priority in my emotionally numb mind.

Power up. Engines active. Take off. I pointed the shuttle at the sky and opened the throttle. The guidance system squawked at me until I turned it off. The atmosphere thinned around me, and the star-studded blackness of space was soon visible. I checked the shuttle's on-board map and the signals being broadcast by nearby beacons. I'd come out of the atmosphere on the edge of a transit lane for craft lining up to dock at Alpha, Aeldora's primary space station and a major transport hub for the star system. I swung my shuttle into the lane, waited a few minutes in the queue, and docked without incident.

Nobody was looking for me yet, it seemed.

As I strode through Alpha's corridors, my mind was racing. Who had done this? Why? My position as Worldweaver Prime had put me in situations such as would make any man a great many enemies. I could think of few with the ability to do what had been done. My mind avoided thinking of what they had actually done; subconsciously, I knew that if I thought about it in any

depth I would break down and be unable to function. For now, the old instinct reasserted itself: fight, or flee.

Since I didn't know who to fight, I had to flee.

Passage out of the system would be essential. I ducked into some toilets and exercised my talent to change the colours of my clothes. A simple trick, but one which would put off anybody looking for the Worldweaver Prime unless they knew my face. I'd have to do something about *that* when I had a lot more time and privacy.

Thus imperfectly concealed, I ventured back into the corridors of Alpha. I knew the station well, having passed through it hundreds of times in my life. As the largest space station orbiting Aeldora, and primarily consisting of facilities for ships to dock and exchange cargo, Alpha was a natural transfer point for just about anybody wishing to leave the planet.

As with any trading centre, it was frequented by a wide variety of people. The people I saw in the corridors were all Aeldar, save for one chest-high Kellan trying to push her way through the crowds without hitting too many people with the large helmet she was wearing to provide her with a breathable atmosphere. Alpha had sections with suitable environments for all known alien species, but there were fewer here in the heart of Aeldari power than one would find elsewhere. And as anywhere else, aliens only mixed when there were good reasons for it. Personal environmental systems are expensive to run, usually uncomfortable to wear and almost always overly vulnerable to the shadier members of society.

It was those shadier members of society I sought out. I knew where they congregated; a man in my position comes by such information as a matter of course. It was a small bar, dimly lit, on one of Alpha's dingier levels. Several pairs of eyes watched me as I entered. Other pairs of eyes watched me as I crossed to the bar and sat on a surprisingly well-padded stool.

The bartender eyed me suspiciously. I cleared my throat, turning my talent inward to settle my vocal chords into a slightly different pattern.

"You got any beer?" I rasped, trying not to look surprised at the sound of my own voice. Without experimentation I can never achieve a specific voice alteration first time, although others can.

"Sure. You want the strong stuff, or the dishwater?"

"Since you call it dishwater, I think I'll avoid it," I told him. "Give me a tankard of the strong stuff."

The bartender chuckled and pulled a plastal tankard from under the bar. He set it under the pump and foaming beer began pouring from the tap into the tankard. When it was almost full, the tap shut off and the bartender slammed the tankard down in front of me. Beer sloshed onto the bar.

"That'll be three and eighty," the bartender said. I looked at the tankard.

"It's not full."

"We're on a space station. Can't waste anything on spillages. Price covers the short measure." He looked at me as if daring to make trouble. I felt eyes on the back of my neck, wondering if I *should* be making trouble. I decided against it. A fine thing if I was arrested for a barroom brawl while trying to get out of the solar system.

"Very well, but it'd better be good beer," I rasped, setting some money on the bartop. Once the bartender had returned my change, I took a swallow and grimaced. "It'll suffice, I suppose," I said. The bartender chuckled again.

Someone slipped onto the stool to my right.

“Not often we see a strange face in here,” he said.

“Not often I need to come somewhere like this,” I replied. “But here I am.”

“Here you are,” the other man agreed. I took another swallow of my beer as I looked at him. Medium height, athletic, middle-aged and dark-haired, he would have been perfectly unremarkable save for an ugly scar near his left eye. “And what might you be wanting in a place like this.”

“I need a ship,” I said. “I find I need to leave the solar system quickly, and quietly.”

“I might have a ship. Depends where you’re going.”

“Irsatis,” I said, naming the first planet with a good transport interchange that came to mind. Irsatis was the first Aeldari colony world, and remained the closest habitable planet to our home world.

“I just happen to be going to Irsatis,” the man said. “Three hundred will have you there in six hours.”

“Six hours? For three hundred I expect to travel a great deal more quickly.”

“I thought you said you wanted to leave quietly.”

“Quietly, and quickly,” I corrected him.

“No great amount of one will be compatible with the other. If you want quick, take a wormhole shuttle. Leaves every half hour, gets you there in two. If you want quiet... you come with me.”

Realisation blossomed to life, belatedly, in my head.

“Your ship can jump.”

“That she can. A couple of hours to get out into clear space, jump to Irsatis, and another couple of hours to enter the system. Give me an hour or so to finish loading the ship, and there you have it. A bargain for three hundred.”

“It would be a bargain for two hundred. Two hundred and fifty would be acceptable.”

“Two hundred and eighty.”

“Seventy.”

The man looked hard at me for a moment, then nodded.

“Two hundred and seventy it is,” he said. “My ship’s the *Sea Maiden*, docked at port sixteen-alpha. Be there in an hour or I’ll leave you behind.”

“I’ll be there,” I promised. The man nodded again.

“See that you are,” he said, and left the bar. The bartender drifted back toward me.

“You want to be careful with that one. Some passengers of his don’t arrive at their destinations. You look to be a man of some resources; I’d watch your back on his ship.”

“I can take care of myself,” I assured him with a smile. “Trust me.”

* * *

When I arrived at the port where the *Sea Maiden* was docked, the man I’d met in the bar was waiting for me.

“Come on,” he said. “I’m ready to go.”

“It’s just you, then?” I asked as he ushered me along the docking tube and into his ship’s airlock.

“Just me on this ship. The business is owned by my brother; he has several pilots. I’ll have to take half your fee in advance.”

I counted out his cash and handed it over.

“Excellent,” he said. At the touch of a control, the inner airlock door opened. The outer one closed a few moments later, and I heard the docking tube disengage from the ship’s hull. “If you’ll follow me, we’ll be leaving.”

His ship had a small habitable volume, being given over largely to the cargo holds and the faster-than-light engines and their associated fuel tanks and generators. The airlock through which we had entered the ship was designed for access to the port cargo holds, and as such it was a fairly long walk forward to the living space and cockpit at the front of the ship. At the owner’s direction, I stowed my bag in a locker next to one of the three unused bunks in the sleeping quarters, and followed him up to the cockpit, where I was invited to sit in the co-pilot’s seat. An unexpected privilege, although I noticed when he powered up the controls that all those on my side remained inactive.

“The name’s Ulch, by the way,” he said after gaining departure clearance from Alpha’s traffic control computer. “Of the house Nopreya.”

He’d expect me to tell me his name as well. I mentally cursed, wishing I’d had the foresight to invent a pseudonym before now.

“I’m—”

“Taewyn De Ko Altos,” he said. “I recognised you in the bar. Kind of surprised you came along, I thought you must have noticed me recognising you. You know they’re hunting you down, don’t you?”

I hesitated a moment, then decided to be honest. One man was of little threat to me in any case. “They’re trying to. I hope to evade them for long enough.”

“Long enough to do what?”

“Find out who murdered my wife, then find them and kill them.”

Ulch nodded approvingly. “A sound plan.” He pulled back the ship’s control column, sending it soaring out of the plane of the ecliptic and on the shortest route to clear space for an FTL jump. “I didn’t think it was likely you’d killed your own wife.”

“And why should you disbelieve it?” I enquired.

“Saw you on the news several times with her. No way you’d ever let any harm come to her no matter how drunk or mad you got. You’re going to have to change your face, you know. I might think you’re innocent, and so might a lot of people, but police as think you’re innocent will still be wanting to follow their orders and arrest you. They’ll tell themselves you can prove it in court.”

“I doubt that. Whoever set this up appears to have been quite thorough.”

“What for, though? Why set you up?”

“Oh, this was just the backup plan,” I said, sharing a revelation I’d had while waiting for it to be time for the ship to depart. “My house was wired with traps; I think if I hadn’t spotted them I’d be in tiny smoking pieces all over my neighbourhood along with my wife and all my possessions. And a good few of the neighbours’ windows.”

“Thorough then. Even if they don’t manage to kill you, they ruin you — and they might manage to get someone else to do it for them. Sounds like organised stuff to me. Deep criminal activity.”

“That’s what has me worried.” I looked out of the window at the endless starfield, a sight I have always loved. “In my profession, one tends to make enemies in such groups.”

“And as Worldweaver Prime, you make even more.”

“Exactly. I just wish I knew which group was responsible.”

Ulch reached for the controls to shut down the sublight engines, and the ship's quiet background hum diminished noticeably.

"I'm sure you'll find out," he said. "They're bound to try and murder you again fairly soon if you don't get caught." He powered up another set of controls, which I recognised as those for an effective but fairly old faster-than-light drive system. "Or maybe even if you do."

"That's a cheerful thought."

He grinned at me. "I always try and brighten up my passengers' day. You ready for the jump? The *Maiden* can be a little jittery coming out of it sometimes. One day I'll make enough money that my brother will be willing to fork out to have the drive overhauled."

"That's an old unit you've got."

"Yeah, as old as the ship. Takes up forty-seven percent of the internal volume and sixty percent of the mass even fully laden, but I can ship cargo just about anywhere with a refueling station. Makes enough profit to pay for herself, even if not to keep her in pristine condition." He patted the control panel affectionately, then touched the controls to power up the FTL drive and input their destination. "Ready?"

"I'm ready," I said, settling into my seat. Ulch waited for the controls to light green, then entered the activation sequence.

"Time to go!"

There was a pause, then reality flickered.

For a few moments, I was jostled in my chair like some giant had picked it up and started shaking it as a baby would shake a rattle, but then the movement ceased and all was quiet. Looking out the window, I saw a different starfield. The FTL drive control panel was blinking a green successful jump indication.

"Right on target," Ulch said proudly. "It's a bit bumpy, but she always puts me down where I want to go."

"How accurately?" I asked with some interest. I'd never heard of a unit that old which was particularly good at hitting the target with any great level of reliability, although they could put you close enough to it for it to be useful.

"Oh, usually within five hundred metres over a seven light year jump like that one."

"For a unit that old, that's impressive."

"She was state of the art in her day," Ulch said, reactivating the sublight engines. The FTL drive controls were now displaying fuel shortage warnings, along with the message that there was insufficient fuel to reach the nearest habitable star system. Stars swung around outside the window as the ship oriented itself to point toward the Irsatis system's vast space station.

"Must've cost you a bit."

"Nah. She was a present."

"A *present*?" I couldn't imagine Ulch knowing anybody wealthy enough to give a ship like this one away when it was new, for although it was undeniably old and fairly primitive by modern standards, forty years before it would have been state-of-the-art.

Ulch shrugged. "My sister's stinking rich." He looked at me, slightly warily. "You'd better not ask how she got the money."

"I'm not going to say anything," I promised. We lapsed into silence, Ulch perhaps thinking that he'd said too much. I pondered the change in my attitude. Three days before that moment I would have detained Ulch, confiscated his ship

and probably not slept until I'd tracked down his sister and sent the police after her with enough evidence to ensure a speedy conviction. On that day, I simply didn't care. Something had changed inside me. Thoughts and feelings I'd always had were vanishing into the void left by the death of my wife.

"Don't let it eat you up," Ulch said as we changed course for the approach to dock with Irsatis Transfer. The guidance computer flashed instructions at him to dock at port two hundred and sixty-four. "If you destroy yourself, they get what they wanted just as sure as if they'd killed you themselves."

There was a slight clatter as the ship eased into position and the docking tube sealed itself to the hull. Ulch powered down the engines and rose from his seat. "Go on," he said. "Get your bag and get off my ship. If I were you, I'd be out of the system before the end of the day."

"If I can find a ship," I said, rising to my feet.

"You can always find a ship at Irsatis Transfer, my friend. Rest assured of that."

Chapter 3

Irsatis Transfer was one of the busiest space station transfer points in the galaxy. The combination of its excellent facilities, an almost hazard-free local star system and numerous highly productive planets in star systems with wormhole links to Irsatis made it a focus of trading activity. Ships docked and departed continuously; some jumping in under their own power and making use of the numerous refuelling stations in orbit of Irsatis' local sun before jumping out again, others coming through the wormholes filled with goods and passengers from Aeldora, Shelan, Nevlien, Orbat and many other worlds.

Taewyn left Ulch's ship with a friendly handshake and a smile for an unexpected ally, then immediately endeavoured to get himself as lost as possible. There was, after all, no sense in making it easy for Ulch to track him if he changed his mind...

Somewhere on the far side of the station from the port where Ulch's ship was docked, Taewyn found an unoccupied room with a screen and computer terminal. Curious, he called up the news and found a report about his wife.

"Found dead in her home this morning... no sign of the Worldweaver Prime, some evidence of a hasty departure. Police wish to speak with Taewyn De Ko Altos. Academy of Worldweavers not commenting at the present time," he muttered to himself. "Interesting."

There was no outcry, no immediate accusation that he'd killed his wife... but then, there wouldn't be. The synthesised news report left by his wife's murderers was a piece of sensationalism, designed to send Taewyn running. And he'd fallen right into the trap.

Real investigations didn't name their prime suspect unless they had to — or until they already had their suspect safely in custody. Perhaps the pressure wouldn't be on so hard for a while, although if they really did suspect him, they'd be hunting him pretty seriously.

Ulch had said they were hunting him down, but he knew as did anybody else that the police wanting to talk to someone meant they'd be trying to find him. And to someone on the edge of the law like Ulch, that might seem the same as a full-blown manhunt... hmm.

At least there might be time to change his appearance properly. Taewyn shouldered his bag again and left the room. A few corridors away he found a bathroom with spacious and free shower cubicles, a facility provided for the hospitality of traders. The water was hot and plentiful, with fairly decent soap also provided. Taewyn took the opportunity to wash, then sat down in front of the mirror and got to work on his face.

His face was that of an old man — he was one hundred and fifteen, although he didn't really feel it. He looked the part though, more than most worldweavers of his age. One useful aspect of their particular talent was the ability to manipulate one's own body, allowing quick healing, a virtual immunity to any disease one took the time to counter, and a number of opportunities to retard the aging process.

Taewyn had made use of some of those tricks to keep his joints and muscles in good condition, but had never changed much in his appearance, so he had wispy white hair, sagging wrinkly skin and a general look about him of "old". But when he was younger, he'd been quite handsome. He peered carefully at himself in the mirror, feeling his skin, the muscles beneath it, all the supporting structures of his face.

Most of what people recognised as being a particular person's face was in the bone structure, Taewyn had read once. His awareness suffused his skull, and bones reformed under his influence. Muscles expanded and contracted to accommodate the movements, and within a few minutes a virtual stranger was looking out of the mirror at him. He blinked a few times, trying to get used to his new reflection, and decided that he probably never would.

He'd be able to change back anyway; he was good at remembering things like that, so his old bone structure was just a memory away. If he ever wanted it again.

A little more effort lightened his skin somewhat, and changed his eyes from their usual dark blue to a medium green. Common, and entirely unremarkable. It occurred to him that he might benefit from growing some more hair, but that would be a tricky business and quite exhausting. His stomach was rumbling loudly enough as it was, demanding to be filled with food.

He would have to do as he was. Sighing, he left the bathroom in search of something to eat.

* * *

Food he found without great difficulty. Conventional, easy-to-prepare Aeldari fare was widely available throughout Aeldari territory, made from ingredients which could be easily transported or grown in a wide variety of environments. It was nothing special, but it filled the hole in Taewyn's belly and restored some of the energy he'd burned altering his appearance. His supplies of cash were starting to run low; that was going to be a problem. Assuming his bank accounts hadn't been frozen, withdrawing more cash from them would immediately alert the authorities to his location.

Was it worth the risk? Without money, he wasn't going to be able to run very far. If he tried, and they knew where he was...

Thinking rationally of course, it was highly unlikely that they didn't already have a good idea where he was. Irsatis Transfer was a logical place to go if you wanted to get lost in the galaxy as soon as possible; the chances of finding suitable ships from here were far higher than for any other place easily reachable from Aeldora. So they were probably already looking for him here.

And he did have the advantage of his changed appearance. A well-known trick of course, and it wouldn't defeat a DNA scanner, but he could easily escape visual checks against his files. And they were hardly going to start running everybody's DNA through the records; people wouldn't stand for it. There were plenty of other people who would prefer that their movements remain discrete. It occurred to Taewyn that he should probably find such people and attempt to

blend into them, taking advantage of their ships and their knowledge to move around.

They might also be able to find out who had murdered Elya.

Finished eating, Taewyn went to a bank terminal and put his hand on the scanner. A tingling sensation in his hand accompanied the scan, which took in surface skin patterns as well as bone structure and a cursory DNA examination to verify his identity. The normal menu came up, and Taewyn requested a withdrawal of the maximum amount of cash he could have. A few seconds later and the money was dispensed without fuss.

Somebody would take note of the transaction though. After stuffing his bag with the money, Taewyn headed for the nearest lift, took it down two floors, then walked several hundred metres to another lift and went up another three. As he was stepping out of the lift, wondering if such primitive tactics would allow him to elude the police who were no doubt on their way to that bank terminal already, he walked straight into a young woman.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, trying not to stumble over his bag, which had slipped from his shoulder. Instinctively, he reached out to it with his mind, and it came solidly into his hand. He settled the strap back on his shoulder. “I am sorry,” he said. “I was quite distracted.”

“Please, I beg you, do not apologise,” the woman replied. “I was hardly paying any mind to where I was walking.” She was looking at him with a very curious expression on her face, as if there was something about him which she thought she should remember, but couldn’t. “Are you hurt?”

He must look frailer than he’d thought.

“No, I am fine. I’m tougher than I look.”

She merely nodded to that.

“I must be going,” he said. She nodded again.

“Goodbye,” she said. “I really am sorry, you know.”

“Really, it was entirely my fault.” Better to cut off this endless loop of apologies now. Taewyn turned and walked down the corridor in the opposite direction to the young woman. Distracted by the encounter, he almost walked into the first policeman before he noticed he was there.

Stifling a startled exclamation, he retreated several steps. The policeman matched the movement and set a hand on Taewyn’s arm.

“Taewyn De Ko Altos, you are under arrest on suspicion of the murder of Elya Daleele,” he said. Behind him, two more policemen were watching warily.

“I’m sorry,” Taewyn told him, and slapped his hand away. The policeman was large, built with lots of muscle and clearly accustomed to having a strength advantage over his prisoners. Taewyn looked frail, but with the aid of his talent his blow struck hard. He felt bone crack under the impact, and the policeman cried out.

Taewyn wasted no time turning to run, but the other policemen had already drawn their pistols and a stun blast hit him in the lower back, turning his legs to jelly and sending him sprawling on the floor, breath knocked out of him by the impact. Gasping, he tried to concentrate to purge the weapon’s effects from his system. Feeling rushed back into his legs and he was scrambling to his feet when a shrill cry came from behind the police. Moving so fast that she was almost a blur, the woman Taewyn had bumped into coming out of the lift delivered a stunning kick to one policeman’s head, knocking him immediately unconscious.

Barely a second later, his colleague joined him in sleep, and the first policeman with the broken wrist was dealt with just as efficiently.

The woman grasped Taewyn's wrist and hauled him to his feet with surprising strength. A slight echo confirmed Taewyn's rising suspicion.

"You're—"

"Not now, Prime," she said. "We'd better get clear of here." She pulled him down the corridor, running now. He drew on his own talent to keep up, and in short order they had crossed at least a quarter of the station. The woman began to slow, then led the way into a lift which she instructed to take them to one of the lower levels of the station.

"Who are you?" Taewyn asked as soon as the lift started moving. "I know every weaver on the books—"

"Then obviously I'm not on the books. It's not safe to ask questions yet. Please, try to curb your curiosity." Her elaborate language of earlier was quite gone — part of whatever cover she was operating under before Taewyn's arrival had blown it, he assumed.

The lift let them out into a corridor which seemed to be seldom-used. Lit by the kind of extremely-efficient lights which didn't really put out enough light to live by, it looked in remarkably good condition compared to the rest of the space station.

The woman indicated that Taewyn should go left down the corridor, and he did so with her following closely behind. At a small door on the right, she put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

"This is it," she said, and waved a hand across the door. It swung silently open. On the other side, lights began to come on, showing a small living space apparently converted from a disused storeroom using a great deal of improvisation and not a small amount of worldweaving talent.

They stepped inside, and the woman closed the door behind them.

"Right. It's safe to talk in here. No surveillance — I checked that out when I got here. My name is Belshanda."

"Taewyn, of house De Ko Altos," Taewyn said, although she clearly already knew who she was. "How did you—"

"Recognise you?"

"Well, that would do to start with. . ."

"The man who brought you here described your clothing to me in considerable detail. It seemed likely you would take the opportunity to change your face, so I hoped you wouldn't also change your clothing." She looked at him critically. "You might want to change it now though, it's quite crumpled. And those three policemen saw you in it."

"How did they know who I was?"

"Camera near the bank terminal you used, I expect."

"How did you know I used a terminal?"

Belshanda laughed. "I've been following you since about half an hour after you came on board. Surely you noticed."

"I can't say that I did."

She nodded approvingly. "Perhaps I'm better at this than I thought."

"Or perhaps I'm just not very perceptive."

"Nobody gets to be Worldweaver Prime if they're not perceptive," Belshanda said. "No matter how good they might be at anything else." She sat down on the makeshift bed and gestured for Taewyn to take the chair. After he had

settled himself, she continued. “I have, of course, heard what happened to your wife. You have my deepest sympathies.”

Taewyn choked down a flood of emotions and memories. No time for that now.

“Thank you,” was all he said.

There was silence for a few moments before Belshanda spoke again.

“Someone has clearly tried to frame you for her murder. The police might suspect this, and they may figure it out for themselves once they talk to you, but I do not think it would be wise for you to hand yourself over to them.”

“Why not? I only ran because I assumed that whoever set me up had already ensured the police would have foolproof evidence to prove that I did it.”

“You told Ulch that they wired your house to explode when you got home.”

“Wait a second. How come Ulch told you so much?”

“We’re old friends. Why do you think the first person with a ship you spoke to was so willing to bring you here? There was no other purpose in his trip; Ulch is probably a thousand light years away by now, back on his normal trading run.” I wanted him to bring you here.

“Why?”

“So I can help you.”

“You’re handy in a fight, but I wasn’t intending to get into too many of those.”

“You might have to. As I was saying, if the people who set you up intended you to die when you got home, getting you into police custody could be a blessing for them. If they’ve got contacts in the police, killing you could be fairly easy. Setting you up for your wife’s murder is just an excuse to get you into a position of vulnerability — if they failed to kill you using their primary plan.”

“So the question is, who would want to kill me that badly — and who from that set of people has the resources to do what they’ve done?”

Belshanda shrugged. “Well I don’t know the whole list. Maybe you do. But I tend to keep my ear fairly close to the ground, and I think you want to start looking for people to blame in Shadowed Hand.”

“Shadowed Hand? I thought they’d been eliminated. We wiped out their entire structure, oh, ten years ago. Maybe twelve.”

“You took out their leaders and their organisational capability. It took them a while to put themselves back together, but the *new* leaders are after your blood. They’re being quite quiet about it, though.”

“And you know all this because...?”

“I told you. I keep my ear to the ground.” Taewyn gave her a look which said very plainly that he didn’t believe her. Belshanda sighed. “Look,” she said. “Being perfectly honest with you, I’m not exactly living a one hundred per cent legal lifestyle. I’m a worldweaver but there is no record of my talent anywhere in any database. I barely exist on the identity systems, the banks all think I’m a different person to who I actually am and I get my money from removing obstacles for people.”

“You remove obstacles? What kind of obstacles?”

“Usually the living, breathing, talking kind.”

“You’re an assassin.”

“It’s my primary trade. I dabble in theft, intimidation and smuggling for variety.”

“Then why should I trust you?”

“Because if I help you, you might be able to take out Shadowed Hand for good this time.”

“And what did they do to you that you want such revenge against them?”

Belshanda hesitated, looking at the ceiling. It was quite clear that she didn't want to say why, but she also knew that Taewyn would not trust her and would not help her without that knowledge.

“They killed my parents,” she said. “My parents weren't exactly your sort of person, but they were good to me and they loved me, and I loved them. And they crossed Shadowed Hand one day, unknowingly, and Shadowed Hand killed them. It was slow, and very messy.” She took a deep breath, calming herself. “I would like to return the favour.”

Taewyn held out a hand.

“I think messy and slow appeals to me right now as well. Let's see what we can do about our mutual problem together.”

Belshanda looked at his hand, then took it. They shook.

“Let's do that,” she agreed.

Chapter 4

They slept in Belshanda's hideaway; Taewyn on the bed, Belshanda on what little floor space as there was. This arrangement was not achieved without incident, but Belshanda eventually won the argument for Taewyn to sleep on the bed by pushing him onto it and instructing him to stop whining and go to sleep.

Upon waking, Taewyn found Belshanda sat upon the chair, chewing on an emergency food bar. He sat up and she threw one too him.

"Sorry," she said. "Not very appetising, but it'll keep us going until we can find some proper food. We'll have to get off the station as soon as possible this morning. Any chance you can change your face again?"

Taewyn considered the effort that would cost him and grimaced.

"Only if I absolutely have to," he said. "It isn't easy." He opened the food bar's wrapper and took a bite. It tasted of... something. He wasn't sure what, but it didn't make him gag. In fact, it went down extremely easily.

Belshanda provided a bottle of water. Once they were fed and watered, Taewyn changed clothes, smoothed out his hair as much as possible and, after a moment's thought, created the appearance of a fairly obtrusive scar across his nose and right cheek. Belshanda nodded in approval.

"Very good," she said.

"It's easier than reshaping my skull again," Taewyn explained, "and should distract people from what I really look like for a bit. I'll attend to my face when I know I'm going to be able to get some rest. I'm a bit too old to be doing things like this."

"I've always thought it would be useful if there was a way we could link our strength and help each other out in situations like this."

"So have lots of people, but nobody's ever figured out a way to do it. Our talent is purely internal — we can affect the outside world, but blending two people's talent together is like expecting the north poles of two magnets to attract each other."

"Right. I was kind of hoping maybe the Academy had found a way to do it that we hadn't been able to find out when I was learning."

"No, unfortunately not. You're going to have to tell me about your training. There may be some gaps I can fill in, in return for your assistance."

"The chance to get my revenge is payment enough, Taewyn."

"It might also increase our chances of success, so I suggest you accept my offer."

“Very well then. When you put it that way...” She smiled. “Come on. We need to get out of the system.”

“I don’t suppose you happen to have an FTL-capable ship hidden away somewhere?”

“Actually, that’s exactly what I do have,” Belshanda said. Taewyn gaped at her.

“I hadn’t intended it as a serious question,” he said.

“Without one, do you think I’d be able to do my job properly?” she asked. “I used to hitch rides with people, but having my own ship makes getting away after a job much easier.”

“So where’s your ship?”

“Cova.”

“Cova? How are we going to get there?” Cova was a backwater planet at the edge of the galaxy. With no wormhole links, it relied on FTL-capable ships jumping in and out. There was very little traffic there, but then, there was very little reason to go there. The Covans appeared to like it that way.

“Well, if we’re very lucky we can find a pilot here who’d be willing to take us there, but I think it’s more likely we’ll have to go to Orbat. I know someone there who can take us to Cova.”

“Orbat should be easy. There’s a wormhole.”

“Exactly. With that wonderful scar of yours we should be fine just catching a shuttle. Come on, let’s go get our tickets.”

They took the lift up several floors, walked to the ticket office for inter-system shuttles and Belshanda bought two singles to Orbat.

“No point exposing your face to scrutiny more than necessary,” she said when she got back with them, handing one of the small plastic cards to Taewyn. He held it up to the light briefly, admiring the rather unusual appearance of the holographically-encoded information in the card, which appeared to extend beyond the extents of the card’s physical form. “The shuttle boards in ten minutes at gate sixteen.”

Taewyn, who’d spent a fair bit of time looking at the various signs hanging from the ceiling while Belshanda was getting the tickets, gestured to his right.

“It’s this way,” he said. They picked up their bags and followed the signs to gate sixteen. A small group of fellow passengers was already there, and when the airlock doors were opened it seemed that the shuttle would be less than half full. Belshanda and Taewyn took seats near the front. Although neither of them mentioned it, they felt it was important to be close to the cockpit in case they had to take some drastic action. Taewyn suspected that Belshanda was quite capable of hijacking a shuttle like this by herself; he knew he could probably pull it off. In close quarters, a worldweaver who knew what he or she was doing could get away with just about anything.

