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**BRANDON
SANDERSON**
AND JANCI PATTERSON

REDAWN

SKYWARD FLIGHT: NOVELLA TWO

DELACORTE PRESS

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For Kenton Olds,
who makes me laugh every day

—JP

One

I stood at the edge of a balcony on one of the branches of the Stadium tree, watching the games play out in the enormous hollow below. This particular tree had been chosen for its shape—branches reaching out horizontally and then curving up and inward like the sides of a massive vase, large enough that the spectators on the far side appeared to be nothing more than rows of rippling dots. Twelve ships soared across the widest part of the hollow, six painted Independence blue and the remaining in Unity yellow.

Dim light filtered through the red and purple miasma in the sky above the canopy, and enormous spotlights hung on cables from the branches above, illuminating the ships jetting about. Above the spotlights, just beneath the huge sweeping branches, a hologram enlarged the skirmish, and I watched as one of the Independence ships broke away from the pack, dodging a barrage of laser fire, and slipped through the hoop marking the goal.

Cheers rang through the stadium, and the mining corps that sponsored this match lit off a round of fireworks in Independence blue. With three goals so far, the Independence team was winning.

At least we were winning at *something*.

Beside me, Rinakin—my advisor in the cytonic training program—half-heartedly waved an Independence pennant: a twig with a blue fabric leaf attached at the top. While most in the stadium wore garments of yellow or blue, Rinakin dressed entirely in black, though at least his jacket had a blueish sheen. He was taller than me, and his skin had a slightly rosier tint to it, both traits that indicated his ancestors came from Reaching tree. In the days before ship travel, the denizens of each tree only intermixed when the trees bumped into each other across the miasma.

Now that Rinakin had lost his Council seat in the wave of Unity appointments, we were more or less equals—him as the leader of the Independence Party and me as a cytonic. That felt strange; he was many

seasons older than me and much wiser, yet here we were, now essentially the same status even if I didn't have his experience.

"It is good to have you home, Alanik," Rinakin said. "I was worried about you."

"It is good to be home," I said. "Even if it means I failed."

"Many of our people have failed between these branches," Rinakin said.

That was true. I remembered a time when failing in the games had felt like a tragedy. The stakes here were personal—members of the winning teams of even the junior league championships could expect to secure top spots as transit and cargo pilots or appointments to the air force, not that ReDawn had seen actual combat for generations.

I'd skipped over all that when my cytonic powers had manifested—I'd jumped from the junior leagues straight to the upper echelons of the fighting corps. As one of only five living UrDail cytonics and the only capable teleporter, I was theoretically invaluable to my people's survival.

Not that I'd done them much good during my last mission.

I sighed, leaning back against the wooden seat carved into the branch of the tree. The island trees floated in the miasma of ReDawn, their roots planted in large chunks of naturally occurring acclivity stone. The trees grew thick layers of bark, deep enough that entire rooms could be excavated beneath its surface without reaching the living parts of the tree near the base of the branches. Here, higher in the branches, one might be able to reach new wood by digging in six feet or so—plenty of room to carve smaller structures without harming the tree. This balcony and all of its seating had been meticulously carved into the bark, making it a part of the huge living stadium. It was good to be back beneath the familiar branches, but...

"I was supposed to bring back the secret to hyperdrive technology," I said. "Instead, I gave the opportunity to the humans. They'll try to make peace with the Superiority—make the same mistakes we have made."

"Perhaps," Rinakin said. "I'm more concerned that we will make the same mistakes we have made."

Given the number of yellow pennants flying in the stadium, the fear was reasonable.

“Besides, we have information now,” Rinakin said. “Not the information you left to retrieve, but important information all the same.”

Much less important, in my mind, but Rinakin had a point. Many of my people believed the humans had been exterminated for their refusal to capitulate, for their stubborn insistence on fighting for freedom instead of assimilating into the Superiority. Humans were a cautionary tale, a justification for the appeasement policies that gave the Superiority more and more control over ReDawn.

If it became known that the humans were alive, that they had somehow managed to resist all this time—indeed, that they were beginning to break free from the Superiority’s forced imprisonment—it would be a huge blow to the Unity movement. A weakness I hoped we could exploit to drag some kind of success from my failure.

Which was why I wanted to keep the information from Unity for as long as possible. We needed to figure out how to use it before they did.

Below, the teams lined up for another bout. As per the rules, the Unity team would now appoint a new stringer—the ship whose job it was to cut across the battlefield and make it to the opposing team’s hoop without getting tagged by the lasers. Each pilot had to take a turn as a stringer until everyone had had a turn, or until the other team could no longer catch up in points. A team couldn’t rely on one strong player—the tree was only as healthy as its weakest branch.

Unity selected their stringer—Havakal, one of their strongest offensive players. Independence had started with their best players in the hopes of building momentum—it was easier to perform at your best when you already felt like you were winning. Unity had saved their better players for last.

“They’re hoping to prey on our overconfidence,” I said. “But the Independence team will know that’s what they’re doing.”

“Yes,” Rinakin said. “But it may still work.”

I looked around at the cloud of blue and yellow pennants waved by the thousands of spectators gathered on their balconies. The colors were about even, which should have been a comfort. But they hadn’t been even in the Council balancing, when Unity swept the Council seats, demolishing the

Independence majority. I'd been gone for nineteen sleep cycles—missing the balancing entirely.

I'd left hoping to discover the secret that would free my people from Superiority control. If I had succeeded and returned before the balancing, the wind might have swept in our favor, but I'd returned with nothing, only to find us closer to bondage than ever.

I glanced over at Rinakin. He'd intimidated me at first, but though he expected a lot of me, he was never discouraging, only intense. In fact, there was an intensity about him even when he was relaxed. Rinakin wasn't a cytonic himself, though he'd mentored most of the UrDail cytonics as we'd come into our powers.

The other cytonics were all working with Unity now. And because the Superiority designated us as "dangerous," they'd agreed to use their cytonic abilities only under Council supervision.

We *were* dangerous to the Superiority. I would give them that.

Rinakin kept his focus on the hologram above. I'd attended games with him before, but when I'd been in training there had always been some lesson I was meant to learn, some larger goal.

Today we were here to keep up appearances. To prove I wasn't hiding from the Council and their questions since my return four sleep cycles before.

Even though I was.

The private balcony did afford us an opportunity to talk out of earshot of others. That was a luxury on the populous trees of ReDawn. "At least people are still flying our flag," I grumbled.

"Yes," Rinakin said. "But most of them have forgotten this is more than a sport."

"They remembered when they cast lots in the last Council balancing."

"That too is a sport," Rinakin said. "They vote for their team, and some switch sides when their current team is losing."

He was right, depressing as that was. Even most of my own family had switched sides in the balancing, voting for Unity instead of Independence. "But that doesn't make any sense. If enough people change their votes it *causes* the other team to lose."

Rinakin's bone ridges arched. "That's politics," he said.

It *shouldn't* be. The decisions of the Council determined everything, and when the balance of representatives shifted, so did the policies. The current Council was a Unity majority, with only a few Independence delegates remaining, so Unity chose the delegates who negotiated trade agreements with the Superiority.

The Superiority set the terms, of course. The Superiority always set the terms. But at least when the Independents were in control of the Council, they didn't grovel at the feet of the Superiority hoping to be treated like favored pets.

Unity scored, and the hologram switched to a series of messages from sponsors—a transportation company showing off the interior of their new luxury ships, and the vineyards on String with a new limited juice flavor they hoped we would try. At the end of the endorsements, a familiar face dominated the air at the center of the branches.

Nanalis, new Council President and Unity High Chancellor. Her booming voice addressed the crowd from the speakers built into the floors of the balconies.

"Greetings, citizens of ReDawn," Nanalis said, her voice proud and confident.

"What is *this*?" I muttered to Rinakin. "*Unity* is taking out endorsements now? That's not allowed, is it?"

"They're supposed to give us equal time," Rinakin said. "But the Council recently decided to waive that requirement so long as the message isn't overtly political."

I wasn't sure Nanalis was capable of a message that wasn't overtly political. She continued to speak—no doubt this message was prerecorded. Many Council members attended the games to see and be seen, but the Council President was often too busy.

Nanalis thanked the pilots for their hard work and preparation. "You represent the best of us, and it is because of you that our future is bright."

I supposed it wasn't out of line for the Council President to congratulate athletes. But then she went on.

“We call ourselves Unity and Independence, but we all enjoy the benefits of both freedom and peace. The real enemies are those who seek to divide ReDawn, who threaten our peace, who put the prosperity of all denizens in jeopardy.”

Unity was always calling us divisive for disagreeing, as if they weren't doing the same by disagreeing with *us*. But of course, as they liked to say, the opposite of division was Unity. As if their choice of a name left us no other option but to fall in line with them. “She called us the enemy,” I said. “How exactly is that apolitical?”

“That's why I argued against this in the last session,” Rinakin said. “Who is to determine what is ‘overt’ and what is not?”

As Nanalis made her final remarks, pennants waved all around the stadium, both blue and yellow. Everyone seemed to agree with her, Independence and Unity alike.

Everyone but us.

“Progress for ReDawn!” Nanalis declared. “May her enemies be swiftly silenced for the good of us all.”

Hairs rose on the back of my neck as voices sang out from all around the stadium, joining in a great rumbling chorus. They were cheering for pretty words that would destroy us.

Progress for ReDawn. It was what we all wanted, of course.

But some of us thought it mattered what we were progressing *toward*.

I knew which enemies she meant to swiftly silence. “I didn't realize the miasma had gotten so thick,” I said.

Rinakin stared up at the hologram, which had cut away to feature the ships as they lined up for their next bout. “The wind has shifted,” Rinakin said. “I fear it grows more toxic all the time.”

The ships flew across the field for the next bout, but all I could see were the waving blue pennants, each one representing a person who should have been ready to fight for our planet, for our *home*, but was instead allied with Unity, who wanted to give it all away.

“I think we should leave the match now,” Rinakin said. “I don't know how many will believe we are the enemy, but I would rather not be caught in the

crowd.”

Cheers went up again, and yellow fireworks filled the air—Unity was gaining on us now.

I didn’t want to watch the match turn on us. “Yes,” I said. “Let’s go.”

We stepped onto the stairs that wound down the branch, passing more private balconies and some larger ones crammed with families—children riding on parents’ shoulders, waving yellow flags. When we reached a crook in the branch we followed it down the stairs to the platforms around the trunk, descending beneath the playing field to Rinakin’s small transport ship, made of dark metal mined from the core of the planet.

I was still bitter about the loss of my own ship, which had been effectively stolen by the humans. I’d put in a request for another, but the order was taking time to process. Normally I would have been granted one instantly due to my status as a cytonic. But the Unity officials must have wanted something to hold over my head until I told them where I’d been and what I’d learned while I was gone. By law, they couldn’t force me. I would have been happy to report to the previous Council, but now I would be facing a room full of Unity officials with very few friendly faces.

I guessed they were growing tired of me putting them off.

I climbed into the copilot seat, preferring to sit beside Rinakin rather than on the cushier seats behind us. Rinakin flew us away from the Stadium tree through the purple and red swirls of gas in the miasma. Somewhere far below us was the core of the planet, noxious and uninhabitable, visited only by the mining corps in heavy protective gear. We were in a day cycle—and still a few sleep cycles away from the fall of night—so the ambient light was fairly bright.

We flew into the atmospheric bubble of Industry, one of the largest of the trees, which housed nearly a quarter of the population of ReDawn. The branches of Industry reached horizontally away from the trunk of the tree in all directions, and towers stretched into the space above them, while shorter buildings were suspended downward from beneath. Several kilometers from the trunk, the branches reached for the sky, with structures built in spiral patterns winding up the branches all the way to the tips. The air was thinner

here, as the tree processed the toxins out of the atmosphere and produced the oxygen we needed to breathe.

A voice reached into my mind unbidden, though I wished I could ignore it.

Alanik, it said. You and Rinakin left the match before I could speak to you. We would like to meet with you in the Council chambers immediately.

“What is it?” Rinakin asked.

“Quilan,” I said. He was one of the Unity cytonics, the closest to my age, though he was a few seasons older. “He wants us to meet him at the Council tree.”

If he’d noticed we’d left the stadium early, he’d been watching us. Probably planning to move on us in the stadium, where it would be harder for us to refuse an escort. Where if we resisted they could accuse us of making a scene, turn public opinion against us.

As if the wind weren’t already blowing that way.

Two

“I’m not going to meet with them on their terms,” I said. I could hyperjump from almost anywhere on ReDawn, but the Council tree—the capital of ReDawn—was home to the other four cytonics. Working together, they could create a cytonic inhibitor, a field from which I’d be unable to escape.

They could all come to me, of course, but it would be much easier for them to catch me if I agreed to walk right into their jaws.

“Offer to meet them in a neutral location,” Rinakin said.

“I don’t want to,” I said. “Too much risk. They’ll bring the other cytonics.”

Rinakin pressed his lips together. I was right and he knew it.

Alanik, Quilan said. Please respond.

I will not be meeting with the Council at this time, I answered. I will let you know when I am next available.

I’m sorry, Alanik, Quilan said. But your attendance is required.

“He’s not asking,” I said. “He wants us to believe we don’t have a choice.” Though of course we did. As long as we could escape from them, we would always have a choice. To believe otherwise was to hand over our own power, the way they wanted to hand ReDawn over to the Superiority.

“Soon we may not,” Rinakin said. “The Council voted to consolidate the military. Many of the Independence bases are already submitting to the Council’s control.”

I stared at him. ReDawn had maintained two air forces since the end of the last war. We competed and drilled against each other, with the understanding that if ReDawn faced a common threat we would work together to fight it. The division kept us sharp, each side trying to maintain an edge against the other.

“They’re getting ready to move against us,” I said.

“Yes,” Rinakin said. “And they’re doing it in the name of peace.”

There hadn't been real fighting on ReDawn in almost a century, and both Unity and the Superiority promised peace and cooperation. Never mind that the Superiority had kept us contained here all this time, punishing us for rebellion. Never mind that if we accepted their peace, we also had to accept their control over every aspect of our technology, our travel, our behavior, our culture. They'd already made us paupers, withholding advanced technology from us because we rejected their rule. Now they would make us beggars as well, stripping us of our dignity and our heritage in the process.

And so many of my people accepted it. A prisoner could be convinced that they lived in a paradise, if the prison was pretty enough.

"Is there anyone left who will fight with us?"

"The base on Hollow refused to unify," Rinakin said. "I sent my daughter and her family there. But I'm afraid they won't be able to hold out long."

My brother Gilaf was stationed at Hollow. He and his flightmates helped supervise the lumber work there. Unlike the rest of my family, Gilaf wasn't going to swallow Unity lies.

"If the other Independence bases see that there are holdouts, maybe they'll reverse course," I said.

"That is my hope, but I expect Unity will mobilize their forces quickly to bring them in line."

It was hard to imagine my people firing on each other, but Unity always seemed more willing to strike out at us than at the Superiority.

"How can they do that and claim it's for peace?" I asked.

Rinakin didn't answer that question. I already knew the answer anyway.

It was easier to believe the story they were told than to awaken to the reality of our oppression.

"What we need," Rinakin said, "are some allies who have not forgotten that we are at war."

I tapped my sharp nails on the dashboard of the ship. "I know," I said. When Rinakin originally suggested that I answer the call to join the Superiority military, I'd been excited. Finally, something I could *do*. All anyone on ReDawn ever seemed to want to do was *talk*. Even though I hadn't

made it to the tryouts, discovering that our old human allies were still alive and fighting should have been a victory.

But then those former allies kept me unconscious for weeks, woke me only when they needed something, and then treated me like a prisoner.

Still, I remembered the desperation of the woman who spoke to me first. *They want my people dead. We need your help.* She at least seemed to understand the gravity of the situation.

And the other one—Jorgen, the male cytonic. He was clearly untrained, to the point that he didn't know how to communicate properly. But I did get a bit of emotion from him through his cytonic resonance, enough to know he wasn't happy with the direction things were going.

He was *scared*.

But at least the humans knew what it was like to fight back.

"The humans are facing the same problem we are," I said. "Their leaders are looking for a way to end the war. If we appeal to them for help, they could side with Unity."

"I don't think that will happen," Rinakin said. "The Council has received a directive from the Superiority. There's someone new in charge apparently, and they're demanding we turn over the humans we're harboring."

I stared at Rinakin. "We're not harboring humans, are we?"

"No," Rinakin said. "But a human took your place and infiltrated the Superiority. How are the Superiority to assume that happened?"

By the branches. "They think I was working with the humans."

"They think we are working with the humans," Rinakin said. "And now they've issued an ultimatum. Turn over the fugitives—"

"Or they will very politely destroy us," I said. "Which isn't aggressive at all, I'm sure."

"They'll justify it," Rinakin said.

They justified everything. And more than half of my people would parrot the justification as if it made sense, simply because the Superiority said it.

"You think I should return to the humans and ask for help." In hindsight I should have stayed longer, tried harder to discern their true intentions. But I'd

been disoriented, alarmed at how long I'd been unconscious, how much I might have missed.

And I *really* did not like that nasty government woman.

I'd thought the myth of human aggression was propaganda spread by the Superiority. Now I wasn't so sure. And if they were as aggressive as the Superiority said, they could be good allies to have right now.

They also could be twice as dangerous if they turned against us.

"The Superiority controls us by dividing us," Rinakin said. "That's why they wanted us to think the humans were eradicated. They're afraid of what we can do together."

That sounded like a Unity argument, but I saw his point. From what little I'd seen, we had more knowledge of cytonics and politics, while the humans had real fighting experience, something no one on ReDawn had anymore.

"I don't know how strong the human military force is," I said. "Or how many ships they might be willing to send our way." If any. My last meeting with them had gone poorly—I hadn't endeared myself to their leadership, nor them to me.

"Then perhaps they would take us in as refugees," Rinakin said. "We could begin to build a resistance from their planet, the way they once mounted a resistance from ours." He glanced over at me. "If the humans joined us, it might grant us the most important resource. Hope."

I didn't like relying on flighty emotions, but Rinakin was right. The humans might be our best option.

They might be our *only* option.

"Or, we could use your knowledge of the humans to buy us time," Rinakin said. "If we seem like we're cooperating, Unity might leave us alone a while longer."

He didn't sound any more excited about that prospect than I was. "If we give the Superiority what they want, we're playing right into their hands."

"Yes. But the Superiority might not be our most pressing concern."

"I don't want to tell Unity I found humans," I said. "We should be using that information to discredit them."

“I agree,” Rinakin said. “That’s why I think you should return and ask the humans for help, while I go to the Council and try to reason with them.”

“They won’t *see* reason,” I said.

“They might,” Rinakin said. “Most of Unity’s supporters are blowing their way because they don’t see any other choice. If you bring the humans to our aid, you give them another option, another path. Remind the humans of our old alliance, and our potential as current allies. If you succeed, someone is going to have to advocate for that option with the Council. Will it be you?”

I sighed. We both knew I wasn’t a diplomat. Rinakin wasn’t a Council member anymore, but he was the High Chancellor of the Independents. The members of the Council listened to him—those left on our side, at least.

Still. “You can’t cooperate with them,” I said. “That is their way.”

“Cooperation is not evil, Alanik,” Rinakin said. “It depends entirely upon who you are cooperating *with*.”

“It’s evil to cooperate with *them*,” I insisted. “They want to work with our oppressors.”

“We all want the same thing,” Rinakin said. “Peace for ReDawn.”

“But the way they’re going about it is *wrong*.”

“It is. And someone has to continue to tell them that, so they can’t forget there’s another way.”

Rinakin exited Industry’s airspace and turned toward Spindle, a smaller tree where we both made our homes. An alert flashed on the panel—the color indicated that we were ordered to stop at the nearest landing bay for inspection by a government vehicle. Normally this alert was used for traffic violations, though we were flying at regulation speed through open airspace.

Alanik, Quilan said in my head. We’ve come to escort you to the Council chambers. Please ground your ship.

I dug my nails into the plush armrest. “It’s Quilan,” I said. He wasn’t a teleporter, but he did have access to cytonic skills I hadn’t yet been able to access—including concussion bolts and mindblades. Last I knew, he wasn’t strong enough to use the mindblades effectively, making him as dangerous to himself as he was to others. “He wants us to land so he can escort me to the Council.”

“You can flee to Hollow,” Rinakin said. “But they’ll come for you there, and you won’t have enough people to defend yourselves. We simply don’t have enough pilots to resist them.”

Rinakin turned the ship toward the nearest landing bay, a loading dock for one of the lumber yards. We cruised over a lot filled with old bark that had been stripped away. It would be turned into remanufactured wood in a pressing facility nearby and used for buildings that couldn’t be hollowed from the branches.

The ship following us pulled up over our left wing to escort us down into the landing bay. Rinakin turned off his boosters and lowered his altitude lever, bringing us down onto the smooth, shaved wooden surface.

As he did, Quilan’s voice reached into my mind again. *I’m here in peace*, he said. *This doesn’t have to get aggressive.*

I dug my nails harder into the armrest. His words made me want to scream. There was nothing quite so frustrating as soft words being wielded like clubs. At least a straightforward attack was honest; everyone could see it for what it was.

Later, when the Council discussed this, Quilan would testify that he was perfectly docile and reasonable, and I was going to look like the problem.

My fingers pierced through the armrest. I was going to owe Rinakin for repairs, but I wasn’t sorry. It felt *good*.

If that made me aggressive, so be it.

“I don’t like leaving you here,” I said. “You could come with me.”

“Our branches fork here,” Rinakin said. “But we’re still connected at the root.”

Pretty words that meant there was no convincing him otherwise.

I reached across the negative realm, searching for that strange planet, the rock with the eerie, clear atmosphere surrounded by orbital platforms and a thick layer of debris.

I found it, but as I tried to form the coordinates in my mind, the surface of the planet felt slippery. Empty. Blank.

They had a cytonic inhibitor. When had *that* happened? That hadn’t been there when I’d left them. I didn’t think they had enough cytonics or enough

knowledge to form one—this was probably more similar to the ones used by the Superiority, especially because it seemed to cover the entire planet.

I scanned over the area searching for a gap, but I found none. Instead I sensed a mind hovering in their atmosphere—Jorgen. His abilities were still active, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to find him.

Superiority cytonic inhibitors operated with a key—a set of impressions that allowed a cytonic to bypass the inhibitor. That made the inhibitors particularly nasty, neutralizing all cytonics except for those the Superiority sanctioned. I didn't imagine the Superiority had handed the humans one—they must have somehow found one on their own.

At least I could speak to Jorgen, even if I couldn't hyperjump to his location.

Rinakin released the ship doors and stepped out with his hands held clearly in front of him. “Quilan!” Rinakin said. “Thank you for escorting me. I was going home to prepare, but since you've gone to the trouble I'd be happy to come with you now. Alanik has business of her own to attend to, so I'm afraid she's going to have to request an extension—”

A flare of cytonic energy blasted from Quilan—a concussion bolt that sent Rinakin to his knees.

Three

Rinakin knelt, looking up at Quilan, who remained in his ship. He'd been stunned by the bolt—a mindblade cut through physical material, but a concussion bolt passed right through it, bouncing around inside your skull. Quilan had surprised Rinakin, hit him dead on. He'd be stunned for a few minutes at least, and would probably have a headache for days.

Two security guards stepped up on either side of Rinakin, each taking him by an arm. They weren't rough with him, but they placed their hands on him firmly and hustled him into the hold of the ship.

I thought this didn't have to get aggressive, I sent to Quilan. He was going to come with you.

We welcome your cooperation, Quilan said.

I had to get out of here, but if they were going to hurt Rinakin, I was bringing him with me whether he liked it or not.

I couldn't let them take him, not to hand over to the Superiority. I could hyperjump to him—one touch and I could take him with me as I escaped. I reached toward the ship, past Quilan, who stared at me with a hard look on his face. Into the back, where I could see the bone ridges of the top of Rinakin's head, where he sat sandwiched between the two guards.

My mind hit a pocket of dead space.

No. They had a cytonic inhibitor on board, creating a space behind Quilan that I couldn't reach with my powers, even though Quilan could obviously use his.

Cytonic inhibitors required cooperation from multiple cytonics, but if Quilan had brought everyone he would have surrounded the ship to keep me from escaping as well. Beyond Rinakin and the guards, I spotted two diones with bright blue skin. This was Superiority technology, run by those diones because the Superiority would never entrust something that powerful to a “lesser species.”

Unity was already working with the enemy, trading away ReDawn's autonomy for the ability to destroy the Independence.

Alanik, Quilan said. *Step out of the ship, if you would.* He sounded so reasonable, which only made me angrier.

I wasn't coming with him. I reached into the negative realm toward his mind, ready to tell him so, when I caught a bit of cytonic communication coming into his ship.

—have them yet? someone asked.

Not yet, Quilan responded. *—picking them up—*

—getting impatient...wants humans, but we don't have them...they will have to do. We need to make the offer before—

I paused, my hands on the altitude control. Quilan's ship hovered over my wing, but if I engaged my boosters, I could shoot out from under his wing and then ascend. I'd flown with Quilan in the junior leagues. I knew I was a better pilot.

But what was *that*? The Council was getting impatient. They didn't have any harbored humans to turn over, so instead they were going to make an offer.

What were they offering?

Rinakin and me?

I wasn't going to be their next bargaining piece. But Rinakin—they were going to give up the leader of the anti-Superiority movement as an offering to appease them.

You're going to give us to them? I asked Quilan.

Your cooperation is appreciated, Quilan said.

This wasn't happening.

I couldn't hyperjump in there. I couldn't save Rinakin.

The only thing I could do was run.

I twisted the dial that fired the boosters.

The ship roared to life, but it only jerked forward a few inches. I twisted around to look and found that Quilan had used a light hook to hold my ship in place. He climbed out of his ship, walking with a brisk step. He might want

to convince me that he came in peace, but he also didn't want to give me time to escape.

As long as I didn't let him get me in the back of that ship, he couldn't keep me here.

"Alanik," Quilan called. He was no longer speaking to me cytonically, possibly trying to distract me from anything else I might hear. "Come with us, and we can get this all worked out." He slowed as he approached the door to the ship.

I was going to have to leave this ship behind, but I might be able to get a new one at Hollow. I reached through the negative realm, forming the coordinates for the base on Hollow in my mind. If that base was the last holdout, I could take shelter there while I made contact with the humans. I'd also be better positioned to get my people out if things went wrong.

"I'm sorry, Alanik," Quilan said. "I thought you might still see reason." He sent a concussion bolt flying into the ship. I felt it coming and ducked just in time, missing most of it, though my ears rang and my vision swam.

I ripped into the negative realm, hanging there for a gut-dropping moment, staring out at thousands of white eyes that all focused on me. I felt lost here as I always did, slack and untethered like a streamer torn free of its post, floating for a moment before fluttering inevitably downward into the dark. The eyes regarded me as a trespasser—

And then I returned to myself. I stood in a vestibule in the Independence base on Hollow, a tree even larger than Industry, though far less populated. This tree was dead, and was now used mostly for lumber harvesting.

Through the enormous window comprising one wall of the vestibule, I could see Wandering Leaf—an abandoned military platform similar to the ones that had shot me down when I first visited the human planet—drifting in the miasma. The platform was slowly migrating closer to Hollow, though if it had to threaten any of our trees with its autoturrets, at least it was a sparsely populated one.

The base around me was silent, the hallways empty. That was odd—there were usually a hundred people in residence here helping with the lumber

transportation, keeping an eye on Wandering Leaf, and monitoring the tree itself for signs that it was becoming unstable.

“Secure the area,” a voice said at the end of the hall, and I pivoted to see several people approaching. They were wearing Unity pilot uniforms, yellow leaves emblazoned on their shoulders.

They’d already taken the base. So where were the Independence pilots? I ducked back into the corner, hiding in a recess until the Unity pilots had passed me by.

Motion through the window caught my eye. I looked down to see a Unity ship hovering just under the branch, outside the base’s landing bay. It would be dangerous to hyperjump again so soon, especially if I wanted to bring my brother or some of the other Independence pilots with me when I jumped out again. I’d never done many jumps so close together before—the more times I hyperjumped in quick succession, the more I would draw the attention of the eyes. Being a teleporter was considered one of the most hazardous of the cytonic skills, because we traveled physically through the negative realm.

We didn’t always come back. But the risk would be worth it if I could get us all to safety.

When I reached into the negative realm, the surface of that ship felt smooth and impenetrable—blank, like the inside of the ship that had taken Rinakin.

Another Superiority inhibitor.

Unity wasn’t going to turn us *all* over, were they?

Alanik, Quilan said in my mind. He’d found me again, though he was still near Industry and he couldn’t hyperjump after me. *Come back so we can discuss this.*

So they could capture me was more like it.

Rinakin was right. We needed allies who knew how to fight. If I could convince the humans to side with us instead of the Superiority, maybe we could remind my people of our heritage of resistance, remind them of what we were capable of.

I reached through the negative realm toward the human planet, finding Jorgen again.

I need to speak with you, I sent to his mind. Can you give me the code to return to your planet?

Alanik? Jorgen said.

Yes, I answered. I would like to return to speak with you, though I need the code to your inhibitor.

Our what?

I closed my eyes. He didn't even know he had the code. Those leaves were the same color as the ones I'd seen when I met him.

Boots marched down the hallway toward me. I might be able to hide here a bit longer—

Alanik, Quilan said. You're not going to find any friends on Hollow today.

I took a deep breath. Quilan knew where I was. He could easily send a hypercommunication to the Unity officials here. They'd be looking for me. I reached into the negative realm, and sure enough I could hear his chatter.

—catch her— Quilan was saying. *—convince the Superiority—worth more than all of them combined—*

I shook my head. Quilan and the others were trying to prove their value to the Superiority. They'd accepted aid to contain us in the form of those ships, but if they didn't do the work themselves, they wouldn't earn any favor.

And I was the rebel cytonic, the biggest prize of all.

I had to get out of here.

You have a code in your mind, I sent to Jorgen. It lets you use your cytonic powers on your planet. I can't return unless you give it to me.

You used cytonics here before, he replied.

I did not have time for this. *You have an inhibitor now, I said to Jorgen. And you know that code, even if you don't know that you know it.*

Um, I'm not sure how to give you that. Let me go talk to Command, see if they'll—

I'm in kind of a bind here, I said. There's no time for that. There's an impression in your mind. Try to think about allowing me to come there. Try to will it to me.

I mean, I think you're welcome to come back. I'm sure Command would like to speak with you again.

The words didn't come with an impression. They were useless to me.

"Find her," a voice said from down the hall.

The impression is in there, I said to Jorgen. *How do you access your cytonics? Do you have exercises?*

I meditate, Jorgen said.

Try that, I said. *Do it fast.*

Hang on, I'm trying. I could feel Jorgen's cytonic resonance growing stronger as he deepened his connection with the negative realm. He was welcoming me into his mind, giving me access to his deeper thoughts.

More footsteps. One of the Unity pilots turned a corner, stepping into view.

Alanik? Jorgen said. *Is it working?*

I reached into his mind as he reached into mine.

There. An impression, like a cytonic key. I copied it, embedding it in my own thoughts, and reached toward the human planet, which took shape again, feeling solid. Accessible. I focused on that place, forming the coordinates.

The Unity pilot's bright eyes fixed on me. "She's here!" he said.

Quilan's voice filled my mind. *This is a mistake, Alanik,* he said. *You can't run from us forever.*

We're going to find out, I said.

And then I pulled myself into the negative realm and left my people behind.

Four

When I emerged from the negative realm, escaping from the ire of the eyes, I stood in the infirmary room I'd fled when I left the humans. It was empty, the overhead lights turned off.

The first time I'd hyperjumped to Detritus, I'd been shot down by the automated weapons that guarded their planet. My wounds had mostly healed while they kept me unconscious here—not that I was inclined to thank them for keeping me in a coma. I was still technically supposed to be taking it easy, and felt twinges in my abdomen if I overdid it.

Thankfully, hyperjumping wasn't physically strenuous.

I pressed my back against the wall by the window so I wouldn't be visible from the hall, then reached out, trying to find Jorgen. The building around me buzzed with a surprising amount of cytonic energy. At first I wondered if the humans had far more cytonics among them than I'd previously supposed, but no, these minds felt different, their energy more subtle—like the difference between a large fruit and a tiny seed.

Potential cytonics perhaps? If the humans had this many, they'd be formidable allies indeed.

I found Jorgen's mind, with two of the smaller resonances hovering near him.

I made it, I said. Thank you for your help.

Oh, good, he said. I lost track of you, and I thought maybe something bad had happened.

Several bad things, in fact. *I need to talk to you, I said. Can you come alone?* He'd wanted to alert his commanders to my presence, and maybe he already had. But I wasn't eager to speak with them again until I had someone on my side, given how poorly things had gone last time.

Where are you?

He couldn't locate me, then. That wasn't a surprise. He was untrained, and of all the cytonics on ReDawn, I was by far the best at picking out locations and individual cytonics in the negative realm. I sent him a picture of the infirmary room.

Jorgen paused. *Can I bring FM?*

That human woman. I'd liked her. *Yes, but only her.*

On my way, Jorgen answered.

I wished I'd been able to choose someplace with more space, where I might be able to get a look at the humans before they found me. But I had the key to their inhibitor now, so they wouldn't be able to stop me from leaving again if it came to that.

But if I left, I'd be no better off, with no way to help retake our base and no leverage to inspire the rest of the Independence military to do the same.

I tracked Jorgen as he moved through the building, first away from me, and then closer. The door to the infirmary opened, and Jorgen and FM stepped in, shutting the door behind them. FM's hair was lighter, similar to an UrDail's though it had an odd golden quality to it, while Jorgen's was dark and tightly curled. The cuts on his face were almost healed, the bandages gone. FM drew a curtain across the window, and they left the lights off.

They weren't any more eager to be caught by their commanders than I was.

"Alanik," FM said. She had one of the translation pins they'd found in my ship, though it barely changed the sound of my name. I spoke fluent Mandarin, which was a human language still in use on ReDawn, but these humans spoke English, and I only knew a few words of that one. "You came back! We didn't think you would." FM smiled. Her face looked so strange, all naked skin with no protrusions, like the bone ridges had been filed off. "It's good to see you again. How are you feeling?"

It took me a moment to realize she was referencing my injuries. Last time she'd seen me, I'd been in a hospital bed.

"I'm well," I said. "And you?"

"Um, we're fine," Jorgen said. "We're glad you're back, but—what are you doing here?"

Straight to the point then. I liked that, but it was the opposite of what my espionage trainer, Finis, had taught me before I'd left for Starsight. Many species were suspicious of direct requests. They saw them as too aggressive. I wasn't much of a spy, but I was the only cytonic who could answer the summons by hyperjumping in my own ship, and who could have the chance to hyperjump back out again if things went wrong. I'd failed, and these humans had succeeded in my place.

If they wanted to be aggressive that was fine by me, but I hadn't forgotten everything Finis had taught me.

"I need help," I said. "And I'd like to offer assistance in return. Your people are in a poor position with the Superiority."

"That's an understatement," Jorgen said. He was about to go on when two brightly colored animals appeared on his shoulders—sluglike creatures with bulbous heads and spines running down their backs. One was yellow with blue spines and the other red with black stripes, and each emitted one of the smaller cytonic resonances I'd felt before.

Had those animals just *hyperjumped*?

"Jorgen!" the yellow one said.

I took a step back into the corner.

They also talked?

"Hi, Snuggles," Jorgen said. The pin translated "Snuggles" as a cuddling action, but the slug looked too spiky to cuddle with to me. Jorgen shot an irritated glance at FM. "I thought you were working on that stay command."

"We're *working* on it," FM said. "Gill is getting pretty good, but—"

"Gill!" the yellow slug said, and then it disappeared and reappeared again on the floor by FM's feet with a second yellow and blue slug in tow, this one with blue markings framing its head.

"Yes," Jorgen said. "I see that Gill is great at it."

"To be fair," FM said, "that wasn't his fault."

"Gill!" Snuggles said triumphantly.

Jorgen sighed, and FM pulled a fabric sling out of her pocket, wrapping it over her shoulder. She picked up the slug from the floor and tucked it into the pouch, petting it on its spines.

I stared at them all. “What is that?” I asked.

“It’s a taynix,” FM said. The creature leaned toward me out of the sling. Its body was long and thin, like the wood leeches that sometimes infested the bark of the trees back home.

I was familiar with several alien species, but not one that looked like this. “Are they intelligent?” I asked.

