

PART ONE

THE INDIFFERENT STARS

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned*
WB Yeats

CHAPTER ONE

SHAARA WAS DEAD the day they found the human.

A rebel straggler had nailed her with a thermal mortar in the waning hours of the last battle. The shell melted the front of her Destroyer armor and burned her to the bone in four places. Half her body was exposed to hard vacuum before Sixth Lieutenant Corax got her back to *Warden*. She'd been dead ten minutes by the time they got her into a regen pod. Long enough that she had to endure the delirious, dissociative fugue that accompanied neural regeneration.

Captain Gethis greeted Shaara personally when she came out of the pod at the end of the second day — her first clue something was wrong. Her brain was a tangled mess. Seeing his massive silhouette looming over the pod, her first reaction was to recoil and shout. It came out as a croak.

Gethis flashed that disgusting grin of his. Too many teeth on top, not enough on the bottom. One eyestalk out of three looking off in another direction. As if he'd already started to forget about her.

"Your brain still work?" Gethis asked.

Shaara squinted against the light, and what it illuminated.

"What?" Her voice grated against her throat.

"I said, 'your brain still work?'" he repeated, still grinning.

"I know what you said."

"I got a shuttle loaded with corpses for the gene farmer." He nodded toward the door. "Leaves in a couple hours. Just wanna know if you're gonna be on it."

Shaara closed her eyes. "Not this time."

"It's in your contract," Gethis continued. "They pay good money for new genes, you know."

Shaara cleared her throat. "Yeah, I know. You don't need to keep

reminding me."

"You keep ending up in these things." Gethis thumped the side of the pod. "Thought maybe you *needed* a reminder."

"Thanks." She sat up. Gethis took a step back. Shaara ran her hands over her head. The stubble pricked her fingers. Her skin was cold and clammy. "Is that all?"

Gethis made a gurgling sound. "Nope. Found a friend of yours."

Shaara made a face without opening her eyes. "Friend?"

"A rock-rat."

Shaara shook her head.

Gethis laughed. A wave of malodorous breath washed over her. It pulled her toward consciousness, kicking and screaming.

"You heard me right," he said. "A human. You sure that pod didn't finally scramble your brains?"

"Sure enough." *You bastard.*

Gethis grumbled. "Come on. You're the welcoming committee."

He hustled her through the corridors as soon as her feet were beneath her, barreling along behind her on all four legs. One of his forelimbs kept darting out to prod her forward, keep her from pitching over. He filled her in on what she'd missed as they walked.

Warden had spotted a decelerating fusion drive on the edge of the system near the end of Shaara's first day in the pod. At first, they thought it might be a rebel courier, but they couldn't figure out why the fool had Breached so far out. It took seven hours at standard acceleration for *Warden* to intercept the thing. By the time he got there, the mystery vessel's fuel was all used up. It was drifting. Easy enough for Corax to take a team over and scope it out.

The ship was strange—no weapons, no Breach drive. Its engines seemed like antiques. Whole thing looked ancient, in fact. A couple thousand cryobeds were onboard. Most were nonfunctional, filled with rotted corpses. A few other freezers had boxes of organic material in them. Also dead.

One of the beds—and only one—still functioned. It held a living human.

"Find out what it knows and where it's from," Gethis said as he shoved her into the interrogation room. She stumbled over the threshold. The door slid closed behind her. Head swimming, she looked up into the first human eyes she'd seen in six years.

They belonged to a man. Unkempt black hair hung over his ears. He had tanned skin and a prominent nose. His face bore a pained expression, reaching toward panic. When his eyes met hers, something in them changed. A softness dulled the hard edges of fear. They didn't smile, but they

wanted to. Needed to.

His eyes stirred something in Shaara too, piercing deep through the layers of life and dirt it lay under to stab it awake. It cried out in alarm, in anger. At having been awoken; at having been buried, so long ago.

But it *was* buried, and deep. Its cries were muted. Shaara ignored them.

It's just that he's human, she thought. And it's been so long.