Assuming they didn’t make any mistakes, that was.

The airlock doors slid shut, and the pilot spoke to them over the intercom.

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen, this is shuttle IT-O-9 direct to Orbat by wormhole. We will be undocking from Irsatis Transfer shortly, and our flight time should be no more than two hours. If you have not passed through a wormhole before, please consult the information available on your seat computer screens for the expected effects. We hope you have a pleasant flight. If you require refreshments, just order them on your screen and a member of the crew will bring them to your seat. Thankyou.”

“I’m not going to insult you by suggesting you should read the information screen,” Belshanda muttered. Taewyn grinned.

“I’ve passed through more wormholes than you have, I’ll wager,” he said.

“Very probably. You don’t have your own FTL-capable ship.”

“I don’t, but I bet you take yours through wormholes fairly often. FTL fuel’s not cheap.”

“It’s not, but my job pays very well. Still, it is wise to use wormholes when they’re available. Considerably more affordable.”

There was a quiet clanking noise as the docking clamps released, and Taewyn’s seat screen showed him a view of Irsatis Transfer station receding behind them. It was a nice construction, he thought. Primarily a large, smooth disk with towers extending from various points on the upper and under-sides. Some of those towers housed offices or living quarters, while the largest held solar arrays or the backup fusion reactors. Two long protrusions from the side of the station carried the receivers for energy beamed from the system’s solar collector arrays, orbiting the local sun all the way around the system.

He switched the screen to a different view, and watched their approach to the wormhole generator which maintained the link to Orbat. The generator itself looked like a giant disc of solar panels with a hole in the middle, into which a continuous stream of ships were passing. Some distance away, a second generator had a continuous stream of ships flying out of it, coming from Orbat. The hole in the middle of the generator defied description. It appeared sometimes black, sometimes like an infinitely deep hole, sometimes like the mouth of a tunnel. At was, of course, a hole in the fabric of reality.

The shuttle crept gradually closer to it, taking its place in the line of ships waiting to pass through. Taewyn and Belshanda talked idly, of unimportant things, all too aware of the potentially listening ears of the other passengers. They ordered drinks and snacks, and just over an hour after departure the shuttle passed through the wormhole.

Some of the passengers clearly hadn’t been through wormholes very often, if the sounds of discomfort from elsewhere in the cabin were anything to go by. Taewyn felt a fairly disturbing twisting sensation in his body, but he’d passed through wormholes often and was able to ignore the sensation. It passed quickly, and then they were in the Orbat system, in a line of ships heading for Orbat’s orbital transfer station. Some of the ships they had passed through the wormhole with were breaking off and heading for other parts — to go through another wormhole to another system not directly linked to Irsatis, or to land on Orbat itself or dock with one of the other space stations in the system.

The docking proceeded without incident, and they disembarked.

“Where’s your friend?” Taewyn asked once they’d got away from the crowd of other passengers.

“No idea,” Belshanda replied. “I expect that he’ll find us.”

“And what do we do in the mean time?”

“Well I don’t know about you, but I fancy some dinner. You?”

“I’m always up for eating.”

Part II
The Other

Chapter 5

The sun rose. Light flared over the horizon and flooded the sky, turning the clouds from their pre-dawn grey to a blinding white against the pure blue sky.

Mil stopped watching it. That was usually a wise move on any planet where the sun was close enough and hot enough to support a habitable surface environment, but it was an even wiser move on Fushtib, where the sun was close enough and hot enough to keep nearly sixty percent of the surface dry, dusty and at a temperature rather higher than most life forms would feel happy in — except for the Braask.

And so they had come to Fushtib, landed near the equator and built their city. Not much more than a hundred years later, the city almost ringed the planet, extending over ten degrees of latitude in each direction from the equator, and housed nearly a billion Braask.

Mil retreated inside and set the windows to filter out most of the sunlight. Because of Fushtib's location on an easy route between worlds owned by several species, the Braask had built sections of their city designed to adequately — not necessarily comfortably, but adequately — support the other races they had contact with. The Kellan section, like the Aeldari section, had strong filtering against the harsh sunlight. For Mil's people, the Braask had also provided high concentrations of carbon dioxide in the air supply. Although they breathed essentially the same gases as the Aeldar and the Braask, the Kellans were used to a substantially higher atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration, and could not survive for long without its presence.

Still, Mil liked to go outside to watch the sunrise. She just couldn't stay there for very long.

The computer at her desk was attempting to get her attention with irritating warbling sounds. She walked over to it and pressed the fingers of her left hand over the six areas on the screen. There was a pause while it registered the pressure from the unique patterns of joint spacing in her hand, different for every Kellan.

Then the screen cleared, and displayed the image of a Kellan battleship captain. Mel took her hand away from the screen and bowed.

“Captain,” she said.

“Ambassador.”

“What can I do for you?”

“You can pack your bags.”

Mel blinked. It was highly unusual for a battleship captain to speak so abruptly to an ambassador.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Pack your bags. My ship just jumped into the Fushtib system and we'll be picking you up in half an hour."

"What? Why? Why didn't I have any warning of this from home?"

"I can't tell you that over this channel. Just pack, and be ready."

"Okay, but you'd better have a very good reason for this, captain."

"It's a very good reason. Not a pleasant one, but a very, very good one. Get yourself to the transfer chamber and wait."

The transmission cut off. Mil stared at the screen for a moment, then out of the dimmed window. Nothing seemed to be particularly amiss, but the galaxy was very large, and something could have happened, thousands of light years away on the other side of Kellan territory. Not that Fushtib was in Kellan territory in the first place, but it wasn't all that far from the edge.

Mil didn't have much to pack — like most of her species, she always travelled light. Her bag slung over her shoulder, she went down to the transfer chamber.

The transfer chamber was a fairly large room with extremely thick walls. The door swung open slowly in response to Mil's handprint, and she entered. The walls, floor and ceiling were pure white, the corners slightly rounded. It was optimal to build transfer chambers in a spherical shape, but that was extremely inconvenient for transfer of both people and cargo, so most races just tended to avoid sharp corners.

A chime sounded.

"Ambassador?" It was the battleship captain's voice.

"I'm ready," Mil told him.

"Okay. Transfer activating in... ten seconds."

A hum started to build, growing rapidly louder. The air started to ripple, distortions which Mil could feel passing through her body. She shut her eyes to help avoid excessive nausea. She really, really, really, really hated—

There was a sound like the planet cracking in half, and then silence.

Mil opened her eyes tentatively, and found that she was in an identical white room. The door was swinging open to reveal two women in battleship crew uniform.

"Ambassador," one of them said. "Please, come with us to the command deck."

Mil nodded and followed, not paying much attention to where she was going. She knew her way around a standard Kellan battleship, and she knew the sounds they made, having served on several before she'd become a diplomat. The sounds this battleship were making spoke of an imminent faster-than-light jump.

And indeed, halfway to the command deck the same rippling distortion swept through Mil's body, then stopped suddenly.

"Where did we jump to?" she asked.

"Homeworld," one of the women replied. "The captain will explain."

They reached the command deck. The two crewwomen left Mil at the entrance, and she let herself in with her handprint on the scanner mounted on the door.

As usual, the command deck was a place of quiet, focussed activity. It was oval in shape, with most of the wider end of the room dominated by a three-dimensional display system showing the view from the front of the ship. The narrower end housed numerous places for crew to sit and operate the ship's

primary functions, as well as a substantial number of auxiliary consoles for diagnostics, backup control, playing computer games and watching television.

There were no games or television on at the moment, though, and the atmosphere was surprisingly tense. The captain looked round as Mil entered, and walked over to greet her with a hand to her shoulder. She returned the gesture.

“Captain,” she said.

“Ambassador. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Captain Kug. Welcome on board the *Vaunted*, a class six battleship.”

“She seems to be a well-kept ship,” Mil said, more from reflex than from a genuine observation. She was too curious about what was going on. “Perhaps you can tell me now why I’m on board?”

“Fushtib isn’t going to be there for much longer,” Kug said flatly. “We thought you might not appreciate being there when it happens. Since you were the only Kellan on the planet, it was fairly easy to get you out without arousing any suspicion.”

Mil stared at him.

“We’re at *war* with the *Braask*?”

“Not yet, but we’re going to be.”

“Why? Whatever possessed homeworld to go up against them? Do they *know* what kind of military the Braask have available to them?”

“They know exactly what they’re up against, but our target isn’t actually the Braask. Unfortunately, it’s on the same planet as them and they’re going to get hurt. Homeworld have tried to get the Braask to deal with the problem themselves, but they refused to admit that there is one, so we’re taking action by ourselves.”

“So... what’s the target? What’s important enough to start an interplanetary war over? A war, I might add, that we’re very likely to lose.”

“Have you ever heard of Project Alpha?”

“No.”

“Really? I’m surprised. I thought all Ambassadors were briefed on it.”

“I’ve not been an Ambassador for all that long.”

“Perhaps they thought it wasn’t necessary anymore. Project Alpha was an attempt to develop a new power source for FTL engines. I’m not particularly well-versed on the science behind it, but I do understand quite well what went wrong. Instead of developing a potent, controlled power source suitable for powering a jump engine, the project eventually produced something which could only be used as a weapon.”

“That wouldn’t be the first time.”

“True, but this is rather unique. Most of the time, if a project discovers a weaponable concept, the military take over the research and develop it. Project Alpha was brought under military control and they spent a while attempting to perfect what they’d developed. Eventually the time came to test the first weapon.”

“Did it work?”

“They did the test in deep space out near the edge of the galaxy. They expected it to be a large yield, so all the observers were in ships a light year away from the device. Special hardened observation drones were spread all around the device up to that distance away, to ensure they got the best possible readings if the closest ones were destroyed. The signal was sent to trigger the detonation.”

“What happened?”

“Nobody found out for two weeks. A ship was sent to discover why the testing team hadn’t returned with their results after a week, which is when they were expected back. That ship was never seen again. So another ship was sent, jumping in another light year distant from the test site. It found... a tear in space-time. There’s a complicated scientific description of it, but it basically boils down to the scientists not having a clue what happened, or what’s on the other side of the tear. Anything that went near it was either ripped to pieces or sucked into the tear, and nobody has any idea what might be on the other side. Even worse, the tear was growing.

“The scientists spent three years trying to find a way to repair it. By the time they eventually gave up, the tear affected a sphere of space over twenty light years in diameter, and was starting to threaten a couple of stars. Its growth rate was increasing, and they estimated that it would consume the entire galaxy within a few centuries. About that time, the Aeldar detected the tear and since it was in our territory, they contacted the government, wondering what it was. The government admitted what had happened and requested Aeldari scientific support.”

“So did the Aeldar help?”

“Oh yes.” The captain paused when one of the command crew came up to them with a screen in hand. “Yes?”

“This just came in from command, Captain.”

Kug took the screen and read what was on it.

“Very good, Hin. Please inform command that we will be ready to jump as soon as we have finished refuelling.”

“Very good, sir.”

Kug turned back to Mil.

“Where was I?”

“The Aeldar helped, you said.”

“Oh yes, they did. They sent four of their giant exploration and research ships to study the tear, and liased very closely with our scientists who knew the most about the project. They did not find the tear to be amaeable to scientific investigation, but they have an advantage in that area that we do not.”

Mil gasped in realisation. “The worldweavers?”

“The worldweavers. No Kellan has ever had that talent, but the Aeldar have a great deal of it. They brought in their very best and brightest. Taewyn De Ko Altos, the Worldweaver Prime, came himself to lead the team. And they closed the tear. Nobody knows how — they say they don’t know either, that’s not how their talent works, they say. I’m not sure anybody really believed what they said about how they did it, but they did it somehow, and saved the galaxy in the process. The Kellans owe them a great debt for that assistance.”

“Indeed. So can I assume that the reason we’re planning to destroy Fushtib is that somebody’s working on a similar project there?”

“Exactly right. We cannot allow another such tear to be created. Before they returned home, the Worldweaver Prime warned us that if another such tear were made, it would be a great deal more difficult to close it. He said that they were not able to repair the damage entirely, and that any further tears would probably expand significantly faster — and that it might cause the original one to reopen.

“A few months ago we received word that the Aeldar had detected what they thought was the beginnings of an experimental programme aimed at triggering another tear similar to the one they’d closed for us. They had tracked down the experiments to Fushtib, and because we get along a great deal better with the Braask than they do, they asked us to attempt a diplomatic solution. Needless to say, that hasn’t worked. Our own readings have confirmed that they’re close to being able to open a tear, and we don’t want to risk allowing that to happen. We don’t know where their laboratory is, so we’re going to have to take out the entire planet.”

“Do the Aeldar support this course of action?”

“They do. In fact. . .” Kug turned to the viewscreen and gestured to several barely-visible ships in the far distance. “They’re helping out.”

As Mil watched, six more ships jumped in next to the four already there. As a group, the ten vessels started moving, and as they turned they revealed the distinctive bird-like shape of Aeldari battlecruisers. Not long after they cleared the area they’d jumped into, ten more arrived.

“How many ships are they sending?”

“Fifty. More than enough to turn a planet to slag, but they’re going to be deployed to intercept any Braask warships which try and interfere. We’re the ones responsible for destroying the planet. The Aeldar have very impressive ships, but we’re the ones with a planet-killer.”

Five more Aeldari ships jumped in as Mil watched, then banked round to join their fellows, heading for the refuelling stations.

“That’s going to take a lot of fuel,” Mil noted.

“We’ve got plenty,” Kug assured her. “Now, as one of our Ambassadors to the Braask, you’re going to be fairly important in the near future.”

“I thought I already was important.”

“Very funny. Now we’re talking about the kind of importance which is going to help you save the galaxy. Aren’t you proud?”

“I’m quivering with anticipation,” Mil said dryly. “Perhaps I should go and freshen up. Is there a cabin for me?”

“Of course.” Kug gestured to a nearby crewman, who came over and saluted.

“Yes, sir?”

“Please show Ambassador Mil to her cabin,” Kug said.

“At once, sir!” The crewman saluted again, then hesitated. “If you’ll excuse me, sir. . . which cabin will the Ambassador be occupying?”

“Fourteen B Seven, crewman.”

“Fourteen B Seven, crewman, Captain, sir!” The crewman saluted again. Kug sighed.

“Sometimes I wish I served on an Aeldari ship,” he said. The crewman looked blankly at him.

“Sir?”

“Never mind, crewman. Carry on.”

“Yes sir!” He saluted again.

Mil turned to the captain and curtsied.

“It’s been a pleasure, captain,” she said, then paused thoughtfully. “Well, actually it hasn’t been a pleasure, but it would have been if we hadn’t been about to start a losing war.”

“I understand entirely, Ambassador.” Kug bowed. “Until we meet again.”

“Which won’t be very long, I suspect.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Good day, captain.”

“Good day, Ambassador.”

Mil followed the crewman out of the command deck — after he’d saluted the captain again — and sighed heavily. The rest of her life looked like it was going to be quite depressing.

At least it probably wasn’t going to be a very long rest of her life.

Chapter 6

About a quarter of the way across the galaxy, Taewyn stepped through the airlock of a small spaceship and looked around.

“Not bad,” he said. Belshanda beamed at him.

“I’ve always been rather fond of it,” she said, looking around at the interior of her ship with pride.

“What’s her name?” Taewyn asked.

“I call her the *Dark Lady’s Talisman*.”

“That’s a bit of a mouthful.”

“Sometimes I like to be just a little bit verbose.” Belshanda frowned. “Sometimes I get the feeling that someone’s trying to make me say more. It’s like there’s a competition.”

Taewyn also frowned. “You know, I get the same urge sometimes myself,” he confessed. “I’m usually able to resist it though.”

“Perhaps I should try that a bit harder.”

“Perhaps you should.”

“Ow!”

“What was that?”

Belshanda looked curiously at her hand.

“I have no idea,” she said. “I just got an electric shock from something.” She massaged it.

“Strange.”

Belshanda frowned at her hand for a bit longer.

“Very strange,” she agreed. “Especially since I wasn’t touching anything.”

“Hmm.”

She looked at her hand again, rubbed it, then shrugged.

“Oh well,” she said. “Probably just a nerve misfiring. I have put them through quite a lot lately.”

Taewyn grinned and chuckled. “That you have,” he said. “Mine, too.”

“And pray tell, my good Worldweaver Prime, was that your fault, or mine?”

“Oh, definitely your fault I think.”

“I seem to recall that if it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t be in this situation in the first place.”

“I seem to recall that you were the one you volunteered to help me,” Taewyn countered archly. “You didn’t have to do that you know.”

“True... but it’s been fun. I seem to recall a promise of some tuition if I helped you.”

“When we have time.”

“I suspect we’ll have time fairly soon. We’re going to have to jump into the outskirts of Fushtib to avoid customs. The Braask are quite picky about such things. The *Dark Lady’s Talisman* is pretty hard to spot, but not when she’s emerging from a jump wash.”

“Quite. How far out will be jumping in?”

Belshanda thought for a few moments.

“Last time I was there, I was about a day out. It depends where the planets are in their orbits though.”

“A day’s not too bad. We can review the basics at least.”

“Excellent. Let’s get to the cockpit and get our way then, shall we?” Belshanda turned and walked to the cockpit door. “Close the airlock, please.”

Taewyn touched the appropriate control, and the airlock slid smoothly shut. A moment later, red lights came on to show that it was sealed. The former Worldweaver Prime followed Belshanda up to the cockpit.

Although the *Dark Lady’s Talisman* had wide windows, there was not much to see out of them as Belshanda had hidden her ship in a deep cave system beneath the surface of Cova. Her friend had brought them out to the remote system in one of his cargo haulers, and they’d spent a couple of days hiking across a fairly unpleasant tundra to reach one of the cave system’s entrances. Taewyn sat in the comfortable copilot’s seat with a great sense of relief.

“I could sleep for a week,” he admitted.

“You’re old,” Belshanda said critically. Then she sighed. “I suppose it happens to all of us eventually.”

“True, true. Even the best of us grow old and miserable. Our joints seize up and then we die.”

“Yours don’t.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your joints don’t appear to have seized up. You were pretty nimble in that little scrap at Cova’s spaceport.”

“Ah, well. My joints wanted to seize up decades ago, but I told them not to. So far, they seem to be listening to me.”

“And how long will that last?”

“Oh, until about five years after I’m lying in my grave. After that, it doesn’t really matter anymore.”

“Perhaps you can show me how to do that,” Belshanda said as she powered up the ship’s antigravity drive. “It might be useful, when I get a bit older.”

“Most people find it so. We can look at that if you like.” Taewyn caught sight of his reflection in a well-polished patch of control panel. “Perhaps I should change my face back to how it used to look.”

“Hmm. Why?”

“If we’re going to go and kill some Shadowed Hand agents, I would like them to know who’s killing them.”

Belshanda considered that for a few moments, then nodded. “If you like. I don’t expect we’ll find who we’re really looking for on Fushtib, but there are likely to be several fatalities. And we don’t need to move in common society anymore either.”

“And if we do, I can always disguise myself again,” Taewyn said. He got up from his seat. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go and do it now.”

“Why not do it here? I’d like to see how it works.”

“I’ll teach you how to do it later,” Taewyn promised, “but I’d rather do modifications to my face where I can see what effect they’re having, and that means I need a decent mirror. I assume there is one in the ship’s bathroom?”

“Of course there is.”

“Good. I’ll see you later.”

Taewyn rose and left the cockpit. The bathroom turned out to be a small but entirely usable compartment next to the ship’s three bedrooms. It had a waterless toilet of the kind fairly standard on small spacecraft away from the luxury end of the market, a waterless sonic shower of the kind which always made Taewyn’s skin itch, and, rather surprisingly, a real bath. Taewyn raised an eyebrow at that — if Belshanda could afford that much water on her ship, surely she could afford a real shower as well? He’d have to ask her about it.

Above the washbasin was a large mirror, scrupulously clean, which as Taewyn expected disguised a cupboard full of toiletries. What he didn’t expect was his probing mind discovering that the disguised cupboard in turn disguised a hidden cupboard which contained two small plasma guns, a miniature but powerful-looking explosive device and two flash grenades. Belshanda obviously wasn’t complacent about security, even on her own ship.

That seemed prudent for a professional assassin.

He closed the secret cupboard and the other cupboard, looked at his face in the mirror and got to work.

* * *

Belshanda liked to fly. She always had, and had made little secret of it. These days she found fighting, sneaking, spying and the occasional murder quite satisfying, but her first love was still flying. She would have been a fighter pilot if she’d had the chance, but life had taken her a quite different direction.

Still, she felt the thrill as the *Dark Lady’s Talisman* responded to her commands and rose gently from the cave floor. The ship was equipped with one of the very best control systems money could buy, utilising an entirely holographic control system and intricately-projected gravity fields to provide some solidity to the otherwise entirely illusory controls. Flying the ship involved some fairly extravagant gestures, but Belshanda didn’t care if she looked a bit silly while using it, as it let her outfly just about any other ship in the *Dark Lady’s Talisman*’s class.

And that was something which had come in very handy.

The co-pilot’s seat had a set of more conventional physical controls, largely in case the ship was damaged during a fight and the primary control system failed. That was unlikely, as in Belshanda’s estimation the most likely way the primary control system would be damaged was if the cockpit had been blown open — at which point, she wouldn’t be in much of a position to care about whether the controls were operating anymore.

It never hurt to have a backup though, just in case.

She pushed her hand forwards against the slight resistance offered by one of the holographic shapes floating in the air before her, and the ship moved slowly through the caves, taking turns so smoothly at her instruction that she doubted Taewyn, reshaping his face in the bathroom, would even have noticed that they were moving yet.

Then again, he might have done — he was a great deal more perceptive than he looked, no doubt something he had learned training as a worldweaver at the Academy. Now there was a missed chance which Belshanda wished she had been

able to take. It would have changed the path of her live completely of course, but she wasn't sure that would have been an entirely bad thing. She haboured no real moral compunctions about killing people who needed to be killed, but she was aware, sometimes, of the grief she'd caused to all those families over the years. . .

Perhaps helping Taewyn would help her in turn, and get her out of the trade. She was getting too old for it if she was starting to have ethical doubts about what she was doing.

There were no ethical doubts when it came to hunting down the Shadowed Hand though. On that, she was entirely clear and happy.

Ahead she saw daylight, and increased the ship's speed, tilting upward at just the right moment to emerge smoothly from the cave mouth and ascend gracefully into the sky. Such a shame nobody was around to see it.

As the atmosphere started to thin out, she powered up the ion thrusters and eased them gently up to half power. The ship accelerated significantly under their force, and it wasn't too long before Cova was retreating behind, and the jump engines determined that they were far enough clear of the planet's gravity to make a successful jump. She entered the commands to plot a jump to the very outskirts of the Fushtib system, just inside the heliopause. It took all of twenty seconds for the computer to declare its readiness. Belshanda flicked on the intercom.

"We're ready to jump," she said. "You ready, Taewyn?"

There was a moment before he replied, probably while he looked for a microphone to switch on.

"I'm ready. This crate doesn't shake when she comes out of jump does she?"

Belshanda bristled a bit at having the *Dark Lady's Talisman* called a "crate".

"She most certainly does not. You'll barely even notice it."

Taewyn snorted, then turned his intercom off. Belshanda let out a breath between her teeth. Sometimes the man drove her to distraction, although he was a nice enough companion most of the time.

"Here we go then," she said to herself, and activated the jump engines.

Chapter 7

Mil felt the jump to Fushtib as the usual rippling distortion. She swallowed the mouthful of pudding she'd been eating, rose from the table and left the mess hall for the command deck. The food wasn't anything special — as she would have expected on a battleship — and she had been eating more for a way to find something to do than out of any real need for it. Since she couldn't think of a way out of the war, she would have to figure out a way of surviving it instead.

Chances were, of course, that she wasn't going to survive more than the next few hours.

The command deck was quiet, but there was an atmosphere of focus and tension. A glance at the enormous viewscreen and the holographic displays projected across the room showing various details and potential targets or threats told Mil that most of the Kellan fleet was already in place in a surrounding maneuver, at the edge of Fushtib's gravity well. It was highly unlikely that any Braask ship could successfully jump inside it, so they had effectively sealed off the planet. As she crossed the room to where Captain Kug stood studying a display, various symbols on the displays highlighted the simultaneous arrival of all fifty Aeldari battlecruisers, in a perfect formation which quickly dissolved as they surrounded the planet just outside the Braask fleet's perimeter.

"They can certainly fly," Mil said, mostly to herself. Kug looked over his shoulder at her.

"That they can," he said. "Unfortunately, so can the Braask." He gestured at a new set of symbols which had just appeared. "And I'd really like to know what that is."

Mil turned her attention to it. The markings denoted a single ship, quite small, and doing its utmost to avoid being detected.

"Part of this laboratory, perhaps?"

"Perhaps. We're waiting to get a better reading on its engines so we can find out if it's a Braask vessel."

"Captain, sir," one of the crew called. "Incoming call from the Aeldari flagship."

"Very well," Kug said. A moment later, a full-sized hologram of the Aeldari officer in charge of their fleet appeared in front of Kug. To Mil's eyes she looked very strange. Like Kellans, Aeldar had two arms and two legs, a single head and two eyes and a mouth on the front of their heads. But where Kellan skin was brown and burnished in places, Aeldari tended to be a pale pinky-yellow colour. Aeldari had large noses between their eyes and nose, while Kellans gained their sense of smell through openings near their ears. Aeldari eyes were also quite

disconcerting — large, wet and completely coloured across the front, save for a small black pupil in the middle.

“Captain Kug, I believe?” she asked. She spoke her own language — despite being about as closely physically related as any known species from different planets, Aeldar and Kellans had never been about to pronounce each others’ languages. Fortunately, with the aid of computer translators and an exchange of teachers, they had been able to learn to understand them. In trade and military cooperation, each race would generally speak their own language and be able to understand the others.

“I am Captain Kug,” Kug said.

“I am First Fleet Commander Ulishii of House Golinban Trinta,” the Aeldari commander replied. “My fleet stands ready. Have you detected the small stealthed craft currently attempting to approach Fushtib’s south pole?”

“We have.”

“Our sensors show that the ship is of Aeldari design and has two Aeldari life signs on board. Although you are the primary force in this situation, we would like to intercept the ship and deal with it ourselves.”

Kug looked over at the appropriate display again.

“You have excellent sensors, Commander. We had only just determined that the ship’s engines are Aeldari.”

“I’m sure you can spot your own ships from further away than we can, Captain.”

“Perhaps,” Kug said guardedly. “Very well. Intercept the ship and let us know if it contains anything relevant.”

“We will.” There was a pause, and then the hologram flickered and vanished. Moments later, the Aeldari flagship broke formation and sped on an intercept course for the small ship. As the two Kellans watched, the small ship made a sudden course correction, piled its engines on full burn and, just as the battlecruiser was about to catch up with it, vanished.

“That pilot was on the ball,” Kug commented. A moment later, the battlecruiser also vanished. “Now that, I don’t understand.”

“I thought it was impossible to track someone through a faster-than-light jump,” Mil said.

“So did I. It certainly is with our technology. Perhaps the Aeldar know how to do it.”

“Or perhaps they don’t,” Mill said, pointing to a new set of sensor readings. “Isn’t that the battlecruiser?”

“It is. They jumped to the far side of the solar system. Looks like they’re still chasing something, but we can’t see the smaller ship from that distance.”

As they watched the sensor readings, the battlecruiser came to a halt. It stayed in one place for a few minutes, then jumped back into its position in the formation.

“Well, that looks to be over,” Mil said.

“Indeed it is. Now we should proceed before the Braask fleet arrives. Communications officer, any contact with the planet?”

“No, sir! They are not answering our attempts to make contact.”

“Very well.” Kug sighed, and spoke quietly to Mil. “I don’t like this.”

“I don’t like it either. But do we have a choice?”

“Not really.” He took a deep breath and touched the controls on his panel which allowed the ship’s weapons to activate. “Signal all ships, ready weapons

and configure for a planetary strike.” He took another deep breath and lowered his voice again. “Fates preserve us after this.”

“They won’t,” Mil told him. “They most definitely won’t.”

* * *

On board the *Dark Lady’s Talisman*, Belshanda and Taewyn stood before the airlock door, listening to the clunking sounds as the battlecruiser’s grapples pulled them into the docking bay and sealed a docking tube to their outer hull.

“Do we fight them?” Belshanda asked.

“An entire boarding party? And the whole crew of the ship? Don’t be ridiculous,” Taewyn snorted.

“I was just asking.”