“Yes,” FM said.

“Sort of,” Jorgen corrected her.

“Not as intelligent as humans,” FM allowed. “They don’t actually talk. They repeat things we say.”

“Things we say!” Gill said.

“Yes, like that,” FM said. “Thanks, Gill.”

“And they hyperjump,” I said.

Jorgen closed his eyes. “Yes. So much for not revealing all of our secrets immediately. Thanks a lot, Snuggles.”

“Snuggles!” Gill repeated.

This was officially the strangest meeting I’d ever had, but at least I’d already learned something. “The creatures are cytonic,” I said. “I can feel them in my mind.”

“Yes,” Jorgen said. He peered around the side of the curtain, like he was afraid we would be overheard. “But don’t try to communicate with this one.” He indicated the one riding on his shoulder. This taynix was red with black stripes down its sides and black spines running down the center of its back. “He’s...temperamental. I can’t go through that again.”

“Again!” the red slug said. Its voice was deeper than the others, and somehow more disconcerting.

“But you’re not here to talk about slugs,” FM said. “You said you needed help? I’m surprised you’d come to us, after the way you were treated last time.”

“I don’t want to judge your whole people by the actions of a few,” I said carefully. “I would not like it if you judged my people by the actions of some that I know.”

FM smiled. “I’m glad you feel that way.”

They both watched me expectantly. We'd certainly been through the small talk portion of the conversation that Finis recommended, even if we'd been talking about teleporting slugs, which was definitely not part of my espionage primer. "Some of my people have decided to align themselves with our common enemy," I said. "I think both our peoples could benefit from an alliance."

FM and Jorgen looked at each other. "I agree," Jorgen said carefully, "but I don't have the authority to make one."

I'd been too aggressive. Maybe humans *were* more like the peoples Finis had prepared me to address. "But you are a cytonic," I said. "Surely you have *some* sway in what your leaders decide."

Jorgen and FM exchanged another glance. "Is that what it's like on your planet?" Jorgen asked. "The cytonics are in charge?"

"Not in charge," I said. The Unity leaders weren't cytonic, and neither was Rinakin, though he was the highest ranked Independence official. "But we are respected for our powers."

The Unity leaders respected the cytonics who sided with them, at least.

"Things are different here," Jorgen said. "Our people are afraid of cytonics. The Superiority has used them against us in the past."

Of course they would, if given the opportunity. "So you see that the Superiority is not to be trusted."

"Yes," FM said. "We've been fighting them for decades. You said you were afraid we would trust them, but they haven't even offered us peace. We are looking for allies though, and there's a former Superiority Minister in residence here who—"

"They are here?" I asked. The Superiority sent representatives to ReDawn of course, under the guise of checking on our progress as a people. They were like squirrel keepers checking the cages. They never came too close, in case we would bite.

"Cuna isn't in good standing with the Superiority," FM said quickly. "The Superiority tried to kill them, and we rescued them. We're not looking to join the Superiority, Alanik. And we do need allies against them."

That was good. If this Cuna had turned against the Superiority, they might have information my people could use. “Is Cuna cytonic?”

“No,” Jorgen said. “Aside from Spensa, we only have two cytonics. Spensa’s grandmother and myself.”

That was important information, and he probably shouldn’t have given it up so easily. I needed to keep them talking, see what else I might learn. If they decided not to send help, at least I’d be armed with more information. This was going much better than our last conversation, when that angry woman threatened to keep me as a prisoner.

“Spensa still hasn’t returned from Starsight?” I asked.

Jorgen took a deep breath. “She did. But she’s...gone again.”

“How did she go there without drawing attention to herself?” I asked. “She sent a message to my people saying she was pretending to be me, but her ruse should have been discovered immediately. How was she able to disguise herself?” I’d been in shock and in pain when I’d given Spensa the coordinates. I’d never been clear on the details of how she’d managed to use them.

“We had a ship with advanced holographic technology,” Jorgen said. “Technology even the Superiority doesn’t have. Spensa was able to use a hologram to make herself look like you.”

“That is clever.” A resource like that could be used to walk right onto the Council tree and break Rinakin out without the use of cytonics.

“It was,” Jorgen said. “But the ship didn’t make it back from Starsight. We can’t use that trick anymore.”

Another broken branch.

“What are you hoping to gain from an alliance with us?” FM asked.

I set my shoulders. This was the opening Finis had taught me to look for. A direct inquiry to my intentions, an invitation to announce what I needed. Time to get to the point, to beg them to send a military force back with me. Quilan wanted to capture me first, but he wouldn’t wait forever before he transported the rest of the resistance to the Superiority. I didn’t know what they would do with us.

I also didn’t want to find out.

“Your people know very little about cytonics,” I said. “I don’t know everything, but I could offer more instruction than you have now. As for what I need—the Superiority already believes that my people are working with yours, because Spensa was discovered to be a human disguised as an UrDail. They’ve demanded we turn in our human co-conspirators, but of course we have none, so instead our government wants to turn me and other resistance members over to them instead.”

“They’re going to turn over their cytonics to the Superiority?” FM asked. “That seems unwise.”

“They’ve already captured our faction’s High Chancellor, who champions independence for ReDawn. By turning him over to the Superiority, those who seek unification will find themselves unopposed.”

“They’re trying to use the Superiority to take out their political enemies,” Jorgen said. “Because that can’t go wrong.”

FM shook her head. “Two birds with one stone, the saying goes.”

The pin didn’t have a direct translation for that first part. “What’s a bird?” I asked.

“A flying animal,” FM said. “We don’t really have them anymore. They were a thing from Earth. You don’t have birds on ReDawn?”

“We don’t have creatures that fly,” I said. “Anything that strays too far from the trees without an atmospheric generator will choke on the miasma.”

Both Jorgen and FM blinked at me.

They clearly had no idea what I was talking about, but it was also beside the point. “As for what I hope to gain, I’m hoping that your people would be willing to help me defend mine against the Superiority.”

“We can’t promise you anything,” Jorgen said. “But if you’ll come with us to talk to our admiral—”

“Is this the woman who tried to interrogate me?” I asked. “I’d hoped to avoid involving her.”

“You’ve met Admiral Cobb, but he didn’t get to say much,” FM said. “He’s...much more reasonable than Jeshua Weight, the woman you ran from. But yes, she will probably be there, especially if you want to meet with Minister Cuna.”

I doubted Jeshua Weight was going to want to work with me. I knew her type—always reaching for power, never wanting to extend any in return. “And if your leaders refuse an alliance?” I asked.

Jorgen and FM exchanged another look. “There’s nothing we can do for you without their permission. That’s not the way it works here.”

“Here!” chimed the red slug on Jorgen’s shoulder.

“Not now, Boomslug,” Jorgen said.

“Boomslug!” sang both yellow slugs, and they hyperjumped onto Jorgen’s shoulders with the red slug. All three slid off and rolled onto the ground at his feet.

The pin translated “Boomslug” to mean a mollusk that explodes.

That was ominous.

Jorgen shook his head. “We really need to get them to only do that when they’re given the code word.”

“Rig and I are working on it,” FM said. “But I think they like each other more than they like caviar, so it’s slow going.”

I had no idea what that meant, but I didn’t think these two were going to help me unless I spoke to their leaders. At least this time I was in a better position. They knew I wasn’t their prisoner, and an alliance would be advantageous to us all.

I’d come this far. I wasn’t going to go home without trying everything.

“All right,” I said. “I will speak with your admiral.”

“Good,” Jorgen said. “I really think we can all benefit from working together. I could use some coaching in cytonics, if you haven’t noticed.”

“I noticed,” I said. All cytonics had slightly different capabilities, but I could show him the basics at least. At some point, we all had to figure out the nuances of our powers on our own.

“So that’s settled, then,” FM said. “I can wait here with you while Jorgen sets up a meeting, if you want.”

“Please,” I said, and Jorgen returned Gill to FM before leaving to talk to his leaders.

I hoped my meeting with them went better this time, because otherwise I had come a very long way for nothing.

Five

It didn't take long for Jorgen's admiral to agree to a meeting. FM and her strange slug kept me company in the infirmary while we waited for Jorgen to send word that they were ready for us.

"What are you doing with the taynix anyway?" I asked her.

"Bonding," FM said. "I shouldn't say too much, but it's a new program the pilots are trying out."

The pilots were bonding with creatures that could hyperjump. After one of their own had infiltrated the Superiority in my place, trying to find the secret to hyperdrives.

The humans, as it turned out, had found it.

"You can use them to hyperjump," I guessed. "Even if you aren't cytonic?"

FM winced. "I really don't have the clearance to tell you that."

"You didn't tell me," I said. "Your slugs revealed it."

"Yeah, we really do need to figure out how to get them to only do that on command. It gets really confusing when they want to buddy up every time we mention their names."

I stared at the taynix, which was tucked back in FM's sling, nuzzling the crook of her elbow. If those things were the key to Superiority hyperdrives, I would need to take at least one with me if I had to flee.

A radio attached to FM's belt made a beeping noise, and then Jorgen's voice spoke. "We're ready," he said. "FM, can you bring Alanik to the command room?"

"We're on our way," FM said, and she smiled at me in a way that was probably meant to be reassuring.

FM led me through the stark metal hallways. My body felt lighter, my steps bouncier than expected—the gravitational pull of Detritus had to be slightly less than ReDawn.

Everything on this platform was so flat, the ceilings so low, not like the buildings at home—which would wind up the branches of the trees, filled with ramps and stairs on the inside and the outside. On some of the wide lower branches, where flat horizontal ground was easier to come by, a building might have a wide first story, but then it would soar upward, making use of the space above it, or spiral around the branches with lower floors built on the bottom side of the branches.

Who wanted to live in a building that was so...squashed? I felt like the ceiling was pressing down on me, closing me in.

Before we reached their command room, we passed beneath a large skylight through which I could see the other platforms that traveled above. They looked a lot like Wandering Leaf, though there were so many more of them.

“Was this an outpost during the last human war?” I asked. “Is that how you became trapped here?”

“No,” FM said. “The technology here is a lot older. Our people were travelers with a small fleet of ships. We crashed here and were imprisoned by the Superiority after the war ended.”

I wondered if there were more humans hiding in pockets across the universe. The people here had been resourceful enough to survive.

As we walked, I caught glimpses of an electric blue barrier stretching across the sky between the platforms above. “What is that?” I asked.

“Our planetary shield,” FM said. “It protects us from the Superiority gunships. Jorgen told me we apparently have a cytonic inhibitor? I guess that must have activated around the same time we put the shield up. We still don’t really understand how all these systems work.”

If I had more information about that, I could have used it as currency, but most of this technology was foreign to me as well. Jorgen had the key to the inhibitor in his mind, but he hadn’t known it existed. I wondered if being born here attuned him to it somehow. That would also explain why the slugs could use their abilities as well.

FM led me to a room with a slightly higher domed ceiling. Several humans with a variety of skin tones, all in shades of beige and brown, sat around a

large table. I wondered if those tones revealed their places of origin like with us, or if they were indicative of something else.

The woman I'd fled from—Jeshua Weight, FM had called her—glared at me. The meanings of facial expressions varied from species to species, and Finis had made me memorize many of them before I left for Starsight. But I was pretty sure that glare meant the same thing in every humanoid culture.

At the far end of the table sat the only other non-human in the room, a dione with blue skin. This would be Minister Cuna.

“Alanik of the UrDail,” they said. “Welcome.” They, like everyone in the room, had a translator pin perched on their shoulder. I hadn't had this many in my ship, so Cuna must have brought a large number as well. Jorgen offered one to me, and I pinned it on.

“Yes, welcome,” said a man in a white uniform. I remembered him vaguely now—he'd accompanied Jeshua the first time we spoke. “I am Admiral Cobb, and this is Minister Cuna.” Admiral Cobb had hair growing from the space below his nose—a big white bush of it. That had to be impractical when his nostrils cleared. Or maybe the bush existed to collect the contents. That was a disgusting thought.

I wasn't supposed to judge other cultures' practices—Finis said we had to be open-minded about the customs of other species if we wanted them to be open-minded about ours. I understood that in theory, but it didn't make it easy.

Admiral Cobb went around the room, introducing Jeshua Weight and several people who seemed to be her attendants, though I didn't understand the significance of their titles or manage to remember their names. Finis would have been disappointed. A good spy, she'd said, always paid attention to detail.

Unfortunately, I was distracted by Snuggles, who slipped off Jorgen's shoulders and onto the table, meandering over to Cobb.

“Is it necessary for those things to be here?” asked a man to Jeshua's right.

“Yes,” Cobb said. “The pilots have been instructed to carry their taynix with them at all times.”

“Could we at least get rid of that one?” the man asked, pointing at the red and black slug. “We all heard what it did.”

“Boomslug isn’t going to hurt anyone,” Jorgen said. “I’m working with him.”

“Perhaps the pilots could step outside then,” the man said. “Since this isn’t the place to discuss the taynix program.” He looked meaningfully at Jeshua. While I didn’t know enough about human expressions to deduce the full meaning, I could guess.

“I know that the taynix are hyperdrives,” I said.

Everyone in the room looked at me in alarm, including FM and Jorgen, though I wasn’t going to reveal that they’d given it away. “We UrDail are not as ignorant as the Superiority assumes.”

“Your species shows great promise,” Cuna said. “That’s why you were selected from among the lesser species to try out for our military exercise.”

I tried not to bristle at the term ‘lesser species.’ This wasn’t the time to split twigs.

“That military exercise showed up on our doorstep and tried to kill us,” Jeshua said. “So let’s not make it sound like such an honor to be invited.”

Ah, so the Superiority was gathering a military force to destroy the humans. That made sense. Perhaps it was a good thing then, that I’d avoided recruitment at Starsight. Now I knew the secret I’d meant to glean there, *and* I hadn’t made an enemy out of the humans.

Jeshua continued to glare at me.

Most of the humans anyway.

“Let’s get to the point,” Jeshua said. “Why have you returned, Alanik? What do you want?”

Cuna leaned back and their eyes widened—a dione gesture of discomfort, I thought. FM stepped back against the door where she still stood, while Jorgen tried unsuccessfully to get Snuggles to return to him.

I would have written Jeshua’s direct question off as human aggression, but it seemed not all the humans accepted it as normal.

Interesting.

“I returned because I think we can help each other,” I said. “The Superiority is also the enemy of my people.”

“The Superiority is not the enemy,” Cuna said quickly. “Winzik, the current leader of the Superiority military, has taken a hard line against the humans, but the Superiority itself is not a monolith. It is a sprawling amalgamation of diverse peoples and perspectives, none of which can be summarized with a single creed or—”

“Yes, as you’ve said,” Admiral Cobb cut in. “But whatever you want to call it, its military is trying to exterminate us. And that makes us enemies.”

“I think the more immediate question,” Jeshua said, “is what the UrDail have to offer us.”

I stood up straighter. Like FM, I had not been given a seat at the table. I didn’t know anything about human customs. Finis would want me to reserve judgment, to allow that perhaps in the human culture being left to stand was a gesture of respect.

But it obviously wasn’t. Any idiot could see that.

“I can teach your cytonics,” I said. “My skills are more developed, because I’ve had knowledge and training that your cytonics lack. If we were allies, we would share information with you. We have knowledge and experience with the Superiority that you don’t have here in isolation.”

I shot a look at Minister Cuna, who certainly had far more experience with the Superiority than I had, but they didn’t argue with me.

Besides, experience cooperating with the Superiority wasn’t the same as experience resisting.

Jeshua hesitated. They did need help with cytonics, and they knew it.

Admiral Cobb cleared his throat. “What exactly do you want in return?” he asked me. “An alliance between our governments?”

That wasn’t something I could officially offer, not with things the way they were. “An alliance between the humans of Detritus and the Independence faction of ReDawn,” I said. I might not have that authority either, but Rinakin did, and he’d sent me. “I need help to defend my people and to inspire others to fight. Once we’ve secured our military base, we could

formalize the alliance, build a plan to resist together. Your people and mine resisted together in the last war—”

“And we lost,” Jeshua said. “That’s how we ended up in this fix to begin with.”

I didn’t like the implication that the UrDail were at fault for that.

“We were allies for generations, not only in the last human war. And now my people are in trouble,” I said. Unity tried to suppress the history, but I’d read the books Rinakin had on the subject. “A rival faction is rounding up those who want to maintain independence from the Superiority, and they’re going to use us as leverage. If we first work together to rescue my allies, we can then build a coalition to fight back against the Superiority together.”

“So you’re asking for help,” Jeshua said. “Not offering help to us.”

“I think Alanik is saying that an alliance between your peoples would be mutually beneficial,” Cuna said. “And I concur. The UrDail are still somewhat aggressive, but if that aggression can be properly channeled—”

That was enough. “We aren’t aggressive,” I said. “We are *defending ourselves*, same as you are. And together we have more resources—”

“We are using all our resources to help ourselves,” Jeshua said.

“It seems like a good offer,” Cobb cut in. “If we share knowledge and resources, we’ll all be better positioned to fight back.”

“Maybe,” Jeshua said. “But if we align ourselves with rebels, we might lose the opportunity to bargain with the Superiority. They are the ones with the real power.”

FM and Jorgen both looked at me. The last time they’d talked about bargaining with the Superiority, I’d reacted poorly. That clearly had been the wrong tactic. Finis said a good spy was levelheaded, measuring her reactions.

“If you bargain with them,” I said, “you will always find that your wood returns to you rotten.”

“Regardless,” Jeshua said, mostly to Cobb, “We can’t send our starships away. We need them to defend Detritus.”

“The shield is defending us now,” Cobb said. “This might be the *best* time to send some of our ships away, to strike out instead of hunkering down here and waiting for the Superiority to devise a new way to come at us.”

“This isn’t our decision,” Jeshua snapped. “An interplanetary alliance should be voted on by the National Assembly.”

“That depends,” Cobb said. “If it’s a military operation, then the DDF should make the call.”

I didn’t know enough about human politics to know who was correct, but I did know enough about politics in general to guess that everyone would interpret the law in the way that best suited themselves.

I reached out to Jorgen’s mind, hoping he wouldn’t react visibly. *Do you agree with them?* I asked him.

Jorgen stared at his unruly taynix, who was lying on the table just out of his reach, fluting softly.

I don’t know, Jorgen said. It isn’t my call.

I know it isn’t your call, I responded. I’m asking what you think.

We don’t have a policy for this. There’s no precedent.

That wasn’t an opinion either. Were these humans not even allowed to *think* for themselves? How had they managed to outlaw *that*?

“Perhaps you could offer Alanik some quarters while you discuss it,” Cuna said.

“Yes,” Jeshua said. “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

I didn’t. “My people are in danger,” I said. “I don’t know how long they have before they’re turned over to the Superiority.”

Aside from FM and Jorgen, only Cobb looked sympathetic. The rest merely stared at me like my problems were none of their concern.

Still, my only choices were to wait them out or return home empty-handed, with nowhere to run and no way to help my brother, or Rinakin, or the rest of the resistance.

“But I would appreciate that,” I said, trying to sound like I meant it. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

If they took too long, I’d have to come up with another plan. I couldn’t leave my people in Unity’s hands for long.

But I couldn’t save any of my people on my own.

Six

Because Cuna professed to be some sort of ambassador to “lesser species,” the humans allowed them to escort me to a low-ceilinged room with strange rectangular furniture. At home we carved our furniture from wood, and even basic inexpensive pieces would have designs carved into them. The more upscale furniture would be soaked and bent, the chair arms and headboards molded into swirling shapes. I stood in front of an armchair that consisted of a fabric cushion stretched over a metal frame, every piece forming a square angle.

I sat down on it. It was more comfortable than it looked, I would grant them that.

Cuna assured me that they would speak to the humans about my offer and then left me alone in the room. They weren’t gone more than a minute before there was a soft knock on the door. I could feel a congregation of cytonic resonances on the other side.

Jorgen and his slugs. “Come in,” I called, and Jorgen opened the door. FM stood on the other side with him, holding a basket of something green and flaky. They both stepped in and shut the door behind them.

“Cobb said we could bring you food,” FM said. “But we didn’t know what your people eat. Cuna said that algae wasn’t toxic for your people, so we brought some for you to try.” She pushed the basket into my hands. I knew what algae was, but I’d never thought to *eat* it. It grew beneath the surface bark sometimes, and could form in our atmospheric water generators if we weren’t careful to keep them clean. “Cuna also told us that you were more likely to eat fruits and tree nuts. We don’t have any nuts, and this was the only fruit we could find.” She shoved a small object into my hand. “Detritus isn’t the best place to grow things.” The fruit was red and roughly round and had a small brown stem at the top. It was much smaller than the fruits that

grew on the trees at home, more similar to one that might grow on a vine on one of the farming branches.

“Thank you,” I said. I moved over to a small table—also square, with straight-angled legs. The conference table had been the same. These humans were *very* fond of right angles.

“I’m sorry about my mother,” Jorgen said.

“Your mother?”

“Jeshua Weight. She’s...a lot to deal with sometimes. But she means well.”

FM looked like she wanted to argue, but she didn’t. At home it would be considered rude to comment on the failings of someone else’s family member unless one was specifically invited to. Possibly humans were the same.

There was another knock on the door, and Jorgen opened it. Three more humans stood there, each with a yellow taynix tucked into a sling across their chest. The humans all wore the same clothes—flight suits, with the same patch affixed to their shoulders. One was a woman with brown skin and long, curly hair that hung halfway down her back. It still surprised me that all of the humans had hair and skin in various shades of bark colors, like they’d been drawn in different tones with the same pencil.

All except the last man who walked in. His hair was a shade of red nearly as bright as the stripes on Boomslug, and it contrasted against his pale skin. I wondered if that color was natural, or if humans sometimes dyed their hair the way my people did.

“We heard Alanik was back,” said the girl with the curly hair. “We wanted to see for ourselves, and Cobb said it was okay as long as we didn’t help her escape.”

I hoped he said that in jest. “I don’t need anyone’s help escaping,” I said. “I’m here of my own free will.”

“Of course you are,” FM said. “This is Kimmalyn, Rig, and Arturo.”

The one she said was Arturo—a man with brown hair—stood by the door staring at me. The humans had done that less than I would have thought, really. The only reason I could keep from staring at them was because there were so many of them.

This didn't feel rude though. More like he was sizing me up. I stared right back at him to let him know I was up to the challenge.

He seemed more puzzled by that than anything, so maybe I'd misread the situation.

Kimmalyn came over and sat down next to me. "Are they feeding you algae strips? They could at least have brought you some dessert."

"Cuna said the UrDail don't artificially sweeten their food," FM said.

Sweeten it? Most of the spices that grew on the vines were flavorful, but not particularly sweet. Which was good, because some of the fruits we grew were too sweet for my taste, especially when they were raw. "This is fine," I said. "Thank you." I lifted the fruit, testing the skin, which was thin and crisp.

"You can just bite into it," Kimmalyn said. "You don't need to peel it or anything. Unless your species doesn't like peel. We could bring you a knife —"

I bit into the fruit, which had a satisfying crunch to it, not unlike pitchfruit back home. It wasn't nearly as sweet though—it had more of a brisk flavor.

"Is it awful?" Kimmalyn asked.

"No, it's good," I said. "Thank you."

"You don't have to say that if you hate it," FM said. "We don't have a lot of fruit, but we can find you something else."

They were being kind, but I wasn't here to discuss culinary habits. If their politicians refused to help me, I could at least collect more information. "Why are people afraid of your taynix?" I asked Jorgen. "You called it Boomslug?"

"Yeah, he did," FM said, and Kimmalyn and Rig both snickered.

"Are we talking about that?" Rig asked. "She definitely doesn't have clearance."

"She already figured out about the hyperdrives," FM said.

"My apologies for announcing that in front of your superiors," I said.

"It's okay," Jorgen said. "Thank you for making it sound like you already knew."

"But Boomslug—" I said. Boomslug seemed to recognize its name, because it descended Jorgen's arm and slid across the table toward me.

“It exploded once,” Jorgen said. “Right in my face.” He rubbed one of the cuts on his cheek self-consciously.

I leaned away as it approached. “It *exploded*?”

“Watch out for your algae strips,” Kimmalyne said, and sure enough the slug began to sniff them speculatively.

“This explosion,” I said. “It was cytonic? Energy pushing out from it and slicing your face?”

“Yes,” Jorgen said. “How did you...”

I stared at the slug in alarm. “That *taynix* can use mindblades?”

“What’s a mindblade?” Rig asked.

Mindblades were an advanced cytonic ability. If this creature could produce them, then it must be a powerful cytonic lifeform.

Though the idea that it could produce a mindblade when I couldn’t was frankly a little insulting.

“I’ve only seen them once,” I said. I could have kept this information to myself, but I didn’t see how they could use it against me—and giving it to them might make them feel comfortable giving more information to me. “Only one of the cytonics on ReDawn can produce them. They are...energy from the negative realm pulled into ours with fantastic force.” I watched the slug carefully as it gripped the edge of my algae strip with its mouth and slowly retracted the strip from the basket. “They are tremendously difficult to produce.”

FM smiled. “So Boomslug is an overachiever.”

“I would like to see it in action,” I said.

Jorgen scooted his chair away from me. “Not with us sitting right here.”

The slug slowly drew the algae into its mouth, watching quietly.

There *was* something ominous about it. Especially now that I knew what it did.

“Are there other types?” I asked. “Communication slugs? Inhibitor slugs, perhaps?”

“We have slugs that power hypercomms,” FM said. “So far we haven’t found a good use for those without a full hypercomm, so the pilots aren’t trying to bond to them. I don’t know about inhibitor slugs though.”

“Are inhibitors powered by a cytonic?” Jorgen asked.

“Power,” Boomslug said.

That was also unsettling. “Sometimes,” I said. “It takes a great deal of power, and generally cooperation between multiple cytonics to accomplish. But the Superiority has hyperdrives that work without a cytonic present. If they are using taynix to power their hyperdrives, perhaps there are inhibitor slugs as well.”

“If it takes multiple cytonics,” Rig said, “I wonder if it requires multiple taynix. We’ve only begun to learn what they can do when they work together.”

Boomslug continued to munch placidly on the algae strip. The idea of this thing collaborating was even more terrifying.

“What can you tell us about hyperjumping?” Rig asked. “Obviously you know how to do that.”

I hesitated. Jorgen and FM and their friends were sharing information with me. I wondered if this was the game—freely give up what they knew so that I would share what I knew with them.

“She’s not going to tell us anything yet,” Jorgen said. “That’s her bargaining chip. She wants help from the DDF in exchange for that information.”

“Oh,” Rig said. “Sorry.”

Apparently that wasn’t the game.

“It’s all right,” I said. “I would like to teach you what I know, if you’re willing to work with me.”

“I’d like to,” Jorgen said. “But it’s not our decision.”

“About that,” I said. “I asked you for your opinion earlier, but you never gave it to me.”

Jorgen sighed. “I don’t know who should make the decision about an alliance with your people. I think the assembly has a point when they say diplomacy is a political matter, not a military one. But the military has been making decisions for the assembly for so many years, it seems like a bit of a power grab for them to reverse course on that now.”

“It’s because of Cobb, I think,” Kimmalyyn said. “Some of the people on the assembly say he’s not fit to make these decisions.”

“Are they really saying that?” Rig asked.

“They are,” Arturo said. “The assembly has been in conflict with the DDF for years, wanting more say in operations. They were too afraid to take power from Ironsides when the war was so close to the surface, but now that the fighting is farther away, people aren’t as scared—even though our situation is worse. The assembly is starting to think about how to take power away from the DDF, trying to find other ways to deal with the Superiority, now that we know more about them.”

“Are all of your assembly dealings so public?” I asked.

“No,” FM said. “He knows because his girlfriend’s mother is a National Assembly Leader.”

Arturo suddenly looked uncomfortable, but he didn’t deny it. The pin translated “girlfriend” as “potential mate.” I wondered if humans got embarrassed discussing such pairings before they were finalized. Some did on ReDawn. It depended on what tree you were from.

“I went home to see my father a couple of days ago,” he said. “But neither of my parents would listen to me. They think I’ve been spending too much time with Cobb.”

“They do have a point about the Superiority,” FM said. “Finding other methods to deal with them seems like a good idea. It’s not healthy for us to think of everything that moves as a target to shoot at.” She looked at me like she already knew I would argue.

She wasn’t wrong. It must be tempting to think that way after years of fighting, but that was the same attitude that led my people right into the Superiority’s trap. The humans’ military had experience we on ReDawn could only read about in books. But it was useless without the will to fight. If they fell for the Superiority’s lies, then I couldn’t rely on them to help pull ReDawn out.

“Some forces can’t be reasoned with,” I said. “They can only be opposed.”

“The DDF would agree with you,” Arturo said. “But the assembly is starting to think otherwise.”

“Otherwise,” his taynix said.

“Which is why I don’t know who’s right,” Jorgen said. “You say we shouldn’t talk to the Superiority, but I see the appeal. If we could strike an accord with them, lives could be saved.”

“It depends on what you mean by saved,” I said. “If you live, but give away your autonomy, your ability to make decisions for yourselves, to be treated as equals...”

“Do we have autonomy if all we can ever do is fight for our lives?” Arturo asked. “No one from the Superiority has ever treated us like equals. They treat us like insects.”

“They’re *afraid* of us,” FM said. “And the assembly wants to convince them that they don’t need to be, but the DDF keeps doing things that escalate the situation.”

“Like turning on the shield,” Rig said. “And developing hyperdrives. The better we get at defending ourselves, the more we convince them they’d better bring everything they have to destroy us.”

“But if you don’t do those things, they will enslave you,” I said.

“Is that what it’s like for your people?” FM asked. “You’re slaves to the Superiority?”

I hesitated. There were so many on ReDawn who didn’t see it that way. “No,” I said. “Because we have maintained our autonomy. Instead of killing us, they isolated us, denying us hyperdrives and mostly leaving us alone.”

The humans all stared at me.

“That must be nice,” Kimmalyn said finally.

I looked down at the table. These people had been on the front lines, fighting people who wanted them dead. Our squabbles on ReDawn must look so easy to them by comparison. “I’m not trying to compare our situations,” I said carefully. “But the Superiority keeps us all in cages of different kinds. They control us and call it peace, but it isn’t peace when we don’t have a choice.”

“That’s fair,” FM said, but none of the humans would quite meet my eyes. This all clearly weighed heavily on them.

I'd misjudged them, I realized. It wasn't that the humans couldn't think for themselves. It was that they had fought for so long with so few resources—but only for survival, not for any particular ideal.

They were desperate and confused, so they were striking around in the dark making confused, desperate decisions.

That was something I could offer them, I realized. Hope. A goal beyond mere survival.

“Our peoples were both autonomous once,” I said. “And Jeshua Weight is right. We lost that war together. But before that we worked together for *centuries*. Cytonics from my planet made contact with yours long before either of us were spacefaring. You inspired myths that we still treasure, and your people wrote about mine in their own mythology. One of your ancient writers even preserved bits of our language, so that when we began to travel across the universe, some of your people could speak to mine.” I'd never read the book, though now I wished I had. There were still a few copies on ReDawn. Something about a ring. “We don't have to let the Superiority tell us we're *lesser species*. We can return to our ancestors' fight. We can pick up our old alliances. We can remind the Superiority why they were so afraid of us to begin with, and maybe this time we could *win*.”

“Or maybe we'd lose,” Kimmalyn said quietly.

“Maybe,” Jorgen said.

“If you're losing now, would that outcome be so different?” I asked.

Before anyone could answer me the door opened, revealing Admiral Cobb in the hallway.

“Is this a social visit?” he asked to the room.

Jorgen startled. “No, sir. I mean, we brought Alanik some food, and we were talking, but—”

“At ease,” Cobb said, though he was the one who looked uneasy as he checked behind him in the hallway and then closed the door. He limped toward us, leaning on a cane.

“Any word from the assembly?” FM asked.

“Yes,” Cobb said. “They've granted permission for Alanik to remain on Detritus as a refugee.”

“I didn’t ask for that permission,” I said.

“I’m aware of that,” Cobb said. He scowled at Boomslug, who had started on a second of my algae strips. I hadn’t tried them yet, and I wondered if the humans would find that rude. I picked one up with my fingers. It was dry and crumbly, like some kind of wafer. Cobb focused on me, and I held the wafer still. “Jeshua has been conferring with NAL Algernon Weight and the rest of the assembly over the radio. Your petition for military aid has been denied—for the moment at least. The assembly is willing to continue debating the issue, and they say they’ll revisit it at a later time.”

“But I need help now,” I said. “My people are going to be given over to the Superiority—”

“So you said,” Cobb said. “They’re right that committing so many resources to your cause right now would weaken our position, especially after losing a flight’s worth of starships.”

FM and Jorgen exchanged guilty looks. I wanted to ask how they managed to lose multiple starships, but I’d lost two so far myself, so I supposed I couldn’t judge.

I should have asked that my ship be returned to me, I realized. That would have to be my next request. I stuck the end of the algae strip in my mouth, sampling it. It tasted like bittermoss, deep and earthy, with an even sharper aftertaste.

“It’s better dipped in custard,” Kimmalyn said. I didn’t know what custard was, so I would have to take her word for that.

“I think they’re also concerned that sending away starships would spoil their current negotiations,” Cobb said. “NAL Weight has been talking to one of the Superiority ministers, trying to negotiate a peace deal.”

I nearly spat out the algae strip. “They’ve made contact with the Superiority?”

“Using the hypercomm,” Cobb said. “And they want to have all of our resources available to bargain with.”

“They’re going to want your cytonics,” I said.

Jorgen’s eyes widened. “Is that true, sir?”

“I haven’t heard their exact demands,” Cobb said. “They’re trying to keep me out of the meetings, saying that this is a political discussion and not a military one.”

“But sir,” Jorgen said, “if they’re planning to bargain with military resources, doesn’t that concern the DDF?”

Cobb went on as if he hadn’t heard him. “I don’t imagine that the Superiority is going to be fond of us keeping our hyperdrives.”

FM’s hand went protectively to Gill in her sling.

“Our hyperdrives,” Gill said.

“We’re not handing the *taynix* over to the *Superiority*,” FM said.

Doing so would be incredibly foolish, but of course that was what the Superiority would demand. Perhaps the humans were closer to agreeing to help me than I’d thought. They did have resources they wanted to defend.

“I don’t think we should hand over a single hyperdrive to the Superiority,” Cobb said. “But right now my hands are tied.” He eyed me. “Tell me, would it be of any help to your people if we could send a single flight of ships?”

It would be far less help than an entire military fleet. But with one flight, I might be able to assault the ships that were holding my brother and the others from the resistance. I could rescue Rinakin. He was still respected by many, even though he’d lost the election. He might yet be able to sway others to our cause if we could show that we had human allies. “I would take any resources you could give me,” I said, “and make the best use of them that I could. My people want freedom. We’ve held out for it for so long, but my people have lost hope that they can grasp it. If we could begin to gain ground toward that goal, I believe others would join us.”

“What exactly would you do with them?” Cobb asked.

That was a very good question. “To start,” I said, “I would liberate the remaining outpost of my faction’s military. My people are being held on a Superiority ship and the base has been forcibly taken from us. If I could restore it to our control, the other Independence bases might feel empowered to fight back.”

Cobb nodded. “That’s good to know. Unfortunately, my hands are tied.”

I narrowed my eyes. Why ask if I could use a flight of ships if he had no intention of sending me one?

Cobb stood a bit straighter. “I’ve been specifically forbidden to order any starships to ReDawn to aid Alanik’s people. I can’t command Skyward Flight to go. I can’t command you to give Alanik the aid she needs in exchange for help learning how to use your cytonic abilities. I can’t order you to make an alliance with Alanik’s people, and I can’t order you to bring some of those resources home to help us here as soon as you can.”

FM and Rig exchanged a glance.

“We understand, sir,” Jorgen said, looking down at Boomslug morosely.

Cobb raised an eyebrow at him, like he didn’t understand at all.

I wasn’t an expert in human communication, but that seemed like an oddly specific list of things they were *not* being ordered to do. Cobb looked up at the ceiling and sighed, clearly disgruntled about something.

“You can’t order them to do it,” I repeated.

“Correct,” Cobb said. “I have been absolutely and expressly forbidden from ordering you to do what clearly and obviously needs to be done for the good of Detritus and her people.”

“That’s really unfortunate, sir,” Jorgen said. Cobb looked like he was ready to whack him with his cane.

