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**BRANDON
SANDERSON**
AND JANCI PATTERSON

EVERSHORE

SKYWARD FLIGHT: NOVELLA THREE

DELACORTE PRESS

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For Darci Cole,
who let me borrow her faith for a while

—JP

Prologue

“Jorgen, are you ready?” my father asked, standing in the doorway to the parlor. He looked over my graduation uniform—admiring it I thought, but also searching for anything out of place.

“Yes,” I said. I stood in front of the glass case filled with my mother’s medals. She was one of the most decorated pilots the Defiant Defense Force had ever seen. At the center of the case was a pewter figure of a Sigo-class fighter—the ship my mother used to fly. As a kid I used to stand here and stare at that ship for hours, imagining what it would be like to be a pilot someday, fighting the Krell: all thrill and heroics and glory. I never took the figure out of the case—my mother would have killed me—but in my mind I flew in that ship to the stars and back.

I could see my reflection in the glass, my dress uniform crisp and fitted. After today, I’d be a full pilot.

“I hope you know how proud we are of you,” my father said. “So many cadets begin flight school, but graduating is a real accomplishment.”

My father was right. I’d started with what had to have been, in my estimation, the finest flight of pilots the DDF had ever seen. They were incredible people, every one of them. I couldn’t have asked for a better team.

And of all of us, only two remained. We’d lost some amazing people in the months of cadet training.

Rig, Bim, Morningtide, Nedder, Amphi, Quirk, Hurl.

Spin.

We needed them, but none of them were graduating today, and the DDF was poorer for it.

That didn’t feel like an accomplishment. It felt like a tragedy—one that was mostly on me. What worth was I? A leader who couldn’t bring his team

with him?

My mother came down the stairs in her own dress uniform. She wasn't officiating, but she'd still be there in all her regalia. She crossed the room to the case and opened it, pulling down her medals and pinning them on. She looked up at me, taking in my uniform, though it didn't feel like she was looking for imperfections the way it had with my father.

I felt like she was seeing herself.

"This is an important day," she said. "You've done every bit as well as we hoped you would."

"Thank you," I said—because it was the right answer, not because I felt it. I'd earned the pilot's pin more than I had the cadet's one—that had been automatic because of my mother's accomplishments. Still, I couldn't help wondering. Did I deserve to be here? Would Ironsides ever have kicked *me* out of cadet training? The son of Algernon and Jeshua Weight? I'd tried my best, done everything I knew how to do. But if I hadn't, I would probably still be standing here, my whole life laid out before me, predetermined just like my uniform.

"How does it feel to finally make full pilot?" my father asked.

This too had a right answer. "It feels great," I said. I glanced back at the now-empty medal stands and allowed myself this one admission: "Not that I'll be flying for long."

My mother's lips set into a line. "Thank the stars you won't have to."

I'd been told before I started flight school that I'd only fly active duty for six months. I should be grateful for that, but I wasn't. I wondered if FM would get to keep flying, or if our whole flight had been trained—using DDF resources, all the focus we'd put into it, the lives of my friends—for nothing.

I knew better than to say that aloud. I didn't need the lecture about how every sacrifice was part of a greater goal. I knew it by heart. I'd occasionally given it myself.

I could never say my mother didn't understand—she understood better than anyone. She was a decorated pilot. She'd lost friends, flightleaders, wingmates. I could see the heaviness in her eyes, the burden she carried.

She pushed on, doing everything she could for our people, because she believed in the cause—because we had to survive.

I was afraid I would never have the stomach for it, that I was soft and weak and would never be able to harden myself to do what needed to be done.

But if I was being honest with myself, I was equally afraid that I would.

One

SEVEN MONTHS LATER

Enough.

I stood in the landing bay on Wandering Leaf, staring through the windows at the exploding Superiority ship as the wreckage spiraled out into the blackness of space. The eerie blue shield of Detritus loomed in the distance. My flight stood around me, all watching the remains of the explosion, the tomb that had claimed my parents and half of our National Assembly.

We were supposed to have saved them. We were supposed to have won. Instead we'd barely gotten ourselves out alive.

I could have died in there. I almost did. I should thank Alanik for pulling me out, but I felt frozen, like something inside of me had died after all.

"Did Gran-Gran—" Rig asked.

"She escaped," Alanik said. "So did Cobb. I saw them." I could feel her reaching out through the nowhere, searching for them. "But...I don't know where they are."

"At least they weren't here," FM said. She put a hand on my shoulder, but I shook her off.

"Boom," Boomslug said mournfully, looking at the wreckage. I didn't know what to do with his sympathy, let alone everyone else's. They were all staring at me, waiting to see what I was going to do. This was the moment a good commander should give an inspiring speech. Maintain morale. Treat this as a setback.

It wasn't a setback. It was a scudding *disaster*. I didn't have anything inspiring to say. I wasn't even sure how I was staying on my feet.

I had to though. They were all looking to me. Or *at* me. I couldn't really tell.

I wasn't going to fall apart. Not here, not where my entire flight could see.

Fragments of the ship spun out into space, while others careened toward the planet. One hit the shield around Detritus and bounced off.

In my mind, my mother looked directly at me.

Do better than we did, she said.

Enough.

In the distance, the Superiority station that monitored Detritus blinked out of existence, hyperjumping away.

They wouldn't even give us the dignity of revenge. They'd run like cowards. There was no one left for us to attack, just the terrible wreckage floating ever outward, a monument to our diplomatic failures.

"We're going down to Platform Prime," I said. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the others looking at each other, not sure what to make of that.

"Okay," FM said. "But I think you need to stop for a minute—"

No. I couldn't stop. This wasn't about me. It wasn't even about my parents. It was about what we were going to do for Detritus.

"Now," I said.

The UrDail were expecting us back to finalize our alliance. That was more important now than ever. The war went on, and we were losing badly. We had to get back on track, and the only way to do that was to find Admiral Cobb and return power to the DDF.

The assembly'd had their chance. We were looking at the remains of it.

"I'm sorry, Alanik," I said. "We'll be a little late returning to ReDawn. There are some things we need to take care of first."

"Jorgen," FM said, "I think you should sit down for a minute."

I *couldn't*. "Put Gill in the hyperdrive," I said to FM, mostly so she'd have to stop talking. "I'll give him instructions to take us into the airspace beneath Platform Prime."

FM hesitated long enough that I looked back at her.

It was a mistake. She was watching me with so much concern that I wanted to shout at her. Scream at the sky. Break things.

But I was the flightleader. It was my job to stay in control, at least until Cobb was back. He'd probably try to send me on leave then.

I'd tell him I didn't want to go. We needed every person to face what was coming. Maybe Cobb would see that. Maybe he'd let me stay.

"Do it, FM," Arturo said.

"Yeah, okay," she said. She headed to the control room, and Rig went with her.

I turned to Alanik. "I need to know where Cobb is," I said. "Where did Gran-Gran take them?"

"I don't know," Alanik said. "I'm looking for them, but I can't find them." I closed my eyes, reaching out toward the planet. It would make sense for Gran-Gran to take them somewhere beneath the surface—to her home maybe—but I couldn't sense her mind. Not on Platform Prime, not on the surface, not in the caverns below.

"Keep trying," I said. "Once you find Gran-Gran, we can go pick them up."

I strode toward my ship, turning my back on the glowing wreckage. I didn't need to see it again. The spiraling shape was already fixed in my mind, expanding outward forever.

"Boom," Boomslug said.

"Boom," I agreed with him.

"Jorgen," FM called. "We're ready."

I reached out to Gill, giving him a clear impression of the airspace below Platform Prime. Wandering Leaf was an abandoned battle platform with hyperdrive technology, and its autofire could tear other platforms to pieces, so we'd need to park it far enough down in the upper atmosphere that the other platforms would be out of range.

Go, I told him.

And then I floated beneath the vast starscape of white eyes. They didn't focus on me—we were invisible to them as long as we used the slugs to hyperjump. But I didn't like the eyes any better when they couldn't see me. I always felt as if they could see *through* me, like I was made of something

flimsy and superficial with nothing substantial underneath. This time though, I felt something different, something new.

I *hated* them.

It was irrational; they weren't the ones who'd spent the last eighty years raining down death on my people. They hadn't trapped my parents in a ship and blown the thing to pieces. I didn't know if they were responsible for these strange powers I had neither asked for nor wanted. As far as I knew, they weren't even responsible for taking Spensa away. She'd done that herself.

But I still couldn't smother the sudden startling feeling that at its core, everything bad that had happened to us was *all their fault*.

Wandering Leaf emerged far below the vast metal underside of Platform Prime, the current DDF headquarters. "Flight," I said, "take your ships up to the landing bay."

"What are you going to do?" Nedd asked.

The raw hatred I'd felt for the eyes was still hot in my veins. It felt *good*, better than the icy chill of shock or the raging terror of grief.

"I'm going to make sure no one else does anything stupid until Cobb gets back," I said. I climbed into my ship. I'd already given my orders to the flight, so I left my radio off.

"Cobb gets back," Snuggles said, settling on the floor of the cockpit by the side of my seat.

"Let's hope it happens soon," I said. And then I directed Snuggles to hyperjump my ship out of Wandering Leaf and up to the landing bay of Platform Prime.

The ground crew looked shocked when we appeared. They wouldn't have been able to see the explosion from here, not with the platforms forming the shield above them.

But word spread fast when half your government was annihilated.

I left the slugs in my ship as I disembarked. "We're under orders to arrest you for desertion," Dobsi, one of the ground crew members, said. She looked at me uncertainly, like she didn't want to be the one to carry out that particular arrest.

A good call on her part. “Admiral Cobb gave us orders to leave,” I said. “He’ll clear everything up when he returns.”

Dobsi hesitated. “Where did he go?”

“It’s classified,” I said. It wasn’t a great answer, but it was the only one I had.

My flight hyperjumped into the hangar, their ships all connected by light-lances. FM and Alanik jumped out first, and the ground crew looked suspiciously at Alanik like she might be the cause of all the trouble.

Alanik stared them down, but she did move quickly over to me. FM looked at me with that terrible sympathy in her eyes again.

Before she could open her mouth, I turned on my heels and headed toward the command center. There wasn’t time to stop, not now. I had to make sure that my flight wasn’t going to be scudding arrested. The assembly’s plan had blown up in all of our faces—literally.

We were going to do this Cobb’s way now, whether they liked it or not.

I walked in, Alanik and FM on my heels and the rest of the flight trailing behind, to find the command center in shambles. Cobb’s aides were all staring at monitors and talking over the radio to various DDF departments on the platform and on the ground. Commander Ulan and Ziming from Engineering were having an argument near the hypercomm, while Rikolfr from the admiral’s staff kept trying to page Cobb, but to no avail.

They couldn’t find him either. Without him, the explosion of the Superiority ship had sent the staff into disarray.

Enough.

“Admiral Cobb is alive,” I said loudly. Most of the room turned to look at me. “The person who’s been giving you orders since last night was a Superiority plant using a holographic disguise.”

Not how I would have started, Alanik said in my mind. *You don’t have proof of that, do you?*

“Anyone who doesn’t believe me,” I said, “is invited to find Cobb so he can confirm. He was kidnapped and taken to the Superiority ship.”

“The one that *blew up*?” Commander Ulan said.

“That’s the one,” I said. “He and Mrs. Becca Nightshade escaped together. They’ll be making their way here soon, and until they get here, *no one else* is going to do *anything stupid*. Do you think you can all handle that?”

“You’re back,” a voice said from behind me, and I turned to see Vice Admiral Stoff striding toward me. He was one of three vice admirals who served under Cobb. My flightmates stepped aside to let him pass. Rig followed behind him. He hadn’t had a ship, so he’d probably asked Drape to hyperjump him to the slugs’ home location in Engineering. “Flightleader Weight, you’re under arrest for—”

Not this again. I wasn’t going to sit in the brig and watch while more people I cared about got hurt.

“The charges were a sham,” I said. “Either they were issued by my mother—who didn’t have the authority—or they were given by the false Admiral Cobb, who was actually an alien wearing a hologram.”

Vice Admiral Stoff blinked at me. This was definitely not the attitude I was supposed to take with my superior officer. On a normal day, I would have been horrified with myself.

Today I had met my capacity to experience horror. I wasn’t looking forward to the moment it all caught up to me.

“An alien wearing a hologram,” Stoff repeated.

“Yes!” I said. “You know, the hologram the Superiority learned how to construct by disassembling the remains of Spensa’s starship—the one we *handed* to them?”

Stoff looked around the room, but no one spoke. “How do we know that’s true if Cobb’s no longer here?”

“It’s true,” Alanik said.

Stoff sighed. “We’ll take you to the debriefing room,” he allowed, like he was doing me a great service. “We can make a determination about the court-martial proceedings after—”

“No,” I said.

Stoff stared at me. “What was that?”

“No,” I said. “We have an alliance to formalize with the UrDail on ReDawn, and my flight and I are expected to be there.” Stars, I didn’t know how I was going to get through that kind of political meeting. I lacked diplomatic finesse at the best of times. Just look at how *this* was going.

“Flightleader,” Stoff said, “that alliance hasn’t been authorized by the assembly—”

“The *assembly* got blown to bits!” I said. “Do you have footage on the monitors? Should we replay it for you?”

“I’m aware,” Stoff said. “But you don’t have the authority to—”

Saints, if we were going to talk about authority, I could talk about authority. “Section 1809 of the DDF Command Protocol says that the chain of command can be temporarily interrupted in the event that the commanding officers are unaware of intelligence that would change their orders beyond reasonable doubt if they *were* aware.”

“In this case,” Stoff said, “there is no such intelligence.”

“You have been taking orders from a Superiority plant!” I shouted at him. “You couldn’t tell the difference between Admiral Cobb and the *alien* who took his place. And he wasn’t even *all that good at pretending*.”

Vice Admiral Stoff’s mouth opened like he wanted to defend himself, but then he shut it again.

“Meanwhile,” I said, “my flight and I have been off on *another planet* trying to secure an alliance so that *all of you* might live to see another day. Cobb ordered us to find allies, and we did. We have a military full of UrDail fighters ready to challenge the Superiority with us. Meanwhile, you all were trying to bargain with them. How did that turn out?”

Stoff stared at me with his mouth hanging open. I was only a flightleader, but because of my parents everyone in the DDF knew who I was. Despite the recent charges, I still had a reputation for being a rule follower. This outburst was the last thing he expected from me.

“You know what?” I said before he could respond. “Maybe we should call my mother and ask her.”

Stoff looked up at the ceiling. I waited for him to cuff me and take me to the brig, but instead he nodded. “We need to have that debriefing.”

“Stars, yes, we do,” I said. “But in the meantime, *no one* is doing *anything* until Admiral Cobb is back.”

“Technically, sir,” Rikolfr said, “Vice Admiral Stoff is in charge in Cobb’s absence—”

“He would be in command if Cobb was indisposed,” I said. “But Cobb *isn’t* indisposed. He will be back soon. And my flight and I are the last people to whom he gave orders and direction before he was kidnapped.” I didn’t technically know if that was true, but none of them could contradict me, given that they hadn’t even realized Cobb had been replaced. “If Cobb were here, he would agree with me because you people are a mess without him. If you want proof, *look* at what happened to the delegation you sent!”

“Fine,” Stoff said. “Until we can get all the information to the assembly —”

“No,” I said. “No more talking to the assembly.”

Stoff stuttered at me.

You should point out that their peace deal turned out to be a sham, Alanik said in my head. They have no hope of securing an alliance with my people without you, and they desperately need one.

Good point, I said to her. “All hope of securing a treaty with the Superiority is dead. Our only path forward is to ally ourselves with the other peoples the Superiority is trying to oppress. And you’re going to need cytonics for that. Unless the assembly has found a way to get themselves across the expanse of space without us.”

“We’ll see what Admiral Cobb has to say when he returns,” Stoff said, and then he spun and strode out of the room again, with the air of a man who had lost an argument but didn’t want to admit it.

I reminded myself to breathe. Stoff wasn’t going to let me get away with this forever. He was giving me some leeway because I had information he didn’t, and more because of what had happened to my parents.

“We need to find Cobb immediately,” I said, mostly to myself.

“Where is the admiral now?” Rikolfr asked.

I looked over to Alanik, and she shook her head. I couldn’t pull off telling this crowd it was classified. A lot of them had security clearance

higher than mine. “We don’t know exactly where he went, but he’ll be back soon.”

He’d better. There was only so long I’d be able to hold things together in his name before people started questioning why they should listen to me.

I was questioning it already.

“Sir?” Ashwin from the Communications Corps held a radio out to me. “National Assembly Leader Winter is on the radio. She wants to talk to you.”

To *me*? I wondered if any of what I’d just said had been broadcast over the radio. There were several people who’d been in the middle of conversations when I’d walked in, and it wasn’t a complicated procedure to switch from headset to ambient reception.

I wondered if NAL Winter wanted to yell at me for what I’d said to Stoff, or give her condolences about my parents.

Either way, I didn’t want to hear it. And while I had some things to say about what I thought of the assembly, none of them would be productive. “Take a message,” I said.

“Sir?” Ashwin said. “Under the circumstances—”

“Take. A. Message,” I said. “In detail. And then tell her that according to Section 57 of the DDF Communications Policy, the DDF has three days to respond.”

Ashwin blinked at me. “Three days, sir?”

“Yes,” I said. This fiasco had been the assembly’s idea. All of it. It was *their fault*, and I wasn’t going to listen to a word they had to say even one second before I had to. “And then make yourself a memo to remind us two days and twenty-three and a half hours from now that we need to draft a response. Or better yet, make a note to tell *Cobb* to do it, because *he* will be back by then. Is that clear?”

“Um, yes, sir,” Ashwin said.

“Good.”

I turned around and found FM watching me nervously. “Are you going to tell me I should talk to the assembly?” I asked.

“No way,” FM said. “Not a chance. You’re absolutely right. That disaster was their fault. Being made to wait is the least of what they deserve. But Jorgen, you need to talk about what happened—”

“You want to talk about something?” I said to FM. “Let’s talk about how we’re going to find Cobb.”

We both looked at Alanik, who held up her hands. “I’m trying,” she said. “It’s a big universe, Jorgen, and I don’t know where Gran-Gran tried to take them.”

“She’d never been off this planet, had she?” FM asked. “Where else would she go?”

“She was born on the *Defiant*,” Rig said. “She used to travel the stars as a little girl, but she said she didn’t remember much about it. I can’t imagine she’d try to take them anywhere else.”

“They aren’t here,” Alanik said. “I’m sure of that.”

FM looked to me for confirmation. I closed my eyes, reaching down beneath the surface of the planet again. There were more slugs down there—I could feel their vibrations.

But no cytonic people, and definitely no Gran-Gran.

“I think she’s right,” I said. “But Spensa managed to contact me from the *nowhere*. If she could do that, we should be able to find Gran-Gran wherever she is, right?”

“I’ll keep trying,” Alanik said.

Arturo stood behind her in the doorway. “Come on,” he said. “I’ll find you someplace quiet where you can concentrate.”

Alanik nodded and turned to follow Arturo out.

I was being too hard on her, probably. It wasn’t her fault Cobb disappeared.

I’d apologize after we found him.

“Jorgen,” FM said. I knew what she was going to say. She’d said it several times.

“What I need,” I said, “is to find Cobb. Are any of the slugs familiar enough with the admiral to hyperjump to him?”

“I don’t know,” FM said. “We haven’t tried to get them to recognize him, but some of them might...” She looked like she was going to go back to arguing that I should sit down and stop for a minute, but I didn’t want to stop. I was outrunning the storm right now, and I was going to keep running as long as I could.

“Find out,” I said. “Get Rig on it too.” I turned and strode down the hall into Cobb’s office, closing the door behind me.

I didn’t know what to say to any of them, not about what happened, not about what had to happen now. Cobb would know what to do with all of this.

But he wasn’t the one I missed most at the moment. In my mind, I watched the Superiority ship explode over and over again. Some of that image must have leaked into the nowhere, because Snuggles and Boomslug appeared on my shoulders, and Boomslug slid down my arm into the crook of my elbow and softly trilled, “Boom.”

“Can you find Cobb?” I asked Snuggles.

She responded by nuzzling my ear, but she didn’t take us anywhere. I pressed my back against the door, closing my eyes.

More than anything, I wished Spensa were here.

Two

Two days later, we still hadn't heard a word from Cobb. Alanik tried her best, but no matter where she looked she couldn't find Gran-Gran. They'd simply disappeared, she said.

At this point, I was the only cytonic from Detritus who *hadn't* mysteriously disappeared. Spensa was stuck in the nowhere, but she'd at least managed to get in contact with me twice. It had been several days now, and I was anxious to hear from her again.

But from Cobb and Gran-Gran, there was only silence.

I sat at a conference table with Alanik, FM, and Minister Cuna, the dissenter Superiority bureaucrat. Boomslug and Snuggles snuffled around under my chair like they expected someone to have spilled some caviar down there, though the floor was swept twice a day as per Mandate 27 of the Facilities Regulations. Alanik had just returned from ReDawn with half the flight—I'd sent Arturo, Nedd, and Kimmalyn to finish solidifying the alliance.

"Rinakin is prepared to send a flight of ships to Detritus as a symbolic gesture," Alanik said. "And more, certainly, if there's a need for them here."

I struggled to focus on what she was saying. I'd barely been sleeping—every time I closed my eyes, that ship exploded in the darkness. In my dreams, I watched my mother mouth those words at me through the glass: *Do better than we did*. The ship tore to pieces before my eyes, sometimes while I watched from the platform—sometimes with me still inside it, somehow conscious of everything as it shredded me.

In the very worst nightmares, it was Spensa on the other side of the glass.

"ReDawn is more vulnerable," I said. "We have the planetary shield to protect us. We should be sending flights to defend *you*."

"The taynix will help with that," FM said.

We'd given Rinakin a single taynix of each type, and we already had people from the ground crews scouring the caverns of Detritus for more. We'd lost many in the trap set by the Superiority, and we were going to need all the hyperdrives we could find in the coming days.

"Do you think Stoff will let us take flights to ReDawn if the Superiority attacks again?" FM asked.

"Maybe," I said. I'd stayed behind while the others went to ReDawn, because I'd wanted to be here to keep an eye on things until we found Cobb. "He's been weirdly receptive to my suggestions."

"Do you think it's because he agrees with you?" FM asked. "Or because he sees an opportunity to escape blame if all this goes wrong?"

"It's the second," I said. Once Stoff got over the idea of me challenging him, he'd become almost *too* accommodating. If things went well, I fully expected him to take credit for all of it. If we crashed and burned, he was going to pin it all on me. "But I don't think Cobb is going to reprimand me for trying to protect our people in his absence."

FM looked concerned. She was still doing that a lot in my direction. She'd mostly stopped trying to corner me to get me to talk, which was good. I didn't need to talk. I needed to stay focused, move forward. My refusal to let her talk to me also meant we still hadn't addressed the fight we'd had on ReDawn. Her words still rang in my mind: *You're not my flightleader.*

I understood why she'd said that—she'd been rightly worried about the taynix being turned over to the Superiority—but it still stung. We were all trained to follow orders, to do as we were told. How bad must I be at this if a member of my own team—and a friend, I'd thought—could disavow me so easily?

"Winzik will not take the defeat on ReDawn well," Cuna said. "Detritus might be the more difficult target, but he will only see that as a challenge to his authority. He is probably mobilizing more ships even now. He will gather enough force to break through Detritus's shield eventually, even with the cytonic inhibitor in place."

That was true, but I didn't know what to do about it. I didn't think Stoff did either. "We need to find Cobb," I said. "He'll know what to do."

FM looked doubtful about that, but she didn't voice it.

"About Cobb and Mrs. Nightshade," Cuna said. A pin on their collar translated their words, which were spoken in an alien language. "If Mrs. Nightshade merely took them to another room on the Superiority ship, they might still have been caught in the explosion."

"No," Alanik said. "I scanned the ship after they left, and there weren't any cytonics on it except for me and Jorgen."

"It's possible they were in an accident returning to the planet," Cuna said. "If they hyperjumped into a dangerous position, they might have been killed on return. That would explain your inability to find them, would it not?"

"Don't say that," I said. "They aren't dead."

Alanik and FM exchanged a look.

"We have no *evidence* that they are dead," I corrected myself. "We aren't going to assume that they are without evidence."

"Stoff isn't going to hold off on replacing Cobb forever," FM said. "Even if he thinks he can use you as a scapegoat, at some point they're going to need to name a new admiral. They're only taking your word for it that Cobb didn't die on that ship."

Alanik looked personally offended. "We are witnesses, so taking our word for it makes perfect sense."

"Maybe," I said. "But FM is right. They aren't going to let this go on forever." It wouldn't necessarily be Stoff who took Cobb's place—there were two other vice admirals of equal rank, though they were both planetside at the moment, trying to deal with the fallout of the Superiority broadcasting the deaths of half the assembly to the citizens of Detritus.

I didn't think Stoff wanted control of the DDF, or he would have seen Cobb's absence as an opportunity instead of a burden he was mostly trying to shift to me. "I'm not sure what options we have though," I said. "Our military is too small and ill-equipped to take on the Superiority once they get their forces mustered. The UrDail pilots are well trained but

inexperienced, and the Superiority's technology outpaces us all. And that's assuming they don't try to send another delver after us. Spensa said the Superiority was trying to make a deal with them."

"We need to continue to reach out and form other alliances," Cuna said. "There will be many peoples who don't approve of Winzik's methods."

I wasn't sure that Cuna entirely approved of *our* methods. They still seemed to find us aggressive and barbaric, even though our tactics had saved them from capture on Sunreach.

"It may be only lesser species in the beginning," they continued. "But as time goes on, I'm sure the more advanced species will also begin to turn on Winzik."

"Those *lesser species* saved your life," Alanik muttered.

"Twice now," FM added under her breath.

"Of course!" Cuna said, as if this didn't contradict what they'd said previously at all. "All species have something wonderful to add to the Superiority—"

"This isn't the Superiority," I said. "We're not trying to join them." Cuna wanted us to see the Superiority as a diverse group of peoples, and I'm sure they were, given the thousands of planets that were apparently under their control. But. "The Superiority has been killing our people since long before Winzik took over, and we're not making an alliance with any part of it. Not again."

Cuna looked like they might argue, but I wasn't going to hear it. Alanik had been right about the Superiority. My parents had tried to reason with them, and look where that got them.

"Boom," Boomslug muttered from down by my feet, where he'd curled around the leg of my chair.

I reached for him and scritchd him between his spines. He nuzzled his body against my hand.

"Cobb ordered us to find allies though," I said, before Cuna could make any more defenses of the Superiority. "So if we reach out to others, we're still following his orders."

"Technically," FM said, "he ordered us to make allies of the UrDail."

“Technically they weren’t orders at all,” Alanik added. “They were not-orders.”

“That’s beside the point,” I insisted. “If we’re making alliances, then we’re doing what Cobb would do. And if our superior officers know we’re doing it, and they don’t order us not to, then we’re still operating within the current chain of command.”

“Do you know anyone we can reach out to with the hypercomm?” FM asked Cuna. “Other species we could make an alliance with?”

Cuna shook their head, laying their hands flat on the conference table. “I have tried to reach my contacts, but some have gone underground. Others might side with Winzik, so I have to be careful whom I reach out to. Your hypercomm does not have the data banks that mine did, and without the coordinates to reach the others—”

“We don’t know their radio frequencies, basically,” I said.

“Precisely,” Cuna said. “I have allies among the figments, if we can reach them.”

“We might be able to do that cytonically,” Alanik said. “Though if we try to reach out to the wrong people, we might set ourselves up to walk into another Superiority trap.”

I nodded. We couldn’t approach other cytonics indiscriminately. “You can monitor hypercommunication though, can’t you?” I asked Alanik. I hadn’t been able to figure out how to do that yet, but Alanik seemed to do it easily. “You could see if you can find any anti-Superiority communication, and we could try to pinpoint the frequencies of the people who are sending them and contact them as potential allies.”

“Most of those who oppose Winzik won’t be using hypercomms,” Cuna said. “The lesser species don’t have access to them, and those who do will be afraid of being overheard.”

Alanik looked like she might punch Cuna if they called her “lesser” one more time.

“If it’s the only idea we have,” FM said, “then it’s still worth a try.”

“I agree,” I said. “And we don’t have to ask Stoff for resources to try it, so that’s even better.” I turned to Alanik. “I’d like to help canvass for

hypersignals,” I said. “You’ll have to teach me, but I’ve caught on quicker to the communication skills than hyperjumping.”

“Of course,” Alanik said. “I’d be happy to have your assistance.”

I hoped I would *be* of assistance, but we were getting desperate, and until we found Gran-Gran I was the only other cytonic we had.

Rig knocked on the doorframe to the conference room. His yellow hyperslug, Drape, peered over his shoulder from his perch in one of the new backpacks Engineering had devised. A boomslug—as everyone had begun calling them, even though technically it was Boomslug’s name—peered over his other shoulder.

“Are you carrying one of those around now?” I asked. That was strange. We’d mostly left the boomslugs alone, except for Boomslug. Everyone else was too worried about triggering the mindblades.

Rig shrugged, and the slugs bobbed along with the gesture. “Boomslug saved my life back on Wandering Leaf, so I thought we should try to keep more of these guys around. For purely experimental purposes, of course. I’m definitely not carrying a slug as a bodyguard.”

I couldn’t blame him if he was.

FM smiled at Rig. The two of them were scudding adorable, which lately made me want to punch things. Spensa’s influence, probably. “He named this one Squeeze.”

Of course. FM had taken glee in naming my hyperslug Snuggles before she assigned her to me. If I hadn’t already bonded with Boomslug, they no doubt would have tried to push Squeeze on me as well.

Cobb would tell me I should have more of a sense of humor about myself. He was usually right.

“Did you need something?” I asked Rig.

“Just wondering if FM was available to run drills with the slugs,” he said. “We’ve got Stardragon Flight ready to practice with the new keywords.”

The other flights had been less than thrilled when FM stole some of their taynix, but she was largely forgiven now that the assembly had lost most of the other taynix to the Superiority. We hadn’t secured enough new slugs to

outfit all the flights yet, and any new ones we found in the caverns would have to start their training from scratch.

Which meant I shouldn't keep them from it. If she was busy, FM had less time to worry in my general direction. "Yeah, we're done here," I said. "How is the platform exploration going?"

"The team is still working on it," Rig said. They were looking for more platform control rooms like the one on Wandering Leaf. It was similar enough to the platforms on Detritus that it seemed likely we might have some with similar capabilities. More platforms that could hyperjump or fire hyperweapons would be a valuable asset. "There is a lot of junk in the debris belt, and a lot of platforms to search."

"I understand," I said. "Let me know if you find anything."

"Will do," Rig said as FM pushed her chair away from the table and moved to join him. Rig didn't report to me officially, but we were all in a holding pattern until Cobb returned, so sharing information only made sense.

"Are you ready to look for signals now?" I asked Alanik.

"Yes," she said. "But not here. These chairs are too square. It's distracting."

I didn't have a chance to ask what she meant, because Alanik had already stood up from her...*square* chair and marched out of the conference room.

I scooped up Snuggles and Boomslug and followed Alanik, as she seemed to know where she was going. I hoped I'd be able to help. I had to do *something*, because if I didn't, the tragedies we'd suffered would only be the beginning.

Three

Alanik brought me to one of the small meeting rooms. At the head of the square table sat the weirdest chair I had ever seen. It looked as if it was made entirely from tree branches, sanded and polished and warped into twisting shapes that stretched up the back in a spiraling pattern. As I got closer I could see that it was a continuous carving from a single large piece of wood.

“Did you *bring* that here?” I asked.

“Yes,” Alanik said. “It was Arturo’s suggestion. I was saying that I find your furniture strangely square, and he said that if I was going to spend hours searching for Gran-Gran and Cobb in the negative realm, I might as well bring myself back a comfortable place to sit. It’s my favorite from my own home.”

The seat was polished wood rather than a cushion, and Alanik folded herself onto it with her legs tucked under her.

There was another chair in here—which did look squarish beside hers, but it had cushions covered in a plain brown fabric, and looked much more comfortable to me. I wondered if Arturo had been using it. They seemed to be spending a lot of time together.

I sank into the chair. “I don’t know if I’m going to be any help at this.”

“If you’re willing to try,” Alanik said, “it can’t hurt.”

I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes. As I reached out with my cytonic senses, I could feel Alanik on the chair beside me, and Boomslug and Snuggles settling on my lap. I widened my focus and found the other slugs across the platform, and—dimly—the vibrations that indicated there were still more taynix down on the planet that we hadn’t been able to locate.

I should probably be down there looking for them myself, since I could sense them and the ground crews couldn’t. Maybe Cobb would use that as

an excuse to send me away for a while once he returned. It would be better than bereavement leave. At least I'd have something to focus on, something to *do*.

"Okay," Alanik said. "We're going to reach away from Detritus. The universe is like a giant map, and we can examine places up close or at a distance. Do you know what I mean?"

"Not really," I said. "I can focus in on one person's mind, or sense the cytonic...vibration of a group. But I don't see locations, only people."

"People!" Snuggles announced. I thought she liked being included.

"Hmm," Alanik said. "This is why you have a hard time hyperjumping, probably."

"I can visualize a physical place in my mind," I said. "Like I can imagine the trees of ReDawn, because I've seen them, and send that picture to Snuggles."

"Snuggles," Boomslug said affectionately.

"Forget about the places then," Alanik said. "I think our experience of them is different. Instead, try reaching for people, but instead of looking for them, *listen*."

That sounded just as nonsensical, but at least it didn't require me to look for things I couldn't see.

"When you say 'listen,' do you mean for things you hear? Or the way Spensa heard the stars, the way I heard the slugs. Like, the vibration of the universe?"

"Neither," Alanik said. "Like when I speak in your mind. Listen for the voices of others. You can intercept their communications, whether it's hypercomm or mind-to-mind. It all passes through the negative realm, and if you are passing through it at the same time..."

Okay. That made sense. "Thank you for explaining," I said. "When Gran-Gran taught me this stuff, she mostly made me knead bread and told me to listen to the stars. It helped, weirdly, but it wasn't exactly intuitive."

"That's not as bad a tactic as you might think," Alanik said. "My training was similar. I can try to explain things to you, but in the end your intuition is the only way you will learn."

I hated that. I liked things that could be explained, preferably with proven pedagogical techniques, written reference materials, and lots of concrete examples. Cytonics was the opposite of that in every way, and I couldn't help but feel that whatever force was handing these powers out had given them to the wrong person when they picked me.

Spensa seized her powers and made use of them. I was floundering around in the dark.

Beside me I could feel Alanik's mind as she expanded her senses, reaching out into the void. I tried to do the same, at first looking for other minds, then listening for voices.

I wondered if I could find Spensa that way, the way she'd reached out to me from the nowhere. My mind was passing through it, and if she was in there it made sense that I would be able to find her again. I hoped every day, and even more since the explosion, that I'd hear from her. I wanted evidence she was all right, news that she was finding a way to return.

But more than anything, I desperately wanted to hear her voice again.

I expanded my mind, listening.

And then, just barely, I heard a snatch of something. A voice in the nothingness. —*solar flares on the—avoid the area—*

"I heard something!" I said. "Something about a solar flare."

"It's a weather report," Alanik said. "I found that one. It's a Superiority broadcast among their hyperjumping ships, warning them about hazards as they navigate the galaxy."

Of course Alanik had already heard it. But that didn't change the fact that I'd found it. I'd given up hope that I would be able to hyperjump, but Alanik said every cytonic should technically have access to all cytonic powers, even if various ones could be harder for some than for others.

Maybe I wasn't completely hopeless. Maybe I could still master this, or at least gain some passable skills.

I continued listening. The sounds were tiny blips in a vast area, like a taynix hiding among all the caverns of Detritus. I found another broadcast giving what sounded like navigational coordinates, and a ship captain complaining about some of his subordinates to his commander. These were

all hypercomm signals—they didn't originate in the nowhere. But if Spensa was in here, there had to be a way to reach her. *Spensa*, I thought. *Are you there? Can you hear me?*

"Stop that," Alanik said. "You're drowning everything else out."

My face flushed. Oh. Right. Of course Alanik could hear that. She was sitting right next to me, literally searching for cytonic signals.

I can hear all of that too, Alanik said. *It would be wonderful if we could find Spensa in here and find a way to bring her home, but perhaps we could focus on one matter at a time?*

"Of course," I said. "Sorry."

