

THE FOUNDER'S SEED BOOK 1

# FALLEN



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***FALLEN***

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*For  
Becky S  
Dylan W  
John C  
Liliana A  
Lillith T  
And Vince G  
who read every draft as if it were the first.*

# chapter 1



## Iridos

ALIRA STABBED HER DIGGER INTO the ground, throwing clods of soil about as she gouged a hole with a fervor beyond her love of this spot or her gratitude for a moment alone. Frustration sparked patterns of colorful luminescence along the pale blue skin of both her arms and drove her stick deeper among the roots.

Surrounded by the rich smell of peat and the muffled sound of the wind, Alira's tension drained. This copse felt like her own personal sanctuary. Its peace kept her sane in a community where she would never belong. Here, no one thought her strange. Here, she could be more than a cleric. Here, she could violate the sacrosanct guild boundary and imagine herself a forager. If she didn't stay too long, the council would never know. Her mother would never know.

Another jab of her digger speared a rufesh tuber. She brushed away the dirt, squeezed the peel to pop it into her mouth, sat back on her heels, and chewed the starchy flesh. Outside the grove, wind rushed howling across the plain from ne'ani, where their star's light never shone, toward ha'ani, where it always did. Inside the grove, towering trees, thickets of fern, and tangles of dozhan weed muted the din enough that she could track sounds in her surroundings. Only deep in the belly of the city, where tunnels burrowed far below the surface, did the unammi escape all vestiges of the wind's wail.

Blue flickers from her dermal display lit the shadows around her and reflected like watershine on the boles and foliage nearby. A scurrying sound accompanied by wagging ferns a short distance away hinted at some minor drama playing out among the ground-level wildlife. It didn't concern her. No carnivores to worry about other than the rare serpentine atlish grown large enough to swallow a squat unammi youngling, but that hadn't happened in many generations.

She drew a deep breath, tightening the band of cloth wrapped around her chest, and let her head fall back. Far above, scaly muñise trees sprouted branches that reached so far as to touch surrounding trunks. Each tree's lower limbs twined among those of their neighbors to form a strong support for the canopy's abundant life. Nearer the top, above the winds, they reached up instead of out, purple leaves turned to capture as much of ha'ani's light as possible. Alira closed her eyes and imagined the insects, worms, and other small creatures that thrived there above the winds. Elevated so, they had few predators besides the delicate white niveym, large birds rarely glimpsed by surface dwellers, and atlish that slithered with ease from canopy to surface and back within the thickets.

She drifted, lost in thought, until voices snapped her eyes open. A group of other unammi approached—too late for her to flee unseen. Alira's shoulders tightened. Pink annoyance and sprinkles of white alarm raced up and down her arms. She bent to her task once more to lend an appearance of validity to her presence. Gathering food for the unammi couldn't—shouldn't—be wrong. If it fed workers in the city, what did it matter who did the digging?

The voices approached, then all stopped at once. Alira began a silent count. One...two...three...four....  
“What are *you* doing here?”

Faster than she'd expected. “Digging for rufesh.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be teaching spiritual fundamentals to the younglings?” another said. “Grinding some muñise resin for incense or leading a ritual?”

“I’m on my own time,” Alira muttered. “I’m allowed to do as I like.”

“Hobbies are fine,” the first said, “but you take it too far. How many guilds’ crafts are you studying now? Eight? Ten? More? If you were normal, you’d stick to the one you chose at your rite.”

Alira kept digging, red streaks joining the riot of color on her skin, racing down both arms and onto all ten fingers where the color disappeared beneath the dirt caked there. “At least I have more than one skill. If our people ever faced the loss of any guild, you wouldn’t know how to survive on your own.”

“That’s insane. Stop inventing excuses for your behavior,” a male said. “You’re scaring the younglings.”

Alira looked up. The wildcrafting class spread out in a semi-circle before her. Frem adults stood with seven students and Sufamel, the most experienced elder in the horticulture guild. The younglings’ skin showed speckles of white, and Alira chided herself for not thinking before she spoke. Still, it rankled to be rebuked in front of the entire group. Some of these little ones were in her own classes. Lavender unhappiness flooded out the red in her dermal display and she sighed.

Two of the frem herded the students away from the confrontation as one teacher pointed at various plants and identified each. When they were out of earshot Tisalan, one of the remaining frem, stepped closer.