FM smacked Jorgen in the arm with the back of her hand. “He’s saying he can’t *officially order* us to go,” she said.

“I heard him,” Jorgen said.

“Heard him!” Snuggles said.

“We’re all going to ReDawn,” FM said to Jorgen. “That’s what’s happening.”

Jorgen finally seemed to realize what was going on.

“Like the Saint says,” Kimmalyne said, “whenever you get there, there you are.”

Jorgen looked up at Cobb for confirmation, and Cobb rolled his eyes. He gestured toward the door.

And then all the humans climbed to their feet. Jorgen scooped Boomslug off the table, half an algae strip still hanging from its mouth.

I paused in front of Admiral Cobb. “Thank you,” I said. I wasn’t going to call him sir. He wasn’t my commander. But he was the only reason I had hope for Rinakin and the rest of my people, so I owed him my respect.

“Don’t thank me,” Cobb said. “I’m just the bearer of bad news.”

I nodded to him, and then followed the others out of the room.

Seven

We hurried down the corridor in the direction of their landing bay. “Is my ship in your hangar with the others?” I asked.

Rig fell back to walk briskly beside me, looking sheepish. “I’m sorry,” he said. “But we kind of...took it apart.”

“You *what?*”

“We were figuring out the differences between your engineering and ours,” he said. “I can put it back together, but it will take me time.”

“We don’t have time,” I snapped at him. I was sure my people would have done the same with a human ship, but that didn’t change the fact that I needed to get in the air *now*.

“We’ll set you up with one of our ships,” Rig said. “Some of the controls are different, but it’s the best we can do under the circumstances, unless you want one of the others to take a Dulo and you could ride copilot.”

“No,” I said. The idea of being at the mercy of one of the humans as we returned to ReDawn was stifling. I could steal a ship there of course, but I’d rather come in with my own set of wings. “Give me one of your ships. I’ll... figure it out.”

“You should take a comms slug with you,” Rig said to Jorgen. “In case you need one to contact us.”

“Good idea,” Jorgen said. “Snuggles, take me to Fine.”

“Fine!” Snuggles said, and Jorgen disappeared, and then reappeared a moment later next to FM with a purple and orange slug tucked under his arm.

“Fine!” Snuggles said again.

“Good job, Snuggles,” FM said, and she withdrew a tin from her pocket and offered it a pinch of some sticky substance.

Interesting.

“Are you coming with us?” FM asked Rig over her shoulder. “Because if not, you should get back to Engineering. You don’t want to be associated

with what we're about to do."

Rig hesitated. "I think I should stay here, but..."

He didn't seem happy about it, possibly because his friends were all running off into danger and he didn't know when they would be back.

"It's okay," FM said. "If we need you, we know where to find you."

"Yeah," Rig said. "I won't be able to say the same for you."

FM looked like she was about to say more, but she glanced at the others and stayed silent. Rig gave her a sad wave and then turned to go. She watched after him over her shoulder, though I couldn't read the expression on her face.

There was clearly a subtext I was missing there. I'd have to ask her about it later, when we weren't about to steal a flight of starships.

I followed Jorgen out a side door and along a narrow path between buildings to the landing bay. Jorgen breezed past two humans who were working on one of the control panels of a partially disassembled ship.

"We're on orders to take our ships up immediately," he said. "Sorry for the late notice."

One of the ground crew followed on his heels, staring at me in alarm. "Didn't you hear?" she said. "There's a mandatory muster—you're all expected to be in your quarters for a surprise inspection."

Jorgen looked relieved. Cobb had obviously done that to cover our tracks, and possibly so he could claim later that we'd used the muster as cover without his knowledge.

"These orders supersede those," Jorgen said.

"We weren't notified," she said. "We can start working through the preflight checks—"

"No time," Jorgen said. "We'll do it ourselves. You can radio to Admiral Cobb directly. He'll authorize it."

Or fail to answer his radio, more likely, to maintain deniability.

"Alanik is going to take one of the spare Skyward ships," FM said.

"There aren't any spare Skyward ships," the ground crew member said. "We've only now got *any* Skyward ships again, and we're definitely not authorized to put an alien in—"

“Do you want to be responsible for us being delayed?” Jorgen asked.

“I am responsible for getting you in the air, and I can’t do that without—”

“The shield is going to fail,” FM cut in. “There’s some debris on a trajectory to destroy the controls, and if we don’t get up there and shoot it down, the sky is going to be open to the Superiority again. Do you want to be responsible for that?”

The ground crew person hesitated, and Jorgen shot FM a grateful look.

“Come on,” FM said to me. “We’ll get you into a ship.”

On the way across the landing bay we passed my own ship parked among a few with obvious damage. It was similar in design to the human ships, but made from darker metal. It didn’t *look* disassembled from the outside, but when I peered through the canopy, I found that they’d taken *everything* apart. My instruments were in pieces, the navigation module disassembled and left on the seat.

“Not flying that today,” FM said. “Rig can fix it for you later. Come on.”

I wasn’t sure whose ship she brought me to, and when I climbed into the cockpit I had even less idea what I was looking at. The instrumentation was all arranged differently.

“Can you fly it?” FM asked.

“I can hyperjump with it,” I said. “Flying might be a bit more of a challenge.”

FM pointed out some of the more vital systems, and I began to acclimate myself. I found the eject lever on the side of the seat, in the same location as ours. Not everything was different from our starships. “These are the radio controls,” FM said, flipping a toggle and spinning a dial. She handed me a helmet. “I’ll set you to the flight channel. Remember what you say over the radio isn’t secure. I’m going to get myself in the air, but if you have any questions...”

I had a lot of questions, but that ground crew tech was probably trying to reach Admiral Cobb right now. Through the canopy I saw Kimmalyn running across the landing bay with three men following her. Trailing after them was a short girl with blue hair.

“We’re all here,” Jorgen said over the radio. “Skyward Flight, let’s get in the air. Go!”

I scanned the ship controls, trying to remember what FM had told me. I found the lever to engage the acclivity ring—those controls weren’t very different from my ship. The throttle lever and the control sphere were the same, though the one in my ship was smaller, and this one felt unwieldy in my hand.

I made sure to remember the location of the button for the destructors—I didn’t want to set those off by mistake. I engaged my acclivity ring and rose in the air, and managed—mostly accidentally—to remember which were the dive controls as my ship pitched forward, nose pointed at the ground.

“You okay, Alanik?” FM asked.

“Fine,” I said, righting myself. I *could* fly. I only *looked* like I couldn’t.

I piloted the ship out of the landing bay and then climbed in altitude until I pulled even with Jorgen. One by one, the ships in Skyward Flight followed us into the air.

“Skyward Flight,” Jorgen said over the radio. “Sound off when ready. Alanik, we’re going to make you Skyward Eight for the moment. You’ll need a callsign eventually, if you don’t have one.”

What was a callsign?

Then Jorgen called out, “Skyward One, callsign Jerkface,”

Jerkface? My pin translated that to something akin to “rude visage,” which didn’t seem like a nice thing to call anyone.

The rest of the flight sounded off, and I recognized a few of their voices, though many of them used different names. Kimmalyyn was “Quirk,” I thought, and FM was still FM. I didn’t think I’d met Nedder yet, and I had no idea which of the men I’d seen were Catnip, T-Stall, or Amphisbaena, though I thought that last one might be Arturo, and the girl with the blue hair must be Sentry. My pin didn’t even offer a translation for some of them. I didn’t fully understand the purpose of the callsigns—perhaps to conceal their identities from the enemy?—but this wasn’t the time to ask.

“Skyward Flight,” Jeshua Weight’s voice said over the radio.

“All ships converge above the landing platform,” Jorgen said, ignoring her. “Alanik, we can’t use the hyperdrives to reach your planet. Are you prepared to hyperjump?”

“Yes,” I said. “But I can’t bring you all unless our ships are touching.”

“We’re going to interlock using light-lances,” Jorgen said. “We’ve tried other things, but that’s the fastest way. We’ll attach to you, so you don’t have to worry about the controls.”

Kimmalyn’s ship drew nearer to mine, and then a line of light, similar to our light hooks, beamed out from her ship, connecting it to mine.

“Skyward Flight,” Jeshua tried again. “You are grounded. Land your ships immediately or you will face court-martial.”

The others began to converge around me, moving closer than I was comfortable with as they connected their ships to mine. I tried to adjust my position by manipulating my control sphere, but it was more sensitive than I was used to, and I ended up jogging unintentionally to the side.

“Jorgen!” Jeshua said, shouting into the radio now. “Ground those ships!”

“Sorry, Mom,” Jorgen said. He did sound sorry, and more than a little stressed out.

“Um, Jerkface?” Nedder said over the radio. “They’re readying ships. You don’t think they’re going to shoot at us, do you?”

“If you leave to fight for the UrDail without permission you are defecting,” Jeshua said. “Ground your ships immediately.”

“Scud,” Nedder said. “Do you think she’ll do it?”

“I don’t know,” Jorgen said. “Let’s get out of here before we find out.”

“I’m ready when you are,” I told him, and reached into the negative realm, feeling across the abyss toward ReDawn. I reached for Hollow, sensing its familiar branches hanging there, a solid point on the other side of all that nothingness.

“Jerkface,” Arturo said. “Stardragon Flight is starting to launch.”

“This is Robin from Stardragon Flight,” an uncertain voice said over the radio. “Awaiting orders.”

“Where is Admiral Cobb?” Jeshua said.

“She can’t tell them to shoot,” Arturo said. “She doesn’t have the authority.”

I wondered if that was the only thing stopping her; if she’d really give the order to shoot down her own son.

Jorgen didn’t respond. I peered past Kimmalyn’s ship to Jorgen’s. I could see Boomslug perched on his shoulders, though I couldn’t see his face, shadowed as it was by his helmet.

“Alanik, we are a go to hyperjump,” Jorgen said.

“Jerkface?” Robin said again. “What are you—”

I reached across the negative realm to Hollow, and I *pulled*.

Eight

I'd never dragged so much mass through the negative realm before, but I was met with no more resistance. We cut through easily, like a knife through whipped whiteberry jam. For a moment we all hung suspended, the eyes staring down at us. A force, massively big and wide, reached for us like it wanted to smother us all. I felt Jorgen and the many slugs around me, all staring up at them. I could feel fear from the slugs, and something else from Jorgen—shame perhaps?

And then the eyes disappeared, and we hung in the miasma in sight of Hollow. We were still on the day side of the planet, the sky bright. I immediately checked our proximity to Wandering Leaf to ensure we hadn't emerged in range of the autoturrets. The platform was a shadow floating off to our right, not close enough to fire. Hollow's corpse reached upward toward the sky, a hazy outline against the miasma.

"Saints and stars," Kimmalyn said. "Does that thing eat people?"

"The tree?" I asked. "No, it doesn't eat people. Have you never seen a tree before?"

"I've seen a tree," Arturo said. "It wasn't much taller than Nedder."

"These can grow up to fifty kilometers tall," I said. "They float in the miasma, and our cities are built on them."

"Scud, that's creepy," Nedder said.

"And beautiful," Kimmalyn added.

"What is all this in the air?" Arturo asked.

"Gases," I said. "Most of the trees have clear patches of air around them, but Hollow has fewer because the tree itself no longer produces oxygen. There's still a bubble of breathable atmosphere from the plants that grow here and from the atmospheric generators installed by the lumber corps, but it's much thinner and we'll have to be more careful."

I scanned the area quickly with my cytonic senses, but I couldn't find any cytonics besides us.

"I'm seeing a ship on my long-range sensors," Jorgen said. "Looks like a transport ship. Is that our target?"

"Yes," I said. I found the controls to expand my own sensors and took a look. I'd brought us in on the far side of the tree, about a five-minute flight out, not sure if the holding ship would even still be here. It had been a few hours, and they could have taken them somewhere else by now.

But the ship was still hovering outside the base. Either they'd subdued the people inside, or my people were too afraid to fight.

We were going to show them how it was done. The Unity fighters wouldn't be expecting us, so even if they'd seen us arrive, we should have a few minutes to prepare while they readied their starships.

"There are civilians still living on the tree," I said. "Some small settlements, plus the lumber mining facilities. I don't want to fire on those or on the transport ship. My people are being held there, and we're going to need them to join the fight."

"Understood," Jorgen said. "What can you tell us about the ship?"

"Not a lot," I said. "It's a small Superiority transport. It's not a fighter, but it has a cytonic inhibitor, so I can't jump in and get people out. The last ship like that I ran across was manned by diones but piloted by an UrDail cytonic. This time there're no cytonics here but us, unless they're in the hold of that ship."

"Do you know if they have a hyperdrive?" Jorgen asked.

"I doubt it," I said. "They'd never give us that technology, for fear we'd figure out the secret."

"That sounds about right," FM said.

"If they can't hyperjump," Jorgen said, "then we can put pressure on them, try to get them to land. Do you know how many fighters we'll be facing here?"

"No," I said. "However many starships were stationed here, plus the number of fighters Unity brought with them when they took the base. They might not have enough pilots to fill all the Independence ships though."

“All right,” Jorgen said. “Our primary objective is to get the transport ship to land and free the imprisoned UrDail inside. Secondary objective is to retake the base. Skyward Flight, detach and move toward the...tree thing.”

“Its name is Hollow,” I said.

“Scud,” Sentry said. “Even its name is spooky.”

All around me, light beams retracted as the flight let each other go. I didn’t see any Unity fighters moving toward us yet.

“Alanik, there should be a button flashing on your radio panel,” Jorgen said. “Press it?”

I did so, and his voice continued over the radio.

“This is a private channel,” Jorgen said. “The rest of the flight can’t hear us. Do you see the dial to switch from channel to channel? You might want to note mine so you know how to reach me specifically if there’s something you need to report that you don’t want everyone to hear.”

“If I have something I need to report,” I said, “I could speak it into your mind.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Jorgen said. “I need to work on that. I can do it with the slugs, and it probably works the same? I also need you to show me how to hyperjump without a taynix.”

“You might not be able to,” I told him. “Not all cytonics can.”

“Do we have different abilities?” he asked. “Like the taynix?”

“Not exactly. More like strengths and weaknesses. And some cytonics are stronger than others.”

“Figures,” Jorgen said. “If it’s possible for Spensa to show me up at something, she always will.”

He didn’t sound bitter about that. I was no master of human intonation, but to me he sounded more sad than anything.

“Where is Spensa?” I asked. “You said she was gone again. Was she taken by the Superiority?”

“No,” Jorgen said. “She’s lost, somewhere in the nowhere. The...place you pass through when you hyperjump. The place with the eyes.”

“The negative realm,” I said. “What do you mean, she’s *lost* there?”

“She went there to escape the Superiority,” Jorgen said. “And she hasn’t been able to find a way out.”

“The negative realm isn’t a place you go,” I said. “It’s a place you...slip through. You can’t *remain* there.” At least you couldn’t as far as I knew.

“Yes, well. You don’t know Spensa. She does a lot of things that ought to be impossible.”

She seemed like a good person to have on your side, though less so if she disappeared.

“Did you want to pick a callsign?” Jorgen said. “We don’t usually use our real names over the radio, but I don’t know if your people have the same custom.”

“We don’t,” I said. “And I wouldn’t know what to call myself.”

“If you ask the flight, you’ll get lots of suggestions. But you might not like them.”

“Why do they call you Jerkface?” I asked. “Is it because of the wounds on your face?”

“No, unfortunately.”

“Are you unattractive by human standards?”

“What? No!” Jorgen stuttered a bit. “You think I’m *ugly*? It’s not about my face. Jerkface means, like, a jerk. A rude person.”

“Oh,” I said. “So you are disliked, then.”

“I am *not* disliked! Or, I was. By Spensa. Anyway, it’s a long story.”

I could have stopped trying to figure this out, but I was too amused by Jorgen’s defensiveness. “So you and Spensa are enemies then. Because she is always showing you up.”

“Um, no,” Jorgen said. “We’re not enemies. Not anymore. We never really were. It’s...complicated. Oh, look! The flight is trying to reach us on the general line.”

The button for the private channel stopped flashing as Jorgen’s voice went quiet.

We started flying toward Hollow. My ship moved haltingly as I figured out how much pressure to apply to the boosters, but by the time we neared the tree I was starting to fly more smoothly.

As we drew closer, the transport ship moved away from the base. The pilot had spotted us, because a flight of Unity ships was now headed our way.

“Skyward Flight,” Jorgen said. “Engage those ships. T-Stall, Catnip, FM, and Sentry, keep the fighters occupied while the rest of us cut through to the transport ship.”

“Copy that,” FM said. We accelerated toward the enemy ships. There were ten of them in total, so we were nearly evenly matched in number. As we approached, Skyward Flight opened fire, forcing the Unity ships to break formation or risk losing their shields.

We used similar techniques when we drilled against each other, but we used lasers, not destructor fire. In this battle there were no tag outs, no warnings. The humans weren’t playing a game.

Neither was the Superiority, and it was about time my people caught up to speed.

“Alanik,” Jorgen said. “You don’t have a wingmate, so you can stick with me and Quirk.”

As the enemy ships broke formation, two pairs of human ships darted after them, chasing them in circles. I smiled. The Unity fighters must be terrified.

Arturo and Nedder took off through the gap left by the broken enemy formation, and Jorgen and Kimmalyn followed. I stayed close to them—none of these Unity fighters were cytonic, and since I was in a human ship they hadn’t figured out which one I was in. They wouldn’t be able to see through the canopies unless their ships got very close, and even then it would be difficult to discern faces beneath helmets.

I scanned for hypercomm signals and didn’t find any, though I might have missed Unity’s call to Quilan, or they might have done so over the ordinary radio. They were probably wondering where I managed to get a full flight of unfamiliar ships within a couple of hours, and that confusion could only be to our advantage.

We accelerated, tearing through the miasma toward Hollow. The silhouette became clearer against the crimson sky. Destructor fire followed from behind me.

I banked to the side, executing a swivel-turn, and opened fire on the two ships targeting me.

“Amphi, Nedder,” Jorgen said. “Alanik’s got some tails. Give her some support while Quirk and I push through.”

“On it,” Arturo said, before I could even tell them I didn’t need help.

Nedder shot past me, drawing the enemy fire, while Arturo did a swivel-turn of his own, pivoting to catch the ships in the crossfire. One of them executed a banking roll and fled in the direction of Jorgen and Kimmalyn, while the other lost its shield and took a direct hit in the left wing. The pilot ejected, a parachute opening and slowing their descent. Their helmets and flightsuits would allow them to survive in the miasma. The pilot would put out a distress beacon as they descended toward the core, and would probably be picked up before they reached it—and if not, shortly after.

We all turned, moving toward Jorgen and Kimmalyn, though Nedder and Arturo beat me to the ship that was chasing them, making quick work of it before I could even get off a shot.

I was going to have to step up my game if I wanted to keep up with them. I didn’t appreciate being treated like a novice. *I can handle two ships*, I said to Jorgen. *Just because I don’t have combat experience doesn’t mean I don’t know what I’m doing.*

I didn’t mean to insult you, Jorgen responded. *I would have done the same for any one of us.*

Really? They *all* felt like they needed to buddy up just to take down a couple of ships? Yes, I knew what we were doing was a lot more dangerous than the games, but for supposedly hardened warriors...it seemed so... spineless.

Nedder and Arturo shot out in front of Jorgen and Kimmalyn and then slowed, taking point again. Jorgen didn’t say a word about it. Rather, he let them ride out in front of him like he *wanted* them there.

The others must have been doing a good job chasing off the other ships. We were nearing the tree now, passing by the thickest branch of Hollow and into the thin bubble of clear atmosphere. A few small towers wound around the edge of the branch.

The transport ship wasn't going to get away. Even if we hadn't had the ability to hyperjump, it wasn't designed to move at fighter speeds in atmosphere. It seemed to have realized that, because it had stopped moving away from the tree and was now headed toward it, quickly disappearing from view.

"Alanik," Jorgen said. "The ship we're after disappeared into the tree. Is there a hangar down there you're aware of?"

"No," I said. "The base with the hangar is in the upper branches. But they call it Hollow for a reason."

"Okay," Jorgen said. "Let's follow that ship. Alanik, since you know the terrain, take point."

It was a good plan, though I wished taking point didn't put me out in front when I was struggling with my ship's controls. Thankfully I had the maneuvering down, so I didn't look like an idiot as I led them around the thick trunk of Hollow and down toward the chasm in the crook of the tree branches.

"FM," Jorgen said over the radio. "Sitrep?"

"We've got them running," FM said. "They're headed in your direction though."

"Took 'em long enough to catch on," Nedder said.

"They had to know why we were here, didn't they?" Arturo asked.

"They did," I said. I remembered what Rinakin said. Just because they understood our tactics didn't mean they wouldn't work.

I flew my ship through the gaping mouth of Hollow and into the depths of its trunk. It was dark in here, though daylight did shine in patches through knotholes in the sides of the trunk, some of which were as much as a kilometer wide. Spindly buildings stretched up the inside, carved and constructed against the interior of the tree. Lumber mining facilities, cutting out the dead wood to be shipped to other parts of the planet. The chasm went deep down into the trunk, partially formed by the natural rotting of the dead tree and then expedited by mining.

We spotted the transport ship heading toward the mining facilities at the bottom of the chasm. "We've got limited time before those ships arrive,"

Jorgen said. "Alanik, plan for forcing the ship to land?"

"You can't shoot it down," I said. "And they're not going to land willingly. Do you have light nets?"

"We have light-lances," Jorgen said. "We can use them to grab the ship, but we wouldn't be able to drag a ship that big without taking out its boosters first."

"Will it be cornered down there?" Arturo asked.

"No," I said. "There are exits near the lumberyard for exports."

"It's bigger than a fighter, isn't it?" Kimmalyn asked. "Could we take out the boosters without hurting the prisoners?"

"I doubt it," I said. "The boosters are right below the hold. My people are practically on top of them."

"Let's get closer," Jorgen said. "Quirk can take a look, see what she thinks."

We approached the transport ship. UrDail transport ships weren't equipped with weapons, but this Superiority ship had a shield and some basic destructors.

And they said *we* were too aggressive.

"Boosters are no-go, Jerkface," Kimmalyn said. "No way I can hit those without damaging the hull. Cockpit is possible though. I'm guessing the pilots aren't our friends?"

"Not friends," I said. "But you can't shoot out the cockpit without hurting my people in the hold...can you?"

"Quirk?" Jorgen said.

"I think I can get it," Kimmalyn said.

"Be sure," Jorgen said.

"Ummmm."

Below us, the transport ship was moving across the top of the lumberyard buildings. It was a medium-sized craft, designed to move maybe thirty people. If they had fit everyone from the base inside, they'd be packed in tight.

The transport ship cruised toward the exit shaft. They probably guessed we were here to rescue their captives, and that we weren't willing to shoot the

ship down.

They guessed right, on my part at least.

“We’ll have to get the shield first,” Jorgen said. “Nedder, go in close, get it with your IMP. Alanik and Amphi, ping them with your light-lances.”

“Where is that, exactly?” I asked. FM had told me, but I couldn’t remember. It wasn’t in the same location as my light hook.

“The buttons on the sides of your control sphere,” Jorgen said.

I found them. “Got it. I didn’t hear Quirk say she was sure she could do this.”

“Um, Jerkface?” FM broke in. “We can’t figure out how to get to you.”

“We’re inside the tree,” Jorgen said. “Entrance is where the branches meet the trunk.”

I still couldn’t tell several of the humans apart, especially when they all started to chatter together.

“Say again, Jerkface? Did you say you’re *inside* the tree?”

“What’s the matter, Sentry? Never flown a ship inside a tree before?”

“Shut it, T-Stall.”

“We’re on our way, Jerkface,” FM said, “but you have incoming.”

“We need to do this now. Quirk?”

“I can do it,” she said. “I want to have to use only one shot, but I can do it.”

“Nedder,” Jorgen said, “catch that ship before it leaves the tree.”

“Jerkface?” Arturo said. “If we chase it outside, we’d have more space to catch it in an uncontrolled descent before it hit the ground.”

“Are you talking about *chasing* that ship full of *my people* down toward the core?” I asked.

“Um, maybe?” Arturo said.

“In here is better,” Jorgen said. “We have incoming. Nedder, get it done.”

“Copy,” Nedder said, and he dove toward the ship as it headed into the mouth of the shaft that would lead out of the tree. When he got close, he hit his IMP, dropping the ship’s shields.

Arturo dove directly behind him, and I jerked my ship to the side in my attempt to keep up. I wished I had my own ship—I looked like an idiot in this

thing, which wasn't going to help them think of me as a capable member of the team.

"Scud," Jorgen said. "Enemy ships, on top and closing. Nedder, help me hold them off." I focused on following Arturo as we neared the transport ship.

Kimmalyn's ship darted over our heads. She had to get ahead of the transport ship to get a clear shot. The transport ship aimed its destructors at her and fired, but she dodged and turned her ship around to face it.

"Ready," she said.

"All right, Quirk," Arturo said. "On my mark." He soared over the transport ship and shot it with his light-lance. I aimed and fired as well, grabbing the ship by the other side.

"Scud," Nedder said. "They're coming in hot."

"Fire!" Arturo said.

Kimmalyn's destructors fired, and the cockpit of the transport ship exploded in a shower of sparks.

Nine

“Quirk!” Jorgen shouted over the radio. “Report?”

“Successful, I think?” Kimmalyn said. “Cockpit annihilated. Hull is intact.”

That was a seriously impressive shot. Kimmalyn would have been a star, even in the professional leagues.

“Alanik? How’s the inhibitor?”

I scanned the area through the negative realm. The hull was a giant blank space. “Operational,” I said. I held one half of the ship by my light-lance and Arturo had the other. The ship’s acclivity ring also seemed to be operational, so we didn’t have to adjust our boosters to keep it in the air. Without the cockpit controls, I didn’t know how much longer that would last.

“What about the pilot?” I asked.

“Um, dead?” Kimmalyn said. “Copilot, too, if there was one.”

I blinked down at the ship. I didn’t have a clear view of the cockpit from this angle, but—

“Well done, Quirk,” Jorgen said, like it was nothing.

She’d just *killed* people, and they thought of it as *nothing*.

I shook myself. What did I think was going to happen in an actual military firefight?

“We’re here to help,” FM said, and I looked up through my canopy to see the rest of the flight descending on the remaining ships. They seemed to have it handled for now, and the light-lance would be sufficient to hyperjump us all.

“We need to jump this ship to the base,” I said. “Where the pilots can board Independence ships and help us.”

“You can take them anytime, Alanik,” Jorgen said.

I didn’t need his permission, but at least we agreed on what had to be done.

“That base will be crawling with the enemy, won’t it?” Arturo asked.

“Probably,” I said. “Drop your line if you don’t want to come with me.”

I gave Arturo a few seconds to decide. With the ship’s acclivity ring still functional, I didn’t need him to hold the ship, but I could use the backup when we arrived. When he didn’t release, I reached through the negative realm up to the airspace in front of the Independence base and pulled us all through.

The eyes were wrathful as we passed beneath them, but no more than last time. Hopefully it had been long enough since my last jump that I wasn’t putting us all at too much risk. Especially because I wasn’t confident that I was going to get out of this battle without needing to hyperjump again.

“Alanik,” Arturo said over the radio, “confirm, personnel in that hangar are the enemy, correct?”

I had to turn my ship to the side to see what he was referring to. There were Unity soldiers inside the hangar, some staring in confusion, others running for cover.

“Affirmative,” I said.

“Copy,” Arturo said. He opened fire as we approached the hangar, and the remaining Unity people began to flee.

“Do we need to secure the area?” Arturo asked.

“My people can do it,” I said. At least, I hoped they would do a better job of it than they did the first time. We flew into the hangar and deposited the transport on the ground, our ships still hovering above it. My people poured out, including my brother, Gilaf, who turned around and stared up at us. There weren’t more than fifty of them—I wondered if some of the Independence people had defected to Unity.

I pulled off my helmet and waved at Gilaf. He waved back and joined a group of Independence pilots already heading to the remaining ships. They’d get in the air and join the fight, putting us ahead in numbers.

For now.

I searched again for hypercomm signals. Far out in the miasma, I heard the buzz of a communication.

—at Hollow. Bring her in alive—other cytonic interference—not sure what to expect—

I smiled. Quilan could sense Jorgen and the slugs, same as I could. A group of humans with hyperdrives would be low on his list of possible explanations.

“More enemy incoming,” I said over the radio.

“Do we know how many ships?” Arturo asked.

“No idea,” I said. “Depends on how many Quilan can muster in a hurry.” And how much of a threat he thought I was.

Ships couldn’t move as fast through the miasma as they could in the vacuum because of the air resistance. Quilan would probably head straight up out of the atmosphere and then skirt the planet in the vacuum. He’d call up units as close to us as possible—which meant they could be here long before he was.

I widened my sensors, searching for the incoming ships. They were coming through the miasma on the duskward side of Hollow. They’d pass by Skyward Flight before they got to us. “They’re coming up fast. Duskward side.”

“What’s that?” Jorgen asked.

Oh. “The side where the sun sets. On the...”

The enemy split into two groups as the ships approached the tree.

“We use time on a clock,” he said. “Like, directly behind me is six o’clock, straight ahead is twelve...”

I had vaguely heard of this—an old-fashioned way of telling directions, probably from the days when we were allied with the humans. “We don’t use that notation anymore. Here.” I sent the direction to his mind so he could see what I meant.

“Scud,” Jorgen said. “I see them on our sensors now. They *are* coming up fast. Looks like about twenty of them.”

“The pilots we rescued are getting in their ships now,” I said, “so we’ll have backup.”

The remaining Unity soldiers seemed unwilling to step into the hangar to be shot by our destructors, which had given the Independence pilots plenty of

time to get in their ships. Arturo and I could now go back and help the flight without risking that my people would be overrun.

“We’re on our way back to you,” I said to Jorgen. “Maybe we can make a stand inside the tree and keep the enemy ships occupied.”

“Affirmative,” Jorgen said. “But if things get too hot or they try to skirt us, we’ll implement bounce protocol.”

I didn’t know what that was, but I had to trust they would handle themselves. I found the Independence radio channel and broadcast to the ships. “Independence pilots. Allies are fighting Unity forces near the lumber mine operations. Hold the base, and we’ll be back to support you as soon as we can.”

“Alanik,” my brother said over the radio. “Who are your allies?”

I wasn’t going to announce that over the radio. “I’ll explain later.” I flipped to Skyward Flight’s channel and followed Arturo as he turned his ship toward the entrance at the base of the branches.

Quilan’s reinforcements beat us there. I could see half their flight entering the shaft that led to the lumber mine, while the others flew into the larger upper opening ahead of us. They’d split up to come at Jorgen and the others from both sides. Arturo opened fire as we chased them in, and some of the ships flipped around, returning fire.

“You’ve got company down below,” Arturo said over the radio. “We’re keeping them busy up top.”

“Copy, Amphi,” Jorgen said. “Flight, star formation. Crossfire positions. FM, Sentry, cover our six.”

Jorgen had said six was behind him, hadn’t he? I was glad that if he was using that terminology, it wasn’t addressed to me. I dodged fire from an incoming ship as Arturo and I sped past, leaving them to follow us down into the depths of the tree.

We approached Skyward’s formation from above, firing at the ships that had them pinned down near the bottom of the tree. The ship I targeted lost its shield, and I pegged it with a destructor blast right in its boosters. The pilot ejected, joining several other pilots drifting down into the mining facilities while their ships crashed into the wooden wall on the downward side.

Skyward Flight flew in a loose sphere with Jorgen and Kimmalyyn at the center, all with their acclivity rings rotated to point their noses upward at different angles. They filled the air with destructor blasts, each line of fire crossing over another. This formation was similar to one I'd learned in training, though we used laser guns. If you had an obstacle at your back and enough ships clustered together, any enemy that tried to get through to you risked getting tagged in your crossing lines of fire.

Arturo took up position next to Nedder, and I dodged past the ships between us, flying through to join Kimmalyyn and Jorgen at the center.

"What are you doing?" I asked Jorgen over the radio. "You're the leader. Shouldn't you be out front?"

"What?" Jorgen said. "No. If I'm out front I can't watch and give orders. And if I'm in trouble, who's going to make sure the rest of the flight is safe?"

Safe? "But you're not getting any of the action," I said. "How are you going to prove yourself?"

"*Prove myself?*" Jorgen said.

"Quirk, incoming!" FM said. Kimmalyyn pivoted her ship to point down, opening fire. It took me a second longer to get my ship turned the right way, and then I joined them.

Kimmalyyn especially was a good shot—she got several blows to the enemy shields before they peeled off to the sides and swung around again.

Two more ships broke past FM and Sentry below us. These got close enough that they deployed their light hooks—two from each ship, the streams crossing each other to form a kind of net. They pulled apart, trying to fly alongside Kimmalyyn to capture her ship, but she rolled to the side, avoiding the trap. "Scud! What is that?"

"Light nets," I said. "It's a capture tactic. Their orders are to bring us in alive." Or me anyway, now that Quilan knew I was here. Though if these pilots got close enough to recognize the humans under their flight helmets, their commander would quickly realize having humans to turn over to the Superiority could only work in Unity's favor.

Not that I was going to let that happen.

The ships turned their nets toward Jorgen, and I fired at one with my destructors. The pilot tried to maintain the net a moment too long, and I landed enough hits to take down the shield. The ship turned, breaking the net, but Kimmalyne got the final shot and the ship went into an uncontrolled spin. The pilot ejected, and instead of flying off to the side like the others, the ship spiraled into one of the mining buildings below.

At least there wouldn't be many people living in here, though there would be some civilians present. I hoped they'd taken cover when the fighting began.

"Jerkface," FM said, "we have incoming."

She was right. My sensors identified a whole fleet of air force ships, many more than we'd been chasing around this tree, and all of them would be equipped with light nets. They were still a few minutes out, but they were coming for us.

"We can't fight all those," Jorgen said. "How defensible is the base? Does it have ground support?"

"Like guns?" I asked. "No. It's never been attacked, not in almost a century. Maybe not even then."

"Scud," Jorgen said. "We need to get out of here. Skyward Flight, bounce protocol. Fall back to the base. We're not leaving without Alanik's people."

Leaving? We were supposed to take and hold the base. If we left now, how would we inspire the rest of the Independence air force to fight?

I could see the incoming ships on my sensor screen though. There *were* too many of them. We wouldn't be able to hold the base against so many, even if they didn't have a cytonic with them.

FM and Sentry immediately disappeared, though I saw them reappear outside the tree through one of the knot holes. They'd used their hyperdrives to escape. The Unity pilots clearly weren't expecting this, and I could hear snatches of confused exclamations over the radio through the negative realm.

"Alanik," Jorgen said. "We don't want to leave you behind."

As if they could. "I've got it," I said.

"Right. Quirk. Ten o'clock. Here we go."

"Copy, Jerkface," Kimmalyne said, and then both their ships disappeared.

Ten

I still wasn't sure which way ten o'clock was, but I guessed which tree gap Jorgen was referring to and reached through the negative realm, pulling myself out on the far side. This was my third hyperjump in a shorter space of time than I would have liked, and the eyes seemed more fixated on me than normal, but I emerged from the negative realm half a kilometer from Jorgen and Kimmalyn, who were much closer together.

How do you do that? I asked Jorgen.

I send the slugs an image of a location. And then we ask nicely.

You ask nicely?

It's not the only way, Jorgen said. But it's ours.

I couldn't argue with their results.

We had a moment to reposition while the enemy shot out of the holes in Hollow. I tried to track the battle on my sensor screen. Independence ships were in the air now, defending the base. I wasn't sure how many Unity personnel were still inside, but we could deal with them in a minute. Hopefully once we'd won this skirmish they'd surrender.

Skyward Flight scattered, leading the enemy ships in circles around the tree and heading toward the Independence base. Jorgen and Kimmalyn hung back as Jorgen gave instructions to the others. I still didn't understand it. If a leader did that in the junior leagues, or in air force training, they would be immediately replaced. You didn't raise your shooting averages or your evasion scores by hanging back, and if your stats weren't impressive enough you couldn't advance. Watching Jorgen work made me wonder if I'd made too much of human aggression based on a few verbal arguments and the willingness to shoot out a single cockpit.

Four Unity ships charged up the branches toward us and I pivoted my ship, showering one of them with destructor fire. The ship dodged around one of

the branches, flying close to the structures hanging beneath, using them as cover.