The incipient smile in the man's eyes retreated. The distant protests of the buried thing grew weaker. High above it, a thick fog settled over Shaara's mind.

That's better, she thought.

"Hi," she said.

The man looked confused. He spoke, gibberish. She sat down across from him.

"Where are you from?"

More gibberish, and he stopped. Looked at her expectantly.

"Just . . . keep talking." Shaara waved her hands. The man's eyes darted side to side. He spoke another short sentence.

Shaara sighed. "*Warden?*"

"I'm sorry," the ship replied in a calm, clinical voice. The man jumped in his seat. Looked around for the voice's source. "He's used three distinct languages so far. The last one has commonalities with some known human dialects, but he must keep speaking it in order—"

Frustration surged through Shaara. It drowned out the quiet but stubborn cries of the monster buried within her. She snapped her fingers in front of the man's face. "Hey! Idiot. Talk." She mimed a mouth flapping with her hand. "Huh? Talk!"

The man shrank back in his chair. He started talking.

Shaara rested her forehead on one hand, her elbow on the table. She scanned the grungy interrogation room. It looked like it hadn't been cleaned in a year because it hadn't. Her eyes fixed on a crusty, off-green smudge decorating one corner. Origin unknown. Gethis liked to keep it this way. Thought it demoralized the prisoners.

The man kept talking. A few words jumped out from the spoken morass. "Safe . . . others . . . alive?"

Shaara closed her eyes, waiting for him to cross the final threshold of understanding.

"I need a drink," the man said.

Shaara's eyes snapped open. "What?"

He blinked. "*That* you understood?"

Shaara nodded. "Water?"

"That's not what I meant, but . . . yes. Please."

Shaara nodded toward the ceiling. Leaned back in her chair. "What's your name?"

"Adnan. Adnan Atal. You?"

"Shaara."

He relaxed on hearing her name. She'd felt the same on hearing his. Tension crept back into her muscles at the realization.

The door to the interrogation room slid open. A disk-shaped drone floated in and deposited a glass of water on the table before Adnan with a jointed silver arm. It floated back out and the door closed behind it. Adnan's eyes followed it all the way. He reached forward, slowly, and picked up the glass. Drank from it. His eyes closed.

"Thanks," he said. He looked up to the ceiling. "Uh. You too."

"Not at all," the ship replied.

Adnan shook his head. His eyes grew unfocused.

"Adnan," Shaara said.

He looked at her.

"What are you doing here?"

Confusion spread across his face. "I—You brought me here. Or your people did." His eyes widened at some returning memory. "Or—"

"Not on the ship," Shaara said, that alluring frustration building again. She controlled it. "In this system."

"In this . . . star system?" Adnan asked. "We're . . ."

Adnan's mouth struggled to form words. He set down his glass. His eyes turned from her, scanned back and forth. He rubbed his forehead, over and over.

Shaara took a calming breath. "Okay. Let's start at the beginning. Where did you come from?"

His eyes snapped back to her. Frustration now crept into *them*. "Where? Earth. We came from Earth."

Shaara's eyes narrowed. "That's impossible."

Adnan shook his head. "What do you mean? How is that impossible? Where *else* would we have come from?"

"*Anywhere* else."

Adnan laughed, short and sharp. He leaned back. His hand started running through his hair. "I don't understand. This doesn't—How—"

"Adnan," Shaara said. Her voice was calm but brooked no argument. "This is not a two-way conversation, okay? I need you to tell me where you

really came from, and I need you to do it now."

"Earth!" Adnan's hands went wide. "I don't know how many other ways I can say that. *Prthvee? Diqui?* Our homeworld!"

"I know what Earth was," Shaara said, voice rising. "But you can't have come from there. *No one* has come from there in a thousand years—"

"Yes!" Adnan thrust his hands toward her. "That's how long it was going to take. That's how long we were going to be out here, nine hundred . . . something years."