“It’s the end of the road for me, I think. And you as well, probably. Are they likely to know who you are?”

“Probably not on sight, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they figure out who I am after a little while. Once they’ve got their hands on my DNA they’ll figure it out in no time.” She sighed, then shook Taewyn’s hand. “It’s been fun, Taewyn.”

Taewyn smiled. “It might have been, if we’d had more time.”

Belshanda gave him a startled glance, then laughed.

“You’re right,” she said. “It might have been.”

There was a final echoing clank, and then the airlock door rolled smoothly open to reveal four soldiers with plasma rifles, which they quickly aimed at Taewyn and Belshanda. Cautiously, they stepped out of the airlock. Behind them came a woman Taewyn recognised. He bowed.

“First Fleet Commander Ulishii,” he greeted her.

“You know her?” Belshanda asked.

“Of course,” Taewyn replied. “I was the Worldweaver Prime, after all.”

“You still are as far as I’m concerned, Taewyn,” Ulishii said. “Now tell me whatever possessed you to go haring off like that? There are some policemen on Irsatis Transfer who are rather put out with you.”

Taewyn spluttered. “But— my wife. . .”

“I see you haven’t heard.” Ulishii made a dismissive gesture to the soldiers, who downed their weapons and filed out of the ship. Ulishii took a seat at the table and gestured for Taewyn and Belshanda to do the same. The Commander and the assassin studied each other for a few wary moments. “And you are?”

“Belshanda Ti Mon,” Belshanda supplied. Ulishii smiled.

“So that’s why you nearly got away from us. I’m honoured to meet you, Belshanda.”

“And then you’re going to send me to the brig pending trial, right?”

“Perhaps. We’ll have to think about that. There are more pressing matters to deal with at the moment.”

“Something to do with the enormous Kellan and Aeldari fleet surrounding Fushtib, no doubt,” Taewyn said.

“Observant as ever, I see. I’ll give you all the necessary details. However, I do need to tell you that the warrant for your arrest has been withdrawn.”

“Withdrawn? Why?”

“One of your worldweavers poked around your house and found some cleaning up that your wife’s murderers forgot to do. It was sufficient to prove that you didn’t do it, although we still don’t know who did.”

“Belshanda thinks it was Shadowed Hand. We were going after their agents on Fushtib when you intercepted us.”

“A good thing we did then. Fushtib’s not going to be there for much longer.”

“What? Why? Are we at war with the Braask?”

“I suspect we probably are now. The Kellans are nearly ready to blow up the planet, and there are a billion Braask still on it. The Braask government refuses to evacuate them or admit that there’s a serious threat down there. I know they have a hive mind, but still. . . a billion people is not something they will easily recover from.”

Taewyn frowned. “And just what is the threat which justifies the use of such extreme measures? This is not like the Council I know at all. It’s also not characteristic of the Kellans.” He paused, then added, “but it is fairly characteristic of them to do extreme things when they think they’re backed into a corner.”

“They’re in the biggest corner anybody’s ever been in, as far as they’re concerned. Someone broke into their most secret databases and stole some of the basic research from Project Alpha.”

Taewyn gasped. Belshanda looked confused.

“What’s Project Alpha?” she asked.

“It’s a long story. Suffice it to say, if we don’t do something about it, it could swallow up the galaxy. It nearly did once, but we managed to stop it. I don’t think it would be as easy a second time.”

Belshanda swallowed. Ulishii continued her explanation to Taewyn.

“We don’t know where the laboratory is on Fushtib, so the Kellans propose destroying the planet to ensure it doesn’t happen. Reluctantly, the Council have agreed to cooperate. The Aeldari fleet is providing a guard against the arrival of the Braask, which is surely imminent, while the Kellans link their weaponry to destroy the planet.”

Belshanda let out a long breath. Taewyn was thinking hard.

“The situation’s different though,” he said. He looked at Belshanda. “Do the Shadowed Hand have a laboratory on Fushtib?”

“Yes. . . oh! You think it’s them?”

“Could be. Ulishii, how many worldweavers are with the fleet?”

“Two on every battleship, and a couple of extra observers from the Academy on the *Experience*, so one hundred and three in total, including yourself.”

“One hundred and four,” Belshanda corrected.

Ulishii looked at her with some surprise for a moment, then chuckled.

“That explains a fair bit,” she said. “One hundred and four worldweavers with the fleet, then.”

“Good.” Taewyn thought for a moment. “That should be enough if this goes wrong. Were any of them involved in the original Project Alpha debacle?”

“Eight of them, I think. Possibly nine. Most of them are quite young.”

“That should be enough, if some of them know what to do they can tell the others. Have them do that anyway, in fact. And call the Kellans.”

“And tell them?”

“Tell them to stop. Belshanda and I will go down there and sort out the problem.”

“I don’t think they’ll be very inclined to listen—”

“Then you’d better make sure they do. Between us we can handle a fair bit, but we can’t repel a Kellan planet-killer.”

“Really, Taewyn—”

“I am the Worldweaver Prime,” Taewyn said. “You said as much yourself.” Belshanda looked at him in surprise, wondering at such an absolutely commanding tone of voice coming from the formerly quite mild-mannered Taewyn. “Based on our previous experience of Project Alpha and related experiments, this is firmly within my authority. Therefore, in this matter, I outrank you. Don’t make me relieve you of command, Ulishii.”

Ulishii took a deep breath, then nodded.

“I’ll tell them. But if they won’t listen. . .”

“They will listen. I’ll talk to them if they won’t listen to you. They might remember me.”

“Perhaps.” Ulishii rose. “We’d better go and do it before their weapons finish charging.”

They went through the airlock, the four soldiers who’d been waiting outside falling in to follow them at a discreet distance. The battleship had an extensive network of internal transport pods, and they got in the nearest one to go to the command deck, six decks above and right in the heart of the ship.

The journey was short, but Ulishii used the time to activate her wrist-mounted communicator and talk to the communications officer.

“Eri, get hold of the Kellans. Tell them to hold their fire. Just hold their fire, I’ll be there to explain why in a moment.”

The transport pod stopped and the doors opened. A grey shimmering field marked the edge of the command deck, and Ulishii strode straight toward it. Taewyn followed, leaving Belshanda to bring up the rear. The field retracted as they approached it, forming a doorway through which they could pass without having to walk blindly through what Belshanda realised was a holographic projection.

Once on the inside of it, it proved to be an all-round projection of the surrounding space. The effect was extremely convincing, leading her to believe for a moment that the floor had disappeared. She stumbled, and Taewyn caught her arm.

“It’s quite common to find these places a bit disorienting to start with,” he said. “You’ll get the hang of it in no time.”

“It’s impressive,” Belshanda said honestly.

“Useful, too.”

“I can imagine.”

“The Kellans have similar projections, but only around one half of the walls of their command decks. For some reason, they get terrible nausea in this sort of environment.”

“Odd.”

“Their sense of balance is quite different to ours. That’s probably what’s behind it.”

Ulishii nodded to the communications officer, and a hologram of the Kellan fleet commander, Captain Kug, appeared in front of her.

“What is the reason for this, First Fleet Commander?” he asked, speaking in Kellan of course. Belshanda frowned. Taewyn leaned down to whisper in her ear.

“He wants to know why Ulishii ordered him to hold his fire,” he translated.

Ulishii looked the Kellan squarely in the eye.

“The ship we intercepted was carrying the Worldweaver Prime and an assistant. They’re going to go down to Fushtib and deal with the problem in a more subtle way.”

“We may not have enough time for that. Do they even know where the laboratory is?”

Taewyn translated that for Belshanda, and she nodded.

“Of course I know where it is,” she said.

“They are in possession of information which they only recently discovered,” Ulishii lied. “They were hoping to deal with the problem before it escalated into interstellar war.”

“And if they fail? What if another tear forms on Fushtib?”

“Then the planet will be destroyed, but I have with me enough worldweavers to catch any such tear in its early stages and close it. Some are veterans of the original Project Alpha mission, and will know what to do. The Worldweaver Prime has the utmost confidence in them.”

“So Taewyn De Ko Altos is there with you?”

Taewyn stepped forward, so that his image would also be transmitted to the Kellan ship.

“I am,” he said. Captain Kug looked visibly taken aback for a moment, then composed himself.

“I see. We will hold our fire. I will inform homeworld of this.”

An alarm sounded. Ulishii looked sharply over to where several red circles had been added to the holographic view of the surrounding space. After a brief moment, symbols appeared identifying them as Braask warships.

“I was wondering how long they’d take to arrive,” Taewyn said.

“Do you see the Braask ships, Captain?” Ulishii asked. The Kellan glanced over at his own displays — invisible to the Aeldar on their own ship of course — and grimaced.

“I do,” he said. “I suggest you send the Worldweaver Prime to the surface immediately, then form a blockade around the planet. We will deploy in support and attempt to negotiate with the Braask fleet. I have with me our Ambassador to Fushtib, who should be able to handle them for a while. If the Braask insist on a fight, we will attempt to hold them away from you.”

“That is not necessary, Captain. We can take care of ourselves.”

“I’m aware of that, Commander, but you may have come up with the way to avoid killing a billion Braask today. We can only show our gratitude by preserving as many of your crew as possible if there is a fight.”

Ulishii sighed, then nodded.

“Very well,” she said. “Ulishii out.”

The hologram vanished, and Ulishii turned to Taewyn and Belshanda.

“Get what you need from the ship’s stores, and take your ship down to the surface,” she said. “Do you need to take anybody else with you?”

Taewyn shook his head, then hesitated.

“Do you by any chance have a young worldweaver called Asha of the house Daleele with the fleet?”

Ulishii frowned. “I’ve heard the name,” she said. She stepped to a holographic control panel and called up a crew search. “Ah. Asha Daleele is currently on board the battlecruiser *Dauntless*, which is deployed on the far side of Fushtib.”

“Get her here as soon as you can. Her talents will be very useful.”

“Very well.” Ulishii entered the appropriate commands into the console. “She should be here within half an hour.”

“That will be soon enough. We’ll need a little while to prepare. Belshanda, let us get some supplies.”

“Supplies? What kind of supplies?” Belshanda asked. Taewyn grinned.

“I was thinking of weapons,” he said. “Big, loud ones.”

Belshanda also grinned.

“I can go with that,” she said. “Let’s go find them.”

* * *

Just over half an hour later, Belshanda and Taewyn were back on board the *Dark Lady’s Talisman*. Each had filled a backpack with assorted weapons and equipment, and also gained a webbing harness upon which they had hung various pieces of equipment and a few grenades each. The quartermaster had attempted to get them to take large and powerful plasma rifles with them, but Taewyn had declined the offer, pleading the need to be stealthy.

“We’re taking enough weapons to finish a small war as it is,” he had pointed out. “And I’m rather hoping that we won’t actually have to use them.”

Taewyn had insisted on packing three such sets of equipment. While Belshanda was in the cockpit preparing the *Dark Lady’s Talisman* for flight, she heard the arrival of Asha Daleele. After a few moments exchanging greetings, Taewyn led the young worldweaver to the cockpit.

“Belshanda Ti Mon, this is Asha Daleele,” Taewyn said. “Don’t let her look fool you, she’s an extremely capable young woman.”

“A pleasure. . .” Belshanda began, but the words trailed off as she turned to look at Asha. Although she looked like a perfectly ordinary — if extremely pretty — young woman, with short yet stylish blonde hair and emerald-green eyes, Asha radiated an aura of what Belshanda could only liken to the feeling of absolute control. Belshanda swallowed. “A pleasure to meet you.”

Asha chuckled and smiled. “The pleasure is mine, I’m sure,” she said. Even her voice was like honey. “I am honoured to meet a woman of your. . . reputation.”

“I’m sure it’s exaggerated,” Belshanda said.

“Oh, I doubt it.” Asha smiled again. “If you’ll excuse me, I should prepare myself.”

She left the cockpit, carrying her aura with her. Belshanda let out an explosive breath and looked at Taewyn. He raised an eyebrow.

“Well?” he asked.

“She’s. . . she’s. . .”

“The most talented young woman I have ever encountered,” Taewyn said. “We’re going to need her talents.”

“Are you sure?”

“Is there something wrong with her?”

“She’s just. . .” Belshanda waved a hand, trying to think of the right word. “Extremely talented.”

“Are you jealous?”

“Well. . .” Belshanda hesitated. “Yes! She comes in here, radiating that aura, smiling like some. . . some. . . hussy! And now you say she’s the key to our success?”

Taewyn looked a little taken aback.

"I hadn't thought that you might dislike her so much," he confessed. "If it's a serious problem. . ."

"No, no. We're going to need all the help we can get. Just don't expect me to like her."

"Very well." He turned to the door, hesitated, then turned back again. "There's no need to be jealous of her talent, you know."

"Why not? She's almost glowing with it!"

"She has. . . a control problem."

"Doesn't feel like it to me. That aura is—"

"That aura is what she lays over the top of her talent to stop herself ripping everything around her to shreds."

Belshanda stared at Taewyn for a moment.

"Then what possible use is she?"

"When she keeps control of herself, she's considerably more powerful than any other worldweaver currently alive. Or, in fact, any other worldweaver we have documented evidence of."

"When she keeps control of herself. Great. What happens if she loses it during a fight?"

"Then you should probably duck. She's got over most of her problems."

"Most of them, you say."

"Yes, most of them. Just stay alert. You'll know what to do if things go wrong. And don't mention it where she can hear. She tends to take doubts about her competency quite personally."

"Lovely. Perhaps you should have shut the cockpit door. Didn't she just hear this entire conversation?"

"Not a word of it. I'm not letting any sound cross the threshold."

Belshanda snorted. "Show-off."

"So, are you happy now?"

"No, but at least I have a better idea of what I'm getting myself in for."

"And that is?"

"Sounds like suicide to me. But it's to save the galaxy and stop a war, and I can't think of a better reason to get myself killed than that."

"Strange to hear an assassin say that."

"Being an assassin doesn't necessarily mean you have no morals."

"Oh?"

"We just have different ones. It's allowable to want to save the galaxy, you know? Where else would we live if it was destroyed? Now get out of my cockpit and let me fly."

"At once, noble assassin." Taewyn bowed, turned, and left the cockpit. Belshanda muttered to herself under her breath, powered up the holographic flight controls, and activated the communications system.

"This is *Dark Lady's Talisman* requesting clearance to depart."

"*Dark Lady's Talisman*, you have permission to depart immediately. Good luck." It was Commander Ulishii's voice.

"Thankyou, Ulishii," Belshanda said with some warmth. "We'll see you when we get back."

"If we're still here. The Braask fleet just arrived and it doesn't look like they're interested in talking."

"Then we'll be as fast as we can."

“That would be appreciated. We’ll cover your path to the surface. Fat lot of good you’ll do if you get blown up before you land.”

“Thanks. *Dark Lady’s Talisman* out.”

They dropped out of the battlecruiser’s docking bay and sped for the surface. They had been orbiting just north of the equator, so Belshanda turned sharply as they began to skim the atmosphere and rode the edge of it around the planet to the south pole, where she once again sped straight downwards. The ship began to bump and shake as they passed through the planet’s various atmospheric layers.

“Hang on!” Belshanda shouted to the two in the back of the ship. “This is going to be a rough landing!”

The ground was coming up incredibly quickly now. Watching the displays carefully, Belshanda triggered the antigravity drive at almost the last moment. Immediately the ship slowed, jerking her hard against her seatbelt, and barely a moment later it settled onto the hard-packed snow of Fushtib’s south pole.

“Rise and shine!” Belshanda called, undoing her seatbelt and leaving the cockpit. Taewyn looked rather ruffled and put out, having apparently been thrown from his chair during the landing. Asha, donning her backpack, radiated as much calm and control as ever, without so much as a hair out of place.

“Couldn’t you have done that a little more slowly?” Taewyn demanded, brushing himself off.

“If we’re very lucky, they’ll have barely seen us coming. Get your backpack and let’s get moving. We don’t want to squander the opportunity surprise gives us.”

Muttering to himself, Taewyn took up his backpack and harness and got them properly adjusted. Belshanda donned her own, and they were quickly out on the surface, where the biting cold wind and freezing ambient temperature forced them all to utilise their talents to warm themselves.

Asha, Belshanda noted, left a trail of melted snow behind her, and appeared to be sweating within the bubble of heat she was projecting.

The entrance to the hideout proved to be where Belshanda’s sources had said it would be. Buried under drifting snow, she felt it rather than saw it, a circle of cold metal, six inches down. It was the work of moments to melt the snow from atop it.

“Be careful,” Belshanda said. “There are probably automated defences protecting the entrance.”

The other two nodded.

“I’ll get the door open,” Asha said, and crouched down next to it. One hand extended, she exerted her will upon the metal. Watching, Belshanda felt Asha’s entire aura shift, and with a hideous screech the metal door tore from its mountings and flew into the air, spinning end over end in a long arc to land nearly to the horizon.

“Impressive,” Belshanda noted. Asha gave her a brief grin, then dropped down the now-exposed hole. Instantly, plasma fire echoed up to the surface, the noise of the discharges and the flashes of light quite visible to Belshanda and Taewyn. It stopped bare moments later, then Asha’s voice came floating up the surface.

“It’s clear now,” she said. Belshanda dropped carefully down the hole and found herself in a smallish chamber. The charred remains of six plasma cannons protruded from the walls, most of them smoking slightly. Belshanda nodded.

“Impressive,” she said again, wishing she could think of something else to say about this disconcerting young woman’s abilities.

“Fairly elementary,” Asha said with a shrug. “That door, on the other hand. . .” She turned her attention to the only other way out of the room they were in, walked over to it and put a hand to it. After a moment, she nodded. “More weaponry on the other side.”

“Great. Asha, you can’t take it all out yourself. You’ll tire yourself out too soon.” Taewyn frowned, then pointed at a featureless patch of wall. “What’s on the other side of that?”

Asha put a hand to it for a moment.

“Store room.”

“I thought so. Why don’t we just go in there and avoid the rest of the welcoming system.” He looked at Belshanda. “Do you know how?”

Belshanda frowned. “You mean we can. . .” she thought for a moment. “Ah yes, of course. I hadn’t even thought of trying it before, but it’s simple, isn’t it?”

“Fairly simple. The trick is to move the wall around you, not move yourself around the wall. The latter’s much more difficult and also fairly painful.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Taewyn gestured to Asha. “If you would care to go first. . .”

Asha nodded, pressed herself against the wall, and melted slowly through it. When she’d disappeared completely, Belshanda noted that the wall’s former speckled pattern was distorted in swirls and eddies vaguely reminiscent of an Aeldari body.

“I’ll come last,” Taewyn said. Belshanda nodded, took a deep breath, and went to the wall.

It was a strange procedure. Solid matter, as everyone knew, is made up of billions upon billions of individual particles, bound together by assorted forces with varying degrees of strength. Even in the most solid of objects, these particles vibrated slightly around their true positions. With a little persuasion, they could be enticed to move a bit further, allowing the passage of another particle. . . or another entire solid object, on a larger scale.

Belshanda walked slowly through the wall, feeling the unusual sensation of billions of molecules ping-ponging out of the way of the molecules in her own body, bouncing their way through her and eventually returning to something close to their original position.

She emerged into the store room, which was dark except for a lamp which Asha had taken from her backpack and activated, casting a cold white glow across empty shelves.

“Not a very interesting room,” Belshanda commented.

“Would you rather get shot at?” Asha enquired.

“No, I was just hoping to see clues to what they’ve been doing here.” Belshanda frowned. “I’d also like to know why it seems that the same secret base that Taewyn and I were going to come and destroy to try and find out who killed his wife is the very secret base the Kellans couldn’t find that’s trying to reconstruct Project Alpha and destroy the galaxy.”

“We don’t know that they’re deliberately doing that.”

“No, but destroying the galaxy by accident is just as bad for the galaxy.”

“True.”

Belshanda frowned again. “I still think I’m being tampered with. It’s just a bit too neat. Why can’t things happen in more than one place at once?”

“They are. This is just where the fate of the universe is being played out.”

“Then why am I involved?”

“I have no idea, but if I were you I’d just accept it and move on. Survive this, and then worry about the philosophical implications of us all being here in the same place at the same time and what it might mean.”

“You know, you may *look* like a brainless ninny, but you’re really quite intelligent aren’t you?”

Asha laughed. “It helps keep people off-balance,” she said. “I find that advantageous at times.”

Taewyn came through the wall at that point and stood, studying the store room’s only door.

“So what’s on the other side of that door?” he asked.

“I checked when I came through,” Asha said. “Just a corridor. Seemed to be empty.”

“Right. Let’s carry on sneaking, but have weapons at the ready. Quiet ones by preference.” He took a stun pistol from the holster on his left leg and armed it. “Try not to overexert yourselves messing about with reality. It’s useful, but we might need our strength later on, so use it sparingly.”

The two women nodded. Taewyn took a deep breath. “We want to find wherever the Project Alpha experiment is, and destroy it. We also want to destroy any information which could be used to recreate it.”

“And if we happen to find out any information about Taewyn’s wife along the way...” Belshanda said. Asha chuckled wickedly.

“The Alpha experiment is our priority. No threatening that mission for my sake, or for my wife’s,” Taewyn chided.

“Of course not,” Asha said. She turned her attention to the door, a stun pistol in her hand. “Let’s go.”

Belshanda drew her own stun pistol and followed Asha out into the corridor. It was well-lit and silent, finishing by the store room but stretching around a gentle left-hand curve and out of sight ahead of them. The three worldweavers moved quietly down its length, pausing outside doors for Asha to touch a gentle hand and sense what might await them on the other side. Each time, she shook her head slightly and moved on.

Although they were being as quiet as they could without exercising their talents to muffle the sounds they were making, the shuffles and creaks and clinks they made as they walked along reverberated along the corridor and seemed to Belshanda almost like whispers coming back to them. It was not the first time she’d stalked down a silent corridor somewhere that she hadn’t been invited to, but it still made her distinctly uneasy.

After about ten minutes of slow progress, they came to a place where another corridor crossed their own. From down the right-hand branch, they heard voices. Asha held up a hand to stop the other two, then reached out and touched a fingertip to Taewyn’s cheek, and a fingertip of the other hand to Belshanda’s.

Stay here, her voice sounded in Belshanda’s mind, carried through the physical contact between them. I’ll go and find out who they are and what they’re talking about.

She drifted silently down the corridor toward the voices, turned a corner and was out of their sight. A short while later, the voices fell silent and Asha returned.

"The main lab's this way," she said.

"Did you—" Belshanda began.

"They're unconscious," Asha interrupted. "I dug around in their minds and got most of the layout of this place. They've definitely been working on something similar to Project Alpha."

"Do they know what happened when the Kellans tried it?" Taewyn asked.

"They do, but they're intending to hold the entire galaxy hostage for something."

"I wonder what they could want that badly."

"These two didn't know. They're just working for Shadowed Hand. Nothing to do with policy. I don't think there's anybody important actually here."

"Well in that case," Belshanda said, "we'd better get moving before any of them arrive and cause us trouble. Are there any guards at the main lab?"

"One of them had some memories of security checks going into the lab, but I think we can get in by going through a wall one level down from here. If we take out the people in the lab straight away, we should be able to deal with the guards as they come through the door."

"Sounds good," Taewyn declared. "Lead the way."

Asha strode confidently down the left-hand branch of the corridor. It wasn't long before they came to another anonymous door, which Asha opened. A staircase leading downwards was revealed to be behind it.

"One day someone will build a secret lair which has signs on the doors," Taewyn muttered. Asha chuckled, and led the way down the stairs to the level below.

Again they found a nearly-deserted corridor.

"Does anybody think," Belshanda said as Asha led the way confidently along it, "that it's a little suspicious that we've only encountered two people so far?"

"It is a secret laboratory," Taewyn pointed out. "Perhaps there just aren't many people here."

"Then why's it so big?"

"They're probably all trying to figure out a way to get off the planet before the Kellans blow it up," Asha said. "Those two I ambushed earlier were terrified of the possibility, but couldn't see a way to escape."

"Well, hopefully we can avoid that happening," Belshanda said. "How much further?"

"Just through here," Asha said, opening another anonymous door and leading the way into a store room not all that dissimilar from the one they'd entered on the level above. This one, though, was stacked high with boxes. They pushed their way between them until they found a clear space of the appropriate wall, large enough for them to pass through. There was no point going through more solid matter than they had to — simple though the concept was, it wasn't something Belshanda particularly fancied getting wrong.

"I'll go first," Asha declared calmly, rummaging through her backpack. She pulled out a couple of flash grenades and held one in each hand. "I'll set these off and use them as cover. Come through as close behind me as you can, and try and get yourself behind something solid. Have your pistols at the ready and take out anybody you can get a shot at."

“Have you done this before, by any chance?” Belshanda asked. Asha grinned at Taewyn, who grinned back.

“We teach this sort of thing at the Academy,” the Worldweaver Prime said. “Asha always came near the top of the class.”

“It’s fun,” Asha said with a shrug. “It’s even more fun when it’s real. Shall we?”

Without waiting for a reply, she hurled herself at the wall and sank through it, leaving the usual slightly distorted surface behind where the wall’s molecules had been swirled around her own. Taewyn gave Belshanda another grin, laughed, and followed her. The moment he was out of sight, Belshanda pushed herself against the wall and again bounced the molecules around those in her own body.

The scene on the other side of the wall was fairly chaotic. In the few moments she had before she spotted a nice, solid-looking bench with cupboards below it which seemed a good place to hide behind, Belshanda noted that there were already three people sprawled unconscious on the floor. As she peeked over the top of her chosen cover, stun pistol at the ready, she saw a blue flash to her right, then another as Taewyn knocked out a guard who’d just burst in through the room’s only actual door.

Another followed immediately behind him, and was hit by a stun blast from elsewhere in the room, where Asha was so well-hidden Belshanda couldn’t figure out exactly where she was. The third guard fell to a shot from Belshanda’s gun, then the fourth was hit by Taewyn and Asha almost simultaneously.

After that, it went very quiet. Cautiously, Taewyn emerged from cover and went to the door. He looked out, then closed it and laid a hand on its surface. The edges of the door shimmered and merged into the frame, becoming a single object.

“That should keep anybody else out for a while,” he said. Asha stood up, at least twenty metres from where Belshanda would have guessed that she was, and holstered her pistol.

“Nice,” she said. Belshanda walked over to the nearest unconscious scientist and thumbed one of his eyelids open.

“This one looks proper unconscious,” she said.

“So’s this one,” reported Taewyn, who’d checked the second. Asha went over to the third, who was groaning a little.

“This one isn’t,” she said, bending down to grasp the front of his shirt. With no apparent effort, she lifted the scientist up by the fabric which shouldn’t have been strong enough to support his weight, and held him at arm’s length, his feet dangling well away from the floor. He tried to pull her hand away from him, but his arms were pulled out to his sides by an invisible force. When Asha let go of him, he hung in mid-air, apparently unable to move. Taewyn walked up beside Asha and gave her an approving nod.

“Very nice,” he complimented her. He turned to the scientist. “Are you going to answer our questions, or are we going to have to be unpleasant about this?”

The scientist didn’t say anything, although his eyes appeared to be almost bulging with fear.

“Very well,” Taewyn said, reaching out to lay a hand on the scientist’s forehead. He closed his eyes, and the scientist started screaming. Belshanda winced at the sound, shockingly loud as it reverberated around the laboratory.

It was over quickly, and the scientist slumped against Asha's hold on him, unconscious. The young woman looked critically at him for a few moments, then let him sink slowly to the floor.

"He doesn't know much about the reasons," Taewyn said, "but they were almost ready to use what they'd developed. It was definitely a deliberate attempt to build a weapon. He's not very clear on why they were doing it or who they were doing it for, although he does know it was some part of Shadowed Hand."

"That confirms what I learned earlier," Asha said. "Where's the equipment and experimental data?"

"Over here."

Belshanda followed them past assorted benches to a section of the lab with a slightly sunken floor. Around the edges of it were a number of cages containing small animals and birds. Some of them Belshanda recognised, while others appeared to be from planets she'd never heard of. One cage near where she was standing caught her eye, containing long and agile furred creatures with four short legs and long tails.

"What are these?" she asked. Taewyn glanced over at her.

"Oh. I've never seen them before. That scientist calls them 'ferrets'."

"Ferrets?"

"Yes. They're small mammalian creatures from a planet called Earth."

"Never heard of it."

"Neither have I. Apparently it's got sentient life not entirely dissimilar to Aeldar, but they haven't developed interstellar travel yet."

"Hmm. Why are these ferrets here then?"

Taewyn frowned. "I have no idea. I suppose one of the other scientists must have been working on something else that involved all these creatures." He turned to the equipment in the sunken area. "This is what we're interested in though."