That was a cowardly move. I wasn't going to fire at the ship while it passed over civilians, but I also wasn't going to let it get away. I kept pace right over it, readying more fire. The ship twisted around the branch, winding up in a spiral pattern, and I followed. I waited for a clear patch of branch with no civilian targets, and then opened fire. The ship tried to dodge, but Kimmalyn flew in from the side, her destructors blocking off the path of escape. The ship's shield went down, and Kimmalyn's shot hit one of the boosters, sending it spinning away from the branch.

The Unity pilot ejected but missed the tree, floating down below Hollow's jagged acclivity stone.

Alanik, Quilan said in my head. I don't know where you found another cytonic, but you're only making this worse on yourself by resisting.

I almost retorted that he was only making this worse on himself by fighting us, but I held myself back. He wasn't worth it.

"Amphi, Nedder, Sentry needs support," Jorgen said. I followed Kimmalyn back to Jorgen. Down by the base of the tree, I could see Sentry's ship being cornered by three ships that had joined their light hooks into a net. They closed in, one of them speeding ahead and cutting her off, catching her ship in their light net and hauling her along behind them. FM was hot on their tail, destructors blazing.

"Sentry," Jerkface said. "Want me to pull you out?"

"Affirmative," Sentry said. "Cheeky's ready."

Sentry disappeared out of the net. The ships wavered for a second, probably wondering what had happened, and then reversed, trying to catch FM in their nets. Amphi and Nedder shot two of them down while FM danced away.

"Um, Alanik?" Jorgen said. "Who is this voice in my head that isn't you?"

"Quilan," I said. "He's on his way."

"He wants to know who I am, but I'm not answering him."

"That's for the best," I said. "Trust me."

We'd shaken most of the first wave of ships, but the second wave bore down on us. They'd be here in moments.

"Jerkface," Arturo said. "We can't take all those ships. Do we have a plan?"

"Unless we have some way to defend the base," Jorgen said, "we're going to have to evacuate."

I'd hoped to have more time to reach the other Independence bases, to call more fighters to join us. If half the fighters *here* had abandoned us, we had even less support than I'd hoped. If Detritus had sent more of their military, maybe...

I'd told Cobb I would make use of what he was willing to send, and I intended to do it. We'd rescued my people. That was still an improvement. If the humans were willing to work with me, we could press forward together from there.

"Let's do it," I said.

"Where will we go?" Arturo asked. "Can we hyperjump home to Detritus?"

"Already?" Nedder said. "We were just starting to have fun."

"No, we can't," Jorgen said. "I got a message from Cobb on the hypercomm. He said the assembly has arranged a meeting with the Superiority. He's had to order our arrest upon our return to convince my mother to keep him in the loop. He's worried about the concessions they're making. If we bring Alanik's people to Detritus now, he's afraid they'll end up as bargaining chips."

"That's not happening," I said.

"Scud, those ships are coming in fast, Jerkface," FM said. "We can't pull everyone out with one hyperjump. We'd make too big a target of ourselves trying to connect everyone together."

"FM is right," Jorgen said. "We'll have to use the hyperdrives, and that means it needs to be somewhere the slugs know, or somewhere I can see, at least for the first jump."

"The platform," I said. "Wandering Leaf. You can use your hyperdrives to get beneath the autoturrets. The Unity cytonics can't teleport. They can't

come after us there.”

At least not unless Quilan could convince his Superiority friends to send hyperjumping cytonics to extract us. He wouldn't want to do that if he could help it; he was trying to prove how useful and cooperative he could be. He'd lose his leverage if he made the Superiority do all the work.

“That might be our best option,” Jorgen said. “We'll bring as many of the UrDail with us as we can. Alanik, can you communicate with them?”

“On it,” I said.

Quilan's reinforcements were arriving now, destructor fire raining through the branches above. Skyward Flight met them in front of the Independence base, Jorgen giving orders for his flight to defend the airspace out front. I switched over to the Independence channel. “Independence fighters,” I said, “there's a fleet incoming, and the force is overwhelming. We need to flee. Who is your commander?”

“Alanik,” my brother said, “our captain was injured in the blast. I can speak for the group. Where would we go?”

I was sorry any of them had been injured, but I was glad Gilaf wasn't among them. “We're going to abandon the base,” I said, “and retreat to Wandering Leaf.”

A long silence followed. “To Wandering Leaf,” another pilot said. “The platform that *shoots at us*.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Stay together in the airspace in front of the base. Have someone land and tell those without ships to gather inside the damaged Superiority vessel.” That might be the only way to retrieve Rinakin's family and our other noncombatant allies, in addition to any wounded. “We're coming to get you. Our allies have some...unconventional methods, but we're not going to leave you behind.”

“Will do,” Gilaf said, though he sounded dubious.

“Hold on,” I said. “We're going to get you out of here.”

“We've got your back,” Gilaf said.

“And we've got yours.” I switched back to the channel with the humans. “The civilians are gathering inside the broken ship. We should be able to use a light-lance to bring that with us, correct?”

“Yes,” Jorgen said. “Quirk and I are headed toward Wandering Leaf. I’ll send Quirk in first, and then the rest of our ships can jump to hers. It might take us a couple of trips to get everyone.”

I hoped their hyperdrives somehow helped them evade the eyes. They must, since the Superiority felt safe using them as often as they did.

“If you get a chance, I’d appreciate a ride from one of your hyperdrives,” I said. I didn’t want to risk taking another jump so soon, not if I didn’t have to.

“Okay, sure,” Jorgen said. He sounded confused, but he didn’t question me. “Help us defend the base, and then we’ll pull you out when we’re done.”

I followed him and Kimmalyne on the sensor screen as they approached the platform. They flew through the miasma at close to Mag-9—a speed that must have threatened to rattle their ships apart.

These humans meant business.

“Careful not to get too close,” I told them.

“We have experience with these things,” Jorgen said. “We’ll keep our distance.”

I leaned on my throttle, catching up to the humans in front of the base. Enemy ships tore through the airspace, trying to run the humans off, but they fought in tandem, harassing the enemy enough to keep them from landing and arresting my people.

I swept down toward the entrance to the hangar, taking up a defensive position near the broken Superiority ship. Even from this distance I could see people pressed up against the glass at the back of the hold, looking up at us, probably wondering what was about to happen.

At least they’d listened to me. I wouldn’t have been able to get them out otherwise.

“All right, I have visual on the surface of the platform,” Jorgen said. “Quirk, you ready?”

“Ready,” Kimmalyne said.

I watched on my proximity sensors as Kimmalyne’s ship disappeared from the sky.

“Quirk, status?” Jorgen said.

“I’m fine!” Kimmalyyn said. “Near the surface of the platform, underneath the autofire. Looking for a hangar entrance now.”

“We can’t wait,” Jorgen said. “Skyward Flight, you are a go to bounce.”

“Copy, Jerkface,” Arturo said. “We’re on it.”

In the airspace directly above, I felt Quilan descending from his reentry into the atmosphere. *Alanik*, he said. *Stop this before someone gets hurt.*

Too late, I said back. I fired on an enemy ship, shaking it off FM’s tail, and FM pegged one of the Independence ships with her light-lance.

Then they both disappeared.

All over the battlefield, the humans disappeared with Independence ships in tow. A moment later FM’s ship appeared again, so close to Jorgen’s that they nearly collided.

“Sorry!” FM said over the radio. “We really need to work on their sense of space when we’re in the air!”

Several of the other humans’ ships also reappeared, and I left my post by the base entrance to provide some covering fire while Jorgen did his best to dodge his own reappearing flightmates.

“Why are they doing that?” I asked Jorgen over the radio.

“We’re using Quirk’s slug as an anchor on one side and mine on the other,” Jorgen said. “It’s a new tactic. We’re still working out the kinks.”

The humans made another lap, taking more of the Independence fighters up to the platform.

“Amphi,” Jorgen said as Arturo reappeared. “Get the Superiority ship.”

“On it,” Arturo said as I flew in front of the hangar, drawing the fire of the nearby ships and then twist-rolling over the top of the base to evade them. I didn’t see Arturo jump out with the damaged Superiority ship, but when I returned the hangar was empty. A ship closed on me, destructors blazing.

Stand down, Alanik, Quilan said in my mind. *Your force is dwindling and you have nowhere to run.*

That wasn’t precisely true, but I gathered Quilan hadn’t figured that out yet. I led him away from the base, and from Jorgen. I didn’t want any of the human ships getting caught in the crossfire if he decided to—

A current *ripped* through the negative realm by my left wing, and I sent my ship into a roll.

If Quilan was willing to throw mindblades, he must have gotten better at them recently. Last time I'd trained with him, he'd have cut himself out of the sky trying something like that.

"How many ships are left?" I asked Jorgen.

"Not many," Jorgen said. "One more trip should do it. How's everything on your side, Quirk?"

"Found a hangar," Kimmalyn said. "Looks like the inside has working atmospheric generators."

That was good. I'd assumed there wouldn't be much of use on the platform, because if it were still useful the Superiority would have dismantled it long ago. Sometimes scavengers and thrill seekers risked the trip beyond the autoturrets, but that was about it.

Alanik, Quilan said, you can't hide from us. Surrender immediately.

Or? I asked. Didn't the Superiority want me alive?

Yes, Quilan said. But if you insist on resisting, arrangements will have to be made.

And with that, Quilan and two other ships behind him opened fire.

I threw my ship into a defensive sequence, but it wasn't as deft or as immediate as it would have been in my own ship where the controls were second nature. I tipped my nose in the direction of Wandering Leaf and hit overburn, shooting out in front of Quilan and the others. My ship shook like it might fall apart and my gravitational capacitors absorbed the g-forces, but a moment later I could see Wandering Leaf through the swirling red mist—the autoturret platform was as big as one of the larger branches of Industry.

Quilan was catching up to me rapidly, and I kept my mind open to the negative realm around me so I could dodge as he sent two more bursts of mindblades after my wings. I couldn't catch a ride with one of the humans and their hyperdrives while Quilan was on my tail, not without putting them in danger. I was going to have to risk one more hyperjump, and hope I came out the other side.

"Alanik," Jorgen said. "Can you get out of there?"

“Working on it,” I said. I’d need to hyperjump under the automated weapons, but to arrive in a position that exact—below the autofire zone but above the platform so I didn’t crash—I’d need to be able to see where I was going.

“I think that’s the last of them, Jerkface,” Arturo said.

“Got it. We’re pulling out. Alanik, do you need assistance?”

Quilan could tear the human ships to bits with those mindblades. The only one who could see them coming was Jorgen, and I didn’t have time to explain what to watch for.

“I’ve got it,” I said, reaching through the negative realm to the space above the platform. There was a ripple behind me, and I dodged too late. A concussion bolt hit my mind, throwing off my focus and wiping out my vision so all I could see were stars. I nearly lost consciousness.

Fire hit my shield in rapid bursts, depleting it. I didn’t have time to reorient myself. I reached into the negative realm and pulled myself and my ship through to the platform on the other side.

I could barely see the eyes, though I could feel their hatred. They were reaching for me, searching for me, ready to tear me apart if they found me—

I emerged, my vision returning, but in my confusion I’d targeted a space too high in the air above the platform. One of the enormous guns pivoted in my direction and opened fire. I dropped immediately toward the platform—

Too late. Gunfire hit my booster, and my ship shuddered and shook. The gun fired again—

I targeted a spot closer to the surface of the platform and yanked myself into the negative realm. Thousands of eyes watched my ship as it coughed and skipped, and then I was back, skimming toward the surface of the platform. I tried to pull up, but I was losing altitude fast.

“Alanik!” Jorgen said over the radio. My sensors showed Skyward Flight and the Independence fighters farther behind me. My ship sputtered, the miasma parting as my nose dove toward the hard surface of the platform.

Eleven

“Eject!” Jorgen shouted at me over the radio.

I scrambled for the eject lever on the side of my seat, and my seat destabilized, still attached to the ship.

Scud, that wasn't the eject lever.

Where is it? I shouted at him through the negative realm, and an image formed in my mind, perfectly clear, of a lever directly under my knees. My ship shuddered toward the surface of the platform—

And I hauled up on the lever, my canopy exploding outward and rockets beneath my seat propelling it into the air. I prepared to hyperjump again if the ejection shot me up into the path of the autoturrets, but I flew through the air below them, and then my parachute opened, yanking me back and dragging me along the surface of the platform. I rolled to a stop at the base of one of the autoturrets.

I unstrapped from the chute and ran along the metal platform in the direction of my wreckage, the miasma clinging to my flightsuit.

The autoturrets fired above me, warding off Quilan and his people. They were peppering the platform with destructor fire, though their shots went wild because they couldn't shoot accurately from beyond the range of the autofire. I ducked under the metal roof that stretched around the autoturrets, working my way toward the hangar entrance Kimmalyn had found. Skyward Flight and the Independence fighters had all parked their ships on the empty hangar floor. Both humans and UrDail had already climbed out of their ships and removed their helmets, staring at each other.

Jorgen popped his canopy open, looking around at the other ships.

Counting them. Making sure his people were all right, seeing how many of the Independence ships we'd rescued. There were about two dozen of them, plus the broken Superiority ship. I recognized Rinakin's daughter among several other people peering out of it.

I pulled off my helmet. Kimmalyn was right; the platform was still generating atmosphere. I wondered if scavengers had maintained the generators to make their jobs easier. Getting past the autofire was difficult and dangerous, but not impossible if you had enough drones to distract the autoturrets. Those who had been here would have had to be well funded, in addition to crazy. We could only claim the second.

“We made it,” Jorgen said. “Alanik, your ship—”

“It’s gone,” I said. There might be something we could salvage, but it wasn’t going to fly again.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Jorgen said. He didn’t say a word about the destruction of their property.

My brother climbed out of one of the Independence ships and approached me slowly, eyeing the humans like he was afraid of them. When he reached me, he embraced me. “Alanik,” he said. “I worried they’d captured you.”

Leave it to Gilaf to worry about me when *he* was the one who’d been captured.

“I’m glad you’re okay, but—” He looked around the hangar. “*Humans?*”

I hadn’t told anyone in my family what had happened on my mission to Starsight, only that things hadn’t gone as planned. “They are willing to ally with us against the Superiority.”

I saw several of the other Independence pilots looking at each other, trying to make sense of this news. Inin, Rinakin’s daughter, stepped forward. She wore a fitted maternity jacket over her round stomach. I remembered now—she was expecting a baby in a few sun cycles. When she’d first announced it, Rinakin had said he wished he could retire from his position to help care for the baby, but of course the political situation made that impossible. “My father was worried the Superiority would come after you,” she said. “Do you know if he’s—”

I wasn’t going to spread jam over this news. “They took him,” I said. “We need to find him before he’s turned over to the Superiority. Quilan is trying to gather us together to use as leverage. Rinakin and me—and the rest of you—in exchange for better trade terms, more advancement.” I didn’t know exactly what they were asking for, but...

“Progress for ReDawn,” my brother said with disgust, and I heard murmurs of agreement throughout the group of pilots.

Inin looked to Jorgen. She didn’t have a pin to translate, but Jorgen did. “You’re here to help rescue my father? To help us turn the wind to our favor?”

“Um,” Jorgen said. “We’re here to make an alliance.” He looked at me. “We’re stronger together, in theory, but we’re in a bit of a spot here. This isn’t exactly a strong position from which to mount a counteroffensive.”

“That’s true,” I said. “But we saved my people, and for that I’m grateful.”

Gilaf smiled at me, but he looked worried. All of them did.

With good reason.

FM looked up through the skylight of the hangar, scanning for ships. “Can they get to us here?” she asked.

I searched for Quilan in the negative realm, and felt his mind hovering out in the miasma. “I don’t think so,” I said. “They don’t have any cytonics who can hyperjump. They could try to bring drones to distract the turrets, but they wouldn’t be able to get many ships in that way, maybe one or two, so we’d have the overwhelming force.”

By a large amount, with the Independence fighters here. Quilan would have to fall back and regroup. Given his current position, he knew it.

If the Superiority was really bent on collecting me, they’d show up eventually. But even Quilan didn’t have Superiority cytonics at his beck and call—and especially not if he expected to prove himself to them—so we’d bought ourselves some time at least.

“Can you hear their communications?” Jorgen asked. “Are they making a plan?”

I didn’t hear any hypercomm transmissions in the area, but Quilan would know I’d be listening for that. He might have switched to radio. “Can you try to find their channel?” I asked Jorgen.

“Sure,” he said. He reached for his radio, disconnecting the headset so we could all hear. He flipped through silence and static, and then a voice projected from his dash.

“—people of ReDawn, with bipartisan support, we are greatly pleased to announce—”

Gilaf swore, and I almost echoed him. The voice belonged to Nanalis.

“Leave it there,” I said, and Jorgen pulled his fingers away from the dial.

Nanalis addressed the audience imperiously. “—our collaboration to elevate the UrDail onto the galactic stage.”

“Who is that?” Arturo asked, drawing closer.

“Council President,” I said. “Elected leader of ReDawn. Currently, anyway.”

Inin folded her arms and leaned back against the Superiority ship. Her father had been opposing Nanalis at Council for years.

“Thank you,” a familiar voice said, and Inin’s eyes widened. “This is Rinakin, High Chancellor of Independence.” It *was* Rinakin—I recognized his voice. “We may have our differences, but one thing both Unity and Independence agree on is that we want the best for ReDawn, and for her people.”

“Is that the person we were here to save?” Jorgen asked.

I nodded, though all around the room I could feel the Independence pilots tensing. Our side wasn’t supposed to talk like that, particularly not while Unity was in the middle of a military coup.

“It is time to set aside our differences,” Rinakin continued, “in the name of progress for ReDawn. I would like to announce a bipartisan cooperation with the Superiority.”

That was rotten wood. Rinakin was using nearly the exact words Nanalis had used in her announcement during the game. Jorgen looked at me.

“They’re making him say this,” I said. “They have to be.” Inin’s face hardened, and she nodded.

“I will be working with Nanalis and the Council over the coming days,” Rinakin said, “to ensure the future of both Unity and Independence, and—first and foremost—progress.”

“Progress,” Gilaf said. “That’s what they say, but they’re selling us out. All the other outposts gave in. All of them but us.”

“There is one matter that concerns me as we move forward with the coalition,” Rinakin said. “Alanik, if you are out there, turn yourself in. It’s not too late to be part of the solution. Thank you.”

The broadcast ended, and Jorgen switched off the radio.

Twelve

I stared straight ahead, trying to make sense of it. One of the humans I hadn't met yet scratched his head. "I'm not the smartest guy around," he said, "but that sounded a lot like a vote in support of the Superiority." I recognized his voice from the radio—this was Nedder, who flew with Arturo.

"They got to him somehow," I said. They must have threatened him. Bribery would never work on Rinakin. He was too principled for that. But everyone had something they were afraid of. Everyone had something they weren't willing to sacrifice.

I didn't know what that thing would be for me, and I hoped I never had to find out.

"My father would never capitulate to the Superiority," Inin said.

"That's true," I said, mostly for the benefit of the humans. Because it was true. Rinakin believed in debate, in discussion, in continuing to advocate and work with Unity. He believed in persuading people to see reason, but he always stayed true to his principles. There was no way he'd flipped sides in a matter of hours. And even if he *had*, he would never have called me out like that.

He *sent* me away. He told me to get help. He wouldn't do that and then announce to the entire planet that I was a fugitive.

"That was his voice though," I said. "They might have told him they'd captured his family, threatened to torture them."

Gilaf squirmed, and I saw several of the other Independence pilots looking at me in alarm. The idea that Unity might torture someone seemed too violent, too aggressive, even for them.

But given that Quilan had just tried to *kill me*, I wasn't feeling so charitable.

"It's possible," Inin said. "In that case, we need to rescue him." She looked at Jorgen. "You saved us. Are you willing to help us with this as well?"

“Rinakin sent me to the humans to begin with,” I told Inin. “This alliance was his idea.” This last operation hadn’t gone as well as we would have liked, but we had more fighters now and there was still hope.

“We did come to help,” Jorgen said, and I could practically hear him sorting through his orders, trying to figure out what he was authorized to do. “It’s obviously terrible that your leader is being used against your movement.”

“But,” Arturo said, “we don’t *know* that he’s being threatened, do we? How do we know that he hasn’t changed his mind?”

Inin’s eyes narrowed, but I spoke before she could. “He hasn’t. He wouldn’t.”

Arturo and Jorgen exchanged a glance.

These humans didn’t know Rinakin at all. They didn’t know *me* well enough to trust my judgment on this, and they knew the rest of my people even less. In their position, I’d doubt me too.

“We need to think this through before we do anything,” Arturo continued.

“Yeah,” Nedder said, “wouldn’t want to defect on bad information or anything.”

“We didn’t defect,” Jorgen said. “We were ordered to go.”

“We were specifically *not* ordered to go,” FM said. “Remember?”

“Cobb phrased it that way because he had to,” Jorgen said. “They were still orders, even if they were...not-orders. That means it wasn’t defection. Right?” He looked around at the others for confirmation, and they all stared at him.

“Bless your stars,” Kimmalyln said.

Jorgen swore.

The girl with the blue hair—Sentry, I’d guessed based on the process of elimination—stepped up to me. “We haven’t met,” she said. “I’m Sadie. And that’s Nedd.”

Nedd. At least that would be easy to remember.

Sadie indicated the two men leaning against one of the ships. “And that’s T-Stall and Catnip. Their real names are Trey and Corbin, but no one calls them that. They just go by their callsigns.”

I had no idea which one was T-Stall and which one was Catnip, but I didn't ask.

"This is my brother, Gilaf," I said. "And Rinakin's daughter, Inin." I didn't know the names of everyone else, and no one seemed to feel that this was the time to require the humans to remember them all.

I turned to Gilaf. I needed to convince the humans to mount an offensive against Unity from here, and that would be easier to do without the rest of my people standing here listening. "We're going to need to map the facilities here," I said. "Figure out what we're working with. Can you take the pilots and try to find somewhere safe for Rinakin's family and the others to rest?"

Gilaf glanced at Inin's pregnant belly, and Inin glared at him. She plainly disliked being treated like a baby simply because she was carrying one.

"I'm *fine*," Inin said. "But it does seem wise to make sure we're safe here. Your captain is injured, and will need someplace to rest."

That was right. I stepped up to the exposed interior of the Superiority ship. Several civilians sat inside, along with the Independence captain, who lay on the floor with a medic attending to a wound in his leg.

"Does he need further aid?" I asked. I could hyperjump him to a hospital if it came to that, but if it wasn't necessary I didn't want to risk it.

"We can manage here," the medic said. "Though he'll need time before he can return to duty."

"All right," Gilaf said. He turned to Jorgen. "Thank you for coming to our aid. Though that thing you did, moving us from place to place—are you *all* cytonics?"

Jorgen looked alarmed, like he wasn't sure if he should give up their secrets. The humans had all left their slugs in their ships, and I didn't want to anger them, but knowing what assets we had on our side would only inspire my people. "They have hyperdrives in their ships," I told Gilaf.

"Shake the branches," Gilaf said, and I heard more murmurs of shock and relief from the other pilots. "We look forward to our alliance." He moved into the ship, helping the medic lift their captain, and together the group of pilots moved through the vestibule that led deeper into the platform. Inin and the other civilians followed them.

I hoped the area wasn't too dangerous, and that any scavengers were long gone. But Gilaf and the others had training. They could handle themselves and protect the others.

I turned to Jorgen and the other humans. We'd come a long way, and I needed to convince them to stick with me a little longer.

"What do we do now?" Jorgen asked. "We don't know if your friend Rinakin wants to be rescued. And these people...are they the only UrDail we can expect to be on our side?"

"Rinakin *is* on our side," I said.

"Yes," Jorgen said. "But he's speaking publicly against you, and he's only one person."

Lots of people would listen to Rinakin, which made him one very important person. But given what we'd just heard, that worked against us at the moment.

"You're a fugitive," Jorgen said. "And now *we're* fugitives for helping you."

"We're not going to escape court-martial if we go home," Sadie said. "Are we?"

"Jorgen might," Kimmalyln said. "Is your mom really going to put you in prison for defection?"

"Maybe," Jorgen said. "But it doesn't make me feel any better knowing they're willing to do that to the rest of you. *Scud*. What do we do?"

"You could call Cobb," FM said. "See what he wants us to do."

Jorgen shook his head. "Cobb said he'd be in touch, but I can't call him. He's trying to maintain the illusion that he had nothing to do with our departure, so my parents don't shut him out of the loop entirely."

"Can they do that?" Kimmalyln asked.

"Maybe," Jorgen said. "There aren't a lot of specific codes on the books for how intergalactic diplomacy should be handled, which gives them some leeway."

"Diplomacy is a mistake," I said. "You're no better off there than you are here, not as long as your government is considering capitulation."

“If both our governments are moving in the same direction, what are we going to do about it?” Jorgen asked. “We’re pilots. We don’t have control over things like that.”

“There are plenty of people on ReDawn who will do the right thing when they can see it clearly,” I said. “But they’re being deceived. Unity talks like we can all get along, but we can’t do that with people who want to oppress us.” I looked around at the others, gauging their reactions. I was in a precarious position here. If they decided not to help me, the other pilots and I would be in it alone.

The humans all looked at each other. They seemed resigned, which in this case was a good thing. I just needed to give them a reason to believe there was hope.

“Rescuing Rinakin will make a difference,” I said. “He’s beloved by many of my people. If Unity is threatening him and we get him to safety, then he can speak the truth, tell people what Unity is really up to. They’ve taken over the military, captured our people. If people hear that news from Rinakin’s mouth, more of them will turn to our cause.”

Jorgen sighed. “Okay. We’re committed. Let’s make the best of it.” He looked up through the skylight at the giant autoturret, which had stopped firing. Through the negative realm, I could feel Quilan moving farther away. “What exactly is this platform doing here?”

“It was a battle platform,” I said. “Abandoned after the second war, centuries ago. I think it used to move through the miasma at will, but now it simply drifts.”

“We should take a look around,” Jorgen said. “The platforms on Detritus are similar, and they have all kinds of capabilities besides the autofire. Maybe it will have a shield we could get working, or something else that might help us rescue Rinakin.” Jorgen turned to me. “Is there a reason you don’t hyperjump in and pull him up here? Is it because you don’t know where he is?”

“If he keeps broadcasting, it will be easy enough to triangulate his location,” I said. “But some of the Unity cytonics have the ability to inhibit, so they won’t leave Rinakin unguarded. The Superiority also granted Unity

some cytonic inhibitors. More than the one in this ship.” I gestured toward the wreckage.

“Is the inhibitor still on board?” FM asked.

It was a good question. The ship’s inhibitor had stayed active, even after the cockpit was obliterated. It wasn’t working now, but the technology should still be on board. I stepped into the empty hull, examining what was left of the ship.

Rows of passenger seats were mostly still intact, and at the end of the aisle was a panel with instrumentation—and a box set into the side of the ship. I moved up the aisle with FM right behind me.

“That’s a taynix box,” FM said, and she squeezed past me and knelt down next to it. The other humans crowded around the hole in the hull, watching.

“There isn’t a slug in it,” Jorgen said. “We’d be able to feel it if there were.”

He was right—the box felt empty to me. But when FM unlatched it and pulled it open, a pale blue taynix with bright green spines stared up at us out of the box.

“Hey, baby,” FM said, reaching in gently and pulling the slug out. She looked at Jorgen over her shoulder. “No slug in the box, huh?”

“I can’t sense it in the negative realm,” I said. I couldn’t even touch the area where it rested in FM’s arms, though the area had been too small for me to notice before. “It’s...inhibited itself.”

“It’s *adorable*,” Sadie said.

FM ran a hand down its spines, and it hummed quietly, as if nervous.

“I guess that answers the question about how they do it,” Jorgen said. “And now we have one. Maybe we could figure out how to use it to inhibit the platform.”

“Can’t you just ask it nicely?” I asked.

“We can try,” FM said. “But it might need a little more instruction. Working with the others took time.”

“Time,” the slug trilled softly.

“Still,” Jorgen said. “If we can harness the platform’s capabilities, we could buy ourselves some. That would also give us some time to determine

Rinakin's location."

FM continued to hold the new slug, and she didn't seem eager to let it go. Technically this slug should belong to my people, because it was recovered on our turf, but I didn't know what to do with it, so for now it was probably better off in her hands. "I expect they'll be keeping Rinakin on or near the Council tree. That's where the Unity cytonics live."

"More trees," Nedd said. "Do you really live on those? Not down on the surface of the planet?"

"ReDawn is a gas giant," I said. "There is no surface, except the core. And the atmosphere down there isn't breathable. We only go down there for mining."

"This is your home planet?" Sadie asked. "Like, your people lived in trees even before you had starfighters?"

"Yes," I said. "We've always made the trees of ReDawn our home."

Sadie made a little squealing noise. "That is *so cool*."

"And kind of terrifying," FM said. "What if you fall?"

"Do you often fall off your platforms?" I asked.

"No," FM said. "But we don't really *live* on those. It's a military base. The civilians on Detritus all live underground. There are no children on Platform Prime."

"We learn young how to be careful," I said. "We don't walk on the edges of the branches without safety equipment. We have walls and railings and nets. A few people fall every year, but those deaths are mostly due to equipment failures, like having a cord break when rubber-jumping."

They all stared at me like I'd lost my mind.

"All right," Jorgen said. "Let's do some poking around and see what we can find on this platform."

I nodded. I wasn't sure what there would be to work with, but at least the humans weren't talking about fleeing anymore.

"Alanik," Jorgen said. "Why don't you try the radio while we look around? See if you can find any more broadcasts that might give us a clue what the people who took Rinakin are planning."

The humans probably wanted to conference without me, but I couldn't stop them from talking to each other. Trying would make me look desperate. "Okay," I said.

FM carried the blue slug out of the ship, and the humans moved toward the doorway that led deeper into the platform. I climbed out of the Superiority ship and moved to Jorgen's cockpit to fiddle with the radio. There was a box bolted beneath his dash, similar to the one that had held the inhibitor slug. I popped the door open, and Boomslug peered out at me expectantly, like I might provide more algae strips.

He was about to be sorely disappointed.

The humans hadn't been gone for more than a few minutes when someone approached the open canopy. Arturo walked toward me with his yellow and blue slug in a sling across his chest. He must have come back to retrieve it from his ship.

I moved to stand, but Arturo held up a hand. "Alanik," he said. "Can we talk?"

"Yes," I said.

Arturo looked over his shoulder, like he was afraid we'd be overheard. The slug in the sling regarded me quizzically. "I was thinking about what you said on Detritus, about the Superiority wanting you to turn over the humans you were working with."

I hadn't said that to him, so I guessed Jorgen must have told him. "We weren't working with any humans," I said.

"Right," Arturo said, his face grim. "But you are now."

Oh. I'd been so focused on getting help that I hadn't thought of how that would look. Clearly I shouldn't have told Jorgen about that particular demand.

"We were just fighting the people who want to turn you over to the Superiority together," I said.

"Sure," Arturo said. "But shooting at a few ships doesn't mean you aren't planning to betray us in some other way."

That was true, and nothing I could say would prove otherwise. "So you believe I'm lying to you."

“I don’t know,” Arturo said. “I’m not sure what your motivations are. Jorgen believes you do want to make an alliance with Detritus, that you’re going to teach him how to use his powers.”

“Use his powers!” his taynix added, as if for emphasis.

“Easy, Naga,” Arturo said, petting its spines.

“I will,” I said. “I would be happy to, because we’re working together. You all risked a lot to be here.”

“We did,” Arturo said. “So I hope you didn’t come to Detritus looking for humans you could use to appease the Superiority.”

I bristled. “I would never work with them. Their wood is rotted all the way through.”

“I want to believe you,” Arturo said. “So does Jorgen. That’s why he didn’t tell Cobb about what you said.”

He should have, obviously. Their commander had made a decision without all the information. “Jorgen suspects me of deceiving you,” I said.

“No,” Arturo said. “Jorgen is too busy worrying about whether he disobeyed orders. *I’m* worried you might have deceived us.” He looked me straight in the eyes. His were dark and deep, not clear and bright like most UrDail. “Can we trust you?”

“You already have. You did it when you left your planet with me.” I’d fled when I’d first met them, not willing to offer them my trust, yet they’d come to help me anyway. I wouldn’t have done the same, but I was glad that in this way they weren’t like me.

“We did,” Arturo said. “Because the potential benefits outweigh the risks. We need allies, same as you. And we may be clueless when it comes to galactic politics, but we’re not helpless. If you turn on us, we will fight back, you understand?”

Arturo presented the threat calmly and evenly, like it was nothing more than a fact.

These humans possessed hyperdrives, had found the secret where I had failed. They’d also survived for nearly a century in the face of Superiority hostility.

“It would be a very serious mistake to underestimate you,” I said.

“I’m glad we agree on that.”

“And I have no intention of betraying you or your people.”

Arturo kept watching me, his face thoughtful, evaluating me. It bothered me that I couldn’t read in his eyes what it was that he saw.

“Thank you,” Arturo said. “I hope we can keep this between us.”

And then he turned and walked confidently back in the direction Jorgen and the others had gone.

I watched until he was out of sight. I hadn’t baited the humans here with the intention of trading them to the Superiority, but I did want to use them, in a sense. Unity used the specter of human extinction to terrify my people into submission. If my people saw humans fighting on our side, they’d see that resistance was possible, even against terrifying odds. Their *existence* was a weapon I could use against my enemies.

Given the circumstances, I would be foolish to do otherwise.

Thirteen

I could only wait in the ship for so long before I set off to find Jorgen and the others. It wasn't hard to find Jorgen at least, because I could feel his mind and follow in that direction. The passageways here were smooth and sterile, similar to the ones on Detritus, though these were structured more like large tubes than square halls.

Jorgen seemed to shift for a moment, and I wondered if he could sense me coming toward him.

And then— *Alanik?* he said in my mind.

Yes, I replied. *You were able to establish contact.*

It's...similar to communicating with the slugs, but also different. It's easier when Spensa establishes the connection first.

Have you spoken with Spensa recently? I didn't know if she'd be able to communicate out of the negative realm the same way we communicated through it.

Yes, twice. Both times she kind of...appeared. But she wasn't really there. Not like a hyperjump.

There was a kind of sadness that accompanied this. A wistfulness maybe.

You and Spensa are close, I said.

Another emotion joined the sadness. Embarrassment perhaps.

Oh, I said. *You and Spensa are a mate pair?*

A what? A...no, not a mate pair. I mean, there is no mating involved. I mean—

I laughed, and Jorgen's voice disappeared from my mind. I thought he'd withdrawn intentionally, and if so that was good. He was learning even without my instruction. I'd found that was the best way, with cytonic powers. They weren't learned directly so much as experienced and guided. Your mind knew what to do intuitively, if only you could get out of your own way and let it.

I caught up to some of the humans outside a room filled with instrumentation panels. Jorgen and Kimmalyyn leaned in the doorway, watching FM as she pored over them.

“Did you find anything useful?” I asked.

“Maybe,” Jorgen said. “I don’t suppose you happen to be an engineer?”

“No, only a pilot,” I said. I approached and glanced at the buttons and switches FM was examining. “Do any of you have expertise?”

“Rig does,” FM said. “He might be able to tell us if any of this would activate a shield, or connect to a cytonic inhibitor.”

“Any of those would be useful,” I said.

FM looked over her shoulder at Jorgen. “As much as I’d love to ask Rig, I don’t know that dragging him into this is a good idea.”

“I wonder if we could get him out without anyone noticing,” Jorgen said. “If we had one of the slugs take us H-O-M-E...”

The pin translated that last bit as a set of letters, but I had no idea what they spelled in the human’s language. “What does that mean?” I asked.

Jorgen sighed. “It’s the word for the place where you live. FM accidentally made that the keyword for the slugs to take us back to Detritus.”

“It wasn’t an *accident*,” FM said. “It was a *logical choice*.”

“And we’re trying to get them to only do it if we say their names first as a command,” Jorgen continued. “But sometimes they mess up and someone says something like, I miss H-O-M-E, and their slug takes them to the engineering bay on Platform Prime. Which is only an inconvenience if they were, say, in the mess hall or something.”

Kimmalyyn sighed. “But it’s a lot more annoying if you were about to climb into a cleansing pod, naked as the day you were born.”

“Not that she would know,” FM said.

“Bless the stars of those startled engineers,” Kimmalyyn added.

“So now we’re reduced to spelling basic words,” Jorgen said. “When we could have picked something more unusual for the code word.”