I sat and listened to the echoing void of the universe, trying not to radiate any thoughts that would overpower Alanik's search. I still wished I could search for Spensa, instead of combing through mundane hypercomm communications on the off chance someone might be sending anti-Superiority messages through the nowhere. The more I thought about this, the more it seemed like the odds of finding such a communication at the precise moment it was being sent would be one in a million. And it was frustrating to hear the Superiority using this technology like it was basic radio—they had made hypercommunication part of their civilization, while the rest of us were only now clawing our way out of the dark ages.

Spensa would be angry about that. She probably *was* angry about it. I wished she were here; she'd be better at this than I was. Spensa would probably—

Spensa!

I opened my eyes, blinking rapidly. That hadn't been Alanik's voice, or the slugs'.

Had I imagined it? After everything that had happened, was I losing my mind?

I reached out again, focusing on the voice. —*please respond*.

And then it started again. *Spensa, human of Detritus—*

"I found something," I said.

Where? Alanik asked. I could feel her mind reaching out for mine, following me into the nothingness.

—*return them! Please*—

“I hear it,” Alanik said. She focused on the words as they repeated again—it was an ongoing signal being broadcast on a loop. As we listened, the words became more and more clear.

Spensa, human of Detritus! the message said. This is the Swims Upstream! We have your humans and would like to return them! Please respond.

“They have our humans and would like to *return* them?” I said.

“That’s what they said.” Alanik frowned. “Do they mean Cobb and Gran-Gran?”

“Or other humans,” I said. “We don’t know if there are other prison planets like ours, or if we’re the only ones left.”

“If they found an entire planet of humans, would they really be contacting Spensa to *return* them?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know what ‘*Swims Upstream*’ is. I don’t have any idea who’s trying to reach us.” The Superiority knew about Spensa, and that she was connected to our planet. They knew she’d disappeared, and they were no doubt trying to find her. This might be an attempt to bait her into the open, the way they did to my parents.

I supposed there was some comfort in knowing that if she was stuck in the nowhere, she couldn’t fall into that trap.

“I can pinpoint the coordinates,” Alanik said. “I could give them to the taynix in your hypercomm, so you could respond.”

“*Should* we respond?” I asked.

“It’s a lead,” Alanik said. “The only one we have. And if they do have Cobb and Gran-Gran...”

I reached out for the message, listening to it play again. “Can you teach me how to pinpoint the message?” I asked. “Can we respond directly?”

“You said you weren’t sure you should respond. Don’t you want to run this by your commanders? I thought that was your answer for everything.”

Alanik had me figured out. “Yes,” I said. “But I want to know what’s possible. These are skills I need to learn, even if I don’t know if we should answer this particular message.”

“Listen then,” Alanik said. “You know how you can tell which mind is mine in the negative realm? You don’t try to speak to me and accidentally reach the taynix. You can even tell the individual slugs apart, can’t you?”

“Yes,” I said. “At first I got them confused, but now I can tell one from another, as long as I’m familiar with them.”

“Places are like that too. They each have their own individual...feeling. And even if you can’t see the whole of the universe, you should be able to recognize the difference in sensation.”

“Like the vibrations,” I said. And...now that she said it, I *did* feel a distinct vibration coming from the message.

Could I use that to communicate with it? Could I speak to the recording as if it were a person? “If I tried to talk to it, would anyone hear me?” I asked. “It’s a hypercomm, not another cytonic.”

“It depends on whether there’s a person listening on the other end,” Alanik said. “But you could try.”

She was right that we should loop Stoff in on this. I wanted to keep an eye on things, make sure no one came up with any new terrible ideas in Cobb’s absence. But I couldn’t leave either the DDF or the National Assembly in the dark completely. I might be stretching the limits of my authority lately, but if I started keeping secrets from my superiors I’d be breaking them entirely.

Still, none of them were cytonics. Even if I looped in Stoff, Alanik and I would still be the only ones who could communicate with these people.

I focused on the vibration of the recording, trying to treat it as if it were the mind of another cytonic, or one of the taynix. *Can you hear me?* I asked.

The recording stopped abruptly, right in the middle of a sentence.

Hello? a voice said on the other end.

Scud. They’d heard me. The voice felt different than a full cytonic mind, but I was able to target the vibration.

Is this the human planet Detritus?

If I told them they’d reached us, would that give anything away? The Superiority already knew where we were. *It is*, I said, but I left it at that.

The message changed. *Human!* it said. *This is Kauri of the kitsen, captain of the Swims Upstream! Can you put me in touch with Spensa?*

“Interesting,” Alanik said.

“What’s interesting?” I asked.

“That they’re a kitsen,” she said. “Or they claim to be one. They’re another of the species the Superiority believes to be *lesser*. They’re small furry creatures, not unlike tree squirrels, but they’re as intelligent as UrDail. I’ve never met one, but I’ve seen a picture. They look...adorable.”

So I was either talking to a Superiority trap, or a tree squirrel that knew Spensa. I wasn’t sure which was more disturbing. “Okay,” I said. “You’re right that we should bring this to the attention of Command. This is too sensitive to handle on our own. We need to go to the comms people with this, and let Stoff know.”

“If you’re sure that’s wise,” Alanik said.

I wasn’t sure it was, but I also wasn’t ready to strike out entirely on my own. I was merely watching over the DDF for Cobb until we could find him.

Let me speak with my superiors and get back to you, I said.

We eagerly await your return! the voice said.

“If they *are* a squirrel, they’re a very enthusiastic one,” Alanik said.

“True.” I focused one more time on the vibration of the transmission. Alanik said she could give it to Fine in the hypercomm, but I wanted to learn to do this too. I waited until the vibration felt familiar, the way I could find Alanik’s mind quickly now that I knew her. And then I pulled my mind back to Detritus, where I could feel the buzz of the taynix all around, and then toward the room where I could feel Alanik sitting next to me.

As I drew inward, passing by the minds of the taynix on the platform, the area around me suddenly felt...denser. *Bumpier*, like it was filled with a hundred raised ridges in the otherwise empty space. They were there, and then as I focused on them, spontaneously absent.

“Did you feel that?” I asked.

“Feel what?” Alanik said.

“That...texture. Like there was suddenly something else in the nowhere with us.”

“Something *in* the nowhere? Like the eyes?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. Scud, I *hoped* what I’d felt wasn’t some sign of an impending delver attack. “Maybe it wasn’t *in* the nowhere exactly. More like I could feel something *through* the nowhere, all around us. Not more cytonics, but—”

Alanik stared at me, shaking her head. “I didn’t notice anything. I don’t feel anything here but you and the slugs.”

“Maybe I imagined it then.” The idea that I was losing my mind was somehow less scary than the thought of some *other* new thing emerging from the nowhere to haunt us. “I need to talk to Cuna and Stoff, to figure out what we’re going to do next. If the kitsen are really reaching out to us, we have to follow up on it.”

Whatever Stoff’s motives, I hoped he continued to be accommodating.

Four

Alanik followed me up to talk to Stoff, and I didn't stop her. Stoff had the entire DDF behind him, and I wanted a little strength in numbers of my own. I would have called in the whole flight if I'd thought it would help.

Stoff was sitting in his office—he'd left the admiral's office empty in Cobb's absence, which I took as another sign he wasn't looking to usurp Cobb's position.

"We've found a transmission from a hypercomm, sir," I said. "Someone called Kauri looking for Spensa."

"Is it the Superiority?" Stoff asked.

"It could be," I said. "But they claim to be a kitsen. We have the coordinates for the message, so we can try to reach whoever it is by hypercomm. The message said they have our humans and they'd like to return them. It could be Cobb and Mrs. Nightshade, but we don't know for sure."

"Thank you," Stoff said. "If you get the hypercomm set up, I'll speak with them."

"I'd like to talk to them, sir," I said. "Alanik and I made the initial contact, and if they really are a kitsen, that might be another group we could approach about an alliance. Cobb put us in charge of making alliances, so we should have the clearance to do so."

I knew that was a stretch, but I tried not to show it. Stoff sighed and gave me an appraising look. I was pretty sure he was weighing how much rope he could give me to hang myself without looking like he was part of the problem when Cobb returned.

But there wouldn't *be* a problem when Cobb returned, because we were doing what Cobb wanted in the first place.

"All right," he said. "Your team has the most experience dealing with aliens, so you may take point."

Alanik raised an eyebrow at him. I didn't think she appreciated our efforts with her people being reduced to "dealing with aliens," but at least he hadn't called them lesser.

"I'd like to brief Cuna on the interaction as well," I said. "They might have some insight about who we're dealing with."

"Agreed," Stoff said. "I'll call the team to the command room in thirty minutes."

"Thank you, sir," I said.

Stoff nodded. I was dismissed.

I found Cuna sitting in their living quarters with the other diones we'd rescued from Sunreach. "We've intercepted a message from someone looking for Spensa," I said. "They claim to be a kitsen named Kauri."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Cuna said. "The kitsen are among the most advanced of the lesser species when it comes to their nonaggression. It's their outdated monarchy that has kept them from ascending to full citizenship."

"I'm not sure if this really *is* a kitsen," I said. "I'm concerned it might be a ploy—Winzik or his people trying to capture Spensa by pretending to be her allies."

"Spensa worked with a group of kitsen when she was training on Starsight," Cuna said. "So the claim is plausible! I interacted mostly with Hesho, their former monarch. His people could be powerful allies. They've had a long military history to overcome as they've worked to be ready for inclusion among the higher species."

I stared at Cuna. "*Our* people have a long military history," I said. "And that's the only reason we were able to rescue you from Winzik in the first place."

"Twice," Alanik said.

"Of course," Cuna said, though I wasn't sure they'd understood my point. "And your people have a distant connection with the kitsen. They have some of the best records of cytonic history, despite having produced no cytonics for centuries."

“We’re going to talk to them over the hypercomm in a few minutes, if you’d like to join us. I need to make sure the hypercomm is ready.”

“I would love to join you,” Cuna said.

“Thank you,” I said, and went off to get Fine into the hypercomm.

Stoff only invited a small number of people to the meeting. He and three people from the Communications Corps sat around the conference table. Cuna and Alanik entered and took two of the remaining chairs while I used the frequency impression I’d learned earlier to ask Fine to open communication with Kauri.

I spoke into the hypercomm’s microphone. “Kauri,” I said experimentally. “Can you hear me?”

“Human,” the voice said. “We are trying to reach Spensa, who once called herself by the name Alanik. Do you know where we might find her?”

“Spensa is away on a mission,” I said. It was true, even if it wasn’t complete. “We would like to speak to you though. What did you mean when you said you had our humans?”

“Two humans hyperjumped to our planet a few days ago,” the voice said. “We believe they might have arrived here by accident. We would have contacted you sooner, but we had to commandeer a hypercomm to do so.”

“You stole a Superiority hypercomm?” I asked.

“We did!”

“Kitsen are known for their bravery,” Cuna said. “It is a good quality, if it can be divorced from violence.”

I was certain violence was going to be necessary before all this was over, so I didn’t see that as a downside.

Alanik opened her eyes. “I’m searching the area near their broadcast point, but I’m not able to find Becca Nightshade. I don’t think she’s there.”

Kauri could be lying. Or these humans might have nothing to do with us. “Kauri,” I said. “What method did the humans use to hyperjump to your planet?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I assume one of them is a cytonic.”

Alanik shook her head, speaking quietly so the microphone wouldn’t pick her up. “I’m not sensing any cytonics in that area.”

“Would you be able to tell from this distance?” Stoff asked.

“Yes,” Alanik said, in a tone that said she didn’t like being questioned by someone who had no idea what they were talking about. “I have used the location of the hypercomm signal to pinpoint the area. I am quite reliable, especially when it comes to reaching a cytonic I’m familiar with.”

“If one of them is a cytonic,” I said, “they should be able to reach out to us, shouldn’t they? Why would you need to steal a hypercomm?”

“Well,” Kauri said, “something must have gone wrong during the hyperjump. Your humans are unconscious.”

I looked at Alanik, and she shook her head. She should still be able to sense an unconscious cytonic.

“If your cytonic died on arrival,” Cuna said, “you would no longer be able to sense her. Hyperjumps can be dangerous, and—”

“Are you certain they’re alive?” I asked Kauri.

“Yes,” Kauri said. “They are breathing, and their bodies are warm. We are not experts in human health, but we believe this means they are living.”

Two living humans could be anyone, from anywhere. “Can you describe the humans to me?” I asked.

“One of them is quite wrinkly,” Kauri said. “The male’s body is rather mottled and purple.”

“He’s purple?” I asked.

“Cobb was injured,” Alanik said. “When I saw him on the Superiority ship, he looked like he’d been in a fight.”

“Yes. The large gentleman with the hairy face has some wounds we’re trying to attend to, but we don’t know much about human physiology.”

“I still need someone to explain that lip hair to me,” Alanik said. “It seems problematic.”

“We would like to return your humans to you for medical attention!” Kauri said. “We have been to the location of your planet, but we don’t have a hyperdrive to reach you! We were able to stow away on a carrier ship to return home from Starsight, but stealing a ship of that size is beyond our abilities. Do *you* have access to a hyperdrive?”

Alanik and I exchanged a look. Winzik already *knew* we had hyperdrives, so giving that away wouldn't be terrible.

"We have transportation," I said.

"That is most fortuitous!" Kauri said. "We look forward to making your acquaintance. Though Spensa deceived us, we found her to be a most honorable and formidable warrior, and we look forward to meeting with her peers, if indeed she has any."

I wasn't sure if I should be offended by that or not.

"Are we going to go?" Alanik asked quietly. "I still think it's suspicious that I can't find Gran-Gran on their planet."

I hesitated. We hadn't said we would go, but if they had Gran-Gran and Cobb, we had to do everything in our power to retrieve them. It was a risk, but without taking risks we'd never be able to find more allies.

I muted the microphone. "Sir," I said to Stoff, "I would like to send a small group to investigate. If we control the destination of our hyperjump, we should be able to scan the area for Superiority presence before we're spotted. According to Section 14 of the DDF Statutes on Prisoners of War, if a commander is missing behind enemy lines, it should be considered an implied order to rescue that commander if it does not directly interfere with the current mission. In this case, I'd say the section applies."

"I agree," Stoff said. "I think you should accompany your flight and investigate the situation."

I blinked at him. I wanted to go—I never wanted to send my flight anywhere without me. Even staying behind when they returned to ReDawn had been difficult.

Stoff knew that. Did he want me to go because he knew I was watching him? Alanik and I were the DDF's only cytonics. They needed us, so they should be reticent to send us both away at once.

But old prejudices ran deep. They were still *afraid* of us. So sending us away on a mission—one they could either take credit for if it was a success or scapegoat us for if it was a failure—probably seemed like a convenient excuse to get us out of the way.

If it meant we'd get Cobb back though, it worked in our favor.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “I’ll get my team ready.”

Stoff nodded. “Better tell them you’re coming, then.”

“I think it would be better if we don’t,” I said. “If it is a trap, they’ll have less time to prepare.”

“All right,” Stoff said. “But you’ll want to hurry. If Cobb and Mrs. Nightshade need medical attention, we’ll want to get it to them sooner rather than later.”

“Agreed.” I unmuted the microphone. “We will try to make arrangements to retrieve our people,” I told Kauri. “We thank you for your patience.”

“We look forward to making your acquaintance, human,” Kauri said. “May the stars guide you.”

“And you,” I said.

I hoped Cuna was right that the kitsen would make excellent allies.

But at the moment, I would settle for having Cobb back, healthy and well.

Five

When my flight hyperjumped near the coordinates we'd gotten from the hypercomm, we appeared in space around a large, bluish-white planet. A blinding star illuminated most of this side of it—far away, but still much larger and closer than I'd ever seen a star before. The planet was *huge*, even from this far out, and the whitish parts of it were moving across the surface, bubbling and roiling.

Clouds, I realized. Collections of moisture that would rain down periodically. I'd read about them, but I'd never imagined them looking so... fluffy. They looked almost *soft*, like cotton. Not like water at all.

"Oooh, that's pretty," Sadie said.

"Gorgeous," Kimmalyyn said. "And I'm reasonably certain at first glance it isn't going to eat us."

The rest of the flight detached and separated into wingmate pairs, with the medical transport ship sticking close to me. The flight adopted a wedge formation around us, with Arturo and Nedd taking point, FM and Sadie on one side, T-Stall and Catnip on the other, and the rest following.

"Can we fly through all of that?" I asked. Our starfighters were airtight of course, but I still wouldn't expect all the systems to function perfectly underwater.

This water wasn't solid though. It was more like steam rising from a boiling pot. Did that mean it would be scalding to touch? "Our ships can handle extremes in temperatures," I said. "So even if they're hot—"

"The clouds are not hot," Cuna said, sounding amused. They were riding with FM in the Dulo. We'd brought them along to help with diplomacy. "The atmospheric pressure allows the water to remain in its gaseous state at a low temperature."

Huh. Okay.

“I think it should be fine,” Alanik said. “Your ships handled the miasma, didn’t they? It’s just a different type of gas.”

Right. That made sense. “Still,” I said, “I think we should try to fly through the gaps between them.” Visibility would be limited in the clouds, and who knew what might be lurking within them. They shouldn’t be too difficult to avoid. Large swaths of the atmosphere were clear, showing through to a brilliant blue-green surface.

More water. An *ocean*. Stars, I’d read about those too, but I’d never been able to quite picture *so much water*. It sounded terrifying to live on a planet covered in that much water. How could you be sure it wasn’t going to wash over everything and swallow it?

I zoomed my proximity monitors way out, searching for other spacecraft or aircraft, but I couldn’t find any around the planet. If there were ships, they must be much closer to the planet’s surface. So far this didn’t seem like a Superiority trap, given the lack of cytonic inhibitors and enormous battleships, but we couldn’t rule out that they might have changed their tactics.

A signal came through the comms—a local radio transmission trying to reach me. I switched over. “This is Skyward One, callsign: Jerkface,” I said.

“Human!” a tiny voice said. It sounded like Kauri, though I wasn’t confident I’d be able to tell kitsen voices apart. “Welcome to the Den of Everlasting Light Which Laps Gently upon the Shores of Time. We will send you a heading to meet us on the Burrow from Which Spring Dreams Both Sweet and Sorrowful!”

“Um,” I said.

“Um,” Boomslug repeated.

“Thank you,” I said. “We look forward to...making your acquaintance.” Scud, I’d listened to enough political pleasantries in my life. Why could I never remember them when I needed them?

Kauri gave us the coordinates, and I instructed the flight to head toward them in formation. We flew down into the atmosphere of the planet and through a large gap in the clouds.

As we neared the enormous blue-green expanse, I began to be able to pick out landmasses—large islands of broken land that looked almost like crumbled pie crusts at this distance. The coordinates led us to one particularly large island, and we flew over some rock formations weathered into bulbous pillars, the stone worn into the same geometric shapes over and over like a castle made out of sand.

The coordinates marked a spot on the far side of the island where one edge of the land met the ocean. The water below us was moving, the blue-green edged with white sea foam where it met the beach.

Waves. I remembered learning about those—they were caused by wind and something to do with a moon, I thought, though I didn't see one of those at the moment. The sky was a wide swath of blue from down here, dotted with clouds, the sun too bright to look at without squinting.

A ship slightly larger than our fighters waited for us on the beach. I reached out to Alanik, who flew in front of me. *Do you sense any inhibitors?*

No, she said. *Still no cytonics either, though I think that ship has a taynix.*

That would make sense, if they had a hypercomm. These aliens had managed to steal a Superiority taynix, which was impressive. It also showed initiative, a good trait in allies. We couldn't be expected to protect every species in the galaxy when we could barely protect ourselves.

We cruised in for a landing on the sand, and I used my ship's air quality monitor to check the levels of oxygen in the atmosphere. The air appeared to be breathable, and there were no alerts about any noxious gases like the miasma on ReDawn.

I landed my ship within sight of the other vessel, and the rest of my flight landed around me. I waited until we were all on the ground before opening my canopy.

The ocean, I discovered, was scudding *loud*, like it was being run by a starfighter engine. The water rushed toward us, the peaks of the waves rising and then receding, like an arm reaching for something it couldn't quite grasp. I didn't understand how it *moved* like that, as if it were alive,

and it made me wish I'd paid more attention when they'd taught us about Old Earth.

I climbed out of my ship, and the members of my flight joined me one by one. Though we should have been focused on the ship, and watching for ambushes over the strange, layered sandstone cliffs that lined the beach, I noticed mine weren't the only eyes on the ocean.

I turned toward a flurry of motion over by the kitsen ship, shielding my eyes from the blinding sun. A group of rodents was moving toward us, the one in front floating on a disk about the size of a dinner plate—a small acclivity-stone craft, I was guessing. Most of the rodents were wearing flightsuits, but the floating one wore a red and gold uniform and had a furry head with a set of enormous ears that looked something like the pictures of foxes from Old Earth, though I thought foxes were bigger. These creatures were around twenty centimeters tall.

But they were coming toward me from a starship, standing on two legs, and wearing clothes, so...

I turned around, looking for Alanik. She was already walking up behind me. The sand seemed to slip from under her feet as she walked, making the trip laborious.

"These are kitsen?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said. "I've never met one, but I learned about the species before I left for Starsight. They have a dynastic culture, I believe."

Dynastic. That seemed so primitive, like something out of Spensa's stories.

Farther back on the sand, I could see Cuna and FM climbing out of the Dulo, which had landed next to the medical transport ship we'd brought along for Cobb and Gran-Gran.

The kitsen were growing closer now, and the robed one on the floating platform raised a paw clenched into a fist, like they were angry with me.

I wasn't the most qualified person to establish diplomatic relations, but I had been the one talking to Kauri over the radio.

"Hello," I called. "Are you...Kauri?"

“Yes, human!” the kitsen said. She had a translator pin affixed to the front of her uniform like a brooch. “I am Kauri.” She floated up in front of us on her dinner plate while the rest of her crew clambered over the sand behind her. “I am the captain of the *Swims Against the Current in a Stream Reflecting the Sun*, and I welcome you to our planet.”

“All their names are like that,” Alanik said quietly beside me. “The Superiority shortens the name of their planet to Evershore.”

The kitsen’s ears twitched, and I wondered if this was an offensive term given to them by their oppressors.

“That is very astute, Alanik!” Kauri said. “Indeed, you may call it that if you wish.”

“Evershore,” I said, glancing at the ocean again. “That seems fitting.” Though Alanik seemed somewhat alarmed that the kitsen knew her by name.

“Thank you, human,” Kauri said.

“You’re...a friend of Spensa’s?” I asked. “But you knew her as Alanik.”

Alanik seemed to relax a bit. It was probably disconcerting to meet people who felt they knew you, but didn’t quite.

FM and Cuna trudged up beside us. I was glad—I could use their help.

“Yes, I know Spensa,” Kauri said. “I was hoping to see her again after her disappearance from Starsight. Is she well?”

I didn’t know if Spensa was well, but I had to believe she was. “She’s on a mission to learn more about the delvers.”

“Ah yes,” Kauri said. “We were there when Winzik summoned the delver. A nasty decision, and one I fear he intends to repeat.”

FM and I exchanged a look. If this ship—stars, it would be a whole battleship to them, given their comparative size—was there in the battle with the delver, then the kitsen had been fighting on the other side.

“Which one of you is the human Jerkface?” Kauri asked.

Scud, I’d forgotten to introduce us. “Sorry,” I said. “That’s me. I’m flightleader Jorgen Weight. This is Alanik of the UrDail. And this is Minister Cuna.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Cuna said. “Your people are quite advanced for a lesser species, and have been very close to acceptance into the Superiority. I hope that we will be able to help you continue to advance, as we consider what is best for all of your species.” Cuna raised their fist in the air with this pronouncement, in a similar greeting to the one Kauri had given me, though Kauri did not look impressed.

Alanik shot me a look. Cuna really had to stop announcing that they found every species we met to be beneath them. We’d brought them along to help with diplomacy, but I didn’t want it to seem like they spoke for all of us.

“And this is FM,” I said. “She’s our...diplomatic specialist.”

FM’s mouth fell open. I raised an eyebrow at her, questioning whether she was going to argue with me. I probably should have put her in charge of this interaction to begin with. I’d been too busy avoiding her to think of it, which meant I was letting my own personal feelings get in the way of my job. That had to stop.

“Thank you for the invitation to your beautiful planet,” FM said. “That rock formation we passed over on our way in—was that a city?”

Cuna bared their teeth in one of their strange smiles, which I thought meant they were okay with FM taking the lead.

Whether they were okay with it or not, it was clearly necessary.

“Yes!” Kauri said. “The Burrow from Which Spring Dreams Both Sweet and Sorrowful! You may call it Dreamspring, if you wish.”

“Dreamspring,” FM said. “That’s beautiful. I would love to see more of it.”

“And I would love to share it with you,” Kauri said. “But we must be careful. Not all of my people will welcome your—oh, how unfortunate.”

She looked up at something in the sky over my shoulder, and I turned to see another starship approaching. This one had a startling number of guns mounted on the front, far too many to be tactically effective.

“Humans!” said a kitsen voice through a loudspeaker on the ship. “Your invasion stops here! You shall not step one more foot into the beauty of the

Burrow from Which Spring Dreams Both Sweet and Sorrowful! We will cut you down where you stand.”

Scud. I took a step backward, taking shelter against my ship, and FM and Alanik joined me. If that ship let loose its destructors we were dead, all of us. The rest of the flight scattered, ducking beneath wings and jumping back into ships.

“It’s all right!” Kauri said. “That’s Goro. I will speak with him.”

“He said he was going to cut us down,” I said. “I don’t think that implies a lot of talking.”

“Yes,” Kauri said. “And he wonders why the Superiority thinks we’re primitive.”

The other ship didn’t fire, but instead began to lower itself onto the sand. Bits of grit blew in our direction, and I shielded my eyes.

A host of kitsen poured out of the ship, all of them wearing tiny suits of power armor and carrying guns no longer than my hand. That made them *enormous* to a kitsen though, and they all wore tiny metal helmets with a visor over their eyes and holes cut out for their ears.

That seemed somewhat impractical—I wondered if they used their ears to regulate their temperature like some animals did back on Old Earth. Or perhaps their ears grew back and were therefore seen as expendable.

In the air above them, riding on another dinner-plate-size platform, was a large kitsen wearing richly ornamented plate armor that looked like something out of another century entirely. His helmet had curved horns jutting out of it, so large that they almost reached the tips of his ears.

Oh, Spensa would *really* have loved *this*.

“Scudballs,” I heard Arturo say.

“Oh dear,” Cuna said. “Such aggression.”

I couldn’t argue with that. The kitsen swiftly marched across the sand. More of my flightmates climbed back into their ships. Since we were currently being flanked by what amounted to rats with rifles, I didn’t blame them. I supposed I should give orders to my flight, but I didn’t have any better idea what to do in this situation than they did.

FM stayed by my side, Alanik and Cuna a step behind.

Kauri rotated her platform to float between us and the oncoming kitsen, though her other people mostly seemed to be getting out of the way. Since they were both unarmed and unarmored, I didn't blame them either.

"Goro," Kauri said. "What are you doing?"

"We intercepted your transmission, traitor!" Goro said. "You invited these treacherous giants onto our planet. Bad enough that any of their kind are being permitted to sully our sands. We should have blown them out of the sky when they first appeared."

"No one is getting blown out of the sky!" Kauri said. "These are friends of a friend." She looked over her shoulder at me. "Aren't you?"

"Um, yes," I said.

"Other kitsen!" FM said. "I am a diplomatic representative from our people." I barely heard her add "apparently" under her breath. "We're here to collect our lost friends and discuss an alliance. We're not...invading anything, and we don't mean to...sully your sands."

"This is heresy!" Goro shouted, pointing a furry finger at me. He had quite a loud voice for such a small creature. "We will not be fooled by your gilded words! The Den of Everlasting Light Which Laps Gently upon the Shores of Time has seen the last of your tyranny and we will not suffer it again!"

"I'm sorry about him," said a voice near my feet, and I looked down to see that one of Kauri's people had scurried over to join us. "Goro has...a tendency toward the dramatic."

"It's understandable," Cuna said. "Your culture is not yet advanced enough to move beyond these aggressions."

FM sighed and ignored Cuna, addressing the kitsen at my feet. She had little white tufts at the ends of her ears and a brownish one at the end of her bushy white tail. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Hana," the kitsen said.

"Hi, Hana," FM said. "I'm FM. Your people have interacted with humans before?"

"When the first wave of humans conquered the galaxy, they started with us," Hana told her. "Our ancestors fought bravely, but they were no match

for human technology. And it didn't help that at first they welcomed the humans to our shores—the kindly giants straight out of legend! The tales of our early interactions through the nowhere had been passed down for generations.”

Goro's soldiers had stopped about three meters from Kauri, but their tiny kitsen leader floated his platform up until he stood toe to toe with her. “I demand that you step aside,” he said.

“I will not,” Kauri said. “I contacted the humans so they could collect their lost people. They aren't invading, and there is no need for all of... *this*.” She gestured at the kitsen soldiers, whose power armor hummed ominously. The kitsen hummed with it. It was probably meant to seem intimidating.

It was working.

“Very well,” Goro said. “If they claim to come in peace, they must prove it by the sword.”

A sword? I supposed that might be preferable to being shot at by many tiny rifles, but...*why*?

“Send forth one of your people,” Goro continued, “and they may duel my champion in honorable combat.”

“Champion?” I said.

A single warrior stepped out of the mass of kitsen. Her power armor was decorated by a tiny skirt, and her helmet curved into two wicked points underneath her chin. She was carrying a sword slightly longer than a dinner knife, which made it taller than she was.

I looked at FM, but she was staring at the kitsen champion. Cuna was watching us all with wide eyes, like they couldn't believe they had deigned to be present for so much barbarity.

On this particular point I had to agree, though it wasn't the barbarity that alarmed me so much as the practical concerns.

A sword? Really? “We're not fighting that,” I said. “No way.”

“I'll fight it!” Nedd called from behind me, and FM shot him a withering look.

“We don’t want to fight anyone!” FM said. “We’re here on a mission of peace. Our people have also been oppressed by the Superiority, and—”

A chortling sound came from the kitsen. Stars, were they laughing?

“You call it oppression?” Goro said. “When you leveled the great city of Defies the Void with Mighty Heart and Endless Perseverance, that was oppression! When you burned the forest of Rain Falls from Clear Skies, that was oppression! When you—”

“That’s enough,” Kauri said. “They get the point.”

“When it happened to you,” Goro added with a menacing growl, “it was *justice*.”

“Our people weren’t even involved in the last human war,” I said. “We were a traveling fleet of ships. It was only when the war was over that we were captured and contained by the Superiority. Also, that was a century ago, and—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Goro said. “All humans are the same.” He pointed at Kauri. “You returned from Starsight spouting ideals of democracy and claiming we could make decisions together without our esteemed One Who Was Not King! But then you skirt the will of the senate, and seek to ally yourself with the enemies of the Den of Everlasting—”

“You’re right!” Kauri shouted. “You’re right. We should have had a vote about it first. But *you* have marched your clan in here and challenged the humans to a fight without bringing your grievance before the senate, even though your clan’s representatives agreed that they would abide by senate decisions.”

Goro looked somewhat disgruntled at this point. “This is correct. But the invaders must be stopped immediately, so there is no time for—”

“We’re not invading!” FM reminded them.

“Right,” Kauri said. “There is still time to consult the senate and see if they are willing to hear the human offer of peace, or if they would prefer that your clan be permitted to prove them in trial by combat.”

Kauri seemed to find this as ridiculous as I did, so maybe it wasn’t a kitsen thing so much as a Goro thing. Kauri’s ship, after all, had only an average number of destructors.

“I didn’t agree to any trial,” I said. “By combat or otherwise.”

“Hush,” FM said. “She said they’re going to vote on it. We could at least wait to see how the vote turns out.”

Given the disaster that had resulted from the DDF trying to work with our own assembly, I wasn’t eager to meet with another group of politicians. But we were looking for alliances, so we’d have to work within the kitsen governmental framework at any rate.

“Fine,” I said.

“Very well,” Goro said. “First we will prepare a feast, and all may partake. Then, after the vote of the senate, we will see who is right.”

“A feast?” FM said to the kitsen at my feet. “That’s good, right? Unless they mean to poison us—”

Goro’s disk shot to the side, and he glared at FM. “Never would my clan participate in something so dishonorable!” he shouted. “Before you die, you will be staring down the glinting metal of my champion’s blade!”

“Um,” FM said. Even she was starting to look unnerved.

With that final outburst, Goro and his people marched back to their ship, their power armor leaving rows of tiny footprints in the sand. Kauri hunched a bit, clutching her hands together like she was trying very hard not to tell Goro exactly what she thought of him.

“The feast is not a good thing,” Cuna said. “Their tradition is to dine first with those they wish to fight to the death. Over the meal, each will try to determine the weakness of the other. They consider it...honorable.”

I didn’t like the implications of that. “We’re *not* going to *fight* them—”

“Hopefully you won’t have to,” Kauri said. She flew her platform over while Goro and his people piled into their miniature battleship. “I think the senate will see reason.”

“I’d like to see Cobb,” I said. “And Gran-Gran. The humans you found.”

“I can arrange that,” Kauri said. “If you will follow the *Swims Upstream*, we will take you to see your people.”

“Thank you,” I said. Hana raised her fist to us, and Kauri and her people traveled across the sands again to their ship.

“That was surreal,” FM said.

I nodded. “Not the welcome I expected to receive.”

But they were taking us to Cobb, and none of my people had yet found themselves on the wrong end of a kitsen blade, glinting or otherwise.

I supposed that meant we were doing okay.

Six

We flew along the shoreline and landed beside the *Swims Upstream* on another beach below the cliffs that sheltered the towering city of Dreamspring. The stone cliffs had clearly been worn over time into fins and ridges by the wind, the sandstone striped with hundreds of red-orange layers. I directed the flight to leave their taynix in the boxes in their ships—the kitsen knew about hyperdrives, but I still didn't want to advertise that we had so many of them. I left Snuggles and Boomslug out of their box, but gave them a stern instruction to stay. I wanted at least one hyperdrive we could access in a hurry if things went wrong, so it was worth the risk that they'd disobey.

I joined Kauri, and my flight and the medtechs followed after us around a bend in the cliffside. The beach down the way was covered in kitsen who appeared to be playing in the surf and relaxing on the sand, at least until they spotted us. We were giants to them, and I watched carefully where I stepped, not wanting to flatten any picnic spots.

These kitsen were enjoying themselves, completely oblivious to the war with the Superiority. We were interlopers, bringing the conflict with us.

It was coming for them regardless, but it still felt tragic to disturb the peace. I wondered what it was like to live that way, in a place where taking a trip to the beach to sit and enjoy yourself was an option on any given afternoon.

The concept seemed alien, but stars, it must be nice.

The kitsen gathered together, watching us. Some appeared frightened, others curious, but none attacked us. Kauri floated out in front, waving both paws at the other kitsen. I wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but they seemed to believe she had us under control, because no one else came after us demanding that we duel their champion to the death.

We walked up a narrow path toward the city—no, it was a wide road to them. The path was lined with small mound-shaped structures cut into the rock or formed out of intricately worked sandstone. The structures had arched doorways with tiny stone or metal doors affixed to them. Some had signs in a language I couldn't read, while others had little pots of flowers sitting on the doorsteps or in boxes hanging from circular windows.

"Saints and stars," Sadie said somewhere behind me. "This is so *cute*!"

She wasn't wrong. It reminded me of a story my mother had told me when I was a child, about a man named Gulliver who traveled to a land full of little people who were wary of him because of his size. He befriended them, but was later kicked out when he doused a fire in the palace by peeing on it.

As a child I'd found that part of the story hilarious. Now I thought maybe the little people had a point.

I shielded my eyes from the sun and looked up the hill at the mountainous city. As the road ascended, the little burrow structures began to pile up, dug into the walls of the cliff or sculpted one on top of another into tiny hills with doors on all sides and at all levels. I wondered if they opened into tiny multi-floored houses, or if each entrance went to a separate room isolated from the others. As we walked, little kitsen hovercars pulled over to the side of the road to allow us to pass. They chattered at each other, some too far away or faint for the pin to translate, though I did catch a few words.

"—humans returned!—"

"—don't look threatening—"

"—can't trust them, look how they—"

"—dione with them, does that mean—"

I glanced back and found that Kimmalyn had stopped, bent down beside what looked like a landscaping shop with barrels and stacks of bricks and groundcovers, all organized by type. A kitsen waited out front while two others used a large metal winch to load a huge decorative rock into the back of a hovertruck.