“You’re a disgrace, Alira. I heard you’re learning to weave, and that you asked a miner to teach you the differences between minerals they extract.”

“Don’t worry,” Alira said. “He refused.”

“Thank Na’Staani for that. Think of the trouble had he agreed. I’m told you’re even working in the landing bay with the mitigants! The *mitigants*! You go beyond odd, cleric! Why won’t you respect our boundaries?”

Alira stabbed her digger into the dirt with half-hearted enthusiasm. Why indeed. Her life would be much easier if she could. “I don’t like living in a box.”

Tisalan scoffed. “That box you scorn was designed by the Founder because it benefits all unammi. We’ve thrived inside it for generations, yet you think your own ideas are superior?”

Alira glared at her. “I don’t believe for a heartbeat that the Founder would have established laws to limit his people so.”

Tisalan’s display flecked with red and pink atop the green of duty, her colors racing down her neck and under the chest wrap she wore. “I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised at your attitude. Human interaction corrupts. You’re a walking example. Just seeing those aliens on the trade guild holovids has sullied you.”

Red flooded Alira’s own skin as she surged to her feet. “What would you know of the humans?”

The other female stepped closer, her features tight. “Everyone’s seen enough of the training vids to know humans are disgusting. Their feet are so tiny they look deformed, especially at the ends of such thin, fragile legs. With that flat, dull skin, how can you tell what they’re thinking? And all those fibers on their heads like they’d stripped dozhan of their filaments and sewn the strands to their pates. What purpose do those serve?” She shuddered. “It’s enough to give one nightmares. You’re the only one who liked those vids. It’s no wonder you’re aberrant. You should have chosen the trade guild at your Rite of Decision. Then you could be a pilot and live with your freakish humans. You’d fit in better with them than you do with your own people.”

“Because I think for myself?” Alira asked, closing the distance between herself and Tisalan. “As far as I’m concerned, that’s better than reciting council rhetoric for lack of anything better to say.”

“Basu’tao.” Sufamel’s quiet voice cracked the tension as she stepped between the two females. “Tisalan, you have work to do. Alira, walk with me.”

The two remaining foragers moved away toward the younglings, glancing back as they went. Sufamel shifted her attention back to Alira. “What will we do with you, chithe?” she said, her skin a confusion of tan affection and pink annoyance.

Chithe? Alira brushed the dirt from both legs of her loose pants and flushed blue with angst. “I haven’t been a youngling in seasons of seasons.”

“Then stop acting like one.” Sufamel started back toward the city.

Alira sighed and fell into step beside her. “I’m sorry. I—”

Sufamel sliced a hand through the air. “Stop giving me words that don’t agree with your actions. Why did you choose the clerical guild?”

“My ama has driven me toward it all my life.”

“Shame on Lurien for influencing you so. It should have been your free choice.” The elder walked on. “It’s clear you regret your Decision, but it’s too late to change now. Why do you fight it?”

If only she knew. “I love being a cleric. But I also enjoy doing other things. It’s wrong to force us to choose when we’re so young. The council should at least allow a longer period of experimentation so we can be sure of what we want before we commit our entire lives to a single guild.” She sighed. “I keep hoping my actions will entice others to follow my example so the council will see how wrong it is to confine us so.”

Sufamel nodded, her jaw working. Probably chewing a leaf or a piece of root. “How can an uprising among the unammi help us?”

Gray surprise flooded Alira’s arms. “I never said—”

“If you divide the unammi, if you tear down the guild structure that’s been in place throughout our history, you’ll break our people. Our civilization. How will you bind us back together then?”

The wind’s roar rose as they approached the border of the grove and Sufamel stopped, her aged profile so calm, so patterned with green veins. An occasional pink speckle touched that dutiful display.

“Why do you think your way is better?” Sufamel asked. “Have the Iri told you this?”

Alira frowned. “No, of course not. You know they don’t speak to us.”

“But they do.” Sufamel bobbed her head. “The Iri have always whispered guidance and wisdom to the high cleric. They speak to Lurien, do they not? That’s why she is the first voice on the council.” The elder chewed her leaf a moment, a twinkle in her eye as she peered at Alira. “They’ll speak to you one day, assuming you settle enough to take on your mother’s role. The people expect the same of you.”

Alira fidgeted. She’d heard her ama say as much, but Sufamel’s words added weight to the admonition. Life would be so much easier if Alira could be content with her Decision like everyone else. She plucked a twig from the knotted shoulder of Sufamel’s wrap.