“So you say the word,” I said, “and the slug hyperjumps with you? That’s convenient.”

“When it works it’s awesome,” Jorgen said. “When it doesn’t it’s annoying at best.”

“Humiliating at worst,” Kimmalyn said.

“It could be *life threatening*,” Jorgen insisted.

“Hey,” FM said. “You and Rig were the ones who said we should stick with the same word when we trained the rest of the slugs for simplicity’s sake.”

“We’re still working with them,” Jorgen said. “We only had a short time with them before you arrived. But so far they will all go H-O-M-E when they’re asked. Some of them will also take us out a couple of kilometers if we tell them to J-U-M-P.”

“I don’t know what that means, either,” I said. “I don’t think the pins know how to spell.”

“It’s the word for leaping up in the air,” FM said. “Also the second half of hyperjump, which they don’t seem to recognize as a command, thank goodness. They’re all a little better at only doing that command when we say their names first.”

“Probably because they’d rather go H-O-M-E than hop somewhere random,” Kimmalyn said. “Wouldn’t we all?”

“Are those the only commands they answer to?” I asked. The humans were freely giving up the details on how to use their hyperdrives, but I wasn’t going to point this out to them.

“If you want to do anything else,” FM said, “you need a cytonic. Jorgen can ask the slugs to hyperjump anywhere he can see, or anywhere he can visualize that the slugs can recognize. The rest of us are limited to verbal commands, which we have to drill beforehand. The slugs pick it up pretty quickly, and they understand some basic abstract concepts like danger. We’re working on a bonding program. That’s why we keep them with us in slings—though engineering is working on a backpack as well. The idea is that even if the pilot can’t give a command, the slugs are attached enough to their pilot partners that they want to pull us out of danger, and are familiar enough with us to understand what might be helpful and what won’t.”

“That seems like a lot to ask of a slug.”

“Slug!” Gill trilled softly.

“It is,” FM said. “But they’re doing great at it. Aren’t you, Gill?”

“Gill!” Kimmalyn’s slug said, and immediately appeared on top of the dash in front of FM, extending itself up to peer at Gill in FM’s sling.

“Good girl, Happy,” FM said, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a tin of a slimy-looking substance. The taynix eagerly ate it off her finger, despite Gill’s best efforts to nudge its way in and take some.

“That’s the other command they know,” Jorgen said. “They can recognize each other’s names and go find each other, regardless of distance. So even if Alanik didn’t want to go to Detritus to get Rig—”

“Are we learning how useless we are without the engineers again?” Sadie asked, walking up behind us with the others. “I thought we knew that already.”

“You’d think,” T-Stall—or Catnip—said. “But it turns out there is no limit to the number of times we have to learn obvious things.”

“Speak for yourself,” the other one said. “I knew it already. I was simply waiting for the rest of you to catch up.”

Arturo followed behind them with Nedd. He didn’t acknowledge me at all, as if our conversation had never happened.

It was entirely reasonable for him not to trust me. But it still *bothered* me that he didn’t, though he was justified—smart, even—in thinking I might betray them.

“Does anyone else feel...heavier here?” Nedd asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Our planets have a slight gravitational difference. I noticed that on Detritus. I don’t think it’s enough of a difference to matter.”

“It matters to my quads,” Nedd said. “I feel like I’ve been doing laps around the orchard at Alta.” He blinked at me. “You probably don’t have orchards, since you live on trees.”

“We do, actually,” I said. “We graft smaller trees into the branches of the large ones. They also grow naturally in places where the bark has disintegrated into debris.”

FM handed Kimmalyn’s taynix back to her. “I was hoping looking at the tech might spark something, since I’ve spent a lot of time listening to Rig talk

about this stuff. But no. Still don't know enough to be useful." She looked over at Jorgen. "It's possible that Command doesn't know Rig was in on us leaving. I don't want to get him in trouble."

"We could try to bring him out and then return him without anyone knowing," Jorgen said again. "We might need Alanik's help for that, though. If we use the H-O-M-E position to hyperjump in, that will be obvious. My mom might even have people staking it out, waiting for us."

"I want to go," FM says. "I can explain the situation to Rig."

"Any of us could explain the situation to Rig," Nedd said.

"Yes," FM said slowly. "But he trusts me."

"He trusts all of us, doesn't he?" Nedd said. "Except maybe Alanik. No offense, Alanik."

"Why would I take offense to that?" I asked. "It's factual."

"See?" Nedd said. "I knew I liked you."

Arturo gave Nedd a look I couldn't quite read.

"Alanik could go get Rig," Jorgen said. "And FM could go with her to explain the situation. Is that all right with you, Alanik?"

Was I willing to take someone with me when I walked onto a platform full of people who now probably considered me a criminal? "Yes, of course," I said.

"I can jump straight to Rig on my own though," FM said. "Gill is really good at finding his slug."

"I still want you to take Alanik with you," Jorgen said. "We *think* Gill will be able to get back easily, but I don't want you stranded on Detritus, facing court-martial."

"Wait," Nedd said. "Why is Gill really good at finding Rig's slug?"

"Because we've drilled them so many times," FM said. She looked a little pink, and sounded defensive.

"Okay," Nedd said. "But we've practiced with all the slugs. We've practiced so many times that I think maybe *I* could find these slugs in the nowhere—"

"You couldn't," Jorgen said.

"Leave it, Nedd," Arturo said.

“But I’m just saying—”

“I hear what you’re saying!” FM said, too loudly.

Everyone stared at her.

She sighed. “Our slugs are really good at finding each other because Rig and I are dating, and we use the slugs to visit each other so we don’t have to deal with awkward questions, because we weren’t ready to tell everyone. There. Now you know.”

“Oh,” Nedd said. He always seemed to have something to say about everything, but now he seemed abashed. Based on the reactions of the group, I guessed that Jorgen and Kimmalyne already knew, and T-Stall and Catnip didn’t care.

“Are mate-pairs taboo in your culture?” I asked. “You all seem very embarrassed to talk about them.”

“Not taboo,” FM said. “But...personal.” She looked at me. “Do the UrDail always speak openly about these things?”

“Fairly openly,” I said. “It’s definitely nothing to be embarrassed about. It can depend on your family culture, but most families are thrilled by mate-pairings, because they welcome children.”

“None of us are thinking about children,” Jorgen said, quickly.

“Can you imagine?” FM said.

I didn’t understand. “Because you’re at war? You were all born during the war, weren’t you?” Unless I drastically misunderstood human aging patterns, they would have had to be.

“Because we’re too young,” FM said. “And we’re pilots on the front lines. Not a life conducive to raising kids. A lot of our parents were pilots, but most of us had at least one parent who wasn’t flying.”

“Wait,” I said. “You’re raised by your *parents*?”

The humans all looked at me like this was a very stupid question. “Yes,” Kimmalyne said. “Who were you raised by?”

“My grandparents,” I said. “We’re encouraged to find a mate-pair young, so we can have children while our parents are still young and healthy enough to raise the children. Parents have to work to support their families. They don’t have time or energy for childcare. Besides, we only have *two* of them,

when there are at least four grandparents involved, so the odds of one of them being able to care for the children is so much higher than with parents.”

“Huh,” Sadie said. “I guess that does make sense when you put it that way.”

I was trying to picture how human parents must handle having babies while—to use FM’s example—still of age to fly in the air force. That sounded like a terrible system.

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “I think the lesson here is that none of us want to talk about relationships or plan to have children in the near future, except maybe Alanik.”

“I’m not going to have a child,” I said. “I’m not in a mate-pair. But it doesn’t bother me to say so. It’s not shameful in my culture either way.”

“Well, I feel shameful,” Nedd said. “Everyone is coupled up but me! FM has a boyfriend, and Arturo is basically engaged—”

“I am *not*,” Arturo said.

“And Jorgen and Spensa—”

“Shut up, Nedd—” Jorgen said.

“Kimmalyn, do you have a boyfriend?”

Kimmalyn looked suddenly uncomfortable. “Um, *no*.”

“But seriously, it’s bad enough that I have to hang around while Arturo and Bryn are making kissy faces at each other—”

“You won’t have to do that anymore, trust me,” Arturo said.

“What?” Nedd said. “Why?”

“Because we broke up.”

Now everyone stared at Arturo. He usually had a confident air about him, but now he withered a bit.

Okay. Humans definitely got unreasonably embarrassed about relationships. It was amazing their species managed to survive.

“Seriously?” Nedd asked. He seemed much more concerned now. “When did that happen?”

“A few days ago. She wrote me a letter. But I thought we established that none of us wanted to talk about relationships. Can we please change the subject?”

“Stars, please,” Jorgen said.

“The question is,” FM said, “do we think Rig’s help with the platform will be beneficial enough that we’re willing to ask him to risk a military trial with the rest of us?”

“If it was a military trial, we’d be cleared,” Jorgen said. “Because Cobb is our military leader, and he told us to go. It would have to be a civil trial for us to be convicted, and they can’t try us civilly because all we did was disobey orders, which isn’t a violation of civilian law.”

“And we stole starships,” Kimmalyn reminded him.

“Which are military property!” Jorgen said. “Also should be tried by the DDF. No defection, no grand larceny.”

Everyone looked skeptical, including Jorgen, but if it helped him feel better I didn’t see any harm in leaving him to his faulty logic.

“You disobeyed your mother,” Nedd said. “What do you think she’s going to do to you for that?”

“I don’t know,” Jorgen said. “But at least the rest of you are off the hook there.”

“I’d like my ship,” I said. “Otherwise we’ll have one fewer pilot in the air. If we brought it here with Rig, could he finish reassembling it?” After my last experience in a human vessel, I’d take my own ship back as long as it flew.

“I bet he’d do it,” FM said. “He felt really bad that he’d dismantled it and then you needed it.”

“I think the biggest question,” Arturo said, “is what are our *other* options?”

Everyone was quiet.

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “The rest of us will stay here and see if we can find a place where the platform is built to interface with the taynix.”

“Interface with them?” I asked.

“If this platform has hypercomm or hyperdrive technology, it will probably have taynix boxes,” FM said. “Like the one in the broken Superiority ship.”

“We’ll look for the boxes while you’re gone,” Jorgen said, “and then Rig can help us figure it out when he gets here.”

I hoped we wouldn't be gone long enough for them to do much searching. Going to get Rig and my ship should be an in-and-out kind of mission.

But these things rarely worked out that simply.

"All right," I said. "Are we ready?"

FM scratched Gill on the head. "Let me take us," she said. "Gill needs the practice."

I was a bit leery of jetting around the universe at the whims of a slug, but the humans seemed certain this would work. Besides, I'd wanted to learn the secrets to hyperdrive technology. This was my chance to see one in action.

"Okay," I said. FM stood beside me and put a hand on my shoulder.

"Scud, I hope he's not in the shower or something," she said.

"Or in a meeting with Command," Jorgen said.

"Or that. Gill," FM said. "Take me to Drape."

"Drape!" the slug trilled cheerfully.

It took all my concentration not to fight the pull of the negative realm as I was sucked into it by a force completely out of my control.

Fourteen

I was unprepared for how it would feel to hover in the negative realm while the eyes fixed their penetrating stares elsewhere. Normally I had their full attention, but this time I was beneath their notice. It was a relief to hide, but it also felt a little insulting.

We emerged in a hallway of the humans' platform immediately in front of Rig, who screamed.

"Scud!" he shouted. "That is *terrifying* when I'm not expecting it."

"Shh!" FM said, and she grabbed him by the arm and pulled him into the nearest room. I took a look up and down the empty hall, then followed them. Into a storage closet from the look of it. There didn't appear to be any alternate exits, but I supposed we could hyperjump out if we needed to.

"I thought you said you do that a lot," I whispered at FM. "I didn't expect him to be so *loud*."

"Usually we arrange it beforehand," Rig said. "Also, you *told* her we do that a lot?"

"It was Nedd's fault," FM said.

"Um, okay," Rig said. "Well, hi. You should know there's a warrant out for your immediate arrest. I could be held in contempt simply for talking to you."

I'd *thought* Jorgen's justifications sounded like a stretch. FM gripped Rig's arm, and they stood close together. And I stood unfortunately close to them, because there wasn't a lot of room between the shelves of...packaged algae strips, it looked like. We must be near their kitchen facilities.

"We need your help on ReDawn," FM said. "We found something. A platform that used to move around the planet but now is in disrepair. It seems similar to the ones we have here, but we don't really know what we're looking at. Or how to use it."

“So you decided to pop into the middle of the hallway? In a place where you’re *wanted* for *desertion*?”

“Is it only desertion?” FM asked. “We were worried they’d charge us with defection.”

“Also grand larceny,” I said. “For stealing eight starships.”

“Nine,” FM said. “Including yours.”

“I’m not sure they’ve *decided* what they’re going to officially charge you with. But it seems like a problem for you to get arrested for *any* of it.”

This was all beside the point. “Are you willing to come to ReDawn to help us with the platform?” I asked.

Rig blinked at me. “Am I willing to—”

“Come with us to look at the platform,” FM said. “If no one sees us leave, you might be able to come back without anyone knowing you were helping us.”

“Except I’d also like to take my ship,” I reminded her.

“Right,” FM said. “Well, you could tell them we kidnapped you or something.”

“And add that to our list of crimes,” I added.

Rig stared at us with wide eyes. “I’ll help you. But you should know, there’s a lot going on here too. Cobb and Jeshua met with some representatives from the Superiority.”

That was right. Cobb gave that as his reason for not wanting us to return to Detritus with the Independence flight. “Have they returned?” I asked.

Rig nodded. “It was a quick meeting. They used a hyperdrive to meet at a ship right outside the shield and exchanged terms. Then they came back, and they’ve been discussing what they want to do. I think they might be talking over the hypercomm to the Superiority people now.”

“Hold on,” I said, reaching into the negative realm, searching for nearby voices.

—*understand your concerns*— said a voice I didn’t recognize. —*danger to themselves and others—learn proper safety measures to prevent disaster—send your cytonics to us for training—*

“They’re asking your leaders to send your cytonics to the Superiority,” I said. “They’ve tried to get us to do the same thing on ReDawn, first by asking, and then by threatening us. I think Quilan believes he’ll have proven himself if he delivers me personally, and that if he does the Superiority will leave him and the other cytonics alone.”

“Jorgen’s parents aren’t considering that, are they?” FM asked Rig. “Turning their *own son* over to the Superiority?”

“My own parents argued I might be *better off* being trained by the Superiority,” I said. “You’d be surprised what people will believe.”

“Is it possible that *would* be better?” Rig asked. “We’re in the dark when it comes to cytonic potential. You can obviously do a lot more than Jorgen can, and the Superiority cytonics might know even more.”

“They do,” I said. “But they aren’t going to help you, no matter what they say.”

“I can see the assembly considering it though,” FM said. “Believing that trading a couple of lives to end the war would be an acceptable sacrifice. Risking a few to save so many. That’s what we all signed up for, isn’t it? They might see it as no worse than letting their son join the DDF, and the potential for peace...”

I held my breath. I’d told them over and over what I thought about making peace with the Superiority. They already knew what I had to say. As I listened, I picked out another voice over the hypercomm. Jeshua Weight. —
assurances that no harm will come to them—

—*valuable, the alien voice said. Never be so aggressive as to—*

—*aggressive enough to exterminate us—*

—*work with us, you have nothing to fear—turn over your hyperdrives, and*

—

“The Superiority representatives say they won’t hurt the cytonics,” I said. Which might be true, but sending them away was still a terrible idea. “And Cobb was right. They want you to turn over the taynix too.”

“We can’t do that,” FM said. “Right?”

“Right?” Drape said, and Rig put a hand on his spines.

“They’re trying to imprison you here,” I said. “It’s what they do. Keep you isolated on your planet unless you play by their rules.”

“That’s what they’ve always done to us,” Rig said. “Ever since our fleet crashed here.”

“But this time we have the power to leave,” FM said. “We can’t give that up without risking that they’ll go back to trying to exterminate us. The shield stops them for now—”

“But not forever,” Rig said. “That’s true.”

“And we’re not giving up the taynix,” FM said. “No matter what.”

—negotiate. We would of course need assurances that—if we are to cooperate—

Human or UrDail, politicians were all the same. “It sounds like they’re thinking about it.”

“I meant *us*,” FM said. “We aren’t giving them up. The politicians will have to come to ReDawn and *take* them from us.”

I smiled. “I’d climb that tree with you.”

“I imagine Cobb will too,” Rig said. “He can’t be in favor of this.”

—your generous offer— another voice said over the hypercomm. Admiral Cobb, I thought. *—need time to collect the taynix—transport them to you and continue our negotiations—*

“Um,” I said. “It sounds like he’s also considering it.”

“Seriously?” Rig said.

FM shook her head. “We should get more of the taynix out while we still can.”

“We can’t take them if we aren’t ordered to,” Rig said. “We’d need to talk to Cobb.”

“Cobb says he’s in favor of sending them to the Superiority!” FM said. “If that’s true, he won’t help.”

“He might be saying that for optics,” Rig said. “Maybe he’d be glad to have an opportunity to send them away so they *can’t* be turned over.”

“He can only do that so many times,” I said, “before your politicians will catch on.”

“That’s true,” FM said. “Maybe we should take them ourselves, without asking.”

Rig looked at FM in alarm, but he didn’t argue with her.

“Where would we find them?” I asked.

“The ones that can hyperjump are all over the platform,” Rig said. “We have most of them partnered with pilots. Some of the hypercomm and mindblade slugs are kept in Engineering, but it’s crawling with people right now.”

So we wouldn’t be able to pull them all out without alerting people to our presence. “I think we should get my ship and get out of here as soon as possible. Is it capable of flight?”

“Not right now,” Rig said. “I’m sorry, I haven’t had time to—”

“Can you fix it on ReDawn?” I asked. If not, we’d need to take another human ship. When it was time for us to make our move, I wanted all the Independence pilots in the air with us.

“Yes,” Rig said. “Given a few hours, I could put it together again.”

“What else is the Superiority saying?” FM asked.

I’d been distracted from the transmission, but I focused on it again.

—meeting to assure you of our intentions—do what is best for your species and the intergalactic interests—

“They’re setting up another meeting,” I said. “Probably to turn over tainix, I’m guessing.”

“What about Gran-Gran?” Rig asked.

“Who?” I said.

“Becca Nightshade. Spensa’s grandmother. If the Superiority is really asking them to turn over the cytonics, she might be in danger.”

“Would you like me to contact her?” I asked.

“We should at least warn her,” FM said. “Maybe we should take her with us.”

I paused, reaching toward the planet below. *Into* the planet, beneath the surface, through the underground caverns where the humans lived.

A voice reached out to meet me.

Alanik? it said.

So she'd heard of me. I spent so long unconscious on this platform, it made sense.

Yes, I said. *Your government is considering a deal to turn their cytonics over to the Superiority. Do you need us to rescue you?*

What followed wasn't words exactly, but a strong sense of reluctance. *Detritus is not our home*, Gran-Gran said. *But these are my people. I won't abandon them.*

Jorgen left to help me, so I felt the need to defend him. *Jorgen didn't abandon them*, I said. *He's gone for help. You could come with us.*

I didn't know Gran-Gran, but I wasn't about to let an old woman to be given over to the Superiority. Besides, we could use another cytonic. The more we had on our side, the more we evened the playing field with Unity.

They are coming for you, Gran-Gran said. *You need to go.*

Who? I asked. Quilan and the other UrDail cytonics couldn't hyperjump, but the Superiority cytonics could.

Did they know we were here?

Go, Gran-Gran said. *A warrior fights. She does not yield, and she does not abandon her people.*

I nodded. "She wants to stay here," I said. "She knows they might try to use her as a bargaining chip, but she won't abandon Detritus."

"Is that a good idea?" FM asked.

"If it's Gran-Gran's idea, you won't talk her out of it," Rig said.

"I can respect her decision," I said. "But she says they're coming for us. I don't know who, but we need to go."

"I still think we should try to get more of the slugs out before we go," FM said. "There are dozens of them here with the other pilots."

"The entire military isn't going to desert," Rig said. "We'd only put ourselves in danger trying to convince them."

"Jorgen can get them to answer him, right?" I asked. "What if I called them to come to me? Do you think they'd do it?"

"Depends," Rig said. "They might be attached enough to their pilots to stay. They'd be more likely to come if you promised them something like caviar."

“I have a little,” FM said. “Not enough to feed them all. If you promise them caviar and we don’t deliver, that’s bad for their training, but not as bad as being *given* to the *Superiority*.”

I grabbed a large box of algae strips on the shelf. “We could bring these. The people on Wandering Leaf are going to be getting hungry, so we should probably bring some for them anyway.”

“Good idea,” Rig said, and he picked up a jug of a white substance.

“Custard,” FM said. “Kimmalyn will be happy.”

“If I’m going to try to call the slugs, it’ll draw attention,” I said. “We should do it from the ship, so we can leave immediately afterward.”

Rig looked at FM, as if to ask if we were actually doing this.

“I think you should,” FM said to me. “I don’t feel good about leaving them here, even with their pilots, when we don’t know if the other flights will defend them.”

“They probably won’t,” Rig said. “The assembly has come down pretty hard on you guys for what you did, and Cobb has had to go along with it.”

“All right,” I said. “I can jump us to my ship in the landing bay.”

I pulled us through the negative realm beneath those strangely distracted eyes. We were only going a short distance, but space didn’t work the same in there. If we were dealing in relative distances we should have spent a much shorter time in the negative realm compared to when we jumped from ReDawn, yet we hung there for a moment and then emerged out the other side in the large hangar next to my disassembled ship. Through a large skylight, I could see the platforms above and snatches of the sparkling shield that encased the planet.

“You’re sure you can make it fly again?” I asked Rig quietly.

“It’ll take me a bit,” Rig said, “but yes, I can.”

“It’s got a better chance of working than the one you left with last time,” FM added.

“Last time!” Gill trilled, and FM shushed him.

“Wait, what happened to that one?” Rig whispered.

“They’re here somewhere,” a voice said from the edge of the landing bay. “Find them.”

FM and Rig huddled closer together under the wing, the containers of food tucked up by their knees.

“That’s Cobb,” Rig whispered.

And so it was. Had Spensa’s grandmother alerted him? She hadn’t wanted to abandon her people, but she’d sounded like she wanted us to keep fighting.

No, it was probably the Superiority. One of their cytonics might have warned them of our arrival and then noticed us hyperjumping to the landing pad.

“Alanik,” FM whispered. “The slugs.”

We might be able to count on Cobb to cover for us for a moment, but not for long. Whatever cytonic was watching would be able to feel me calling for the slugs, but if I hyperjumped out fast enough they wouldn’t be able to stop me.

I gave FM a sharp nod, pressed my back to the lower part of my fuselage, and reached out across the base.

There were a *lot* of those tiny minds. Dozens at least. As I reached toward them, they turned to me as if curious.

I could work with that. I wasn’t sure how much language the slugs understood, but in the negative realm all communication was reduced to thoughts, which anyone could understand. Still, I didn’t want to get too complicated. *Friend*, I sent to them. They obviously understood that concept, given how attached they were to each other and to their pilots. And this was a concept every living being responded to: *Food*.

I could feel them answering me, some of them hungrier than others, all of them searching for a social connection like it was the thing they longed for most. These things had relationships with each other long before the humans captured them, I realized, but they saw the humans not as kidnappers but as a joyous addition to their family.

Many of them didn’t want to leave.

Footsteps approached as Cobb’s people spread out across the hangar. It wasn’t going to take them long to find us here. I didn’t have much time.

More family, I told them, sending them images of Rig and FM and Jorgen.

That intrigued them. They knew and liked all three of them, and wanted to see them again.

More boots clicking on the metal surface of the platform. Movement over the edge of the wing, and then...

“We have to go,” Rig whispered.

Come, I called to the taynix.

And then Cobb appeared, several paces away. His eyes fixed on us under the wing.

And half a dozen taynix popped into existence at our feet.

FM and Rig reached forward, grabbing the slugs, while Cobb’s jaw dropped.

“They’re here!” he shouted.

No. Not covering for us. The opposite of that. We probably should have expected that, given that we were stealing his military’s hyperdrives without permission.

More slugs appeared—maybe as many as a dozen now.

Cobb strode toward us, like he was about to yank us out from beneath the wing.

It might have been for show, but he didn’t *have* to alert them to our presence, did he?

I wasn’t going to stay here and find out. I reached into the negative realm, toward Wandering Leaf and the rest of the humans. With the ship to my back and my shoulder pressed against FM, I *pulled*, and the landing bay disappeared.

Fifteen

We emerged from the negative realm in the hangar on Wandering Leaf, which was empty of both humans and UrDail.

“That never gets less terrifying,” Rig said.

“And disorienting,” FM said. “And we don’t even see the creepy eyes.”

“Be glad for that,” I said. I reached out again, searching for Jorgen’s mind. I found him and the taynix belonging to the other flight members. They hadn’t gone far.

“Why did Cobb come after us like that?” FM asked. “He didn’t even try to talk to us. Maybe Jeshua is watching him too closely?”

“Maybe,” Rig said. “Cobb played along with everything they said after you left. If I hadn’t been there when he gave you the order to go, I never would have thought he’d done it.”

“Done it!” one of the slugs said.

Cobb was far away now, and whatever Superiority cytonic had been tracking us either couldn’t or didn’t follow.

That felt more ominous than anything.

“At least we saved these guys,” FM said, cuddling the slugs. “Though I don’t imagine their pilots are happy with us.”

“Happy!” one of the slugs trilled. And then several of them disappeared.

We all climbed out from beneath the wing, FM and Rig hauling the case of algae and the jug of custard with them.

“This way,” I said, leading FM and Rig toward the others.

We found them several sections down from the hangar, gathered around an arched open doorway. Most of the flight sat outside with two crates open in front of them. Jorgen was inside, while Arturo leaned in the doorframe, watching the others dubiously.

“Rig!” Kimmalyn said, waving furiously. Several of the new slugs were gathered around her and Happy.

“Hey, everybody,” Rig said.

“Look!” Sadie said, waving a half-wrapped wafer bar at us. “We found their old food supplies!”

“The *centuries-old* food supplies?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” Nedd said. “I can’t read the labels on these, but there’s no way this stuff is that old. We took some to your friends, and they said thank you. They wouldn’t have done that if we were offering them two-hundred-year-old food, would they?”

I approached, looking at the boxes. “I think you’re right. That looks like some salvager’s food stash.” The wafer bars were individually wrapped, and the outer box did bear the date of origin. “Looks like they’re only five years old.”

“Delicious,” Arturo said.

“This one *is* delicious!” Sadie said. “It has some kind of nuts in it.” She looked at me wide-eyed. “Those aren’t poisonous to humans or anything, are they?”

“I have no idea what humans find poisonous,” I said. “Though your people used to live among us on ReDawn and ate our food, so most of it is probably safe to eat. The nuts are called udal nuts. They grow on bushy plants that live in the crevices of the branches. They’re quite good, though I can’t vouch for these bars.” I pulled one out and unwrapped it. It was more crumbly than usual, probably owing to its age, but at least it hadn’t molded.

“Maybe we should have been more careful,” Sadie said, scowling at her nut wafer as she set it down.

“It’s all right, Sadie,” Nedd said. “I’m on my third bar. If you die, I’m going with you.”

Sadie did not look comforted.

“We brought you food,” FM said, lifting the case of algae strips. “So you don’t have to rely on scavenged nut bars.”

“Oh, custard!” Kimmalyn said, taking the jug from Rig. “Thanks!”

“You also brought more slugs,” Jorgen said, joining Arturo in the doorway. “Why?”

“It’s a long story,” FM said.

“How long could it be?” Jorgen asked. “You were gone ten minutes tops.”

“They were only gone for ten minutes,” Sadie said, “and we *still* managed to find the taynix boxes while they were gone.” She and Catnip—or T-Stall? I really needed to figure out which was which—slapped their palms together in what I assumed must be a human gesture of celebration.

“Seriously?” FM said. “You found them that quickly?”

“It wasn’t hard,” Kimmalyyn said. “We found a station map of the platform in that engineering room written in English. The control room was labeled on it.”

“Shhhhh,” T-Stall or Catnip said. “You could have let them think we were *amazing*.”

“We *are* amazing,” Sadie said. “Amazing at reading maps.”

“I want to see this,” Rig said, and FM set down the box of algae strips at Sadie’s feet and followed Rig and me into the room with Jorgen. The new blue taynix sat on the control panel, and trilled at FM when she walked in.

One wall was dominated by panels and levers and switches, with a wide window above the panels looking over the edge of the platform into the miasma. All around the room, mounted against the walls, were metal boxes like the one in Jorgen’s ship.

“Do they all have holoprojectors?” FM asked. “Because if so we could strip those, since we don’t need them for the slugs anymore.”

Rig knelt down and looked at the wires beneath the panel. “Looks like it’s been looted already. But most of the wiring is intact. The wires themselves must not be worth much on this planet.”

“Why would they be?” I asked. “They’re wires.”

“Depends on whether you have the resources to mine the right metals,” Rig said. “Some of those are valuable on Detritus.”

That made sense. The core of ReDawn was rich with metals, which was why the Superiority bothered with us to begin with. They wanted our resources, and we traded them away for the barest recognition of our dignity, instead of remembering we were in the position of power.

“Taynix are valuable too,” Jorgen said. “Seriously, where did those come from?”

“We brought them with us,” FM said, “because the Superiority wants to take them.”

“Did you talk to Cobb?” Jorgen asked.

“No,” FM said. “Cobb and Jeshua were talking to the Superiority over the hypercomm. They’ve already met with the Superiority once, and the Superiority was asking for them to turn over our cytonics and our hyperdrives.”

“FM,” Jorgen said. “Please tell me you didn’t steal the taynix.”

“We didn’t *steal* them,” FM snapped. “We *rescued* them. Alanik called to them and they came of their own free will.”

“They’re hyperdrives!” Jorgen said. “Not people. Cobb ordered us to come here, but he *didn’t* ask us to take the slugs that were commissioned to *other pilots*—”

FM narrowed her eyes. “Sometimes you have to do the right thing, Jorgen. Even if Command says to do something else.”

“*Okay*,” Jorgen said in a low voice. “But you were gone *a few minutes*, FM. You didn’t think this through. You didn’t talk to Cobb, and for all we know he has a plan that depends on the hyperdrives! You can’t do this.” He looked from me to Rig. “Why did you help her?”

“Um,” Rig said.

I didn’t have any more of an answer. Arturo was watching me, and I wasn’t about to admit that having more hyperdrives on ReDawn seemed like a good idea to me. Arturo wasn’t an idiot, and neither was Jorgen. They were probably already putting that together.

“It needed to be done,” FM said. “Even if they weren’t *living beings* that have *feelings*—”

“The other pilots are *human* beings,” Jorgen said. “And you left them without a tool they could use to *survive*, FM. Besides, the fact that the slugs *let* you do this is not good. If they’ll respond to Alanik, who they *don’t know*, it means enemy cytonics could use the same tactic against us.”

“And clearly we need to train that out of them,” FM said. “But this time it was a good thing because—”

“This is not a good thing!” Jorgen said. “Coming here when Cobb gave us sort-of orders to do so was one thing, but this is entirely out of the chain of command, *and* you didn’t think it through *or consult me* before you did it. You could have had Alanik contact me. We could have had a *conversation* about it—”

FM closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. “You’re right, okay? It was rash. But we’re not sending them back. Not while *your mother* is considering taking them to the Superiority. That doesn’t even make good *tactical* sense, Jorgen, and you know it.”

“But *you* don’t make the tactical decisions,” Jorgen said. “You don’t know what the bigger plan is.”

“The bigger plan may be to give the taynix to the Superiority!” FM said. “I’m not going to let them do that. And if *you* are, then you are not my flightleader.”

Rig and Arturo both stared wide-eyed at FM, like she’d said something horrific. FM looked down at the floor, her hands shaking. “I didn’t mean that,” she said quietly.

Jorgen stared at FM, his mouth set in an angry line. Rig and Arturo exchanged a concerned look, and outside the control room the rest of the flight had fallen silent.

“Fine,” Jorgen said, setting his jaw. “We’ll keep them here for now. Though I imagine there are going to be a lot of pilots who are *not thrilled* with us for *stealing their taynix*.”

“We’ll return them when the situation is safe,” FM said through gritted teeth.

Right. Of course they would. They had no intention of sharing with *us*.

I couldn’t let the humans leave here with all the slugs. Even *one* could change everything for ReDawn. But they weren’t making noise about leaving now, so this wasn’t the moment to worry about it. Not when I still had hope they might help me.

“Okay,” Rig said. “If the taynix are staying, maybe we should figure out how they interface with this platform.”

FM looked like she wanted to flee the room, and Jorgen looked like he wanted to punch someone, but they both nodded.

“Good idea,” Arturo said.

“All right then,” Rig said. He squeezed FM’s shoulder and then moved over to one of the boxes on the wall. “The boxes themselves weren’t stripped. Makes sense, if the people here don’t know the secrets to hyperdrives.”

“We found something weird on that map,” Arturo said. “There was a control room and the autoturret systems, of course. But no engines and no navigation systems. Alanik said this platform used to move, but there doesn’t seem to be any way to move it, at least not on the schematics we found.”

“Interesting,” Rig said. “Maybe it requires a hyperdrive to move? Get me something to stand on so I can get a look above the boxes and see how they’re interfaced with the platform.”

Everything useful in this room that wasn’t screwed down appeared to have been looted, but T-Stall and Catnip hauled in a chunk of metal that was tall enough for Rig to boost himself up. While they did, Kimmalyyn slipped into the room with us and linked her arm through FM’s. She and Jorgen were both still silent. Jorgen leaned against the wall opposite FM with his arms crossed, and FM actively avoided looking at him. It was an improvement over the yelling. The more they fought, the more I worried they’d decide ReDawn wasn’t worth the trouble. Though if that happened, perhaps I could convince FM to stay and keep the taynix with her. Jorgen was their cytonic, so he could influence the slugs to go with him.

But as we’d discovered, he wasn’t the only one.

Rig stared at the debris as Catnip and T-Stall deposited it on the floor. “Is that a piece of a starfighter wing?”

“Yep,” one of them said.

“Is it a piece of one of *our* starfighter wings?” Rig asked.

“I had a little trouble with the landing,” I said, and the other one snickered.

Rig looked at me like he wondered how I was still alive. “We’ll tell you all about it later,” Jorgen said. “Right now we need to know what the taynix can do if we interface them with the platform.”

Rig boosted himself up on the wing, first knocking on the wall and then swinging open a panel to reveal a circuit board.

“This all looks like it’s intact,” Rig said. “Either it’s not valuable, or the salvagers didn’t know it was here. The holoprojectors would have been much more recognizable.” Rig climbed down again. “These boxes are labeled underneath, but not in English. Alanik?”

I had to lean over the control panel and crane my neck upward to see the labels. They were in neither English nor my own language, but Mandarin. “This box says it’s for the weapons system,” I said. “But that doesn’t make sense, does it? The weapons systems aren’t cytonic.”

Rig and Jorgen exchanged a look.

“The autoturrets aren’t,” Arturo said. “But the map had those facilities in another location. Are there...cytonic weapons systems?”

“Maybe,” I said. “I’ve never heard of that.”

Still, while the writing on the boxes was a bit antiquated, the meaning was clear. The next few boxes were for the comms system. On the opposite wall I found one with a different label. “This one is for the navigation system.”

“So it does have a hyperdrive,” FM said.

Rig nodded. “There’s only one spot for a navigation slug, and several for the hypercomm. Probably so you could have commlinks open with many people at once. It only takes one slug to move the platform.”

I examined the boxes along the third wall. “These are for the defense systems.”

“Could be a shield like the one back home,” Rig said. “That would be useful. Though I don’t know how that would work, because on Detritus the platforms combine to become the shield, and the shield mechanism doesn’t require a taynix.” He turned to me. “Do you know how this platform was used in the past? Was it part of a larger system?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “The Superiority doesn’t like us teaching the details of our military history. Rinakin taught me some things, but most of our education is limited to being told we were wrong to fight.”

“You don’t believe that though,” FM said. “Why not, if that’s what you were taught?”

“Do you believe everything you’re told?” I asked.

“No,” FM said. “But it’s hard for most people to ignore the dominant messaging sometimes, especially when no one is willing to speak against it.”

“Oh,” I said. “No, the official curriculum is tailored to make us look good for the Superiority, but there has always been turmoil on ReDawn as to whose ideas are the best. There is no shortage of differing opinions here.”