I couldn't hear what Kimmalyyn said—she didn't have a translator pin, so she wouldn't have been understood anyway. But then the kitsen stepped back and Kimmalyyn lifted the rock—which was only half the size of her palm, but still enormous for the tiny creatures—and set it in the rear of the truck.

One of them tipped its nose up at her, and I hoped that was a gesture of thanks. We didn't need to be accused of property damage or delivering insults. The kitsen we'd met so far didn't seem like they'd appreciate being condescended to.

“Do you think she should be doing that?” I asked FM.

“She's not hurting anything,” FM said.

Cuna walked up behind us. “Compassion is universal,” they said. “It's seen in all cultures, though it is communicated differently.”

FM sighed. “I suppose there might be some cultural norm we're not aware of, but any of us could break one of those at any time and cause an interstellar incident.”

“Scud, our lives have gotten weird,” I said.

“That's the truth,” Arturo said, following us up the road. “It was simpler when we were fighting the Krell.”

Simpler, but also stagnant. Our people had spent eighty years fighting for our lives, which meant we had very specialized skills. We were a well-oiled survival machine, but we lacked something these people had. It wasn't happiness exactly. We had that, even if it was tempered by pain and fear.

Prosperity maybe. Peace. I wondered if this was what we would have seen on ReDawn, if we'd spent any time in their cities.

Kauri had drifted ahead of us a bit, and she hovered back, watching us. “Do you need to stop and rest?” she asked. “I'm sorry if I'm outpacing your human endurance.” Her shipmates were walking up the path on foot, and they seemed fine. They ran many steps to our one, but they didn't seem to be tiring.

“No, we're fine,” I said. “Just appreciating your beautiful city.”

“This used to be the home of Hesho, the Most Honorable and Magnificent One Who Was Not King. He died in the battle with the delver

at your planet.” She gave a little sigh. “We miss him. The Superiority insisted that we needed to transition to a democracy in order to advance to primary citizenship, and I think that change was good for us. But I wish Lord Hesho had remained here with us to see the initiative of his people. He and his ancestors before him served us well for centuries.”

Kauri continued to lead us up the path, and the pinnacles of the city of Dreamspring came into view. The cliff had been split into little vertical ridges, the effect uneven enough to be natural rather than kitsen-made. The rock was full of holes and walkways so the kitsen could duck from tunnel to tunnel all across the cliff face of the upper city. The city only rose in height along the cliff face; in front it opened into a sprawling urban landscape that filled the stone area between the sheer cliff and the sand of the beach.

Here along the wall, our faces were even with the higher stories of pathways and tunnels. Scud, we wouldn’t fit in their buildings. We couldn’t sit down in their homes with them or enter their shops. I imagined what we would feel like on Detritus if ships full of sixty-foot giants suddenly arrived. They’d be unable to fit in our elevators, unable to visit our caverns.

We’d be terrified. It was a miracle that the kitsen had welcomed the humans in the past. And those humans had taken advantage of their trust—that wasn’t our fault, but we were responsible for overcoming that history now.

“Kauri,” I said, “I know you need to speak to your senate, but where will we even be able to meet with them?”

“Our senate meets in a large auditorium,” Kauri said. “We can welcome you there, but you’ll have to remain on the floor. I’m afraid we don’t have any chairs that will accommodate you. We destroyed all the humans’ dwellings after they were expelled from our planet in the Second Human War. Perhaps we could find some sturdy tables for you to sit on.”

I worried about our ability to sit on even the sturdiest of kitsen tables. Like FM said, we didn’t want to cause any interstellar incidents. “We can sit on the ground,” I said. “If there’s room.”

“As long as that wouldn’t be too much of an insult,” Kauri said. “We wish to meet with you as equals, but we do not know your customs.”

“No,” I said. “No insult. Where exactly are Cobb and Gran-Gran?” They wouldn’t have fit inside these buildings either. And if they were unconscious—stars, they wouldn’t fit inside a kitsen hospital.

“Our feasting grounds are just beyond the turn of the cliff, and the tent with your people is beyond those,” Kauri said. “We might be able to put up another tent large enough to shade you while you eat, but the first one took us quite a bit of effort to construct.”

“It’s not necessary,” I said. “Please, take us to Cobb and Gran-Gran.”

We took a narrow road across the clearing in front of the cliffs, the roads continuing to empty as we passed through. When we reached the other side of the city, the road turned toward the beach again, and Kauri presented the feasting grounds, which were basically a wide stretch of sand with stone tables and small gazebos set against the cliff. Some of Goro’s people—I recognized them by their armor—were filleting fish as big as they were and loading them onto conveyers that rolled into ovens carved out of the cliff face.

“Scud, I don’t know if we can eat the food here,” I said.

“What are those things?” Alanik said, staring at the fish. “They look... slimy.”

Huh. They wouldn’t have fish on ReDawn, I supposed. We had some that we raised in vats, and a few that lived wild in underground lakes.

“Those are fish,” Cuna said. “They pull them from the ocean and eat them. You will be better off trying the fruit.” They gestured to the bowls and platters being laid out on the banquet tables. “It should be palatable to your people.”

Alanik did not look thrilled, though she’d been polite about the food we’d given her on Detritus, despite most of it being made out of algae.

“If you want to leave some of your people here you may,” Kauri said. “The tent near the hospital is up ahead.”

“That sounds good,” I said. I waved to Kel and Winnow—our medtechs—to join us.

I looked over at Alanik. The kitsen seemed to react better to her, since she wasn’t human. “Come with me?”

“Of course,” she said.

“Do you want me to come?” FM asked.

“No,” I said. “Stay here and maybe do some diplomacy?”

FM gave me a withering look.

Cuna wandered over to the kitsen, observing their cooking. I lowered my voice. “Try to make sure Cuna doesn’t insult them too much,” I said. “And that Nedd doesn’t volunteer to duel creatures one-tenth his size, all right?”

“I can try to make sure he doesn’t volunteer *again*,” FM said.

“Good. I do not need that on my conscience.”

FM turned to the others and directed them out onto the beach.

The burrow that Kauri said held the hospital was enormous, towering up into the air. There were many small doors into the complex itself, none of which an adult human could fit through. The kitsen only needed a small fraction of the head clearance humans did.

Kauri led us to a tent that had been erected out front. It looked like many smaller tents had all been affixed together on long poles, creating a structure perhaps three meters long by two meters wide. The roof was about the height of my shoulders, so when Kauri maneuvered her platform near the entrance and pulled back the tent flap, I had to stoop to look inside.

There, on two platforms so low to the ground that I thought they might originally have been kitsen banquet tables, lay Cobb and Gran-Gran. Their bodies had been covered with many blankets layered over each limb and across their torsos.

Kel and Winnow both ducked inside, and Kauri continued to hold the tent flap open as they examined Gran-Gran and Cobb. They were both breathing, I was relieved to see, but their eyes were closed, and one side of Cobb’s face was covered in bruises. Some medical equipment was attached to the side of the tables, and kitsen wearing little white robes and hats were surveying it. One stood on a ladder that reached to about the height of my knee, changing out the tiny bottle on what looked like a makeshift IV pole.

At least they were alive and had already received medical attention. “You’ll want to get them home to your people, I imagine,” Kauri said.

“Yes,” I said. “We brought a medical transport ship, and our medtechs will supervise the transfer.”

Alanik was watching them both with concern on her face, and she shook her head. “I’m still not sure that’s Becca Nightshade.”

I blinked. The person in the bed looked like Spensa’s grandmother. “Why do you say that?”

“Because she isn’t cytonic,” Alanik said.

I reached out, trying to sense the vibration I always felt near another cytonic. I could feel waves of it rolling off Alanik.

But she was right. Nothing from Gran-Gran. Farther out, I could feel our taynix still in our ships, but no other cytonics.

But there was something, a vibration coming from the cliffs behind us. Not the concentrated frequency of a cytonic mind, but more like a...cloud of something.

“Do you feel that?” I asked. “The strange buzzing from behind the cliffs?”

Alanik frowned. “No,” she said. “I’m not finding any cytonic presence here.”

That was odd, and I had no idea what it meant. I moved past Winnow to Gran-Gran’s bed and brushed the blanket off her hand on one side and then the other, checking for hologram bracelets.

There weren’t any. And if the Superiority were trying to trick us, where was the spring for the trap? I reached up and brushed Gran-Gran’s hair with my hand. It moved exactly as I expected it to.

“I think that’s her,” I said. “But you’re right, her cytonic abilities seem to be gone. What *happened* to them? And why did they end up *here*?”

“Gran-Gran was behaving strangely before she hyperjumped,” Alanik said. “She told me she could tell where Cobb was on the ship, which doesn’t make sense. He’s not cytonic, so she shouldn’t have been able to find him through the negative realm.”

That was strange. “But you knew it was her then,” I said. “Because you were familiar with her mind. So was I. She wasn’t a Superiority fake.”

“She also said she was hearing voices calling to her, asking her for help,” Alanik said. “She asked if they were my people.”

I narrowed my eyes. That could have been the Superiority interfering with her cytonics. Like what happened to Spensa’s father.

I looked at the medtechs. “What is their condition?”

“They seem stable,” Kel said.

“We’ve focused on keeping them nourished and hydrated,” Kauri added. “Our lorekeepers have some records of what nutrients your people need.”

“Cuna said that your people don’t have cytonics,” I said, “but that you still have information about them.”

“Yes,” Kauri said. “Our lorekeepers have preserved the records, and they study and understand them, but we have not had kitsen cytonics for centuries. Some of my people believe it’s a curse, that we haven’t proven ourselves worthy to regain the powers.”

That was unfortunate. Still, detailed records of cytonic powers would be useful. “We would love to speak to your lorekeepers,” I said.

“Of course,” Kauri said. “I will send a message saying that you’ve requested an audience with them.”

“In the meantime, we can load Cobb and Gran-Gran into the transport ship.” Something strange was happening with Gran-Gran, possibly with both of them, and they needed better medical care than our medtechs could give here in the field.

“I think you should meet with our senators first,” Kauri said. “If you remove your people from the planet before the meeting, Goro may try to use that as evidence that you’re trying to sneak away, or that you’re preparing to attack.”

I hesitated, looking to Winnow.

“I don’t think a few hours are going to make a difference,” Winnow said. “Unless their conditions worsen.”

That was fair. I looked at Cobb one more time. His face was pale, but he was breathing. He was alive.

We’d wake him up. We had to.

He had to find us a way out of this mess.

Seven

When we returned to the feast area, we found FM sitting cross-legged at one of the tables, rolling melons the size of her head through a machine with many coordinated blades that cut them into precise slices. Nedd and Arturo sat behind her, loading citrus fruits onto small spindles that spun around a sharp blade, which removed the peel in a long, thin strip. Nedd deposited the peels into very small waste canisters, which two kitsen replaced with empty canisters and then scurried away to offer the full canisters to a pen filled with miniature goats, about the right size for a kitsen to ride as a mount. Kimmalyn and Sadie were seasoning fish with very small seasoning shakers, while Catnip and T-Stall knelt next to the ovens, using handheld controls to remove the fish from the conveyors with acclivity-empowered spatulas.

“I’m sorry,” Kauri said to me. “You are our guests. Your people shouldn’t have been asked to prepare the food.”

Hana ran up, sitting at my feet. “We didn’t ask them,” she said. “They volunteered. In fact, FM *insisted*.”

FM raised her eyebrows at me from across the sandy pavilion.

“We take no offense,” I said. “Thank you for allowing us to serve you.”

FM smiled.

This was kind of brilliant of her. We were trying to convince them that we weren’t invaders. I bet the humans who’d marched in and declared them a colony didn’t offer to help them with food preparation.

“What can I do to help?” I asked.

Alanik and I were brought to rotating spits where squashes roasted over a fire. We were instructed to use miniscule spray bottles to hydrate the turning vegetables with a brownish liquid that smelled both sweet and spicy.

I sprayed a bit on my finger and tasted it. Stars, it was delicious.

Not long after, Goro arrived. His champion rode on the saucer beside him, her sword tucked into a sheath and strapped across her back.

Goro didn't look happy to see us all helping prepare the food. He gave me an especially affronted glare. I was supposed to be the enemy, the invader he was here to defeat.

Putting FM in charge of diplomacy had clearly been the right decision.

When we finished the food preparation, several kitsen carried away the remaining waste and cooking implements, and Kauri returned with another kitsen riding a second, smaller saucer.

"This is Juno," she told me. "One of our lorekeepers. He has offered to dine with you, though he will wait until after the senate meeting to impart knowledge."

"I am sorry this is necessary," Juno said, "but there are some among us who find our lorekeeping to be superfluous or even threatening. It was only the will and continued patronage of the Most Honored One Who Was Not King that sustained our order. We do not wish to go against the will of the senate or attract the ire of—"

"Humans!" Goro bellowed from the head of one of the large tables. "It is time to begin to feast. I will not offer you welcome! You come as invaders, and so we give you the greeting fit for those who dare think to conquer the Den of Everlasting Light Which Laps Gently upon the Shores of Time! A full belly to make you sluggish, so that my champion may more easily pierce you with the sword!"

"Well that's disturbing," FM muttered beside me.

"At least he's upfront about it," Alanik added.

"Let us feast!" Goro shouted, and the kitsen all echoed these last words with their fists raised in the air.

I was beginning to wonder if I'd made a grave tactical error by dining with these creatures. I thought we were doing the right thing by being diplomatic and trying to prove we weren't here to conquer them. But now I worried they would discover some weakness they might use against us.

"Juno," I said as one of the kitsen brought me a small plate—it must have been an oversized serving platter to them—piled high with fish and

nuts. “I know you don’t want to share your knowledge with us until the senate agrees to it, but may I ask if any of this food is poisonous to humans?”

“Certainly,” Juno said. “The photophores of the flatfish are mildly venomous, but those have been removed. Our records show that humans ate most of our foods, and indeed put a great strain on our resources, trying to export some of our most prized delicacies for their own gain. To answer your question, the only foods we eat that would be poisonous to you are a few varieties of berry and some of our summer shellfish, and none of those have been offered to you this day. Make no mistake, Goro means to kill you, but he will only do so with senate permission and in the way that is most advantageous to him.”

Over at Goro’s table, I heard him comparing his fish to a worthy foe slain in battle. That seemed like a stretch to me, but I’d once heard Spensa muttering something that sounded a lot like “fear the wrath of my very soft socks” on requisition day, so she probably would have approved. I wasn’t sure how fighting one of us with a sword could be advantageous to him, but clearly he had some kind of endgame in mind.

FM poked at her own fish, then took a bite. “This is delicious.”

“Eh,” Nedd said, settling down cross-legged on the sand by Kimmalyn. “It’s a little fishy.”

FM blinked at him. “It is literally fish.”

“Right,” Nedd said. “But...*fishy* fish.”

“Totally,” Catnip said. “I hate it when my food adjectives its own noun.”

“Exactly,” Nedd said.

“It’s like the Saint says,” Kimmalyn added. “You are what you eat.”

“Hey, look!” Sadie said. “There are boats out there!” She pointed out onto the water, beyond the waves. The noise from the ocean was fainter this far up on the beach. And out on the blue-green expanse that seemed to go on and on forever until it melded with the sky...scud, she was right. There were ships out there. Sailing vessels that couldn’t have been much longer than a meter or two, bobbing up and down in the waves.

“I understand the basics of how boats work,” I said. “But how do they do that? How do they *sail* out there on all that water, without worrying that it’s going to swallow them up?”

“Sometimes it does,” Juno said. “The water is dangerous, especially for sailors who are caught in a sudden storm. As for how they brave it—how do you fly into the blackness of space? It seems just as unknowable to me, and a great deal more vast.”

That...was a really good point.

“I don’t know,” Arturo said. “You can’t drown in space.”

“But you can asphyxiate,” Nedd said. “Which sounds just as unpleasant.”

The food suddenly felt heavy in my mouth. I set down my fork, which might have originally been some sort of gardening implement.

“Or freeze to death,” Catnip added. “It’s cold in space.”

“The ocean can be cold,” Juno said. “Depending on the currents and the time of year.”

“You don’t depressurize if you jump into the ocean though,” Nedd said. “That scud sounds nasty. Did you know it can make your saliva boil in your mouth?”

“Ew, Nedd,” FM said. “We’re eating.”

The Superiority ship exploded before my eyes. The bodies of my parents were flung into space, fluids voiding, their eyeballs boiling.

I shook my head and set down my plate. That hadn’t happened. They’d been torn apart by the mindblades first.

Hadn’t they?

“The ocean does the opposite,” Juno said. “The pressure in its depths is so great it can crush you.”

“Whoa,” Nedd said. “That’s awesome.”

Stars. Why did everything in the galaxy feel like it was trying to kill us? I had started this conversation, but now I had to get away from it. “Excuse me,” I said, and I got up, leaving my food behind. I moved away from the city, down the beach toward the water.

A projectile shot over the ocean, and I flinched. Was the *water* attacking us now?

But no, it was a *bird*—a whole flock of them, wings tucked against their bodies as they shot like bullets into the waves, and then flapping to give them lift again, carrying them into the air with fish in their mouths.

Stars. I'd seen pictures of birds, but watching them glide over the water like so many starfighters...

It was incredible, but it didn't stop my hands from shaking.

I wiped cold sweat from my forehead. Scud, I'd walked away from the feast. Was I ruining our diplomatic relations? Offending the kitsen somehow? Would they perceive this as a threat?

It didn't matter. I couldn't go back. I couldn't *breathe*. As I stared out at the ocean, the whole of it pressed down on me, all the weight of what felt like millions of miles of water bearing down on my body.

It was too much.

"Jorgen?" FM said. I wheeled around to find her watching me with concern.

Scud, not concern. Anything but concern. I wished she'd look at me the way she had back on the platform on ReDawn, when she'd been pissed at me for telling her she shouldn't have liberated the slugs from Detritus. She'd been so angry at me, when I'd simply pointed out the obvious—she'd broken the chain of command, violated our orders, and put our comrades in danger.

You are not my flightleader, she'd said.

That had gutted me then, but I found it infinitely preferable to what I knew she was going to say now.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I said.

"Jorgen," FM said. "You aren't fine."

"Yes," I said. "I am."

"That's ridiculous. You can't be fine. Your parents—"

"This isn't the time!" I said. "We are in the middle of a diplomatic mission! We need to talk to the senate so we can get Cobb and Gran-Gran home."

Once we brought Cobb back though, Stoff was definitely going to declare him indisposed. There was no avoiding that. In fact, according to protocol, I should have already told Stoff that we'd found Cobb and he was indeed unconscious.

I...didn't want to. As soon as I did, Stoff would be fully within his rights to start acting as admiral. I had no idea what he would do, but whatever it was...I didn't trust it. Cobb knew what was best for the DDF, for our people, for Detritus. He should be the one in charge.

He would get us through this.

FM stared at me with her lips pressed together like she was trying to hold in all the things she wanted to say.

"This isn't about Cobb," she said finally. "It's not about Gran-Gran, and it's not about our diplomatic mission."

"Exactly," I said. "And those are the only things that matter right now."

"That's not true," she said. "*You* matter, Jorgen. What happened to you, it matters."

I balled my fists, turning away from her to look out at the sea. A particularly large wave washed up the beach, and I wished it would come all the way up and wash me out to sea and be done with it. I imagined the water pulling me down, crushing me the way Juno said it would, all that weight blocking out the questions, the demands, the *needs* of everyone else.

Moments ago all that water had seemed terrifying. Now it felt like release.

"Jorgen," FM said, "you need to talk to someone. It doesn't have to be me, but have you said *anything* about your parents? To anyone?"

I hadn't. I couldn't. Not until I knew everyone was safe.

"We need to be prepping for the senate meeting," I said. "Go ask Kauri what we can do to support her in convincing the senate we're here in peace."

"I don't think—"

"Do it, FM."

"Jorgen—"

"That's an *order*."

I looked back at her, and she stared at me. There was some anger there now, and that was good. Much better than pity. For a moment I thought she was going to tell me off again, announce that I wasn't her flightleader and I couldn't tell her what to do. Say what we both knew: that I was only pretending to be in control, that I'd never known what I was doing, that I was incompetent to be in command, and that I was failing at everything—even this.

“Fine,” FM said, and she spun around and marched back up the beach. Past her I could see that the rest of the flight had finished eating. Kauri escorted them down to the water, where Nedd and Kimmalyne took off their shoes and rolled up their jumpsuits, letting the water wash over their feet. Alanik and Arturo sat in the sand, laughing.

I couldn't remember what it felt like to laugh.

I wondered if that meant I had already drowned.

Eight

I was still on edge when Kauri led us to the senate assembly, held in an arena built into the cliffside. The arena was an enormous space for the kitsen, containing hundreds upon hundreds of small padded seats carved into the sandstone, ascending up to the ceiling at the back of the room. There was barely space for Alanik to stand, and I had to hunch my shoulders to avoid scraping my head.

The floor at the bottom of the seats provided enough space for a few of us to sit. The others stayed on the beach, while FM, Alanik, and I all tried to squeeze in together. We'd used the lack of space to leave Cuna out of the meeting, but in reality I was afraid of what they might say.

We had to sit with our knees tucked up to our chests to fit all three of us. A kitsen floated on a small platform with a raised wall around it, like a cup we might drink out of on Detritus. The cup had a microphone attached to the front of it like on a podium.

"I am Adi, director of the senate," the kitsen said. "It is my job to ensure that the proceedings progress in an orderly fashion. You will not speak unless you are asked a direct question."

"Will we be given an opportunity to plead our case?" I asked. "We're trying to retrieve our friends and offer an alliance, and if we aren't allowed to speak—"

"You may be called upon to speak if there are questions," Adi said. "Please do not speak out of turn."

We *may* be. Stars, I hoped Kauri had this under control.

The kitsen senators began to file in, all wearing silk robes of a similar style. The colors varied widely, and I wondered if they were based on personal preference, or if they indicated what region the kitsen was from. We'd landed on this island, but we'd passed over hundreds more. As the hall began to fill, I noticed physical differences in the kitsen as well. Some

had longer ears and smaller snouts, while others had darker coloring to their fur. A pair in the back each had an ear notched as if ceremonially cut, and one that took a seat toward the front had a row of silver earrings pierced all the way up to the tip on one side.

“That’s a lot of kitsen,” FM whispered beside me. “Are you going to do the talking if there are questions?”

“I appointed you our diplomatic specialist,” I said. “You should do it.”

FM took a deep breath. “Okay. But if I say something wrong, I’m a little afraid Goro’s champion is going to run me through with a sword. It’s not easy to get in and out of here. We wouldn’t be able to escape.”

“I’ll talk, if neither of you wants to,” Alanik said.

“No,” FM said. “I can do it. But...”

Goro arrived, riding on his disc with his champion beside him. He’d left the rest of his entourage outside. The champion’s sword was still sheathed, and I hoped it would remain so.

Goro lowered his platform to be even with the bottom row of chairs, presumably so he wouldn’t block the view of any of the senators. This put him alarmingly close to Alanik’s knees, but she didn’t seem intimidated by him.

It was hard to be intimidated by something so small, but that didn’t mean I wanted his champion charging our ankles with a sword. Diplomatic disaster or not, someone could get seriously hurt, and it could be one of us.

Adi called the meeting to order. Only about a third of the senate seats were filled, but I imagined there were probably senators who were away, or who hadn’t been able to gather on such short notice. A lot of the kitsen were watching us suspiciously, but none of them were advancing on us with weapons drawn, so this was still an improvement.

Until they started to speak.

Adi gave both Goro and Kauri the floor, which surprised me. I’d sat through enough boring assembly speeches that I expected this meeting to be much the same. But instead, Goro and Kauri entered into a sort of debate.

“These human invaders,” Goro said, “must be dealt with. Given our long and violent history with them, we know what language the giants speak.

They must receive the only communication they understand—a swift and violent lesson by combat. Their kind has brought only ruin upon our shores, and it is up to us to visit vengeance upon all our enemies.”

FM leaned over and whispered to me. “He says violence is the only language *we* speak, but he’s the one who keeps trying to attack us.”

That was an interesting argument. I wanted to hear more, but it was apparently Kauri’s turn.

“The humans *aren’t* our enemies,” Kauri said. “They have come by my invitation to collect their friends who arrived here by accident, and who are even now receiving medical treatment. They also bring with them a promise of an alliance, which they have already established with the UrDail.”

Most of the audience eyed Alanik, and Alanik stared back at them, stone faced.

She wasn’t any better with people than I was, but at least she didn’t go around referring to them as lesser. She leaned over to me. “You could just fight him,” Alanik said. “He is literally asking for it. Any of us could beat him in combat.”

“If we do that,” FM said, “we’ll only solidify their image of us as dangerous, violent, and aggressive. All the things we’re trying to prove we aren’t.”

Besides, the kitsen were fast and trained in dueling. I wouldn’t put it past them to get a good blow in on one of us and seriously injure us. I doubted they’d manage to kill us, but I didn’t want any of it on my conscience.

If Spensa were here, she would have seen it differently. She would have dueled the kitsen and probably won spectacularly, and would have somehow spun that victory into an alliance. But she wasn’t here, and I was doing the best I could.

“Of course they *say* they come in peace,” Goro said. “But we all know what humans are like.”

“I don’t think we do!” Kauri said. “Humans invaded us in the past, but *these* humans have a common enemy in the Superiority. I was there when Winzik summoned a delver to destroy the humans.”

“It was in that battle that we lost our most Honored and Revered One Who Was Not King!” Goro said. “If we had not meddled in interstellar affairs, he would be with us even now.”

“It was Lord Hesho’s decision to answer the Superiority’s call,” Kauri said. “Do you question his will?”

Goro sputtered. “No, but—”

Kauri continued as if Goro hadn’t interrupted her. “The delver immediately turned on Winzik’s own people, but still he persists. He offered us a path to primary citizenship, but we were only pawns meant to enact his violence for him. If we don’t begin to forge alliances, we will stand alone when the destruction comes.”

“This is fearmongering,” Goro said. “The humans are the real threat.”

Kauri replied and the two of them went on, arguing back and forth.

Juno, the kitsen lorekeeper, sat in the front row near my feet. I leaned forward and whispered to him. “Is it always like this?”

Juno leaned toward me. “No,” he said. “Our senate is young. Before we lost our king he made the decisions, instructing our people how to vote. It was easier then for us to arrive at decisions. Our wills were aligned, and we had unity.”

Alanik bristled a little at the wording, but I saw his point. That was the way the DDF worked. Our admiral made the decisions, and the rest of us carried them out. We could act quickly that way, and decisively.

But it also meant we could swiftly make the wrong decision, if the person at the top made the wrong call.

I thought about what Arturo said, that our lives were easier when we could think about things simply. We had to kill the Krell because they were trying to kill us. There was no moral ambiguity, no diplomacy to navigate. I supposed after a fashion my parents had been doing something brave, trying to pioneer a new way.

In other circumstances, they might have been heroes.

Goro looked ruffled, like he felt he was starting to lose the argument. “We must settle this matter decisively,” he said. “Allow my champion to

fight a champion of the humans' choosing. Our might will decide the victor."

He seemed to have only that one argument, and I noticed no one in the senate had brought a champion with a sword. We hadn't seen anyone else dressed like Goro in the city either. He was the only one insisting that a trial by combat was a reasonable course of action.

"The humans have already said they mean us no harm," Kauri said. "They don't want to fight with us. A physical fight between kitsen and giant would only cause unnecessary pain."

"To them maybe!" Goro said. "My champion will fell the giant like our heroes of old! They will not stand before the blades of—"

Yeah, his argument was starting to reach the fever pitch of someone who knew they were losing. But the senate members hadn't given their opinions yet, so why would he be?

Goro looked over at me and seemed...confused.

Was he trying to *bait* us into fighting him? That would certainly make his argument easier.

Kauri followed his gaze and I raised a hand, indicating that I wanted to speak.

"For my next argument," Kauri announced, "I would like to introduce the witness testimony of Flightleader Weight."

Goro hunched a bit, looking disgruntled.

"Jorgen?" FM whispered. "What are you doing?"

"Trying something," I said.

"This is preposterous," Goro mumbled. "A human should not speak to the senate."

"Kauri is allowed to enter the testimony of another to make her argument for her," Adi said imperiously. "Flightleader Weight, you may speak."

Stars, I wished I was more prepared for this. I'd have preferred to have FM do it, but there wasn't time. She was right. If we gave even the slightest indication that we would participate in Goro's duel, we solidified their already terrible preconceptions of us. "On behalf of my people," I said,

“I’m sorry for what you’ve suffered at human hands. But we aren’t interested in fighting you.”

“They arrived with destructors on their ships,” Goro said, “and they expect us to believe—”

“You will wait your turn,” Adi admonished him, and Goro snarled a bit but shut his mouth.

“Our destructors are used in defense,” I said. “Of ourselves and of our allies. And we would very much like you to *be* our allies.”

Goro’s furry little brow bunched, and his champion leaned over and whispered something to him, though Goro waved her off.

Kauri gave a triumphant little smile. “I rest,” she said. And she nodded to me.

Goro *had* been trying to bait us into something. And if we’d risen to the bait and fought his champion, we would have proven everyone right about us. Goro clearly wanted that. Was it because our presence weakened his power, or did he think he was doing his people a favor by trying to reveal our true intentions?

“Very well,” Adi said. “The argument is over. We will now hear from the senate.”

Kauri turned around and raised her fist at me, in a gesture I was coming to recognize as both a greeting and approval.

Goro floated closer, his champion standing beside him with her gauntleted arms crossed. “I don’t know what your game is, human,” he grumbled.

“I don’t have a game,” I said. “Except to bring our people home, make peace with you, and coordinate a resistance against the Superiority.”

Goro narrowed his beady little eyes at me. “Your people never looked at us as allies before.”

“And I’m sorry for that,” I told him. “But we aren’t them. We’re concerned about your welfare, and the welfare of all the species the Superiority claims are lesser.”

I looked over at FM and she nodded her approval. Stars, maybe I was getting some of this right at least.

“Hmph,” Goro said, crossing his arms to mirror his champion. “Well, we will see.”

Paws waved in the air all around the room, and Adi floated her microphone over to them, allowing the senators to speak.

The first few senators focused on Goro’s argument—his right to challenge newcomers to a trial by combat. Several felt there was no harm in granting his request—though they all seemed to regard it as odd—and suggested we should be obliged to appoint a champion or leave the planet in disgrace. The kitsen with the rings in his ears said that Goro had no authority over Dreamspring or the surrounding island, so his challenge was invalid. Goro would need to wait and reissue it if one of us set foot on his island, which had another long name I didn’t quite follow.

Stars, it was getting hot in here. We were inside the rock, where it should have been cooler, but the heat of so many bodies in one place was starting to make the room humid and stuffy.

I looked over at FM, who was listening to the kitsen speak with obvious and growing concern. “This isn’t going well,” she said to me.

She was right. Instead of focusing on what I’d said about peace, the conversation was getting bogged down in the disputed legality of Goro’s request. And in between, senators began to comment on the bigger issue—dare they defy the Superiority by working with us? That would mean throwing away all their progress toward primary citizenship. They gave up their *monarchy* for that, which they all seemed to consider a great sacrifice.

“Lord Hesho gave his life to try to further our cause with the Superiority,” one of the kitsen with a notched ear said. “How can we dishonor his sacrifice by abandoning his quest?”

Kauri squirmed like she dearly wanted to argue with that, but both she and Goro remained silent, which I gathered was the rule.

We had not been given permission to speak again, and we hadn’t interrupted. I simultaneously wished someone would ask our opinion and was unsure of what I would say.

If Spensa were here, she’d say *something*. She wouldn’t be able to sit here and listen to this without telling them how wrong they were. She

wouldn't worry about finding the right words—she'd trample forward on moxie alone, and it would *work*, because Spensa was amazing like that.

And somehow she had confidence in *me*. Stars, I could have used a little of that confidence right now. I let my mind slip into the nowhere, searching for her. Alanik was sitting right here, and while I didn't hear her in the nowhere, I also didn't want her to open her mind and hear me, so I stayed quiet, looking, listening.

The kitsen senators continued to argue, but I caught only snatches.

“—Superiority has the power. Who are these humans, that they think they can win—”

The nowhere was quiet as ever, devoid even of that strange raised texture I'd encountered on Platform Prime.

There was *something* though, there in the emptiness. Not Spensa, but... an *image* of her. She was...cleaning a part from a starfighter. I couldn't see the area around her, but I could see *her*, and could sense...her loneliness. And a feeling of concern for her that wasn't mine. It came from the image, from the nowhere.

Stars, was the *nowhere* concerned about Spensa? It was only a strange place, it couldn't think or feel—

Could it?

The kitsen went on, the arguments getting more heated as they went.

“—threaten our way of life. We shouldn't be working with any of them, unless we want—”

The image of Spensa faded. It hadn't seemed like it came from Spensa herself, but I had no idea where—or who—it had come from. It was gone now, and I couldn't find it again.

“—destruction for us and all our kin. If we aren't careful—”

An image welled up in my mind—the Superiority ship where my parents died, cut to ribbons and expanding ever outward against the blackness of space.

I shoved it down, reaching through the nowhere again. Spensa was in here somewhere. I'd found that image, I should be able to find *her*. Even if we couldn't talk, I wanted to *know* she was *there*—

That vibration I'd felt before grew stronger, a cytonic resonance from somewhere on the island. And then, loud in my mind, a voice cried, *HELP US!* and I visibly startled.

Other than Juno, who looked up at me in alarm, the other kitsen didn't seem to notice. Both FM and Alanik did though, and they turned to me.

Are you okay? Alanik asked.

Fine, I said. I drew back into myself. That voice—it had come from the nowhere, but it wasn't Spensa. I didn't know *who* it was. Maybe Gran-Gran? But she was here on Evershore, not in the nowhere.

Scud, why was it so *hot* in here? The sandstone walls felt like they were closing in on me. I wanted to escape, but I couldn't slip out. I'd have to crawl through the scudding doorway on my hands and knees again. What kind of message would that send?

I tried to focus on the words of the senator who was speaking, a very large kitsen with brown tufts at the ends of his ears.

“—if our most Honored One Who Was Not King were here, he would surely agree that—”

“Do not profane the name of the One Who Was Not King!” another interrupted. “In his wisdom, he would surely have said—”

Stars, they all seemed to have an opinion of what their not-king would do if he hadn't died in the battle with the delver. Did *we* kill him? We very well might have.

And when they invoked his name, they sounded uncomfortably like *me* trying to convince Vice Admiral Stoff of what Cobb would do if he were here.

Stars, was this what I sounded like? Like I was merely trying to win a scudding argument, making the specter of Cobb agree with whatever I said?

Jorgen, Alanik said again, *are you okay?*

I'm fine, I said, and I cringed, glad FM couldn't hear me.

You aren't fine, she'd said. *You can't be fine*.

She knew. Stars, everyone probably knew. I was trying to hold everything together, but it was all slipping through my fingers and—

Help us! the voice in the nowhere said again.

Stars. It didn't *sound* like Gran-Gran. Who *was* that? Didn't they know I couldn't help anyone, not my flight, not even my parents?

"Our lives are stable here," a greying kitsen said. His skin was loose around his face, and he carried a small cane that he leaned on while he sat. "Why would we risk angering the Superiority? We should be working with them, or we will end up hunted like the humans have been, and we will have no one to blame but ourselves."

Damn it. The kitsen might have easier lives than we did. They might be able to choose to go play on the beach in the afternoon, or have feasts, or duel each other needlessly because they were squabbling and bored, but if it drove them to that kind of thinking then it was a luxury that bred carelessness. My parents had wanted that kind of luxury for me, for *us*, and they'd reached for it—and that was why they were dead.

I saw my mother's face behind the glass, resigned to her fate.

Do better than we did.

But we weren't doing better. We were having the same damn argument *again*.

Help us! the voice said from the nowhere. No, *voices*. There were many of them. Maybe they weren't real. Maybe it was my own mind conjuring up all the people I was failing—Cobb and my flight and all the people on Detritus who were going to die because *I* didn't know what I was doing.

I can't do better, I thought to my mother. She couldn't hear me. She wasn't here with us. She wasn't in the nowhere. She wasn't anywhere. She was *gone*, and soon the rest of us would be too and it would be all my fault.