“Do you think I’ll ever be ready?” Alira murmured.

“That is between you, Lurien, and Na’Staani,” Sufamel said. “But you know what it means if you do not resolve this conflict. Mitigation wouldn’t suit you, Alira. Don’t press the council. You won’t like their decision any more than you liked your own.” She took Alira’s hand and leaned closer. “Open defiance makes you a target. Quiet rebellion satisfies almost as much but with fewer troublesome side effects. If you really want to play in the dirt, come to my quarters. I’ve plenty of seedlings there and can put you to work where no one can see.” She squeezed Alira’s fingers and went back to her class.

Sufamel was right, but that didn’t make it any less complicated. It was still so surprising that no one thought to investigate deeper reasons behind Alira’s discontent. They always chose instead to assume she enjoyed causing problems. But that was the least of her worries. Far more pressing was the fact that one of the others was sure to speak of this encounter. Word would get back to Lurien.

Alira worked on an explanation as she closed her inner eyelids against blown sand and stepped outside the shelter of the trees. Walking into the wind, the trek to the protected canyon and the city beyond always took longer than the trip to the wood. She was almost at the mouth of the canyon before she remembered she’d left her gathering sacks in the dirt.

## chapter 2



### **New Canaan, Harajüd** **Consortium Trader Base**

ADMIRAL SKALAR EXITED THE CLEAR plaz holding cell and stood far enough away that the prisoner wouldn't be able to see him in the shadowed corridor outside. He looked her over again. Most curious, that broken and badly set nose, that scar along the bottom of her jaw. Now why didn't she get that fixed? All colonial worlds provided free medical care. It didn't make any sense for her to have a badly set nose and a scar anywhere on her body. Unless she couldn't go to the medfacs because....

Because what?

His adjutant, Andrea Sweeney, stepped up beside him. "Sorry, sir, but the DNA swipe was a bust. No records."

High-level connections, then. Who sent this troublemaker? This netzyl? One of the other factions, maybe, given the human cargo she'd been carrying. Surely not a bigwig from another colony world, despite the prisoner's claims that corporate would burn him for holding her.

He'd almost laughed at that. Civilian governments did dip an occasional toe into Trader business, but they were far more likely to hire a Trader faction to do work they, as respectable governors of their various worlds, could not. Skalar had no compunctions about breaking colonial law or even violating the Intercolonial Charter. Those rules didn't apply to Trader business.

But slaving? Never. Nor had he ever known a colony world to trade in slaves. For them, it was too reminiscent of a past they wanted to leave behind.

For Skalar, the issue was far more personal.

His little sister's image swam through his thoughts, Rugrat's laughing, childish face followed by her petite form so wracked and abused her kidnappers had dumped her on the docks like a broken toy. The last time he'd seen her alive, she'd shied at every sound. Her haunted expression highlighted the pain etched into every line on her skin. She never would've been taken in the first place if their recalcitrant mother hadn't refused his support. Skalar clenched his fist and shoved it into his pocket.

"Should we bring the prisoner some water, sir? It's been almost two days. She can go a bit longer without food, of course, but she's gonna need something to drink soon." Sweeney shifted on her feet. "Unless you're finished with her. Did she tell you anything?"

He spared her a glance before looking back to the cell. "No. She's not ready to talk. Yet."

Sa'abah, captain of security, approached the cell. "Sorry to disturb you, sir, but Captain Crow is on his way to your office with Jarod."

"Acknowledged. Sa'abah, have your teams prep the blackout cell," he said. "When it's ready, tranq and transfer our guest there."

"You want the full system setup?"

"Same as last time. Wait, belay that. Amp audio volume by six."

Sa'abah nodded. "Right away, sir."

Skalar gestured for his adjutant to follow, then swept out of the brig and into the main lift.

Sweeney hesitated, pointing at the private lift behind the security desk. “But...aren’t you going to your office?”

“Via the scenic route. There’s a guest in my office. I’d rather not draw attention to the lift there.” He flashed a quick smile he didn’t feel. “I want to know who this prisoner is. Keep checking. Send every tidbit you find to my TICS pad.”

“Yes, sir. Do you know who’s behind this?”

“I have my suspicions. Any other questions?”

“No sir.” The lift stopped at the administrative level, and Sweeney hurried off to her tasks.