“That must be so confusing,” Rig said.

“Sometimes,” I said. “But it’s also liberating. With so many different ideas, it’s easier to choose what to believe. Unity would like us to all unite under one set of beliefs, one agreement about what is best. But that takes away our knowledge, reduces our ability to decide what’s right and what’s wrong.”

“So you need each other’s ideas to really be free,” FM said. “I like that idea.”

I didn’t feel like we needed Unity, but maybe that was true. Maybe if Independence won we’d do the same, simplifying what we taught to make us always in the right. Maybe the tension between us was what truly allowed the conversation to happen.

If we wanted to maintain that tension, I needed to make sure the Independents survived.

Jorgen still stood to the side with his arms folded. I couldn’t tell what he thought, and I didn’t think he’d appreciate being called out in front of the others after his confrontation with FM.

You disagree with this idea? I asked in his mind.

No, Jorgen said. *But I agree with Rig that it sounds confusing.*

“Let’s try the cytonic defense systems now,” Jorgen said to Rig. “If we can inhibit the platform or turn on the shield, we’ll buy ourselves more time.”

Rig nodded and extended his hand to the blue slug, who seemed to sniff it even though it didn’t have a visible nose. After giving the slug a moment to acclimate to him, he picked it up and set it gently into one of the defense systems boxes and closed the door.

Nothing happened.

“What are you supposed to do now?” I asked. “Ask it to do something?”

“I don’t know what to ask it to do,” Jorgen said. “I can’t give it an image of an inhibitor. It doesn’t *look* like anything.”

“Maybe you could try to show it an image of a cytonic approaching us, let it know what we’re afraid of.”

“We’re not going back to scaring the slugs into submission,” FM said.

“Right,” Rig said. “But there’s a difference between frightening them and communicating with them. You could, like, *explain* the situation?”

Jorgen looked doubtful, but FM nodded and went back to staring at the floor.

“All right,” Jorgen said. “I’ll try to...explain.” He closed his eyes, and I listened in the negative realm, trying to hear what he was communicating.

There were no words here, only ideas. Jorgen showed the slug his own fear, and then a picture of a cytonic emerging in the control room. I could feel the slug’s own fear—it didn’t like the way it had been treated by cytonics in the past.

By the branches. These things *were* intelligent.

Still, the slug didn’t do anything.

“Can you ask it to protect us?” I asked. They said the slugs understood abstract concepts like danger...

Jorgen sent an image, almost like a request. An impression of the platform being shut off to outside cytonics.

Arturo’s slug made a squeaking noise and then the universe around me stopped vibrating, as if the whole of it had suddenly died. It was gone—my ability to reach out, to find the others, to reach the whispering voices that told me I wasn’t alone. Maybe that was what Jorgen meant when he said Spensa could hear the stars. It wasn’t so much stars I could hear, but all the matter in the whole of space and time.

And now they were gone.

Jorgen looked as disoriented as I felt. Boomslug had his face buried beneath Jorgen’s arm, and Snuggles lay deflated in the sling across his chest. Gill huddled around FM’s shoulders.

“I can’t hear them anymore,” Jorgen said. “It worked, but—if we can’t use our own powers, we can’t keep track of the enemy, or listen in on them.” He

turned to me. “How did we do that on Detritus? Some kind of impression?”

“There should be a code that lets us use cytonics while we’re within the inhibitor. I don’t know how you got it back on Detritus, but you did. Maybe because your powers manifested there, you grew up with the code in your mind?”

“That would explain how the taynix got it too,” FM said.

“There might be a key here somewhere,” Rig said. He leaned over the control panel. “There are some recordings in the database, but they seem to be blank.”

“Play them,” I said.

“Sure,” Rig said, and he fiddled with some of the buttons.

An impression pushed into my mind like a key being slipped under a door. I concentrated on it, committing it to my memory, and the world began to vibrate around me again like a chorus of insects beginning to chirp again after a windstorm.

“Stars,” Jorgen said. “That’s better.”

“Better,” Gill and Boomslug both agreed, their voices forming a strange harmony.

I reached out, finding the minds of the slugs farther away on the platform, and I offered the impression to them. I could feel each of their relief.

“That should give us some cover,” Rig said. “I can work on getting the shield up and spend some time fixing Alanik’s ship so she’s battle ready. Then we can try out the weapons systems and the hyperdrive.”

“All right,” Jorgen said. “That seems like a good plan.”

“We think we can use the slugs to move the platform,” Arturo said. “But what will we do with it if we can?”

“It’s a large and powerful tool,” I said. “But not the stealthiest, to be sure. If we start moving the platform around, Unity will take notice. We need to figure out a way to use the distraction to save Rinakin.”

“We’re assuming he wants to be saved,” FM said. She turned to Rig. “We want to rescue her friend, but we heard him over the radio saying he was defecting to the other side.”

“Wonder what that would feel like,” Rig said.

I imagined they felt very similarly, having their commander try to capture them after sending them away. I hoped there was a reasonable explanation.

FM looked nervously at Jorgen. “There’s more,” she said. “Cobb sent people after us when we went to get Alanik’s ship. They knew we were there somehow, and Cobb saw us himself. I thought maybe he’d cover for us, but he didn’t. He called the people who were with him right to us.”

“Maybe he did that because he knew we’d escape anyway,” Rig said. “He knew Alanik could get us out.”

“Still,” FM said, “he could have given us a few more seconds.”

“He might have noticed you were ‘rescuing’ taynix,” Jorgen said.

“Yeah,” Rig said. “That probably didn’t help.” He looked down at the instrumentation and sighed. “As for how we could use the platform, I want to take a look at these other systems and get a better idea of what we’re dealing with. Then we can talk about ways we might use it.”

“That will all take some time,” Jorgen said, stepping away to peer out the window into the miasma. “It’s getting late. At least, it is on Detritus. What time does night fall here?”

I wasn’t exactly sure. I looked out the window at the angle of the sun through the miasma. “In about three sleep cycles, I think.”

“Interesting,” Rig said. “You sleep multiple times in a day?”

“Yes,” I said. “One day is equal to nine sleep cycles at this time of year on the tree where I live. Sometimes it will be less or more, depending on the location of a given tree in the miasma. I’m not sure what it’ll be here, but judging by the angle of the sun that’s my estimation.”

“So a day here is about a week,” Jorgen said. “We grew up underground, so our days are manufactured as well. Even if it isn’t going to get dark we still need to sleep, and eat something that won’t kill us.” He looked grudgingly at FM. “Thanks for bringing the algae strips.”

“It was Alanik’s idea,” FM said.

“It’s a good thing Nedd gorged himself on those nut bars,” Arturo said. “Might be some algae strips left for the rest of us.”

“Though I hope he doesn’t keel over,” Kimmalyn added.

“I’ll get to work,” Rig said. “We can rest and then return to the plan.”

“Sounds good,” Jorgen said, and he stalked out, leaving the rest of us behind.

Sixteen

As Jorgen left the room, FM appeared to deflate.

“You okay?” Kimmalyn asked her.

“Yeah,” FM said. “I really shouldn’t have said that to Jorgen.”

“Definitely not,” Rig said. “But I understand why you did.”

“I need to walk,” FM said. “I’ll show you that other control room. There might be systems for the shield in there.” She and Rig left, heading in the opposite direction from Jorgen. Kimmalyn followed them, telling the rest of the flight that they needed to check in with the Independence pilots and see if they’d found somewhere we could all be comfortable for the night.

They wandered off, taking most of the slugs and the food with them. Arturo remained behind.

“Are they always like this?” I asked.

“FM and Jorgen?” Arturo said. “No, not like that.”

That wasn’t much of a comfort, but as they all seemed committed to seeing this through, I supposed I should leave their internal politics alone.

Arturo watched me quietly.

I sighed. “You still think I’m going to betray you?” I asked.

“I hope you aren’t,” he said. He didn’t seem upset about it either way. Merely uncertain.

“You could also betray *me*,” I insisted. “You could promise the Superiority you’ll bring me in, use me and my people as a bargaining chip to get yourselves a better position the way Quilan is doing.”

“We could,” Arturo said. He seemed surprised, like he hadn’t thought of that.

I hadn’t meant to give him any ideas. They’d be heroes, enough that their commanders might forget about their court-martial. Their admiral could claim this was his plan all along. That was what our Council would do in such a situation.

“But we won’t,” Arturo said. “We’ve come all this way to secure an alliance. Those are our orders.”

They were not-orders, as I recalled. But I wasn’t going to mention that.

“Thank you,” I said. Arturo nodded, but we both watched each other uneasily.

I waited for him to leave, but he kept standing there. Did he not want to leave me alone in this room? Did he think I would *sabotage* it somehow? “You don’t have to watch me every minute,” I said.

“I know,” Arturo said. He seemed surprised again, like the idea hadn’t occurred to him. “I was just wondering why you’re doing this.”

I blinked at him. “Trying to rescue my friend?”

“Fighting the Superiority,” he said. “When you described it back on Detritus, it sounded like your lives are good here.”

“They are,” I said. “And I’d like to keep it that way.”

“So if your people joined the Superiority, what do you think would be worse?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. It was hard for me to imagine exactly what that would be like. Giving in to the Superiority felt like the worst thing that could possibly happen, but on the surface I could see how it would look attractive to the humans after the years of war and terror.

“I don’t think they’d try to exterminate us,” I said carefully. “If they were going to do that, they would have done it years ago, after we lost the last war.”

“Okay,” Arturo said.

“But I think they would oppress us.”

“And they’re not oppressing you now?” Arturo asked.

“No, they are,” I said quickly. “They withhold the secrets of hyperdrives from us, try to control how we use cytonics, tell us what aspects of our culture are ‘lesser’ or ‘advanced.’ ”

“Do you really want to fight a war with them just because they’re critical of you and refuse to share?”

“It’s not that,” I said. “They actively try to stop us from learning. They tell us that wireless technology is dangerous, that cytonics are dangerous—but

they became a powerful civilization through the use of those same resources. By denying us access—it's not only that they won't help us, it's like they walked through the door and then locked it behind them."

Arturo nodded. "Still," he said, "what do you need that technology for, if you want nothing to do with them? Wouldn't that be the only reason you'd need it? To interact with them?"

"We need it to *fight* them," I said. "Because we don't want to be under their control. Because we're not 'lesser.' We're intelligent, and we have a right to direct our own lives and our own future. We're not trying to take over from the Superiority. We only want to exist without their interference and their...*judgment*."

Arturo nodded. I got the feeling he wasn't arguing with me. He was trying to understand. "And that's worth it to you," he said. "To risk war, to risk them deciding to exterminate you after all. To risk your life and the lives of everyone you love, the lives of your whole *people*. To avoid being judged by them."

"It's not only that they judge us," I said. It was so hard to define, but I felt the resistance to everything the Superiority stood for like it was a part of me. "It's that they judge us and find us *wanting*. And if we cooperate with them, it's like we're admitting they're right. That we *are* lesser. And we're *not*. We are equal beings who deserve to be treated as equals. And I would rather risk everything than capitulate, because I can't deny that to myself. It would kill me to do it."

Arturo met my eyes, and he nodded. I thought...maybe he respected that answer. At the very least he accepted it.

"What about you?" I asked. "Why are you here?"

"I was ordered to be here," he said.

"You were not-ordered," I said.

"Right, but Jorgen is my flightleader and I followed him."

The way I remembered it, the rest of them dragged Jorgen along until he caught up to the idea.

"So you disagree, then. You don't think you should have come."

Arturo hesitated. Maybe he was worried about expressing disagreement with his superior, but he seemed to have a more familiar relationship with Jorgen. I thought there was more to it.

“Do you wish you were back on Detritus?” I asked. “Helping your people to broker a peace deal?”

He was quiet for a moment, staring out the window into the miasma. “No,” he admitted. “I think we’re doing the right thing, helping you.”

I nodded. “Yes. You are.”

“Maybe not the *smart* thing,” he said. “I worry we’ve chosen the losing side on both your planet and mine, and I’m afraid that this is going to go terribly wrong for all of us. But I don’t like the idea of bargaining with the people who’ve been murdering us for generations. I don’t like the idea of peace talks with the beings who’ve been keeping us in a cage.”

I smiled. He understood then. “Giving in to them feels like deciding to die slowly.”

“I don’t know about that,” he said. “But you’re right that it feels like admitting we’re lesser. Like we’re saying we deserved the way they treated us, and we’re willing to simply forgive and forget.”

“The Superiority likes that idea,” I said, “so long as we’re always the ones doing the forgetting.”

Arturo nodded, staring out at the miasma again. I liked the way he thought about things. The fact that he *did* think about them, while so many people on both his planet and mine were willing to swallow the easy story without worrying about whether it was a true one.

“Did you choose to be a pilot?” I asked. “Your people are at war, but you can’t all be fighters.”

“No,” Arturo said. “They say we’re all part of the war effort no matter our job, and maybe that’s true in a way. But being a pilot gets you a lot of respect. A lot of disadvantaged people want to pass the pilot’s test for the opportunities it affords them, but for me it was expected. My parents have a lot of connections, a lot of...social power, I guess. And to maintain the empire, I had to be a pilot.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “You have to prove you are the best.”

“They didn’t want me to stay and prove it,” Arturo said. “I nearly got killed when I was a cadet. My parents pulled strings, got me my pin early so I wouldn’t have to keep flying.”

“But you are flying.”

“Yeah,” Arturo said. “My parents weren’t happy about it. Neither was my girlfriend. They all felt like I’d done my part. But I hadn’t, you know? I hated the thought of slinking back to the caverns and benefiting from the deaths of my friends, people I knew and liked. It felt like cowardice, hiding when I should be out there fighting.” He shook his head.

“Is that why your...” Jorgen didn’t like it when I used this word. “I don’t think there’s an exact translation for it in my language, but your mate—”

“My girlfriend,” Arturo said. “Yeah, that’s why she broke up with me ultimately. I think she wanted to for a while, but didn’t feel like she could. Like, it doesn’t feel good to give up on someone who’s fighting for the future of humanity, but she’d always thought I was going to come back a few months after flight school. And then I didn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay. I think we’re both better off, honestly. She said I’d changed, that I didn’t care about the things I used to.” He shrugged. “She was probably right.”

Given how deeply he seemed to care about his people’s freedom now, I thought that could only be a good thing, but I wondered if he would agree.

“We’re on the same side,” I said. “As long as you want to fight the Superiority, you don’t have to worry about me.”

“Same to you,” he said. “Jorgen gets hung up on rules, but he doesn’t want to play nice with them any more than you and I do.”

I believed him. I couldn’t be absolutely sure he was telling the truth, but he had the same problem with me.

Regardless, once we got everything in order, we were all going to find out.

I worried it would be uncomfortable to sleep on the platform, but my brother and the Independence pilots had found the bunk rooms from when the platform was inhabited. There was an entire block of them—more rooms than we could possibly need. The Independence pilots took up residence in one, and Rinakin’s family and some of the other refugees spread out over a few more. The rooms had obviously been used by salvagers in recent years, because the old cushioning had been replaced on all but the top bunks, where it was mostly disintegrated. The other bunks weren’t as soft or as clean as I would have liked, but they were better than sleeping in the cockpits.

The human men all settled into one of the sleeping rooms and the women into another, where they invited me to join them. In one of the adjoining common rooms, Kimmalyn and Sadie divided the algae strips and custard so that everyone got a portion for dinner. I passed on the algae—since we knew the nut wafers were safe for me to eat, I choked a couple down.

I could have gone to eat with my brother, but instead I stayed with the humans. I needed to make sure they didn’t have any second thoughts about what we were doing here, and besides that I was starting to enjoy their company.

“You can have a cup of custard to dip those nut bars in if you want,” Kimmalyn said, pushing the jug of liquid in my direction.

I peered at the cloudy white substance. “What is it?”

“It’s milk,” Sadie told me. “But like, old milk. I think? I’m not totally clear how they make it.”

“Human milk?” I asked.

“Ew, no,” Sadie said. “Cow’s milk, I think.”

That sounded disgusting. “I’m all right,” I said. “Though I think Happy will take my portion.”

The slug was leaning out of Kimmalyn’s sling, dangling down like it was going to dip its face right into the jug.

“Happy!” Kimmalyn said. “Yours is over here.” She pulled the slug out of the sling and deposited it with the others, who were happily chewing algae strips.

Jorgen approached. FM and Rig hadn't joined us—last I'd seen she was sitting with Rig in the hangar while he worked on my ship, both of them speaking in low voices.

“Can I ask for your help with something?” Jorgen asked me.

“Yes,” I said, and we walked out into a hallway with a long window looking out into the miasma.

Jorgen pressed his fingers to the glass, watching the miasma swirl against it. “Since we have a minute, I was wondering if you could teach me something about cytonics.”

“Of course,” I said, and I took a seat on the floor of the hallway, my back opposite the window. The outline of Hollow was dimly visible, its dark branches reaching up toward the red sky.

“Gran-Gran taught me how to meditate,” Jorgen said, sitting down facing me. “To listen to the stars. It helped, but I didn't end up hearing the stars. I heard the taynix instead.”

“That sounds ultimately more useful,” I said.

“It probably was. But Spensa was able to hyperjump all the way to Starsight.”

“Technically all cytonics have every power,” I said. “I'm not clear on how many there are. We're only able to manifest some of them deliberately after a lot of training. And some we may never be able to use. Of the five cytonics on ReDawn, I'm the only one who has been able to hyperjump.”

“Which is why the other cytonics weren't able to follow us here immediately, even before we got the inhibitor up,” Jorgen said. “And if I'm never going to be able to learn—”

“That's what I'm trying to tell you,” I said. “There are other valuable types of cytonics. Mindblades are supposed to be the most difficult. I've never been able to manifest those.”

“You said those are like little bits of the nowhere that cut like razorblades?”

“Yes,” I said. “Like your Boomslug.”

“Boomslug!” Boomslug said from Jorgen's shoulder.

“I haven't been able to do that either,” Jorgen said.

“Let’s start with what’s already working,” I said. “You know how to find my mind and the minds of the taynix. Can you do it now?”

Jorgen absently stroked Boomslug on its spines. He closed his eyes, and I could feel his mind reaching out toward mine.

“Good. Now reach out farther. Stretch yourself over the space of the planet. See if you can find the Unity cytonics. Now that you have the key to the inhibitor, you should be able to find them.”

“It’s easier when I’m closer to the source,” Jorgen said. “When I heard the taynix below the surface of Detritus, there were so many of them, so it was louder—”

“Try, Jorgen,” I said. “Stop focusing so much on what you aren’t able to do, and *try*.”

I felt his presence in my mind as he reached out. *I hate this*, Jorgen said. *I can’t do enough*.

“There you go,” I said. “You can reach me. Now try to find others. And be quieter while you do it. They don’t know yet who you are, and we don’t want to give them that information unless it benefits us to do so.”

“You heard that?” Jorgen said. He sounded embarrassed. “I didn’t mean to send what I was thinking—”

“You have to be careful not to broadcast when you’re making contact,” I said. “But now try the meditation you learned before. Instead of reaching for my mind, reach out into the negative realm that surrounds us, out across the planet.”

Jorgen was quiet for a long time, while Boomslug tucked itself in the crook of his elbow and snored softly. After a while I thought Jorgen might have fallen asleep sitting up.

“I can feel the other taynix,” Jorgen said finally. “I can’t find any other cytonics—and there’s a space somewhere in the distance, a space that feels... solid. Like I can’t reach into it.”

I followed him across the miasma. Yes, there it was. On the far side of the core, on the side of the planet in a night cycle.

“The Council tree,” I said. “Inhibited by the other cytonics.” I wondered if they’d done that as a precaution once our inhibitor went up. They wouldn’t

be able to maintain it all the time, but they must be worried about what we had planned.

They wanted us to believe they were in control, but they were still afraid of us, which meant they weren't. Not entirely.

"I need to learn how to make those inhibitors," Jorgen said.

"You learned how to find a place that's been inhibited," I said. "You might be happy for that first."

"It's not enough," Jorgen said.

I understood what he meant. It would never be enough until the fight was over and his people were safe. "Focus on what you have," I said. "We can work on it more, but I think you should sleep first. Tiring yourself out will only make you more frustrated. And when you're frustrated, it's much more difficult to learn." And dangerous, if you started manifesting things like concussion bolts and mindblades.

Jorgen didn't argue. "That makes sense. Thanks, Alanik."

Now *I* felt inadequate. Jorgen and his team had risked everything to help me, and I'd hardly shown him anything.

It's not enough, he'd said. I felt the same.

"Get some rest," I said.

"Good night," Jorgen said, and he left me staring up into the red-violet glow of the sun against the miasma above.

Seventeen

I had a hard time following my own advice, and so I spent a good portion of the sleep cycle lying awake, listening. Sometime while the humans were all asleep, I caught a communication traveling through the negative realm.

—everything in hand— Quilan was saying. *—give us time—retrieve Alanik—*

—give us the rogue cytonic and her allies—if that proves difficult for you—set up a government who can.

I drew a deep breath. Quilan was still trying to pacify the Superiority, but he had a storm in a bottle, and any moment the glass might break. He was holding them off for now, but if they grew tired of waiting we were going to pay the price.

We had to make our move tomorrow, with whatever resources we had to work with.

I woke in the morning unsure of how much sleep I'd actually gotten, though I was still glad we'd taken the time to rest. Tired pilots were sloppy pilots, and sloppy pilots lost matches. Or in this case got themselves killed.

While the humans were eating, I used the radio in Jorgen's ship to check the frequency Nanalis had used to broadcast the message from Rinakin. It was a Unity channel, one they often used to send messages to their people, despite Superiority admonitions that we keep wireless communication to a minimum. I wondered how long that would last once they gave the Superiority more influence over ReDawn. I wondered if they would regret it.

There was no broadcast now, but there was a repeating message about an upcoming special conversation between Rinakin and one of the most popular Unity orators later in the morning.

That was good. If Rinakin was broadcasting, I could use that signal to find his location. They would unintentionally lead me right to him.

When everyone finished eating, I followed the humans to the control room with the taynix boxes. Rig, Jorgen, FM, and I gathered in the room while the others waited outside.

“None of your people died in the night,” I said to Jorgen. “So I suppose the udal nuts weren’t toxic to you.”

“You only say that because you didn’t have to share a room with Nedd last night,” Jorgen said.

“All right,” Rig said. “I’ve finished reassembling Alanik’s ship, and I found the shield systems. They’re similar to the ones on Platform Prime, so I was able to get them working. I don’t think it’s *as* effective as the planetary shield, because we don’t have hundreds of other platforms to form a barrier. But look.”

He gestured out the window at a blueish tint now coloring the miasma.

“That’s something,” Jorgen said. “Good work.”

I wondered how much sleep Rig had gotten, but he didn’t complain. “We expect we know how the comms and navigation systems work,” he said. “They should be similar to the hypercomms and hyperdrives we already use. But we want to check out this unknown cytonic weapons system, and then make a plan for how to use the platform to fight back.”

“Rig and I were thinking that Boomslug might be the right type to put in a weapons system,” FM said. “Given what we’ve seen him do.”

Jorgen knelt to gently pick up Boomslug, who was lying in the doorway to the control room. “You ready, buddy?”

“Buddy,” Boomslug said in his deep voice.

“Okay,” Rig said. “It would be really nice to have a weapons system we can control.”

FM took Boomslug from Jorgen and put him into the box. “I am going to give you so much caviar if this works,” she said.

“If we have to experiment on him,” Jorgen said, “I’m glad he’s inside a metal box where he hopefully can’t hurt us.”

I was pretty sure mindblades could pass through most substances and do damage as they went, but I didn’t tell Jorgen that. If the former inhabitants of

this platform had put a tainix in this box and then used it to power weapons, presumably they hadn't cut themselves to ribbons in the process.

"All right," Rig said when the box was locked. "Let's see what he can do."

"What am I going to ask it?" Jorgen said. "Please attack...nothing?"

"Go boom," FM said. "You remember what that felt like, right?"

Jorgen winced. "Too well."

"Can you aim the gun?" I asked. "We're a long way from Hollow, but we don't know exactly how far this weapon can reach."

"She's right," Rig said. "The Superiority had planetary weapons. This could be one of those. I didn't see anything on this platform as big as that was, but I didn't exactly perform an exhaustive search, and—"

"I'll try to focus away from the tree," Jorgen said. "Out in the miasma. The same way I do when I direct them to hyperjump. Anyone else have any concerns?"

We were all quiet.

"Okay," Jorgen said. "Here goes."

I focused on the mind of the slug, trying not to make enough contact that I would distract it from Jorgen's message, but just enough that I could feel the change.

I didn't need to though. The whole platform quivered with the reverberation, like a weapon had fired with incredible force. Out the window, the miasma in front of us shifted, swirling in eddies around invisible projectiles.

"Scud!" Nedd shouted from outside. "What was *that*?"

"Mindblades," I said. "Did they aim where you wanted them to go?"

"They did," Jorgen said. "We still have no idea how powerful that weapon is. It moved the gas clouds around, but that doesn't mean—"

"A well-placed mindblade can cut right through a ship's hull," I said.

"That seems like something we can use to defend ourselves," Rig said. "Though I worry we'll have already drawn attention by using it."

A plan began to form in my mind. "Drawing attention might be a good thing though," I said. "If we were to move the platform and activate the weapons, Unity would want to stop us."

“That’s true,” Jorgen said. “They’d send forces after us.”

“But they wouldn’t be able to get past the autoturrets quickly,” I said. “That kind of operation requires a lot of drones and a lot of patience, and that’s *if* they could get through the shield. They’d want to send Unity’s cytonics to stop you.”

“What good are cytonics if we have an inhibitor up?” FM asked.

“They’d still be able to affect us,” I said. “The inhibitor prevents cytonics without the key from using their powers from *within* the field. The other cytonics could still surround us and put up an inhibitor field of their own, preventing us from using the cytonic weapons or hyperjumping out, essentially trapping us.”

“We’d still have the autoturrets and the shield to defend us,” Jorgen said.

“Yes,” I said. “But they can also magnify each other’s abilities. Quilan can use his cytonic powers to knock people out with a concussion bolt. It’s what he did to me before I crashed your ship. The other cytonics can help him amplify it, creating a concussion field, similar to the way they join their minds together in an inhibitor. They’ve done it before during political protests.” They said they were quelling riots, trying to keep things peaceful. But knocking people out en masse always seemed violent to me.

“Why haven’t they done that to us already?” FM asked.

“I imagine they’re planning to,” I said. “But it wouldn’t let them get inside the shield, and it’s not easy to do. They’d have to surround the platform and maintain more or less the same positions while they do it. It’s not very applicable in an actual battle, where the enemy ships can chase you out of formation.”

“So we’d need ships in the air,” Jorgen said, “making sure they can’t get into formation to inhibit us or use the concussion field. We could tempt the other cytonics away from Rinakin, which would make it easier for you to rescue him.”

“Right,” I said. Even if they had Rinakin inside a taynix-powered inhibitor, I’d still have a better chance of rescuing him without the other cytonics to contend with.

“What exactly are we going to do to get their attention though?” FM asked. “It’ll take more than just firing the hyperweapon into the miasma.”

“Is there some Unity base we could fire on?” Jorgen said. “We don’t want to hit civilian targets, but if we could hit a military one—”

The idea of actually firing a mindblade weapon, even at a Unity target, was horrifying to me. “I don’t want to kill anyone unless we have to,” I said.

“Sure,” Jorgen said. “We could wait for them to fire first.”

“But there will be a lot of Unity people on their base who *aren’t* firing at us,” I said. “And I don’t want to shoot at them.”

The humans stared at me for a moment, like they could accept this but didn’t quite understand it.

They’d been at war their whole lives and were willing to make sacrifices I wasn’t ready for. I acted like I was hardened to the consequences, but I’d never killed anyone. I’d mostly shot people with tagging lasers—most of my time in starships had been spent playing games.

“What if we moved the platform into the miasma outside the Unity headquarters on Tower?” I asked. “It’s a tree with a huge population, so I don’t want to fire on it. But just *being* there would feel like a threat to Unity, more than any other tree but the Council tree. We can’t threaten that one, because we need to draw the cytonics farther away so I can go and get Rinakin if they leave him behind. But you don’t have to shoot at the tree. Just hyperjump there, maybe fire a warning shot with the hyperweapon into the miasma.”

“That’s a better idea,” Jorgen said. “You’re right. We don’t want to hurt anyone we don’t have to.”

“Good,” I said. “Meanwhile I could go in and get Rinakin, since he’d be relatively unguarded.”

“Unless they bring him with them,” FM said.

“They might,” I said. “But if they bring him to us, we can pivot the plan and I can come back to rescue him from their ships.”

“You shouldn’t go alone,” Jorgen said. “There are too many things that could go wrong with that plan, and you’d need backup.”

“I’ll be stealthier alone,” I said.

“But we work as a team,” Jorgen insisted, sparing a glance at FM. “You need someone there if things go wrong. At the very least that person could engage their taynix to come back here and tell us what’s happened to you, so we can organize a rescue effort.”

It was a good sign that they would consider rescuing me if something went wrong.

“I’ll have to stay here to communicate with the slugs in the platform,” Jorgen continued, “and Rig will need to stay too, but—”

“I’ll go,” Arturo said from the doorway.

I looked at him. Yesterday it had seemed like he was starting to trust me, but here he was volunteering to come along and babysit me. To make sure that I wasn’t going to have his people make a spectacle out of themselves and then grab Rinakin and run.

I could do that, I realized. Arturo’s presence wouldn’t stop me. But the whole point of going to Detritus in the first place was to find allies. Even if the rest of their people were making a different choice, these humans were still willing to work with me. So far, anyway.

Jorgen nodded. “That makes the most sense. Maybe you should take Nedd as well.”

“Alanik is right,” Arturo said. “The more people we bring, the less stealthy we are. But if we’re going into combat with a ship with a cytonic inhibitor, we’ll want at least two of us. If we find that it’s being guarded by a whole fleet, we can hyperjump back and regroup, but at least we’ll know more than we know now.”

“All right,” Jorgen said. “We’re going to need to get everyone together and talk this through. Alanik, would you go talk to the Independence pilots? See if they’ll join us? We could meet in the hangar. It’s the only space we’ve found so far that’s big enough to fit all of us together comfortably.”

I nodded.

I didn’t like putting any of them in danger, but if we succeeded it would be worth it.

Eighteen

An hour later, Rig, Jorgen, and I gathered in the control room again to use the hyperdrive. The other pilots—both human and UrDail—were all ready in their ships to be transported out to defend the platform. Rig had pulled the radio out of the wreckage of my ship and installed it in the control room, so he'd be able to talk to us once we were in the air.

“Here we go,” Jorgen said as Rig deposited Drape in the navigation system taynix box. “At least we've used hyperdrives before. Do we think this works the same way as the ones in our ships? I just send it a location and the whole platform will move?”

“The Superiority moves massive ships with hyperdrives,” I said. “So this platform shouldn't be a problem.”

“I only know how to send the slugs to places we both know,” Jorgen said. “I don't know where we're going.”

“I can give it coordinates,” I said. “If we're going to Tower, I want to be sure we're out of range of the tree so the autoturrets don't fire on it.” I wasn't going to be responsible for that many civilian casualties, and not just because it would be impossible to convince my people we meant well after something like that.

“Could you move the platform yourself?” Rig asked me. “It seems like you could do it without the help of the taynix.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But I'd rather not risk it.”

“Plus, we should test it with the hyperdrive,” Jorgen said. “That way we know if it works, in case I need to pull us out after Alanik is gone.” He turned to me. “Do you know what kind of range the guns have?”

“I'm going to overestimate it,” I said, “just to be safe. We want the guns shooting at the people who come after us, not at Tower. We can always move the platform a second time if we need to.”

I searched out across the planet, reaching past Industry and Spindle—where I lived—to Tower. It was far from other trees at the moment, leaving many branches of space out in the miasma to move the platform to. I needed it close enough to Tower that Unity saw it as a threat, but not so close that anyone got hurt, even aircraft that were passing through the busy airspace around the tree.

Better to be too far out than too close. I chose a place farther away and impressed the coordinates into my mind. And then, reaching out for Drape, I fed them to him.

Nothing happened.

“Why isn’t it working?” I asked.

“He’s not listening to you,” Jorgen said. “Probably because he doesn’t know you.”

That made sense. Most of the slugs back on Detritus hadn’t come when I called them either. And those that had only did so because I’d promised them food and friends.

“That’s a good thing,” Rig said. “It means not all the slugs can be used against us in combat.”

“You’re going to have to give him the command,” Jorgen said to Rig.

Rig bent down, speaking through the metal door of the box. “Go.”

There was the slightest hesitation.

And then that horrible loss of control again as I slipped into the negative realm without pulling myself through. I came back to where I was standing before, in the center of the control room.

The window facing the miasma suddenly went dark.

“Um, guys?” Kimmalyn called from the direction of the hangar. “You need to come see this.”

We all crowded out the door to the hangar. Pilots sat in their ships with their canopies open, looking out the enormous windows through the swirling miasma at the reaching branches of Tower, so named because it was the tallest of all the trees—long and lean, with branches that soared nearly straight upward into the sky. Here there were almost no horizontal buildings, only spirals built into the sides of the branches, all illuminated with hundreds

of thousands of city lights. The intricacies of the architecture were too tiny to see from this distance, but the overall effect was still impressive. I felt a little bit of pride at the way the humans gaped at it.

“That’s incredible,” Rig said.

“I thought that other tree was impressive,” Arturo added.

“Hollow is a ruin,” I said. “*This* is UrDail civilization.”

All around, I could see the Independence pilots sitting taller.

I was glad to see that I’d managed to place the platform far enough from the tree that the turrets weren’t shooting at it. But we were close enough to be visible from the branches, so people had to be taking notice.

Jorgen moved to his ship and fiddled with the radio. He picked up a channel talking about the weather patterns in the miasma, and then an air traffic control channel.

“—obstacle in the airspace on the duskward side. All flights avoid—”

“Yeah,” Nedd said. “They definitely noticed us.”

“What about the other cytonics?” FM asked.

Jorgen closed his eyes, and I waited while he reached out across the negative realm around ReDawn. “I can feel one of them,” he said. “Your friend Quilan?”

I followed his reach. He was right. Quilan was moving toward us. He’d moved so fast, he must have already been in a ship before we hyperjumped.

“We’ve got their attention,” Jorgen said. “All ships, time to get in the air. We’ll fly out of the hangar together. When we’re all ready, we’ll hyperjump everyone beyond the range of the autoturrets.”

Canopies lowered and ships lifted off the landing pad. Nedd hung back, pulling his taynix, Chubs, out of its box. We’d agreed that I should take a hyperdrive with me, in case Arturo and I were separated, and Naga would be able to find Chubs instantly. It would leave Nedd without a hyperdrive in the battle, so he’d have to rely on his flightmates to pull him in and out with light-lances, just like the Independence pilots.

“Okay, buddy,” Nedd said. “You’re going for an adventure with the nice alien lady.”

“Nedd,” Arturo said, like he thought he might offend me. But when Nedd handed over his taynix—a *hyperdrive*, a creature so valuable most people in the universe would kill for it—I couldn’t feel anything but awe.

They were really going to let me *take* one. And yes, I knew it was only because they thought it would help them follow me if I tried to escape them—and it probably would.

But still. I’d risked everything to find out the secret to these creatures. And now I was holding one in my hands.

It looked up at me, its face quizzical. “Alien lady!” it trilled.

“Get to your ship,” Jorgen said to Nedd. “Let’s *go*.”

The rest of the flight was already maneuvering their ships out the hangar doors and onto the surface of the platform. I set Chubs down in the space behind my seat, but moments later he was nuzzling my ankles down by the pedals. I didn’t relish the idea of his obstruction getting me shot down by the autofire, so I scooped him into my lap.

“How do they stand flying with you?” I asked him.

“Flying with you!” Chubs said. The taynix sounded like simple mimics, but they must understand at least some of what they said if they could learn each other’s names and then find one another through the negative realm.

Rig waited outside my ship while I checked the controls.

“We removed that thing that was intercepting signals as they came in,” Rig said. “We thought it might help Jorgen not be susceptible to cytonic interference.”

“No, my ship doesn’t block cytonic interference,” I said. “I think what you removed was an encryption device, but I won’t need that today anyway.”

“Oh,” Rig said. He looked embarrassed, but he didn’t need to be. He’d done a good job getting my ship back in flying condition, from what I could tell.