Shaara's mouth dropped open. "*What?*"

Adnan nodded vigorously. His hair flopped over one of his eyes. He ignored it. "We left. We were put under . . . cryo, and we were gonna sleep for nine hundred something years, and then when we reached the system the ship would wake us up"—he slapped one palm with the back of his other hand—"and we would make planetfall, and we would . . . we would have to start work right away. The colony. We'd have to start building it because we didn't have enough supplies, barely enough for a year. And there wouldn't be anyone else *here*."

He looked at her, desperate anger in his eyes. "There *couldn't* be anyone else here. Let alone someone who would unfreeze us and drag us off the ship and cram us into filthy interrogation rooms"—his hand swept over the stain in the corner—"and grill us like criminals!"

Shaara sat in stunned silence. Not just at the sudden tirade. At the fact that it was true. Somehow, it was true. But it couldn't be.

"Now," Adnan continued, his voice wavering with a mixture of indignation and fear, his finger stabbing at the tabletop, "I have answered your questions. I want to know what the *hell* is going on here, and why I'm being treated like this! And where are the others?" His finger waved at the door. "Are you giving them the third degree too? After everything we've been through?"

Others, Shaara thought. *We. Us.*

She searched his eyes. Waiting. Anxious. He didn't know.

Of course you didn't tell him. Fucking Gethis.

The tension of confrontation fled Shaara's body. Her gaze dropped to the table.

Adnan's raised finger drifted down. His fevered energy drained away. "Am I the only one you've woken up?"

Shaara made herself look at him.

His eyes twitched. "Why? Why me, why not Captain Danton, or . . . *anyone* else?"

Shaara worked her jaw.

Doubt cast its terrible shadow over Adnan's eyes.

"No . . ." He shook his head. "No. No."

Shaara had delivered more than her share of bad news over the years. Enough to crush most people. Even in *this* galaxy. Something in Adnan's eyes made this time different. Maybe it was the simple fact he was human. Maybe it was that she knew what she was heralding.

Because as impossible as it was that he was from Earth, she knew it was true. And she knew what that meant.

"You were the only one that made it," she said.

Adnan's eyes became pits of terror. He started hyperventilating. "No . . . you . . . no . . ."

He rose to his feet. His chair clattered to the ground. He paced back and forth around it.

Shaara stood, slowly. "Easy, easy."

"No," he said. "Please God, no. Not this. Anything, please, just—"

His movements became erratic. His pace quickened. Shaara circled the table and reached out to calm him.

"Hey—"

He yelled and thrashed like a wounded animal when her fingers brushed his arm. Shaara stumbled back against the wall. His foot caught the leg of his chair. He tripped, just out of Shaara's grasp.

Adnan's head smacked hard against the corner of the table. He landed on the deck with the weight of a corpse. Blood poured from a wound in his temple. He twitched.

Shaara stood over him, shoulders slumped. "Well, fuck."

"I'll prepare a regeneration pod," *Warden* said.

"He can use mine," Shaara said. "It's still warm."

CHAPTER TWO

“WHAT!”

THE CAPTAIN swung his head toward Shaara. She stood in his office at a rough approximation of attention. All three of his eyestalks were fixed on her. None of them looked happy.

She raised her hands. “He didn’t take the news well. Being the sole survivor. Took a header into a table, some brain damage . . .”

Gethis pointed an accusing finger at her. “You’re wasting regen on a fucking *rock-rat*?”

“The pod was already keyed human for me. I figured—”

“Don’t get smart, Shaara. I made you my second in command because you can take orders, not because I expect you to *figure* anything.”

You made me first lieutenant to keep me quiet, she thought.

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“And I’m wondering if you can even do that anymore,” Gethis said, swiping at the air above his desk. A copy of Shaara’s report on the interrogation appeared above it. “If you recall, I ordered you to find out what the little shit knows. Who sent it? Is it a spy for those terrorists? You know, useful fucking information?”

Shaara blinked slowly. “Why would the Gaeans put a spy on a corpse-filled ship with no Breach drive? And why would they want to spy on *us*?”

Gethis snorted. “I thought you’d have heard. They’re after *everyone* now, not just slavers. Even other rock-rats.”