Alone in the lift, Skalar brushed at his immaculate trousers and crisp shirt and tried to fend off dark childhood memories.

Forget it. Can’t go back.

On the top floor, crewmen along the wide corridors stepped back to give the admiral space and he swept past them. Up here, thick windows formed outer walls offering stunning views. On any given day, Skalar stopped at one or another of these to survey his domain. That’s how he thought of it. *His* domain. Never mind that HHU, Harajüd House Unlimited, governed unchallenged on this colony world, or that they owned every resource, every scrap of dirt outside Consortium land. They didn’t own his Trader faction, and they didn’t own him. On the contrary, the HHU board of directors—and Chairman Logan Roucharde in particular—owed a great deal to the Consortium. To Skalar. Trader factions stood outside the law. They could do what colonial security forces, neutered by the Charter, could not. In exchange, HHU left Skalar alone to run the Consortium’s many business interests and fatten his personal credit account like any other member of Harajüd’s colonial elite. The sole difference between him and them was that Skalar didn’t sit on the HHU board of directors and couldn’t influence planetary policy.

At least, not yet. But that was a problem for another time.

The office door slid aside and Skalar entered the comfortable, familiar room. Outside his private residence, this workspace best supported the image he wanted to portray: simple, refined, elegant. One floor-to-ceiling window stretched from the north wall around the northwest corner overlooking markets, sculpted skyscrapers of the city center residential district and, in the distance, Mari Bay. Two of Harajüd’s seven moons shimmered low in the afternoon sky beyond the bay. An enormous nanopanel, now set to exhibit an ever-changing swirl of blue and green, filled in the remaining window space. Pearl gray walls stood unadorned save for a preserved Jolly Roger, a tribute to the pirates and privateers on whom all early Trader factions were modeled, which hung above a table halfway across the room. A bar and seating area before the door invited visitors to relax. Those familiar with the admiral knew better than to fall for that trap.

Skalar poured a drink while he sized up the setting. At the other end of the room his second, Captain Crow, stood near the spartan desk with arms crossed over his wiry chest, green eyes in that lined brown countenance. Even from behind, Skalar would have known who he was, given the captain’s standard choice in clothing—dark, utilitarian shirt and pants, and those heavy, steel-toed boots he seemed to favor. Salt-and-pepper braids hung to his shoulders and swung with his movements.

Jarod, the Consortium’s chief metalsmith, waited near the nanopanel, his lanky form tense inside his artsy trousers and loose tunic, his silver-shot black ponytail slightly askew. At his sandaled feet lay two square metal plates, each about thirty centimeters to a side. Skalar glanced his way. “Why are you here?”

Jarod shifted his weight. “I’ve been at the hematium again.”

Skalar took his brandy to the desk and sat. “We discussed this.”

“I was on my own time, Admiral.”

“You work for me,” Skalar said. “All your time is mine. Hematium wastes it. That metal is fit for nothing but ship parts.”

“I think this might change your opinion, sir. If I may?” He inclined his portable TICS pad toward Skalar. Skalar nodded.

Jarod touched the pad and threw a small holovid, which hovered above Skalar’s desk. In the vid, a panel like those Jarod brought hung in braces at one end of a test room. “This is playback at 1/1000<sup>th</sup> speed.”



He started the vid. Seconds later, a small projectile crossed the holo in slow motion and punched through the plate. Jarod paused the playback and picked up one of the panels. Its surface, scorched black, sported a hole more than seven centimeters across. "This is that same outer hull segment," he said, "which came off a personnel carrier, XL class. A ship part, if you will."

"Where'd you get the test panel?" Crow asked.

"Faction shipyard. Recycling."

Crow grabbed the piece, examined it, then passed it to Skalar. "That ain't even a bug bite."

"Big enough to be disastrous in space. That," he said, pointing at the hole, "came from a projectile the size of a typical meteoroid, maybe three centimeters in diameter, discharged by a rigged pulse cutter at one hundred percent strength. Larger debris in space packs a bigger punch."

Skalar laid the damaged metal aside and squinted at the metalsmith. "Standard risk for space flight. So?"

Jarod restarted the vid. The hologram switched to a new panel of slightly different color, same size, same braces, same sized projectile. This time, however, the panel deflected the nugget.

"That's one hundred percent," Jarod said.

A few seconds later, a bigger chunk flew across the vid and bounced off the panel.