“Thank you for fixing this for me,” I said.

“Of course,” Rig said. “I’m confident about the damage repairs. Those were all completed ages ago. All I did last night was finish the reassembly. You should be fine in the air.”

He backed off, and I engaged my acclivity ring, lifting off the landing bay floor and flying out to meet the others in formation around Jorgen.

I let one of the humans hit me with their light-lance and hyperjump me beyond the autofire with the Independence pilots. I didn't know how much hyperjumping I was going to have to do, and I wanted to keep the number of jumps to a minimum when I could. Jorgen jumped us way out, giving the autofire a wider berth than we probably needed.

I checked the frequency Rinakin had been broadcasting from. His program had begun, and I could hear him opining about how the rift between our factions was the *real* problem for ReDawn. According to my ship's frequency locator, the signal was coming from the Council tree, exactly as expected.

That was good. I reached out with my cytonic senses, searching for Quilan, and found him closing on our location. I scrambled with my radio, trying to find the flight's general channel to let Jorgen know, but by the time I found it he was already giving the flights the bearing of the incoming enemy. "We're going to slow to point-five Mag," he said, "and fly toward Tower, away from the enemy."

The ships immediately followed his order. By putting our people on the opposite side of the platform from Quilan, Jorgen ensured that Quilan would have to pass around the platform to get to them. Jorgen would be able to fire the hyperweapon at him without worrying about clipping his own people in the blast.

The Independence flight joined us as we flew away from the platform toward the tree, slow enough that Quilan would easily catch us. He had to know we were up to something, but he wouldn't know what.

"Rig?" Jorgen said. "Do you have a visual on the enemy flight?"

"I do," Rig said. "They're closing on the platform."

Flying in the opposite direction, I couldn't see the incoming ships—which Quilan must have called in from the reinforcements at the Council tree—except on my sensor screen. But I *felt* the disturbance rippling through the negative realm as Jorgen contacted Boomslug in the platform control room and directed him to fire on the flight as they skirted the other side of the

platform. I scanned radio channels, catching bits of their transmissions as pilots screamed and swore and called their intentions to eject.

I didn't know if they all made it, but as Jorgen directed us to pivot around and fly below the platform again, I did see several pilots descending through the miasma with parachutes. Two of the ships collided with the far side of the platform.

A few more ships cut toward us, having avoided the mindblades. Unfortunately, Quilan was among them. *Alanik*, he said in my mind. *What are you doing?*

If this distraction was going to work, Quilan had to believe I meant business. *I'm doing what has to be done. Look what that did to your flight. What do you think it will do to your people on Tower?*

You've lost your mind, Quilan sent back.

That was good. I needed him to believe that I had.

"FM, Sentry, take point. Engage the enemy ships. T-Stall, Catnip, Nedder, back them up."

Five ships shot out in front of us, meeting with the enemy ships as they skirted around the platform outside the autofire zone. A number of Independence ships joined them.

I reached into the negative realm, checking on the Council tree. Nearly a quarter of the way around the planet, I could feel the dead space fading away, the area around the Council tree no longer covered by cytonic inhibitors.

Quilan had called in the other cytonics, realizing that the only way to stop the platform was to inhibit our ability to use cytonics in the area or lay down a concussion field.

"Jerkface," I said over the radio. "We are a go."

"Copy," Jorgen replied. "Do it."

"Don't forget about me," Arturo said. He flew close on my wing, like he wanted to be sure I remembered he was tagging along.

As if I could forget.

When I reached out for Naga's mind, I realized that Chubs had snuggled around my waist and fallen asleep.

In a starfighter. In the middle of a battle.

I was glad *someone* had been able to find some peace. It wasn't going to be Naga, as I reached out for its mind, giving it cytonic coordinates near the Council tree, but far enough away we wouldn't be immediately spotted.

"Tell Naga to go," I said to Arturo over the radio.

"Naga, go," he said.

Arturo's ship blinked out of existence, and I followed.

Nineteen

We passed through the negative realm and back into our reality, staring out into the purple darkness of the night sky. There were no stars peeking through the miasma, not this deep. Merely a cloudy darkness with patches of violet and red, like someone had put a multicolored blanket over the sun.

It was nearly dawn on this part of the planet. The Council tree stood out in the distance, the walkway lights of the city pathways blinking through the reddish cloud between us.

“Stars, I’m never going to get used to how strange this is,” Arturo said over the radio.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” I said.

“So scudding beautiful,” he agreed. “They make our trees look like infants. Those used to seem impressive to me. Most of our plants grow in vats.”

I reached out toward the Council tree. Quilan would know I’d disappeared, of course. He’d guess what I was doing. But the other cytonics were moving away from us now in the direction of Tower. They’d boarded ships in a hurry. Quilan was worried.

He was right to be. I’d left a group of humans with a superweapon outside one of ReDawn’s major population centers.

“The other cytonics are leaving,” I said. “Do you think Jerkface will keep his promise not to fire on the tree?” I was proud I remembered to use the callsign over the radio, though I still didn’t quite understand the purpose.

“He will,” Arturo said without hesitation. “Do you worry he won’t?”

Yes, I did. But admitting it felt like weakness.

“Your callsign,” I said. “It’s...Amphi?”

“Amphisbaena,” he said.

My pin didn’t translate it. “What does that mean?”

“It’s a dragon from Old Earth mythology. I picked it because it’s fearsome and it flies.”

“If I need a callsign I’d like something that flies,” I said. “That seems logical.”

“It doesn’t have to be something logical,” he said. “It can be anything you want.”

That seemed more difficult though. To pick from *anything*. “We don’t have creatures that fly on ReDawn. They wouldn’t survive the miasma.”

“Yeah, well, we never had real dragons either. There are other things that fly though, real or not. Like eagles. Or angels.”

“I’ve heard of those!” I said. “Flying humans from your old religions. When my people first met yours through the negative realm, some of them thought we were angels. Others thought we might be devils. Like angels but evil, right?”

“That’s true. But you’re more of an angel though, right? I don’t like thinking we’ve made a deal with the devil.”

He said it jokingly, but it was the kind of joke that had the bite of truth to it. “An angel then,” I said. “Definitely.”

“It suits you,” he said. “An angel with a great big sword, coming down to exact justice.”

I wasn’t sure that was what I was, but the idea of wielding a sword of justice against the Superiority was appealing, so long as it was a metaphorical one. I had no desire to get into an actual fight with such a crude weapon.

“One moment,” I said. “I’m going to check on Rinakin.”

I tuned my radio to the channel he was broadcasting from. He was still there, talking with one of the Unity orators about the trade benefits of capitulating to the Superiority. I ran the signal through my ship’s location device, then switched to my channel with Arturo.

“Rinakin is still broadcasting from the Council tree,” I said. “The signal is coming from the area of his old residence. His primary residence is far from here, but he has a place where he stayed when he was on the Council, before he lost the election.”

“What are we flying into?” Arturo asked. “Do they have gun emplacements? Other defenses?”

“No,” I said. “Putting weapons around the government headquarters would be far too aggressive. They’re trying to convince the Superiority that we’re peaceful. And Quilan and the others will have taken most of the in-residence air force with them as well.”

“Finally the Superiority has done us a favor,” Arturo said. “I’ll take it. Are we flying in or hyperjumping?”

“We shouldn’t get any closer in our ships,” I said. “Let’s stop our ships and leave them. We can leave Chubs behind as well. That way we’ll both be able to get back here if something goes wrong.”

“Last time I hyperjumped out of my ship, I left it on the other side of the universe,” Arturo said. “But you’re the flightleader on this mission. And I’d rather your friends down there didn’t see us coming.”

“Agreed,” I said, reaching out to Naga. I wound my way through the negative realm to the Council building, forming the coordinates in my mind. I’d traveled via hyperjump to Rinakin’s residence before, so I knew exactly where I was going.

And then I called Naga to follow as I jumped. The eyes fixed on me and I could feel their ire, like they wanted to swat me out of the sky. That was two hyperjumps in quick succession. I hoped I wouldn’t have to make many more.

We emerged in Rinakin’s study, next to the wide barkwood table. The room looked pristine, nothing like the mess it had been when Rinakin was working in here regularly. The shelves were empty, the table polished and clear.

Through the arched doorway I could hear a voice.

I grabbed Arturo by the arm and pulled him behind the door. Naga squirmed in her sling, trying to twist around to look up at me.

“Thank you, Cessil,” Rinakin was saying. “You don’t need to return for the tray. I’ll hold it until morning.”

“Of course,” another voice responded. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to call.”

Rinakin was no longer broadcasting. I scowled. He was being treated like a guest, not a prisoner. Maybe Nanalis wanted to keep that a secret from the staff as well, and Rinakin had decided to go along with it. But that seemed so...spineless. Rinakin wasn't the type to back down, even if they were threatening his family.

I heard the clicking of a spoon in a metal-lined cup. Rinakin was apparently taking *tea*.

Behind me Arturo was silent, but I could feel his breath against my neck. Every part of me was suddenly aware of him, standing so near. Goosebumps broke out over my skin.

"How do you want to play this?" Arturo whispered. The pin read his volume, translating his words so softly I could barely hear them.

The spoon clicked against a table, followed by silence.

"Wait here," I whispered back.

Arturo nodded. I was glad he didn't feel the need to keep me in sight every second. I didn't need him tending me like a child.

But I hesitated. He could jump away in a moment and leave me behind. I could follow, of course. I could jump right back to their planet and give them a piece of my mind, so it wasn't being left behind that frightened me.

It was losing their trust, I realized. It was being alone.

It was discovering that I always had been.

"You ready?" Arturo asked. He was watching me quizzically, like he didn't understand why I was hesitating.

"You'll be right here," I said.

He looked surprised. "Yes," he whispered, his voice barely a breath. "I'll be right here if you need me."

I was a cytonic. With the inhibitor gone, I was in power here. I didn't need some human watching my back.

But somehow it made me feel better anyway.

"Okay," I said, and I stepped around the door and into the hallway beyond. The corridor opened up into Rinakin's living space. It wasn't the most lavish place—Rinakin preferred function over ostentation. He sat on a cushioned chair formed with branches that twined together high above his head. He had

a wooden cup pressed to his lips, and he looked up at me in surprise as I approached.

I glanced around. If Rinakin was secretly a prisoner, they might be recording and monitoring him rather than posting obvious guards. I put a finger to my ear. *Are they listening?* I mouthed.

Rinakin shook his head and set down his cup. “We’re safe here,” he said. “Alanik, I’m so glad you’ve come back.”

“I can take you out of here,” I said. “I got rid of the other cytonics.”

“It isn’t safe,” Rinakin said. “Alanik, I’ve learned so much since I’ve been here. There isn’t time to explain, but you’re in terrible danger.”

Obviously. We were *both* in danger. “You need to come with me,” I said. “I’ll explain everything, but let me take you out of here before the Superiority realizes I’m here.”

“That’s just it,” Rinakin said. “*You* have to come with *me*. I have a ship we can use. I’ll tell you everything on the way.”

I blinked at him. Had he used the exact line on me that I’d used on him? And why didn’t he seem at all concerned about whether or not I’d rescued his family? “I really think we should have this conversation somewhere else.”

“Of course. As I said, I have a ship—”

Hairs rose on the back of my neck. Something was wrong here. “Rinakin,” I said. “Where did I go when I left?”

“What?” Rinakin said.

“Where did I go?” I asked. “When I left here. Where did you tell me to go?”

“You went to get fighters, and you brought them to rescue our allies at Hollow,” he said. “I heard all about it. You’ve done very well.”

“Okay,” I said. “Where’d I get the allies, Rinakin?”

“Alanik,” Rinakin said. “Time is of the essence—”

“I know,” I said. “*So tell me where you told me to go when we last spoke.*”

Rinakin sighed, and then he moved one of his hands to a device on his wrist. I took a step back, afraid it might be a weapon.

But he simply depressed a button.

My cytonic senses abruptly stopped, like I'd gone instantly blind. I was lost, alone, isolated, unable to reach out for the company of the endlessness of *everything*. Rinakin had a taynix box here somewhere. He'd activated a cytonic inhibitor.

"You're not Rinakin," I said, mostly for the benefit of Arturo.

The person who was not Rinakin smiled.

Twenty

“You’re not Rinakin, but you look just like him,” I said. “How are you doing that?”

He smiled at me again and leaned back in his chair, like he wasn’t worried at all about what I was going to do next. That meant he probably had backup on the way, perhaps alerted by the inhibitor, or by another button on his wristband. From there they’d be able to drag me off to their ship, and then to the Superiority.

I hoped Arturo would stay silent. If they didn’t find him, at least he and Naga would be able to return to the platform if I didn’t find a way out of this. I didn’t expect them to mount a rescue, but at least—

A crash sounded from the office behind me, and I closed my eyes.

Not-Rinakin stood. “Did you bring someone with you?” he asked. He edged around me, keeping his back to the wall as he moved down the hallway so as not to turn it on me or the source of the noise.

I should try to make a run for it—

But I couldn’t leave Arturo to be taken. I followed not-Rinakin down the hall. Maybe we could surround him. Maybe we could—

Not-Rinakin turned into the doorway to the office, where little bits of a piece of one of Rinakin’s decorative vases lay in fragments on the floor. Not-Rinakin had barely taken a step into the room when he took a punch to his knee and an elbow to his gut, and went flying onto his backside on the hallway floor.

I moved toward him to kick him while he was down, but not-Rinakin lifted his hands in surrender. “Human! So aggressive! Stop, please!”

Arturo stood in the doorway, shaking his hand. “*Ouch*,” he said. “That scudding *hurt*. How did Spensa make it look so easy?”

“Easy!” Naga added.

Not-Rinakin tried to scramble to his feet, but Arturo raised his fist, and he sank to the ground again, protecting his face. I grabbed his wrist and pulled off his bracelet.

With a click of a button the inhibitor was gone, and the universe came to life around me again, like it had suddenly burst into song. With a second click the image over not-Rinakin's body dissolved, revealing a dione with bright crimson skin.

"Oh, scud," Arturo said.

This time I kicked the dione. Hard. They moaned and clutched their side.

"Where is Rinakin?" I asked. We didn't have much time, but with the inhibitor down we could get out much faster.

"You won't find him here," the dione said. "They took him away not long ago."

Oh *no*. I put a hand on Arturo's shoulder and sent Naga the coordinates of the cockpit of my ship in the miasma. She was either getting used to me or was very aware of the danger we were in, because she went without Arturo's permission this time.

"Ouch," Arturo said. He was squished in the cargo space behind my seat in the cockpit, his head pressed against the roof. "This is not ideal."

"Better than being taken by the Superiority," I said.

"Taken!" Naga said from the side of my seat.

Chubs sat on my dash, looking at us curiously.

"Think you can return me to my ship?" Arturo asked.

I gave Naga a clear picture of Arturo's cockpit. His ship had drifted away a bit, but I could still see it through my canopy, floating off to the side. Arturo and Naga disappeared, and a moment later the ship started flying toward mine. Chubs settled on my lap.

"Are you okay?" Arturo asked.

"I'm fine," I said. "How's your hand?"

"It's all right, though I think my ego is bruised. Nedd always said we ought to have more training in hand-to-hand combat. I guess he was right."

"It did the job," I said. "Superiority operatives apparently *really* don't like it when you punch them. I still have no idea how he managed to look like

Rinakin.” I still had the bracelet in my hand, and I set it on the floor next to my seat to be examined later.

“About that,” Arturo said. “Spensa had a ship she found on Detritus. It had holographic technology that let her pretend to be you.”

I remembered FM and Jorgen saying something about that. “And the Superiority stole it?”

“I think they must have gotten their hands on her ship. They already knew she’d been using a hologram to look like you, so they would have been searching for it intentionally.”

That was a terrifying thought. Though it was also startling to learn that Spensa had technology even the Superiority didn’t know about. They always seemed like they knew everything.

“Poor M-Bot,” Arturo said. “I’m kind of surprised he didn’t self-destruct or something. Spensa is going to be *pissed*.”

“She’s not the only one,” I said.

“I’m checking on the others over the radio,” Arturo said. “Scud, their situation sounds hot.”

It would be. We’d sent all the cytonics Unity had to offer right at them. I hadn’t heard from Jorgen. He said it was easier for him to contact me when I was near, but I hoped he could manage it even across the distance. I reached out to him now—the Unity cytonics had reached them, but they hadn’t managed to get the field up.

Status report? I asked him.

We’re holding out, Jorgen said. We’ve kept the cytonics out of position so far, so they haven’t been able to get up their inhibitors or that concussion thing. They’re too busy not getting shot down. Did you find Rinakin?

Working on it.

Jorgen fell silent, probably fully occupied dealing with Quilan and his people.

“We have to hurry and find Rinakin,” I said. “If they just left to take him to the Superiority, he could still be in transport. Let me see if I can find their ship.”

I closed my eyes, reaching across the miasma around the tree. It was easier to find a huge field of cytonic inhibition rather than one ship across the whole of the planet.

“Angel?” Arturo said. “We have incoming.”

I opened my eyes and scanned my proximity sensors. He was right. A contingent of ships was headed right for us. Either they’d scanned and found us, or Quilan had reported our whereabouts.

I needed to focus on finding the ship holding Rinakin. “You want to take point on this one?”

“Gladly,” Arturo said. “Evasive maneuvers.”

“Copy,” I said, mirroring Arturo’s movements as he cut a path away from the incoming ships. I tried to focus on the negative realm, reaching out with my senses, canvassing the area for dead spots.

There. Above the reaching branches of the tree, kilometers up in the miasma, was a tiny spot I couldn’t feel, like a dead nerve on an otherwise healthy patch of skin.

“Found it,” I said to Arturo. “Closer to the tree and *up*.”

“You want to take the lead now?” Arturo asked.

“Yes.” I accelerated and shot out in front of him, veering sharply upward so fast that my gravitational capacitors engaged, taking the brunt of the g-forces. The incoming ships changed course a moment later, following and gaining on us.

“I don’t know what kind of maneuvers you’re used to,” Arturo said. “And I’m sure we call them different things. So I’ll follow you and we’ll try not to get shot, okay?”

“Yes, that,” I said, and the ships behind us came into range and started to fire. Off my left wing, Arturo rolled his ship and pulled a tight series of dodging maneuvers I’d never seen before. But I had tricks of my own. Three ships came at me, destructors all firing at once, and I cut to the side, weaving between the projectiles, and then rolled upward again, still aiming for that dead patch in the sky.

“*Nice*,” Arturo said. “You’re going to have to teach me that one.”

“Same to you,” I said. The varsity leagues would die to get their hands on moves none of the other teams had seen before. Maybe *that* was how I was going to sell this alliance to the rest of my people. If they couldn’t see the sense in saving themselves from the Superiority, they could always be counted on to want their team to win.

“On your right!” Arturo said. I dodged before I saw the destructor fire, and it narrowly missed pinging my shield.

“We’re coming up on that dead spot,” I said.

There it was. The ship Quilan had used to take Rinakin. An UrDail ship with a cytonic inhibitor inside.

“They’ll have taynix in there,” I said to Chubs. “Should we collect you some new friends?”

“Friends!” Chubs said, hugging my stomach like he was enjoying the warmth.

If the taynix couldn’t hyperjump out of those boxes, he wouldn’t be able to go in and get them anyway. We were going to have to disable the ship and then grab it with my light hook to pull it in.

The ships behind us must have alerted it though, because it was flying away at high speed. “Accelerating,” I said to Arturo.

“Right behind you,” Arturo said, and we shot off after the escaping ship, the others close on our tails. I admired the way Arturo somehow managed to pull the most elaborate maneuvers, all while staying near enough to back me up when it got too hot.

I was every bit as good at evasive flying as he was, maybe better. But Arturo was something I’d never been—a real team player.

I closed in on the ship with the cytonic inhibitor, matching its speed. “I need to be sure he’s in there,” I said. “I’m going in close.”

“I’ll cover you,” Arturo said, and he did, blasting one of the ships on my tail with his destructors.

I cut a path toward the ship, pulling even with its left wing. The miasma turned my canopy into a blur of violet, but I held my ship steady. At this close range and at such high speed, it would be easy to collide and knock us both out of the sky.

The ship was much larger than mine, with a wider canopy. There in the pilot's seat was another dione, recognizable by the bright blue skin under their flight helmet. I pulled farther forward as destructor fire rained over us—the ships behind us were apparently more interested in taking me down than they were worried about hitting their allies. The larger ship cut to the side, trying to evade me—

But not before I caught a glimpse into the hold, where a second dione sat next to Rinakin, who was bound and gagged.

“He's there,” I said to Arturo. I followed as the ship turned a wheel roll to try to shake me. I stayed firm on its tail.

“Orders?” Arturo asked.

“Hang on,” I said, and I fired my light hook at the spinning ship, trying to grab it.

My hook connected, but the other ship's momentum pulled me to the side, right into a line of destructor fire. My shield took a hit, and I felt the impact in my bones.

“Angel,” Arturo said, “I've got three on my tail. I'm going to have to pull away to shake them.”

“Do it,” I said.

“You've got more on you,” he said. “Watch out—”

The destructor fire continued, and I was forced to drop my light hook and take a dive beneath the diones' ship to avoid losing my shield. “I lost them,” I said to Arturo.

“Stay alive,” Arturo said.

I had to ground that ship, but I couldn't do that way out here away from the trees. And certainly not with so many ships on our tail.

“I'm going to take them on,” I said. “Don't let them get away with Rinakin.” I pulled one of my favorite maneuvers from the junior leagues, a tight turn where my ship pivoted and my gravitational capacitors groaned and the weight of the universe seemed to bear down on my body—

And then it lifted, and I opened fire right in the faces of the enemy ships. They dodged to the side, but I pegged the shield of one and then caught another in a long burst of fire. It rolled, trying to avoid me, but its boosters

went up in smoke and then the ship exploded, blooming like an opening flower.

The ship started to drop, beginning an uncontrolled descent, still flying forward with the force of its momentum.

The pilot didn't eject.

I'd killed them.

"On your right," Arturo said, and he opened fire, driving back two ships. "Rinakin's ship is just ahead."

Right. Focus. I gripped the control sphere much tighter than I'd been trained to do, trying to ignore the panic rising in my throat.

I killed someone.

They were alive before, and now they were dead.

I did that.

Me.

"There it is," Arturo said. As if he sensed my hesitation, he flew past me, chasing after the ship. "Plan?"

Bile rose in my throat. I had to get out of here. I had to get out of the sky before—

Destructor fire shot over my left wing, and I startled. I slammed forward with my boosters, picking up speed, joining Arturo.

That was enough. I had to end it now. I gained on the ship holding Rinakin and shot at it again with my light hook, which connected, wrapping around the fuselage.

With my light hook in place, I did the only thing I could think of to do.

I reached into the negative realm, called to Naga behind me, and pulled.

Twenty-one

We ripped out of the negative realm and skidded across the metal surface of Wandering Leaf. Our momentum died abruptly in the negative realm, but our boosters propelled us forward anew as we emerged again. I cut their power, keeping my eyes on the ship that held Rinakin as it skidded toward the base of one of the autoturrets and crashed to a stop.

My ship skidded a bit, grinding the landing gear against the metal of the platform, but it didn't sustain too much damage. I scrambled out, tucking Chubs under my arm in case I needed to hyperjump. I didn't know what the diones would do with Rinakin, but I guessed if they were his guards they'd be less averse to violence than not-Rinakin had been.

Sure enough, the canopy opened and one of the diones pointed a pistol at me and fired.

I lunged away behind the wing of their ship. They weren't going to mess around, so neither would I. I grabbed coordinates for the spot right behind the dione's seat and sent them to Chubs.

We appeared directly behind the dione with the gun, and right in front of the other very surprised dione, who let out a shriek.

Arturo's ship had slid farther than mine, and he climbed out and raced toward us, but before he could arrive I put a hand on each dione and sent Chubs the coordinates I knew best.

We appeared moments later in the living area in my home on Spindle. Several Unity operatives looked up at me from where they were playing a card game. They could do nothing but watch as I shoved both diones forward and then slipped into the negative realm again, directing Chubs to bring us both back to the surface of Wandering Leaf.

I ducked into the hangar to find Arturo staring at me wide-eyed. His voice was muffled by his helmet, but still audible. "I was going to try to punch them again."

“Thank the wind it didn’t come to that,” I said, and climbed into the back of the ship, searching for Rinakin.

The oxygen generators were still working in here, so thankfully he hadn’t gotten a whiff of the miasma. Rinakin looked up at me in shock, though he must have assumed I was the one chasing down his ship. One side of his head was red and swelling, possibly from the impact on landing.

I grabbed the gag and pulled it off of his mouth.

“Tell me something so I know it’s really you,” I said.

“Our first lesson in cytonics,” Rinakin said. “I tried to teach you to meditate, and you told me you thought it was a waste of time.”

That was true. I still got impatient with it, but now at least I saw the purpose behind it. Rinakin looked over my shoulder at Arturo. “Did you do it? Did you truly make an alliance with the humans?”

“I’m working on it,” I said. “Come on. We need to go check on them.”

I helped him forward and untied his wrists. He was favoring one of his arms, though I didn’t know if that was from the impact or rough handling by his captors. Arturo stepped to his other side and helped me guide him through the hangar and down the tunnels toward the control room. As we passed beneath the skylights I scanned the sky for ships, but it was too dark for me to see any. As we neared the control room the platform shuddered and the miasma parted off to the side, the mindblade weapons slicing the miasma into ribbons.

Rinakin stared in the direction of the fire. “I think I’ve missed a few things.”

“You have,” I told him. “There was someone pretending to be you, making speeches about how you were joining the cause of progress.”

“That I did know,” Rinakin said. “My captors played the broadcasts for me. That was...unpleasant to listen to.”

“I don’t have time to explain everything,” I said as we reached the control room door. “I need to get out there and help the humans.”

“You’re back,” Rig said, turning from the main control panel to look at us with surprise.

“This is Rinakin,” Arturo said, helping him inside. Rinakin slid to the floor next to one of the defense system boxes, holding his arm.

“Jerkface,” Rig said into his headset. “Alanik’s mission was a success.”

“Good to hear,” Jorgen said over the radio.

“Way to go, Alanik!” I could hear Nedd say.

“Did anyone follow you?” Rig asked.

“No,” Arturo said. “Alanik took care of them.”

He meant the diones. I hadn’t killed them. I’d simply marooned them. Not like that ship I shot out of the sky. It would have reached the core by now, crashed there, entombing the body of the person who’d burned alive inside.

Arturo put a hand on my shoulder, pulling me outside. “Are you okay?” he asked in a low voice. “You’re shaking.”

My whole body was trembling, and though I tried to get a grip on myself I couldn’t make it stop. “I’m fine,” I said.

“The hell you are,” Arturo said. “What’s wrong?”

He didn’t know. I’d shot someone out of the sky and their ship *exploded* before they could eject and I *killed* them and he didn’t think anything of it. Probably more people had died in the battle here at the platform. I could hear Rig talking to Jorgen over the radio inside. We needed to get up there.

The world seemed unstable though, like the platform was wobbling in place.

“Talk to me,” Arturo said.

“We need to go—”

“And we will. But first tell me what’s wrong.”

He was probably worried I knew something he didn’t, that I had some plan I was hiding from him. “I swear, I’m not going to betray you.”

“I know,” he said. “I believe you.”

He seemed like he meant it, but he was still looking at me with concern. If he didn’t think I was going to betray them—

Arturo’s grip tightened on my shoulder. “Alanik—”

“They didn’t eject,” I said. It felt good to say it, like I was confessing some sin. “I shot down that ship and the pilot didn’t eject.”

“Oh,” Arturo said. He looked down at the ground. “You’d never killed before?”

“No,” I said. “We play *games* in our ships. We tag each other with *lasers*. I don’t know what I’m doing out there! And I *shot* someone down, and I *killed* them. And it shouldn’t matter, because they were the *enemy*, but—”

“I used to think like that,” Arturo said. “Before we knew who the Superiority were, when they were still a faceless evil. It didn’t hurt to kill them. Scud, it felt *good*. But now that I’ve seen their faces, some of them anyway—” He shook his head. “I don’t know. It’s not as easy anymore. Maybe it never should have been.”

“Easy seems better,” I said. “When the enemy shoots at you, you have to shoot back.”

“Then what you did was justified,” Arturo said. “But it *feels* terrible.”

“Yes,” I said. “It does.”

Saying that out loud steadied me a little. Arturo dropped his hand from my shoulder. I wished he hadn’t, because that was steadying me too.

“Can you fight?” Arturo asked.

If I didn’t, and some of my allies didn’t make it, I would never forgive myself. “Yes,” I said. “Yes, I want to help.”

Arturo leaned against the doorframe to the control room. “Jorgen needs to give the order to get back inside the platform. We got what we came for and now we need to *go*.”

“They’re working on it,” Rig said. “But a new flight of Unity ships showed up that’s doing a better job protecting the cytonic ships. If they don’t keep the enemy moving, the cytonics are going to get the inhibitor up and then we won’t be *able* to leave. They could use your help.”

The humans could hyperjump, but it would take precious minutes for them to collect all the Independence ships. They’d helped us do this, and we couldn’t leave them behind.

“Come on,” I said to Arturo. “Let’s get to our ships.”

We ran through the tunnels and the hangar. Arturo followed me to my ship, checking the damage to the landing gear as I climbed inside. He leaned

on my canopy and put a hand on my arm again. “Are you sure you can do this?”

If he were anyone else I would have shaken him off, but Arturo wasn’t being condescending. He was genuinely concerned.

“I’ll be fine as soon as I’m in the air,” I said.

He nodded. I thought maybe he respected that answer. “Good. Let’s get up there.”

Another burst of mindblades ripped through the space around the platform. I didn’t want to teleport us into the path of that, so I turned on my radio as Arturo and I hovered off the platform.

“—got ’em,” Rig was saying. “Jerkface, the enemy is circling around to your position.”

“Copy, Rig,” Jorgen replied. “I see them. Sentry, FM, head them off. I’ll ask some of the Independence pilots to help you.”

“We’re back, Jerkface,” I said. “This is Amphi”—I still couldn’t remember the rest of his name—“and...Angel.”

“Ooooh,” Sadie said. “Angel. That’s pretty.”

“Told you,” Arturo said.

I smiled. “Where should we jump to?”

“Welcome, Angel,” Jorgen said. “Come out on the treeward side. Your friend Quilan is over there with a bunch of Unity ships protecting him. The cytonic ships all seem to have gotten into position now.”

Which meant we needed to get out there immediately or we could be trapped.

“Copy that,” I said. I picked a spot between us and Tower, and beckoned Naga along with me as I hyperjumped.

I realized too late that I should have used Chubs. The malevolence of the eyes felt stronger than ever. We were angering them, drawing their wrath. They struck a chord with something primal that told me they meant me harm, and someday they were going to snatch me out of the sky and exact vengeance.

Arturo and I emerged from the negative realm in the airspace between the platform and Tower, and several ships immediately turned toward us.

Alanik, Quilan said. Surrender your humans and I can argue for your pardon.

They'd figured out who I was working with. I wondered if they'd gotten close enough to get a look, or just deduced.

No, I told him. But I'll accept your surrender anytime.

Why would we offer a surrender when we're winning?

"Cover me," I said to Arturo.

"On it," Arturo replied. I went into evasive maneuvers, diving past several of the ships as they came at us, pushing toward Quilan.

I reached into the negative realm to retort, and caught snatches of his voice.

—have your humans— Quilan was saying. —to the Superiority—come and get—

By the branches. He was going to turn us in *right now*. He had his bargaining chip—me, Rinakin, and our human allies—all out here in the open. He must have decided that was enough.

"Jerkface," I said over the radio. "Quilan is calling in the Superiority. I don't know how fast they can get here, but—"

—holding out on us— the person Quilan was talking to responded. *—measures, effective immediately—should have been more forthcoming—*

Quilan's voice sounded panicked as he answered. *—just found them —told you everything we—have been perfectly loyal—*

"I don't think it's going the way Quilan anticipated," I told Jorgen. "But I don't think it's going to turn out well for us either." At least if he was talking mind-to-mind he wasn't concentrating on the concussion field, though they might not need him for the inhibitor.

"It rarely does," Jorgen said. "Any idea what we're facing?"

"No," I said. "But—"

Alanik, Quilan said. This is your fault. You brought this down on us. Surrender now, or—

Shut up, I told Quilan, and he did, though I couldn't shake how *frightened* he felt out of my head.

What had the Superiority threatened him with that had him so shaken?

At that exact moment the universe went silent again. Tucked around my waist, Chubs let out a whimper.

“They’ve got the inhibitor up!” I said. “We need to get them out of formation or we can’t hyperjump out of here.” We could leave the platform, I supposed, and run for our lives. But we’d still need time for the humans to light-lance all the Independence ships. We might not all make it.

“Jerkface,” Nedd said over the radio. “We lost another one of the Independence ships. Kimmalyyn had to fall back to reignite her shield, and we couldn’t keep them from—”

“Boomslug can’t fire the hyperweapon as long as that inhibitor is up,” Rig said. “I don’t know what else to do to help.”

The longer we let them maintain that formation, the longer Quilan would have to concentrate on getting a concussion field over the area, knocking out the Skyward and Independence pilots so they could be picked out of the air one by one.

And then on my sensor readout, something enormous appeared in the sky above us. I tilted my ship upward to get a better look through the canopy.

It was a Superiority ship. A battleship, judging by the enormous cannon pointed right at us.

At me and my allies. At my *people* on Tower.

“Jerkface?” Nedd said. “Are you seeing this?”

“I’m seeing it,” Jorgen said.

“Is that the one from Detritus?” FM asked.

“Looks like it,” Jorgen responded.

“I think so too,” Rig said. “That means those are planetary weapons.”

“What does *that* mean?” I asked.

“It means ReDawn is in serious trouble,” Jerkface said. “Unless we can figure out how to take that ship out. Rig, do you think the mindblades are up to the task?”

“I don’t know,” Rig said. “We can’t use them with the inhibitor up.”

“We need to get those cytonics out of formation *now*,” Jorgen said.

“T-Stall and Catnip are trying to run one off,” Nedd said. “They need backup.”

Getting just one of the ReDawn cytonics out of position would disturb the inhibitor. I couldn't sense them anymore through the oppressive silence. "Where are the cytonic ships?" I asked.

"I see them," Arturo said. "Follow me."

"Copy that," Jerkface said. "All Skyward pilots are clear to provide backup."

Arturo took off beneath the platform and I followed. The Superiority wasn't going to extract the humans. They were going to shoot them down, right here near a population center. I didn't know how much damage that cannon could do.

And I didn't want to find out.

"Guys," Rig said over the radio. "You're going to want to listen to this."

Rinakin's voice came over the general channel. "People of ReDawn," he said. "You've all been deceived."

"Is that broadcasting generally?" Jorgen asked.

"Yes," Rig said. "He's broadcasting to the planet."

"This is a dark day in our history," Rinakin said. "Unity operatives kidnapped me and then had a Superiority agent take my place, giving you a message I myself would never give. The Superiority has turned on us, and now a battleship threatens Tower. But we will not give in, and we are not without support."

Oh. I saw what Rinakin was doing. I held my breath, following Arturo as he sped away from the platform out into the miasma. I could see the ships ahead now, T-Stall and Catnip contending with a group of Unity fighters.

"For today marks the historic reunification of our alliance with the humans," Rinakin said. "They've come to help us in our hour of need."

"Um, Jerkface?" Rig said. "Rinakin wants me to put you on—"

"On the radio?" Jorgen said. "What does he want me to—scud, okay, do it."

Above us, the cannon started to glow with an ominous blue light.

"They're going to fire on us," FM said. "We don't know how long the shield on the platform will hold, so we'd better be fast."

Arturo and I reached the ships and joined T-Stall and Catnip in a barrage of destructor fire. The other ships returned fire, while another ship darted away toward the platform.

That would be the ship with the cytonic, then. “This one,” I said to Arturo, then flipped back to the general channel.

“It is my pleasure to introduce to you Jorgen Weight, human of the planet Detritus, whose people have long struggled under Superiority oppression.”

“Um,” Jorgen said. “Hi. That’s me.”

An alert blinked—Arturo trying to get me on our private channel. I switched over. “Let’s split up and come at them from either side,” he said.

“Done,” I said, and we veered away from each other, still rocketing toward the ship with the cytonic.

“How long have you been fighting for your lives against the weapons of the Superiority?” Rinakin asked.