Shaara shook her head. “I know that, but—”

“Never mind.” Gethis waved at the report. “All I got is this ‘Earth’ nonsense. What am I supposed to do with that?”

“I couldn’t tell you, sir.”

“Exactly.” Gethis gestured dramatically with his forelimbs as he turned

away. "No salvage worth a damn on that ship. Bodies are so rotten I can't even sell 'em. *And* I had to have the little bastard and the whole landing party deconned, 'cause god knows what kind of rock-rat diseases were on that shit heap."

He turned and glared at her, as if it was all her fault. "He better be worth something—if not alive, then dead."

Just like us? "I guess we'll see when he comes out of it."

"I guess we will. And speaking of which, the energy that pod uses on his cycle is coming out of *your* contract bonus. Just like the armor you melted on your last sortie."

Shaara's jaw dropped. "The hell was I supposed to do? The reb son of a bitch was waiting in an asteroid to ambush us for three days!"

"You should've sent scouts."

"*I was* the scout."

"Drones."

"You wouldn't release—"

"Enough!" Gethis bellowed. Shaara shut up. "It comes out of your bonus. Understand?"

"Yes, Captain."

"And as soon as he wakes up, you finish interrogating him."

Shaara frowned. "I told you—"

"You told me the dumb shit brained himself before he could tell you anything useful. That doesn't mean he doesn't *know* anything useful. Grill him again."

Shaara sighed. "Yes, Captain."

Gethis turned his back on her.

"Get out," he said.



Shaara sank into the biped-molded chair across the mess table from Corax.

"Weren't you dead?"

She cracked open a bottle of beer. "Not for long."

"Lucky you." Corax drummed his nail-tipped fingers against the tabletop. "Remind me who it was that saved your life? *Again?*"

Shaara raised the bottle to him. "That'd be you."

Corax clicked his tongue three times in rapid succession. "Right, right. I avenged you and everything. Chased the little bastard down, blew a hole in his thorax. Dodging thermal mortars the whole time—you know, the same

thing you got nailed by.” Corax took a sip of nectar. “Pretty heroic, if I remember correctly.”

“And I’m sure you do.” Shaara took a long swig.

Corax’s large, wide-set eyes swiveled around the mess hall. “You sure you don’t wanna have something to eat before you start pounding ‘em back?”

She drank some more. “Yep.”

The feathers running down Corax’s neck and shoulders fluttered. “Fair enough.”

Shaara sighed. “We lose anyone after I went down?”

Corax’s feathers flattened against his skin. Their color dulled. “Yeah. Two more.”

Shaara took another drink. “Who?”

“Mawbor and Relkala.” Corax clicked his tongue once. “Rebs left a cargo transport behind when they pulled out of the ring system. Captain sent Maw and Relky to check it for high-val shit. Blew as soon as they got close.”

Shaara shook her head. “Of course it was fuckin’ booby trapped. Those bugs don’t just leave shit lying around. What was it?”

“Nuke.”

Shaara scoffed. “Fuck.”

“Nothin’ left of ‘em.” Corax feather-nodded. “Probably hoping the ship would come in to pick it up.”

Shaara drained her bottle. “Yeah, well. *Warden* never would’ve let Gethis do something that stupid.”

She looked up at the ceiling, raised the empty bottle. A drone detached from the service alcove and floated over. It swapped the empty bottle for a full one and zipped away. “Thanks.”

“You know what they’re gonna do to ‘em?” Corax asked.

“Huh?”

“The employer. To the rebs.”

“Dunno,” she said. “Kill ‘em?”

“Reprogram ‘em.” He swiped a hand across his hairless head. “Poof. Gone. Just like they did with those prisoners we brought in last month.”

“Guess that makes sense.”

“No, you don’t understand. They’re doing it to *all* of ‘em. Everyone in the outer system. What is that, five, six hundred thousand people? Now that we’ve crushed the rebs, the Reciprocity got their teams going into every hab and station out here. Wiping people’s memories. Uploading loyal, obedient citizens.” His feathers darkened. “Fuckin’ mental genocide.”