"Two hundred percent."

The third time, a large hunk of metal flashed across the vid and shattered against the panel, its pieces careening in every direction. One fragment raced closer to the holocam, increasing in size until it impacted the camera and the vid vanished. Skalar set his drink down hard and surged to his feet.

"Three hundred percent. I would have tried more force, but that was the best I could coax out of improvised gear. Also, we lost the holocam and a bit of the ceiling to collateral damage in the last test." Jarod lifted the other panel off the floor. He tilted it one way, then the other. Turned it around, back. No marks marred the light gray surface. "This is the panel from the second test."

"Hematium?" Skalar said.

"Yes, sir. The whole panel." He exuded that smug excitement of scientists everywhere when revealing a new discovery. "Ships made from this would be nigh impervious."

Crow barked a laugh. "Big boats confined to space, maybe. A hematium hull would be too heavy for atmospheric craft."

Jarod tossed the panel at Crow.

Crow scrambled, bracing himself, and caught it mid-air. His eyes widened, then narrowed. He scowled at Jarod.

"Hematium, my ass. This ain't heavy enough. What is it really?"

Skalar leaned over and snatched the panel from Crow, hefting it with one hand. He raised a brow at the metalsmith. "Well?"

"It's hematium with a honeycomb core. See for yourself." Jarod threw a new visual to the holodisplay. "Here's a bottom-line analysis compiled by your own chemists."

Skalar passed the panel back to Crow and scrutinized the breakdown. The numbers were close. "Trace elements are off."

"Temperature accounts for that."

"Temperature."

Jarod nodded. "Yes, sir. Extreme heat."

"I thought that would shatter it," Crow said.

"It does if you do it fast. This took a long time."

Crow squinted. "So, if it breaks..."

"No second chances, Captain. If it breaks before the process is completed, or if it's fired more than once, the finished product will never reach this level of integrity. But, once it's worked in this way and cooled at a controlled rate, tensile strength is enhanced beyond belief."

Skalar sat down. "Every hematium part in every ship's energy chamber is heated and cooled in production. Why has this never been noticed before?"

"It isn't the heating and cooling alone, sir," Jarod said. "It's a multi-step, specialized process. I'll show you if you want."

“Later.” Skalar sipped his brandy. “Did you try this on a normal piece of hematium scrap?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Jarod. “Without that sequence in its initial construction, the panel’s as vulnerable as any other to hull stress or damage.”

“Why?” Skalar said. “No other metallurgy results in magical effects like this.”

“It’s part of the allotropic phase transformation. And the timing, of course. This new process evokes a stronger reaction in hematium than in any metal I’ve ever worked with. The difference is off the charts. It’s as if the molecular bond—”

Skalar held up a hand. “Thank you.” He swiped away the holo, retrieved the undamaged plate, and hefted it again, considering the panel and all the implications of this discovery. “How long did this take?”

“Not counting the trial and error in the learning process, start to finish, that one piece took about two days.”

Two days! “At that rate, it’ll cost a fortune to build even one ship.”

“Not if we refine the process, sir. Automate it. Mass production at our shipyards would bring the cost down.”

True. “I want to see this for myself. Set up a series of off-world trials.”

Jarod squirmed. “I can do one, sir, then I’m out of material. I used up most of my spare stock to produce this,” he said, nodding at the plate.

Crow smirked. “Scrap yard’s full of it. Pick up all you want.”

“No, I told you,” Jarod said. “That won’t work. Scrap’s already been fired. It has to be raw ore.”

Skalar laid the panel on his desk and leaned back. “How much do you need to set up five additional tests?”

“Depends on how big you want them to be,” Jarod said.

“Say we convert one quadrant on each of several junked ships,” Skalar said.

“Yeah,” Crow said. “Then we haul ‘em off-world and use ‘em for target practice.”

Skalar nodded. “Just so. This shows the material’s effectiveness against ballistic damage from space debris. It doesn’t guarantee its effectiveness against energy weapons. We’ll test for that, as well, and include a comparison between new and old panels.”

Jarod’s eyes darted back and forth as if he were reading calculations on an internal screen. After a moment, he said, “Fifty tonnes might be adequate.”

Crow whistled.

Skalar pursed his lips. That would raise Roucharde’s brows. “Very well. Set up the first one with what you have. Keep me informed of your progress. TICS,” Skalar said to the air above his desk, “attend.”