That was good. Put an emphasis on their violence. Pull the curtain back on their false peace.

“My whole life,” Jorgen said, sounding more sure of himself now. “Three generations, in fact. They beat us back, made us live underground. They’ve been trying to exterminate us. But we’re still here, and we’re still fighting.”

“Yeah, Jerkface!” Nedd said.

The Superiority ship let loose a blast from the cannon. The shield around the platform sputtered and sparked, but it held—for the moment at least.

“ReDawn is with you,” Rinakin said.

“Let it be so,” I said to myself.

“Let it be so!” Chubs repeated.

Arturo and I both opened fire on the ship with the cytonic. They dodged, but we wove with them, catching them with one blast, then two, then three. Their shield blinked out and I fired off one last hit—

And missed as I dodged a torrent of destructor fire coming at me from the side.

Quilan. *They’re going to destroy us all, Alanik*, he said. He had the key to speak inside the inhibitor, but I couldn’t answer because I didn’t. *And it’s your fault.*

He fired on me and I dodged again. I'd lost track of the first cytonic ship, so I hoped Arturo still had it in his sights. Quilan bore down on me. He was bound and determined to blow me out of the sky.

But I wasn't going to let him best me. I executed a swivel turn and unloaded my destructors directly at his cockpit.

His shield fizzled and dissipated. His ship continued flying toward mine, so close that I could see him through the canopy as I fired the final shot. He pulled his nose up—

But he was too late. The destructor blast took off the nose of his ship and cleaved the cockpit in two. His ship plummeted out of the sky.

He didn't eject. I didn't think he could have survived that blast, but even if he had he wouldn't survive the fall.

He was the enemy. It should feel *good* to kill him.

It's not as easy anymore, Arturo had said. Maybe it never should have been.

I pulled up just in time to see Arturo, T-Stall, and Catnip all firing at the ship with the cytonic. Both the pilot and the cytonic ejected, and the ship fell out of the sky.

The universe buzzed to life around me.

The Superiority ship fired again. The shield around the platform blinked out of existence.

One more shot and it would be gone.

"Hyperweapon is back online!" Rig said. "Jerkface, should we hyperjump out?"

"If you do," I said, "can you be sure the Superiority ship won't fire on the tree?"

"Alanik is right," Jorgen said. "We need to finish this if we can, for ReDawn."

For ReDawn?

"For ReDawn!" Chubs said.

They were going to stay and help us. Even at so great a risk.

"Hang on, Rig," Jorgen said. "I think we need to get the cannon closer."

“You’re going to put the platform *closer* to the enormous gun?” FM said. “Isn’t that giving them an easier target?”

“I don’t want to miss,” Jorgen said. “Is the hyperdrive ready?”

“Ready,” Rig said.

And then the platform disappeared and resurfaced up in the sky, blocking my view of the battleship. The autoturrets fired.

“Weapons system ready,” Rig said. “Scud, they’re charging the gun again, Jerkface, so make it quick. I don’t think the turrets are going to be enough.” I lifted my nose and shot up through the atmosphere, cresting the edge of the platform just in time to see the mindblades ripple through the battleship, cutting the metal into long, thin strips. The cannon shattered apart, the energy it had been building crackling back on itself.

“Scud! Someone just landed outside,” Rig said. “I think we must have lost our inhibitor when the shield went down.”

“Jerkface?” FM said, sounding terrified.

“All ships, converge on Wandering Leaf,” Jorgen said. “Bounce protocol.”

I didn’t wait for him to send in the others. I sent an invitation to Naga and then prompted Chubs to hyperjump inside the hangar.

Another ship had landed ahead of me and I jumped out and followed its pilot toward the command room. It was a varvax—a crustacean species I’d learned about when I was preparing to go to Starsight—but it looked so strange out of its ship, walking in some kind of armor apparatus that looked like it was made from different types of stone.

I ran toward it, though what I was going to do against a creature in armor I had no idea. I knew less about hitting people than Arturo did.

The creature reached the doorway, far ahead of me.

“Boomslug, help!” Rig called from inside.

A torrent of force emanated from the command room and cut the armor of the varvax into pieces. The creature inside the armor scuttled out, and then disappeared into the negative realm again.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Rig said. He reached the doorway of the command room and knelt to pick up Boomslug. “I am going to get you a whole crate of caviar, Boomslug. I promise.”

Boomslug nuzzled Rig, looking quite pleased with himself. And then FM came running up and threw her arms around both of them, knocking them hard against the doorframe.

“Don’t squeeze the slugs!” Jorgen said, running up right behind me. No one listened to him.

Arturo came up beside me, staring up through a skylight at the battleship that was breaking into pieces above us.

“Jerkface,” Sadie called from her ship. “We have incoming!”

I looked out through the entrance of the hangar and I could see them—numerous UrDail ships painted a bright blue.

More Independence fighters coming to our aid.

“We did it,” I said. The Superiority would surely come after us again, but we weren’t alone anymore.

Twenty-two

“I don’t know if we need the backup,” Jorgen said, looking over Sadie’s shoulder at her sensor screen. “The Unity forces are retreating.”

“Thank the stars,” Arturo said.

I concurred. From inside the command center, I could hear Rinakin resuming his broadcast about the strength of ReDawn and her ability to resist. He seemed to be using the word progress a lot. I bet Nanalis was going to love that, but Rinakin’s broadcast would make certain that blame for the Superiority’s appearance fell squarely where it belonged.

“He’s going to want to parade you around at the Council tree,” I said to Jorgen. “You’re the hero of ReDawn now, apparently.”

Jorgen looked horrified, and I laughed.

“Hey,” Nedd said, coming up and slapping Jorgen on the back. “If you want, you can tell them I’m Jorgen Weight. I’ve always wanted to be in a parade.”

Jorgen looked like he might consider it. “We need to report to Cobb,” he said. “Tell Command we’ve been successful here. After that, hopefully we can go home. If I can talk some sense into my parents, maybe they’ll even send an official diplomatic coalition instead of a flight of pilots.”

Actual aid, and a renewal of our old alliance. I’d gone to the humans looking for help—but until this moment I don’t think I’d let myself believe help would actually come.

“Thank you,” I said to Jorgen, “for not abandoning my people to the Superiority when the inhibitor went down.”

Jorgen looked confused. “Of course,” he said. “That’s what an alliance is. It means we protect each other.”

So many of my own people backed down at the first sign of inconvenience that I’d expected the same of the humans. They could have left and waited

out whatever that ship would have done to Tower in retribution. They'd risked their own lives to save *my* people. They'd done it again and again.

I'd misjudged Jorgen. He was an incredible leader, and it was a privilege to fly with him.

"Yes," I said. "That's what an alliance is."

Jorgen still looked confused, like this was so obvious it didn't bear saying. "I'm going to try to reach Cobb on the hypercomm," he said. "We need to warn them about what the Superiority almost did to the people who were supposedly working with them." He ducked into the command center.

"I told you he wasn't going to turn on you," Arturo said. He leaned against the corridor wall, watching me.

"You did tell me that," I said. "But you also said you thought *I* was going to turn on you."

"I said I *didn't* think you would," Arturo said. "But that it was a possibility."

"I seem to remember you being very threatening," I returned. "And quite concerned."

Arturo grinned. "Fine. Maybe neither of us is a perfect judge of character."

"If I'd really believed you all weren't trustworthy," I said, "I never would have asked for your help to begin with."

"That's probably true," Arturo said. "Though did you have other options?"

"Not good ones," I admitted. "So thank you."

Arturo's expression grew serious. "You shot down that other cytonic," he said. "You knew him?"

I could still see Quilan's face as he bore down on me, destructors firing.

"I did," I said. "He was going to kill me, and I got him first."

"Right," Arturo said. "That seems like it should make it easier, doesn't it? But I've never had to shoot down someone I talked to. Someone I knew."

I wanted to say the world was better off without Quilan in it, but I wasn't sure that was true. My people had so few cytonics. We needed every one.

Maybe Rinakin was right. There was a place for persuasion. Quilan's death was a waste, of a leader as well as a cytonic. Killing him had been

necessary, but everyone would have been better off if we could have persuaded him to change his mind to fight for our side.

Now he could never change his mind, and there was a kind of tragedy to that.

“I’m not glad he’s dead,” I said, “but I’m glad I’m still alive. I wish it had all gone differently, but I don’t know what I would have changed, or if I even had the power to change it.”

“You had the power to do something really good for your people and ours,” Arturo said. “Does that make it feel better?”

I thought about that. “I don’t know,” I said. “But I don’t regret it, I know that.”

Arturo nodded. “Yeah. Neither do I.”

He held my gaze for a moment, and something about the way he looked at me was thrilling and terrifying all at once. I followed after Jorgen into the control room.

Rinakin was finishing his broadcast. He slumped against the control panel, looking exhausted. His daughter stood by his side, urging him to come rest in one of the bunk rooms.

“We need to get him medical attention,” she told me.

“I know,” I said. “If the Independence medic can’t care for him, we’ll take him to a hospital soon.” Rinakin’s injuries didn’t look life threatening, but he should still receive treatment.

Jorgen leaned against the wall by the hypercomm. The purple and orange slug from his ship was now in there, and he tapped his fingers on the control panel, waiting.

“Admiral Cobb will speak to you now,” someone said, and then Cobb spoke through the hypercomm.

“Jorgen,” he said. “It’s about time you reported in.”

Jorgen frowned. Cobb had told him *not* to call, hadn’t he? Because he was trying to stay in good with the politicians, and not let anyone know he was involved in Skyward Flight’s desertion.

“We’ve been successful here,” Jorgen said. “We were able to save Alanik’s people and establish an alliance with them.”

FM and Rig appeared in the doorway. Rig's hair was a bit messier than normal, probably due to some human mating ritual. I was still fuzzy on the details of all that, but humans were clearly uncomfortable discussing these things, so I wasn't going to ask.

Arturo at least had been open to talking about his former girlfriend when we spoke before. Though the idea of asking *him* about human mating rituals felt...disorienting.

"That's good," Cobb said. "I'd like you to return as soon as possible for a full report. And bring some representatives of the UrDail with you, if you would. We'd like to begin official talks with them."

Jorgen looked over at me. "Is it safe, sir?"

"Of course. It's perfectly safe. The shield is holding fine. You have nothing to worry about. I have new orders for you as soon as you can get your people back here."

FM and Rig exchanged a glance.

"You said before that the UrDail should stay away," Jorgen said. "Because you worried they might become a bargaining chip in the negotiations with the Superiority."

"Oh," Cobb said. He sounded surprised, like he'd wanted to pretend he'd never said that. "No, the negotiations are at an impasse. If you return immediately, I can—"

Jorgen pushed the mute button on the hypercomm. "Something's up with Cobb," he said.

"Is your mother in the room with him?" FM asked.

"Maybe," Jorgen said. "But why would he respond to my call if my mother was right there?"

"Maybe he got the message that you'd tried to reach him in front of her," Rig said. "So he didn't have a choice."

"Or maybe it's not him," I said.

The three of them stared at me.

"What?" Jorgen said.

They didn't know. We hadn't had time to tell them. "The Superiority stole the holographic technology from Spensa's ship. The Rinakin who was

working with Unity was a fake—a Superiority plant. If they did that to us...”

“Scud,” Jorgen said. “You think maybe this *isn’t Cobb?*”

“Cobb didn’t behave like himself when we saw him last,” FM said. “I assumed there must be an explanation.”

“I think Alanik just gave us one,” Jorgen said.

“Jorgen?” Cobb said over the hypercomm. “Are you still there?”

Jorgen turned on the microphone again. I’d missed the last thing Cobb had said, and I didn’t think he’d paid attention to it either. “I’m here, sir,” Jorgen said. “I’d like to speak to my mother, if that’s all right.”

That was a good move. Jeshua might not be helpful when it came to diplomacy, but she’d surely be on our side if she knew she was dealing with a Superiority fake.

“You’ll have to be sure she’s not also a plant,” I whispered, and Jorgen nodded.

“You can talk to her when you return,” Cobb said. “I need you here immediately. That is an order.”

Jorgen muted the microphone again. “This has to be a trap.”

“It sounds like it,” I said.

Jorgen swore and turned on the microphone again. “Sir, I’m ordering our people to prepare to return,” he said. “It may take us a bit to gather the UrDail delegation together.”

“Get here as soon as you can,” Cobb said.

“I will. Thank you, sir.” Jorgen turned off the microphone. “I need to communicate with my mother somehow. Warn her and the assembly that the Superiority has infiltrated the DDF.”

“What do you think they did with real Cobb?” FM asked.

“They probably replaced him when they met for peace talks,” Rig said. “Right after you left for ReDawn. We worried it might be a trap, but Cobb and Jeshua went anyway because the offer to negotiate a truce was too good to refuse. And they didn’t want to let them *inside* the shield because that could potentially be worse.”

“That sounds like the Superiority,” I said. “They pretended to talk about peace and used the opportunity to undermine you.”

“So Cobb has been in their custody for a while,” FM said. “Do you think they’ll hurt him?”

“I wouldn’t put it past them,” I said.

“I can’t contact my mother directly,” Jorgen said. “She’s not cytonic.”

“We could contact Spensa’s grandmother,” I said. “She might know something, since the Superiority is demanding your cytonics. They might have collected her by now.”

“Yes,” Jorgen said. “That’s true.”

I was already reaching out through the negative realm, finding Detritus and canvassing the planet. I found Gran-Gran’s mind far enough from the planet that she had to be in a ship.

That wasn’t a good sign.

Gran-Gran, I said, It’s Alanik. Are you all right?

These vat-suckers are looking to trade me for their own freedom, Gran-Gran said.

Who’s trying to trade you? I asked.

Some bottom-feeders from the National Assembly, Gran-Gran said.

Is Jeshua Weight with them?

She is, Gran-Gran said. *War hero my wrinkled behind. They’ve brought that blue alien too, and the alien isn’t happy about it.*

Cuna was a defector from the Superiority, so it made sense that the Superiority would also want them turned over. Gran-Gran seemed to understand what was happening at least.

Where have they brought you? I asked.

They’ve got us on a ship taking us to some delegation, she said. *They’re dressed to the nines too, like they’re meeting royalty.*

Oh no. “They’ve got Gran-Gran and Cuna on a ship en route to some delegation with the Superiority,” I said. “Your mother is there, and some people from the assembly.”

Jorgen swore. “That has to be a trap too. Tell her to tell them to turn around.”

Of course. *Tell them it’s a trap. The Superiority isn’t going to work with them. They’ve replaced Admiral Cobb with a Superiority operative using a*

holographic disguise. They offered progress to my planet and then turned their guns on them instead. Tell them nothing will come of this but ruin.

I'll tell them, Gran-Gran said. But they didn't listen to me before and they aren't going to listen to me now.

"She says she'll tell them," I said. "But she doesn't think they'll listen."

"She's probably right." Jorgen squeezed his eyes shut in frustration. "Do they have a hypercomm on board?"

I searched the area near Gran-Gran. I could sense taynix, all clustered together like they were trapped in some kind of container. "They have a box with slugs in it," I said. And another one alone, sitting a few feet from the others. I probed at its mind, trying to send it coordinates to talk to our hypercomm, and it felt receptive, like it understood the message.

I did the same with the slug in our hypercomm. "Try it now," I said. "I think you'll be able to talk to them."

"Mom?" Jorgen said into the hypercomm.

There was a beat of silence, and then, "Jorgen?" Jeshua Weight said.

"Mom," Jorgen said. "You have to turn the ship around. You're walking into a trap."

"We're walking into a trap? You *fled* the planet against orders. Where are you?"

"ReDawn," Jorgen said. "We negotiated that alliance. We have people willing to work with us against the Superiority."

"Then you're undermining everything we've been working for here," Jeshua said. "We've met with the Superiority, and they want to arrange a treaty."

"I don't think they do—" Jorgen said, but his mother cut him off.

"I think they're being sincere," Jeshua said. They always did—that was the problem. So many people couldn't taste the poison past the sweetness of the tea. "We can't keep fighting like this. We've been losing the war for years. If there's a chance we can save our people's lives, we have to take it."

"Mom, they replaced Cobb," Jorgen said. "He's a Superiority operative wearing a hologram like the one Spensa used to infiltrate Starsight."

Jeshua was quiet for a moment. “Are you sure?” she asked. “You saw this?”

“No,” Jorgen said. “But they used the same trick on someone here, and when we talked to him something was off about him.”

“Jorgen, I’ve been with Cobb for the last two days. He’s tired like we all are, but it’s him.”

Jorgen hit the edge of the control board with the heel of his hand. “It *isn’t*, Mom. You can’t go to that delegation. You’re walking into a trap.”

A man’s voice came over the radio. “Jorgen,” he said, “I know this is all hard for you to accept. We raised you to hate the Krell. We’ve hated them all our lives. But son, if we keep fighting them you’re going to die up there some day. That’s what we’re trying to prevent. The Superiority is offering to *train* you. This is a huge opportunity, and you need to try to accept it.”

“They tried to kill me today,” Jorgen said. “They’re *lying* when they offer us peace.”

“You should never have gone to ReDawn.” Now Jeshua was talking again. “Can’t you see we’re trying to keep you safe?”

Jorgen muted the mic again and swore, covering his eyes with his hands.

Arturo appeared in the doorway. “Everything okay?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “The Superiority replaced Cobb, same as they did Rinakin, and Jorgen’s parents are taking Gran-Gran and Cuna to a meeting with the Superiority right now.”

“Scud,” Arturo said. “We have to stop them. We can’t let them walk into that.”

In my mind, Gran-Gran and the tiny slug presences stopped moving, as if they’d arrived at their destination.

“I think they may already be there,” I said.

“We need to go now,” Jorgen said. “We’re taking the whole platform. We’ll come back to finish the alliance with Alanik’s people, but for now we may need the air support.”

“Agreed,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Rig was already putting Drape back in the hyperdrive box.

“Alanik,” Jorgen said. “Can you give him coordinates near where Gran-Gran is?”

“Yes,” I said, and I stretched myself across the space between galaxies, pinpointing her location and then sending it to Drape.

“Ready,” I said.

“Drape,” Rig said. “Go.”

We slid into the negative realm beneath the distracted eyes, which then shifted into glittering stars as the entire platform came out the other side in the airspace around Detritus.

A small human passenger ship was docked at the outside of a boxy Superiority transport ship a couple kilometers away. The transport ship wasn't nearly as big as some I'd seen arrive at ReDawn, not even as big as Wandering Leaf.

“You're going to need backup,” FM said. I didn't think FM and Jorgen had really resolved their issues with each other, but that didn't seem to matter to either of them at the moment.

“We are,” Jorgen said. “I want the rest of you in your ships, ready to fight in case we need additional air support. It doesn't *look* like they brought fighters, but they could hyperjump them in at any moment.”

“Okay,” FM said.

Jorgen turned to Arturo. “You command the flight while I'm in there. Make sure everyone's ready to go on my signal.”

Arturo looked at me, and I thought maybe he'd been planning to volunteer to go with us to the Superiority ship. I wished he would. “Got it,” he said, and he spun around from the doorway, moving toward the hangar. “Skyward Flight,” he yelled, “everyone to your ships!”

The flight scattered. “I'll get Boomslug back in the weapons system,” Rig said.

“Good,” Jorgen said. “Alanik, you don't sense any cytonic inhibitors on that ship, do you?”

“No,” I said. “Not yet.”

Rig handed him Snuggles, and Jorgen slipped him into his sling. “Alanik,” Jorgen said, “can you give Snuggles directions to the command room on

Platform Prime?”

“Yes,” I said. “But I can’t jump us into the Superiority ship afterward. I’m not familiar with it, so I could end up materializing us in the middle of a wall.”

“The taynix seem to be able to avoid that,” FM said. “You said they took some of the taynix with them, right? Could you hyperjump to them?”

“We’ll have to try it,” Jorgen said.

“It would probably be the ones issued to the other pilots,” FM said. “The ones who didn’t come with us. Try Corgi or Snide, or maybe Waffle or Pipsqueak.”

Jorgen blinked at her. “I’ll...try to remember that.”

“You’d better,” I said. “Are you ready now?”

Jorgen closed his eyes, like he was steeling himself for battle. “Ready,” he said.

I put a hand on his shoulder and sent Snuggles the coordinates for the room where I’d met with Cobb and Jeshua.

Twenty-three

We emerged next to the conference table where Jeshua Weight had turned down my offer of an alliance. The room was empty, and Jorgen strode out the door, moving with purpose. I followed behind him as he walked up the hall—he knew where he was going better than I did.

A man sitting behind a desk looked up and visibly startled.

“I need to talk to Cobb,” Jorgen said. “I’m to report to him immediately. Is he here?”

“Of course,” the man said. “Hold on a moment.” He went to the door behind him and knocked, then opened it. “Jorgen Weight to see you,” he said.

Admiral Cobb shuffled to the door immediately, looking over the shoulder of the receptionist at Jorgen and me. “Stars, I’m glad you’re back,” Cobb said.

I could see Jorgen scrutinizing him. This man had Cobb’s cane and his limp. His voice sounded the same to me, but so had Rinakin’s.

Jorgen closed the distance between them, and I stayed close. I wasn’t going to be left behind. Jorgen put a hand on Cobb’s arm and slid his sleeve up just enough to reveal the bracelet on his wrist. It was identical to the one not-Rinakin had been wearing.

“What are you—” fake Cobb began.

“Snuggles, take us to Corgi,” Jorgen said.

“Corgi!” Snuggles said.

A moment later we materialized in front of a very startled-looking pilot who was lying on a bunk with his jumpsuit half off, taking a nap.

Oh. Apparently Jeshua hadn’t taken *all* the slugs we’d left behind with her.

“Hey—” fake Cobb shouted, but Jorgen didn’t give him a chance to finish.

“Snuggles, take us to Snide!” he shouted.

“Snide!” Snuggles said.

We passed beneath the eyes, and then suddenly we stood in a storage room on an unfamiliar ship, next to a box containing several small cytonic minds.

I could feel Gran-Gran moving away from us. There were a few other taynix on this ship in other directions, probably powering Superiority hyperdrives or hypercomms.

Fake Cobb recovered enough to wrench himself away from Jorgen and move toward the doorway, but Jorgen caught him by the back of the neck, shoving him to the ground and then twisting his arms behind his back.

“You aren’t going anywhere,” he said.

“I’m your commander,” fake Cobb said.

Jorgen didn’t even bother responding.

“They took Gran-Gran in that direction,” I said, pointing.

“I think my parents’ ship must be docked nearby,” Jorgen said. “Let’s split up. I’ll find my parents and prove to them that they’ve walked into a trap. You retrieve Gran-Gran and then hyperjump to me.” He opened the crate of slugs and handed one to me. “I think that’s Snide,” he said. “If we stop being able to find each other, we’ll know the other got caught in an inhibitor and come help. Does that work?”

“Yes,” I said. I moved up to the door, peering through a small window to see if there was anyone there. The hallway was empty, so we moved out of the storage room, heading in two different directions.

This whole ship made my skin crawl. I wished I didn’t have to do this alone. The taynix—Snide—snuggled into the crook of my elbow, as if it felt the same.

Gran-Gran and whoever was moving her away from here had to be ahead, but I didn’t see or hear evidence of anyone else. The ship was eerily empty, like it had only a skeleton crew aboard. If they really believed the humans were so aggressive, why hadn’t they brought more forces?

Gran-Gran, I said through the negative realm. I’m here on the ship, coming toward you. Where are they taking you?

To a holding cell, they say, Gran-Gran said. I spat in one of their eyes. I don’t think they liked that much.

I smiled. The more I got to know Gran-Gran, the more I liked her. *How many of them are there?*

Two diones, she said. One with me, and one with Cuna. But I'm hoping they'll take me to Cobb. I think I can hear him.

Cobb was here? I'd assumed they would have transported him away already. *Hear him?* I said. *Through the negative realm?* That didn't make sense. Cobb wasn't cytonic. It shouldn't be possible for her to find him. I searched over the area where she was headed myself, but I couldn't feel anything except a couple of taynix.

Yes, I'm sure it's him. He's just up ahead. Not like those other voices, the quiet ones. Are they your people?

My people? What voices was she hearing? I knew she was an old woman, but had she lost her mind?

Yes, those voices. They're asking me for help.

I don't know who those are, I said. You probably shouldn't answer them, just in case. I'm coming to get you, but they might have inhibitors on this ship. Those will cut off the use of your powers. You may want to get out now.

I'm certain Cobb is there, Gran-Gran said. I want to bring him with me. I don't know if I can travel the way you and Spensa do, but some things feel so real in there—I think I can try.

It was a risk, but I could hardly blame her for that. *I'll follow until you're out. And then return to help Jorgen. If you can't manage the hyperjump or you get inhibited, I'll come to help you.*

Thank you, Gran-Gran said. I can tell by your spirit that you have the heart of a warrior like my granddaughter.

I felt oddly touched by that, even though I barely knew either of them. I continued to move down the hall, peering around corners to make sure no one was there.

The ship continued to be empty, which made me more and more uneasy.

We've reached the holding cells, Gran-Gran said in my mind. Cobb is here. Stars, he looks bad.

But he's alive? I asked.

He's alive. I don't know what they've done to him, but—

Gran-Gran's voice cut off as a section of the ship ahead went dead in my mind. I couldn't reach Gran-Gran anymore—she'd disappeared beneath an inhibitor cloud.

I needed to get there quickly and see if I could disable it. I hurried around a corner—

And then ducked back at the sound of voices. There were people ahead, though I wasn't yet close to the inhibited area of the ship. I didn't understand much of the dialect they were speaking, and they were too far away from me for my pin to translate. But I did catch a few words I recognized.

Ready. Hurry. Leaving.

These people *were* leaving. Running in the opposite direction, away from the center of the ship.

What were they trying to get away from so fast?

I needed to get to Gran-Gran, Cobb, and Cuna, but something was very wrong here and I wanted to know what it was. *Did you find your parents?* I asked Jorgen.

Not yet, Jorgen said. Took a wrong turn. Moving toward them now. Fake Cobb is dragging his feet, slowing me down.

I wanted to suggest that he break fake Cobb's legs, but that probably wouldn't help them move any faster.

I know where Gran-Gran and real Cobb are, I said. Cuna is with them too. Will get them in a moment. Need to check on something first.

Copy, Jorgen said. Keep me informed.

I moved in the direction the fleeing people had come from. At the end of a short hall, I found a door with a heavy handle that was closed and locked. I listened; no noise came from inside and no light was visible under the door.

I reached through the door, feeling the space beyond through the negative realm, and then hyperjumped through.

I emerged in a dark room and immediately felt the wall for a light panel. The room lit up, and there in the center of the large room was a tainix box with wires and equipment mounted to the outside.

I took a step toward it, and then paused. The device was hooked up to a large tube with a wide-open end aimed at the wall. It looked suspiciously like

a cannon—

And in the box attached to it I could feel the tiny cytonic mind of a taynix.

Oh *no*. The Superiority operatives had said something was “ready” and they needed to “hurry” and get away from it. They had a mindblade weapon, and instead of aiming it into the sky to shoot us down they had it aimed toward the *center* of the ship itself.

It was a *bomb*, and it was rigged to explode.

I was out of my depth here, but I knew where to go for help. *The ship has a bomb on it*, I sent to Jorgen. *I’m going to get Rig*. I gave Snide the coordinates for the control room on Wandering Leaf.

Rig let out an undignified scream, which the slug in his sling promptly echoed. “Scud!” he said. “I will never get used to you doing that!”

I wondered if FM got that reaction when she and Gill snuck around to see him. There wasn’t time to talk about it now. “Come with me,” I said, and reached for his arm, then directed Snide to take us back.

We appeared again in the room next to the taynix bomb.

“I want to tell you to warn me before you do that,” Rig said, squeezing his eyes shut. “But I suppose you did.”

I gestured at the device. “We’re in the Superiority ship,” I said. “This is a bomb, isn’t it? Can you defuse it?”

“Can I *what*?” Rig looked over the equipment, and I watched his face contort in horror as he came to the same conclusions I had. “I don’t know anything about bombs! I’m not qualified to deal with this.”

None of us were qualified, but I couldn’t let the Superiority blow up the ship with people inside. “What if we break the box?” I said. “If we remove the taynix—”

“The box is rigged to prevent tampering,” Rig said, looking it over. “I don’t know how it works, but I can tell that much. Alanik, I’m sorry. I can’t fix it. We need to get off this ship immediately.”

I understood. There was nothing he could do. “Can you get yourself back?” I asked. “I’ll go for Jorgen and the others.”

Rig nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Go,” I said.

“Drape, take me to Gill,” he said.

“Gill!” Drape said. And then Rig disappeared, back to Wandering Leaf.

I tore off down the hallway in the direction of the cytonic inhibitor while simultaneously reaching out to Jorgen. *You need to get out of here. Can you get to your parents?*

Working on it, Jorgen said. The Superiority people took them into a room, but it’s locked. I’m moving around to the other side, trying to find an open door. Fake Cobb is not helping.

Near Jorgen, I could feel a new patch of dead space—another inhibitor had been turned on near him, probably in the room with the human politicians. Even if I left Gran-Gran, Cuna, and real Cobb to join him, I couldn’t jump in and get them.

Work fast, I said. We have to get out of here.

I raced past closed doorways to a side hall ahead, and found a series of rooms with windows in the walls. Cuna was in one and Gran-Gran and Cobb in another, but as soon as I moved close to them the sounds of the universe quieted.

Cobb looked awful—he had bruises down his face, and he sat slumped against the wall like he was having trouble holding himself in a sitting position. Gran-Gran knelt over him, and Cuna stood in the other cell, motioning to me.

“Alanik!” they yelled through the glass. “I don’t know what Winzik plans to do with us—”

“He plans to blow us up!” I yelled as I moved by. “We’re working on it.” I hauled open the doors at the end of the hall, searching for the inhibitor. I found a custodial closet and a room with a couple of old broken chairs. At the end of the hall was another door, this one locked.

I stepped back and kicked it with all my might. The handle snapped on the third blow, and I tore it off and dragged the door open.

There, inside, was a taynix box. I opened it, and a blue and green slug tumbled to the floor.

The cytonic inhibition faded. *Alanik, Jorgen said in my mind. I can’t get to them. The Superiority people all fled, and you disappeared, and I can’t—*

On my way, I said. I didn't waste time running down the hall again. I hyperjumped back to the room with Cuna and grabbed them roughly by the arm.

Get Cobb out, I sent to Gran-Gran. She must have already been prepared to do so, because they disappeared before I even finished the thought. So she *could* hyperjump. That was good. One less thing for me to do in the unknown time before this ship exploded.

"Snide, take me to Drape," I said, and Cuna and I passed beneath the unseeing eyes as we jumped to the control room on Wandering Leaf. I deposited Cuna at the feet of a somewhat-less-surprised Rig, and then Snide and I hyperjumped back to the Superiority transport ship, this time to the storage room where we'd landed originally.

I took off at a run toward the area of the ship where I could sense Jorgen. I could feel his panic even before I reached him. He stood in a narrow observation room overlooking a tiered meeting hall that was clearly designed for a large assembly of people. Fake Cobb seemed to have escaped from Jorgen, because I didn't see him here. There were a dozen or so humans on the other side of the window, including Jeshua Weight, who stood right against the glass. One of the other humans—a man who looked like an older version of Jorgen—hefted one of the chairs and threw it at the glass.

It must have been some kind of reinforced plastic, because it didn't break.

"Humans of Detritus!" a voice said. It was coming from a loudspeaker inside the room, but was loud enough that we could hear it even from here. "For your years of resistance, you have been judged too aggressive to live. You will meet your end for the good of all. In our graciousness, we will end your lives swiftly. Your pain will be brief. Your deaths will be broadcast to your planet, so that they may mourn you. You may have a moment to say your goodbyes."

"How benevolent of them," I said.

Jorgen beat his fists against the window. Inside the room, I could see the politicians starting to panic.

As they should. We couldn't get them out of there. The Superiority might be satisfied with merely enslaving my people, but the humans?

Then they were going to destroy.

“We have to find that inhibitor,” I said, and Jorgen nodded, moving toward the doorway.

I tore down the hallway in the opposite direction. But there weren’t many crevices in this part of the ship—and all the other inhibitors had been *inside* the zone they inhibited, not outside of it. While there was a door on every side, they were all locked, and reinforced far better than the closet.

I ran the circle around the meeting room until I met up with Jorgen, and then we double-checked the areas we’d each checked before.

None of the doors would give, no matter how hard we beat on them.

When we reached the viewing room again, Jeshua still stood at the glass. She turned around, glaring at Jorgen.

“Look for a box,” he shouted through the glass at her. “A box with a taynix in it!”

Go, she mouthed at him.

Jorgen shook his head, beating on the glass with his fists again.

“Go!” Jeshua yelled through the glass at Jorgen. Her voice was faint, but I could make out what she said next. “Do better than we did.”

We weren’t going to be able to save them. There was nothing more we could do here.

I put a hand on Jorgen’s shoulder. He still had Snuggles in his sling. He didn’t need me to pull him out.

“She’s right,” I said. “We have to go.”

“No!” Jorgen shouted. There were tears running down his cheeks now.

He wasn’t going to leave, but I couldn’t let him die here.

I didn’t take chances with the slug. I reached through the negative realm to the hangar on Wandering Leaf, and I pulled.

Through the negative realm, I heard a scream.

Epilogue

The wrath of the eyes bore down on me as I floated beneath their ever-present glares. But I could barely feel it, consumed as I was by the full force of Jorgen's pain, his anger, even his resentment of me for tearing him away from there. I choked on it, feeling every ounce of it down to my bones.

We fell out of the negative realm and the feeling faded, but the echoes of it lingered, as if I'd just watched my own parents die.

The members of Skyward Flight were climbing out of their ships, moving toward the windows near the entrance of the hangar to watch the Superiority ship as it tore itself to shreds, its hull ripped apart, its engine systems exploding in silent clouds of dust and smoke. Cuna stood off to the side, staring out at the remains of the Superiority ship as they scattered across the backdrop of stars.

Jorgen made a strangled sound and most of the flight turned around and saw us there, shock and relief reflecting across their faces. Arturo closed his eyes, like he'd been sure we were both gone and had to steady himself for a moment. Rig hurried down the tunnel from the control room behind us. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know what to do with it, I—"

"It wasn't your fault," I said. And that was true.

This was the Superiority's fault. Every bit of it.

Jorgen stared out at the pieces of the ship as they spiraled outward, shrapnel spreading in every direction. His face was like a statue, though I'd felt the grief he was holding in.

"Did Gran-Gran—" Rig asked.

"She got out," I said. "So did Cobb. I saw them." I scanned over the planet, searching in the negative realm for another cytonic mind, but I couldn't feel one. I reached out farther, searching for Gran-Gran—or even for Cobb, who Gran-Gran said she could feel in the negative realm though I'd been sure he wasn't cytonic.

I couldn't find them. They weren't here. And there were no dead spaces left that would hide them.

"They made it out," I said. "But...I don't know where they are."

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

"We're going down to Platform Prime," Jorgen said.

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

"Now," Jorgen said. "I'm sorry, Alanik. We'll be a little late returning to ReDawn." He turned and looked at the floating pieces of ship, the place where both his parents had died. "There are some things we need to take care of first."

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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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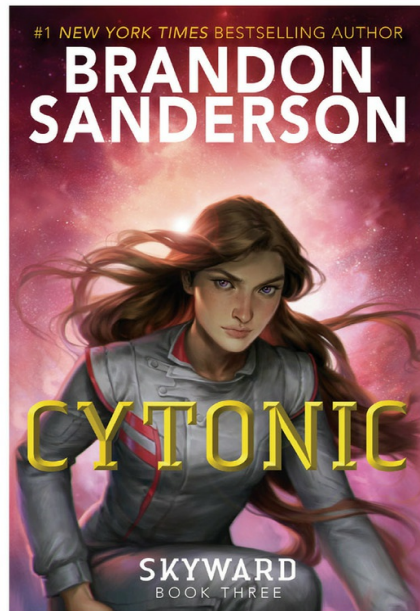
Janci Patterson writes in a variety of genres, so whatever you're looking for, she's probably got something you'll like. Her first book, *Chasing the Skip*, was published by Henry Holt in 2012. After publishing several contemporary YA novels and the YA paranormal *A Thousand Faces* trilogy, Janci discovered a love of collaboration and has written books with Megan Walker, Lauren Janes, 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 Brigham Young University. 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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