I tried to take a deep breath, but I couldn't. The room was stifling, and the walls were closing in, and that Superiority ship exploded and contracted again and again in my mind, the bits of debris flying outward into the void. There was a hollowness in my chest where my soul used to be, where the part of me that loved my parents—that cared and felt—had been kept. Now it was nothing but emptiness, and for the first time I was glad Spensa wasn't here. I didn't want her to know. I didn't want her to see. The shame of it all coiled inside me and then exploded outward like the Superiority ship—

Boom.

Bits of the nowhere ripped through my mind, coalescing into physical waves and bursting out like shrapnel from a bomb. The explosion caught the platforms on which Kauri and Goro were hovering and pitched them to the side, dumping the kitsen to the floor. Adi's cup tilted wildly, bits of the sides chipping off. The force of it knocked several of the kitsen in the front rows back in their seats.

Alanik grabbed me by the arm. She seemed unharmed but—

What just happened?

Snuggles and Boomslug suddenly appeared at my feet. "Boom!" Boomslug said. The senators were all staring at me, and many of them began to talk at once. The pin couldn't parse what they were all saying, but I gathered that not one of them was happy with me.

"What the scud was that?" FM asked.

"Mindblades," Alanik said. "Jorgen, how did you—"

"I didn't mean to," I said. "I didn't mean to." Saints and stars, I'd just been talking about peace and now I did *this* in the middle of a diplomatic meeting?

"Boom," Boomslug said again, and he started to nuzzle my ankle as if in sympathy.

He hadn't done this. He and Snuggles had felt it through the nowhere and had come to *comfort* me. I'd somehow manifested mindblades in the middle of a room full of scudding diplomats and now—

"Order!" Adi called. "The house will come to order!"

Goro regarded me with satisfaction. "Now you see!" he bellowed from the floor, close enough that the pin managed to pick him up. "The humans speak only the language of violence! It is the only means they'll respond to!"

I couldn't catch all of it, but several of the kitsen raised their fists in that gesture of solidarity.

Stars, I'd ruined everything. "That's not true!" I said. It came out louder than I wanted it to, my voice overpowering Adi's as she called for order.

"That's not true," I said again, and the senators began to quiet. Several of them had scrambled over the backs of their seats to use them as shields.

“We’re not here to hurt you,” I said. “We only want you to understand that we have tools to fight the Superiority. It is possible for us to beat them, but only if we work together.”

That was a lie on two fronts. I *hadn’t* done that on purpose as a display of power and I *didn’t* know if we really had the power to defeat the Superiority, even together.

But Saints and stars, I was in it now. “I understand. It’s a lot to ask for you to side against the Superiority. I know they have better ships and better technology. But that’s been true since long before I was born, and my people have been successfully resisting them for eighty years! We don’t know anything about you or your culture, but we know about *them*, because we have fought them and we have *survived*. We don’t want what happened to us to happen to anyone else. We don’t want anyone else to be hunted, to have to live in hiding, to be killed in droves every time you so much as stick your heads out of the ground.”

The kitsen’s eyes widened as they watched me, and several of them laid their ears back in what I thought might be fear. I didn’t know if it was still me they were afraid of, or the Superiority, but I’d made this mess. I’d insisted on coming here. I’d scudding lost control in the middle of the most important diplomatic meeting I’d ever been in, and stars, I had to fix it.

“You may feel like you have peace and prosperity here, but Kauri is right. The Superiority is trying to make a deal with the delvers, and they’re going to come for anyone who opposes them. This might be our *last chance* to resist before they have the power they need to control every planet in the galaxy. How long do you think your planet will last without allies?”

FM put a hand on my arm, and I startled. Scud, was I messing this up? But beside me, she smiled and nodded.

Keep going, Alanik said in my mind. You have to convince them.

The kitsen watched me in shock, but not one of them had complained yet that I was speaking out of turn.

I didn’t know if I *could* convince them, especially after what I’d just done—stars, what had I done?—but I had to try.

“We tried to reason with the Superiority,” I said. “They offered us a treaty, and we sent a delegation to sign the deal.” My throat closed, but I spoke through it. “The Superiority offered us peace and then locked our leaders up in a ship and blew it to pieces. Half our government is gone. I *will not* fight you, because I have had enough of senseless violence and death. If you want, we will collect our people and go. But before we do, I want to offer you the opportunity to join us. The UrDail already have! The Superiority made a deal with the UrDail—and then visited their planet with a battleship bent on destroying them. This new Superiority government, that’s what they do. And if you try to reason with them, they’re going to come for you, too. And I don’t want to see it happen again. Not what happened to—”

My voice broke.

“—to my people.”

To my parents.

The room was so hot, but my hands felt cold. My vision blurred. I couldn’t stay here anymore. I had to get out.

“Thank you,” I said. And I stood, my neck bent to avoid hitting my head on the ceiling, then moved in a crouch down the aisle and got down on my hands and knees to crawl through the double doors out of the chamber.

The cool air hit my face, and I squinted against the bright sunlight.

I turned toward the beach, careful not to step on anyone or anything, and ran away as quickly as I dared.

Nine

I made it almost to the water before FM caught up to me. My calves burned from moving so quickly across the sand, though I'd been out of breath since before I left the senate.

"Jorgen," she said.

I didn't turn around.

"Jorgen!" She caught me by the shoulder, spinning me around. My thoughts raced, and I felt like I could just keep spinning.

What the *scud* had I just done?

I'd shot a bunch of *mindblades* at a group of politicians. I'd sat in so many of those kinds of meetings growing up. I knew how to behave, how to hold everything in, how to present a calm front no matter what was going on inside.

Why did I have to go and do *that*?

"Jorgen," FM said, "this has to stop."

She was right, though I wasn't sure which "this" she meant. The part where I faked being in control, though I didn't have any idea what I was doing? This charade where we pretended we could put together alliances and fight the Superiority? Even if these people did agree to join us, what did we have to offer them? Was there any victory over an enemy this powerful? The best we could say was that so far we hadn't been exterminated completely—though until very recently I didn't think the Superiority had really been trying.

"Say something," FM said. I didn't see Alanik behind her. I wondered if she'd gone to tell the others what happened, or stayed to try to reason with the kitsen some more. She couldn't possibly do a *worse* job than I'd done—

I swore, scrubbing my hands over my face.

"Okay," FM said. "That's a good start."

I wanted to order her to go away again. I wanted to tell her I had no desire to talk about it.

But I also...*didn't*. I was drowning, and I'd brought my whole flight with me, and—

A large wave crashed onto the sand, and I jumped.

“Scud, Jorgen,” FM said. “Sit *down*.”

That was the only thing I thought myself capable of, so I did.

FM sat next to me and set Boomslug and Snuggles into the sand next to her.

“I messed that up,” I said. Stars, I was the flightleader. I wasn't supposed to admit weakness. If I had to, I was supposed to go to my superior officer so my flight wouldn't lose respect for me.

But FM had lost respect for me a long time ago, so I guessed there wasn't much to lose.

“Actually,” FM said, “I think what you said *improved* the meeting. I mean, I wouldn't have suggested that you start throwing around random cytonic powers—”

“I didn't do that on purpose,” I said.

“I know. But you got their attention, and then you gave them the speech they needed. And now they're going to have to make a decision. And if they choose to side with the Superiority...” she sighed. “Sometimes people are going to make bad choices, and there's nothing we can do about it.”

“That sucks,” I said.

“It's the worst!” FM said. “But it's not your fault.”

Scud. “We're talking about my parents now,” I said.

“Yes, we're talking about your parents!” FM said. “And don't even try to order me not to because I'm not going to listen to you this time. You are holding everything in so tightly that it *literally* exploded. We are doing this now, whether you like it or not.”

I expected to feel angry, but instead I felt...relief. Like I'd been holding up something very heavy and someone else finally saw through my assurances that I had it and took some of the weight.

That didn't make any sense though. "Talking about it isn't going to change anything," I said. "Nothing can change it."

"That's true," FM said. "And trust me, I don't like talking about these things any more than you do. But it helps, I promise. It doesn't change what happened, but it changes *you*."

I looked over at her. "You know this from experience?"

FM nodded. "Rig taught me that. Sometimes he has to *make* me talk, but every time I'm glad I did."

"You guys are really good together," I said. I would never have guessed it before they got together, but they seemed to balance each other out.

FM smiled. "Rig is my safe place," she said. "But we're not talking about me. We're talking about you, and the fact that you need to talk or you're going to explode. Again."

I ran my hands through the sand. The grains were so tiny, and some of them stuck to my fingers. "I don't even know what to say," I said.

"Okay," FM said. "I'll go first. I was terrified when that Superiority ship exploded. I thought you had died in there. That's the second time in a couple of weeks that we all thought you'd died, and it was *horrible* both times. So I would appreciate it if you'd stop doing that."

I hadn't thought about what that was like for the flight, waiting in their ships. They'd known there was a bomb. Alanik had pulled Rig in to try to disarm it.

Oh scud. "Is Rig okay?" I asked. "He knows that it wasn't his fault, right?"

FM held out a hand and wobbled it back and forth. "I mean, logically he knows. He is not an expert at defusing explosives. But he still blames himself."

I should have said something to him. I was the officer in charge of that operation, and it was my responsibility to—

"We're not talking about Rig either," FM said. "The question is, do *you* blame yourself?"

"Yes," I said. I didn't even have to think about it.

"But you know it isn't your fault, right?"

I stared out at the ocean. The sun was starting to get lower in the sky, the light over the whole landscape turning an orangey-yellow.

I didn't answer, and FM sighed. "What happened on the ship? Before the explosion."

I closed my eyes. My memories felt fractured, slowed down and sped up all at once. "We split up," I said. "I was taking fake Cobb to my parents to out him. Alanik went to release Gran-Gran. She was able to communicate with Gran-Gran, and Gran-Gran said she could sense Cobb, like, cytonically, even though she shouldn't have been able to do that."

"So something strange was going on with Gran-Gran even before they hyperjumped," FM said.

"Yeah, I guess so. Alanik also said Gran-Gran was talking about hearing voices."

Voices asking for help.

Oh *scud*.

Whatever had gone wrong with her, was it happening to me too? She'd somehow lost her powers because of it, and if I did the same—

"There's more," I said. "Those people in the tent are Gran-Gran and Cobb—at least, best as we can tell—but Gran-Gran doesn't appear to be cytonic."

"What does that mean?" FM asked.

"It means her mind isn't...visible to us in the nowhere anymore. She's lost her...vibration, I guess."

"I'll take your word for it," FM said. "That's bad, Jorgen."

"Yeah," I said. "She was fleeing a Superiority ship. Maybe it was a trap they left for anyone trying to hyperjump away? But Alanik and I didn't get caught in it."

Not yet anyway.

I remembered the strange *things* I'd felt when Alanik and I were looking for Gran-Gran and Cobb in the nowhere—the texture, like there were hundreds of beings around me, there one moment and gone the next.

There was something out there in the nowhere. Maybe it wasn't the Superiority at all. "I wonder if it's *them*," I said. "The delvers. The voices

didn't sound like I would imagine a delver—"

"Wait," FM said. "You've heard them? The voices that asked for help?"

Scud. "Yeah," I said, rubbing my hands on my knees, trying to wipe off the sand. The stuff seemed to cling to everything. I wondered if we'd ever be free of it. "I heard them in the meeting. Right before I... Right before."

"That's not good," FM said. "There's something really weird going on, and you're all caught up in it."

"I know," I said.

"And that's the only reason I've let us get sidetracked for this long. You were telling me about what happened on the ship. You told me all about what happened to Alanik..."

"I went to find my parents," I said. "It took me a while, because the ship was big and I took some wrong turns. Eventually fake Cobb got away from me and ran off. He seemed really eager to get out of there, though I didn't know why until Alanik told me about the bomb."

"Right," FM said.

"By the time I found my parents, they were trapped in this room in the center of the ship. I could see them through the glass but it wouldn't break, and all the doors were sealed shut."

I saw my father's face through the glass, his resignation when the Superiority announced they were going to be exterminated. My mother yelling at me to leave them, to escape, to save myself.

"The Superiority announced they were going to kill them," I said. "Alanik and I tried to find a way to get them out, but there wasn't one."

"That's not your fault," FM said. "You had minutes at best, like Rig. You weren't prepared for that and it isn't your fault. The Superiority did this, not you."

"My mother told me to go, but I didn't. I wouldn't listen to Alanik either. And right before Alanik pulled me out, my mother spoke to me through the glass—she said to do better than they did."

"Stars," FM said. "No wonder you feel pressure to stay in control of everything."

I didn't want to be in control. I just wanted to make sure the DDF was in the hands of someone who would keep our people safe.

"I didn't want to leave them," I said. "If Alanik hadn't pulled me out, I would have died there."

FM closed her eyes. "Thank the stars for Alanik then."

I couldn't say this next part. I couldn't bring myself to form the words, especially not to FM.

Maybe it would have been easier if I had died there.

I looked out over the ocean.

I couldn't think like that. My flight needed me. *Cobb* needed me. We had to figure out how to reverse whatever the Superiority or the delvers had done to him and get him back in charge of the DDF.

FM was right. My parents' deaths weren't my fault. But all the ways I was failing everyone now, falling apart when I should have been leading—

That was squarely on my head.

I stood up and brushed sand off my flight suit.

"You aren't done talking," FM said.

"Yes," I said. "I am." I couldn't sit here being useless. Maybe FM was right. Maybe talking could change how I felt, but it didn't do anything to help everyone else.

I couldn't indulge in that. I couldn't be useless. I'd already lost Spensa, lost my parents.

I couldn't let it happen again, not to anyone else.

"Maybe for *now*," FM said. "We'll talk more later."

Scud. I'd answered her questions. Wasn't that enough?

I was almost glad to see Alanik headed my way with Nedd and Arturo. Juno floated along farther behind them. I didn't want to answer their questions either, but at least they weren't going to probe me about my feelings, especially in front of the kitsen.

"Dude," Nedd said when they drew near. "Did you seriously *explode*?"

"Shut up, Nedd," Arturo said. "But, did you?"

"I already told you what happened," Alanik said, looking annoyed. "You didn't believe me?"

“We believe you,” Nedd said. “We’re just incredulous.”

“That word literally means ‘unable to believe,’ ” Alanik said. “Is there a translation error, or are you making fun of me?”

“Neither,” FM said. “They’re just idiots.”

“Yeah, it’s true,” I said.

“That they’re idiots?” Alanik asked.

“Sometimes,” I said. “But I did...explode.”

“That is *awesome*,” Nedd said. “I mean, not the part where you threw around deadly mind weapons at a political summit. That seems bad.”

“Bad” didn’t begin to cover it, but there was also something off about it. Juno finally caught up to us, which was good, because I wanted his opinion on this.

“Why didn’t I hurt anyone?” I asked. “When I startled Boomslug, he cut me up.”

“Your mindblades are ill-formed,” Juno said. “You need training to make them sharper, stronger.”

“I don’t *want* them to be sharper,” I said. “I could have killed somebody.”

I waited for one of them to tell me I was being overdramatic.

They didn’t.

“When Kauri said you wanted to learn about the shadow-walkers,” Juno said, “she didn’t tell me you *were* one. I have spent my life studying their texts, their lore, their ancient wisdom. You have strength, but you need control, and I can teach you if you will consent to be taught.”

“What about your senate?” I asked. “Will they allow it?”

“The senate has taken a recess,” Alanik said. “They want to think about the things you said, and then they’re going to convene in the morning to make a decision. In the meantime, they say we’re free to transport Cobb and Gran-Gran home to Detritus.”

“Okay,” I said. “We need to take care of that first.”

“I can handle the transport,” Alanik said. “You can go with Juno, as long as you promise to fill me in on what you’ve learned later.”

“Okay,” I said. “You hyperjump Gran-Gran and Cobb to Platform Prime with the medical crew.” Hopefully Cobb and Gran-Gran would recover faster with our medical resources at home. Then they could tell us what had happened to Gran-Gran’s powers. I turned to Arturo and Nedd. “You two help her get them there safely.”

“Of course,” Arturo said. “We’ve got this.” And they all headed toward the hospital tent.

“I’ll go check on the others,” FM said. “And see what kind of accommodations we can find for the night. We may have to sleep in our starships, but I guess Spensa did that for most of flight school, so it can’t be too bad.”

She walked away, leaving me alone on the beach with Juno, who hovered up until he was at eye level with me.

“I have studied mindblades all my life,” Juno said, “but I had never seen them before today. Tell me, human. What you did, was it a stunt? A display of power? Were you trying to intimidate them?”

“No,” I said. “I just...lost control.”

“If I may ask,” Juno said, “control of *what*?”

I blinked at him. “Of myself,” I said. “Of...”

Of this unstoppable, unknowable force that wanted to rip its way out of me. I’d been taught all my life to feel shame for the defect, never to speak of it. I’d spent so long wishing I could keep up with Spensa, with Alanik, wishing I wasn’t so hopeless at using my powers—wishing I could harness them to protect the people I loved.

But somehow I’d still never made this connection: I was *dangerous*.

“I want to learn how to control them,” I said.

“Good, then,” Juno said. “Come with me, and we’ll see what we can do.”

Ten

“Breathe in, breathe out,” Juno said. “You are now completely relaxed.”

I was far from completely relaxed. I sat cross-legged on top of the cliff above Dreamspring while Juno hovered on his platform in front of me, reading from a book that he said contained the ancient exercises used by kitsen cytonics. He’d changed into a set of power armor that covered every part of him except his ears, his eyes, and his nose. The terrain up here was rough and rocky, the orange stone warm beneath me. We’d chosen this location because the tops of the cliffs were unpopulated; if I managed to produce a mindblade, there was no one around to be hurt by it but Juno, and he swore it was his sacred responsibility to put himself into the line of fire.

I didn’t know how much his armor would help against a mindblade, but he’d insisted on wearing it anyway.

And it did look badass, I’d give him that.

“I thought this was supposed to focus on mindblades,” I said. “Not breathing.”

“Patience,” Juno said. “According to the wisdom of the ancients, in order to achieve control, you must first accept that you have none by bringing yourself into alignment with the will of the universe.”

“I can’t both achieve control *and* have none. That’s ridiculous.”

“It is the way of the shadow-walkers,” Juno said. “It is the way the ancients channeled their power, and the way that you must channel yours.”

I sighed, interrupting the “continuous breathing” that Juno insisted I try. That didn’t make sense to me either—I was pretty sure every creature with lungs used “continuous breathing” to stay alive, so why was that something I needed to practice? Spensa had figured out how to hyperjump and Alanik could do it with ease, and I was pretty sure extra “continuous breathing” had not been involved.

Then again, it wasn't any *more* ridiculous than kneading bread while wearing a blindfold, and that had been oddly helpful.

It changes you, FM had said. I still wasn't sure I'd done a great job of talking, but maybe I could be better at this. Breathing was easy, so what did I have to complain about?

"Let's begin again," Juno said. "Close your eyes." And instead of telling him this was a waste of my time, I did.

"See yourself walking along a beach," Juno said. "With each breath, the waves wash in, and the waves wash out."

Less than a day ago, I would have had no idea what Juno was talking about. But now I *could* picture myself on the beach. I could practically hear the churning of the ocean, the strangely mechanical white noise produced by so much water moving at once.

"Feel the wind on your skin," Juno said. "The heat of the sun as it burns down from above. Hear the sounds of the waves as they lap upon the shore. Smell the salt in the air and the rotting of the seaweed washed up on the beach as it slowly decays."

"That's disgusting," I said.

"Yes," Juno said. "But it is the method of the ancients. And you're not supposed to speak during the exercise."

"Sorry," I said.

"You walk forward and stand in the ocean. Feel the water as it washes against your feet. The temperature is pleasant, not too warm, and not too cool."

If Spensa were listening to this, she would embellish on it.

I laughed.

"Is something funny?"

"No," I said. "Just imagining the ocean running red with the blood of my enemies."

Juno sounded startled. "Is that some kind of...cytonic premonition?"

"Nope," I said. "A memory of my girlfriend. Never mind. Go on."

"The waves wash against your legs once...twice...three times. Feel the pull of the ocean current as it tugs on your feet. Your mind is the ocean,

flowing from this realm to the next, drawing close and then away again. Let your mind slip outward like the tide, into the vast ocean of nothingness that surrounds you.”

Scud, my mind did slip into the nowhere as easily as he said. In and out, like the tide. The longer I pictured it, the easier it was to do.

I didn’t want to be in the nowhere. That was where the voices came from, and that strange texture, the presence that felt like so many beings all crowding in on me. Either or both could be the eyes, but they *felt* different. Not as menacing. Friendly even—

“As the wave of your mind washes into this dimension, it carries with it a bit of the nowhere. Shards of nothing ride atop the wave, washing into the somewhere, each of them *becoming* only for a moment, then fading away.”

I could feel them. The fragments of nowhere, the little bits of nothing following my mind into the somewhere. They had to take form—everything in this world had form, while that world was the absence of it.

A presence pressed in on my mind—Alanik working with the medtechs to transport Cobb and Gran-Gran. She might return with orders from Stoff calling us back to Detritus, so I needed to concentrate and learn while I still could.

“Observe the fragments as they emerge. Notice their shape and their texture. Draw them forth from your memory.”

The fragments *did* have a shape. My mind skipped over the nowhere like a stone on a pond, and each time it made contact the fragments of nothing broke off. They were shaped like crystals, oblong with crisp, faceted sides. I couldn’t hold them so much as *glimpse* them.

“Picture their shapes in your mind, and begin to mold them. Will them to alter their form little by little, growing sharper, larger, stronger. The fragments are you, and you are the fragments. They bend to your will, as you bend your will to the vibrations of the universe.”

I didn’t what it meant that I *was* the fragments, but I focused on them, trying to change their shape. And they *did* change, as if they weren’t bits of nothing at all, but pieces of my mind—energy that was scattering and

dissipating while I made contact with the nowhere. My whole body tensed as the fragments got sharper.

“When you are ready, bring your mind into alignment with them. Feel their rhythm; align your vibration to theirs. You are them, and they are you. You are as one—neither exerting control over the other—of one mind, one will, and one spirit.”

“What am I supposed to do?” I said.

Juno cleared his throat. “Do you want me to read it again?”

“Okay.” Though I wasn’t sure I was going to understand it any better the second time.

“I will admit, when I imagined having the opportunity to guide the meditations of a shadow-walker, I had not envisioned quite so many interruptions.”

“Sorry,” I said.

As Juno read, I tried to focus on the vibration of the fragments—were they really my own mind?—flying out of the nowhere. I worried about what they might do if I tried to move them, especially since I didn’t have any idea how to align my *will* with them.

But I needed to try. I touched the fragments lightly, and—*Oh*. I opened my eyes, sensing a fragment flying off over the cliff, cutting through the breeze before it dissipated. “I think I did it,” I said.

The sky above us was turning a deep shade of indigo, but over the water it was a bright yellow, which faded into orange and then pink. A sunset. I’d seen paintings of those, but they’d failed to capture the beauty. And here I had been keeping my eyes closed.

I hoped the rest of my flight was watching it at least.

“We came up here because you would not harm anything if you succeeded in manifesting the blades,” Juno said. “Now I see the folly in it. We cannot tell if you’ve manifested them, because there is nothing for you to manipulate but me.”

That wasn’t entirely true.

“Hang on,” I said, and I turned around—scud, now I was facing *away* from the sunset. But if this worked, it would be worth it.

“Read to me again,” I said. “The part about the continuous breathing.”

Juno started the meditation over, and I closed my eyes and tried to focus on my surroundings, to skim the surface of the nowhere with my mind, until I could feel the fragments appearing and scattering. I focused on them, molding them into tiny points, like blades of grass I’d seen in paintings of Old Earth. I reached out, touching the fragments lightly with my mind.

And then I pushed them down, shoving them out away from my feet.

A sound, like marbles hitting sandstone.

I opened my eyes.

Scud, I’d *scratched* the stone in front of me, leaving gouges in it.

“Shadow-walker,” Juno said. “It seems the meditation has worked.”

It seemed it had. “Let me try that again,” I said.

Juno read to me from his meditations, and each time I aimed with the strange shards of nowhere the grooves in the sandstone grew deeper, until I was cutting deep gashes no wider than my index finger.

“Do you have more of those meditations in your books?” I asked.

“Many more,” Juno said. “Entire volumes, in fact.”

If Stoff decided to pull us home, maybe I could use that knowledge as an excuse to stay, at least until Alanik and I could learn more about how to use our powers. We were the best weapons the DDF had right now, but we needed more training. A lot more.

“Thank you, Juno,” I said.

“It has been my pleasure, shadow-walker.”

It was strange for him to call me that, since I didn’t *walk* anywhere. I wondered if he had a meditation in his book that could teach me to hyperjump.

“Let’s try it again,” I said, walking over to a fresh section of the cliff. “I want to see how deep I can make the shards—”

I slipped into the nowhere, and immediately a voice entered my mind. *We hear you*, it said.

Scud. Was that the delvers? It didn’t *feel* terrifying, but—

Help us! it said. *We hear you.*

They didn’t sound menacing. They sounded...desperate. Scared.

I don't know how to help you, I said.

"Is something wrong?" Juno asked.

"I can hear someone," I said. "Someone asking for my help."

Jorgen? a voice said. I recognized that one.

Gran-Gran! Was she awake now? You have your powers back?

I... What?

Your powers, I said. Are you awake? Did they disappear while you were asleep somehow?

Not a lot of time, Gran-Gran said. Hard to concentrate, but you need to... help us...

Her voice faded, and while I called her name again into the nowhere, she didn't respond.

Jorgen, Alanik said. We need you at the medical tent. You need to see this.

She sounded urgent, so I didn't ask questions. "Excuse me," I said to Juno. "I want to learn more, but my people need me."

"Of course," Juno said.

I called to Snuggles, who was waiting again in my ship. She appeared in my arms. "Take me to Alanik," I said, sending Snuggles a picture.

"Alanik!" Snuggles said.

Juno, the cliff, and the melting remains of the sunset all disappeared.

Eleven

Snuggles and I passed by the eyes and jumped to the front of the medical tent, where the medtechs had loaded Cobb and Gran-Gran onto stretchers. Nedd and Arturo each stood at the foot of one of the stretchers, with Kel and Winnow at the heads. I sent Snuggles immediately back to Boomslug in my ship.

“What’s wrong?” I asked Alanik.

“We started moving them over to the ship,” Winnow said, indicating to where the transport shuttle was waiting down by the water. “But as we took them farther from the tent, they started to deteriorate.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Blood pressure dropped,” Kel said. “Heart rates became irregular. What’s strange is that it happened to *both* of them at more or less the same time.”

“Why would that happen?” I asked.

“I can’t explain it,” Kel said. “Even weirder is they stabilized as soon as we brought them back here.”

“It’s like they don’t want to be away from here,” Winnow said. “We wanted to load them in the ship first so we wouldn’t jostle them when we hyperjump—”

“If their condition is linked to this place then we definitely can’t hyperjump them,” I said. “But why would it matter if they’re *here*?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Winnow said. “But my professional judgment is that we don’t move a patient if moving changes their condition for the worse.”

“Can you treat them here?”

Winnow nodded. “We may need to go home for some equipment. But for the moment we can get them comfortable.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Arturo stepped up beside me. “What do you think is going on?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. I slipped into the nowhere, listening, but the only cytonic I felt nearby was Alanik. “Gran-Gran’s powers still seem to be gone. But I *heard* her in the nowhere.”

“Really?” Alanik asked.

“Yeah. Hang on. Let me—”

I focused, returning to the imaginary ocean from the meditation. Instead of focusing on the fragments—which I now realized splintered off every time I touched the nowhere—I listened, trying to hear her again.

Gran-Gran?

No response. I tried to push farther, listening closer...

And then I felt the texture again, the strange sensation of *bumps*, hundreds of them—maybe thousands—all over and around the island. One minute Alanik and I were alone, and then there were so *many* of them.

What *were* those?

I shook myself, dropping my link to the nowhere. “Do you *feel* that?” I asked Alanik. “Those...weird ridges?”

“No,” Alanik said. “And I don’t hear Gran-Gran either. You’re sure it was her?”

I was sure. If this Gran-Gran didn’t have powers, but *another* Gran-Gran was talking to me from the nowhere, did that mean she was lost in there like Spensa somehow? I’d assumed Spensa’s body had gone with her when she left, but I hadn’t asked, and maybe she wouldn’t even know.

Juno had finally caught up to me, his disc floating toward us from the cliff face.

“Juno,” I called to him. “Do you know anything about shadow-walkers projecting their spirits into the nowhere without their bodies?”

“The soul is made up of the body and the mind,” Juno said. “Your mind enters the nowhere whenever you interact with it. Only when you hyperjump does your body follow.”

“Sure,” I said. “But can the mind end up *stuck* in the nowhere without the body to follow it?”

“I have not read of it happening,” Juno said. “Not in all the books of lore.”

“It wouldn’t explain this anyway,” Alanik said. “When your mind goes into the negative realm, your body remains and continues to resonate cytonically. Otherwise we would stop being able to sense each other every time we communicated through the negative realm. Why would your body stop resonating if your mind was stuck?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I wonder if it has something to do with the voices Gran-Gran was hearing before she hyperjumped.” The voices I was hearing now. Scud, I did not want to end up in a mysterious coma. “Something went wrong in the jump, and it’s still possible that she’s stuck somehow.” Though I didn’t know why she would have stopped talking to me. She said it was difficult somehow...

“Juno,” I said. “Can you show me where Cobb and Gran-Gran first came through the nowhere?”

“Of course,” Juno said. “They were found in the burrow that once belonged to our master shadow-walkers. Now it is our library, the home of our lore.”

In a *library*? That seemed...unhelpful. But still... “I’d like to see it,” I said. “Alanik, will you come with us?”

“Of course,” Alanik said. She seemed confused about why I’d want to see it, but she didn’t argue.

“FM said we’re camping on the beach tonight,” Nedd said. “Because there are no kitsen buildings big enough to hold all of us. We’ll go see about setting up camp.”

The sky was rapidly growing dark now that the last sliver of the sun had finished setting. The horizon over the ocean had turned a rosy shade of pink, but over the cliffs I could make out the first of the stars.

“Thank you,” I said to Nedd, and I followed Juno as he led Alanik and me toward the library.

Unlike the elevated burrows of the rest of Dreamspring, the library was set down in a kind of crater, deep beneath the sandstone cliff. We descended a set of tiny stairs, and Alanik and I pressed our hands against the sandstone

walls, resting our feet on three or four steps at a time, using them more for traction than as stairs. As we moved I felt that cytonic resonance I'd detected earlier growing stronger. We were heading toward something important.

We descended far enough down that if the waves were to lap this far, they'd surely fill the basin. But they must not ever reach this part of the island if the library had remained intact for so long.

We had to crawl through the ornate arched doorway after Juno, but the library itself was several levels tall, which allowed Alanik and me to stand with a meter of headroom to spare. The room was filled with tables barely above ankle height, and I was careful where I stepped, so as not to disturb any of the cushions set around them or the carts covered in books and scrolls.

Along three of the walls were shelves covered in books, all of them smaller than the palm of my hand. Ladders scaled the walls, which were lined with railed walkways for perusing the rows of shelves, though several of the acclivity stone platforms also waited at the entrance of the room to provide ease of access.

It was the fourth wall though that caught my attention.

It was a stone wall, smooth and polished, with rows and rows of lines carved into it in a strange, almost technological design. The wall radiated a power that was undeniably cytonic, and something about it felt familiar.

"This is where you found them?" I asked Juno.

"Yes," Juno said, hovering in the doorway on his platform. "Over there, by the scroll case. They appeared lying side-by-side on top of some tables."

Alanik picked her way across the room and examined the wall, which stretched all the way to the relatively high ceiling. She pressed her hand to the lines on the wall. "I've never seen anything like this," she said.

Neither had I, but I swore I'd heard of a wall like this.

Oh, *scud*.

Now I remembered where.

"Alanik, step away from the wall," I said.

She looked over her shoulder at me like I was crazy, but she did as I asked, working her way past the rows of tables littered with books.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I think...I think it’s a portal,” I said. “An entrance to the nowhere. Spensa told me there’s one in the caverns of Detritus. She said we should search for it—but that we needed to be careful, because a cytonic could fall through and get stuck there like she did.” We had teams looking for it, but I hadn’t heard if they’d found anything.

Alanik suddenly looked alarmed. “What does that mean?” she asked. “If Gran-Gran hyperjumped, she shouldn’t have had to use a physical portal. There wasn’t one like this on the Superiority ship.”

“I don’t know what it means,” I said. “But Gran-Gran heard voices asking for help before she jumped, right? And I’ve been hearing them too.”

Alanik squinted at me. “Voices from the negative realm?”

“Maybe,” I said. I concentrated, listening for them again. “Juno, you said this used to be the burrow where your master cytonics lived. What happened to them?”

“They met in a great summit to compile the vast knowledge of our people,” Juno said. “During the summit, they simply disappeared, leaving behind only these strange symbols.” He gestured to the wall. “Beyond that we don’t know, as there was no one left to write down the history.”

There wouldn’t be, if they all disappeared at once. My people had lost knowledge the same way. After the crash of the Defiant fleet, the first lifebuster bomb dropped by the Superiority had killed all the officers, the entire command staff—everyone who knew what had happened and why. We were left to make up our own stories about the “Krell.”

Thanks to Spensa though, I had a hunch as to what might have happened. “They left this wall behind,” I said, “because the summit was here? In this room?”

“Yes,” Juno said. “This city has been our capital for centuries, so it was a natural meeting place.”

“If they decided to try out their knowledge,” I said, “they might have figured out how to create this portal into the nowhere and then gotten

trapped inside.”

“If that is so,” Juno said, “I’m afraid they should have died many years ago.”

That was true, but I’d heard *something* in the nowhere. I focused on the portal. I couldn’t hear the voices at the moment—not Gran-Gran’s or the others.

They were asking for help. Gran-Gran had heard them—she’d spent so many years trapped on Detritus, listening to the stars. If anyone could have honed their skills at detecting signals in the nowhere no one else could hear, it was her.

“Did Spensa tell you how to open it?” Alanik asked.

“No,” I said. “And I haven’t been able to reach her again these last few days, so I can’t ask.” I turned to Juno. “Are there legends of what happened to the cytonics?” If there was any truth in them, there might be some clue as to how to reach the kitsen cytonics—and Gran-Gran, who had been lost chasing after them.

“Oh, many,” Juno said. “Most of them are children’s tales. My favorite involves a band of space pirates who flew through the skies on the back of an enormous turtle.”

“Space pirates stole your cytonics?”

“Almost certainly not,” Juno said. “I said it was my favorite, not the most accurate.”

“Which would you say is the most accurate?” I asked.

“It’s impossible to say for certain, of course,” Juno said. “But I’ve always given credence to the theories of Ito, who wrote that—”

“Jorgen!” Arturo’s voice came from the handheld radio clipped to my belt.

“Yes?” I responded.

“Superiority carrier ship,” Arturo said. “There are fighters headed this way.”

Scud. The Superiority. I’d hoped they hadn’t heard Kauri’s signal and didn’t realize we were here.

Apparently I was wrong. “We have to go,” I told Alanik.

“If you are going to use your new skills against the enemy,” Juno said, “perhaps I could accompany you.”

I didn’t know if I was ready for that, but a kitsen wouldn’t take up much space in my cockpit. Even less than the slugs, though I hoped he didn’t want to cuddle as close. “Okay,” I said. I called to Snuggles, and she appeared instantly on my shoulder with Boomslug in tow, because she couldn’t seem to go anywhere without him anymore.

I put one hand on Alanik’s shoulder and one on Juno’s platform and asked Snuggles to hyperjump us all to the beach.

Twelve

The carrier ship loomed in the sky above Dreamspring, illuminated by the ivory-colored moon peeking over the horizon. The ship sat directly above the city, ringed by puffs of clouds. It looked out of place over the idyllic landscape.

“They are here for you?” Juno asked. He didn’t sound like he blamed us. He was simply gathering the facts.

“Probably,” I said. We’d brought this down on the kitsen. It was our responsibility to do what we could to protect them.

I didn’t have to give the order for my flight to get to their ships. They were already running. I kept my hands on Alanik’s shoulder and Juno’s platform and directed Snuggles to hyperjump us to FM’s fighter. “We need to release the taynix,” I said. “We might need them to retrieve the others.” I raised FM’s canopy and released Gill, and then Alanik and I raced between the ships, opening the boxes. When we finished, I had Snuggles hyperjump Juno and me straight to my cockpit.

Alanik ran for her ship, while Juno took up position right behind my seat. We lifted off as four enemy ships swooped in overhead.