A chitter sounded in response.

“Send Lieutenant Sweeney to my office.” The system responded, and he picked up the panel again, examining its webbed construct. “Has anyone else seen you working on this?”

“Sure. I had to use the shipyard to do it. But I didn’t advertise my medium. I figured you’d wanna hold this close to the vest.”

“That’s correct,” Skalar said. “Tell no one. This is your new priority.” The door chime sounded, announcing Sweeney’s arrival. Skalar smiled at Jarod. “Good job. My adjutant will see you to the gate.”

Skalar pointed at a chair. Crow sat.

“TICS, attend.”

The system chittered.

“Comm Logan Roucharde.”

Soon, the chairman’s smiling image hovered above the desk.

“Hello, Skalar. What can I do for you?”

“Logan, I need a favor.” Skalar liked calling the directors by their first names. “The Consortium needs an additional quantity of raw hematium.”

“How much?”

“Fifty tonnes.”

Roucharde winced. “Damn! That’s nearly twice your annual allotment. Building some new ships?”

“I’m testing a new prototype.”

Logan leaned to one side in his seat. “We only delivered your regular shipment two months ago. I don’t have that kind of quantity lying around. Have you tried buying it from our competitor?”

Skalar lowered his brandy. “Come now, Logan. To buy from Saacharis Aggregate would breach our contract with Harajüd House. I would never violate the Charter that way.” Not and admit to it, anyway.

Logan seemed to consider the issue. “Is this a one-time thing?”

“I’m not sure. It may be.”

“If not, let me know. We’ll work something out. In the meantime, I won’t take it amiss if you don’t buy from us this once. Will that work for you?”

“Indeed,” Skalar nodded. “Please have your staff draw up an agreement and transmit it to my TICS right away. I’d like to have your permission on record as soon as possible. Oh by the way, that interference job you asked me to run...”

“It’s done?”

“Yes.” And Roucharde better not forget who did this for him. “Should I expect the price to go up on Gadney livestock?”

Logan leaned forward and dropped his voice. “There’s no...evidence?”

Skalar’s free hand went to his heart. “You wound me.”

“No offense. I’ll transfer payment in installments over the next week, as agreed.”

“Of course.”

The chairman sat back. “Was that all?”

“Yes. Thank you, Logan. I’ll keep you posted on the other deal you asked about.”

“Sounds good.”

The visual winked out.

On the other side of the desk, Crow grinned. “You sure know how to make Roucharde dance.”

Skalar sipped his brandy. Damn right. He’d been doing it since Logan took over as chairman almost twenty years ago.

Crow slid down in his seat. “So, what are you thinking? Use it on our own ships? Take over the other factions? If the tinker’s right, we’ll be undefeatable.”

“If it works as Jarod claims, we’ll use it for our newer ships as an edge in our favor, not to issue a statement of intent. There’s no sense courting a shooting war.”

“Why not?” his captain said. “The other admirals wouldn’t hesitate, especially Rizzo.”

“They’re stupid. I’m not.” Skalar frowned. “Have you forgotten the Triad Wars?”

Crow’s expression went blank. “Of course not.”

Skalar shook his head. Crow was never a student of history. “The Unions destroyed what was left of the ecosystem on Earth, exacerbated the spread of the virus that killed the remaining population. No, we will not fire the first shot in a new war. It isn’t worth destroying the six surrounding colonies to take over our competitors. And what would I do with crippled factions? I want them whole. Functional. Profitable. There are better ways to assume control. More insidious, perhaps, but less destructive to the worlds we all require.”

He rose and turned toward the window, his mind working at an alternate plan. If Jarod was right, Skalar could sell the plating to Harajüd House. Not the formula for its production, of course. No way he’d part with that, but he would be more than happy to fabricate the parts required to replace the hulls on their space stations. For that matter, all the colony worlds would buy such advanced protection. Small orbital debris did a share of damage from time to time.

When it came to HHU, he could sell the parts for fewer credits if a seat on the board came as part of his payment. As a director, he’d be in a unique position to benefit the Consortium, as well as Traders on other worlds. Leadership of the other five factions seemed a reasonable next step. Those admirals wouldn’t thank him at first, but they’d come to see the benefit of an alliance with a Trader admiral who could influence laws, loosen trade restrictions, and manipulate influential administrators, not only here but on all the colonies.