"That's it?" Asha asked. "Just that?"

"That and a huge antimatter generator, yes."

"So we just destroy it?"

"Yup."

"Explosives?"

"I think we should do it the other way. I don't want many molecules left stuck together if we can help it."

"That's going to be difficult," Asha noted.

"Better than letting the Kellans blow the planet up though."

"True."

"Belshanda," Taewyn said, "let's get this done."

Belshanda stood next to the other two worldweavers and took a deep breath.

"Okay," she said. "I'm ready."

"Let's do it then."

It was a peculiar feeling. Belshanda had seldom had the opportunity to cooperate with another worldweaver on any task, as her training had been informal and sporadic, delivered by numerous people of greater or lesser talent she'd encountered in the dark world of the assassin. Taewyn had started giving her the rudiments of some techniques she'd missed out on entirely during their journey, but that was little substitute for the kind of training he'd received, or the kind of training Asha had been able to add to her already impressive talent.

Holding out a hand, Belshanda reached her influence out to the mysterious piece of equipment, sinking her awareness through it. Already she could feel parts of the device falling apart as Taewyn and Asha dissolved the intermolecular bonds which held it together. Selecting an area away from their efforts, Belshanda began doing the same, easing her influence between two molecules and throwing one of them away from the other, then moving on to the next in a fast yet painstaking process. Time became irrelevant as she focused entirely on pulling the molecules of the device apart. One more, then another, then another, then another. . .

Abruptly, suddenly, they were done. Belshanda staggered and nearly fell — would have fallen, if Taewyn hadn't caught her around the waist and held her upright.

"Are you okay?" he asked. She nodded weakly.

"That was hard," she said. Taewyn gave her a tight grin.

"Not the easiest thing I've ever done," he said. The sunken area of the lab was now covered in a slightly sparkling fine powder, the result of all their efforts. Some of the molecules had clearly bonded back with others, but most likely not with the molecules they had originally been connected to.

Belshanda looked over at Asha, who looked pale but otherwise unchanged. The same aura still hovered around her, although she sighed and rubbed her temple for a moment, then looked over at Belshanda.

"Tricky," she said, then grinned. "What now?"

Taewyn shrugged.

"Get off the planet and get the fleet to bomb this place into rubble," he said. "Now we know the equipment's useless, we can make it a lot harder to recreate."

"What if they've got backups of their research elsewhere?" Belshanda asked.

"Not much we can do about it if they have. This is at least a setback. But we need to get out of here before we get into any more fights. I'm not up to much at the moment and you certainly aren't." He took a communication unit out of his backpack and activated it. There was a pause, then it chirped at him.

"This is Taewyn De Ko Altos," he said.

"Taewyn," Ulishii's voice said through the unit's speaker. "Is it done?"

"We have destroyed their equipment. Use this signal as a locator to target your weapons fire. You'll need to make a crater about half a mile deep to take out the entire complex."

"That big?"

"Not quite, but let's not take any half measures here. We'll get back to the *Dark Lady's Talisman* and signal when we're clear."

"We'll be watching. Ulishii out."

Taewyn put the communicator away, and shouldered his backpack again.

"Asha, do you remember the way back to the ship?"

"Of course."

"Good. Let's go. Without going through any more walls, if we can avoid it."

"I'll get the door open," Asha said. She walked over to it, placed a hand on it, and a moment later it fell from its merging with the wall and clanged loudly on the floor. "Oops," she said, then led the way out of the room.

Using the knowledge she'd pulled out of the minds of the two scientists she'd encountered earlier, Asha took them unerringly along deserted corridors to a lift

which took them up to the surface. Belshanda shivered and stumbled unable to summon the strength to project a field of warmth around herself. Only dimly aware of what was happening, she felt Taewyn project his own warmth around her, then lift her from the ground and carry her back to the ship. They put her down on something inside.

“I should be able to fly her,” Asha said. “The controls look fairly standard.”

“They are,” Taewyn said, “but the engines don’t have an entirely normal thrust profile thanks to all the stealthing around them.”

“I’m sure I can cope,” Asha assured him. A few moments later the gentle hum of the antigravity drive lulled Belshanda to sleep, with Taewyn’s hand absently stroking her hair.

Chapter 8

When Belshanda fell asleep, Taewyn rested a hand on her shoulder for a few moments, then sighed and hauled himself to his feet. His legs threatened to quiver, but he held them steady as he made his way to the cockpit. It was all very well for an untrained young woman to become exhausted destroying a secret laboratory, but entirely another thing for the Worldweaver Prime to show such weakness.

Even if he did feel it, it wouldn't do his reputation any good.

Asha looked round as Taewyn entered the cockpit and smiled at him.

"You look really tired," she said.

"I am," Taewyn admitted. "That's not the sort of thing you do easily."

"Absolutely," Asha said, although they both knew she could have done it singlehandedly and still gone for a substantial run afterwards. They were the only two who did know that, though.

"It hasn't diminished at all, has it?" Taewyn said. Asha shook her head.

"No. In fact, I think I'm still getting stronger."

"That could be a problem."

"For the time being I'm trying not to worry about it. At some point, though, I'm not going to be able to keep control of it anymore." A note of worry entered her voice. "And then what am I going to do?"

"In the absence of anything else, find a remote spot on a backwater planet and stay away from other people until it subsides."

"Or until I die."

"Possibly, yes." Taewyn sighed. "After the accident I always thought you were going to return to normal some time. It doesn't look like you will, now."

"No. But if you're going to continue your hunt of Shadowed Hand, I could be very useful to you."

"I am not going to use you for my own revenge, Asha."

"Aren't you using Belshanda?"

There was a thick, heavy silence.

"She chose to come along," Taewyn said eventually.

"And so am I. This is me, choosing."

"But you're doing it because of what you are."

"Of course I am. Why else does anybody ever do anything?"

"But it was my mistake that made you what you are. I can't owe you any more than I already do, Asha."

"You were quick enough to instruct me to come along on this little jaunt."

“To save a billion Braask lives, yes! Not to help me get petty revenge on my wife.”

Asha turned in her seat, her face angry.

“And what am I going to do with my life then?” she demanded. “I haven’t *got* anything else. I can barely keep control of my powers sometimes. If they’re going to burn me up from the inside, if I’m going to die because of this... at least let me do something *useful* with them before that happens. I’m not a little girl anymore, Taewyn!”

“I know you’re not, Asha. But...”

“But nothing! I am coming with you.”

“No, you’re not. I can’t have that, Asha.”

“You can’t stop me.”

Taewyn sighed. “You’re right,” he said. “I can’t stop you. But I wish...”

“So do I.”

The navigation computer chimed, and Asha turned her attention to it. “We’re clear of the planet,” she said. “Moving to dock with Ulishii’s flagship.”

“Send Ulishii the signal to open fire,” Taewyn said.

“Already on it,” Asha assured him. She called up a view of Fushtib’s south pole, and a few moments later they saw weapons fire streaking down through the atmosphere from the orbiting fleet. Massive explosions roared into the sky from the impact points, all of which were almost precisely on target, by Taewyn’s estimation.

“They’re very good shots, aren’t they?” A weak voice said. Taewyn looked round and saw Belshanda holding herself upright in the cockpit doorway.

“You should be asleep,” he said.

“So should you,” she replied. “I wanted to know what you were doing with my ship.” She yawned. “Also, you were having quite a loud argument.”

Taewyn felt himself blushing. Asha grinned.

“It’s an old disagreement,” she said. “But I think I’ve got the upper hand this time.”

“It sounded like it,” Belshanda noted. “Even though I don’t have a clue what you were talking about.” She looked directly at Asha. “I’ll be perfectly honest with you,” she said. “I didn’t like you when I saw you the first time, but I think I could get along quite well with you given a bit of time.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m not done yet. I want to know what it is about you that’s got Taewyn so worried. I want to know why you’re so strong, and why you have so much trouble keeping control of your power.”

Asha and Taewyn exchanged looks, then Asha nodded.

“I’ll tell you,” she said. “But we all need to sleep first. It’s a long story, and you’re going to want to be awake for it.”

Belshanda hesitated, looking like she was about to protest, but another yawn crept up on her and she had no choice but to nod.

“Very well,” she said. “Just don’t find anything more pressing to do if you can avoid it. Can you dock the ship safely? I don’t want any dents in the hull.”

“I doubt I could dent this ship’s hull if I tried,” Asha said. “She’s very sturdy. Handles well, too.”

Belshanda beamed. “I tuned the engines myself,” she said proudly.

“You did a good job. Perhaps you can have a look at my ship some time.”

“You’ve got your own ship?”

“Just a small one. It’s something of a contingency plan. I’ll explain when you’re properly awake. Now go and get some rest. I can handle the docking just fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay then.” Belshanda turned and went back into the middle section, closing the cockpit door behind her. Taewyn looked at Asha.

“So you’re going to tell her, then?”

“Yes.”

“Everything?”

“I think she deserves to know.”

Taewyn sighed, then nodded.

“Yes,” he agreed. “She probably does.”

In his heart, Taewyn knew that Asha was absolutely right. Belshanda had to know what had happened. He just wished the story didn’t have quite so much about what a fool Taewyn De Ko Altos had been in it.

Chapter 9

Mil watched the destruction of the secret laboratory with some satisfaction. They'd avoided having to blow up the planet, probably avoided starting a nearly-unwinnable war with the Braask — a species particularly well-known for holding grudges — and destroyed the latest attempt to reconstruct Project Alpha.

"We're going to have to do this again, you know," she said to Kug. He nodded.

"I know. Hopefully not very often though."

"Enough people know about it that it's bound to be tried again. Somebody will decide that they know where we went wrong the first time, or they'll decide that they actually *want* to hold the galaxy to ransom, or just that they fancy destroying the Universe because they've had a bad life."

"Of course, but the same thing happens every time we discover a new and destructive piece of technology. Nuclear weapons, antimatter weapons, mass drivers... they're hardly difficult to build for anybody with a decent education in modern science. But you can hold most planets to ransom with a few of those quite easily."

"Given the right delivery methods, sure. But this stuff lets you hold the entire *galaxy* to ransom."

"The entire universe, even."

"Yes. Doesn't that make you just a little uncomfortable?"

"Of course it does. I can't do anything about it though. If people are going to discover how to do it then they're going to discover how to do it." Kug shrugged. "I just have to do my best to make sure that if they are going to discover how to do it and consider actually doing it, I'm going to be in the way."

"Or that the Aeldar are going to be in the way." Mil gestured to a magnified view of the small Aeldari ship carrying the Worldweaver Prime and his team, slowly docking with First Fleet Commander Ulishii's enormous bird-like battlecruiser. "They do seem to deal with things very firmly when they put their minds to it."

"They do. It's fortunate we've never fought a war with them."

"Oh yes. We'd lose, wouldn't we?"

"Wouldn't stand a *chance*. The Aeldar don't fight wars like the rest of us do."

"Why?" Mil asked. "Because they win?"

"No. They sneak. They can out-navigate anybody else in the galaxy, except possibly for the Xathras. You go and attack an Aeldari base, and you'll find your

own homeworld in ruins when you get back. I've never seen a single report from the wars we've observed them fighting where an FTL barricade actually stopped them from getting to wherever they wanted to go and blowing it up. They take casualties of course, and it's possible to destroy their bases, but ultimately it's nearly impossible to defend yourself against them."

"Do they have an FTL barricade which could stop them, do you think?"

"I have no idea." Kug laughed shortly. "Probably though. They're not stupid enough to think that nobody else can figure out how to get around such things. They'll at least have tried to build one." He sighed. "We'd better get out of here before the Braask get belligerent."

Mil turned her attention back to where it had been for most of the time that the Aeldari team was on the surface. The Braask fleet, numbering some seven hundred vessels in all, had jumped in almost simultaneously and deployed around Fushtib, but had made no effort to block the Kellans or Aeldar from making FTL jumps out of the system. Not that they could have stopped the Aeldar, but the Kellan fleet wouldn't last very long if the Braask decided to destroy it. Instead, they seemed to be waiting.

In her position as Ambassador to Fushtib, Mil had sent a message to the Braask fleet explaining their presence and their intent, and all they had received in reply was silence and inactivity.

Which was, Mil reflected, better than death threats and weapons fire.

The communications system activated, and the hologram of First Fleet Commander Ulishii appeared once more.

"Captain Kug, Ambassador Mil," Ulishii said in Aeldari. "I don't know why the Braask have let us have this chance, but let's not waste it. My team's back, and the laboratory is destroyed, so let's get out of here."

"Good idea, Commander," Kug said, speaking Kellan of course. "We'll jump to our standard meetup point. Then I would appreciate a report from the Worldweaver Prime about what happened on the surface."

"You can sit in on his debriefing if you wish, Captain," Ulishii offered. "They require sleep beforehand, though. I'll contact you when we're ready."

Kug nodded. "That would be appreciated, Commander."

"My pleasure, Captain." Ulishii bowed, then her hologram vanished. Kug turned to Mil.

"Delay, or do they genuinely require the rest?" he asked. Mil shook her head.

"Genuine, I think. I've spent some time with the Aeldar, the worldweavers become tired after heavy use of their powers. They may be able to make a report now, but they will probably make a better one after they've rested and regained some of their strength." She paused, then grinned. "That's something you could probably do with as well. When did you last sleep, Captain?"

"Oh, about two days ago."

"Well then. Go snatch a couple of hours, and the crew will make sure you're awake when it's time to hear the debriefing."

Kug sighed. "You're right, of course. It's been a little difficult to sleep lately." He turned to the pilot. "Follow the Aeldar to the meetup point, and signal the rest of the fleet to go there as well. Get the ship refuelled, and wake me when it's time for me to attend the debriefing."

The pilot frowned. "When's that, sir?"

“About the same time that the Aeldar call and tell us it’s time for the debrief,” Kug said.

“Very well, sir.”

Mil watched Kug leave the command deck, then turned back to the view of Fushtib on the main display. The Braask fleet was just visible in the distance. What *were* they doing there? It made no sense at all. She watched them as the crew around her made the preparations to jump to the meet-up point, and then through the dizzying distortion of reality which accompanied passing through folded space, and the sudden shift in external images as the sensors realigned to their new location, precisely in formation next to the also-precisely-in-formation Aeldari fleet. Ships started breaking out of their aligned patterns to dock with the various refuelling stations present in the system. As Mil watched the displays, the entire Aeldari fleet deployed solar collectors to refuel their own engines, as the star system’s facilities didn’t carry enough antimatter fuel in storage to supply both Kellan and Aeldari fleets.

As their solar panels unfurled, the Aeldari battlecruisers looked almost like a field of flowers, opening to the rising of the sun. Strange that such deadly ships should be so beautiful in all the things they did.

She frowned again. It still made no sense what the Braask fleet had done. She turned to the ship’s communications officer.

“Did we leave any probes behind at Fushtib?” she asked. He shook his head.

“No ma’am,” he said. “It might have antagonised the Braask. We didn’t want to take any chances, given how they didn’t attack.”

“Good thought. But I’d like to know what’s happening there now that we’ve gone.”

The communications officer frowned and checked one of his displays.

“There’s a scoutship in this system with jump engines fully fuelled,” he said. “You could ask them to go and look.”

“Could you pass that on for me, please.” Although she had no formal military rank, Mil’s Ambassadorial status gave her the authority to ask things of the military, which they could do or not as they saw fit. She’d not yet met a scoutship crew who weren’t willing to risk detection by overwhelming forces to get a good scan of something.

“At once, Ambassador.”

“Thank you,” Mil said. She turned for the door. “I’ll go and get something to eat.”

“If you wait a moment, Ambassador, it’s about my time for a break. Would you care to join me?”

Mil looked back at him, and considered him carefully. He was short, yet well-built and quite handsome. She smiled.

“I’d be delighted,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Communications Specialist First Class Din, Ambassador.”

“Please call me Mil, Din.”

“Very well, Mil. I’ll be but a moment, and then I know exactly how to get the best food out of the galley on this ship.”

“I look forward to it.”

Din set to work sending the message to the scout ship. Mil watched him with an idle interest. He certainly knew what he was doing. . .

Her attention was grabbed by a series of red flares on the display, rapidly resolving into warning symbols as the ship’s computer identified the Braask fleet

jumping into the outskirts of the system. Alarms began to sound.

“How did they know where we went?” Mil asked of nobody in particular. Din frowned.

“I don’t know,” he said. He pulled up another view of the Braask fleet, and checked how many ships were present. “It’s the same fleet we saw at Fushtib.” He activated another control. “I’ve called the Captain back to the command deck.” Another symbol appeared on his console. “The Aeldari Fleet Commander is calling.”

“Put her through,” Mil said. Moments later, First Fleet Commander Ulishii’s hologram once more appeared in front of the Ambassador. Mil bowed. “First Fleet Commander Ulishii. Captain Kug is not on the command deck at present, although he has been alerted to the situation and will return shortly. I am Mil, Ambassador to Fushtib.”

“Ambassador Mil,” Ulishii said. “There should be no need for me to ask if you are aware of our current situation.”

“There is not. Have you any idea how the Braask fleet could have tracked us here?”

“No, but I am currently running a complete scan on both of our fleets in case there are any tracking devices on board our ships. After this, we cannot rule out the possibility of a traitor on board one of our ships.”

“I will suggest to Captain Kug that we initiate a similar scan ourselves, in case yours misses something.”

“Very well,” Ulishii said, although her tone of voice suggested that she thought it was futile. Which it was; Aeldari sensor systems were and always had been far more sophisticated than their Kellan equivalents, which was a problem at times. Especially since Kellan ships had significantly better sublight performance’ flying faster was all very well, but the Kellans also had to fly blinder. Numerous people had attempted over the years to blend Kellan engines with Aeldari sensors in what might be termed an “ultimate ship”, but the various problems with power supplies, disparate technologies and political opposition from various segments of both governments had always managed to stall the project. Mil had always thought it would make a good place to start on a co-operative venture in military technology, something to replace both the Kellan and Aeldari battleship models currently in use.

Political tensions would again rule that out though, as the Kellans and Aeldar still hadn’t entirely given up on the idea of fighting a war with each other — even though they had never done so, and only twice come within any really significant point of starting one.

Mil checked the displays again.

“I note that the Braask fleet is holding position again,” she said.

“This concerns me,” Ulishii said. “At least if they attacked, we would understand their motives.”

“Given their numbers and our current inability to jump, I am quite pleased that they do not move to attack, Commander.”

“As am I, Ambassador, but I am left wondering why they are here. Have you tried to contact them yourself?”

“I have. Captain Kug suggested that they might be more open to communication with me since I have been the Ambassador to Fushtib for some years now. Nobody has been able to even open a communications channel with their ships.”

Ulishii sighed. “We have had the same response,” she said. “Or lack of it.” She looked over to one side, presumably to her own displays of the Braask fleet. “What *are* they up to?”

She looked the other way suddenly, looking startled. A moment later, the holographic image of an elderly Aeldari man appeared next to Ulishii’s. He wore rumpled and dirty military clothing, which looked startlingly out of place next to his substantial white beard and thin white hair. He blinked and frowned at Mil.

“Ambassador Mil,” Ulishii said. “Allow me to introduce Taewyn of the house De Ko Altos, the Worldweaver Prime.”

“I am honoured,” Mil replied, absolutely honestly. Taewyn waved a hand dismissively.

“Yes, yes,” he said. “You don’t know what the Braask want?”

“No,” Mil said, quite startled by the Worldweaver Prime’s bluntness. He had an excellent reputation as a diplomat in Kellan Ambassadorial circles, enforced largely by his courteous and sophisticated treatment of the Kellan Ambassador to Aeldora.

“How long until any of your ships are ready to jump?”

“Err. . .” Mil looked around for someone to ask for that information. Kug surprised her by speaking from her other side.

“We will have ten ships refuelled in three minutes” time,’ he said. “After that, we will need another half an hour to get ten more ships refuelled, and so on. There is enough fuel stored to supply the entire fleet currently present, excluding your own ships.”

Ulishii nodded acknowledgement of Kug’s appearance. Taewyn appeared to barely notice that someone different had answered his question, although that might just have been Mil misreading Aeldari facial expressions. He was frowning and muttering to himself, then suddenly shouted out an exclamation of triumph.

“Ahah! I’ve got it.”

Ulishii looked at Taewyn curiously.

“Got what, Taewyn?” she asked. Taewyn blinked at her.

“The answer, of course.”

“To which particular problem?”

“All of them, naturally.”

“*All* of them?” Ulishii asked, incredulously. Taewyn nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “All of them. The key thing is—”

He broke off as the holograms of the two Aeldar flickered. An alarm sounded.

“Captain!” One of the command deck crew called. “The Braask just opened fire on the Aeldari fleet!”

“Battle stations!” Kug ordered. “Are they firing on any Kellan ships yet?”

“Negative, sir, but they have the Aeldar outnumbered substantially.”

“Ship for ship, though, the Aeldar are more powerful than they are. Order the fleet to deploy in support of the Aeldar. Bring all weapons live and fire at will.”

“Aye, sir.”

Kug looked back at the holograms of Ulishii and Taewyn.

“We’ll try and draw some of their fire, or at least take out some of their ships,” he said. Ulishii looked concerned.

“You don’t stand much chance head-to-head with that many Braask ships,” she said.

“Neither do you,” Kug told her bluntly. “So let’s help each other out.”

“Sir, the Braask are firing on our lead ships,” the same officer reported. Kug nodded.

“We’ll continue this conversation later,” he said to Ulishii. She inclined her head, and the holograms vanished. Kug surveyed the battlefield and began giving orders for the deployment of the Kellan fleet. The Aeldar had retracted or jettisoned their solar collectors and were returning fire, their weapons slicing through space with deadly efficiency. Braask ships showing signs of damage began to limp out of the fight, but here and there in the Aeldari ranks a battlecruiser spun slowly, out of control or on fire. As Mil watched, one of the leading battlecruisers exploded, sending those nearby racing to avoid the full impact of the shockwave and debris.

Then the full Kellan fleet engaged the Braask, and the battle turned slightly more even. Braask weapons — laser cannons appeared to be their preferred way of dealing death — stabbed out at the Kellans, hitting some ships, damaging them to greater or lesser extent. In return, the Kellans sent searing packets of superheated plasma, nuclear missiles and laser fire of their own. The Aeldar fought primarily with small, self-sustaining fusion packets, essentially miniature stars, which would burn their way through a ship’s hull, or undergo a miniature supernova in proximity to an enemy vessel. Missiles equipped with antimatter warheads were also a favourite form of Aeldari ordnance.

“We’re losing,” Mil noted after a few minutes.

“I had noticed,” Kug replied tightly. Two of the Aeldari battlecruisers vanished almost simultaneously and Kug’s worried expression was replaced with a tight smile. “The tricky devils,” he said.

“What?” Mil asked.

“Those two ships which just jumped out. They’ve not been firing very much. I’d bet that they’re planted in the fleet deliberately. None of the ordinary battlecruisers have enough fuel left to make an FTL jump, and neither do most of our ships, but those two probably carry extra fuel tanks instead of the majority of their weaponry. Help will be on its way fairly shortly now.” He gestured to the communications officer. “Tell any ship with enough fuel to jump to go to fleet headquarters and request reinforcements.”

“Captain sir, that will reduce our ability to hold our line against the Braask.”

“I know, but if we don’t get more ships here we’ll eventually lose anyway.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kug turned back to the views of the battle, staggering slightly as the ship was hit a glancing blow from a Braask laser.

“Minor damage to the outer hull,” someone reported. “All systems still operational.”

Another shot hit, more solidly this time.

“Rear starboard ion thruster array is damaged. Only ten percent thrust available.”

“Dammit,” Kug swore. He raised his voice. “Bring us out of the main battle, but try not to look like we’ve taken that much damage.”

“Aye, sir.”

There was groaning from the ship as it started to move, but it moved, if slowly, out toward the edge of the main battle zone, with two other Kellan ships

moving discreetly to cover them.

“When this is over I’m going to have a very stiff drink,” Mil said. Kug grinned at her, and then the whole ship convulsed. Mil was thrown across the room, coming to a painful halt against the rear wall, seeing stars in front of her eyes. She tried vainly to get her arms and legs to move, but they flailed around not really under her conscious control. Her head was spinning, and a massive headache started to form.

Then all the lights went out.

Chapter 10

A great many light years away, Rirsh Nopreya woke up. His bedroom was dim and cool and quiet, as it always was. The sounds of the waves breaking against the gentle sandy beach at the end of his garden drifted gently through the slightly open window, as they always did.

What was unusual was the darkly-dressed figure standing over his bed.

Rirsh reacted automatically, sending out a powerful push that sent the intruder staggering across the room. Flinging the bedcovers aside, Rirsh rose to his feet, lifting a hand to extend the push. The intruder slammed into the wall and rose slowly up it, until he was suspended only by the force of Rirsh's talent focussed in anger.

"Who are you?" he demanded of the intruder. "Why are you here?"

"I am Zarata of the House Kross," the intruder said in a harsh voice. "I mean you no harm."

"Then why can't you just use the doorbell like a normal person?" Rirsh asked. He flicked out a small potion of his talent to pull the hood from Zarata's face. Underneath it, she was a middle-aged woman, her skin showing the signs of much exposure to sun and weather, and the scars of frequent wounds. With a grunt, Rirsh let her drop to the floor and reached for his dressing gown.

"Come," he said. "We'll discuss this over tea."

He led the way into the kitchen, filled a kettle with water and set it on the stove to heat.

"You have a nice house," Zarata commented, taking the stool in the corner upon which Rirsh sat sometimes when he was waiting for something to cook which required a close eye to be kept on it.

"I try to keep it as tidy as possible," Rirsh replied. "That still doesn't explain to me what you are doing it."

"I came to talk to you."

"Really. Who sent you?"

"I sent myself."

"I see. And what do you want to talk to me about?"

"I want to talk to you about a man named Taewyn, of the House De Ko Altos."

Rirsh was silent for a long moment.

"And what is my son up to now?" he asked eventually. Zarata spluttered.

"He's your *son*?"

"Yes. You didn't know?"

"No, I—"

“Yet you knew there was a connection between us?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting. Still, not many people know that we’re related. His mother took him into her House when he was born, and we didn’t see much of each other. I can’t say that we’ve ever got on very well when we have attempted to spend any time with each other. What’s your interest in my oh–so–respected Worldweaver Prime?”

“Have you ever heard of a planet called Fushtib?” Zarata asked. Riiirsh frowned.

“A Braask colony, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t say I know much more about it than that. I suppose if it was really important, I’d know quite a lot more.”

“Probably. As it turns out, it’s very important.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. Did you ever hear of a Kellan research project called Project Alpha?”

“The one that nearly destroyed the galaxy? Oh yes. I was on the team of worldweavers they eventually sent in to clean up the mess.”

“Well, someone on Fushtib was about to discover the same technology. Quite deliberately, I might add.”

“Deliberately?” Riiirsh stared at Zarata in surprise. “Who’d want to do that?”

“The Shadowed Hand.”

“Aaaah. Of course. Am I to assume that you are a member of that organisation?”

“You may assume. If you did so, you would be incorrect. I no longer consider myself to be aligned with them.”

“And how long have you not been aligned with Shadowed Hand?”

“For about two months.”

“So about the time that my son ran off looking for the people who killed his wife,” Riiirsh said.

“Actually, it was a little before then. I disapproved of certain elements of that plan.”

“Like killing my daughter–in–law?”

“Actually, that’s not what I would have objected to. I’m not averse to the occasional killing myself, you know.”

“As a former member of Shadowed Hand, I can easily believe that.”

“And it may surprise you to find out that your daughter–in–law is actually alive.”

Riiirsh stared at her.

“She’s alive?”

“Absolutely.”

“Where? How?” The kettle boiled. Riiirsh lifted it off the hob. “And why?”

“I don’t know all the details. I still get some information out of Shadowed Hand. I didn’t exactly officially leave, and some people still consider me to be a valuable member.”

“Devious.”

“Prudent. They tend to take a dim view of people leaving, and I have better things to do with my time than dodging assassins.”

“As do most people.”

“Quite.” Zarata paused. “Did you know that your son was involved in a fairly large battle in a Kellan star system used for battleship refuelling three days ago?”

“I’d heard there was a fight. The Braask against us and the Kellans.”

“Yes.”

“I’d also heard that it was a stalemate and both sides eventually withdrew.”

“There were heavy losses on both sides.” She held up a hand to stop Riiirsh interrupting. “Your son is still alive, don’t worry. He’s in the custody of the Braask. They appear quite put out with him.”

“Why?”

“He went to Fushtib and destroyed the secret facility where Shadowed Hand were working on replicating Project Alpha.”

“Good for him. Why didn’t the Braask give him a medal?”