The rest of the flight were still running. We needed to provide air support or they were going to get gunned down before they got into the air.

Cover me, I said to Alanik.

Got it, Alanik responded.

I flew straight at the enemy ships, opening fire so they had to scatter or lose their shields. Juno gave a little squeak of surprise, like he hadn’t expected the fighter to...what? Fight?

Alanik got a few good shots on the ships as they rolled, and then followed on my wing as I pursued the ships long enough to draw their fire and lead them out over the ocean away from the beach.

“Well, that was exciting,” Juno said. He seemed to have affixed the boots of his power armor to his hovering disc so he wouldn’t go flying off as I accelerated.

“You haven’t seen anything.” *Circle around and cover the others*, I told Alanik, and she peeled away and shot at one of the enemy ships, which had also turned back.

For all Alanik’s talk about proving yourself in combat, she fit effortlessly into the flight and never argued when I gave her orders.

“Jerkface,” Arturo said over the radio, “the others are getting in their ships now, but Quirk and Sentry are pinned down over by where we had that feast.”

“Got it,” I said. “Angel, cover the others until they get in their ships, then back me up.” I darted off down the beach, immediately spotting the ship Arturo was talking about. It was peppering the rock with destructor fire, and I hoped Kimmalyn and Sadie had found good cover. I opened fire, getting in one good hit before the ship went into a bank, then rolled and returned fire. I flew beneath the ship, forcing it to turn again and keep its attention on me. Once I had it, I threw my ship into a wave sequence, evading its fire, leading that ship out over the ocean again.

I caught the attention of two more tails. Arturo and Nedd were both in their ships now, circling over the area where Kimmalyn and Sadie had been pinned down.

“Amphi,” I said, “how are Quirk and Sentry?”

“Climbing out of an oven, it looks like,” Arturo said.

“How clever,” Juno said behind me.

“They’re coated in soot,” Arturo said. “We can cover them to their ships.”

“I’ve got it,” I said. Kimmalyn and Sadie couldn’t call to their slugs, but I could let the slugs know where they were. I sent Cheeky and Happy a mental image of the oven area. I felt the slugs hyperjump to the ovens, and then to the ships.

“They’re here!” FM said. “Very dirty, but they appear to be fine.”

“Good,” I said. “Everyone sound off when you’re in the air.”

My three tails were trying to catch me in their crossfire, and I darted through another defensive sequence while the flight sounded off. Instinct took over while I kept mental track, making sure no one was missing.

“Is someone helping Jerkface?” Kimmalyn asked over the radio.

“I’ve got it,” I said. My tails were right behind me, all three targeting me at once, though I still had my shield and they were firing wildly.

“This might be a good time to try a meditative exercise,” Juno said.

“How do you figure?” I asked, going into a barrel roll. Juno’s platform tipped to the side, and he let out a little squeak that sounded suspiciously like a *whoop*.

The others were all in their ships now, so I didn’t have to worry about leading the enemy away. I didn’t want to encourage the enemy to fire on the kitsen city, but I also didn’t want to leave the city alone for too long and have it get blasted in our absence. I didn’t know what the Superiority’s orders were, so we had to plan for anything.

“Remember the fragments,” Juno said. “Your breathing.”

“I’m busy,” I said.

Juno continued as if he hadn’t heard me. “Breathe in, breathe out. You are now completely relaxed.”

I was not at all relaxed. I’d seen the biofeedback reports, tests where the DDF tracked our vitals even on routine flights. We functioned on pure adrenaline up here. “Juno,” I said. “I don’t think—”

“You are a stone, skipping on the sea,” he said, and I remembered that sensation, the skimming across the nowhere. The vibration I felt along the boundary between this world and the nowhere was not unlike the vibration of my ship as it cut through the sky.

“I can’t manifest mindblades inside my ship,” I said. “I could cut the ship to pieces.” Slices of metal curling outward, flying away from each other in a giant burst.

“Boom,” Boomslug said.

“Right,” I said. “No booms. Not here.”

“Not here,” Boomslug agreed.

The enemy ships were still on my tail, and I evaded their fire and swung around parallel to the beach. If I brought them back, I could—

“Jerkface, you okay?” Arturo asked.

“Fine,” I said. “Get the rest of the flight in offensive formation.” I couldn’t get a good view of the battlefield without giving an opening to my tails, so Arturo would have to manage it. He was capable. He could handle it without me.

“Ah, here it is,” Juno said, flipping through the pages of the book. “Return to the ocean. Stand with your feet in the water. You are a part of it, as it is a part of you.”

I could hear Arturo over the radio, giving instructions to the rest of the flight. He had Nedd supporting Kimmalyne while he and Alanik came after me. “Juno,” I said. “I really don’t think—”

“As the wave of your mind washes into this dimension, it carries with it shards of the nowhere. Feel them fly from the surface of the ocean of nothing. The shards are far from you, farther than your reach. They are not shards at all, but birds, growing wings, flying far, reaching into the beyond, cutting everything in their path with their razor-sharp beaks.”

Scud, I could see them, the shards, the *birds*. They flew along the edge of the nowhere like the ones I’d seen dodging over the waves earlier. I jogged my ship to the side to avoid a blast of destructor fire and completed my loop, heading for the beach. “You know if I mess this up, we’re going to fall out of the sky, right?” Snuggles could hyperjump us out, but I’d lose my ship and this was not the moment for that.

“Feel the birds fly away from you, the flock sailing toward your enemies, their beaks sharp and ready.”

Scud, was he going to keep reading this until I tried it? On my proximity sensors I could see more ships reaching the beach, engaging the rest of my flight. We couldn’t call for backup immediately. Either Alanik or I would have to go to Detritus retrieve them, so we needed to exhaust our other options first.

“All right,” I said. “Fine. I’ll deploy the birds.”

I shot upward toward a low-flying cloud. Alanik said these things would be fine to fly into, and we'd been watching them pass over all day without incident, so I didn't think there was anything nefarious hiding within. Using the cloud for cover, I executed an Ahlstrom loop and then watched on my proximity monitor for the ships to enter after me. They kept chasing me, but I used the cover to shake them off, coming out the bottom and banking hard toward the beach.

Arturo and Alanik caught up, showering my tails with fire.

"Amphi, Angel, back off," I said. "I'm going to try something."

I didn't want to close my eyes, not in the air. But I let my mind disconnect, flying by instinct. It was dangerous to do with three tails and with my backup dropping away like I'd asked them to. I might not have more than a moment, but I reached into the ocean of the nowhere and caught those fragments, forming them into birds that flew forward like missiles, their wings tucked against their bodies, their beaks sharp and ready.

One of the enemy fighters got a hit on my shield, and then another. I launched into a twin-scissor to avoid the fire, still trying to split my mind, to focus on the fragments.

"You are the birds, and the birds are you," Juno read. "You and the birds are one. You are one with the nowhere, and with yourself."

I zipped away, my tails still following me. "Everybody stay back," I said, and I slowed, nearly letting the enemy catch me.

My shield took one more hit and disappeared. I reached out for my flock of projectile birds.

And like tiny ships, I flew them into the enemies behind me.

The pilots didn't dodge. They never saw it coming. The mindblades tore through their wings and hulls, ignoring their shields, taking them apart. In my mind the fragments scattered and dissipated. The chunks of ship fell over the ocean, pieces of metal cleanly cut apart from each other.

Over the radio, Arturo swore.

"What was *that*?" Nedd said.

"Mindblades," FM said. "By the stars, Jerkface, that was incredible!"

My own ship was fine. I was almost surprised.

“I can’t believe that worked,” I said to Juno.

Juno made a self-satisfied little noise. “The lore of the ancients contains much wisdom.”

Apparently it did.

“Fine,” Alanik said over the radio. “You were right. You don’t need to fly out front to prove yourself.”

“Listen to her, Jerkface,” Nedd said. “Fall back and leave some for the rest of us.”

“Gladly,” I said. I took cover by the cliffs while I reignited my shield. Kimmalyn hovered above me, watching my back. While I waited I extended my sensors, taking stock of the enemy ships as the others engaged them. There were many of them, but not *overwhelmingly* many, and they seemed to be firing only on us, not the kitsen.

At least so far. I expected that meant they had come looking to eliminate us, not necessarily to destroy the kitsen for harboring us. That could turn very quickly, but I imagined that convincing the kitsen to help us if we were the only ones under attack was going to be—

Two ships bore down on us, and Kimmalyn tipped her nose in their direction—

The ships soared over our heads, and a new voice shouted over the radio. “Invaders!” it said, the words translated out of the sharp kitsen language by my pin. “Do you think to mar our beautiful home with your vulgar presence? We will cut you down where you stand, and you will regret the day you set foot on the Den of Everlasting Light Which Laps Gently upon the Shores of Time!”

Was that— “Goro?”

“Human,” Goro said. “I offer you a temporary reprieve from my challenge.”

At least that tirade wasn’t aimed at us then.

“I don’t have one of those pin things,” Catnip said. “Anyone want to translate for the fox-dude?”

“He’s offering to let Jerkface out of fighting him,” FM said. “Not that he agreed to fight him in the first place.”

I hoped this wasn’t another trap. Goro could offer to help us, only to turn around and use the fact that we’d fired at the Superiority as evidence of our savagery. “We are *defending ourselves*,” I said over the radio.

“Of course!” Goro went on. “You have proven yourself a coward in one-on-one combat, but many who are cowardly with the sword show their courage when they step into a ship!”

Stars. “I’m not a *coward* because I refuse to kick around someone one-tenth of my—”

“If you were to face my champion in combat you would bleed like the Red Rivers That Lead to the Empty Sea!”

“You shouldn’t let him bait you,” Juno said. “I think at this point he’s doing it for sport.”

I was glad one of us was enjoying it. “Goro,” I said, “we’re defending ourselves, and your people as well. The Superiority were willing to turn on the UrDail for harboring us, and they’ll do the same to you.”

I winced. That might not have been the best thing to say—that we’d knowingly put them in danger by coming here. But we couldn’t go *anywhere* without putting people in danger, and we needed to—

“This is your opportunity to prove yourself, human,” Goro said. “If you are defending the sacred cliffs of Dreamspring, then you are already our allies. Our ship might not be as fast as yours, but she is no less fierce. We will fight by your side as equals.”

Oh. That sounded more like an...opportunity. If we flew together, fought together, he might begin to believe that we truly intended to be their allies and not their conquerors. FM continued to translate for the others, catching most of the gist. Our response was up to me.

“Excellent,” I said to Goro. “We are pleased to fight by your side.”

“Jerkface,” Arturo said. “Another large group of fighters has left the carrier ship, headed this way.”

“*Jerkface*?” Goro said. “My shipboard translator interprets that as—”

“It’s not what it sounds like,” Alanik said. “Just go with it.”

“Goro,” I said, “are there other ships that could fight with us?” I widened my sensors to get a look at the incoming ships. Scud. “We’re badly outnumbered.”

“We’re here!” Kauri said, cutting in over the radio. “And there’s a small airfield on the other side of the island. The Air Force That Does Not Belong to He Who Was Not King should be joining us soon.”

Stars. “Your names are so long,” I said to Juno. “Aren’t your people ever in a hurry?”

“We shorten them often,” Juno said. “We use the full names when we want to impress or intimidate.”

Ah, okay. That made more sense. And an influx of kitsen ships could only be a good thing.

“Skyward Flight, let’s push the ships away from the city. FM, Sentry, you two take up the rearguard. We don’t know what the enemy target is, and I don’t want civilians getting hit while our backs are turned.”

“Copy, Jerkface,” FM said.

I didn’t command the kitsen, and I couldn’t act like I did. “Goro and Kauri, if you fly with us, we’ll protect your gunships while you shoot down the incoming enemy. Is that strategy acceptable to you?”

“The enemy’s faces will glisten with tears as they know the honor of being defeated by the *Ever-Glorious Crashing Waves of Time!*”

I took that as a yes.

“Is that...the name of your ship?” Kimmalyn asked.

“Yes, treacherous human,” Goro said.

So he hadn’t entirely given up on baiting us.

“I’m calling you *Crashing Wave*,” I said. “Unless that offends you?”

“If I am calling you Jerkface, I believe the offense is to you, human.”

“Yeah, probably,” I said. My parents had been on me to change my callsign ever since I finished flight school. I should probably do it now out of respect. If I said that was why, no one would question it.

But the real reason I’d kept it wasn’t because I wanted to defy my parents. I *liked* my callsign. Spensa had given it to me, and it reminded me of her. I wasn’t going to change it.

Especially not now.

My flight pushed toward the new ships and I flew out to join them, watching their approach. The Superiority forces were inconsistently trained, and this batch looked like they hadn't been in ships for long. Some of the Superiority groups seemed to have flightleaders, but these weren't following any specific formation. If they had leaders, they didn't know what they were doing.

My flight divided into three groups—a rearguard over the city, and then a two-pronged offense that came at the enemy ships from either side. The tactic was designed to break up a formation—and since a formation was already lacking, it sent the enemy ships into chaos. Goro and Kauri split up, one at the center of each prong, and Kauri especially seemed to understand our maneuvers and complement them.

Kimmalyyn was ordinarily my wingmate, but I'd assigned her and Nedd to support each other. Nedd was usually Arturo's wingmate, but Arturo had taken it upon himself to get Alanik up to speed to fly with us. I wasn't sure how necessary that had been—she'd taught us as much as we'd taught her in terms of maneuvers—but I also hadn't seen a reason yet to break it up.

A group of nearly a dozen ships slipped away from the rest of our flight and headed for the city.

"FM, Sentry," I said. "We have incoming."

"We see them," FM said.

"Protect the city," I said. "We don't know their exact target, but—"

Scud. All of those ships seemed to be headed directly for *me*.

"I think we know what their target is," FM said. "They saw what you did earlier."

"Would you like me to read the meditation again?" Juno asked.

"No," I said. "I think I've got it. Unless you have one in there about getting your birds to fly better."

"Fly better!" Snuggles said.

"Let me see," Juno said, flipping through his book.

The ships were rapidly incoming. I didn't have time to wait for Juno.

"Cover me," I said to FM and Sentry. "But keep your distance."

“Done,” FM said.

Instead of turning and making the ships tail me, I flew directly at them. I pictured those birds over the ocean again, finding the rhythm of the waves, the way the nowhere pushed against my mind and my mind against it.

The ships scattered as I approached, all firing on me wildly. They didn’t want me to get too close.

I had an idea. “All ships, keep your distance.”

“Jerkface?” Arturo said. “What are you doing?”

“Something Spensa would try,” I said. If this worked, I would wish she were here to see it. If it didn’t, she was going to hear about it anyway. “Hold on, Juno,” I said. And I reached out in my mind for that flock of birds, raising them from the waves of the ocean so they skimmed along outside my ship, following me, flying with me.

I chased after the fleeing ships, dodging fire. I hit overburn on my boosters and cut a path up through the battle, ships scattering in front of me. I sent my mindblades out in clustered flocks, catching this ship and that one, cleaving off wings and tail fins and noses while my flight shot down the others as they ran. A few of the braver pilots tried to charge in after me, and pieces of their ships rained down over the ocean, torn to ribbons.

“*Damn*, Jerkface,” Arturo said.

“It seems you were correct,” Juno said. “You didn’t need a meditation.”

“Boom,” Boomslug said from his spot below my seat.

I gripped the edge of my panel to keep my hands from shaking. I *shouldn’t* be able to do this. It felt...unnatural.

“Supernatural” might be a better word. Why was it so much easier to watch Spensa do things like this than it was to do them myself?

“The enemy is headed toward the city,” FM said. “Sentry and I are on them.”

Sure enough, the enemy ships were fleeing in the direction of Dreamspring. I’d scared them, but instead of retreating to their carrier ship they were going to hit us where it hurt.

I didn’t think the kitsen’s dwellings were going to stand up well to destructor fire, and Cobb and Gran-Gran had no more cover than a scudding

tent.

“Skyward Flight, shoot down those fighters,” I said. “Don’t let them fire on the city.”

Gunning them down over Dreamspring would cause damage, but not as much as if we let the ships attack. I hadn’t seen any carrying lifebusters—they had come looking for us, not to destroy the kitsen city.

But that didn’t mean they couldn’t do a hell of a lot of damage if we let them run wild.

“Amphi,” I said, “where is Cuna?”

“They ran for the city to find shelter,” Nedd said. “I gave them a radio to stay in touch.”

“I am here,” Cuna said over the radio. “I took shelter in the senate building.”

The medtechs should be with Cobb and Gran-Gran, but they were all exposed. “I need you to go to the medical tent and help the medtechs move Cobb and Gran-Gran.”

“We can’t move them,” Alanik said. “Remember?”

We couldn’t leave them in a tent during an aerial raid. “They appeared in the library,” I said. “And our medical transport was in the other direction. Maybe moving them in the toward the library will be okay.”

“I’ll give the medical personnel your instructions,” Cuna said.

“Let me know how it goes,” I told them.

The flight chased after the ships as they cruised toward the city, while I watched our six, making sure it wasn’t a ploy to let another group of fighters from the carrier fall into flanking position. No more ships came from that direction. Yet.

“We’ve got incoming,” Arturo said, and sure enough from the other direction, over the cliff above Dreamspring, more ships were joining the fight. Kitsen fighters, two dozen of them, all engaging the remaining ships as they reached the city.

“Welcome, kinsmen!” Goro shouted over the radio. “Now we’ll show these humans how it’s done!”

The enemy ships turned their destructors on the new arrivals, sparing the city a bit, and my flight flanked the enemy, shattering shields and bringing down ships. One of the ships careened toward the city, and Alanik caught it with her light hook, dragging it toward the beach and dropping it on the sand where it wouldn't destroy the buildings. Nedd did the same with a ship Kimmalyyn shot down right over the middle of the city, dragging the fuselage up and dropping it on the cliffs. Some debris was pelting the city, but hopefully damage would be minimal.

"Jerkface," Alanik said. "The enemy is going to fall back."

She'd barely finished saying it when the enemy ships turned almost as one and accelerated out over the ocean again, angling up to the carrier ship waiting in the clouds.

"Do we follow them?" Nedd asked.

"Wait," I said. I didn't know what their game was, and I didn't want to leave the city vulnerable to another attack.

The fighters slid into the clouds near the carrier ship, which was half hidden now as the cloud cover moved overhead. They were still up there, beyond the clouds—I could see them on my proximity monitor. The only reason for them to pull back like that was if they thought they had more of an advantage at that fallback position, or—

"Angel," I said. "You heard a transmission?"

"Yes," she said. "They were given orders over the hypercomm to retreat and wait. They've reported that the kitsen are fighting alongside us, so they want a larger force to beat down the resistance."

Saints, that was not a good sign. "Amphi," I said, "I'm giving you temporary command of the flight."

"Jerkface?" Arturo said. "What are you doing now?"

"I'm going to go for help," I said. We had a few moments here, so this was the best chance I was going to get. I couldn't rely on the mindblades for everything. They were an effective tool, but I'd seen some of the monstrous weapons the Superiority had on their side and I wouldn't be able to stop them all—not even with the rest of the flight watching my back. "They're waiting for backup, so we need it too. I'll try to get Stoff to let me take the

platform.” I was tempted to tell him, rather than ask him, but I wasn’t sure how much longer that would work. It had only worked the first time because the command staff was reeling from the loss of Cobb and half the assembly, and because no one wanted to argue with me after what had happened to my parents.

I needed to feel out the situation, and I needed to do it quickly. “FM, I want you to come with me. Sentry can team up with Quirk and Nedder for the moment. We’ll land our ships and leave Snuggles in mine so we can return quickly and get back in the air.”

I hoped it would be quick, anyway. I didn’t know how long we’d have before the Superiority forces would arrive. “Alanik can keep me posted. Contact me immediately if you need us. Everyone clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Arturo said.

“Say hi to Stoff for us,” Nedd added.

I landed my ship against the cliff where it would be partially sheltered from view. FM’s came down beside me.

I looked over my shoulder at Juno. “Do you want to stay here?” I asked. “I can’t guarantee you’ll be safe in the ship.”

“I’d like to come with you,” Juno said. “Clearly my presence has been helpful.”

“It has,” I said. “I’m not going to use mindblades on Detritus though.”

“A shadow-walker travels the path at all times,” Juno said. “Not only when violence is required.”

I didn’t really know what that meant, but I also didn’t want to have to explain Juno’s presence to Stoff. “Actually,” I said, “the most helpful thing you could do is stay here and teach that meditation to Alanik.” She might not have a lot of time to learn, but she didn’t know how to use mindblades, and if she could pick up any skill at all...

“I can see the wisdom in that,” Juno said. “I never dreamed I’d work with a single cytonic, let alone have the privilege of directing *two*.”

“It’s your lucky day then.” I flipped on my radio. “Angel, if you want to come pick up Juno, he can run you through some exercises while I’m gone.”

“If his exercises taught you to do *that*,” Alanik said, “then I’ll be right there.”

“She’ll probably complain less than I did,” I said to Juno. I showed him how to work the radio in case he ran into trouble before Alanik arrived, and then I lifted the canopy of my ship.

My taynix needed to remain on Evershore so Gill would have a target he recognized to bring us right to our ship. “Stay here,” I said to Snuggles and Boomslug. Not that Boomslug could go far, but he tended to go wherever Snuggles went.

“Here!” Snuggles said.

I didn’t know if she understood, but it had to be good enough. I climbed out of my ship and met FM and Gill out on the sand.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s make it fast.”

“All right,” she said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Gill, take us home.”

Thirteen

It was even later on Detritus than it was on Evershore, but when we emerged in the taynix room on Platform Prime, we found Rig still at his desk in Engineering. Rig smiled when he saw FM, but then his smile immediately dropped.

“If you came without the rest of the flight, I’m guessing this isn’t good,” he said.

“It’s not,” I said. “We need to talk to Stoff.”

“I’m sure he’s gone to bed,” Rig said. “Almost everyone has.”

“Except for you,” FM said.

“Yeah,” Rig said. “I’ve been looking at some of the reports on the other platforms from the exploration crews. They found one a few hundred klicks from here with some similarities to Wandering Leaf. We think it might have a control room, and I’m charting us a good way to get in and take a look without getting hit by the autofire.”

That could be useful. I wondered if Stoff would let me take a few of the platforms to defend Evershore. Our planetary shield filled in the gaps between the platforms that had been wrecked, so I was pretty sure we could take a few without leaving ourselves entirely open, but Stoff wasn’t much of a risk-taker.

I could probably bring Wandering Leaf, because it technically belonged to the UrDail and not to the DDF, and I hoped he’d send a few extra flights. It might help if I reminded him that the Superiority hadn’t attacked our planet since we’d put up the shield, and that we could hyperjump back in a hurry the moment anything changed. Though I’d have to spin it in a way that allowed him to cover his ass later if I had any hope of convincing him extra firepower was necessary.

“How are things with the kitsen?” Rig said.

“Precarious,” FM said. “Come on. I’ll explain on the way to wake Stoff.”

Dragging the man out of bed probably wasn't going to endear us to him, but we didn't have a choice. I doubted those Superiority ships were going to wait until morning, and even if they did we'd better have reinforcements in place long before that.

While FM filled Rig in, I reached out to Alanik. *Status?*

Still waiting, she replied. *I don't like it.*

Neither did I. The Superiority had both cytonics and hyperdrives—they could bring vast resources to bear in an instant. If they were hesitating, it was because they were calling up their people wherever they were stationed—and it could be nearly anywhere in the galaxy. We'd taken out their planetary cannon on ReDawn, but I doubted it was their only one.

And Juno? I asked.

He keeps telling me I am relaxed. I am not.

Yeah, I said. *I wasn't either. It worked anyway though.*

That is encouraging, Alanik said. *Thank you.*

Keep me informed, I said, and I felt her agreement although she didn't respond in words.

When I tuned back in, FM was in the middle of telling Rig about me taking out the Superiority ships with the mindblades.

"That sounds dangerous," Rig said.

"It was amazing," FM said, and she sounded like she meant it.

"Sure. Amazing, but dangerous."

"It was kind of surreal," I said. "But it worked well in that fight. It won't be enough in the long term though. Now that the Superiority knows we're working with the kitsen, they'll gather more ships to bring against us. We need help."

We reached the corridor with Stoff's quarters. At the end of the hall a guard stood watch by his door—Kelin, who'd been assigned to watch Cobb since he became admiral.

That seemed like a bad sign.

She saluted as we approached. "I need you to wake Vice Admiral Stoff," I said. "We have urgent information."

Kelin nodded—I had higher clearance than she did, so she didn’t ask me for the information. She stepped inside, and then came out a few minutes later with Stoff, who wore a dressing gown.

“Oh good,” Stoff said. “You’re back. How are Cobb and Mrs. Nightshade? Are they in the infirmary? What is their condition?”

Oh, scud. Of course we had to start there. “The medical team was unable to move them without destabilizing them,” I said. Hopefully Cuna was able to move them into the library—I’d left before I’d found out the outcome. No need to get into the strange details of that. Stoff would only want answers I didn’t have. “The team wants to keep them there until we understand more about their condition.”

“Okay,” Stoff said. “I hardly think I needed that report in the middle of the night.”

“We have a bigger problem,” I said. “The Superiority found us on Evershore. They must have heard Kauri’s transmission and came looking for us. They attacked, and we defended ourselves and the nearby city, but then the Superiority withdrew. We heard over the hypercomm that they’re waiting for reinforcements.”

“Well,” Stoff said. “That does sound like a problem.”

At least we agreed on that. If he’d tried to convince me this wasn’t *our* problem, I would have worried about exploding in mindblades again.

“Sir,” I said. “We need to take Wandering Leaf to defend against whatever the Superiority is planning.”

“Fine,” Stoff said. “You didn’t need to wake me for that either.”

Didn’t I? It surprised me that Stoff wasn’t trying to claim DDF ownership over the thing since we were the ones who had retrieved it from ReDawn and figured out how it worked. It was a good thing—both for our current situation and our relationship with the UrDail—if he didn’t. But...

“We also need DDF support,” I told Stoff. “A few more flights at least. The more you can spare, the better.”

Now Stoff looked skeptical. “Detritus isn’t under attack,” I said. “We have the shield to protect us even if the Superiority were to return, and with the hyperdrives we could be here at a moment’s notice. We can spare the

ships, not only to protect Cobb and Mrs. Nightshade, but to show solidarity with the kitsen.”

Stoff watched me carefully, and then looked over at Kelin. “Excuse us,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Kelin said, and she paced off down the hall.

Stoff glanced at Rig, as if considering whether to send him away as well, but seemed to decide it wasn’t necessary. “Okay,” he said.

Um. “Okay, sir?”

“Okay, take the flights. How many do you need?”

“How many will you—”

“Never mind,” Stoff said. “Don’t tell me. I’ll radio over to Command that I’ve authorized you to call up flights to support you on Evershore. You can call them up yourself.”

I could? “Sir?” I said.

Stoff sighed, and I felt like I was missing something. I looked sideways at FM, but she didn’t seem to be any clearer on what was happening than I was.

“Your orders came directly from the admiral, didn’t they?” Stoff said. “I wouldn’t dream of overruling him.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw FM and Rig exchange a look.

I didn’t really know what to say to that. I didn’t want to argue—I’d been worried that Stoff was going to take away what limited autonomy I had now that he knew Cobb was in fact incapacitated. DDF protocol was clear that he had the right—even the responsibility—to do just that.

“I can decide how many flights to call to Evershore,” I said. I didn’t want to belabor this too much—it was good news really, and Skyward Flight needed us to take care of this quickly and bring them help.

But this felt more like a trap.

“Yes,” Stoff said. “You’ve been very clear on what Cobb ordered you to do. If this is your mission, then you should have the autonomy to complete it, don’t you think?”

Ah. I saw what he was doing. On paper I was a renegade. I’d taken my flight and our starfighters to ReDawn, officially against orders. I’d then

returned and demanded that we cut the assembly out of the loop and that we work with the kitsen to retrieve Cobb. There were plenty of people who would testify to my insubordination—everyone but Cobb would consider that case open and shut.

Stoff hadn't arrested me when we returned, but he'd been watching me ever since. He'd been giving me a lot of leeway in case my actions might be in Detritus's best interest, but he'd never quite committed to attaching his name to anything I'd done in case it blew up like the scudding Superiority ship.

If Stoff kept this up, he could still take credit for anything Skyward Flight accomplished—if he *wanted* the credit. If we failed he'd be able to wash his hands of it. Say I acted on my own, say he didn't really understand what was happening while I was offworld.

Did Stoff really not care about anything but keeping his head down and avoiding responsibility for whatever came next?

"Sir," I said. "Forgive me for questioning, but that's a lot of autonomy."

"It's no more than the admiral saw fit to give you," Stoff said. "Isn't that right?"

Stars. Maybe that *was* all he cared about. This was in fact a *lot* more autonomy than the admiral had seen fit to give me. I didn't want to push Stoff too hard though. I only wanted to understand his motives, not change his mind.

"This is important," I said to him. "We're protected for now, but it isn't going to last. The Superiority's resources are as vast as the galaxy. They're trying to convince the *delvers* to be on their side. If we don't find a way to resist them..."

Stoff cringed, his shoulders hunching forward. "You don't have to tell me." I saw genuine fear in his eyes. He was *terrified*. "If you think you can do something to better our situation, then you scudding well had better do it."

He closed the door in my face.

"Did he seriously just do that?" FM asked.

“Dump responsibility for everything on us?” Rig asked. “Yeah, I think he did.”

Not on us. On *me*. I was an easy mark. My parents were gone, so I couldn’t depend on them to cover for me. I was isolated. Politically speaking, I was *expendable*.

Stoff seemed sincere about wanting us to succeed. He knew how desperate our situation was. But he wasn’t going to do anything about it. He was a vice admiral; with Cobb out of commission it was his job to step up and lead.

But he was hiding like a coward because he was too afraid to deal with it.

“Jorgen?” FM said.

“Hang on,” I said. “I need to check on the others.”

I leaned against the wall next to Stoff’s door, reaching into the nowhere. *Alanik?* I said.

Still nothing, she said. *This rodent keeps talking to me about birds. There are no birds living in my mind, Jorgen, and I don’t know what he means about the waves either.*

Huh. That had made sense to me, but... *That’s about how I feel when you talk about finding locations in the nowhere*, I said. *Maybe mindblades aren’t your thing?*

I felt annoyance from her. Alanik didn’t like to think herself incapable of things other people could do.

I understood. I didn’t like it either.

I can keep trying, she said, *but I worry about leaving those ships alone in the sky. We could go up there and try to take them out if you want. Fewer to fight later.*

If there was the option to wait or to act, Alanik was like Spensa—she always leaned toward acting. More than leaned; she ran toward it at full speed. This time she had a point, but I still didn’t think it was the right move. *No*, I told her. *Protect the city.*

There are a lot of cities, Jorgen, Alanik said. *A whole planet’s worth. How are we going to protect them all?*

She was right. Evershore didn't have a shield, or even the cover of platforms and debris. They were so *exposed*. At least we'd only had to protect Alta. The kitsen were spread out over the entire *planet*.

How did people survive this way? How were we going to protect them?

Could we?

I'm working on it, I said, as if I had a clue about what I was doing. *Focus on Dreamspring for now.*

"Jorgen?" FM said. "Should we head over to Command?"

The command center was staffed all night. The vice admiral had probably already put in the call and gone back to sleep, leaving the rest of it to us.

We did need to head over to Command, but if Stoff was really going to let me have whatever I wanted...

"Rig," I said. "How long would it take you to get people over to the control room the exploration team found on that platform?"

"We can get there quickly," Rig said. "Whether or not we can get it to work—"

"It's worth a try," I said. If Stoff was giving me free rein...scud, he expected this to blow up in my face, and he might be right. "At least get a team over there to look at it."

"I'll start knocking on doors," Rig said.

I closed my eyes. I was pulling Rig into this. Again. He'd take the fall with me if we failed at this. "I can't order you to do that," I said. I didn't have the authority for that.

"Jorgen," Rig said, "I jumped on the going-rogue train with you all when I left with you for ReDawn. It's a little late to reconsider now." He squeezed FM's hand, and then he took off down the corridor toward the dormitories.

We were all on that train, and it was my scudding fault. The corridor walls seemed to squeeze in on me, and I closed my eyes.

"Jorgen," FM said.

I didn't respond.

"Say something so I know you're not about to cut the platform apart from the inside."

“I’m not,” I said. I could control it. I *would* control it.

“He’s setting us up,” she said.

“Yes.”

“He’s going to try to make *you* look like this rogue who doesn’t care about orders. *There’s* a piece of irony.”

I wasn’t the only person who saw it. That was comforting. “Only if it goes wrong.”

“Of course,” FM says. “If we succeed, he’ll probably try to take credit.”

That was exactly what he would do.

“So,” FM said, “are we going to call up the flights?”

That was what I should be doing. The others needed us.

But I couldn’t move. I knew I should be acting, but was this really what I was doing now? Running off on another set of not-orders toward—what? Did I really think we could take down the entire Superiority air force with a couple of flights and one platform? Even if Rig got a few other platforms to move, did we stand a chance? We’d won on ReDawn, but that could have been a fluke. A bit of false hope that preceded total destruction. I could be leading everyone I cared about to their deaths, and it was *my* call, *my* idea, *my* decision—

I couldn’t watch anyone else I loved die like that.

In my mind, I watched the Superiority ship explode again.

Boom.

FM grabbed me by the arm, and I startled.

“*Jorgen*,” she said. “Talk to me. You’re starting to freak out again, and I *really* do not want to be diced up by your mindblades.”

Stars, was she afraid of me? “I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be sorry. You aren’t alone in this. I know you think you are, but you’re not.”

“He’s making me make the call,” I said. “But is this the right one? I *think* it’s what Cobb would do. But I don’t really know, do I? And if I’m wrong...”

“This isn’t all on you,” FM insisted.

“It is.”

“You still believe in the chain of command, right?”

“Yes,” I said. “And we’re operating way outside of it.” By orders. Sort of. Two separate commanders had *sort of* ordered me to do this, and the “sort of” part felt like it was going to break my brain.

“It’s a chain for a reason,” she said. “It’s not one person at the top all alone doing everything. Yeah, ultimately you make the decisions. And you are doing a scudding good job of that, okay? But we’re all here to support you. The only piece you have to do on your own is the final word.”

“I know,” I said. “But at the end of the day, it’s my call that saves people or gets people killed.” Maybe both. Stars, why was it always both?

“That’s true,” FM said. “But we’re all here supporting you because we trust your judgment.”

“You question my judgment all the time!” I said. “On Sunreach, I was going to make the call to leave the flight behind. And maybe we could have gone back for them, but maybe we couldn’t have, and who knows how many of them would have died in the meantime. *You* figured out how to save their lives. Not me.”

“Okay,” FM said. “But what about ReDawn? You made the call to stay and take out that Superiority ship. We could have cut and run after the cytonic inhibitors were taken out, but *you* risked all of our lives to destroy that battleship and protect the people of ReDawn, and that was clearly the right thing to do.”

“What about when I chewed you out for stealing the taynix and bringing them to Wandering Leaf?” I asked. “You didn’t think I was doing the right thing then.”

FM closed her eyes. We’d been avoiding this conversation ever since that happened. I didn’t want to have it now—or ever—but I also wasn’t going to let her pretend that she always agreed with me.

“I was angry with you,” she said quietly. “And I was scudding *scared*. I said things I didn’t mean. And I’m sorry I said those things, I really am, because they aren’t true. You are my flightleader, and you’re scudding *good* at it, Jorgen.”

“It doesn’t feel that way.” It felt like I was failing them all.

FM shook her head. “Do you think we all follow you because of the chain of command? The things we have done lately are scudding *insane*. There is not an officer in all of the DDF who would condemn us for refusing to go along with it.”

That was probably true. Stars, I’d justified a lot of things I shouldn’t have, by the book at least.

“We’re all here,” FM continued, “because we believe in what we’re doing. And we all trust you with our lives because we know that at the end of the day, Jorgen Weight is going to do the right thing. Sometimes you lose sight of that. Sometimes you get so bogged down in the *rules* that you lose track of what’s right for a minute. But when it comes down to the decisions you make with our lives, you do the right thing every time.”

I wasn’t so sure. That was why I tried to follow the rules, because if I was going to make a mistake, I wanted it to be one that couldn’t have been avoided. If I erred in following protocol, at least I always had the protocol to blame.

“You think I should call up the flights,” I said.