Of course, it would be a simple matter of time before the other admirals wanted the same kind of shielding for their own ships. Even at an exorbitant price, he’d lose his advantage if he sold to them. He

made a mental note to set Jarod the task of breaching the hulls, too. No sense in having the shield if you didn't also know how to defeat it.

Skalar finished his brandy, then went to the bar. "TICS, record communique, destination Iridos." He filled his glass and returned to his seat.

"I am Admiral Skalar of the Harajüd Consortium. I wish to purchase fifty tonnes of hematium to be delivered as soon as possible to my main base in New Canaan. What is your asking price? Do remember that I can also assist you with acquisitions you might find difficult to secure through any of your other corporate connections. Further considerations are possible. I await your reply." He paused with an amiable smile. "TICS, end communique. Conclude and transmit."

Momentary silence filled the space before Crow broke it. "Colonial security isn't used to seeing direct dealings between squibs and Consortium crew," he observed. "You think they'll kick up a stink?"

"Logan blessed it. Who's going to argue with that?"

Crow blurted a sarcastic laugh. "He meant his colonial competitor, not the squib source. HHU will have words."

"He didn't specify any particular seller." Skalar shrugged. "I'll have his written agreement as *carte blanche*."

"What makes you think the squibs will deal with you? If I recall correctly, it was hard enough to get them to deal with humans in the first place."

"Indeed. But it has been almost twelve hundred years since anyone new tried. Who knows? Maybe they're tired of their exclusivity with HHU and Saacharis Aggregate. I could offer them more than both put together."

"Worth a try, I guess. It's not like we could get it anywhere else," Crow muttered. "At least not unless we find it on some other rock."

Skalar sipped his brandy.

Crow frowned. "Are you gonna want me to deal with them when they come?"

"Is that a problem?"

"No. I can handle it if you want. They're just so weird-looking."

"They're humanoid," Skalar shrugged.

"Sure, one bald head, two arms, two legs. But they're blue. And their parts are mismatched. Huge eyes, big-ass feet on squat pissant bodies. Hell, I never even saw a squib that stood as tall as my chest."

"Evolution, Captain."

"What?"

Skalar gestured with his snifter. "The core of Iridos is denser than any colony world. Higher gravity means a different body shape."

"I guess. But they light up. Like bugs."

"Iridos is tidally locked with its star."

"So?"

"So, it's a safe bet they live in permanent shadow. We already know they trade glowing pigments and plant fibers. I expect bioluminescence is common there." Skalar shrugged. "You'll have at least three days to get used to the idea, time for them to get the message and deliver the shipment. But if you don't want the job—"

"I didn't say that." Crow looked almost offended. "Don't worry. I can deal with ugly."

## chapter 3



### Iridos

YOUNGLING VOICES REACHED INTO THE tunnel outside the classroom. Alira slowed, listening.

“You can’t be a raneal,” one said. “You’re too big.”

“Can, too,” another said. “Watch me.”

Alira crept to the door. Kipa’s small body melted into a horizontal position, his limbs retracting and reforming as four thick legs. Skin raised into pebbled bumps along his back and down the tail that grew from his spine.

Alira freckled with tan affection. Youngling classes always raised her spirits. Everyone encouraged Kipa with shouts and bright colors of excitement. Everyone except Trumo, who observed in silence.

She stepped into the room, clapping. “Good try, Kipa. But Enfil is correct. An actual raneal lizard could sit in the palm of your hand. Your approximation will always be too large. Pick something closer to your own size. Like a fealle sprite. Watch.”

The younglings around her shimmered and wavered as Alira shrank to half her normal size. She couldn’t see herself, but she knew how it appeared to them. Luminescent hues in her skin flattened into subdued dun fur. Her shifting form dropped to all fours, hindquarters raised over a wide, stumpy tail and back legs built for power. Huge, double-lidded eyes dominated an exaggerated head with a fuzzy snout pointed to dig under the sand. A sudden leap carried her morphed body into the air and she landed in the same spot. Snorting and huffing, she pushed her muzzle toward the younglings, eliciting squeals and yellow flashes of delight. Then she expanded and straightened until she stood upright wearing her own face.

“You see?” she asked.

Bright features shone back. “Shifting makes me tired,” one said.

“It gets easier as you get older,” Alira explained, “but even frem can’t hold an unnatural configuration indefinitely without rest.”