“Because they were sponsoring the research. It’s no accident that Shadowed Hand were able to set up the facility on a Braask-controlled planet. You think they wouldn’t have noticed any such behaviour if it was unauthorised?”

Riiirsh poured hot water into the teapot and sprinkled in some leaves.

“You’re right, of course,” he said. “There’s no way you could get onto a Braask planet that heavily populated without someone seeing you. Not if you wanted to build anything, anyway.”

“Exactly. So the Braask are put out because your son ruined their chances of developing the ultimate weapon.”

“Which would take them with them.”

“I’m sure they think they had a solution to that particular problem,” Zarata said. “They’re not stupid, after all.”

“The thing is, why would they want such a weapon?” Riiirsh asked. “It’s not like anybody’s attacked them in the last fifty years.”

“Perhaps they see an external threat. We haven’t explored past Braask territory.”

“No. They don’t appreciate people poking around, and we can respect that.”

“We can, but they have explored deeper into the galactic core. What if they’ve encountered another race? One more dangerous than any we’ve yet seen?”

“Then we would be willing to consider a military alliance to deal with any potential threat.”

“What if they’re that much more powerful that no such alliance could possibly hope to withstand them?”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m just passing on speculation, based on rumour. There is a rumour that the Braask went out and found something, and it scared them. I guess they’re willing to risk destroying the galaxy — and themselves — in order to find a way to combat it.”

“And what if they’re just warmongering?”

“Have the Braask ever behaved like that?” Zarata asked. Riiirsh sighed.

“No,” he admitted. “If they decide to fight you, they just do it. No need for excuses or preparation.”

“Exactly. So if the rumours are true, they’ve found someone they don’t think they can defeat.”

“Then why haven’t they shared this information with us?”

“Perhaps they don’t trust you. They certainly don’t now.”

“Well of course they don’t now.” Riiirsh poured two cups of tea and handed one to Zarata, who took a sip.

“Nice tea,” she said.

“Thankyou. I grow it in my garden.”

“Impressive. We shall have to discuss it more when we have the leisure to do so.”

“Why, will you be visiting again?”

“I was hoping I could persuade you to go on a journey with me, Riiirsh Nopreya.”

“Really? Why?”

“You’re a worldweaver of some talent. I am no worldweaver at all. I need your skills.”

“Do you. What for?”

“How do you fancy going to rescue your daughter-in-law from the Shadowed Hand?”

“It’s tempting,” Riiirsh admitted. “What do you get out of it?”

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to accept that I would feel satisfied by such an act of kindness and generosity?”

“Not a chance.”

“You’ve read me like a book,” Zarata laughed. “Aside from making Shadowed Hand think they’re a bit less invincible, we might also get the chance to find out a bit more information about what the Braask are up to. And why they need Shadowed Hand to help them.”

“It’s definitely tempting. You do know that I’m not far off my two hundredth birthday, don’t you?”

“I did some research. You’re as spry as any eighty-year-old worldweaver.”

“I have cheated a bit,” Riiirsh admitted. “Most of the modern studies on worldweaver longevity are based on me.”

“I noticed that as well. How come you can manage it when most worldweavers stop bothering by the time they’re a hundred and twenty?”

Riiirsh shrugged. “I have absolutely no idea,” he said. “It just happens. It’s a lot like most of our talent — we have very little idea or understanding of how it works, where it comes from or what rules govern it. We can identify the genetic factors involved in inheriting the talent, but there are so many of them it’s no surprise it varies so much between people. I believe last time I looked there were over seven thousand gene combinations which have been identified as causing the development of a worldweaver talent in an individual. All of them produce a slightly different talent. But for all that research, we still don’t have a clue how it actually works.”

“So how do you manage to teach it?”

“We make people aware of the possibilities that we’re aware of. Some things we can do can be explained, but they still require the basic knowledge of certain skills. It’s like if you were to teach somebody how to move silently, you wouldn’t first attempt to teach them how to move their legs, would you?”

“Of course not.”

“We do the same thing. If I teach somebody to walk through a wall, I tell them how the molecules in the wall need to move so that the molecules in their body can pass between them. I don’t tell them how to move those molecules,

because that's something we've never been able to actually explain. People can either do it, or they can't, and everybody talks about it in a different way."

"That must make things a bit difficult."

"It's extremely frustrating. We manage, though."

"Obviously." Zarata finished her cup of tea. "Should we go, then?"

"Where to first?"

"There's a Shadowed Hand den on Irsatis. The last I heard, your daughter-in-law was being held there."

"So we go there, then?"

"Naturally. If they've moved her somewhere else, we should be able to find out where and follow them."

"This could end up with us chasing people all over the galaxy."

"It could, but that seems unlikely. They have a movement problem because they have to move covertly. We don't have a movement problem, because it doesn't matter how many people see us moving around. We can take whatever transport will get us where we want to go the fastest."

"Except it would be nice if the Shadowed Hand didn't know we were coming," Riiirsh pointed out.

"Oh yes, but information only travels as fast as the fastest spaceship..."

"...except through a wormhole."

"Except through a wormhole," Zarata admitted.

"Like the one between here and Irsatis."

"Yes, like the one between here and Irsatis. Wouldn't that be an argument for you to get dressed and leave as soon as possible?"

"It would." Riiirsh rose and headed for his bedroom. He paused. "Try not to steal anything."

"Would I?"

"I don't know. That's why I mentioned it."

Zarata folded her arms and scowled at his back as he closed the bedroom door with a chuckle.

Chapter 11

It didn't take Riiirsh long to get dressed. One hundred and eighty-nine years old he might be, but he knew an urgent mission when he saw it. Already he was starting to regret wasting so much time drinking tea and engaging in light verbal banter with Zarata. She was an excellent conversationalist, he thought — agreeing with him just enough to make things friendly, but offering her own point of view often enough to keep things interesting.

Conversations in which both sides agreed about everything were obviously not as interesting, although sometimes they could be very emotionally satisfying. A shared moan was widely known to be a very effective mitigator of some early forms of depression.

Zarata, it turned out, had travelled to Riiirsh's island by aircar. She'd hidden the vehicle in a small grove of trees a short walk from Riiirsh's house, and they walked there in considerate silence. Riiirsh felt the excitement of an impending mission rising in him as it hadn't for over seventy years. Perhaps he had been retired for too long.

The aircar was small but quite adequate, and Zarata a skilled pilot. She flew them to the spaceport near Dero, Aeldora's second largest city, and there she hired a mini-shuttle for the journey to Irsatis. It was a light, airy and very compact craft, consisting mostly of a floor, a completely transparent enclosure, some seats to sit on, a set of controls and an engine. Riiirsh supposed that there must be a fuel supply somewhere, but he couldn't figure out where the designers had found room for it.

"Technology marches relentlessly onward," Zarata noted when he mentioned this. She was settling herself comfortably in the pilot's seat, and Riiirsh took the seat next to it, which had an excellent view to the front, sides and above. Some people didn't like this sort of shuttle due to the feelings of vertigo they experienced when there was apparently nothing between them and the vast distances found between objects in space. Riiirsh found it rather exciting.

"That it does. I fear it leaves me behind," Riiirsh said. He sighed. "I'm getting too old for this world."

"Perhaps you should just spend less time growing tea leaves," Zarata suggested. Then she paused. "On second thoughts, perhaps not. You might want to consider it as a career. How much longer do you expect to live?" she asked, bluntly. Riiirsh shrugged.

"No idea. According to my doctors, my physical age hasn't changed at all for nearly a century. I actually look younger than Taewyn."

"Really?"

“Yes. He may have a similar level of ability in retarding the ageing process, but he doesn’t choose to use it. Although I think you’ll find he’s done some work on his joints.”

“Doesn’t that mean he’s likely to die before you do?”

“It might.”

“I always heard it was the worst nightmare of any parent, to outlive their child.”

“It might be. I hope I won’t have to find out. When I catch up with him again I intend to have a serious talk about it. I want to know if he’s doing what he’s doing because he doesn’t have the ability to do what I’ve done, or if he just doesn’t want to.” Riirsh snorted a laugh. “Perhaps he’s seen what a crotchety old man I’ve turned into, and doesn’t want to become that way himself.”

“You do yourself an injustice, Riirsh,” Zarata assured him. She powered up the shuttle’s engines and it floated gracefully from the landing pad on its antigravity drive. They accelerated smoothly, the ground retreating beneath them as the shuttle’s nose angled toward the vivid purple sky.

“Do I?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t really know me very well, do you?”

“Well, we did only meet a few hours ago.”

“Then I suggest you reserve your opinion until you’ve got to know me a little better.”

“I always keep an open mind,” Zarata assured him. “Closing your mind on any topic is a good way to get fatally surprised by it later on.”

“I see you’ve been schooled in philosophy by rather more violent techniques than I ever experienced.”

“Shadowed Hand is a criminal organisation. Many things within it are a matter of life and death, quite literally.”

“Sounds like a good reason to leave.”

“It’s one of them, yes. I thought the idea of destroying the galaxy was slightly more pressing, though.”

“You’ve got a point there.”

They were in orbital space, now, circling above Aeldora until they reached the appropriate location to fire the ion engine to bring them on a course for the Irsatis wormhole. Zarata looked down at the landscape below fondly.

“You know, I’ve always liked Aeldora,” she said. “In a more peaceful life I’d have spent a lot more time there.”

“Perhaps you can come and live there when this is all over,” Riirsh suggested. Zarata fired the engine to put them on course with the Irsatis wormhole and shook her head.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Life doesn’t work out that well for people like me.”

“What do you mean?”

“If we succeed in this, do you really think that Shadowed Hand are going to let me live? They don’t like people who betray them, Riirsh. They’ll hunt me down and kill me. Probably slowly and painfully.”

“I’d like to see them try.”

“What?”

“We’ll put you in the Academy, under my son’s protection. They’ll have a hard time getting at you in there.”

Zarata was silent for a moment. “Your concern humbles me, Riiirsh Nopreya.”

“If you have half the courage of your namesake, I will owe you a great deal before this is done.”

Zarata chuckled. “I was wondering if you were going to make that connection.”

“If?” Riiirsh was incredulous. “You mean some people don’t recognise your name?”

“I mean exactly that. The famous, legendary Zarata of House Kross is just another dull historical figure for most people. They don’t even know her name.”

“But she was one of the greatest worldweavers who ever lived!”

“True, she was. Not in talent, but in courage and daring.”

“And tactical planning. Without her, we may well have lost the Xathras War.”

“And two hundred years later, we’re trying to prevent someone destroying the galaxy. Did she really gain us anything?”

“She did. Two hundred years where the galaxy wasn’t in imminent danger most of the time. I’d say that’s a good start on utopia, wouldn’t you?”

Zarata laughed. “I think it could be counted as a necessary prerequisite,” she admitted. Ahead, they could now see the Irsatis wormhole generator and the stream of ships flying into it. At the prompting of the navigation computer, Zarata guided the shuttle into that stream and paced the ship in front. “Are you ready for this?” she asked. Riiirsh nodded.

“Oh yes,” he said.

“Right then. Here we go.”

And they passed through the wormhole.

Chapter 12

It was dark. Belshanda opened her eyes and could somehow see even less than she could when her eyes were closed. That must just be an illusion, or perhaps there was something in her eyelids which was giving off faint amounts of light. She closed them again. Yes, there were little sparks of light dancing there. Opening them, she saw only constant darkness.

In the darkness, she became aware of something hurting. Her leg, she thought. No, her arm. Her *left* arm. She moved it carefully, and found that it was stuck under something. The pain, it seemed, came from an object which had fallen on it. When she tried to move the arm, she felt the disturbing sensation of two piece of bone grinding against each other. She bit back a scream.

First things first. She needed some light. Closing her eyes again, more out of habit than of any real need to avoid visual distraction, since there was nothing to see, she gathered up her talent and directed it into the idea of photons, bursting from a point in the air just above her. Gradually, she felt the idea take hold, although it was shaky. When she opened her eyes again, a feeble point of reddish light glowed in the air above her.

“It’ll do,” she muttered, and lifted her head to look around. She was in a corridor, and quite a lot of things seemed to have fallen from the ceiling. One of them, a bit of structural beam by the looks of it, had fallen on top of her arm, but the rest of her body seemed to be more or less intact. She rolled over toward her left side and tried to push the beam off with her right hand. It moved sullenly, grating over the bits of bone in her arm, and the pain made her black out again.

When she woke up for the second time, she didn’t bother with the light again. Clearly she was going to need to use her talent again to move the beam, and wasting her concentration on a light at the same time wasn’t going to help. She touched the beam with her right hand, wincing at the strain that put on her left arm, and flowed her awareness into it, enticing it upwards.

It lifted slowly, and she pulled her arm out from under it. Letting the beam fall to the floor again, she concentrated once more on light. The dim reddish glow reappeared, and she examined her arm, gritting her teeth against the pain. It appeared to be crushed, the bone obviously not intact, and the skin ruptured in several places. Blood had clotted around the wounds, although the state of the deck gave mute evidence that she’d bled quite a lot before it had clotted.

“How long was I unconscious?” she wondered, trying to get to her feet. It took a couple of attempts, and she swayed woozily for a few moments, one hand against the wall, trying to get her balance. Eventually she felt steady enough to

move, and looked up and down the corridor trying to remember where on the ship she was. She'd been going to... from...

She couldn't remember.

Picking a direction at random, she made her way carefully over the debris to the door at the end of the corridor, which failed to open at her approach, entirely unsurprisingly. The thought of mustering her talent enough to walk through it was frankly terrifying, so she pulled off the emergency panel next to the door with her good arm and a twist of her mind, and flipped the lever inside which released the pressure from the automatic system and would allow the door panel to slide freely. It hissed and moved slightly in its housing, and Belshanda put a hand against it and slid it slowly open. The corridor on the other side was lit, albeit barely, by a couple of bulbs left in the ceiling lights which glowed unsteadily, as if they were about to run out of power.

Belshanda checked the door panel as she went through it, and was pleased to find that the location code was still intact. She was on deck two, on the right-hand side of the ship near the top of the wing. That didn't answer why she was there, but it did give her enough information to know which way to head to get to the medical centre. She wasn't all that familiar with Aeldari battlecruisers, having hoped during her career as an assassin never to have to go on one (since that would probably have meant she had been captured and sent for trial) but they were legendary ships, and she had studied their layout, as had most Aeldari children.

The medical centre — one of the medical centres, for each battlecruiser had two — was located one deck down and not far toward the centre of the ship. Belshanda made her slow, shaky way in the right direction, hoping to find more signage or at least a way to get down to the deck below. She passed through several corridors, noting that the emergency doors between most sections had closed, indications that the battlecruiser had taken a number of severe hits. She started pushing her mind out to the other side of each door before opening it, checking that the compartment on the other side wasn't open to space or otherwise uninhabitable.

She'd almost got to a point she thought was above the medical centre when she found a door with hard vacuum on the other side. It hadn't even taken her talent to tell her that — the vacuum warning flags were visible behind the panel next to the door, informing anybody wishing to pass that they could expect to die if they overrode the door lock.

"That just takes the biscuit," she muttered, looking around. This section had seemed less damaged than the rest, so finding it right next to an area that was open to space was extremely disappointing. It also implied that quite a large amount of deck one, on the top of the ship, might be missing.

She backtracked, taking another corridor which led toward the rear of the ship, then turning right again as soon as she was able. This time, the next door had air on the other side, and she opened it. A short way along that corridor — which was relatively undamaged — she found an emergency access ladder leading down. The route up was blocked by an emergency pressure door which had sheared off the ladder in the process of closing — evidence enough that the deck above was open to space.

As carefully as she could with only one working arm and two very shaky legs, Belshanda descended the ladder to deck three, and was pleased to recognise a corridor near the starboard medical centre. The lighting here was much better,

in fact it appeared to be almost perfect, albeit at emergency levels rather than its usual unnecessary brightness. Only a few bulbs weren't lit, and there was very little mess on the floor.

Except for some fairly worrying patches of blood, that is.

Belshanda headed for the medical centre, and found it at the end of a well-lit corridor. The door opened at her approach, which startled her as it was the first such door she had encountered. Inside, things were quiet but obviously extremely hectic. Every bed Belshanda could see had someone on it, and there were a few less-wounded crew members standing against a wall, or sitting on chairs. Doctors and nurses bustled about, tending to wounds of greater or lesser severity.

Despite all this, a doctor appeared next to Belshanda only a few moments after she entered the room.

"What's your injury?" he asked.

"My left arm," Belshanda said. "A beam landed on it. I think the bone's shattered."

The doctor moved around to Belshanda's left side and looked at the arm, carefully avoiding touching it. Under his scrutiny, Belshanda started to become aware of the pain still coming from it which she'd started to ignore. She gritted her teeth against it.

"Nothing life threatening," the doctor said, "although we'll be wanting to get it set as soon as we can to reduce any further damage. I'll put you down for a scan, but it'll be a bit of a wait. Would you like something for the pain?"

"Yes, please," Belshanda said. The doctor nodded and took a couple of jet injectors from his breast pocket. One of them went straight back into the pocket with a shake of the head. The other, he pressed to the top of her left arm and activated. There was a hiss, and a cold feeling started spreading down Belshanda's arm, like syrup dripping down a pipe.

"Give it a few minutes to take its full effect, but try not to knock the arm," he said. "You don't want to damage it any more than it already is. Go and sit over there, if you can find a seat," he waved a hand at an area across the room. "Someone will have a proper look at the arm in a while."

"Thank you," Belshanda said, and went to see if she could find a chair. She couldn't, as they were all full with other people with broken arms, broken noses, large cuts which had been temporarily sealed up with a clear spray-on jelly-like substance which was the mainstay of first aid kits across the galaxy. She instead found herself a space against the wall and leant against it, relaxing as much as she could. The absence of pain from her arm was like a blessing, and she almost felt giddy from it.

She had a start when she realised the female officer she was standing next to was First Fleet Commander Ulishii.

"Belshanda," she said. "I'm glad to see you're okay."

Belshanda had to stop herself staring at the Commander. Her head appeared to have been hit very hard by something, and her scalp had split open. Under the jelly which had stopped her bleeding to death, Belshanda could clearly see the bone of Ulishii's skull, and that the injury stretched right down through Ulishii's face, stopping just above the mouth. Her right eye was closed beneath a thick layer of jelly, and the left eyelid didn't seem to open fully.

"Ulishii," Belshanda replied. "What happened to you?"

“Something fell on my head. I don’t know what. I was down in the engine room looking over the damage from the battle, and by the time I woke up again after the impact, the engineers had already covered me with sealant jelly and found an emergency stretcher to carry me up here on.” She smiled slightly. “They’re a good crew.”

“They are,” Belshanda agreed. “I don’t understand what happened. I thought the battle was over, but...” she shook her head slightly, but instead of clearing it, the movement just induced a headache and a slight twinge from her nearly-numb arm. “I don’t even remember what I was doing, I just woke up in the dark on deck two with a beam on my arm.” She gestured with her right hand to the limp arm at her left side.

“Our reinforcements came just in time,” Ulishii said, “we’d taken heavy damage and pulled back out of the fight. The Braask started to retreat, but they seemed to deliberately strike at the retreating ships as they did so. We got hit square on. Most of deck one isn’t there anymore, and a lot of deck two’s in serious condition. About half of it’s open to space. You’re very lucky to be with us still.”

“It sounds it,” Belshanda said.

“I don’t really have any idea how many of my crew are still alive,” Ulishii continued. “But we need to make sure everyone who is still alive gets the appropriate medical care to avoid making the body count any larger for the time being. The engineers say that life support is good for at least five days, and the emergency food and water supplies will more than cover that period even if we had a full crew still, so there’s no great urgency.”

“Some of the less-damaged ships will have jumped out for assistance, as well,” Belshanda said.

“Yes, I hope so. Our sensors are down, so we have no way to know. They’ll have to send plenty of ships just to gather the crews off the ships like ours which aren’t capable of FTL anymore.”

“Do you know where Taewyn and Asha are?”

Ulishii frowned. “I saw Asha in here when they carried me in. She was healing people. Taewyn was around as well...” she trailed off, then gasped. “Of course! You’re a worldweaver, don’t you know how to heal yourself?”

“Heal myself?”

“Yes. I thought everyone knew worldweavers can heal their own injuries at a remarkable rate.”

“I didn’t. But then, I’ve not had any formal training, and probably missed out on a lot of the education you had. Being more or less raised as an assassin I didn’t exactly get a normal schooling.”

“I see. You should find Taewyn, he can show you how to do it.”

Belshanda was frowning as an idea came to her.

“No, I think I can figure it out,” she said. “It sounds like a simple concept after all...” she trailed off, thinking about it.

“I wouldn’t. If you get it wrong, the doctors probably won’t be able to sort it out,” Ulishii said. “Talk to Taewyn first. Or Asha.”

“Very well,” Belshanda sighed. She did still let her awareness filter into her left arm, feeling her way around the bits of bone and broken flesh. It was very messy in there, that was for sure. “Actually, it does seem quite complicated,” she admitted. “The bone in my arm seems to be in... twelve pieces. A couple of them have been busy slicing blood vessels open.”

“You can tell that?”

“I can. I hadn’t looked before, but I can now...”

“Don’t you even think about trying to repair it,” Ulishii warned. “You don’t want to make it worse, the doctors are having enough trouble as it is.”

Reluctantly, Belshanda nodded. “It is interesting to look, though,” she said. “There’s a bruise on my left leg. I didn’t know bruises were like that.”

Time passed with Belshanda almost lost in internal contemplation. Ulishii made a few attempts to start another conversation, but eventually gave up as the worldweaver grew increasingly inwardly aware, enraptured by her own internal structures.

She was jerked out of it by Asha slapping her across the face.

“What?” Belshanda demanded, suddenly angry.

“Snap out of it!” Asha said. “People have got lost inside their own bodies before. Sometimes they never come back. It would have been better if Ulishii hadn’t mentioned anything about this to you. Taewyn wanted to teach it to you properly. Assuming you survived, that is.” She smiled. “It’s good to see you’re still alive, Belshanda.”

“You too,” Belshanda said, her anger fading. She looked around. “Where’s Ulishii?”

“She came out of surgery an hour ago and is sleeping,” Asha told her.

“An hour ago? How long was I...” she shuddered, realising the implications of getting lost inside her own body. She’d been very close to that, she now knew.

“I don’t know, but I think it must have been at least five hours. The doctors thought you were in shock, but your vital signs were all okay so they hadn’t got around to giving you a proper examination. They’re still dealing with a few more serious cases.”

“Do we know how many of the crew survived?”

“There are seventy-eight surviving crew,” Asha said.

“What was the original crew complement?”

“Two hundred and thirty.” Asha said this in a flat tone of voice which implied that she wished she didn’t have to tell anybody else about this again. Belshanda didn’t know what to say, and found herself looking at the ceiling instead. One of the light bulbs had gone. “So shall we fix up your arm?” Asha asked. Belshanda shook her head slightly to shake off the sick feeling in her stomach, then nodded.

“Yes,” she said.

“I don’t want you to try and help,” Asha said. “Watch instead, be aware of what I’m doing. It’ll give you a lot of the basic ideas you’ll need to do this sort of thing for yourself.”

“Okay,” Belshanda said. She sank her awareness back into her arm, around the shattered bone. Distantly she noted that the painkillers were starting to wear off, leaving a far-off throbbing ache that threatened to become a great deal stronger in a short time.

She felt another awareness around her arm, and recognised it as Asha’s. Gradually that awareness flowed through the muscle and bone and sinew, penetrated Belshanda’s blood, permeated every cell in her arm.

Then it changed, becoming a gentle warmth and an irresistible encouragement as it spoke to the bone to rejoin. And slowly the bone did so, fitting together perfectly, all the splinters and shards and larger finding their places and fusing back together.

Asha's awareness changed again, this time calling on flesh to knit and blood to unclot and nerves to reactivate. Even through the painkillers, Belshanda felt the stabs of pain as severed nerves started communicating the pain they hadn't been able to send before. She gasped. Asha put a hand strongly on her shoulder.

"Nearly done," she said. "Nearly done."

And so it was. A few moments later, Belshanda flexed her arm and marvelled at it.

"Thankyou," she said. "That's amazing."

"It's just a little trick," Asha said, smiling. "Come. I've got a few more people here who still need my assistance, and if you watch you'll learn a lot more about it. I won't ask you to help though, I suspect you need a good night's sleep before you can really start on anything serious."

"That would be good," Belshanda agreed, stifling a yawn. It had not been a relaxing day. She followed Asha as she accosted a passing doctor and spoke to him briefly. The doctor pointed to a bed on the other side of the room where a patient lay motionless. Asha and Belshanda stood on either side of the bed and Asha placed a hand on the patient's chest. Belshanda hesitated, then put her hand next to Asha's and sent her awareness outward through it.

Immediately it was clear that something was terribly wrong in this man's body. In his blood, chemicals which shouldn't have been there tumbled in an ongoing battle with the cells of the immune system, ripping their way through anything which got in their way. In places, they had breached the walls of his blood vessels, and blood was pooling in places it shouldn't be.

Even as Belshanda comprehended this case of chemical poisoning, Asha began to work on curing it. Once more her awareness was soft and persuasive, enticing the poison out of the body, encouraging blood back into the veins and arteries, and gently closing breached blood vessels.

There was a lot of poison and a lot of damage, and Belshanda lost track of where and how and all sense of time was gone in the awareness of what Asha was doing. After some time, Belshanda exerted her own awareness, closing a breach in a vein in the patient's left arm and drawing the blood back to where it should be. She felt Asha's awareness focus on the area for a moment, then pass on. Assuming she had done the right thing, Belshanda moved on to the next small area and set to work on it.

Not long after that, they finished. Asha looked sternly at Belshanda as she came out of that trance-like state.

"You shouldn't have done that," she said. "Get some rest. Now."

"I don't know if there's anywhere to sleep."

"There are some spare beds in the room next to this one," Asha replied. "We started clearing out patients about an hour ago. Go and rest. I'll get Taewyn to come and wake you up later."

Sighing, but also holding back a yawn, Belshanda went into the next room and found three beds unoccupied. She picked the closest one and lay down upon it. For a few moments she thought she'd be far too uncomfortable in her tattered, dirty clothing to sleep, but only a few moments later she closed her eyes and was lost to the world.

Chapter 13

On Irsatis, Riiirsh and Zarata were well-rested, refreshed, enthusiastic and extremely dangerous. A local Shadowed Hand hideout found this out when Riiirsh walked right through their front door and shot the two guards stationed to guard it. After a brief pause to open the door to let Zarata in, Riiirsh continued into the small warren of rooms and corridors, using his ability to walk through walls as the primary means of surprise, appearing in rooms which the occupants had just vacated in an attempt to intercept him in the corridor. Instead, they found Zarata in the corridor and Riiirsh behind them, and were cut down in a deadly crossfire.

The narrator points out that the word “deadly” is used in an entirely metaphorical sense here. Being ethically-minded citizens and not particularly enamoured of multiple convictions for murder, Riiirsh and Zarata were using stun weapons only.

Within five minutes the entire hideout was quiet, and Riiirsh and Zarata had twenty-four unconscious Shadowed Hand members. They hauled all of them into the largest room and bound them with the chains and other restraints they found in what was presumably used by the Hand as a dungeon.

“Which one do you think is the leader?” Riiirsh asked once this work was done. “Or who’s going to have the most information?”

Zarata walked down the two rows of bound and unconscious men and women, considering each one.

“I recognise this one,” she said, stopping by a middle-aged man with almost pure white hair. “He used to be in charge of the Hand base on Cova. It was much bigger than this one, but coming here could have been a promotion, given how little traffic goes through Cova.”

“Perhaps he was just visiting.”

“Perhaps. I know he left Cova, I don’t know where he went after that.”

“How long ago was this?”

“About a year ago.”

“I see. Shall I see what he knows?”

“Would you like me to do it? I have some experience in extracting information from reluctant people.”

“You mean you know how to torture people?”

“Well... yes.”

“Then why not just say so?”

“I thought you might not find the idea very pleasant,” Zarata said. Riiirsh rolled his eyes.

“I know what the Hand are capable of,” he said. “And therefore what you are capable of, even if you’re not capable of all the insanity that they are. Your skills in the area of torture will not, however, be required.”

Riirsh walked over to the former leader of the Covan Shadowed Hand base and knelt. “What’s his name?” he asked.

“I don’t know. We don’t use real names in the Hand. He styles himself as Dominator.”

Riirsh snorted. “Typically ostentatious,” he muttered. He laid a hand on Dominator’s forehead. “Let’s see what he knows.”

He closed his eyes.

About a minute later, he stood and looked at Zarata.

“Guess where he went after he left Cova,” he said.

“Braask territory?”