“Honestly?” FM said. “I don’t know. Maybe we should pull back; maybe the Superiority would leave the kitsen alone. Or more likely they’d do some damage and there would be lives lost, but maybe it would be fewer lives than if we goad them into a full-scale attack that we’re not sure we can defend against. It’s a risky move, Jorgen, and I don’t know what the right answer is.”

I gritted my teeth, dragging my hands over my hair. If I could see the future, know which would be the right choice for the most people—for *our* people—I’d do it.

Why was it so scudding hard to know what that was?

“But,” FM said, “one of our goals on Evershore is to make an alliance. And the calls you made on ReDawn are the reason we have an alliance with the UrDail. Because of *you*.”

I shrugged. “I was ordered to make that alliance.”

“Right. And everyone always succeeds at everything they’re ordered to do, right? Having an order makes it easy! Basically done for you. So you

barely get credit for it, because you were simply following orders. Is that it?"

"Um," I said. That sounded about right, but from her tone I could tell that it shouldn't.

"Meanwhile, if you don't succeed, *that* is entirely your fault. No one else could possibly be to blame, because Jorgen Weight is all powerful and if anything goes wrong it's always on him."

"I think that's a little hyperbolic."

"You think?" FM said. "Tell me that's not how you feel. Go ahead."

"Um," I said again.

"You can't have it both ways. You can't be powerless and totally at fault. Which is it?"

I thought about that. "It's neither."

"Right," FM said. "Some things are under your control, and others aren't. You do the best you can with what you have to work with. And *that* is what sets you apart—what you do with it."

I sighed. "Fine. You've made your point."

"So, what are we doing? What are your priorities here?"

"Cobb's life." That was a clear priority, clean and by the book. "And we can't pull him out." But stars, even if it would save kitsen lives, we couldn't *leave* him there.

"Okay," FM said.

"Also the lives of our flightmates," I added.

"And all the kitsen lives in danger right now? What about them?"

"They aren't our people. But Cobb ordered us to—"

"Forget for a minute about what Cobb ordered you to do," FM said. "What do you think is the *right* thing to do?"

I didn't know which call would turn out to be the best one, but for the moment I tried to set that aside. Maybe the right call was the one that hoped for the most good for the most people, even if the outcome wasn't totally assured.

Things seemed clearer when I looked at them that way. "Save lives," I said. "Defend the kitsen, defend Cobb, secure the alliance. Work together

against the people who are trying to kill us all.” It sounded so simple when I said it like that. It had a ring of truth to it.

“That sounds right to me too,” FM said.

I nodded. “What Stoff is doing is a trap, but it’s a political one. We can save lives first and politic later.” I would have preferred to politic *never*, but if there was an order to this, that was it.

FM watched me, waiting. She was doing what she’d said—talking me through it, but then waiting for me to make the decision.

I could recall my flight and leave the kitsen to deal with the Superiority. If Stoff could hide behind the chain of command so could I, and no one in the DDF could blame me for it. I could pin the whole thing right back on Stoff, and he wouldn’t have a renegade on whom to shuffle off the responsibility.

But I already knew I could never live with myself if I did that.

“Enough standing around,” I said. “Let’s call up the flights and get that platform.”

FM grinned at me. “Yes, sir,” she said.

And together we took off running down the corridor.

Fourteen

No one questioned me when I said I wanted three flights readied for hyperjump as soon as possible, and all pilots on standby in case we needed more. If we were committing to protecting Cobb, Gran-Gran, and the kitsen, then we had to be all in.

We'd left a taynix on Wandering Leaf—Bob the commslug, named by Nedd—so the other slugs could take us back and forth. Gill transported us to the taynix control room on the platform, a room with a wide control panel and rows of boxes to hold taynix in the various defense and weapons systems.

Everyone on the platform was asleep—some of the UrDail Independence pilots had chosen to stay here, probably to ensure that our military didn't adopt Wandering Leaf as their own asset.

FM tucked Gill into the hyperdrive box. I intended to direct the hyperjump to Evershore from this control room. I could send the instructions to the pilots' slugs from here, so long as each flight had at least one hyperdrive on board. Then I could hyperjump Wandering Leaf into the airspace over Dreamspring, coordinating with Alanik to ensure none of our people ended up close enough to get shot by Wandering Leaf's defenses.

Rig appeared in front of the control panel beside FM, and she jumped. No matter how many times we hyperjumped, it was still hard to get used to people appearing out of nowhere. It reminded me of the times as a child when I used to jump out from behind furniture and startle my mother. It always worked no matter how many times I did it, much to my mother's chagrin.

Sometimes it wasn't what happened that surprised you. It was when.

"I'm about to fly out to that platform that resembles Wandering Leaf," Rig said. "But I'm worried we won't be able to figure out how to move any

platforms quickly enough. I'm equally worried that we will and we'll leave Detritus open to attack."

"There are already holes in the platforms around the planet," I said. "The shield stretches between them. It would continue to fill in the gaps if we only took a few platforms, wouldn't it?"

"I hope so," Rig said.

"If it doesn't, we'll return them," I said. "Maybe we won't even be able to figure out how to move them, but I think we need to explore all of our options."

"Of course," Rig said. "I'll have Drape with me, so if you need to communicate you can hyperjump in and back out again. I'll also see if there's a hypercomm there that we can get working." He looked nervously from me to FM, and FM threw her arms around him.

"Be safe," he said.

I hoped we would be, but stars, none of us could promise that.

Rig gave Drape the command to take him home, and he blinked out to meet with the engineers. FM looked shaken.

"You okay?" I asked.

"No," FM said. "But this isn't the time to talk about it."

"We have to wait for the signal from the other flights that they're ready to hyperjump," I said. "They've just been roused from their beds, so we have a few minutes."

FM squeezed her eyes shut. "Saints and stars, Jorgen. It's a lot easier to make you talk than to do it myself."

"I could call Rig back," I said. "But I think he needs to get moving with the other engineers."

"I don't want to talk to Rig about it anyway," she mumbled.

That surprised me. "I thought you said you liked that he made you talk."

"I said it was good for me. But I hate it. And I realize that if I don't talk to you right now, you're going to use that as an excuse to shut down and probably explode again."

I hoped that wasn't true. But I didn't deny it.

FM sighed. “So yes, it sucks, okay? I hate leaving Rig, knowing I may not be coming back. I know what it does to him and how much worse it’ll be if something happens to me, and I feel terrible about it. I wonder if I ever should have started things between us, if that was really fair to him. *And* I wonder how much longer he’s going to want to put up with this before he decides that I’m not worth the stress. Okay? Are you happy now?”

“No,” I said. “But I’m glad you told me.”

FM fiddled with one of the console buttons, looking at me out of the corner of her eye. “Do you ever feel like maybe you shouldn’t have started things with Spensa?”

“I didn’t start it,” I said. “She did. But...” It surprised me how easily the answer came. “No. I’ve never regretted it. I could never regret one minute with her, no matter how it all turns out.” The strength of my conviction startled me. I meant every word.

FM’s shoulders relaxed.

“You don’t regret it either,” I said. “You’re just scared.”

FM pressed her lips together, and she nodded. “I don’t think it’s fair to him. But if you can handle Spensa running off into literally nowhere...”

Rig dropped out of flight school after his first time in the air, but he’d come with us into battle on ReDawn anyway, and he hadn’t flinched. “He knows why you’re doing this. He’s making the same call.”

“Yeah,” FM said. “And I hate him being in danger too. I almost hope he can’t get the platforms to move, because then he’ll be here and he’ll be safer.”

If the platforms didn’t move, we’d all have far fewer resources to deal with whatever the Superiority brought against us. But I didn’t point out her bad logic. I understood.

“I’m going to go wake the UrDail pilots,” FM said. “So they aren’t frightened when the platform moves, and so they can decide to stay here if that’s what they want.”

“Good idea,” I said. Alanik’s brother and the others had fought beside us on ReDawn, but this wasn’t their fight. They deserved the opportunity to decide for themselves.

“Jerkface,” a voice said over my radio. “This is Robin from Stardragon Flight. We were told to contact you as soon as we were in the air.”

Last time I talked to Robin over the radio, her flight had been called up to keep Skyward Flight from escaping to ReDawn. “Copy, Robin,” I said. “Do you have a hyperdrive?”

“We’ve got one of them in our flight,” Robin said. “Ivy and Victory Flights have a couple more each.”

“Good,” I said. “Connect all your ships with light-lances. Don’t leave anyone behind. Signal me when you’re ready, and we’ll bring everyone with us to Evershore.”

“Jerkface?” Robin said. “What the scud are we doing?”

“Defending potential new allies,” I said. “They’re under attack because the Superiority got wind of our presence there. We’ll be joining their air force in defending their planet. I’ll give you specific formations when we arrive.”

“Yes, sir,” Robin said.

I blinked. I wasn’t technically Robin’s superior, and I was giving her orders anyway. Stoff had given me leave to do that, but...

I didn’t correct her. I was going to need them all to listen to me, so this was a *good* sign even if it wasn’t exactly right.

Jorgen? Alanik said in my mind. *Another carrier ship has arrived.*

We’re on our way, I told her.

I made sure Gill was ready while FM alerted the UrDail pilots.

“We’re ready to go,” Robin told me over the radio. “My flight wants to know where exactly we’re heading?”

Had I not told them? “Evershore,” I said. “It’s a planet inhabited by small fox aliens.”

There was a pause. “Okay,” Robin said. “Thanks for filling us in.”

I sighed. Answering all their questions would take time we didn’t have. “You’ll see soon enough. All flights, prepare for hyperjump.”

FM returned to the doorway of the control room. “Gilaf and the others are getting ready. They’re in.”

“Good,” I said. “We’re going to need them.”

I'm ready to hyperjump, I said to Alanik. Get someone high enough in the air that the platform won't fire on the planet when we arrive.

There was a long pause.

Arturo's up high enough, Alanik said. The space around him is clear. Go.

I reached out to the other flights, finding the minds of their taynix, and gave them instructions to go to Alanik's slug, Snide, down near Dreamspring. Then I reached for Gill in the box and instructed him to take the platform to Naga. I wanted us to emerge in the air, not drop the platform on top of the beach where the autoturrets would fire on the city.

We slipped beneath the unseeing eyes and appeared beneath the black sky, marred grey by periodic clouds. I could see the carrier ships Alanik was talking about up above the clouds, pieces of their large boxy shapes visible behind the fluffy obstructions. Arturo hovered right above the platform's surface, close enough that he wouldn't be hit by the autocannons.

"Scud, Jerkface," Arturo said. "That thing popping out of nowhere is terrifying."

The platforms shook as the guns fired at some enemy ships that had been waiting right inside the clouds. They scattered and retreated.

"Welcome back," Kimmalyn said over the radio.

"Thanks," I said. "I'm going to do something about those carrier ships. Everyone else steer clear of the platform and defend the city."

"We've got more kitsen ships on our side now," Arturo said. "They're gathering over Dreamspring."

"And we will feast on the souls of all who dare to harm our beloved city," Goro said.

"I sure hope that's metaphorical," FM muttered, then turned to me. "Gilaf will contact you over the radio when he and the other UrDail pilots are ready to jump out to help. I'm going to take Gill to my ship."

"Do it," I said. "Amphi, I want you to command the flight. It's too hard for me to keep track of you all while I'm working the platform." Last time I'd had Rig to handle this, and all I'd had to do was command Boomslug to shoot the hyperweapon. This was going to be more complicated.

"Copy, Jerkface. What is our strategy?"

Scud, we needed one of those. Not only for our flight, but for everyone. “Protect the city,” I said. “Victory Flight, make sure the city itself doesn’t take fire. Keep the enemy distracted.” I paused. “Amphi, have we heard from Cuna?”

“They’re working with the medical people to get Cobb and Gran-Gran moved to the library. Going toward the cliffs doesn’t seem to be causing their vitals to drop.”

It all had something to do with that portal, but I didn’t understand what. “Good,” I said. “They’ll have better cover there. But we still need to protect the city. Stardragon and Ivy Flights, intercept the enemy ships before they reach the city. Your goal is to make sure Victory sees no action.”

“Copy, Jerkface,” Robin said.

“Skyward Flight will take point. All flights stay at least five clicks from the platform to avoid the autofire. Our objective is to convince them we aren’t worth it and pull their ships back. If you have a hyperdrive and need to be pulled out of the heat, let me know. Otherwise, Amphi will give you specific formation instructions.”

“Okay,” Arturo said. He probably wasn’t prepared to do that for multiple flights, but he started doing it anyway.

Which left me free to focus on the new carrier ships in the sky. I wasn’t going to sit here and wait for them to pour out their fighters to bombard the city.

I was going to take them out first.

“Jerkface,” Alanik said, “your sidekick wants to join you again. I think he’s given up on me.”

“Send him over with Snide,” I said.

Snide and Juno appeared a moment later, both riding on Juno’s platform. A moment later Alanik called Snide back, and the slug disappeared again.

“I did not give up on her,” Juno said. “I simply said she appeared to have less aptitude for mindblades than you do. It wasn’t a qualitative judgment.”

“To Alanik it probably felt like one,” I said.

“Is there some particular meditation you would like to try?” Juno asked. “I don’t have all my books, but I could—”

“Not right now,” I said. I called to Snuggles, who appeared in my arms with Boomslug. I tucked Snuggles into the taynix box where Gill had been. “Maybe later. Right now I need to concentrate.”

“The purpose of meditation is to help your concentration—”

I tuned him out, loading Boomslug into the platform’s hyperweapon. Then I focused on the airspace near the carrier ship and sent Snuggles the instruction to go.

We slid beneath the eyes and then Wandering Leaf reappeared beneath the carrier ship. Our inhibitor field encompassed the enemy ship, preventing it from hyperjumping while the autoturrets fired, weakening the shield, piercing through it in a few places to punch holes in the hull. The hangar doors opened and ships poured out, trying to escape. The big guns couldn’t possibly hit all those targets. The sensors showed that my people were still flying low—I didn’t need to worry about clipping them yet.

Go, I said to Boomslug, focusing on the area right outside the hangar.

I felt the edge of the nowhere ripping apart as the hyperweapon fired, mindblades flying out at the escaping ships, bypassing the shields, cleaving their hulls in two. Debris rained down out of the sky. The pilots didn’t even get a chance to eject.

I couldn’t afford to feel sorry for them. I leaned toward the window, spotting the next carrier ship halfway behind a nearby tower of clouds.

Go, I said to Snuggles, and suddenly we were in front of it, the platform shaking with autoturret fire.

“We’re ready,” Alanik’s brother, Gilaf, said over the radio. “But we’d rather not jump out right here, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Sorry for the short notice,” I said. “We didn’t get much more ourselves. I’ll jump you down closer to the planet.”

“Hell of a way to wake up,” Gilaf said.

I contacted the taynix in Gilaf’s ship and sent him and the other UrDail pilots down to the place where we’d first brought the platform in.

This carrier ship seemed mostly empty, but I still told Boomslug to fire, aiming the hyperweapon at the hull of the ship. It diced into chunks, bits of it blowing out into the sky and then falling.

“Did you do that?” Juno asked, watching through the window.

“I did,” I said. Stars, this thing was powerful. This tactic could be less effective against a battleship, which might be equipped with an inhibitor, but we were putting a serious amount of metal into the ocean from these carrier ships. Bits were going to wash up on the beach for years.

What could we do if we were able to move more of the other platforms from their orbit around Detritus?

The third carrier ship belched forth more fighters. I could feel the distinct vibration of a cytonic among them, and I reached out, listening for any cytonic communications, to see what we could learn about their plans.

Instead I felt something else. A thrumming against the nowhere, a rhythmic knocking like someone tapping their nails against the boundary between that world and ours.

The enemy cytonic sliced across the battlefield, headed directly for Alanik. The thrumming followed them, and as I focused I could feel small projectiles swarming around them, like pointed shards of glass made out of bits of the nowhere.

Oh, *scud*.

“Angel, get out of there,” I said. “That incoming ship has—”

The shards of nowhere flew out around the enemy pilot’s ship in a swirling melee, clipping wings and piercing hulls. Two ships went down—one from Ivy Flight and one from Stardragon—as the ship neared Alanik.

Alanik’s ship blinked out of existence and reappeared farther down toward the city, where Victory Flight was chasing off the fighters that had pierced through our other forces. The enemy ship sailed right past the place where she’d been, toward Kimmalyn and Nedd, who darted away. The ship pursued Kimmalyn. Before I could say anything, Arturo was yelling at her over the radio to go into a dive, get out of there.

She dove, but the enemy ship followed her, slicing her ship into three even pieces. The wreckage fell to the ground. She didn’t eject, but she wouldn’t have needed to. I searched for her taynix in the falling wreckage, but I couldn’t find him. I hoped he’d hyperjumped her out.

“All flights,” I said, “that pilot has mindblades. Take them down.”

“We can’t get close enough to use the IMP,” Amphi said. “Quirk’s our best shot and she’s down.”

“Nedder,” FM said. “Did Quirk make it out?”

“I don’t know,” Nedd said. He sounded shaken. The cytonic with the mindblades dove again, this time taking off after Catnip.

I found Catnip’s slug, Whiskers, and instructed it to jump down closer to the city, below Victory Flight. Catnip disappeared. Our ships flew loosely around the enemy cytonic, all trying to peg the ship with destructor fire without getting close enough to be torn apart by the mindblades, but the enemy ship rolled and dodged, evading their fire.

I couldn’t let this continue. I could get in my own ship and try to go after the cytonic, but I imagined they had a lot more practice with those mindblades than I had, and possibly a lot more reach.

“All flights,” I said, “pull up.”

All across the battlefield, ships shot up into the clouds, clashing with the Superiority ships that had made it out of their carriers. Not all the kitsen flights obeyed, but those that didn’t were far enough away from the cytonic that they should be safe from the autofire above and below.

Go, I told Snuggles.

And I hyperjumped the platform directly below the cytonic pilot.

The cytonic pilot immediately pulled up, accelerating to get out of the inhibitor field.

Go, I said to Boomslug.

Boomslug fired the hyperweapon in the direction of the pilot, but they reached the edge of the inhibitor field and hyperjumped away. I searched for them across the sky—

And found them high above the planet, farther even than the carrier ships. Most of our forces were between me and them, but I could follow in an instant, if I could only see where they’d gone. I looked up through the window at the clouds—

And was blinded by a blast of blue energy that poured down from the sky, striking the shield around Wandering Leaf, which sputtered and crackled.

I squinted against the light. When it faded, I stared up at a large, newly arrived ship with an enormous cannon on the front of it.

Scud.

Scud.

“What is that?” Juno asked.

“It’s a planetary weapon,” I said.

“A weapon for planets,” Juno said. “It seems wrong to invent such a thing.”

“No argument here,” I said. It looked just like the one we’d destroyed on ReDawn. It made sense that it hadn’t been unique. They must have had the thing charged before they hyperjumped it in, which made a sick, reckless kind of sense.

We could *not* let that thing fire on the planet. I didn’t know how many kitsen that ship could destroy in one blast, and I didn’t want to find out.

“Jerkface—” Arturo said over the radio.

“I see it,” I said. “All flights, clear the space around the cannon.” The flights split, going into evasive maneuvers and leading the enemy ships away from the cannon, which was fixed squarely on Wandering Leaf.

They’d take out the platform and then Dreamspring. I had to destroy the cannon before that happened.

The airspace between me and the cannon was clear. I still didn’t know for certain if Kimmalyn was okay, or if any of my friends had been caught in that energy beam, but there were going to be a lot of other casualties if I didn’t act quickly. I focused on the space just below the cannon and hyperjumped the platform up.

The autoturrets fired immediately, pummeling the cannon and the ship around it. *Scud*, this thing was terrifying from this close. Last time it was Rig who’d had to stare one of these down. I hadn’t given him enough credit for it. The blue light was building again. I focused on the cannon, ready to tell Boomslug to fire—

And suddenly the vibration of the universe went dead. I could no longer feel the cytonic inside the enemy ship, or the minds of Boomslug and Snuggles so nearby in the boxes. Scud, the enemy cytonics had put up an

inhibitor, and I'd brought the platform right into range. It was the same thing I'd done to the mindblade cytonic, but they had a ship with an engine, and Wandering Leaf moved only by hyperjump.

I was stuck here.

"This seems bad!" Juno said, his voice almost a squeak.

The blue light glowed brighter and brighter, and then the beam pummeled my shields again. The shield crackled and then blinked out, leaving the platform vulnerable to the next attack. I couldn't hyperjump out. I couldn't use the hyperweapon. I didn't have a starfighter on board, and Alanik couldn't come in to get me.

I stared up into the mouth of the cannon as it once again began to glow with an eerie blue light.

Fifteen

The autoturret continued to pound at the cannon. It was doing damage, but it wasn't going to disable the thing fast enough. I was going to get blown to pieces on this platform the moment it finished charging.

"Amphi," I said over the radio. "I have to get out of here. The autoturrets are distracted. Can any of you dodge the fire and fly in to pick me up?"

"Nedder's closest," Arturo said.

"On it," Nedd said.

"Follow me," I said to Juno. I scooped Snuggles, Boomslug, Bob the commslug, and the inhibitor taynix out of their boxes and took off at a full run toward the hangar.

When I arrived, I watched through the windows as Nedd pulled a barrel roll past the autofire. The turrets were focused on the ship with the cannons and were doing some impressive damage to the ship *around* it. Maybe they *would* be able to disable the thing before—

The blue light grew even more blinding. Nedd used his light-lance to flip around one of the turrets and landed on the platform right outside the hangar.

Juno's floating platform zipped along behind me as we ran up to Nedd's cockpit just as he lifted the canopy. The noise of the autofire was deafening, and I dove into the cockpit behind Nedd, straddling the back of his seat and holding on with both hands. Juno hovered beside Nedd's seat, and the four slugs flattened their bodies against me.

Nedd pulled down the canopy and didn't even have time for a wisecrack before he took off again. The turrets were so focused on the planetary weapon that they didn't fire on us, but when we got far enough away that the vibrations returned, I had Snuggles hyperjump us several kilometers farther just to be certain.

The world flared blue as the cannon fired, the blast rocketing through Wandering Leaf, tearing it apart. The autocannons had taken out a good half of the Superiority ship, and the cannon's light faded, no longer powering. We'd gotten rid of the weapon.

But we'd lost the platform in the process.

"Jerkface," FM said, "did the UrDail pilots all make it out?"

"They did," I said. "No casualties. Just catastrophic damage."

"Dude, I saved your life," Nedd said. "The least you could do is stop squeezing my pecs."

I dropped my arms from around Nedd's chair. I hadn't realized I was holding on so tight or so...awkwardly. "Sorry," I said. "Hang on, I'm going to transport us to my ship." My whole body was squeezed into a space so tight I wasn't sure how I was managing to fit. I'd only gotten in here on pure adrenaline.

I directed Snuggles to jump Nedd's ship to the beach next to mine, still sheltered under the cliff, then I held on to her and had her hyperjump me, Juno, and Boomslug out of the cockpit. We landed in the sand outside my ship.

There standing in front of it was Kimmalyn, with Happy tucked into a sling across her chest. "Thank the stars you're okay," I said.

"Happy teleported me to the other side of the beach," Kimmalyn said. "I was thinking about stealing your ship, but I guess you need it."

"I do," I said. I didn't think for a minute that the cytonic with the mindblades had been killed in that blast. They would still be out there, and I wasn't going to let them wreak havoc on our forces. "If you take Happy home, you can get another ship and then hyperjump to Naga," I said. "That'll get you back in the fight."

"On it," Kimmalyn said. "Just...be careful."

Scud, she'd been shot out of the sky. It was only Happy that had saved her. "If you're too shaken up—"

"I'm fine," Kimmalyn said. Her hands were shaking, but she gave me a very forced smile. "I would feel much worse knowing you all were still up there without me. Happy, let's go home."

Kimmalyn disappeared, and I climbed into my cockpit, Juno floating in behind me before I closed the canopy.

My radio was going nuts.

“Jerkface!” FM said over the radio. “Are you okay?”

“He got out,” Alanik said. “He’s down on the beach.”

“I’m here,” I said. I lifted my ship a couple of meters, using my sensors to take stock of the battle. The planetary weapon was high enough in the atmosphere that it wasn’t falling immediately to the ground, though the cannon was obviously destroyed.

Jorgen, Alanik said in my head. *Watch out—*

With a great crunching of metal and shattering of glass, my ship ripped apart around me. A pair of mindblades sliced down into the dash, obliterating the canopy. I slammed down the altitude control and jumped out through the torn metal, pulling my slugs with me out onto the sand.

I could feel the enemy cytonic over on the beach. They’d hyperjumped after me. Juno slid out through the broken glass and hid beside me, the ship between us and the enemy cytonic.

It wasn’t going to last for long. I felt more mindblades forming around the enemy cytonic, another volley about to rip through the ship to get at me.

“Now would be a good time for that meditation,” I said to Juno.

“You are completely relaxed!” Juno said.

I reached for the nowhere, skimming my mind over the surface. My birds formed again, little shards of death and nothingness, and I flew them with all my might over the ship toward the enemy cytonic. More blades flew at us, and I pulled Juno’s platform down as I flattened myself against the ground. The enemy’s mindblades dug into the ship, and I twisted mine around, jabbing at the enemy cytonic where I could see them in my mind.

The enemy’s mindblades vanished. We’d had cover but they hadn’t, and when I peered over the ship I found the body of a dione with bright red skin lying bleeding on the ground.

Scud. I’d never killed someone at such close range before. I’d never had to stare at their bleeding body, knowing I caused that. The sand beneath the dione turned a strange dark blue color. The body didn’t so much as twitch.

My ship was thrashed, but the radio still worked. “Jerkface, you okay?” Arturo asked.

“Fine,” I said. “But I lost my ship.”

“We’ve got more company.” I looked up and found another carrier ship arriving. The Superiority had to be mustering their ships as they went, or else they’d underestimated what size force it would take to defeat us.

But they were going to keep coming until they’d accomplished it. We were going to need to bring a lot more fire to this fight.

“Amphi,” I said, “you’re in command. Protect the city. I’m going to go check on Rig, see if we can bring more platforms.”

“Copy, Jerkface,” Arturo said.

I picked up my slugs again, letting Boomslug ride on my shoulder, and placed a hand on Juno’s platform.

“You want to come with me?” I asked Juno.

“Where you will go, I will go,” Juno replied.

I would give the kitsen this—they were some of the bravest beings I’d ever met. “Take me to Drape,” I said to Snuggles.

“Drape,” Snuggles said.

Evershore and all of the ships above it disappeared. We passed beneath the eyes, and then suddenly I stood in a small room much like the one on Wandering Leaf. The window looked out at the stars, over half a broken platform drifting next to the one where we’d landed, a large defunct autoturret jutting up beyond it. The walls were lined with boxes.

Scud, there were so *many* of them. Taynix boxes from floor to ceiling, enough to house maybe a hundred taynix.

“Jorgen,” Rig said. “How are—”

“We lost Wandering Leaf,” I said. “Planetary weapon destroyed it.”

Rig’s eyes widened. “Is—”

“FM is fine,” I said. I probably should have led with that. If it had been Spensa, that was the first thing I’d want to hear. “But Winzik sent more reinforcements, and they may not be the last. We need to get more platforms over there.”

“Yeah, about that,” Rig said. “We have a small problem.” He gestured around him. “We don’t know what any of these boxes do, much less where we would get enough slugs to power them. I sent the transport ship back to collect the taynix on the base, but most of those belong to the remaining pilots. I’m not sure they’re going to part with them, not without a direct order from Stoff.”

Stoff might give such an order, but the more I involved him the more he’d feel he had to question me, which we did not have time for. The flights on Evershore could be dead by the time he made a decision. We’d also need the taynix with those pilots if we had to bring in more reinforcements.

I looked around at the boxes again. We’d sent expeditions down to the caverns to look for more slugs, but it was taking them time and I understood why. The slugs tended to hide in the less inhabited areas, and I’d been too busy to go down myself.

Scud. “Do you need to use all the boxes?” I asked Rig. “Can we figure out which one is the hyperdrive, then take the platform over and use the autocannons?”

“Maybe,” Rig said. “Even figuring out which is the hyperdrive is going to take time though. The boxes aren’t well labeled.”

Rig looked around, wringing his hands. I was putting a lot of pressure on him and demanding instant results. Just because we’d been able to pull ourselves out of some tight spots in the past didn’t mean he could produce miracles on demand.

“I know you’re doing your best,” I said. “I know you don’t have enough time or resources. You’re doing amazing work for us, and you’ve saved all our lives several times now. If you can’t figure this out it isn’t your fault, but I need you to try.”

“Of course,” Rig said. “We’re just not prepared for this.”

“What can I do?”

“Finding me more slugs would be nice.”

“Okay, let me see what I can do.” I moved out into the corridor. In the rooms along the hall, other engineers were calling to each other about the contents of each one. I peered through the nearest doorway.

Scud. More taynix boxes.

We were going to need a lot of help. Rig's team had done so much for us. Now it was time for me to come through for them.

I found a bench in the corridor and sat down, Juno hovering over my shoulder next to Boomslug.

"Do you have a meditation for searching?" I asked Juno.

"Not in this book," Juno said, "though most of them begin the same: 'Breathe in, breathe out. You are now completely relaxed.' "

I wasn't, but I tried anyway. I reached out over the planet, searching for that vibration, the one I'd heard in my dreams. The one that had called Spensa's great-grandmother to Detritus to begin with—the reason we'd arrived here.

It was still there, that resonance. We'd found some taynix, pulled them up from their mushroom-infested caves and brought them to live with us. But there were more down there, maybe a lot more.

Help, I called to them. *We need help*. It was hard to pinpoint the individual minds of the slugs—it always was, before I became familiar with them, and when there were so many together. I could feel them listening to me though. They were interested, but unmoved.

"Hey!" Rig said. "Get back here!"

I looked through the doorway to see Fine, our original comms slug, wriggling out of his grasp.

"Hey!" Fine shrieked at him. "Get back here!"

Snuggles disappeared from the crook of my arm and reappeared on the floor by Fine, and then picked him up and brought him to me.

"I'm trying to concentrate," I said.

"Sorry," Rig said. "I think I figured out which box is the hypercomm, but when I tried to test it he went crazy."

"Crazy!" Fine shouted.

Rig looked at him. Fine wasn't usually this agitated...

"Leave him," I said. "Try again in a minute when he calms down."

"Okay," Rig said. "Sure."

I reached down and petted Fine on his spines. This slug—in conjunction with Gill—had saved us on Sunreach. The least I could do was give him a little breathing room.

I reached toward the planet again, down toward the vibrations that were actually taynix. Many of them, beneath the surface, in caves we hadn't yet discovered. As I did I felt that texture again, the strange bumps in the nowhere—little ridges, all packed together in clumps below the surface of the planet. They weren't taynix—they didn't vibrate with energy. Instead they felt hollow, like little vessels waiting to be filled. The way they grouped together, thousands upon thousands of them, was familiar somehow. The shape of the gatherings. The pattern.

Scud. Those were the Defiant caverns. They were filled with thousands of *somethings*. They couldn't be delvers, could they? No, they were something else. Maybe—

Stars, were they *people*?

I focused on one little raised vessel, drawing close to it, examining it. It was...*thinking*. Its mother had set it here, and told it not to move until it was ready to apologize for hitting its brother. But it would never be ready to apologize, because its brother had really, really deserved it.

My mouth fell open. I wasn't supposed to be able to do that, was I? Find the minds of non-cytonics?

Listen to them?

"Juno," I said. "In your books, are there meditations for communicating with other people? People who don't have cytonic powers?"

"You communicate with them all the time," Juno said. "You use words."

"This is not the time to be pedantic!" I said. "Could your cytonics talk to other people mind-to-mind?"

Juno's little brow furrowed. "I have read that a few achieved it. But if there are meditations for that, I have not read them. As you are just learning, it seems like it might be wiser to try to stick to the more general skills, and not rely on those only a few were ever able to achieve."

That did seem wiser. And I hadn't *communicated* with that little kid, only listened to his thoughts. That could *also* be useful—scud, the espionage

possibilities were endless.

Now though, we had cities under attack on Evershore and a room full of empty taynix boxes. I searched for the slugs in the areas around the caverns. I felt the vibrations, concentrated in the caverns away from people. Minds that were smaller yet *louder*, projecting themselves into the nowhere instead of remaining self-contained.

I could figure out what to do with the rest of it later. For now I needed to focus on the taynix. I didn't know how many of them would come to me—they hadn't jumped on it the first time I asked, but maybe I could convince them.

We need your help, I said. *Please*.

Someone else reached for me, so near that I startled. Another cytonic mind joined my plea, and with it came an image.

Mushrooms. Caviar. Friends. Family. *Danger*. The fear was so strong, though the mind that sent it was small. I saw all of us crowded together on Sunreach, holding on to each other while Gill took us home.

Help. It wasn't a word so much as a feeling.

Fine was helping me. He was making a *case* for me, though not in so many words. Telling the other taynix he was happy here. That he liked us, that we treated him well and were good to him, that he *cared* about us.

We care about you too, I thought at him. FM cared most of all. I knew she thought I was heartless sometimes, but I didn't want anything terrible to happen to them if I could prevent it.

I didn't want anything terrible to happen to *anyone*.

Maybe when I was speaking to the taynix I should focus less on the words. Everything was translated to thoughts through the nowhere anyway—that was how Alanik and I could understand each other.

I focused on the idea of home—my home, and what it meant to me. The danger the Superiority posed to this planet we all shared. The power we had to stop it, but only with *help*.

It was more hope than I truly felt, but it was the message they needed and it wasn't a lie. It was simply a different way to tell the story.

Do better than we did.

“Scud!” Rig shouted, and I opened my eyes as hundreds of taynix all appeared in the corridor at once. They spilled into the various control rooms, all wriggling on top of one another. They were bunched together in groups, taynix of many colors all rolling and sliding away from the hyperslugs they’d been huddled around.

The ones who could hyperjump had answered me, and they’d brought friends.

There were so *many* of them. Commslugs, and mindblade slugs, and the hyperslugs too, of course. Also the blue and green kind we’d found on Wandering Leaf, the ones that powered inhibitors. It made sense there were some on Detritus—there had to be a few somewhere, enabling our cytonic inhibitor.

But there were more still. Wrinkled grey ones with black and white spines, several with spines that faded between the many colors of the rainbow, and a strange set of mostly blackish ones that shone an iridescent blue under the control room lights. Some of the slugs were significantly smaller than the others, teal colored with pink spines. Were those babies, or a smaller variety?

The other humans and I all stared at the slugs dumbly. While we did, Boomslug, Fine, and Snuggles jumped into action. Snuggles teleported Boomslug right into the middle of the taynix. Snuggles started touching slugs and hyperjumping them into the control rooms, gathering them in front of the boxes, while Boomslug herded groups of them together with the light touch of a blunt mindblade. The other slugs slithered out of his way, heading in the directions he sent them. Through the nowhere I could feel Fine sending them all feelings and images. Danger. Help. Hurry.

“Um,” Rig said. “I know I asked you for more slugs, but I really don’t know which boxes to put them in. I have no idea what some of these slugs would *do*, even if we did figure out where to put them.”

“Do your best,” I said. “They came to help, and we need all the help we can get.”

Sixteen

Rig and the engineers started working on where to put the slugs. We'd only need a few to move our platforms, but I wasn't going to complain about having access to extras. Meanwhile, I reached toward Evershore to contact Alanik.

Report? I asked her.

We're managing, Alanik said. *But there were a lot of ships in that last carrier. I don't think we can handle another without reinforcements. Will Rig be able to move the platforms?*

We've summoned help, I said, watching the slugs writhing about in the control rooms. *But it's going to take some time. I can send over another few flights, but I'm worried that the enemy is going to keep coming. Do you think Rinakin would send some of your people to help?*

I can make a case for it, Alanik said. *It would be best if I went in person.*

Ask Arturo if he can spare you, I said. *I'll send in reinforcements as soon as I can.*

Will do, Alanik said.

Help! a voice said. It came from near Alanik, somewhere on Evershore—the voices I'd heard before. *Help!*

I didn't have time to help voices I didn't know. Enough corporeal people were in danger.

We know, the voices said. *We want to help!*

Who are you? I asked, but the voices faded again.

I didn't have time to figure out where they was coming from. Gran-Gran had heard voices calling for help before she'd had what appeared to be a hyperjumping accident. I still couldn't rule out a Superiority trap, so I needed to focus on the help I knew I could trust.

I used my radio to put in a call to Command, asking them to get another three flights in the air. They agreed immediately—apparently Stoff hadn't

rethought the length of the rope he'd given me to hang myself with. The other flights had all been put on alert, so it wouldn't take long for them to get in their ships, but I couldn't return to Evershore without them.