Shaara’s eyes dropped. “Not our problem, is it?”

Corax didn't respond.

Shaara looked into her comrade's eyes. They avoided her. His expressions were tough to read, even after almost six years fighting together. His smooth, green and brown skin had none of the telltale wrinkles that gave human emotions away. He had no eyebrows to arch, droop, or narrow. At the moment, his feathers were still and monochromatic.

"Don't you wanna ask me about it?" Shaara said.

His eyes snapped back to her. Some color flushed back into his feathers. "I figured if you wanted to talk about it, you would."

She took a drink. "Guess I'm talking about it."

His feathers ruffled. "So . . .?"

"What do you wanna know?"

Corax drummed his fingers on the table. The nails on their tips made a sharp clicking sound. "Where's he from?"

"Earth."

Corax looked confused. She knew that one.

"Our homeworld."

"I thought that place was . . ." Corax slashed a finger across his throat.

Images ran through Shaara's head. People on Earth, way back when—choking, melting, wasting away. Suffering. Killing. Dying. Like in the old stories. She'd always wondered if it really went down that way.

Ask Adnan when he wakes up.

"Thousand years or so now," she said. "Says that's how long he's been out here."

Corax trilled. "Hell of a trip. He okay?"

Shaara shook her head. "Went headfirst into the table when I told him his crew was dead. He's in a regen pod now."

Corax clicked his tongue. "Poor bastard."

Shaara frowned. "All the other freezers were shot? Nobody else made it?"

Corax feather-nodded. "Saw it myself. They didn't all go at the same time, judging from the decomp. Some of 'em almost looked fresh, but . . . yeah. I didn't think your boy was gonna make it either. He didn't like waking up to my face, let me tell you."

Shaara remembered the fearful look in Adnan's eyes, when he was talking about coming aboard *Warden*. She took a swig. "Can't say I blame him."

Corax stuck his tongue out at her.

"Not *just* 'cause you're ugly," she said. "He and his buddies probably went to sleep thinking humans were all alone out here. Waking up to this . . ."

She looked around the mess hall. Including her and Corax, seven species from twice as many star systems were in attendance.

"Yeah," Corax said, following her gaze. "Guess that'd be a shocker."

Shaara tapped her now empty second bottle. "I'd like to hop over to that ship. See if I can find . . . I dunno. Something."

Corax blinked. "It's gone. Gethis sold it."

Shaara's eyes widened. "Already? What the fuck!"

"Like you said, it was a thousand years old." Corax bobbed his head back and forth. "Filotha said Gethis'd get more money melting it down for scrap. He sold it to the Reciprocity with the rest of the junk they wanted."

Son of a bitch. "You take anything off it besides . . .?"

Corax rustled his feathers no. "If he had any personal shit on there, I guess it's gone."

"Yeah." She rubbed her forehead. "Yeah."

"Sorry, Chief."

"Ahh." She waved the apology away, trying to send her guilt with it. "Probably nothing useful on the shitheap anyway." She held up the empty bottle.

Corax's tongue clicked. "You sure you're not hungry?"

Shaara looked at him. "Who said I'm not hungry?"



Shaara stumbled back to her quarters two hours later. She'd finally eaten, too late to stave off drunkenness and the hangover that would surely follow in the morning. She hated going on duty hungover—or so she said.

Liar, she thought. *You love it.*

The crew she passed in the corridors ignored her. Knew not to bother her when she was like this. She opened the hatch to her quarters and stumbled in. Caught herself on her desk before she hit the ground. Laughed at her body's pathetic attempt to injure itself. Straightened and brushed herself off.

Her feet carried her toward the bed then just as thoughtlessly stopped her. The voice of the buried creature made itself heard through the drunken cacophony in her head, just for a moment. Her eyes drifted down to her desk. She reached out and tapped a small drawer on the underside. It opened.

She stared down at a small bit of metal. The drawer's only occupant.

I love you, it said.

Shaara swayed on her feet.

“Fuck you,” she replied.
She closed the drawer and fell into bed.