“Spot on. And guess what he found out when he was there.”

“The Braask are developing weapons of galactic destruction in order to defend themselves against a powerful but unknown external agency?”

“Nope.”

“Well what, then?”

“Well, he doesn’t know all the details. His real name is Auritar of the House Reshi, by the way. He does know a few useful things. They are attempting to develop a weapon that can be used on a localised scale, based on the Project Alpha research. And they are intending it for use against another threat, but he doesn’t know what that threat is. He is, however, responsible for offering Shadowed Hand expertise to the weapon research.”

“The Braask took that, I assume.”

“Of course. And he’s mightily annoyed at a short bit of video footage he’s seen of my son and two other worldweavers dismantelling their prototype into individual molecules.” Riirsh grinned. “I’m really rather proud of Taewyn right now.”

“And so you should be. What else did you learn?”

“Some bad news. The Kellan and Aeldari fleets engaged the Braask at a Kellan resupply station near the edge of Kellan space. The Braask eventually retreated, but there were heavy losses to all three fleets involved. It looks like we’re at war with the Braask whether we like it or not.”

“We’ll have to see if we can find out more about that,” Zarata said. “I don’t suppose he knows anything about the location of your daughter-in-law?”

“Unfortunately not. But he does know who the leader of this little hideout is, so I’ll have a look around in her head and find out if she knows anything.”

Riirsh moved a few people down the row of unconscious forms and knelt beside a woman about Zarata’s age. He placed his hand on her forehead and closed his eyes. After only a few seconds, he opened them again and rose.

“Dira Tulag,” he said. Zarata gasped.

“Surely not!”

“That’s where Elya’s being held.”

“But Dira Tulag has been interdicted for centuries.”

“All the more reason to hide something there. In any case, it’s only the planet that was dangerous, not the entire star system. If someone could sneak past all the sensor nets, they could build a space station or a moonbase or an asteroid colony quite comfortably. And that’s exactly what they did.” Riirsh glanced

down at the base leader again. “The Hand use a system of encrypted tight-beam beacons and obscure codes to keep people informed of the coordinates of safe jumping-in points.”

“Do you have the keys to that system?”

“No, she doesn’t know them all. She does know which asteroid they’re living in though. She did some digging of her own, perhaps hoping for the opportunity to blackmail her way into a higher position, or for leverage should she ever be arrested. And we don’t have to worry about jumping in quietly.”

“Don’t we?”

“Of course not. We’re not doing this one by ourselves, Zarata. There should be a communications console somewhere around here. I’ll call for some police assistance, get all these people into proper custody and then we’ll get in touch with the local patrol fleet and take a battlecruiser or two with us.” Riiirsh grinned. “This could easily cripple the Hand for years. Dira Tulag is their main base, and one that nobody’s even suspected existed before.”

A slow smile spread across Zarata’s face. “Sounds perfect,” she said. “I saw a comm unit in the next room when we were moving the captives.”

“I’ll go and use it at once,” Riiirsh said. The local police chief was surprised to receive such a call, but after Riiirsh verified his identity, she sent a sizeable contingent of officers to the hideout, who entered looking rather bemused. Riiirsh guided them to the large room where the Hand members were still unconscious, and the officers muttered among themselves.

“Impressive,” the police chief, who’d decided to come herself, observed. “And you did this by yourselves?”

“Zarata provided the location,” Riiirsh explained. “And we took the occupants down together. They didn’t quite seem to be prepared for fending off attackers with the ability to walk through walls.”

“And they’re all stunned, you say?”

“Yes.”

“How long have they been unconscious?”

“About three-quarters of an hour now.”

“They’ll be waking up soon then,” the police chief observed. She looked at her officers and gestured to the prisoners. “Get them in proper cuffs and haul them out of here,” she ordered. The officers nodded and spread out around the room. The variety of restraints Riiirsh and Zarata had used on the prisoners presented them with little difficulty, as Zarata had found most of the keys and the two worldweavers who had come along made quick work of the rest. Each prisoner was then placed in handcuffs and carried by two officers out to the shuttles parked outside.

“Hopefully you can find suitable charges against all of these people,” Riiirsh said when there was only one Hand member left in the room.

“I doubt we’ll have too much trouble,” the police chief replied. “Most of them are probably wanted for various crimes. We just have to match up their biometrics to something in the database and we can charge them.” The last Hand member groaned quietly. “And it looks like they’re waking up. Good. I’d be worried if they’d stayed unconscious for much longer.” She walked over to the groaning man, who was being guarded by two officers, and knelt beside him. “Good afternoon,” she said. “Recognise me?”

The Hand member tried with some difficulty to look at her face, and she made a dismissive noise. “His vision isn’t back to normal yet,” she said. “See

if he can walk out, or carry him otherwise. I'll see you later," she added to the Hand member, then rose. The two officers hauled the prisoner to his feet and half-carried him out of the room. The police chief turned to Riirsh. "You said you need a ship to take out the Hand's main base?"

"Yes. I know where it is, but I doubt we can take it out by ourselves. Plus there's a slight problem with the location, as it's inside an asteroid in the Dira Tulag system."

"A problem indeed. I've got good relations with the local patrol fleet commander. I'll call him up and tell him what's happened. Would you like to come back to the station with us and have a meal and a bit of a rest?"

"That would be wonderful."

"Excellent. By the way, my name's Dierya De Ko Altos."

Riirsh shook the police chief's hand.

"Pleased to meet you," he said. "I'm sorry, I should have asked your name earlier."

"I should have told it to you," Dierya said. "I'm supposed to, after all. Goodness knows what my boss would say if he found out."

"Well, I'm not going to tell anybody. Now, can we get on and contact the local fleet commander? I'd like to know if I've got time for a nap before the raid."

"Of course, Worldweaver." Dierya walked a little distance away and took a handheld videophone from a pocket. After a short while, a miniature hologram of a man in Fleet Commander uniform appeared in the air above it, but the device's localised speaker system prevented Riirsh from hearing any of his words, and it appeared that Dierya was using a privacy device to muffle her own speech.

Their conversation continued for several minutes, during which time Riirsh attempted rather unsuccessfully to look like he wasn't trying to eavesdrop. He was saved from that necessity when Zarata wandered back into the room and came over to him. She nodded in the direction of Dierya.

"Is that a Fleet Commander she's talking to?" she asked.

"It is indeed," Riirsh replied. "Hopefully we can get onto a battlecruiser before long and get going."

"I wouldn't mind a nap first," Zarata said.

"Neither would I, but the faster we can strike, the less chance the Hand hear about what we did here."

"True, true." Zarata might have been about to say more, but she didn't because Dierya had finished her conversation and came back over to them.

"Bad news," she said. "Although the Commander has agreed to take you to Dira Tulag, with two of his battlecruisers, an assault force and all the worldweavers he's got assigned to him at the moment—"

"How many worldweavers is that?" Riirsh interrupted.

"Five," Dierya said.

"Good."

"Do you want to hear the bad part of the bad news?" Dierya asked sarcastically.

"No, but I'm sure I should."

"Indeed you should. The Commander has just been ordered to send most of his fleet to a Kellan resupply system to conduct rescue and salvage operations. It seems an Aeldari and a Kellan fleet suffered some heavy casualties fighting the Braask not long ago. The Commander says if you want to go to Dira Tulag,

you'll have to go with him on the rescue mission first. The Kellans say there's still fuel at the resupply station, so he can jump in, pick up injured or stranded crews, and then refuel and jump to Dira Tulag. It'll delay you by a day or more, but it can't be helped."

"I suppose it can't. He is the only person likely to be able to help us who can get the clearance to go there anyway."

"That is so. Any other Fleet Commanders you might find will also be likely to be helping with the rescue operation — or will be actively patrolling against Braask attacks. Looks like we're at war."

"Lovely. That should complicate things nicely." Riirsh pursed his lips. "Very well. At least we'll be well-rested. Where do we go?"

"The Commander's battlecruiser is in orbit. Do you have a ship?"

"Zarata has a small shuttle," Riirsh said. Dierya nodded.

"Then you can fly it straight up there and put it in the battlecruiser's docking bay. If you give me its registration I'll pass the information on to Fleet Commander Ishin so he'll be able to tell his crew to let you dock."

"Here," Zarata said, handing Dierya a small data card. "That should have what you need on it."

"Very organised of you, Zarata."

"I've found it useful to have all sorts of bits of information to hand," Zarata replied. "That one is particularly handy when you're planning to fly somewhere somebody needs to give you permission to go — a common occurrence when working for the Shadowed Hand."

"I can imagine," Dierya said dryly. She gestured to Riirsh, and they moved aside. "Are you sure you can trust her?" Dierya asked in a low voice. "Do you have any evidence that she's actually turned to our side?"

"I wouldn't call it our side," Riirsh said, "so much as mine. Yes, I do trust her."

"Have you been in her mind to find out?"

"No."

"Then how can you be sure?"

"I just am."

"And if you're wrong? You could end up with a plasma blast in the back, you know."

"I know. I've been around too long anyway." Riirsh grinned at Dierya impishly. "Maybe now's my time. I don't know. But I do trust Zarata. Trust me."

"Like I know you at all." Dierya sighed. "Oh very well. It's not like I've got anything to do with this after you leave the system, so on your own head be it. Just try not to lose us the war at the same time as Zarata betrays you, okay?"

"She's not going to betray me," Riirsh insisted. "But I'll be careful."

"You do that."

Zarata was scowling at them.

"She knows what we're talking about," Riirsh said.

"Of course she does. I said you can't trust her, not that she's stupid. Come on, you'd best get yourself off to the *Inquisitive*."

"Yes. We'll leave immediately." Riirsh walked back to Zarata and took her arm. "Come, my dear. Let us depart upon our historic mission of glory!"

Zarata giggled and followed him out of the room.

Chapter 14

The moment that the shuttle showed a positive atmospheric seal with the battlecruiser *Inquisitive*, the docking staff were coming in and looking around. One had a look at the controls.

“No jump engines,” he reported to his colleagues. One of the others nodded and took out her communicator.

“Docking bay to command deck. Shuttle is docked, no jump engines.”

She switched the communicator off and put it away again. To the right of the shuttle, the great doors which opened the docking bay to space finished sliding shut.

“We’ll be jumping momentarily,” the first docking crew member reported. “We’ll get you to your quarters after that.”

“Thankyou,” Riiirsh said, sitting back in his seat again. He wasn’t really a great fan of faster than light jumps, but they were a necessary evil when one wished to travel between out-of-the-way systems. . .

Reality wobbled all around him, and he caught himself trying to retch. Taking deep breaths, he looked around and saw that the docking crew appeared entirely unaffected by the jump. Of course, serving on a battlecruiser — a ship too large to pass through most wormhole generators and certainly too impatient to wait in line at one of the larger ones — they would have become used to the effects of a faster than light jump a long time ago. It was something which was reputed to become less unpleasant over time.

“Right,” the man said. “If you’ll follow me, we’ll see you to your quarters.”

“Lead the way,” Riiirsh invited him, although he was perfectly capable of finding his way around a battlecruiser. The deckhand of course knew exactly which rooms they had been assigned, so it was much easier just to follow along and take note of where they went. The basic layout was the same as when Riiirsh had last been on a battlecruiser over a hundred years before, although the technology in evidence and the style of the decor had changed quite considerably over that time. The corridors were slightly more spacious, better-lit and far less cluttered than Riiirsh remembered, with everything hidden behind smooth access panels and glossy computer interaction surfaces.

The internal transport system was faster as well, taking advantage of the very latest in acceleration dampening technology to change speed at rates which should have had the passengers staggering into the walls and breaking bones from the force of the impact, but instead only made them sway slightly. Four decks up their quarters awaited them.

“It’s not much,” the deckhand apologised, “but it’ll suffice. The Commander

says you should get some sleep while we pick up our allotment of casualties, and we'll give you a wakeup call before we jump to Dira Tulag."

"Thankyou," Riiirsh said. The deckhand saluted and walked off. Riiirsh and Zarata looked at each other. Zarata shrugged.

"Sounds like a good plan," she said, and went into her room. Riiirsh followed suit. His room was small — just a bed, a wash unit and a wardrobe — but it would do for some sleep. He put his bag in the wardrobe, stripped, had a quick wash and retrieved the crumpled nightshirt from his bag. He'd never been very good at folding things. After putting it on, he lay down on the surprisingly comfortable bed, pulled the blanket over him and fell immediately to sleep.

In his dream he saw his son.

They floated unprotected in open space, yet it was comfortable and warm. A distance separated them which they could not bridge, as they neither one had anything to use to gain the necessary acceleration. Taewyn reached out a hand to his father, as the Other watched.

"Father," he said.

"Taewyn. My son."

"Father... how can I feel thee here? How can you be so close?"

"Where art thou, my son? Where dost thou sleep?"

"Come, father, I will show thee."

The dreamscape blurred and changed, and they drifted next to a near-derelect battlecruiser, its top deck destroyed, a giant hole in one wing, which tumbled slowly in space. Around it floated debris, and the hulks of other dead or nearly-dead ships. In the distance, a group of brighter lights was moving closer.

"My son, art thou in one of the ships we have come here to rescue?"

"I feel your presence nearby, my father..."

Taewyn faded away. A moment later, Riiirsh awoke. By all the chances in the galaxy...

He quickly dressed and activated the comm unit. Unsurprisingly, it refused to allow him to call the Fleet Commander on the command deck directly, but it did allow him to leave a message with the ship's communications officer. She didn't seem particularly excited by Riiirsh's news that his son was on one of the wrecks, but she promised to pass it on to the relevant people. Riiirsh finished the call with a scowl on his face, then wondered what it was he'd just experienced.

Throughout all of recorded history, worldweavers had possessed telepathic talents, but nobody had ever been able to use them without physical, skin-to-skin contact with the other person. Riiirsh could read minds — voluntarily or otherwise — with a touch to the face or hands, but not from across the room.

Yet in a dream, had he really communicated with his son? Or was it all his imagination? If Taewyn De Ko Altos was found on one of these ships they had come here to retrieve, then the answer about the dream's reality would be provided. And if it were true... what did it mean? Some new aspect of his talent that he hadn't been able to access before?

But there had been, at the start... yes, and throughout the dream. There had been a sense that there was someone else there, watching them. But who? What? Perhaps it was that entity who had brought them together. That seemed marginally more plausible than a sudden extension of Riiirsh's or Taewyn's abilities. Given their ages, the chances are that they would have discovered such a thing earlier.

Not that it was entirely impossible, but it did seem incredibly unlikely.

Riirsh's stomach rather pointedly reminded him that it was time he thought about having some breakfast, and he went off in search of the canteen.

Chapter 15

Belshanda was awoken by the feeling that the world had jolted slightly to one side. She lay on her bed in the medical centre, confused and disoriented for a few moments, then she remembered where she was and why.

That didn't explain why she'd felt the world jolt to one side though. Or rather, not the world: the ship.

At the thought of a ship, her mind skittered to thoughts of her own ship. She realised she had no idea if it had survived the battle or not, but given the state of the rest of the battlecruiser she was on, it seemed unlikely that the docking bay had fared very well. Belshanda's ship would be at least damaged, very probably unflyable and maybe even irreparable.

But that was not what was important right now. She cast her mind back to her memory of the jolt, but was distracted when it happened again, accompanied by a clanking sound that seemed to echo through the very structure of the ship. Realisation dawned: something was impacting against the ship, and without the acceleration dampeners which usually suppressed such forces, everyone on board could feel and hear it.

She rose from her bed and tried unsuccessfully to smooth out her tattered clothing. No matter; it covered her decently enough, even if it was filthy, blood-stained, torn and smelly. For the time being there were much bigger things to worry about.

The medical centre was quiet, although most of the patients seemed to have woken up at the noise. The hectic activity which had characterised it in the hours after the battle had died down, now that everyone who needed treatment had been seen. Only those requiring long-term care now remained, and a few exhausted crew who had nowhere else to sleep owing to their quarters being made uninhabitable by damage.

Most slept in the ship's quarters though, for although many such rooms were no longer usable, nearly as many crew had surely been lost. Now that she was refreshed, Belshanda let herself feel the presence of life around her, and found it much diminished. As much as half the crew might be dead.

The jolting noise came again, different this time, then faded in an entirely different manner. Belshanda knew what that feeling was: something had docked with the ship, with difficulty by the fact that this appeared to be the first attempt. That probably meant the main docking hatch was damaged, although hopefully not sufficiently to make it difficult to hold a good seal.

She also hoped that the ship was capable of holding an environment between the intact parts and the docking hatch.

Belshanda emerged into the corridor and found it quiet and dimly lit to save energy. She turned right and made her way through several doors, all on manual operation now, and headed forward to where the docking hatch was. As she neared it, she saw that the corridors grew dark and cold, even though there was air.

She sniffed. The air didn't smell quite the same as the air she'd been breathing further into the ship, and was warmer. Perhaps. . .

Light flared up ahead, flickering, flaring light that swung and danced. The light of handheld lanterns. She quickened her step and moved around a bend in the corridor. Lantern light shone in her eyes, momentarily blinding her, but she heard voices.

"Found someone!" one said. "Ragged, but alive." Someone moved closer. Belshanda tried to blink the spots out of her eyes. It was the same person who had spoken, as he revealed when he spoke again. "How many others are there on board?" he asked.

Belshanda shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "A lot of the crew are dead."

The man seemed to realise that Belshanda wasn't wearing fleet uniform.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Belshanda of house Ti Mon," Belshanda said.

"And what are you doing on board a ship such as this?" he sounded suspicious.

"I've been working with the Worldweaver Prime."

"Taewyn?" another voice — the voice of an elderly man — said. The owner of the voice moved nearer. In the lanternlight, Belshanda could see that he bore a resemblance to Taewyn. "Is my son on this ship?" he asked.

"You're Taewyn's father?" Belshanda asked, incredulous. At one hundred and fifteen years of age, she'd assumed that Taewyn's parents must be long dead.

"I am," the man confirmed. "I am Riiirsh, of house Nopreya. Is my son well?"

"I haven't seen him since the battle," Belshanda admitted, "but I was knocked unconscious during it. When I awoke, I was told that he had been healing some of the injured, and was resting. I believe he is well."

Riiirsh let out a sigh of relief. "I am pleased," he said. "Thank you, Belshanda Ti Mon." He frowned. "Are you the same Belshanda—"

"Yes," Belshanda interrupted him, to cut off any long and tedious evasion. "I am the famous assassin."

"And you've been working with my son?"

"I have. He demonstrated a more productive use for my skills."

"I see." Riiirsh and the others with him were looking doubtful. The man who'd spoken to Belshanda originally was now looking at her as if he wanted to place her under arrest immediately. Belshanda had to admit to herself that he did have a certain justification for that. Riiirsh cleared his throat. "Right," he said. "Belshanda, can you take me to my son?"

"No," Belshanda admitted. "I do not know where he is."

"Then we'll just have to find him," Riiirsh said. "Zarata, come with me."

A middle-aged woman came forward and nodded. Belshanda glanced at her face, then gasped.

"You!" she cried. Zarata grimaced.

“I was hoping that you wouldn’t recognise me,” she said.

“You two know each other?” Riirsh asked.

“We’ve met,” Zarata said.

“You know she works for Shadowed Hand?” Belshanda asked Riirsh. He nodded.

“I’ve given that up now,” Zarata explained. “Their experiments in universal destruction were getting out of hand. I thought I should get out of it. As you know, the Hand don’t take too kindly to people looking to leave.”

“I have heard, yes,” Belshanda said.

“Can we continue this story while we move?” Riirsh asked, clearly impatient to find Taewyn. Belshanda nodded, and they walked down the corridor. Behind them, the rest of the boarding party followed, although some of them split off at the first intersection they encountered.

“I needed some protection,” Zarata continued, “and I had some useful information. Since I don’t care too much for what the Hand have been doing of late, it was a simple decision to come to Riirsh and offer my assistance.”

“And what have you been helping him with?”

“We are currently on our way to rescue his daughter-in-law.”

“His... you mean, Taewyn’s wife is still alive?”

“She is. We have an arrangement with the commander of the battlecruiser *Inquisitive*. Once they’ve picked up as many survivors as they can carry, they’re taking us to the Hand headquarters in the Dira Tulag system.”

“Dira Tulag!”

“Yes, most people have that reaction when we tell them where they’re based. Don’t worry, I’m reliably informed that it’s only the planet which is dangerous, not the entire star system. The system was interdicted for safety. Since it has little else of interest in it, nobody missed it very much.”

Riirsh made an irritated sound. “Could we continue the history lesson later?” he asked. “I’m trying to concentrate.”

They were back in the better-lit parts of the ship by now. Riirsh was choosing the directions they took seemingly at random, although the edges of Belshanda’s awareness occasionally caught a slight flutter, as if he was using a worldweaver’s talent to make the decision about which way to go each time. Which, Belshanda admitted, he probably was; although it was quite old in style, Riirsh wore a worldweaver’s uniform.

She had no idea how the worldweaver’s talent could be applied to divining such information, but Taewyn had proven to her repeatedly that the holes in her knowledge of such things were large enough to push a decent-sized planet through. As had Asha, for that matter.

Riirsh stopped outside a door in a corridor that looked to have sustained no damage at all.

“Here,” he said, and knocked. There was a pause, and then the door slid slightly open. Fingers came through the gap, wrapped themselves around the edge of it, and pulled it the rest of the way. Asha stood on the other side and stared at them.

“Belshanda,” she said.

“Asha,” Belshanda said. “The rescue party is here.”

“Is Taewyn in there?” Riirsh asked. Asha nodded.

“He’s asleep,” she said. She yawned. “He’s done a lot of healing.”

“As have you,” Belshanda reminded her. Riirsh pushed his way into the small room and made out the figure of his son on one of the three beds. The second bed was crumpled and looked as if Asha had just left it, which she probably had. The third was neatly made.

Riirsh shook his son’s shoulder.

“Taewyn,” he said. Taewyn’s eyes opened and he blinked up at his father.

“Father?”

“Hello,” Riirsh said.

“I had a dream. . .”

“So did I. We can talk about it later.” Riirsh sighed. “I’m sorry. You’re tired, and you need more rest.” He looked over at Asha. “You are too. Come, rouse yourselves for a while and we’ll find you quarters on the *Inquisitive*.”

Taewyn nodded sleepily, and hauled himself out of bed. Like Belshanda and Asha, he’d slept in the clothes he’d been wearing during the battle — the ones which they had worn on their excursion to the secret laboratory on Irsatis, in fact. Suddenly, Belshanda felt very grubby and unkempt.

“Don’t worry,” Zarata said, as if reading her mind. “The *Inquisitive* has plenty of washing facilities on board. You’ll be clean and fresh in no time, and then you can have a good sleep.” She paused. “But don’t sleep for too long. I imagine you’ll be wanting to come with us to Dira Tulag.”

“Absolutely,” Belshanda said. Taewyn and Asha looked shocked.

“Dira Tulag?” Taewyn exclaimed. “Why are you going there?”

Riirsh gave his son an appraising look, then sighed. “Elya isn’t dead,” he said. “We’re going to rescue her.”

Taewyn looked absolutely dumbstruck. He stared at his father for almost a minute, then, suddenly, started to cry. Riirsh took him in his arms and held him. Embarrassed, Belshanda turned away. This was something for father and son alone.

Chapter 16

Belshanda ended up going with Asha and Zarata to the *Inquisitive*, where they met Fleet Commander Ishin. He was of Belshanda's house, and although the houses were all very large and included multiple families on many worlds, she actually recognised him. It didn't happen very often, as her upbringing in the underworld had left her vastly ignorant of her heritage and house, but Ishin was one she had known about from an early age. His rise through the ranks of the fleet had been impressive, and now they stood on his command deck with him regarding her with disdain and more than a hint of contempt.

"So you're working for the good side now, are you?" he asked her finally. Belshanda looked at him levelly.

"That's what they tell me," she said. There was a long silence.

"Why?" he asked finally.

"It seemed like the right thing to do at the time," Belshanda replied. She thought of a flippant comment to add, but decided against it. Ishin was clearly not inclined to trust her very much right now, and she was starting to get unpleasant visions of spending the trip to Dira Tulag in the ship's brig. "Much like Zarata, I find that the prospect of somebody destroying the entire galaxy is quite remarkable when it comes to sorting out appropriate priorities."

Inwardly, Belshanda winced. Perhaps that had been rather too flippant despite her caution. Ishin's eyes flickered to Zarata. He hesitated, then nodded.

"Very well," he said. "I will commit you to the custody of the *Worldweaver Prime*. He will be responsible for ensuring that you do not do anything... inappropriate."

Belshanda let out a breath she hadn't realised she was holding, and bowed.

"As you wish, Fleet Commander," she said formally. To her disappointment, Ishin didn't so much as twitch a smile, instead eyeing her with distrust as she left the room with Zarata and Asha on either side. Once they were safely in the corridors, she relaxed a little.

"Well that was a happy family reunion," Asha commented.

"Hardly. I was raised as an assassin; we hardly saw each other on a regular basis," Belshanda reminded her. "Or at all, for that matter."

"Then how come you recognised him?"

"I paid attention. It didn't teach me very much, but some of it has come in useful over the years."

"I'd say." Asha looked at Zarata. "How about you?"

"What about me?" the older woman was adept at avoiding questions, Belshanda had noticed in the short time they'd known each other. Perhaps

she would loosen up after a little while, for Taewyn's father seemed to trust her and she must have said a great deal to him in order to get him to trust her.

"Were you raised in Shadowed Hand?"

"Goodness me, no. They don't keep children around. Too much hassle. No I was raised a proper, prim and respectable young lady of House Kross. My parents were determined that I live up to my namesake's quite frankly unachievable reputation. When it was determined that I had nothing of the worldweavers' talent, my parents sort of abandoned me to my own devices. I dallied in all the usual less than savoury diversions until I stumbled across the Hand. Somehow they ended up taking me under their wing and I grew quite adept at certain illicit activities they wanted performed.'

Belshanda looked at Zarata with interest. Perhaps she wasn't so reticent after all. Or maybe she'd just needed some time to decide what to tell them.

"Something bothers me," she said to Zarata. "If they wanted to frame Taewyn for his wife's murder, why not just kill her and be done with it? Why fake her death? Surely someone would have worked out that what Taewyn found wasn't her corpse eventually."

"I believe that all they needed was a short time in which he would be poking around in the affairs of various underground organisations, trying to find his wife's killers. He wouldn't need to believe that she was dead for very long to discover what they wanted him to know."

"And what was that?"

"That Shadowed Hand are working on Project Alpha technology for the Braask."

"So are you saying that it wasn't Shadowed Hand which framed Taewyn?"

Zarata stopped and gave Belshanda a look which spoke of exasperation.

"You claim to have been an assassin since you were a child, yet you know very little of how the Hand operates."

"I was always told to stay away from them. I did."

Zarata considered that for a moment, then nodded. "That may have been wise," she admitted. "However, you need to know this now. The Hand is not a single entity. There are factions. Some do things which other factions do not approve of. The politics are as convoluted as those you'd find in the councils on Aeldora, but considerably more deadly. Being one of the leaders of the Hand is an extremely nervous occupation. Few of them last more than a couple of years before somebody manages to kill them and take their place."

"Sounds lovely," Asha commented.

"I once found it exciting," Zarata said. "Of course, I never rose high enough to be much of a threat to anybody, so I only had to deal with a few would-be assassins."

Belshanda pursed her lips. "So the people who framed Taewyn are a different faction to the people who are helping the Braask?"

"I am not sure, but it seems most likely. Certainly, there are several factions who do not support that course of action. Hand law, however, states that those who are helping the Braask may not be interfered with."

"So they arranged for Taewyn to interfere instead?"

"You don't get much more interfering than a powerful worldweaver who thinks you've killed his wife," Zarata said. Belshanda had to admit the truth of that.

"Does he know this, do you think?"

"I doubt it. He will probably find out soon though. I expect I will probably tell him."

"He's not going to like learning that he's been manipulated."

"I will mention it as a possibility. Hopefully, by the time he is convinced of it as truth, he will be in a position to direct his irritation at those responsible, and not at the messenger."

Belshanda smiled. "You sound like you know him very well."

"I've been travelling with his father. He tells stories about his son. It seems that despite not spending much time together, they are quite similar." She thought for a moment. "Perhaps that is why they do not spend much time together."

"Perhaps, but I imagine that as Worldweaver Prime, Taewyn is kept very busy."

"And that his father likes his solitude and quiet," Zarata finished. "Riirsh lives on an island on the opposite side of Aeldora from the Academy. Not the easiest place to visit."

"Far from impossible, though."

"Indeed. I managed to sneak into his bedroom without any trouble at all."

"His *bedroom*?"