While I was still here—

“Rig,” I said. “I don't want to scare you, but I'm going to try something.”

Rig poked his head out of the command room. “Something more scary than dumping hundreds of unknown taynix at our feet?”

“Potentially,” I said. “Or maybe nothing will happen. I don't know.”

“So either you're going to scare me or nothing will happen.”

“Right,” I said. “You can keep working. I just wanted to warn you.”

“About potentially nothing.”

Stars, I shouldn't have said anything. It would have taken less time. “Exactly. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt.”

Rig gave me a very confused look and went back to examining the taynix boxes. I closed my eyes and focused on the now-overwhelming cytonic resonance all around me. The times I'd felt the strange ridges, I'd been listening to the nowhere the way Gran-Gran taught me.

“Can I assist you, shadow-walker?” Juno asked.

It was only then that I realized that Juno hadn't remarked on the sudden arrival of a horde of gastropods, most of them bigger than he was. He didn't seem shocked by much of anything, taking it all in quietly through that eye slit in his armor.

“I don't know,” I said. “I'm trying that advanced thing you said wasn't wise.”

“You've done a great many things I thought were unwise,” Juno said. “But it seems to be working for you so far.”

I hoped the trend continued. I focused on the vibrations. I located Boomslug and Snuggles, and they seemed to sense that I was reaching for them, because they returned to my shoulders. They each had their own type of hum that was distinct, the way every human has a slightly different voice. It was almost like FM's music, harmonious in its own subtle way.

I stretched my mind, trying to push past the vibrations, and searched for those ridges again, the ones that were so still and quiet. I gripped the edge

of the bench in frustration—I'd done it when I wasn't meaning to. I should be able to do it on purpose.

I remembered what Alanik had told me back on ReDawn. *Try, Jorgen, she'd said. Stop focusing so much on what you aren't able to do, and try.*

"Hey, Juno?" I said. "Can you read me one of those meditations again?"

"Of course," Juno said. "Breathe in, breathe out..."

I did that all day, every day of my life, but this time I tried to really focus on it. I tried to let go of everything I wished I could do, all the ways I could solve our problems if I were only better, stronger, smarter.

Do better than we did, my mother said.

For the moment I tried to let go of whether I could. I listened to the slugs, to their vibrations, to their hums.

"See yourself walking along a beach," Juno said. "With each breath, the waves wash in, and the waves wash out."

I tried to hear the ocean, to really be there, be present and let go of the frustration of everything I couldn't yet do.

In order to achieve control, Juno had said, *you must first accept that you have none.*

I have none, I told myself. And for the first time, instead of terror and frustration accompanying that thought, I felt relief.

"Feel the wind on your skin," Juno said. "The heat of the sun as it burns down from above."

"Above!" Snuggles said.

And then, all at once, the ridges appeared around me. Not nearly so many as I'd felt down beneath the surface. Only half a dozen moving about the platform. Minds, so quiet but no less real. I approached the one in the room nearest me and listened. This mind was working through a complex calculation, trying to figure out which of the wires from the taynix boxes went into which of the many holoprojectors labeled along the wall. *Why couldn't someone have labeled these effectively?* they were thinking. *Did the labels disintegrate maybe? Surely they had to have—*

Rig? I asked.

The thought stuttered to a stop.

Jorgen? Rig said. *Are you inside my mind?*

Apparently, I said.

Okay, yeah, Rig said. *This is deeply terrifying.* He paused. *Is this what it's like for you and Alanik all the time?*

I laughed and let the link drop. Rig appeared in the doorway. "Jorgen," he said. "What the scud did you do?"

"I think I did something really advanced," I said. "Something Juno didn't think I should try."

"Hmph," Juno said. "I never said you *shouldn't* do it. I only said I thought there were better exercises to try first."

This one, though, seemed like it could be an asset at the moment.

I radioed Command. "How are those flights coming?"

"They're in the air," the Command staffer replied. "Working on the light-lance connections before they give the go-ahead to hyperjump."

"Excellent."

I closed my eyes again, trying to see if I could still find the ridges. They were faint but they were there, easier to recall now that I'd brought them up once.

Help! A faint whisper, calling to me through the nowhere. *Help us,* the voices said again. *We want to help.*

I sighed. I had no idea where those voices were coming from, much less if I should respond—

Listen, boy, another voice said.

Scud. That was—*Gran-Gran?*

She didn't answer, but an image formed in my mind, clear as anything.

A picture of the portal in the library, the strange wall with the lines, the gateway into the nowhere.

Gran-Gran, I said. *What happened when you appeared near the portal? Where are you?*

She didn't—or couldn't—answer.

"Jerkface," Steadman from Command said over my radio. "The flights are ready for hyperjump."

“Good,” I said. *Rig, how much longer do you think it will take you to figure out if we can move the platforms?*

We’re going to need time, Rig said. I can’t tell you how much, but I can keep you posted.

And he could do it without a hypercomm now.

Okay, I said. I’ll check in.

I put a hand on Juno’s platform, and instructed Snuggles to take us to the beach on Evershore near the wreckage of my starfighter. We passed beneath the eyes, and then the sand of Evershore formed beneath my feet, the roaring of the ocean loud in my ears.

I reached toward Platform Prime, finding the taynix belonging to those flights. Corgi was among them, I thought, though I couldn’t remember the rest of their names. FM would know. She knew them all.

I gave the taynix a clear image of Snuggles. And a moment later three flights of ships—light-lanced together in three distinct groups—appeared over the sand, some of them extending out over the waves.

“Amphi,” I said over my radio, “I brought backup.”

“Platforms?”

“Not yet,” I said. “Three flights of ships. Can you get them up to speed?”

“Copy, Jerkface,” Arturo said.

My proximity sensors had been busted when the cytonic slashed their mindblades through my dash. I looked up at the dark sky, trying to read what was going on with the battle.

Scud, there were a lot of ships up there. Our side seemed to be holding their own, but we needed the backup badly.

Alanik, I said, status?

Rinakin is sending ships to support us. He says the kitsen alliance is worth the risk. I told him you were going to bring platforms from Detritus. Did I lie to him?

Rig is working on it, I said. Can you come support Arturo?

I’m on my way, Alanik said. I’ll come back for the flights after they’ve had a few minutes to prepare.

Good, I said. Keep me updated.

“Should we have brought you a new ship?” Juno asked.

“I’ll get one later,” I said. “Right now I need to have a look at that portal in your library.”

Seventeen

“The portal?” Juno said. “This seems like an odd time—”

“I know,” I said. “But I think it’s important.” My mindblades could help in the battle, but we needed more than that. We needed Cobb’s command expertise. We had to get him back in charge of this battle, of the war.

The medtechs would be crowded into the library with Gran-Gran and Cobb, and I didn’t want Snuggles to accidentally land us on top of one of the stretchers. Instead I put a hand on Juno’s platform and had Snuggles hyperjump us to a foothold I could see at the top of the cliffs. From this vantage I could see the staircase that led to the library, and I had Snuggles make a second jump to land us outside the domed doors.

I reached down below my knees for the handle, but found the door locked.

I knocked, and there was a scuffling inside.

A moment later the door cracked open. On the other side Cuna stooped down, looking out at us, and then opened the door the rest of the way. “I didn’t think that Winzik would knock,” they said. “But one can never be sure.”

“Not Winzik,” I said, crawling into the room.

Kel and Winnow knelt between the long tables, which had been scooted together so the stretchers holding Cobb and Gran-Gran could rest on top. Several of the kitsen doctors sat on the stretchers, helping the medtechs monitor Cobb and Gran-Gran, while their transport pilot, callsign: Zing, listened to the radio that was perched on a glass case filled with very small books. I could hear Arturo giving orders to the new flights. Hopefully the additional ships would help us hold out a while longer while Rig figured out the platform.

“How are they doing?” I asked Winnow.

“Stable,” she said. “You were right—moving them didn’t cause them to deteriorate this time. It’s possible we could put them in a ship now.”

“I don’t want to move them while we’re under attack,” I said. “And I don’t think it’s the time that made the difference. I think it was the direction. Farther from that.” I indicated the wall, and the medtechs only looked more confused.

“What is that?” Cuna asked.

“A portal to the nowhere,” I said. “I think.”

I was becoming increasingly sure that Gran-Gran—or her spirit? her soul?—was behind this wall. I hoped Cobb was there with her, that non-cytonics could even exist in that strange place. We’d learned from the datanets that the Superiority had mines in the nowhere and ran entire operations to get acclivity stone. They probably used people who weren’t cytonic on those missions.

Of course, those people probably had *bodies*, so it wasn’t a perfect comparison. Still, I suspected the kitsen cytonics were lost in there too. I didn’t know how they could have survived all this time, but it seemed likely those were the voices I was hearing.

I looked up at the portal, at the strange mass of interconnected lines running all over the wall. I could feel the vibrations of the nowhere, but not Gran-Gran’s distinct signature.

“Quiet, please,” Juno said to the others. “The shadow-walker must concentrate.”

Zing turned off the radio, and everyone else was silent. That was helpful, if a little presumptuous of Juno. Usually *he* was the one chattering and distracting me.

I considered the portal. Spensa said if I got too close I might fall in. There was a draw to that—the idea that if I got lost in the nowhere I could see Spensa again. But I had no idea if I would be able to find her, and I couldn’t leave while Evershore was in peril, my friends in jeopardy.

Instead I reached out to the wall with my mind, inspecting it.

Are you there? I asked.

The answer was immediate. *We’re here. We want to help.*

The kitsen cytonics had been gone for centuries, Juno said. Cytonic powers were genetic, so if the kitsen cytonics had all been lost somehow, it made sense no more had been born. Though...Spensa had said she thought living near a portal could change some people into cytonics; why hadn't that happened to any of the lorekeepers?

An image struck me. Voices calling out of the portal for years and years, but there was no one left on the other side who could hear. Eventually they stopped calling.

Stars, was I imagining that? Or...*reading* it somehow? I needed to reach them, but I didn't want to get lost in there. If I could find Spensa, could she find them in the nowhere and help me somehow? Together maybe we could find a way to get them all out at once.

I reached across the nowhere, searching for Spensa. I'd found her before, even if our connection was strange and distant.

Something reached back. It was another image of Spensa cleaning a piece of a ship, a different one from the last time. I'd been too distracted before to think about the significance of that. We had ground crews for that, but Spin didn't have those in the nowhere. Did she have a ship? I thought she'd lost M-Bot on Starsight, and that was how the Superiority got hold of his holographic projector.

The image was hazy, but the *feeling* that went with it was unmistakable. Loneliness. Loss. A fog of forgetfulness, like the stupor of coming out of an illness and not really being sure how many days had passed. It was so un-Spensa-like that it floored me.

When I talked to Spensa before, she was right there, face-to-face with me. This was so much more distant, almost like a memory.

As if it came from someone else, someone watching her from the outside.

Who is this? I asked.

I felt a tingle of...amusement maybe? And then an image came into my mind of a hyperslug sitting on the control panel of my starfighter. "Jerkface!" it cried at me.

Doomslug? I asked.

The tingle of amusement grew stronger.

Huh. I'd apparently found Doomslug in the nowhere. It made sense that she'd left with Spensa, but the fact that I could contact her and not Spensa herself was more than a little concerning.

Is Spensa okay? I asked.

The amusement faded, replaced by a sadness, a loneliness.

Saints. *What can I do?* I asked.

A trickle of doubt. Doomslug didn't know.

I sent a picture of the portal in front of me. *Do you know how to open it?* I asked her.

I heard nothing in response, except maybe a tiny bit of confusion. Either she didn't understand, or she didn't know.

"Are you learning anything from staring at the portal?" Juno asked. "I don't mean to interrupt a shadow-walker at work, but—"

"Oh," I said, shaking myself. "I was listening."

"To the silence?" Winnow asked.

"No," I said. "To a taynix. But I don't think she's going to help us here." Though if I could figure out how to open the portal, I still might be able to use it to get Spensa and Doomslug home.

"Did you want to try another meditation?" Juno asked.

"Do you have any meditations for traveling to the nowhere?" I asked.

"There are many meditations for hyperjumps," Juno said. "I could select one of my favorites."

Learning to hyperjump without a taynix would be useful, but it wasn't what I was after here. "Hyperjumping is moving *through* the nowhere," I said. "I need to be able to move *into* it. And ideally back out again." That was the important part, really.

Juno paused. "'In and back out again' sounds indistinguishable from 'through.'"

I blinked at him. I supposed it did. "When we hyperjump, we pass beneath the eyes, but there's no one else there. This time I want to *stop* while I'm in there and help my people escape—and the kitsen cytonics too."

Cuna and the medtechs all looked at each other. The medtechs, at least, seemed to think I had lost my mind. I was the scudding commander of this battle, and here I was staring at walls and claiming to hear things while everyone else was fighting. I would have thought the same thing in their place, and maybe they were right. If anyone got hurt up there while I was chasing shadows, it would be my fault. I'd never forgive myself.

"You really believe that our shadow-walkers still live, trapped on the other side of this portal."

"Yes," I said.

Help us, they called.

I picked up Snuggles, and she nuzzled my wrist.

Juno steered his platform over to the glass case filled with books and opened it, extracting a volume. The thing was as thick as three of my fingers together, but no larger than the palm of my hand. It still looked enormous in Juno's paws. "Let me find one of those meditations."

I wasn't sure a meditation was what I needed, not for this. Instead I took a step closer to the portal.

"Shadow-walker?" Juno said. "Are you sure you wish to get closer? If you truly believe it to be a portal into the nowhere—"

"Spensa said a cytonic could fall through it," I said. "And maybe that's what happened to your people long ago. But if I don't at least try to interact with it, how can I reach them?"

I walked between the stretchers holding Gran-Gran and Cobb and moved up to the portal, careful not to step on any of the tiny tables or chairs or carts covered in books. I walked within arm's length of the portal and examined it.

I *could* feel them. Kitsen, many of them. I felt their sorrow and their frustration, trapped behind the portal. Generations of them, some born behind the portal and unable to ever leave. Some had died, while others had learned to extend their lives. They'd been sucked in and trapped, leaving no one on the other side who could hear them, their planet devoid of cytonics for centuries.

Until now, one of them whispered. I could feel their hope, and their disbelief.

And then suddenly a familiar voice filled my mind. It's about scudding time you listened, Spensa's grandmother said. I am too old to be trapped in here for eternity with gerbils, and too set in my ways to live to be two hundred, even if I could figure out what in the stars they're talking about.

Scud. Gran-Gran, I said. Are you in there? We found your body and Cobb's. How did you—

I was trying to follow the voices, Gran-Gran said. And I followed them all right. Right into the same scudding trap. Never listen to a rodent who asks for your help. Let that be a lesson.

I supposed I had volunteered to help rodents, but I didn't regret it.

Is Cobb okay? I asked.

He's here, Gran-Gran said. Growing grumpier by the hour. The kitsen say they're not sure our bodies could have survived out there. They say we might be dead.

You're not dead, I said. But why did this happen?

I couldn't figure out how to pinpoint a location to hyperjump to, Gran-Gran said. But I could hear the voices calling to me. So I tried to go to them instead.

Oh, stars. I haven't been able to figure out how to do that either, I said. It doesn't make sense when Alanik describes it. That was clever, trying to move toward the voices instead.

It would have been, Gran-Gran said. Except when we got here, our bodies were gone.

They're trapped outside the portal, I said. This was why we had to hyperjump to places we knew, or places we could see. Gran-Gran had tried to go somewhere unfamiliar, somewhere she couldn't physically hyperjump to—and it had only partially worked. I think trying to hyperjump through the portal severed your soul in half.

Sounds like the sort of thing that could kill a person, Gran-Gran said.

That it did, though it hadn't killed them yet. But scud, how long could they survive like this, half in and half out of the nowhere? I wouldn't have

thought such a thing was possible.

I could see the other side of the portal in my mind now. It looked like Evershore, a sandy island in an ocean of nothing. It looked...oddly corporeal for a place called the nowhere.

I understood. "They accidentally closed the door behind them," I said. "They were trapped, with no one left on this side to let them through." They'd remained there, huddled together, for so many years.

Scud. That was incredible. The *knowledge* these kitsen must have.

Through the portal, I could feel the despair of the kitsen as their kinsmen died, their fear that they would all perish behind the portal, that their long life would run out, that they didn't have enough people to breed and sustain their numbers. That the line of kitsen cytonics would come to an end, long after the rest of their people had supposed it had. They'd been searching for help for so long, and now they were weary. So weary. Gran-Gran was among them, and they were afraid her end would come even faster, separated from her body as she was.

Juno had piled several books onto his platform, so many that he barely fit in the center in his suit of power armor. He held one of the new books open in his gauntleted paws, floating over to me.

"The waves of the ocean wash upon you," Juno said.

"I thought you didn't have a meditation for this," I said.

"I don't," he said. "But the last one seemed to help you even though it was not specific. This is a meditation for the ages. One that is meant to sharpen your mind and your focus, to bring out your best potential. I don't have the answer for you, but you may find the answer for yourself."

Huh.

"Should I go on?" Juno asked.

I didn't see what it could hurt. "Yes," I said.

"The waves of the ocean wash upon you, but they have no power to drag you away. You are one with the waves, and you are one with yourself. You are eternal, relentless as the rising sun. Your heart beats with the rhythm of the stars."

I still wasn't relaxed—when was the last scudding time I had been relaxed?—but I could hear it, the rhythm Juno was talking about. The vibration of the stars. The heartbeat of the universe. I could hear it in the taynix, and in the battle above. I could feel it from the portal, brimming with power.

I felt a nudge at the edge of my mind. It was that image of Spensa again, lost and alone. No, not alone. Doomslug was with her, and M-Bot, though I didn't know how that worked if M-Bot's ship had been dismantled by the Superiority. I couldn't help Spensa, couldn't reach her. I didn't know how to do anything except—

Take care of her, I said to Doomslug.

And then something shifted, and Doomslug teased a thread out of Spensa's thoughts and passed it on to me, clear and powerful as anything.

Stars, it was her memory of *me*. She was forgetting herself, her friends, her family, everything, but she still remembered *me*. She *cared* about me, deeply and with a ferocity that was totally and uniquely Spin.

That made me incredibly lucky. More so than I'd ever be able to express.

I felt a swell of agreement from Doomslug; she would take care of Spensa. But it was accompanied by gratitude that I already was.

Thank you, I said. I tried to hold on to that snatch of memory, to cling to what little I had left of Spensa, not sure if I'd ever see her again. But it was slipping away along with Doomslug, back into the nowhere.

Doomslug faded, but the portal remained, pulsing with power, with a rhythm all its own—a rhythm that felt familiar somehow, like a melody I'd heard before.

“You yield to the universe,” Juno went on, though I'd missed some of what he said, “not because of its power, but because of your wisdom. You yield power over all things, and in doing so become one with the stars—”

I felt the impenetrability of the portal, the lock that kept me from pushing through. I didn't know if I could fall through, or if it prevented entry from both sides.

I couldn't open the portal, I realized, because I lacked the key. Similar to the impression that let us use our powers inside a cytonic inhibitor, there

was some kind of cytonic vibration that would open the portal, letting the kitsen pass through.

“Juno,” I said. “Do your people have any kind of recordings from the days before the kitsen cytonics disappeared? Some kind of database, or digital records?”

“We do not,” Juno said. “We lost much when we were colonized, and more in the War of Liberation.”

Stars. I didn’t even know if such a recording had ever existed. The kitsen had become stuck, after all. They might never have been fully capable of traveling in and out. I didn’t know how to get in and out of a portal, and since Alanik hadn’t recognized it, she wouldn’t know either. She hadn’t even been able to *hear* the kitsen.

I could feel the sense of failure pushing in around the edges, the sense that I never had enough to give, never had the right pieces at the right moments to really come through for the people I cared about. FM was right though. Sometimes I did. But the failures loomed so much larger than the successes that it was easy to forget.

“You are completely relaxed,” Juno said.

I *tried* to relax. I didn’t need to solve all the problems on my own. I was supposed to lean on the people around me for help, and while no one on this side of the portal had the information I needed...

I want to help you, I said. But I don’t know how to open this portal.

I felt despair from the other side. Weariness. The burden of centuries spent watching, wondering, hoping and then losing hope, and struggling to find it again and again. A picture formed in my mind—a wrinkled kitsen watching her friends and loved ones die, knowing others were dying on the other side of the portal as time passed, knowing she would never see them again. The occasional glimpse of a cytonic nearby—probably Superiority ships visiting the planet. But they never heard, and they never came to help.

Then a voice, far away. A woman who had spent her lifetime listening finally heard them.

And now she was trapped somehow, strangely separated from her body. Regret, a sense that reaching out was selfish, because she and Cobb had

now suffered their same fate.

“The stars shine upon you, an ancient light in the darkness,” Juno continued. “The darkness widens to swallow them, but they shine endlessly on.”

We’re going to get you out, I said. It was a promise I didn’t know I could keep, more a message of determination than of certainty. *How did you get in there?*

What followed wasn’t words so much as images. A summit. A room full of kitsen, each bringing their unique talents, knowledge, and abilities. They meditated together, sharing their knowledge, their scribes writing furiously to contain it all.

They toyed with the threads of the universe, the barrier between our world and the nowhere. I could feel the memories now, not only from the old kitsen but embedded in the portal itself, as if it were *made* of experiences.

Together the kitsen had picked at the boundary, separated the threads. They’d meant only to figure out how to visit that realm for a time, the way the legends said their people did when they first met humans. But instead they opened the gaping maw of nothingness and it swallowed them all, along with a large chunk of their world.

Stars, the chasm this library was built in. It was formed when the kitsen left the somewhere, taking the stone of the cliffs *with* them.

“You look up at their lights,” Juno said, “letting their vibrations wash over you. You too are eternal like the stars, a piece of the endless *something* that makes space for the *nothing*, but never yields to it.”

I didn’t know what that meant, but I tried not to focus too hard on it. I concentrated instead on the threads that made up the border, infused with memory, vibrating so strongly as if the nowhere wanted to burst out of the portal. I didn’t want it to swallow Dreamspring, didn’t want to open the entire thing.

Just enough for those trapped on the other side to come through.

I could feel Gran-Gran listening, noticing what I was doing as I began to manipulate the threads. The way Alanik described the boundary—it was

like listening to a description of an ocean when I was young. I never really understood until I saw it for myself. But I could *feel* the boundary between the realms. I might not be able to carry myself through, but here I had power.

I tried to give you the story you needed, Gran-Gran said. *I told you to imagine yourself flying among the stars.*

I remembered Gran-Gran's story, about how disobeying orders could be the right thing to do.

Wait until you hear what I've done, I said.

I can see it, she said. *I tried to give you the story you needed, but perhaps you've found your own story after all.*

Had I? I could feel the way the threads of the boundary wove together, sealing the portal. I didn't know how to move them, but I focused on them the way I had the birds. That image wasn't quite right for this, so I tried vines all woven together, creating a wall between us and them. I didn't want to cut the vines down, only move a few aside, forming a small area where the kitsen could return, where Gran-Gran and Cobb could slip through.

"You are the light and the darkness," Juno said. "You are the place where the two worlds meet. The intersection of what is, and what could be."

Spensa flies among the stars, Gran-Gran said. *But you build things up from the ground. She is a warrior, and you are a defender. It's a different kind of story.*

I can't protect them all, I said.

You can't, Gran-Gran said. *We all have our own burdens, even if we carry them differently.*

I thought about the way I'd lost it in the senate meeting. *I'm not carrying mine well,* I said.

Ah, Gran-Gran said. *Well, you're not alone in that.*

I hated it. I wanted to get it right, to get everything right. But maybe sometimes there was no right. There was only the best I could do.

I pictured the vines and touched them each in turn, trying to see which would shift and which held fast. I was able to bring one to the side, creating

the smallest part in the jungle of them, but there were more vines on the other side, ones I couldn't reach.

I couldn't do this alone. I needed help.

I reached out to the old kitsen on the other side of the portal, trying to show her what I saw. Her mind seemed to receive it, as if she also knew the barrier well, had been over these same vines thousands of times. I showed her the ones I could move, and I felt her study them.

And then the ones on the other side began to shift.

I focused on the vines I could control, feeling the vibrations, holding fast the ones that supported the entire structure while manipulating those that only supported tiny bits of it.

"You are completely relaxed," Juno said.

I breathed in rhythm with the vibrations. I wasn't relaxed, but I was calm. I was at peace. I *was* the power.

And then all at once, the smooth surface of the portal cracked open, and a kitsen hobbled through. Her fur was greying and her skin was so wrinkled it folded down over her eyes. She pushed it back and looked up at us.

And then a dozen more followed.

Eighteen

More kitsen crowded into the area in front of the portal, all blinking at each other and at us. Several of them hummed with a cytonic vibration, though some of the younger-looking ones didn't. Non-cytonics who'd been born on the other side of the portal, who'd lived their whole lives there.

Juno nearly fell off his platform. He bumped his stack of books and had to snatch at them to keep them from sliding over the edge. He started fumbling through his book, like perhaps he needed a meditation to calm himself.

"Human!" the one with the wrinkled skin said to me. "Are you the one who released us?"

"Yes," I said. "I can't believe...I can't believe that worked."

I looked down at Cobb and Gran-Gran, but they lay still with their eyes closed. Scud, had it *not* worked for them?

No. Wait. I could feel something, a signature emanating from Gran-Gran. That had to mean...

Cobb stirred, and then he coughed. Kel bent over the screen that showed his vitals.

"Is he okay?" I asked.

"He's improving," Kel said.

"Will he wake up?"

"I don't know. But if he does, he'll be in no condition to help. We should get them home to Detritus."

Stars. Of course he wouldn't be in any condition to lead. He'd spent the last *two days* with his mind disconnected from his body.

A loud boom sounded through the walls of the library, as if the stone above us had been struck—probably by a falling starfighter.

Zing turned the radio back on, and the airwaves were a mess of talking.

I didn't want to take the time to sort that out. *Alanik*, I said, *how's it going with those reinforcements?*

The UrDail flights have joined the battle, she said. *What are you doing down there?*

Found us some more backup, I said. Cuna had bent down to the level of some of the kitsen cytonics and was conversing with them quietly. I hoped to all the stars in the sky they weren't calling them "lesser."

That's good, because we need help.

Scud. Sitrep?

Three more carrier ships. No planetary weapons yet, but Arturo is worried. Something about a bomb.

Oh no. What bomb?

He said he spotted a ship with a strange flight pattern.

My whole body went cold. I focused, widening my reach—

And I found the impressions again, the minds of the pilots, all flying around in what felt like disarray.

No, there was a method to it. Arturo had them divided into flanking groups and the flights were working together, though I couldn't pinpoint the strategy at a glance. If Arturo had seen what I thought he'd seen, I didn't have time to consider it. I found his mind flying near Alanik. As I drew closer I could feel his focus, his determination.

And his *terror*. He didn't know where I was, wasn't sure what they should do. He spotted that ship again, moving slowly in a familiar pattern he'd never wanted to see again—I could see it in his mind. We'd fought a lot of those ships in our days as cadets, though we hadn't seen one since we'd driven the Krell away from the surface of Detritus.

It looked like a lifebuster.

Amphi? I said.

I felt Arturo startle.

Jerkface? he said. *Are you in my scudding head?*

Apparently, I said. *You saw a lifebuster?*

Yeah. It's moving slowly like they do, but it's headed toward Dreamspring. Kimmalyn and Nedd are keeping an eye on it.

I closed my eyes. A bomb of that size could take out the whole island, maybe more. Such an impact would have been big enough to cave in the caverns below the surface of Detritus—I didn't want to see what it would do to the kitsen city, how far the devastation would reach.

We'd have to be very careful taking that down.

When I opened my eyes again, several of the kitsen cytonics had disappeared and the others were moving toward the exit. Juno had landed his platform and was powering up some of the floating disks that would let them reach the top library shelves, and the kitsen cytonics were boarding them.

They were going to help, but if we let a bomb hit the city that wouldn't be enough to stop it.

I turned to the medtechs and Cuna. "Stay here," I said. "Get Cobb on the radio the *minute* he's awake."

"Yes, sir," Kel and Winnow said. They didn't tell me again that he needed more rest. We all needed a lot of things we weren't getting tonight. Survival took priority.

Juno climbed back onto his platform and hovered up to my shoulder.

"You could stay here," I said. "It would be safer."

"You are the Restorer of Lost Souls," Juno said solemnly. "He Who Harkens unto Silent Voices, Opener of Locked Doors. Where you go, I will go, shadow-walker." He still had his platform piled high with books, and I wanted to tell him I didn't think those would be helpful to bring, but they'd done all right for us so far.

"Okay," I said. "Let's go." I put a hand on Juno's platform and asked Snuggles to take us to my ship on the beach. I wanted to get a better picture of what was happening.

We appeared next to the wreckage of my starship, and I tried not to focus on the body that must still be lying on the sand somewhere behind me. Several kitsen ships flew down the beach, fleeing the city. None of them looked like fighters, and one was nothing more than a water tank bolted to a floating pedestal. It didn't move as fast as the others, but it was carrying five kitsen all packed together inside. If the bomb hit, I hoped they could

get far enough away, but I wasn't sure there was any place far enough, not on this island.

The sky above the city was full of ships—Superiority, human, UrDail, and kitsen. I could feel some of the kitsen cytonics—those who could hyperjump—already moving around in the gunships above, and one shot forth a flurry of mindblades, cutting an enemy fighter to pieces. Another disappeared and then reappeared on the other side of the battlefield, catching an enemy ship with its shield down in a barrage of destructor fire. The wreckage fell from the sky.

This was good. The contributions of the kitsen cytonics would give my flight some time to deal with the lifebuster without losing ground to the Superiority. I wanted to return to Detritus for a ship, but every second counted. I leaned against the damaged fuselage as I reached out to Arturo again. *How far out is that ship?*

Too close, Arturo said. Hard to say without Command to run numbers, but if we bring it down I can't guarantee it won't destroy the city.

It must not have reached optimal placement yet, because they were still bringing it closer before detonating. I had no idea how much time we had, but if we couldn't shoot the ship down without the risk of destroying Dreamspring, we had better work fast.

Have Nedder engage his IMP, I told him. Then Quirk can shoot the ship down and someone can grab the bomb with a light-lance. The safest place to take it will be out of the atmosphere.

Spensa had managed to carry one off once and survive, but it was dangerous. If the bomb was on a timer and that person didn't get out before it exploded, they'd be gone.

Arturo didn't like that idea. He knew that was what had to be done, he was just terrified to do it. *I'll take the bomb*, he said.

No, I told him. You're in command. You have to give it to someone else.

The hell I do, Arturo said. If someone needs to risk their life like that, I'll do it.

No, I told him. You won't. That's an order.

Arturo cursed me out, and I understood. It was terrible telling your friends they had to be the ones to do it. Any of them would though. In a heartbeat.

Have Alanik carry the bomb, I said. She doesn't have to use a hyperdrive to get out. Might save her the half second of communication time.

Scud, Arturo hated that even more. He was...oh, he was *attached* to Alanik. Nothing was going on between them yet, but he hoped for it.

I'm sorry, I told him. Spensa didn't need me to order her to get into trouble, but it hadn't been easy flying with her, knowing I might be the one to give her the order that got her killed. I get it.

I know you do, Arturo said. I'll take care of it.

I pulled back, away from Arturo's fear and pain. I tuned my handheld radio to our general channel—I wanted everyone to hear this next part, and that was the fastest way to talk to all of them at once.

“Kauri,” I said, “do you copy?”

“Copy, Jerkface,” Kauri said. “We've called in as many ships as we can. We have more, but they aren't fighters.”

If we sent civilian ships, we'd be needlessly throwing away lives. “Are you in contact with your senate?”

“I am,” she said. “They have taken shelter, but they have encouraged us to defend the planet. They fear if we surrender, the Superiority will destroy us anyway.”

The ivory moonlight glinted off the shards of the canopy on my broken ship. “That's exactly what will happen,” I said. “I want you to extend them an offer of evacuation. We can grant your leaders safe harbor. Detritus has a shield. It's protected. We could get your senate out. Their families. *Your* family. Maybe some civilians from Dreamspring. We will continue to fight here, but I don't know if we'll be able to save the city, and at least this way your government will survive. Some of your people will make it out.”

We could fit a lot of kitsen on a human transport ship. We had the one we'd brought to carry Cobb and Gran-Gran. I could go get another or send someone else to get one. With a hyperdrive we might be able to get some of the kitsen out before the lifebuster arrived.

“I will send word to the senate of your offer,” Kauri said. “Thank you for your generosity.”

I believed her gratitude was genuine, but her voice sounded frightened. I didn’t blame her.

“Tell them to hurry,” I said. “I’ll have a transport ship meet them at the senate meeting hall.”

“Thank you,” Kauri said.

I looked up at the sky again. Wreckage smashed against the cliff maybe half a klick from me. I thought it was UrDail, but I couldn’t be sure.

“Jerkface?” Arturo said. “What can we do to support the evacuation?”

“I want FM and Sentry to land and orchestrate the evacuation effort,” I said. “Can you spare them?”

“Yes,” Arturo said.

“Good. FM, Sentry, get as many kitsen leaders on board the medical transport ship as you can. Alanik or I will jump them out as soon as the ship is full. We’re going to need plenty of cover over Dreamspring while we evacuate. Everyone you can spare.”

“I’ll tell them,” Arturo said.

“Are we planning to pull back?” FM asked.

“No,” I said. “But if that bomb hits the island, I want to have saved as many people as possible.”

“Copy, Jerkface,” FM said. “We’re on it.”

I saw FM’s and Sadie’s ships soaring down out of the sky above the city to land near the senate building. If anyone would do their best to save literally everyone they could, it was FM.

I reached out. *Alanik*, I said. *Status?*

We’re coming up on the bomb, she said. *Shield is down. Kimmalyne—she hit the ship!*

Alanik dropped off, probably swooping in with her light hook, and I reached out to the minds around her, finding Arturo.

Scud, his whole mind was lit up with fear. I watched through his eyes as Alanik caught the lifebuster with her light hook and disappeared, taking it up into the vacuum.

She's got it, Arturo said. He was wound tight, and I almost asked Juno to read him a meditation.

It wouldn't help. Not in a situation like this. I could feel the others, I realized. Kimmaly, Nedd, T-Stall, Catnip—all of us holding our breath. They wouldn't relax until—

I felt Alanik emerge on the other side of the battlefield. *She's back*, I said.

The lifebuster flashed across the sky with its three distinct explosions. I felt profound relief, not only from Arturo but from all of us. We could do this now. We should still load that ship for evac just in case, but without that bomb—

Oh, *scud*.

I watched in horror as the Superiority ships began to scatter, spreading out away from the island. There were more carrier ships in the sky now, belching forth more fighters, but they were all fanning out, moving away from Dreamspring. What the hell were they doing?

They're spreading us thin, Arturo said. *They know they don't have to defeat us to win. We're protecting Dreamspring, so they're going to take their vengeance elsewhere.*

It would work, too. They outnumbered us. If we split up, we lost our position. If the battle spread everywhere, they could circle around and fire on Dreamspring while we were out trying to protect the other cities. There weren't enough of us. The damage would be immeasurable.

The Superiority didn't care who they hurt, as long as they got what they wanted. We'd escaped them too many times. Now they were going to teach us a lesson.

And the kitsen were going to pay the price.

Nineteen

Arturo had our flights concentrated over Dreamspring, focusing on the ships that remained here. But it wouldn't help the kitsen on the surrounding islands. Some of the kitsen cytonics had hyperjumped their ships after the enemy—I saw one with mindblades trying to take down a ship, another using what felt like concussion bolts to stun a flight of enemy starfighters. They were fighting valiantly, but there were so many of the enemy, and maybe more yet to arrive.

We weren't going to be able to save everyone.

I looked up at the sky, at the relatively fewer number of ships. This wasn't a good thing. The Superiority would destroy the outer islands and then return for Dreamspring when they were done. I couldn't stop it.

The words of Juno's mantra came into my mind again, although the kitsen was silent beside me.

In order to achieve control, you must first accept that you have none.

I wanted control though. I wanted to put a stop to everything terrible that was happening, to save my people, to rescue Spensa, to pull her out of the nowhere and have her with me again safe. I wanted to go back and save my parents. They'd died because they'd made a desperate gambit in hopes that they could control our fate, make a better world for me, for all of us.

They failed. They couldn't control it. And neither could I.