Zarata shrugged. "It was the middle of the night, so I thought it the place he was most likely to be. I was correct, and I managed to persuade him not to do any number of nasty things he might have done until I had explained why I was there. After that, he almost started doing what I told him."

"Almost?"

"Then he started taking charge again. Men always do."

"It doesn't help that he's about three times as old as you."

"Perhaps. I must admit he does make good decisions most of the time."

Zarata looked up and down the corridor. "Come," she said. "We're not getting any rest standing around chatting."

She strode off at a pace which precluded further conversation.

Chapter 17

The reunion was done, the emotion was over, and Taewyn and Riiirsh sat in a small two-person bunk room on board the *Inquisitive*, waiting for the jump to Dira Tulag. They'd talked of many things, although not of anything particularly important. Riiirsh had answered many questions about Zarata and her news that Elya was still alive. One issue, however, had not been covered, and it hovered in the air between them ominously.

Eventually, Taewyn decided to mention it.

"I had a dream," he said, at the exact same time that Riiirsh said the same thing. They looked at each other.

"I don't think you'll need to describe it," Riiirsh said. "We were in space, and you were talking to me, right?"

"Exactly right," Taewyn confirmed. "The question is, then: how? Long-distance telepathy is impossible. I've only read... oh, maybe two reports of worldweavers sharing dreams. And they were sleeping in the same bed, so were believed to be in physical contact." He coughed. "They had both also just made love, which was considered to have left their minds open to each other."

Riiirsh blushed. Love between worldweavers was a fairly intense experience owing to the ability of both partners to enter each other's minds. It was not, however, something which people usually discussed.

"Well I think we can rule that out," he said. "The fact is that we shared a dream without even being in the same star system. It's more than just long-distance telepathy, it's astonishing. I was in the Irsatis system; you were here. How far is that?"

Taewyn frowned. "I don't know," he admitted. He turned slightly to use the small computer screen embedded in the room's wall, which helpfully projected a holographic interface. A quick query to the ship's navigation system provided the answer. "Forty-three thousand light years," he said.

"That's a very, very long way," Riiirsh noted.

"Yes." They both pondered this for a moment.

"This means, of course, that one of the fundamental laws of physics is wrong."

"Oh?"

"It *is* possible to transmit information faster than the speed of light. We did it."

"We already do that."

"No we don't. We beam radio signals through wormholes, and we use FTL drive to circumvent distance and carry messages, but we cannot talk in real-

time between any two points in space, without setting up a wormhole between them first. What we did last night was entirely unprecedented.”

“That’ll keep the scientists busy,” Taewyn chuckled.

“As if they’re not busy enough already trying to explain how our talent works. I suppose given how many principles it already seems to violate, this one shouldn’t be a surprise.” He thought for a moment. “The others, though, the scientists thought were plausible, just an explanation that they’d missed, some form of energy that they couldn’t detect yet. I’m not sure how they’re going to react to this one.”

“Perhaps they’ll just say that we created a wormhole.”

“With our minds? At the same time? Even if we did, how did we know where we were?”

“Good point.” Taewyn frowned. “Perhaps we can do it again.”

“Maybe. Can you read my mind from there?”

Taewyn squinted at his father, then shook his head. “No,” he said. “But even if I do now have the ability, would I necessarily be able to use it instinctively?”

“Last night argues that one of us did.”

“Or both of us at the same time.”

“Hmm.” Riiirsh paused. “Now why don’t you tell me what’s going on with that young worldweaver, Asha.”

“Nothing’s going on, father.”

“I didn’t mean like that. There’s something decidedly odd about her, Taewyn.”

“I know. Don’t worry, it’s nothing dangerous.”

“I didn’t say it was. I said I want to know what’s going on.”

They looked at each other levelly. After a while, Taewyn sighed.

“Oh very well,” he said. “But you mustn’t tell anybody else. Most people can’t sense what it is that’s different about her, so we’ve been able to keep it fairly secret.”

“I won’t spread it about,” Riiirsh promised.

“Well then. Let me see. About ten years ago, Asha started at the Academy. She was a very gifted student, absolutely laden with talent. I started keeping an eye on her progress, although it wasn’t particularly difficult because her teachers were almost tripping over each other trying to tell me what a prodigy she was. She went through the basic training in a month, and covered most of the rest of the standard curriculum before half a year had passed. Everything she was shown, she could do pretty much instantly. She has an incredible level of perception and can comprehend anything she senses in a startlingly short amount of time.”

“That wouldn’t explain what she feels like though,” Riiirsh said. Taewyn gave an irritated sigh.

“That’s because I haven’t got as far as explaining why she’s like she is,” he said. “Let me finish my explanation before you criticise it.”

“Sorry.”

“Asha graduated from the Academy after she’d been there a year. She was actually capable of graduating earlier, but we wanted to make sure that she had a good understanding of appropriate use of her powers before we let her finish. After she graduated, she went off by herself and we lost track of her for a few months.

“Then we received a message from her, saying that she was on Cova and had got herself in a bit of trouble. I contacted the Covan authorities and discovered that she’d been arrested while trespassing on one of their military facilities.”

Riirsh winced. “They don’t take too kindly to that,” he said.

“No, they don’t,” Taewyn confirmed. “In fact, they mandate the death penalty for that sort of thing.”

“The death penalty!”

“Yes. Nobody has ever managed to persuade the Covans to abolish it. They don’t much like being told what to do, either. I got myself a ship and jumped straight to Cova to see what I could do about it, but the Covans were moving faster than I thought they would, and when I got there they’d already taken Asha to the execution chamber.”

“She seems to have survived.”

“Do you know how they execute people on Cova?”

“No.”

“It’s quite simple. The chamber has a transparent cylinder in it in which the condemned is placed. At the top of the cylinder is a fusion-cluster emitter of a similar kind to that which you find mounted on the front of a battlecruiser. When they activate it, it generates a miniature, short-lived star and propels it down the cylinder. The enclosure’s tough enough to withstand the heat flash, but anything else in there is incinerated pretty much instantly.”

“Unpleasant.”

“It’s generally considered that to actually die that way is incredibly painful, but only for a brief instant, since the brain’s one of the first things that goes.”

“It’s horrible.”

“It’s a death penalty, of course it’s horrible. Still, they’re entirely within their rights to keep it if they want to. I’m not quite so sanguine about them executing the most talented worldweaver we have records of though. Even as we came into orbit and I was trying to contact anybody on the planet who could stop the procedure, their central justice building exploded.”

“Is that where the execution chamber was?”

“Spot on. It looked to me a lot like someone had set off a thermonuclear warhead in one of its underground levels. What was unusual about it, though, was the size of the explosion. The buildings nearby were barely damaged at all. Most of the justice building, though, ended up in orbit.”

“In *orbit*?”

“More or less. It went up pretty high. When we scanned the resulting crater, we found one life sign at the bottom of it.”

“Asha?”

“Absolutely. I took a shuttle down and landed next to her. She was pretty stunned and incoherent, but I managed to get her on board and in the air. About halfway back to the ship she started speaking sanely again. It seemed that she’d decided her best chance of escape was during the execution itself, so she’d pretended that their precautions against her talents were sufficient, and let them start the procedure. When the emitter fired, she made a few modifications to it. What it actually discharged was significantly more powerful than the usual strike, and didn’t do her any harm at all. She claimed she caught it and sent it back upwards.”

“She *caught* it?”

“She did. Since then I have seen her deflect a full-power shot from a battlecruiser’s main cannons, so I quite believe her. As she was explaining this to me, though, I noticed a strange feeling about her, like I was seeing flickers of light shining out from within her, something she was trying to keep controlled. I asked her about it and she said that she was having some difficulty keeping her talent under control. I immediately changed course and landed on Cova’s moon instead of docking with my ship, as I had no desire for her to rip it apart. By this time she was having periodic convulsions, and insisted that I leave her behind so that she could die without hurting anybody else. She thought she’d used too much power and had opened up whatever it is that our power comes from to such an extent that she had no chance of controlling it.”

“But nobody knows where our power comes from.”

“She says she’s got a theory. I personally don’t understand a word of it, but she seems convinced she’s on the right track. Most of her spare time is spent investigating it. However, back then I was convinced she was about to die. I got inside her mind to see if she was right.”

“Without her permission?”

“Had she really wanted me out, she could have got me out,” Taewyn said. “Nobody’s ever been able to get inside Asha’s mind if she didn’t want them to.”

Riirsh nodded. Taewyn continued his story.

“She was right. Once in her mind I could feel that her power was threatening to come boiling out of her at any moment. There was some part of her mind which was looking forward to it. It seemed she’d not had a good few months away from us. I ignored that part of her and concentrated on the rest, using my power to calm her own. I couldn’t go up against it directly of course, as she was already many times stronger than me, but I was able to help her use what bits of power she could keep under her control to calm the rest of it.

“I don’t know how long it took, but eventually we were both in our own minds, lying on the shuttle’s deck, exhausted.” Taewyn sighed. “Since then she’s been more powerful than ever, but it brings her little satisfaction. During those hours when I was fighting to save her, she remembers having all the answers; how our talent works, where it comes from, what it means. Everything. Bringing it back under control, though, affected parts of her mind, and she can’t remember them anymore. Just the fact that she had them once affects her deeply though. I don’t think she’s actually forgiven me for saving her life. She’d have rather died with that knowledge and understanding.”

“But she doesn’t know that the knowledge was good or comforting,” Riirsh pointed out.

“No, she doesn’t, but she’s determined now to find out about it again. By any means she can find. She hasn’t found anything that’s strong enough to trigger the same effects in her powers again though. And it’s undeniable that as a result, she is now the strongest worldweaver we may ever see. She can be a bit erratic at times; her strength isn’t entirely predictable, and sometimes she overdoes things. That’s what you can feel about her. Most worldweavers don’t notice anything, but those with finer senses generally do.”

“Just how strong is she?”

“She can keep herself alive in deep space without a suit for several hours.”

“How many is several?”

“I’m not sure. She decided to try it one day. Went outside, and came back after five hours when she was bored.”

“That’s scary, Taewyn.”

“A bit, yes. I trust her, though. She’s not going to start using her talents for anything unusual. I must admit I was surprised when she said she was joining the fleet. We would have preferred her to stay at the Academy and research her new limits, but she insisted that she needed something productive to do. She was with the fleet at Fushtib, so I recruited her to come along. Actually, she could have done the whole thing by herself, but these last few years she’s become rather reticent about showing off how strong she really is. She did, however, save the lives of half the crew of the battlecruiser we were on. After the ship was damaged, she held the rest of it together against a few shots that should’ve finished us off. Then she pretty much exhausted herself healing the injured.”

“So just how strong do you think she is?” Riiirsh asked. Taewyn sighed.

“I don’t really know,” he said. “But there’s no way I could turn back a shot from a battlecruiser, even a low-powered one.” He sighed again. “A few times since then she’s lost control of her talent for a while, and caused some fairly serious damage. It hasn’t happened for five years or so now though, so I think she’s fairly safe, otherwise I’d never let her serve on a battlecruiser, but then again. . .” he chuckled. ““let” is not a word that you can really use when you’re talking about Asha. There is something else you should know though.”

“What? I think I know quite enough already.”

“She’s getting stronger. She’s concerned that one day she’s going to lose control of her power for good, but I don’t think that’s likely to happen. I do wish I knew why she keeps increasing in power though. I honestly think that she might be able to survive a dive into a star at the moment.”

“I don’t recommend testing that experimentally,” Riiirsh said.

“I wasn’t intending to. It’s just. . . what do we do when we’ve got someone with power approaching that of a Goddess in our midst?”

“Don’t get her angry?”

Taewyn chuckled. “You always did give me good advice,” he said, then tried to stifle a yawn.

“You’re tired,” Riiirsh said immediately. “Get some sleep.” He rose to his feet. “We woke you up when we came to rescue you and now I’ve made you relive old trauma. I’ll make sure you’re woken up when we get to Dira Tulag.”

Taewyn let a full yawn out. “Thankyou,” he said. “I’ll do just that.”

He stretched himself out on the bed and closed his eyes. Riiirsh watched for a few moments, then left the room in search of something to eat, and somewhere quiet to think.

Chapter 18

Taewyn dreamed. Once more he floated in space, all bemused by the stars around him and the ease in which he survived in this cold dark vacuum. All was quiet; all was peaceful, and his heart, so sore for so long, was at ease.

“Taewyn.”

A voice, or the sense of a voice. He felt a presence, and opened up to it as he would to his wife, for the presence was his wife.

“Elya.”

They shared an endless moment of presence, bathing in each other being alive, and well, and able to perceive each other.

“You must come soon,” Elya said. “We are running out of time.”

“Less than a day, my love,” Taewyn said. “We will be there in less than a day.”

“All should be well, but you must not delay. It will be dangerous, but I will help you. Come to Dira Tulag, my love. Come and see the answers.”

“The answers? What answers?”

But Elya’s presence was no longer there, and Taewyn drifted in the void, alone again.

* * *

He awoke, and knew that his wife was alive. Zarata’s news had no evidence, but the evidence in his dream had been real enough, and the experience with his father’s dream had convinced him that such dreams could be true. His heart leaped with joy at the thought, and he rose from bed relaxed, refreshed and ready to take on the entire universe if necessary to see Elya again.

As if on cue, he felt the rippling distortion in reality which accompanied a faster-than-light jump. Moments later the intercom in his room sounded.

“We have arrived at Dira Tulag. Worldweavers Taewyn, Riirsh, Asha and Belshanda report to the docking bay immediately. Zarata Kross, report to the docking bay immediately.”

Taewyn had no clean clothes with him, but he was refreshed and energetic, and a small application of his talent smoothed out the wrinkles in his clothes and purged the worst of the dirt. He didn’t look great, but he looked okay. Elya wouldn’t mind, and the Shadowed Hand operatives he was expecting to encounter would hardly be in a position to criticise what he was wearing.

He left the room and walked to the docking bay, where all but Belshanda were selecting weapons and other equipment from the *Inquisitive*’s quartermaster. Taewyn joined them.

“I trust you slept well, Prime?” the quartermaster enquired politely.

“I did, actually,” Taewyn said. “I wasn’t expecting to, but I had a most reassuring dream.” He glanced at Riirsh, who was looking at him curiously. “I’ll tell you about it later,” he said, then turned back to the quartermaster.

“Excellent, sir,” the quartermaster said, then gestured to an assortment of pistols in the open crates next to him. “Hopefully we have your preferred weapon available.”

Taewyn cast his eye over the crates and spotted a familiar-looking stun pistol.

“I know how to use one of these,” he said, gesturing to them. The quartermaster nodded.

“A fine general-purpose non-lethal weapon,” he agreed, taking two from the crate. He cast a critical eye over each one, then armed them both with power cells from another case. “Would you like both of these, sir?”

“Yes, please,” Taewyn said. The quartermaster nodded, opened another crate and produced a belt with two appropriately-sized holsters already attached to it. Taewyn put it on and settled the pistols into place.

“Would you like anything else, sir? The commander has authorised me to make our full supply of weaponry available to you and your colleagues.”

“What else do you have?”

“Flash grenades, smoke bombs, tear gas, plasma rifles, all the usual personal armaments.”

“I think I’ll steer clear of the lethal weapons,” Taewyn said. “I’ll take a couple of flash grenades.”

The quartermaster duly produced a pair and wished Taewyn good luck. Taewyn thanked him and went to join the others, who were similarly kitted out, except for Zarata. She carried two pistols, a plasma rifle and ten grenades of assorted types. Most of her armaments were lethal. Taewyn looked at her disapprovingly.

“Planning on killing everyone we come across?” he asked.

“Only if they try and kill me first,” she replied. “I’ve got a stun pistol, and this plasma rifle has a stun setting as well. I’m just preparing for the worst.”

Taewyn continued to look disapproving. Zarata sighed.

“I don’t have the advantages you all do. I can’t walk through walls or deflect plasma shots or anything like that, so I’m defending myself with superior firepower instead.”

“Oh very well, but try not to kill any more people than you absolutely have to,” Taewyn said. He turned to the others. “Everyone ready?”

Asha nodded. Riirsh grinned. Zarata checked her plasma rifle and chuckled rather chillingly.

“I’m ready as well,” Belshanda said from behind Taewyn. He jumped, and she laughed. “Got you there, didn’t I?”

Turning, Taewyn took in Belshanda dressed as her profession would suggest — ready to kill. Closer inspection showed that most of her weapons were stunning devices, or at least had the ability to fire stun shots. Numerous pistols, darts, knives and other unusual pieces of equipment Taewyn didn’t recognise were attached to every part of Belshanda’s clothing she could find a space on.

“You look well-prepared,” Riirsh noted.

“I am a professional assassin,” Belshanda reminded him. “I know how to take care of myself. Shall we go?”

They turned to the shuttle and climbed in. The pilot looked round and made sure they were all seated.

“This might be a rough ride,” she said. “There are some things on the asteroid that look like defensive weaponry, and they’re bound to have noticed our arrival.”

“I’ll make sure they don’t hit us,” Asha said quietly. “Just fly straight and I’ll take care of the rest.”

The pilot looked dubious. Taewyn looked at Asha curiously. A change seemed to have come over her since they’d been retrieved by the *Inquisitive*. A quiet confidence now surrounded her, instead of the aura of barely-contained power she’d possessed before. He considered asking her about it, but decided that was best done in private.

She looked at him, and met his gaze calmly.

I had the same visitor that you did last night, her voice sounded in his mind. He jumped, for she was on the other side of the shuttle. *She showed me a few things. We’ll explain it all later.*

Taewyn blinked. Asha smiled.

It’s quite simple really, Asha’s mental voice continued. *The answers are on that asteroid.*

Taewyn frowned. Why would Asha have been visited by Elya? Evidently Elya had learned some things, and even taught Asha a new aspect of her already-remarkable abilities. Elya, however, had always been a fairly indifferent world-weaver, quite content to do no more than the basics with her talent, never pushed by Taewyn’s drive to master ever more complicated tasks and push the boundaries as he did. Something important had clearly happened to her since her apparent murder. Frowning over that, Taewyn barely noticed as the docking bay was pumped out and opened to space, and didn’t really feel the shuttle detach from its docking clamps and head out into space.

He did notice when the Shadowed Hand base started firing at them, though. Judging by the colour and intensity of the plasma bolts which started streaking toward them, they’d been buying Do weapons from somewhere. It seemed unlikely they were bought directly from the Do, as they made a rule of never trading their weapons with anybody. Which meant they were probably taken from wrecked Do ships before the Do salvage teams arrived.

Fortunately they didn’t appear to be particularly accurate weapons, as the shuttle pilot was able to avoid many of the plasma bursts with fairly gentle maneuvers.

“Watch out,” Zarata said, “they might have close-range laser cannons.”

The pilot nodded and activated an extra sensor display scanning specifically for such emplacements. Asha had closed her eyes, and was breathing slowly and calmly. Gradually, Taewyn started to feel something radiating from her, and was surprised to see that she appeared to be glowing.

A barrage of plasma bursts came for the shuttle then, in a pattern that would be impossible to dodge. The pilot winced and started to spin the shuttle so that the tougher underside would take the force of the impacts, but about ten metres from the hull, the shots bounced off some invisible barrier and detonated fairly violently against the cannons which had fired them in the first place. Suddenly all the weapons fire was doing the same thing, whether it would have hit the shuttle or not, and not long after that the guns fell silent.

“All the weapon emplacements are destroyed,” the pilot reported in an awed voice. Taewyn, Riiirsh and Belshanda were all staring at Asha, feeling the waves of power emanating from her. Taewyn found it particularly strange, for Asha’s power had always been turbulent and unpredictable before. Now it was calm, serene and stronger than ever. Slowly, the young worldweaver smiled.

“I told you I’d get us safely there,” she said. “Elya says that there are several powerful worldweavers who will probably try and stop us. She recommends that you let me deal with them, while you hold off the non-talented guards.”

“We can take on worldweavers,” Riiirsh protested.

“Not as well as I can,” Asha said, and sitting there amidst that aura of power she made a very convincing argument. Even her eyes seemed to be glowing now. Taewyn nodded.

“Very well,” he said.

The shuttle pilot brought them around to what looked like the doors to the asteroid’s docking bay, shifting slightly to one side and darkening the canopy as the *Inquisitive* opened fire, efficiently blasting a hole through the doors for the shuttle to enter.

“Thanks, *Inquisitive*,” the pilot said over the radio.

“No problem,” Fleet Commander Ishin replied. “Good luck. We’ve got a couple of shuttles full of our best troops ready to back you up if you need them.”

“We’ll let you know if we do,” Riiirsh said.

The shuttle latched on to a docking hatch, which refused to respond to the normally-automatic request by the shuttle to seal and open.

“They don’t want us here, obviously,” Belshanda said.

“What they want is quite far from my mind right now, Taewyn said. Asha didn’t say anything, merely rising from her seat and striding confidently right through the docking hatch. They waited in silence for perhaps half a minute, and then the atmosphere seal lights came on, and the hatch slid open. Asha stood on the other side, and five unconscious men littered the room behind her. She grinned.

“Easy peasy,” she said.

“Don’t get cocky,” Taewyn warned as they stepped out of the shuttle. He turned back to the pilot. “Did you want to come, or would you rather fly back to the *Inquisitive*?”

“I’m ordered to return to the ship,” the pilot said apologetically.

“That’s fine, we’ll call when we need picking up,” Taewyn said.

“Or we’ll steal one of their ships,” Belshanda added, drawing a stun pistol and arming it.

“Good luck!” the pilot said, and closed the shuttle’s hatch. Asha waved a hand at the hatch on their side, which slid smoothly shut and sealed.

“Do you have to keep doing that?” Zarata asked with distate.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Asha replied, and strode to the room’s only other door, a large sliding affair presumably designed to get cargo pallets through. She touched it and nodded. “There are twenty people on the other side,” she said. “All armed and ready to fire. Seems we’re not going to be given an honoured guest’s welcome.”

“People are so rude these days,” Belshanda agreed. Asha had moved along the wall and stopped at an anonymous point of it.

“There’s a small office here,” she said. “We should be able to come round behind them if we go through here.”

“Right,” Taewyn said. “Zarata, Belshanda, stay here and engage them from the front when you hear us start firing. Father, Asha, we’ll go round behind them and catch them by surprise.”

“Sounds good,” Belshanda said. The others all nodded. Taewyn went to the wall, gathered up his talent and walked through it.

The office was small indeed, and the three worldweavers barely fit as Asha checked what was on the other side of the next wall. It was another small office, and they left scrambled sheets of paper behind them as they had to walk through the desk pushed against the wall.

“Why do they use paper?” Taewyn wondered quietly.

“Harder to hack into a piece of paper than a computer network,” Rirsh suggested. “Probably for security.”

“Ah.”

Asha had moved to the door.

“This will get us behind them,” she whispered. “Let’s give them a surprise.”

She took a step backward, raised a hand to the door and concentrated. Taewyn caught the briefest sense of a flash of power directed at the door, and it blasted outward with an enormous bang. Asha dived out immediately behind it, followed closely by Taewyn, a stun pistol in each hand. He started firing as soon as he saw his first confused figure trying to turn around to meet the new threat from behind, and moments later it was all over.

“That was loud,” Zarata observed as she rose from the crouch just behind the doorframe which she’d adopted as a way to avoid getting shot.

“It did the job, didn’t it?” Asha asked.

“Very effectively. Just let me put some earplugs in next time.”

Asha laughed.

“Come on,” Taewyn said. “We need to keep moving.” He looked at Zarata. “Any idea which way we need to go to find my wife?”

Left, a voice sounded in Taewyn’s mind. By the startled looks on everyone else’s faces — except Zarata’s and Asha’s — this was a universal experience.

“Elya?” Taewyn asked.

Who else. Go left. Quickly!

“Left, then,” Rirsh said. Zarata looked confused.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Taewyn’s wife is telling us where to go,” Belshanda said. She looked at Asha. “You don’t look surprised.”

“I’m not,” Asha replied. “We should definitely be going left.”

They went left, then right, then down two floors by ladder, then straight on for a while, always at the suggestion of Elya’s mental voice. They met people, who always seemed surprised to see them.

“She’s guiding us a back way round,” Belshanda concluded after the fourth lone man had attempted to run for reinforcements. She checked the charge on her stun pistol. “The main group must be somewhere else. They’ll get here eventually.”

Hurry! Elya’s voice said again. *Go right at the end of the corridor.*

They did so, and ran straight into the main group Belshanda had just mentioned. Fortunately, both sides were as surprised as each other, which gave the advantage to the worldweavers. Taewyn, Rirsh and Belshanda all acted instinctively, each generating a shockwave which blasted down the corridor and sent the Shadowed Hand guards staggering backwards. Asha waited a moment to let

them start to get back to their feet, then unleashed her own shockwave, which sent them all sprawling on the floor. Belshanda and Zarata strode forward and rapidly put a stun blast into each of the struggling guards.

"Too easy," Zarata muttered. "Where are their worldweavers?"

"We're here," a new voice said. Five men rounded the corner and stood confidently in the way.

The door behind them, Elya's voice said. I'm behind it.

Taewyn and Riirsh exchanged glances they'd have to go through these worldweavers, but five of them. . .

"I'll take care of them," Asha said, walking forwards. She stood in the middle of the corridor, and almost seemed to grow in size as she let some of the restraints on her power go. "Who would like to be first?"

The five Hand worldweavers exchanged looks, shrugged, and acted simultaneously. Lightning flared in the corridor, a dazzling exchange too fast to follow. When it finished, the rightmost of the Hand worldweavers was sprawled on the floor, smoke rising from his ruined chest.

"Got anything else?" Asha asked contemptuously. Her opponents answered with fire, which she spun around herself and turned back. It dissipated from a shield they projected before themselves. Taewyn ruled that round to be a draw. Asha didn't wait for them to strike first. As the fire faded, she lifted a hand and sent a crackling stream of lightning straight past the Hand worldweavers to strike the substantial door behind them. It buckled, and moments later a flare of green light came from behind it and the doors blasted outwards. Standing behind them was Elya of house Daleele. Grimly, she strode forward, one hand raised, and the four Hand worldweavers burned from the inside, fire bursting out through their skin as they screamed their way into death.

There was silence as Elya looked with satisfaction at the one body and four smoking piles of remains.

"I've been waiting to do that for a long time now," she said. She looked at Asha. "Thankyou."

Her gaze passed over the others and fixed on Taewyn, who choked back a sob as they walked toward each other.

"Elya," he said. "I—"

"No need to say anything, my love," she said. "Your face says it all."

They embraced, and Taewyn planeted along-awaited kiss on her beautiful lips. Eventually, they parted.

"There's a lot I need to tell you," Elya said. "There are many things going on that I don't think you're aware of, but we need to get away from here quickly. There are more worldweavers on this rock, and they're not all as weak as these five."

"More?"

"That's one of the things I need to tell you. Come, we must move before they realise what has happened here."

She strode off the way they had come, then halted at the first corner, head cocked.

"They're sending people to try and stop us," she said. "Do you have a shuttle here?"

"No, but we've got a battlecruiser waiting for us," Asha said.

"Right." Elya looked around as if listening for something else, then fixed her gaze on a blank section of wall. "Through there," she said. Asha went through

the wall without hesitation, followed by Belshanda. Zarata cleared her throat.

“Umm. . .”

“Oh yes, you can’t follow us through here can you?” Elya said cheerfully. “No matter.” She took Zarata’s hand, walked up to the wall and pulled the other woman through it. Taewyn and Riiirsh exchanged looks, shrugged, and followed. The other side was an empty storeroom, and Zarata was looking shocked.

“Next time, warn me before you do that!” she said.

“We don’t have time to waste on being surprised,” Elya replied calmly. “Now, we’re going to go to the hangers, steal a ship and get out of here. There are dangerous people here, but the real danger’s happening elsewhere and we don’t have much time if we want to stop it.”

“What is the real danger?” Riiirsh asked.

“Just the destruction of the galaxy,” Elya asked. “If it goes wrong, that is. If it doesn’t, the Braask worldweavers, and a few Shadowed Hand members, are going to make Asha and I look fairly pathetic. And the Braask aren’t very pleased with certain actions taken by the Aeldari and Kellan governments recently.”

“I’d say that’s reason enough to hurry.”

“How do you know all this?” Taewyn asked. “And you were never this powerful, love. What’s happened to you?”

“That is something I need to explain,” Elya said. “And I will, but we can’t do it here.” She pointed at the left-hand wall of the room and took Zarata’s hand again. “This way,” she said, and walked through it, pulling Zarata after her.

They proceeded through the base, and through more walls than Taewyn cared to keep count of, avoiding all but the most minor confrontations. Elya seemed to have a sense of where people might be waiting for them, and coupled with an apparently encyclopaedic knowledge of the base layout this allowed them to get to the docking bay unharmed, although Taewyn, Riiirsh and Belshanda were feeling quite harried by all the walking through walls they’d had to do, and Zarata looked more numb than anything else.

Elya’s docking bay of choice, for she had explained in one of their rare pauses that there were four, was the smallest, yet would contain a shuttle capable of carrying them all. Now they waited just on the other side of a wall from the docking bay while Elya and Asha each rested a hand on the wall and sensed what was on the other side. Elya made a disgusted sound.

“It’s vacuum on the other side,” she said. “Doesn’t feel like any activity, I think they might have opened up the bays you didn’t blast your way into in order to make it harder for us to get out of here.”

“Well I’m sure we can do something about that,” Asha declared. She put a hand on the wall and closed her eyes. For almost a minute, she didn’t move, then they heard a rumbling noise, transmitted through the structure of the base. Asha opened her eyes and smiled. “Shut the doors,” she said. “Air should be pumping in any moment.”

Belshanda shook her head. “You just made the doors close from this far away from the controls?”

“Yes,” Asha said. “And I made sure that they can’t reverse that until I’m ready to do it myself.”

“How can you affect something that far away?”

Asha and Elya exchanged looks. Both women shrugged.

"I don't know," Asha said. "I just can. How can you affect something you're close to?"

"But nobody can affect things that far away."

"We can. Maybe the rules have changed."

Elya held up a hand. "That too, I can explain, but we need to get out of here." She touched the wall briefly, and nodded. "There's air on the other side now. Let's go!"

She took Zarata's hand, and the entire party went through the wall simultaneously. On the other side they were greeted with a barrage of stun blasts which splashed against an invisible barrier and vanished. Zarata and Belshanda had their own weapons out and opened fire, making short work of the spacesuited people set in the bay to stop them.

"You know stun blasts compromise the integrity of space suits, don't you?" Riirsh asked them as they climbed into a shuttle.

"Serves them right for being in our way," Zarata said. "Besides, it doesn't do all that much damage. They'll have time to get out of the docking bay before they asphyxiate."

Asha strapped herself into the pilot's seat and powered up the engines. As they came up, she started to concentrate with eyes shut, but then looked at Elya.

"I can't be bothered to do it properly," she said. "Would you take care of the doors for us?"

"Of course," Elya said, and lifted a hand. The docking bay doors trembled, then shattered into several pieces which went spinning off into space. Air rushed out of the docking bay, as did a couple of the unconscious spacesuited guards. Nobody paid them much attention as Asha set the ion thrusters on full burn and they shot out of the docking bay into clear space.

Behind them, the asteroid dwindled rapidly. Asha located the *Inquisitive* on the scanner and changed course toward it. A voice came over the radio.

"Unidentified shuttle, this is the Aeldari battlecruiser *Inquisitive*. You are leaving a hostile base. Stop and identify yourself or we will open fire."

Taewyn reached over Asha's shoulder and pressed the control which allowed him to reply.

"This is the Worldweaver Prime," he said. "Our mission is accomplished. Request permission to dock."

There was a momentary pause, then Fleet Commander Ishin's voice came over the speaker.

"Permission granted," he said. "Congratulations. I look forward to meeting Worldweaver Elya."

"We'll have to keep the social pleasantries very short, Commander," Taewyn said. "My wife has some important information for us."

"Commander Ishin," Elya said.

"Worldweaver Elya, I assume," Ishin replied.

"The very same," Elya said. "Do you have enough fuel to make a faster-than-light jump to Yurith-tar?"

"Yurith-tar..." there was a pause. "It's deep inside Braask territory. We can jump there, but we won't have enough fuel to jump out again. If we jump to the resupply station at Vur first, we'll have enough to get in and out with some to spare."

“Very well. Plan a jump to Vur and get us moving as soon as we’ve docked.”

“Worldweaver, I’ll have to get permission from the Council to jump to Yurith-tar now that we’re at war with the Braask, and they’re going to need to know why you want to go there.”

“I’ll give you a proper briefing, Commander.”

“Very well. We’ll jump to Vur as soon as you’re on board.”

“Thankyou, Commander.” Elya flicked a finger at the control panel and the radio deactivated.

“So now we get to hear the full story behind what’s going on?” Belshanda asked.

“Absolutely,” Elya assured her. “I don’t know absolutely everything, but while I was in the custody of Shadowed Hand I was able to learn a great deal.” Ahead of the shuttle, the *Inquisitive*’s docking bay loomed invitingly open and brightly-lit. Asha guided them to a halt and powered down the engines. Because their stolen shuttle wasn’t a very similar design to those carried by the *Inquisitive*, they couldn’t attach a docking tube and had to wait until the docking bay doors shut and the bay was filled with breathable air before they could disembark.

The instant the doors closed, they all felt the rippling of reality which marked the jump to Vur. When it finished, Elya opened the shuttle’s hatch and climbed out. Several deckhands were making their way to inspect the shuttle. Elya stopped one of them.

“Does this ship have a briefing room?”

“Yes. The Commander wants to see you there,” the deckhand replied.

“Good. Where is it?”

“I know the way, dear,” Taewyn said, coming up behind Elya and taking her arm.

“I knew you were useful for something,” Elya told him with a smile. He grinned back and they walked across the docking bay. Touching his wife’s skin, Taewyn could feel a vast amount of power radiating from within her, power probably greater than Asha’s. His wife was a lot better at hiding it though. He hoped she wasn’t planning to hold anything back.

Chapter 19

The *Inquisitive*'s briefing room was roomy and comfortable, with large seats arrayed in tiered rows facing a sophisticated holographic projection system. Elya went straight to the front of the room and started setting up the computer, waving Taewyn away impatiently when he tried to see what she was doing. Belshanda took a seat in the front row with the others, nodding to Commander Ishin when he came in.

"I'm glad to see that you're all well," Ishin said, looking around the room. His gaze settled on Elya. "And you must be Elya Daleele."

"I am," Elya said, not looking up from the computer. "Please excuse me, I'm trying to set up some visual aids for what I'm about to tell you all. I recommend taking a seat, because you're going to need it."

Ishin looked a little taken aback by this treatment, and took a seat next to Belshanda.

"Is she always like this?" he asked in a low voice.

"I have no idea," Belshanda said. "Taewyn looks a bit surprised though. I don't think he's used to his wife being the one with the urgent task. That's usually his job."

"Ah. Do you have any idea what it's about?"

"Not really, but it's got a lot to do with the Braask, and a great deal to do with why Asha and Elya are both exhibiting more power than any worldweaver's ever had before."

Ishin swallowed. "Fate of the universe sort of thing?"

"Absolutely. Don't you like it when the stakes are high?"

"Personally, I prefer chasing down smugglers and rescuing people from botched faster-than-light jumps."

"Look upon it as valuable career experience then."

"I wish Ulishii had come with us. She loves this kind of thing. I could have given command of the *Inquisitive* to her and gone for a nap."

Belshanda laughed.

"You'll do fine," she assured him. "Everything's gone okay so far, hasn't it?"

"Remarkably, yes. I can't convince myself that it's going to remain that easy. Elya is proposing to jump into the heart of Braask territory after all. I don't think they'll take too kindly to us being there."

"I'm sure she has a plan for that as well. It wouldn't be a very good plan to save the universe if we all die five minutes after getting to the place of the final battle, would it?"

“I suppose not.”

“Then trust her, and listen to what she has to say. You can always say no.”

“Knowing what the stakes are likely to be, I actually probably can’t.” Ishin sighed. “I should have stayed quietly at home and become a doctor, I think.”

“No, too messy,” Belshanda disagreed. “All that blood and guts. Trust me, it’s not nice.”

“I take it you’ve seen a fair amount of that.”

“In my profession you tend to be more in the business of opening people up than sticking them back together, so you get to see a lot of anatomy first-hand.”

“That’s horrible.”

“I know. Somehow I doubt I’ll be going back to it when this is all done though.”

“Oh?”

“Well assuming I survive the upcoming confrontation with whoever it is who we’re actually supposed to be confronting, there’s going to be a disagreement about where I should be, and I suspect the people who think I should be in prison are going to win.”

“We’ll have to see about that.”

“I wouldn’t mind, actually. At least I’d get a quiet life. I could write some memoirs, catch up on my reading. Maybe study faster-than-light engineering. It might be good.” She chuckled. “Although I might miss the excitement of running away from people like you all the time.”

Elya cleared her throat.

“If everyone is ready,” she said. The various conversations people had been having fell silent. Standing under the lights at the front of the briefing room, Elya looked every inch a calm and composed woman, almost buzzing with power. To Belshanda’s senses as a worldweaver, she really did buzz with power, although it was much more carefully concealed than the waves of it which emanated from Asha.

“Okay. I’m going to explain what I know of what’s currently happening with the Braask and the Aeldari criminal group known as Shadowed Hand. Not much more than a month ago, while my husband Taewyn was at the Academy, Shadowed Hand worldweavers broke into our home and abducted me. I was not strong enough to resist their combined talents, and they drugged me. I have since discovered that they created a facsimile of my body, which they then abused and left for Taewyn to find, along with indications sufficient to set him up for my murder.

“Their motives seem confused here, unless they simply wanted to get rid of the Worldweaver Prime, in which case why not just kill me? I believe I was kept drugged for about a week after my abduction, but eventually my captors allowed me to wake up. They explained that Shadowed Hand had been doing some scientific investigation for the Braask, along with some more esoteric research in the area of worldweaver talents. I asked them what sort of research, and they said that it was extremely dangerous, and I would find out soon what sort of thing they’d been doing. Then they left me alone.

“For a couple of days nothing happened. I think it was a couple of days anyway — I had no point of reference, as the illumination in the room was constant and so was the temperature. I used my own meagre talents to obtain food and water, but the energy depletion of doing that is not compensated for by the energy gained from eating the food, so I began to grow weaker. I contracted

a fever, and some time passed in a delirium.” Elya took a deep breath before continuing. “When I recovered from that, I felt good. In fact, I felt better than I could recall feeling in my entire life. I also felt powerful. The room’s door had always resisted my attempts to open it or walk through it, but after I woke up that day I realised that it wasn’t really a significant obstacle at all. On the other side of it, I found a corridor, and after exploring for a bit I discovered that I was on a small space station. There was nobody else on board, and the station’s computer had been locked down. Since there were no ships or other craft on board which I could use to leave, I set to work hacking into the computer to get the communications online.

“I was about halfway through that work when a ship jumped in next to the station, gave it a thorough inspection, and docked. I was more curious than angry with the people who arrived, because I wanted to know what had happened to me to change my powers in the way that they had been changed, for I had thought that it was impossible to modify the powers of a worldweaver. I knew about Asha of course, but that had always seemed to us to be her realising unfulfilled potential rather than gaining new potential.”

Ishin cleared his throat. “I’m not familiar with Asha’s story,” he said.

“It’s not pleasant,” Asha said shortly. “I’m sure Elya will cover the relevant parts as necessary.”

Elya nodded. “I will,” she said. “To cut a long story short and to avoid unnecessarily distressing Asha, she broke into a new aspect of her talent as an instinctive action to save her life. Since that time she has had considerable trouble keeping her power under control. We had thought when it happened, as I mentioned, that Asha had merely accessed the full potential of her strength, rather than any fundamentally different part of her power. As it turns out, we were wrong, although it took until my abduction for me to realise that.

“The ship that arrived at the space station carried two young men, both of them possessed of some level of the worldweaver’s talent. I found myself stronger than them, and easily overcame their efforts to contain me once they discovered I had escaped the room of my confinement. Once they had surrendered to me, I demanded that they explain themselves, and what had happened to me. One of them began to laugh, a truly cheerful sound which I was greatly surprised to hear in the situation. The other wept tears of joy. Eventually, when they had both calmed down somewhat, they explained to me what had happened — and apologised profusely for subjecting me to it, but they had felt that they had no other choice.” Elya looked up and met Taewyn’s eyes, then looked away again, a distant hurt showing in the set of her face.

“I had been injected with an experimental drug developed by Shadowed Hand scientists working in conjunction with Braask researchers and their own worldweavers. They had also heard of Asha, and concluded the correct answer which we had not considered. They sought a controlled method to release that part of the power from Braask worldweavers. When they failed to make any headway, the Braask sought out Shadowed Hand and the Aeldari knowledge of our talent, for we understand more of it than any other species which possesses it — meagre though that understanding is.

“The Hand scientists were able, after much experimentation and research, to create a drug which they thought would activate those powers in an Aeldar. They were, however, unwilling to test it on themselves, and so continued their research with the aim of unlocking the same power in a Braask worldweaver.

Eventually, they succeeded, and three Braask worldweavers were ordered to take it. Two died, but the one who survived grew considerably more powerful in many of the same ways that Asha had. The drug also left her brain-damaged.

“A key component of this research was technology developed by the Kellans for an energy project they called Project Alpha. I believe you have all heard of how that research nearly destroyed the galaxy, and without the timely intervention of a team led by my husband Taewyn, none of us would be here today. It was only by exposing genetic material to the particular distorting radiations produced by a Project Alpha singularity that the drug could be created. Braask genetics vary far less between individuals of a particular caste than ours do between any two individual Aeldar, so they anticipated being able to mass-produce the power-enhancing drug once it had been made safe, and giving it to all their worldweavers. The Aeldari version, on the other hand, had to be manufactured for each recipient individually based on a genetic sample.

“I had been abducted by a faction of Shadowed Hand who had come to disapprove of the vast amounts of power which this research would place in the hands of the Braask. They infiltrated the research operation and used a sample of my blood taken while I was unconscious to synthesise a dose of the drug for me. I was the first Aeldari subject to be given the drug, so I am fortunate to have survived its effects undamaged. My powers expanded vastly, and unlike Asha I was able to keep control of them.

“The two of my captors I had overpowered said that they had done what they had done in order to ensure that somebody destroyed the Braask research programme before it continued any further. By framing Taewyn for my murder, they forced him into contact with the criminal underworld, where word of the Shadowed Hand experiment was arranged to be passed to him by dropping hints that my location could be found by raiding a secret laboratory on Fushtib. As it turned out, this was actually where they had constructed a secondary singularity generator. Taewyn, Asha and Belshanda effectively demolished that facility and also prevented the Kellans from destroying the entire planet in order to ensure the research was eliminated, for the Kellans had been unable to determine where on the planet it was located.

“Shortly afterward was the battle which Commander Ishin here rescued my husband and his companions from the aftermath of.

“Additionally, by testing the experimental drug on me, they gained the possibility of an ally powerful enough to counter the enhanced worldweavers the Braask and the Hand would no doubt soon be creating.

“Not long before the battle, after much deliberation and examination of files which my captors made available to me — and a thorough examination of the mind of each of them — I elected to help them in their cause. After deducing a way to hide my excess power from the senses of another worldweaver so long as I didn’t use it, they shipped me to the headquarters facility in the Dira Tulag asteroid belt, where I was given into the custody of the Hand’s most powerful worldweaver, a man who calls himself Wo. He inspected me minutely and determined that I was the perfect test subject for the drug. He took a sample of my genetic material and sent it to be made into a test dose. He also sent a sample of his own, in case the drug was able to work on me. The possibility that he was being deceived about my having already taken the drug never crossed his mind, and it appeared that our plan was working.

“Although I had concealed my enhanced power, the senses which came with

it were still available to me, as they are passive and thus generate no detectable aura. It was in that manner which I detected the arrival of the *Inquisitive*, only minutes after a small shuttle arrived carrying the two doses of the experimental drug. Wo came immediately to my cell to inject me with it. I allowed him to do so, but once the drug was in my veins I faked a mental fit, forcing him to leave the room for fear that my uncontrolled powers would kill him." She paused. "Once he had left, I turned my power inward and dissolved the drug, as I did not wish to see what it would do to an already-enhanced person. I had been lucky once, and it seemed imprudent to rely on luck a second time. I then feigned unconsciousness. Wo detected the aura generated by my use of my talent, and declared that he would take the drug himself if I was still alive a day later.

"You, of course, arrived before then, and I took the opportunity to escape."

"You could have escaped at any time, couldn't you," Belshanda said.

"Yes, but you provided me with a convenient excuse to do so. Also, you came at a fortuitous time."

"What if this Wo takes the drug and it has the same effect it had on you?"

"Asha and I are strong enough together to overcome him. I do not think that would be a problem, though, as I was able to locate the drug and have modified its chemical structure. I suspect that if he has taken it, Wo is already dead."

"That was good thinking," Taewyn complimented his wife. "So what do we do next?"

"I recommend we meet with my former captors. They claim they wish to apologise to you for the inconvenience they caused you, my dear."

"I'm sure I can forgive them that," Taewyn said magnanimously. "It does appear to have been in a good cause, and I suppose it would have been difficult for them to get an audience with me to explain what was happening in a more conventional way."

"That's what they thought, but they also didn't want anybody to know what they were doing. The reprisals for betraying the Hand are severe, as I'm sure Zarata will tell you." She looked to the former Hand member, who nodded. "Yet despite those threats, Zarata chose to abandon the Hand and go to Rirsh in an effort to rescue me," Elya added. "Thankyou, Zarata. I know you now know that I was in no danger, but the thought is much appreciated."

Zarata grinned. "Any time, Elya," she said. "Any time at all."

"And the reason you want to go to Yurith-tar?" Ishin asked.

"That's where the main research facility for the drug is," Elya said. "There's another Alpha-singularity generator there, which they haven't lost control of yet."

"It's only a matter of time before they do," Taewyn put in.

"Yes, so I'm sure the Council will authorise a mission just to destroy it. I would say we should jump in, blow the space station in question up, and jump out again, but if they have succeeded in using the drug on any more people, the station will be extremely difficult to destroy."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"My former captors are on that space station at the moment. They went with the intent of making a dose of the drug for each of them and taking it, hoping that they survive the process and then using their own strength in conjunction

with mine to take control of the station and destroy it from within. So what I need is a lift.”

“My battlecruiser is not a taxi,” Ishin protested. “However, we will be honoured to convey you to Yurith-tar. Who else will be going?”

“I will,” Asha and Taewyn said simultaneously. Elya looked sternly at her husband.

“Taewyn,” she said, “you are not strong enough for this fight.”

“I’m strong enough to deal with any untalented people we come across. They can’t all be worldweavers, can they?”

Elya sighed. “Very well,” she said. “You may come.” She said not a word about Asha. The young woman’s presence was taken as a given by everyone in the room who could sense the barely-contained power within her. Ishin rose from his seat.

“In that case,” he said, “I shall go and explain the situation to the Council and Fleet Command. With any luck, they will grant us permission to jump to Yurith-tar.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then I’m afraid you’ll have to find alternative transportation. I can’t disobey that sort of restriction, not when it might worsen a war we already look like we’re not going to win.”

Elya nodded wearily. “I understand, she said.” Ishin nodded to everyone, turned, and left the room.

When the door closed behind him, Taewyn spoke.

“We’ve got to go anyway,” he said. “With permission or not.”

“Then we’ll have to be ready to steal a ship,” Zarata said. “Battlecruisers carry at least two small craft with faster-than-light drives.”

“But to jump from here to Fushtib would use well over half their fuel,” Asha said. “We wouldn’t be able to leave again.”

“In this situation, that’s not my primary concern,” Elya said. There was a long silence, then everyone nodded. They all knew what was at stake now.

Chapter 20

Yurith-tar was a red giant sun deep in the heart of Braask territory. As a destination for a faster-than-light jump it presented particular navigational challenges, for it lay in an unusually dense cluster of stars, and at some point in the last billion years a black hole had drifted fairly close to them, resulting in complicated and unpleasant gravitational forces throughout the area. For nearly a century this had made it an excellent area for top-secret research conducted by the Braask government and military, as no ship had the capability to jump into the system. It had taken nearly a decade to set up a wormhole link to allow people to move in and out easily, but once it had been done, numerous research stations had sprung up outside the reach of any other government. Should the system at the other end of the wormhole link be captured, it would be the simplest thing to shut it down, rendering Yurith-tar unreachable in less than ten years of sublight travel.

Recent developments, however, had rendered that advantage obsolete, something the Braask government perhaps hadn't fully realised. Kellan and Aeldari faster-than-light engineers, on a joint project designed to pool the best aspects of both race's jump technology, had developed an engine capable of tolerating much greater gravitational distortion than any other, thus allowing them to jump closer to planets and other large masses, and into regions of space previously inaccessible due to black holes, stellar clusters or other phenomena. Not all of space was made accessible by this development, but Yurith-tar most certainly was. Although they had tried to keep this fact from the Braask military, the Aeldar and the Kellans elected to assume that the Braask would find out about it before the development could be used to Aeldari or Kellan advantage. Since they had enjoyed peaceful relations with the Braask for a considerable length of time, this was not considered to be a particular threat.

So as the *Inquisitive*, authorised by the Aeldari Council to make a potentially suicidal jump into the heart of Braask military territory, prepared her engines for the folding of space which would move the ship instantaneously from safety into danger, Fleet Commander Ishin and all the *Inquisitive*'s crew wondered just how much the Braask did know about the capabilities of the *Inquisitive*'s engines. She was a fairly new ship, only four years old, but had already received one complete engine replacement, leaving her with the very latest jump engine technology on board.

In the docking bay, six people waited for the jump. They each displayed a different emotional state. Elya Daleele was calm and composed next to her husband Taewyn De Ko Altos, who appeared distracted and jumpy. Taewyn's

father, Riiirsh Nopreya, talked quietly with Zarata Kross, the only person on the mission without worldweaver talents of her own. She was out for revenge, and had a set, hard expression on her face.

Slightly apart from the others, Belshanda Ti Mon and Asha Daleele sat upon the deck, meditating. Asha radiated an aura of power, but more contained and calm than that which usually surrounded her. Belshanda had no aura at all, for her talents were minor, but at Elya's suggestion she and Asha had linked their minds through a touch of the fingertips and now Belshanda was acting as a balance point for Asha's powers, helping the young woman to improve her control of them.

"Your control of your powers will be essential in the coming battle," Elya had said to Asha. "Anything that will aid you in that, even temporarily, is of the utmost value."

Belshanda, aware that her powers would leave her vulnerable to most of the Hand and Braask worldweavers that they were likely to encounter on the station, had taken the opportunity to be of significant help to the mission with a sense of great relief, for she had been concerned that she would not be able to contribute anything to this incredibly dangerous and vitally important mission. She had no particular desire to put her life in danger, but her priorities have shifted significantly since she had met Taewyn and offered to help him hunt down his wife's apparent murderers, and she now felt obligated to take what she knew and what she could do and use it to defeat the people who would threaten all life throughout the universe.

Eventually, it came — a slight build-up as vast quantities of energy was discharged from the *Inquisitive*'s antimatter reactors into the jump engines, then that rippling distortion of reality which marked a spacefold jump. Immediately, the battle stations alarms began to sound, and the docking bay was evacuated. The six split into two small shuttles — Asha, Riiirsh and Zarata in the one, Elya, Taewyn and Belshanda in the other. Even as the hatches sealed shut the air was pumped out of the bay and the doors opened, allowing the shuttles to drop into space and drift powerlessly toward the space station. Behind them, the *Inquisitive*'s docking bay doors closed, and the great battlecruiser executed a sharp turn to avoid the first shots fired by Yurith-tar's automated defense systems. She returned fire, and bright explosions blossomed against the distant stars.

"Looks like they caused a sufficient distraction," Elya noted, looking out of the shuttle's transparent canopy to verify that the other shuttle was still in roughly the right position. They had elected to make an unpowered approach, relying on the momentum granted to them by their launch from the *Inquisitive* to carry them most of the way to the space station. The fine manoeuvring would be achieved through Elya and Asha's powers, thus allowing the shuttles to run on minimum systems and making them almost impossible for the Braask sensor systems to detect.

"They have no idea we're here," Taewyn said, observing that the defensive guns on the space station they were heading for were still tracking the now-distant *Inquisitive*, which was busily pounding another space station with its packed fusion cannons, just visible in the distants as bright flares like newly-formed stars — which is more or less what they were.

The space station loomed large in their vision now, and Elya reached out with her awareness to nudge their course slightly. The docking bay doors were

now directly in front of them, and she raised a hand.

“Close your eyes,” she advised the others, and unleashed her power. There was a bright flash as the doors melted and blasted outward on the force of the air in the docking bay. Several Braask were visible flying out into space as well, waving their many insectile limbs in a futile gesture as they slowly asphyxiated and froze.

The two shuttles smashed hard into Braask and a couple of Hand craft parked in the bay, jolting everyone in their seats. Immediately, Elya took Zarata’s hand and they fell through the floor of the shuttle, through the hanger bay deck and into the room below, which was still pressurised and safe. Moments later, Taewyn dropped through after them. A little way across the room, Asha, Belshanda and Riirsh also came through the ceiling.

All six wore small gas cylinders on their upper arms, connected through a regulator to a nose tube which delivered a steady stream of gas as they inhaled. The cylinders contained oxygen, as Braask environmental preference was to a lower concentration than Aeldar needed to function at peak efficiency. The cylinders they carried would last them for several hours — enough, at least, to sabotage the station’s environmental controls to produce more oxygen.

“Why is it that we always arrive in an empty room?” Belshanda asked, unholstering two plasma pistols. They had abandoned stun weapons for this mission, as no weapon had ever been developed capable of stunning both Aeldar and Braask with any effectiveness.

“I don’t know, but I’m not going to complain,” said Riirsh. A noise came from across the room, and he pointed to a door. “I don’t think it’s going to be very long before this room isn’t empty though. Ready!”

As if on cue, the door exploded inward and Braask soldiers poured into the room, firing their laser rifles as they came. Several shots scored glowing, smoking lines in floor and ceiling, while others reflected from an invisible barrier set up at a wave of Asha’s hand and cut down the Braask.

Belshanda and Zarata raised their weapons and opened fire, the bright plasma bursts a clear contrast to the Braask lasers, which were only visible as flickers of blue light as they passed through dust or smoke in the air. The six Aeldar moved forward implacably behind Asha’s shield, with Zarata and Belshanda firing. Close to the door, the Braask managed to keep them at a halt by bringing in portable shields. Elya raised a hand and swept it to one side, delivering a stunning force which flung broken Braask bodies against the walls. Suddenly, everything was quiet apart from the clicks and hisses made by the injured.

“Everyone okay?” Elya asked. They all confirmed that they were. “Right. Let’s continue.”

What followed was extremely violent and highly unpleasant for the Braask troops. After they had explored three levels and encountered nothing strong enough to significantly slow them down in their search for the laboratory facilities, Belshanda paused to load a new power pack into her rifle.

“Do you think they could write this up as a textbook example of what happens when one of your own weapons is used against you?” she asked.

“Perhaps,” Elya agreed. “I don’t think this is all they have though. Can you feel that?”

“Feel what?”

Elya paused as if listening to something. “Power.”

Belshanda cocked her head, extending all her senses. Distantly, she felt it, like a sigh, or an almost-silent song.

“Power,” she confirmed.

“Lots of it.” Elya looked round at the others. “Let Asha and I deal with it, whatever it is. The rest of you stay out of it.”

“I wasn’t planning on interfering,” Riirsh said. “It’s clearly way out of my league.”

Taewyn merely nodded agreement, although he didn’t look too happy about it. Elya kissed him.

“Oh my husband, always trying to protect me,” she said. “This time, you’ll just have to settle for me protecting you.”

Taewyn blushed.

Something changed. Asha’s eyes widened, and she unleashed a burst of power which sent the others sprawling across the wrecked dining room in which they had paused. “It’s coming!” she cried, and then the ceiling burst in on top of her. There was a flare of light, and a detonation which sent Belshanda, half back on her feet, sprawling against the wall again.

When her vision returned, she saw Asha and a middle-aged Aeldari man facing off in the middle of the room, a continuous stream of attacks and counterattacks flickering between them.

“Where’s your tame experiment, freak?” he asked during a brief lull in the battle. “Did she trip and fall?”

“I’m sure she’s around somewhere,” Asha replied, just as Elya rose up behind him and clubbed him over the head with a table leg. A surprised expression crossed his face, and he fell to the floor, unconscious. Wasting no time, Elya knelt and put a hand on his forehead. For a moment she concentrated, then her eyes widened in alarm.

“He’s set the self-destruct,” she said. “We have to get off the station at once!”

They exchanged horrified glances, then ran.

Afterward, Belshanda had little recollection of what happened. She remembered trying to find an escape capsule, a shuttle, anything, with the others alongside her. She remembered the jolt as the power went out and the gravity shut down, then the searing heat and light as the station’s reactor turned into an enormous thermonuclear bomb, incinerating the station from the inside out.

Then she was in stillness and calm, and a presence surrounded her. Taewyn’s presence.