I closed my eyes. In my mind, the Superiority ship exploded over and over.

Do better than we did.

We weren't though, were we? We were trying, but failing all the same.

"Boom," Boomslug said.

"Boom," I answered him.

A wave of helplessness washed over me. I couldn't stop what was coming. It would be like trying to stop a wave in the ocean. I couldn't stop

it, but I could let it wash over me and I could remain standing after it passed.

My radio flashed. Arturo's private channel. "Amphi?" I said.

"Jerkface. What...what are we going to do?"

We needed more help, but at this point I wasn't sure what else we *could* do. Against any other enemy it made sense for us to withdraw, to hope that they would have mercy on the kitsen. But I was never going to count on the Superiority's mercy.

"Protect the city," I said. "Send Quirk and Nedder to Detritus for more transport ships. Ask Angel if she can bring in any UrDail transport ships to evacuate other cities. We need to get as many people as we can off this planet before the Superiority musters up another one of those planetary weapons."

"Copy," Arturo said. He sounded as hollow as I felt. We both knew what we were about to watch. It would be the worst atrocity either of us had ever seen.

The general channel flashed. "Jerkface?" FM said. "The kitsen are boarding the transport ship. Should we send them out?"

"Is the ship full?" I asked.

"It will be soon. But...we can see the closest island, off to the dawnward side." She'd picked up that term from Alanik, and it was helpful, I had to give the UrDail that. "The ships are firing on the island. Shouldn't we... *help* them?"

There was pain in her voice, not unlike Kauri's. FM had a gift for that—feeling what other people were feeling.

Today it might as well be a curse, but at least I'd been able to give her the job of saving the people we could.

"Take the ship out," I said. "I'm going to check on Rig. We'll try to save them, but...I don't..."

"It's okay," FM said. "I know you're doing your best."

That was what I was afraid of. That this was my best.

And it was never, ever good enough.

"Juno," I said, "I'm going to take you to safety."

Juno looked down at his platform, at the piles of books stacked at his feet. “I should have brought more,” he said. “The books are digitized—the knowledge will not be lost, but these are the originals. It is a tragedy to lose them, but that’s even more true of my kinsmen.”

My throat closed up. All their knowledge. We needed that, and the Superiority would do their best to destroy it.

Stars.

In my mind, I reached for Detritus, searching for Rig. I felt his adrenaline before I’d even found him. He and his team were worn out trying to get the platform up and running, but they were still there doing the best they could.

Report? I asked him.

We’ve got lots of slugs in lots of boxes, Rig said. And we think these rooms are connected to several platforms. That’s the only reason we can see that you’d need so many. But Jorgen, we don’t even know what some of these systems do.

Alanik’s words to me on ReDawn echoed in my mind: *Focus on what you have*. If we could get even a few of those platforms here, we might be able to protect more cities while we evacuated them. There were hundreds upon hundreds of kitsen cities. The death toll would still be horrible. But... it would be something.

I’m coming, I said. Whatever you’ve got, we need to try it now.

Okay, Rig said.

I looked up at the sky. I could see what FM was talking about now—the flashes of light over the water, the Superiority firing on that island. FM should be pulling the transport ship out, but that was one tiny group of kitsen among so many.

It was going to take a miracle to get us out of this. Spensa taught me never to count a miracle out, and I hoped that held true even if she wasn’t here to work one for us this time.

“What are you going to do?” Juno asked. He stood with a book open, resting it on his forearm. In his paw, he held a small stick poised over the page.

A pen, I realized.

“What are *you* doing?” I asked.

“I’m making a record,” Juno said. “An original account of the actions of a shadow-walker.”

“No one’s going to want to read about anything I’ve done,” I said. I immediately realized it wasn’t true. He might be chronicling the end of civilization on Evershore. That depended not on me, but on how far the Superiority wanted to take their vengeance.

“I have waited all my life to witness the deeds of a shadow-walker,” Juno said. “And if this day is the last for my home, it will be my honor to record that it was not because your people left us to suffer alone.”

Scud. Wouldn’t we, though? We could evacuate *some* kitsen, but if we couldn’t turn the battle in our favor I was going to have to pull my people out. I couldn’t let them all die for nothing.

Do better than we did, my mother said.

I closed my eyes. I didn’t know if I could, but I was going to keep trying until I knew the answer. I rested my hand on Juno’s platform.

“Snuggles,” I said, “take us to Drape.”

We appeared in the room with the boxes and a lot fewer roaming slugs, most of which had been corralled into corners by the engineers.

Rig spun around from one of the control panels on the walls. “Jorgen,” he said.

“FM is fine,” I said. “She’s working on the evacuation effort. But the Superiority is fanning out over the planet, bombing civilians.” I didn’t know how they justified this to themselves. I didn’t know how they justified anything, but we had to put a stop to it. “We need to get these platforms over there. As many as we can move, as quickly as we can.”

The hum of all the slugs around us was overwhelming, and it was difficult for me to pick them out one from another. I tried to focus on the hyperdrive slugs, but I couldn’t because there were so many. I didn’t want to give a blanket instruction to all of them, since we didn’t know what many of them could do.

“Where’s Fine?” I asked.

“Hypercomm box, I hope,” Rig said. He moved down the row of boxes. “Over here.”

I found Fine before he did—one of the few signatures I knew in this cacophony. *Fine*, I said. *Can you tell them to take these platforms to Evershore?* I showed him an image of the slugs he knew—Naga, Happy, Chubs, Whiskers—all flying around the planet, and then some of the platforms appearing in a ring beneath the clouds, where they could fire on enemy ships.

Go? Fine said to me.

Go, I responded.

He hesitated for a moment—conversing, I thought, with the other slugs. And then I felt us slip into the nowhere, the surface of it rippling around us like rings on a pond. We passed beneath the eyes—scud, this was working. We’d be able to support the flights, and at least reduce the damage the ships were able to do to the islands of Evershore.

As we reemerged, I looked out the control room window, expecting to see the stars above.

Instead I saw the planet itself, an enormous ball of water, punctuated by sand-colored islands. Scud. The platform was way too high up, and we were facing the opposite of the direction I’d expected. I could see the backside of several of the Superiority carrier ships. They might be in range of our hyperweapons, but—

One of the engineers swore. “Flightleader Weight,” she said, “you’re going to want to see this.”

She indicated the proximity monitors, which showed the planet of Detritus and all the platforms moving around us—the entire belt of them.

They were *still there*.

Scud. The control room had worked, but it hadn’t only moved some platforms. It had moved the whole damn *planet*.

Go, I heard Fine say through the nowhere.

And all around me, the nowhere began to ripple, tear, and explode.

Twenty

Bits of the nowhere ripped apart, exploding outward toward nearby Superiority carrier ships. Scud, there were more of them. It was kind of gratifying, seeing how much force Winzik felt he had to bring in order to take us down.

But he hadn't done it yet. Hyperweapons I didn't know we had erupted from the surfaces of the platforms, ripping up enemy ships. Ships swarmed below us, mostly centered over the island of Dreamspring. They weren't much more than dots, but through the nowhere I could feel the minds of the pilots—UrDail, kitsen, and human alike—all fighting together.

We were pretty high up, maybe even out of the atmosphere, so many of the enemy ships were out of range. I didn't feel like we should move the whole planet on a whim, though scud, did we need to move it farther away? What were two planets this large going to do to each other?

Jorgen, Alanik said. What did you—

We brought company, I told her. All of it.

Apparently, she answered.

My view of the planet below began to shift, and I realized the platform was drifting *away* from Detritus.

“Rig,” I said, “are we *moving*?”

“Oh, scud,” Rig said. “Is *that* what that navigation system does?”

Rig called to the other engineers, and several of them joined him at the panel. “Here,” he said. “These are navigation controls like the ones on Platform Prime, but because there are no engine systems I could never figure out what they're for. But now—I think these inputs here are for coordinates, and then the system tells the hyperslugs where to go.”

“Jerkface!” Kauri said over the radio. “I don't know what's going on up there, but our tidal authority would like you to know that your planet is going to pull on our oceans, gathering all the water on that side, causing an

even worse wave to engulf our islands. Wait—oh, they say it will do that *if* one of our planets doesn't rip the other one apart first."

"They're right," Rig said. "But it should have happened already." He scanned the monitors, looking for something. "I don't know why it hasn't, but my best guess is that the planet itself has some kind of gravitational capacitor—almost as if it was intended to be a traveling space station, so it has systems to counteract the gravitational forces for the surrounding bodies —"

"The *planet*," I said, "has *GravCaps*?"

"Yeah," Rig said, shaking his head. "Apparently it does."

"Negative, Kauri," I said over the radio. "Detritus has systems to prevent damage to Evershore."

"If so, they aren't working perfectly," Kauri said. "The tidal authority is seeing a rise in the water, though not nearly as bad as they'd expect."

"We're too close," Rig said. "GravCaps have limits, and running them at this strength has to be depleting their power source quickly. We need to move the planet farther off."

"Let's do it," I said. "Before that though, can you send the platforms out to the kitsen islands to defend them?"

"I need to find the coordinates," Rig said, tapping at his console, using the platform sensors to pinpoint the coordinates of the various islands.

"Kauri," I said. "Does your tidal authority know how far out Detritus needs to be to keep you safe?"

"They're working up some coordinates now," Kauri said.

"Okay," Rig said. "Here goes."

The platforms around us began to move, this one jumping to that island, that one to another, the hyperweapons firing on the Superiority ships caught in the air above the islands. We hadn't sent our forces out that far, so they wouldn't be caught in the blasts.

"We can't move all of them," I said. "We don't want to leave Detritus exposed. But let's unload as many as we can and then I'm going to instruct the slugs to move the planet again."

“This is Commander Ulan,” a voice said over the platform radio. “What the *scud* is going on up there?”

Oh stars. I couldn’t explain this, not now. “Defense protocol to protect the kitsen planet, sir,” I said. “I’ll give you a full briefing when the sequence is complete.”

“You’re calling this a *protocol*?” Ulan said.

I was stretching the definition of the word, that was for sure.

Rig reached over and turned down the volume on the radio. “Gerrig, help me enter these,” he said, and one of the other engineers stepped up beside him, assisting Rig in getting more coordinates into the system.

“Jerkface,” Kauri said. “The tidal authority says the water levels are still rising. Even if you move the planet, this is going to cause a tidal wave to hit Dreamspring. They’ve put out a warning to the city for everyone to get to high ground. The other nearby islands are doing the same.”

Moving everyone to high ground would make them easy targets for the Superiority, but if they were to drown anyway, what choice did they have? “I’ll send my people on the ground to help,” I said to Kauri, and then I switched to the medtechs’ channel. “Cuna, Zing,” I said. “There’s a tidal wave coming. Go into the city and help the kitsen get to high ground.”

“Copy, Jerkface,” Zing said.

I turned to Juno. “Will the cliffs be high enough to protect the library?”

“It has stood for centuries,” Juno said, “and we have faced tsunamis before.”

This one might be bigger. It depended on forces I didn’t fully understand. “Kel and Winnow,” I said over the radio, “Keep an eye on the water. If it looks like you’ll be overwhelmed, we’ll get you all out with a hyperdrive.”

“Copy,” Zing said again.

“I’m working on it,” I said. “Make sure your people are still headed for high ground.” I turned to Rig. “We need to move fast so that wave doesn’t get worse.”

“We’ve got platforms moving toward the islands that are under attack. Shield still operational. Ready when you are.”

I reached out to Fine, expressing our need for the slugs' help again, showing him an image of the planets tearing each other apart and an approximation of how far out I'd like them to move Detritus.

Go, Fine said.

Go, I agreed.

And in a blink we passed beneath the distracted eyes and stared out at Evershore, which was much smaller than it had been. Beside me Rig swore.

"Kauri," I said, "is that far enough?"

"They're watching the tidal levels," Kauri said. "They say they would like advance notice before your planet decides to visit again."

"Tell them we'll call first next time," I said. "And let me know if we need to move again. We can keep trying until we get it right."

Jorgen, Alanik said, we could use some help down here.

I expanded my senses outward, taking in the whole of the battlefield. Our people were fighting, but they were scared. The appearance of Detritus and the scattering platforms both encouraged and confused them. Arturo was doing a good job with our people, but a lot of the UrDail and kitsen couldn't understand him, and they lacked our organization and discipline. They were struggling.

I felt the kitsen cytonics wielding mindblades, hyperjumping their ships into better positions. I felt their joy at being reunited with their kinsmen and their terror that this day could be the last for their home. Down on the planet, I could feel the kitsen civilians huddling, frightened. And one mind listening carefully, with rapt attention and a fair amount of confusion.

Was that—

Cobb? I asked.

Son, he said, I don't know what you've done up there, but for the North Star's sake don't stop now.

I closed my eyes. There were people all around, fighting and dying because of me. I'd worked so hard to find Cobb, but now I realized I was *afraid* to find him, afraid of what he'd think of what we'd done.

All this, all the resources we'd expended, moving the scudding *planet*, that was on me—

You WHAT? Cobb said.

Oh. He could hear me. Scud.

Sir, we—

Never mind, Cobb said. *Focus. You've got a battle to win.*

I felt like I should stop and give a full report, find out what my commander's orders were. But I was pretty sure he'd *given* me an order, so...

Over by the control panel, Rig was fiddling with a radio, finding the flight's channel. We knew he'd found it when Arturo swore loudly. "Is that *Detritus* up there?"

"Yes, it is," Rig said. "If we couldn't bring you home, we thought we'd bring home to you."

"Saints and stars," Sadie said.

I waited for Nedd's wisecrack, but it didn't come and my heart dropped.

"Amphi," I said, "why don't I hear Nedder?"

"Because he's speechless for once," Sadie said.

"Like the Saint says," Kimmalyln said, "if you don't have anything to say, you might scare your flightleader into thinking you're dead."

"I'm here," Nedd said. "Just...wow."

"Orders, Jerkface?" Arturo said.

"The enemy ships are scattering away from the platforms," I said. The platforms were taking care of the area far above Dreamspring now, but even with their mobility they weren't versatile enough to do all the work. "All flights, intercept those fighters and chase as many as you can in the direction of the platforms. We have the advantage now. Let's use it."

Arturo started giving orders, but I could already see what the problem was going to be. We had three different species of pilots in the air, and only some of them had translators in their ships. Defending a city was a more contained effort. Trying to catch and herd the enemy ships was going to take an enormous coordinated effort. We needed precision, but we had different training, and some of the kitsen ships probably had no training at all in working with a group this large. Communicating with them all was going to be impossible.

Unless.

Scud, I had an idea. I reached for Fine's box and opened it, pulling him out into my arms.

Thank you for your help, I said. *Mind lending me some more?*

"Fine!" Snuggles said.

"Fine!" Fine said.

"Fine," I said. And I focused on the battle again, on the many minds now scattering out over the planet. I felt Fine following me, his mind scanning over all the fighter pilots, a few of them winking out of existence, others blind with terror about what would become of them. Some determined. Fighting. Focused mostly on staying alive.

I could see the shape of the battle. I could see the patterns in the chaos, the places where we needed to push forward and those where we needed to pull back to manipulate the enemy. To stop their destruction and get them where we wanted them.

"Ready?" I said to Fine.

"Ready," Fine said.

And I pushed outward toward their minds, sending them all the vision, helping them see what I could see. Not a mass of individual fighters, but a military so brave and strong and *powerful* that even the almighty Superiority was afraid of it.

This was it, I realized. The thing the Superiority feared the most. The power of all of us working together.

I could feel other commslugs joining us, amplifying the signal to my allies below. I could sense their minds responding. I couldn't pick out individual voices, only this *feeling*. We were in this together, and in that we had hope.

I focused on the different fronts, directing our flights, pushing this one here, that one there. Pulling back some of our forces and urging others to retreat to the city, to cover the hospital area and the homes of the civilians. They all understood me, because in our minds there were no languages, no barriers. Around me Rig's team continued to direct the platforms into place. Piece by piece the platforms were extending their shield across Evershore,

trapping the enemy inside where my fighters hunted them mercilessly, driving them up into the fire of the platforms.

So many pieces, but I could see the larger pattern and I did my best to express it. Our fighters began to fly better, more precisely, taking more and more control of the skies—

And then I heard a whisper from the nowhere. One word, the sweetest of all.

Retreat.

The Superiority ships began to race for the edges of the shield, the fighters pouring into their remaining carrier ships, which blinked out of existence. Some of the fighters turned and ran without a ship to go back to, flying with blind terror, and my people picked them off one by one.

In my mind, one feeling resonated above all others.

Relief.

They were leaving.

We'd won.

It was only one battle, one raincloud from the oncoming storm. But we were going to hold out. We were going to keep fighting.

From now on, we'd do it together.

Twenty-One

When the battle was over, I hyperjumped with Juno down to the cliff above Dreamspring. The tidal wave had hit the lower city while I'd been gone, and there was considerable flooding, though the upper city remained intact and the water hadn't reached the cliffs by the library. A few of the buildings had taken damage from falling ships or destructor fire, and bits of wreckage were scattered over the fins and ridges of the city.

"I'm sorry this happened," I said to Juno.

"So am I," Juno said. "But my people leave today richer, despite the setbacks."

"You have your cytonics back," I said.

"It is more than that," Juno said. "We are no longer isolated."

There was still so much to figure out, so much work to do. The ever-present political squabbling would continue on.

But Juno was right. We weren't alone anymore. We were still fighting for our lives, but at least now we could fight side by side.

I squinted up at Detritus, which hung in the sky like a second moon, a bright sphere of metal and glinting shield. Stars, I didn't know how long we should leave it here, but I was going to let Cobb make that call. And all the calls from here on out, just as soon as I explained everything to him.

A transport ship hyperjumped into the middle of the road below the cliff face, probably carried by one of the taynix from Platform Prime. I squinted, watching as the ship's cabin lights illuminated a man in a vice admiral's uniform.

Stoff climbed out of the ship and moved toward the library. The medtechs were just pulling Cobb and Gran-Gran down the stairs, still on their stretchers. They left Cobb at the top and carried Gran-Gran, who protested loudly all the way down to the transport ship.

“I have to go talk to my superiors,” I said to Juno. “It’s better if you don’t come with me this time.”

“That’s all right, shadow-walker,” Juno said, lifting his book. “I have a great many things to record.”

“Snuggles,” I said, and I urged her to hyperjump us to the roadway beside the ship. When we arrived, I could hear Gran-Gran yelling at the medtechs.

“I can walk!” she said. “I may be old and blind, but I’m not infirm!”

I stepped aside as the medtechs persisted in carrying her to the transport ship. “It’s okay, Gran-Gran,” I said. “No one thinks you’re incapable.”

“They’d better not,” Gran-Gran said. “Or I’ll show them.”

I was sure she would.

Stoff had already made it to Cobb’s side. FM came up next to me—I saw her ship parked up the road now, by Sadie’s.

“Sir,” Stoff said. “We are so thrilled you’re back. We’ve made some great strides in securing alliances with the UrDail and the kitsen.”

“That’s good,” Cobb said. He looked over to me, like he was waiting for me to say something. His face was still bruised, his left eye partially swollen shut.

“It’s true, sir,” I said. “We have made progress.” I knew Stoff was going to take credit for everything now that it had panned out, and I didn’t want to start a war with him. I was too tired from the one we’d just fought. We’d saved lives and made alliances. That was what mattered, not the petty politics of who ordered what.

I glanced at FM, thinking she’d be glad I wasn’t picking this battle.

“Stoff had nothing to do with it,” she said.

“Excuse me?” Stoff said.

Cobb looked over at her.

“Permission to speak freely, sir?” she asked.

“I think you’ve already started doing that,” Cobb said, his voice hoarse. “So go on.”

“Stoff had nothing to do with the alliance with the kitsen,” FM said. “He refused to make the call to send the flights to help them. He dumped all the

responsibility onto Jorgen so that if it was the wrong choice, Jorgen would take the fall for it.”

Stoff’s mouth fell open.

“Is that true, son?” Cobb asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Though in Stoff’s defense, I did come in swinging.”

FM gave me a sharp look, like she didn’t understand why I was speaking in Stoff’s defense, but it was the truth.

“I told him we were already authorized by you to make alliances,” I continued, “and we weren’t going to hear anything more from the assembly about talking to the Superiority.” I was pretty sure I’d implied we weren’t going to hear anything more from the assembly *ever*, but that was obviously not a long-term solution.

“Before we knew of your whereabouts,” Stoff said, “we felt it was best to follow your last orders.”

“Who is we?” Cobb asked. “Last I checked, in the absence of the admiral the vice admiral’s job isn’t done by committee.”

Stoff stammered.

“If he hadn’t listened to me,” I said, “we might never have found you and Mrs. Nightshade. I don’t know how long your bodies would have lasted with your spirits in the portal, but I can’t imagine it would have been long.”

Cobb gave me a look that said I wasn’t helping myself, but it was true. Stoff was a coward, but he’d stayed out of my way when it mattered.

“The point is,” FM said, “Jorgen is the one who found Kauri’s transmission, which led us to you on Evershore. He made the call to travel here to find you, and to try to follow your last orders to us and make alliances for Detritus. And when everything went wrong, Jorgen is the one who made the call to pull in more flights, to put Rig and his team on moving the platforms, and to ultimately make the discovery together with them that we could move the planet.”

Cobb looked at me. I couldn’t deny anything she’d said. Those were the facts. “That’s true, sir. Though she did leave out the part where I manifested mindblades in a meeting full of alien politicians. So it wasn’t all good.”

“Yes, well,” Cobb said, “you seem to have overcome that misstep all right.”

“Sir,” Stoff said. “I’m sure you understand that I was only trying to do what was best for the people of Detritus. Clearly you had put your trust in Flightleader Weight, and so I—”

“That’s enough,” Cobb said. “Stoff, take a walk.”

Stoff’s jaw dropped again. “Sir?” he said.

“*Take a walk,*” Cobb repeated.

Stoff blinked at him, and then he turned around and left.

“It really was a good thing he listened to me,” I said. “If he hadn’t let me make the decisions, we could have lost the whole kitsen planet.”

“That may be,” Cobb said. “But a commander who shuffles off the hard choices is no commander at all.” He looked at me like he was considering something. He bent over for a moment, coughing, and FM and I looked at each other in alarm.

I had no idea what being half-stuck behind that portal had done to Cobb’s body, but he seemed to be weathering it poorly.

“Sir?” I said.

“FM, would you excuse us?” Cobb said when he could speak again.

My heart dropped. Here it was. He was going to chew me out for taking control. The decisions I’d made were far above my pay grade. I shouldn’t have done the things I did, even though they’d saved lives.

Stoff would have painted me as a renegade if things had gone poorly, but that wouldn’t have taken a very broad brush.

FM gave me one worried look, and then she nodded and turned to leave. Cobb sat up in bed, glancing with irritation at the medical devices still strapped to his arm.

“I’m sorry I acted rashly, sir,” I said. “I can brief you on everything, get you up to speed.”

“I heard quite a bit over the radio there at the end,” Cobb said, his voice still strained. He looked up at me like he was struggling to focus. “And that thing you did, speaking directly to everyone’s minds. That’s cytonic, isn’t

it? You haven't manifested some other ungodly power I need to know about?"

"No sir," I said. "It's cytonic. How...how long were you listening over the radio? I told them to call in as soon as you were awake—"

"And I told them to keep their mouths shut and let you work," Cobb said. "It was clear you had things well in hand."

That...seemed like an overstatement.

"We may not have done everything exactly by the book," I said, "but we've made progress on the alliance, and we have a lot more knowledge of how our own technology functions. I think you're going to be really pleased about what we have to work with. There were some rough patches, sir, but we pulled through them. And now that you're back—"

"You've taken on an incredible amount of responsibility," Cobb continued.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said. "I was doing the best I could with the resources I had. And I think my judgment was a little impaired by what happened to my parents—"

"I'm sorry about what happened to them," Cobb said. "The med team filled me in. They were lost in the explosion?"

"Yes," I said.

Cobb shook his head. "We disagreed, but they didn't deserve for it to end like that."

My eyes started to burn, but I blinked it away.

"None of that changes the incredible work you've done here," Cobb said. "If this is what you do when your judgment is 'impaired,' I'd like to see what you do when you're thinking clearly."

"I was simply trying to do what I thought you would do if you were here," I said.

Cobb gave me a look, and I stuttered.

"I may not have predicted that perfectly," I added.

"In this case, that only seems like a good thing." He looked up at the clouds and shook his head again. "You have things so well in hand that I'm going to promote you to vice admiral."

Stars. *Vice admiral*? That was skipping a lot of ranks. Though I did like the idea of getting to advise Cobb directly, what with everything we'd done and learned since he was replaced by that Superiority plant.

"Thank you, sir," I said.

"As soon as that's taken care of," Cobb said, coughing again, "I think it's clear that I'm in no condition to lead, especially when we're now hopping our entire *planet* around the galaxy." He eased himself back on his stretcher, staring up at the sky. "So I'm going to need to relieve myself from duty, until such a time that I'm fit for command."

I blinked at him, trying to make those words mean something other than what I thought they meant. "Which of the vice admirals do you intend to give operational command to, sir?"

"I know subtlety isn't your strong point," Cobb said, "but if you can figure out how to move an entire planet, I think you can answer that question yourself."

Saints and stars. "You can't be serious. You have so much more experience—"

"With all of *this*?" He waved his arm, taking in the kitsen city, the ships above us, Detritus shining in the sky like it had always been there. He winced, holding his side, and then let his arm fall again. "No, Admiral, I would say you and your flight are the only ones with *any* experience dealing with all of this. Both our military and a coalition of alien races are ready to follow you into battle against a foe so powerful they probably shouldn't have any hope of survival, much less victory. But they *do*. They're chattering about it over the radio, all of us resisting together."

"I didn't mean to take control," I said. "I was only trying to hold out until you returned. I never wanted—"

One corner of Cobb's mouth turned up. "No," he said. "The good ones never do."

I stared at him. "You're serious."

"I am. I don't intend to abandon you. There's a whole lot of paperwork surrounding the position, and it'll be good for you to have someone to help keep that out of your way. But clearly you're best suited to be in strategic

command. The Saint knows you're better suited to it than I am." Cobb raised an eyebrow at me, and his mustache twitched. "Unless you mean to turn down the promotion."

He watched me carefully, waiting for my answer.

I looked up at the sky, at the gleaming moon of Evershore and Detritus hanging up there with it. I'd brought us this far on the hope that Cobb would relieve me of the responsibility to pull us through this—if not unscathed, then at least *alive*. I'd thought there was an end, a point at which I could unload everything that rested on my shoulders.

If I said yes, that might never end. But if I refused, I'd only be shuffling it off to someone else. There was no one besides Cobb that I'd trust to lead us as we faced what was coming. I'd pushed us this far so we could have the benefit of his judgment again.

And if this was what he thought was best, then so be it. "No, sir," I said. "I'll accept it."

"Good." Cobb put a hand on my arm. "I wish your parents could see what you've accomplished. They would be so proud of you."

Something inside me cracked.

In my time in the Defiant Defense Force, I'd felt lost and inadequate. I'd felt undermined and humiliated in front of both my flightmates and my superiors. I'd made calls no human being should ever have to make, had been both right and wrong about them, and had to live with both. I'd stayed in control through it all, because that was what I had been raised to do.

But at that moment, the veneer of my composure shattered like a damaged canopy. In front of my superior officer—*scud*, was he still my superior?—I started to cry.

"You're going to be all right, son," Cobb said, squeezing my arm. "If you need my help, you can now contact me no matter where I am. Which is a little disturbing, by the way. If you're going to make a habit of it, find some way to give me warning. It's going to take some getting used to."

"I'll try, sir," I said.

Cobb shook his head at me. "You can do what you want with Stoff," he said. "It's your decision."

“I don’t think he should be in command anymore,” I said. “But I don’t want to punish him either. He really could have made things a lot more difficult and gotten a lot more people killed.”

“That seems like a good decision,” Cobb said. “Not your first.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now if you don’t mind,” Cobb said, “I’m going to close my eyes for a minute.”

“Of course, sir,” I said.

“And Jorgen?”

“Yes, sir?”

Cobb sighed. “You’re going to have to stop calling me sir.”

Epilogue

I left Cobb with the medtechs and stumbled up the road toward the city. I found Cuna standing outside the senate building. It appeared to be filled with kitsen, all packed in together. Goro hovered by Cuna's shoulder, still in his ceremonial armor.

"How did the evacuation go?" I asked.

"Very well," Cuna said. "We opened the buildings in the upper city so that the kitsen in the lower areas had somewhere to take shelter. I believe most of them made it out."

"Thank you for your help," I said.

"I'm glad I could be of service," Cuna said. "And that we could save the people here." They looked back into the senate chamber, packed with so many kitsen I could hardly tell one from another.

Cuna cared about these people, I realized. They spoke like they thought themselves superior, but they were trying to save lives. I could work with that.

"I'm sorry about the flooding," I said to Goro.

Goro looked out at the city somberly, and I expected him to announce that we were enemies once again, for all the destruction we'd brought in our wake. "Tell me, human," he said. "Now that you have fought on our shores and won, do you consider us your conquest?"

"No," I said. "But I'm hoping we can call you our allies."

Goro narrowed his eyes at me. "Cuna says you've brought back our shadow-walkers, who we thought lost forever. You command the tides themselves, moving celestial bodies in the firmament. But you don't mean to rule us?"

"If I commanded the tides," I said, pointing toward the lower city, "I wouldn't have told them to do *that*. We humans have enough trouble ruling

over ourselves. We only want an alliance, I swear to you. No one is going to invade.”

Goro snorted. “Fair enough, human. It’s not my decision, but I will speak for you if you need my support.”

“Thank you,” I said. Though at this moment, what I needed most was to get away. I excused myself and strode down the road, past the crowds of kitsen who were leaving the buildings of the upper city to survey the damage.

I found FM at the end of the road, where the water now flooded the lower levels of the city. Ships hovered over it, pilots lifting their canopies, looking up at the platforms surrounding the planet. Some of the platforms disappeared and reappeared again in different positions—Rig was obviously still working out their optimal spacing for generating the shield.

Stars, the things we’d accomplished, and yet there was still so much work to do. We had to seize on this—the way we’d worked together, the potential we had as a group. Someone was going to have to keep that momentum going...and scud, that was *me*.

Do better than we did.

I was...*excited* to get started.

“How did it go?” FM asked.

“Cobb made me vice admiral,” I said. “And then he stepped down and put me officially in charge.”

Her mouth fell open. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“Jorgen,” she said, “that’s wonderful.”

“Is it?”

“Yes! I mean—” She shook her head. “You’ll be so great at it.”

FM knew my weaknesses as a leader as well as anyone, so her confidence meant something.

“Scud,” she said, “that means you won’t be our flightleader anymore.” She sounded sad, which was also significant.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s right.”

I looked up at the sky. The clouds had thinned, and stars peeked through the blackness, so clear it felt like we were out in space.

“You could take over the flight, you know,” I said. “You’d be good at it.”

“I don’t want it,” FM said. “I’ve never wanted to be in charge.”

“I know,” I said. “I think I’m going to leave it to Arturo.”

“You should. He’ll do a good job.”

“He will.” FM would too, but I understood why she didn’t want it. Besides, I needed her somewhere else. “How would you feel about leaving the flight?”

FM looked at me. “What?”

“You were right,” I said. “We don’t have diplomats, and we need them. The assembly is a mess, but we do need to work with them. The DDF needs a diplomatic program to work with our *own* scudding people in addition to our allies. We’ve got to get everyone on the same page, and we can’t do it by ordering them there. I’m going to need someone in charge who cares about more than the chain of command.”

“*You* care about more than that,” FM said.

“I do,” I said. “And that’s why I want to put you in charge of our diplomatic program. We need your empathy. *I* need you to help me figure out how to handle all of this—the politics, and the foreign relationships. You’re so good at seeing through the rules and the orders and the scudding red tape and getting right at what needs to be done for the people involved. I know you don’t want to be in command. But there’s nobody better to be in charge of *this*.”

I took a deep breath. I could order her to do it. I had the authority now, but I didn’t want to do that to FM. She was my friend. She’d already gone above and beyond for our people. She didn’t have to take this on if she didn’t want it. “It’s your choice though. I understand if you want to stay with the flight.”

FM stared up at the sky, the stars reflecting in her eyes. “I’ll do it.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “I hate the idea of the flight going out without me. I hate that I won’t be there to protect them.”

“You’d be protecting them in a different way,” I said.

“I know. And that’s why I’ll do it. I never wanted to fight, you know. I only wanted to do what was best for the people who don’t have a voice. The people the DDF ignores.”

I nodded. “And I don’t want to get so caught up in the military structure that I forget why we’re doing this. I need your help.”

FM nodded. “You’re going to regret having said that when I start disagreeing with you.”

I laughed. “Probably. But that’s what I need you for.”

“I’ll be sure to remind you of that often.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

FM continued to stare at the sky with a troubled expression.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” I asked. “If you need to think about it—”

“I’m sure,” FM said. “I feel relieved, and I hate myself for it.”

“I don’t think you need to.”

She looked sideways at me. “Does that ever stop you?”

Um. “No. But if it makes you feel better, flying is probably a whole lot easier than getting people to communicate with each other.”

“Probably,” FM said. “And it’s not like our lives won’t still be in danger. But it’s not the same.”

“No,” I said. “It isn’t.” I’d already made calls that put my friends in danger. I was going to have to do it again and again and again. I wasn’t sure how to feel good about that.

Maybe I never would.

Maybe that was because I shouldn’t.

“I’m going to go tell Rig,” FM said.

I wondered if she was agreeing to leave the flight because of him, but I didn’t ask. I wouldn’t judge her for it if she did.

FM looked at me. “If you need to talk more—”

“We’ll do that later,” I said. “You can go.”

I did need to talk more, I realized. I couldn’t do this alone, so it was a good thing I didn’t have to. Right now though...

I wished I could talk to Spensa. I missed her so much I ached. I wanted to know what she thought of all this.

She would believe in me. I was sure of that much. She *always* believed in me, even when I drove her crazy. The same way I believed in her, even though I hated how far away she was, hated that I didn't know if she'd make it home.

I reached out, searching for her, and I found that presence again. Doomslug. She was worried about Spensa. I could feel it. So was I.

I'd done some impossible things tonight, things I couldn't explain. I usually thought of Spensa as the one who pulled off impossible tasks, but apparently she wasn't the only one.

I wasn't going to give up on her. I'd keep learning, I'd keep trying, and I'd find a way to help her if I could.

But if not, I would at least make sure she had a home to come back to.

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Max

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Brandon Sanderson is the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestselling Reckoners series: *Steelheart*, *Firefight*, and *Calamity* and the e-original *Mitosis*; the #1 *New York Times* bestselling Skyward series: *Skyward*, *Starsight*, and *Cytonic*; the internationally bestselling Mistborn trilogy; and the Stormlight Archive. He was chosen to complete Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time series. His books have been published in more than twenty-five languages and have sold millions of copies worldwide. Brandon lives and writes in Utah.

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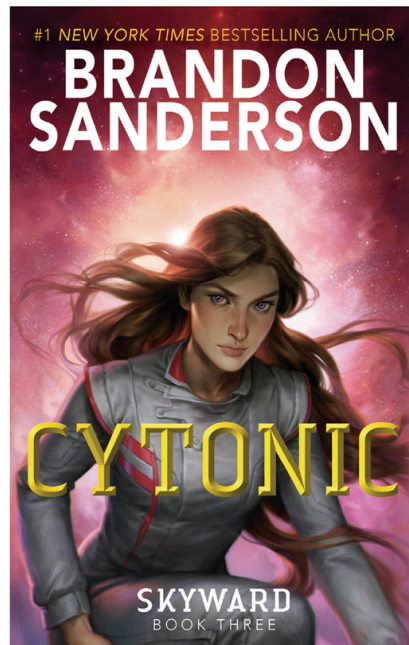
Janci Patterson writes in a variety of genres, so whatever you're looking for, she's probably got something you'll like. Her first book, *Chasing the Skip*, was published by Henry Holt in 2012. After publishing several contemporary YA novels and the YA paranormal *A Thousand Faces* trilogy, Janci discovered a love of collaboration and has written books with Megan Walker, Lauren Jane, James Goldberg, and Brandon Sanderson.

Janci lives in Utah with her mini-painting husband, Drew Olds, and their two awesome kids. She has an MA in creative writing from BYU. When she's not writing, Janci enjoys turn-based RPGs, miniatures board games, Barbie repaints, and playing with her border collie.

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