Another chimed in. “Why does everything look so weird and shiny when I’m morphing?”

“Because your eyes are changing their shape. You get used to it.”

Trumo leaned forward. “Can we mimic something that’s bigger than us?”

“Sure,” she said “to a point. What did you have in mind?”

Trumo drew a breath to respond, but the others nudged Kipa.

“Do it,” they challenged.

Kipa hissed back. “No.”

“Do what?” Alira asked. “Show me, Kipa.”

Blue sprinkles danced across his chest. “I shouldn’t.”

“Why not?” Alira said. “Practice is a good thing. We won’t tease you. Will we?”

“No,” the younglings said in unison.

Kipa glanced at the others and back at her. His silver eyes dimmed to a startling gray before he expanded to almost half again his normal size. His torso lengthened, drawing up from the waist until his too-small head towered above his overlarge feet. Sparkling colors died into wan, dull skin stretched taut over exaggerated bones. Alira gaped up at him.

He’d come close. Too close. The other younglings waited, hands at their mouths, for her response.

Her breath snagged, drawn tight on a barb of fear. Had she neglected to secure the trade guild vids the last time she'd been in that classroom? "Kipa, where have you seen a human?"

He resumed his own form. "I don't remember."

"Was it the holovids?" she said.

"No. I—" he mumbled to his feet. "One of the pilots in the dining hall was thinking about the humans. I saw it."

Alira blinked. Kipa was telepathic? Already? Such gifts normally surfaced after fifteen or sixteen seasons. He was no more than twelve. "You saw it in the pilot's thoughts?"

He nodded, meeting her gaze.

"Did you ask permission first?"

Kipa paused. "No, Na'ama. It just came to me. I didn't mean to peek."

Alira took in the tense coloring of the other younglings. "Who else have you told about this?"

"Only my friends."

"Kipa."

He looked up. Lavender veins of uncertainty streaked his small face.

"Your other teachers should be told. And not by me, do you understand? This must be considered in your training."

He nodded.

"Good," she said. "Now, take your seats."

"But morphing's fun, Na'ama Alira. Can't we do that a little longer?" Enfilu pleaded.

Alira weakened. "We have other studies today."

"Can you at least tell us if Kipa got the human right?" another chimed in.

She eyed them. "Very well—if you can answer my questions about the Founder."

Excited assent greeted her suggestion as if she'd offered to play a game. Perhaps she had.

"Who was the Founder?"

All spoke at once. "Elisul."

"Good! Why did he and our ancestors come to Iridos?"

Everyone clamored to answer, and Alira pointed at one youngling.

"Their world was unstable. They needed a new planet."

"That's right. Did Elisul send founders to other worlds?"

A young female shook her head. "No one knows."

"No," Alira agreed. "We don't. It's strange, isn't it, wondering if there are other unammi out there somewhere?"

Everyone nodded.

"One more question. What sorts of things did Elisul pass down to us? Call them out."

"Our social structure," one said.

"Our culture," another said.

"The rites."

"The taboos!"

Alira winced.

"Elisul didn't like outsiders," another added. "I don't think he would have traded with the humans if he were still alive when they came."

Alira sighed. Indoctrination ran strong in her people. The council saw to that. The students took advantage of her pause.

"Can we talk about morphing now?"

"Yes, Na'ama Alira, was Kipa right?"

"He was close," she said, choosing her words. "Humans' feet are smaller, their legs thinner. And they have hair."

"What is 'hair'?"

"Questions first," she said. "What are the Iri?"

No one jumped to reply.

“Anyone?” She waited, then went on. “They’re microorganisms too tiny to see without technology. Where do they live?”

“In the irolium,” several students called.

“Not exactly,” Alira said. “They live in the rock at the base of the irolium. It’s the Iri that produce the crystals, right?” Many younglings nodded. “Do you know why?”

“Na’Staani made them sensitive to us,” one said, “so as long as we live with them, they could grow the crystals and make us special.”

“Special how?” Alira said.

“The Iri give us healing,” one began.

Another broke in. “And morphing and all our other skills.”

“And without it, we’d be ordinary. Like fealle sprites. Or the humans.”

The humans again. “That’s speculation, Kipa,” Alira said, “not fact. We don’t know what would happen without the irolium. Let’s hope we never find out.”

“Na’ama Alira, what’s hair?”

“Yes!” another said. “Mimic a human for us!”

All their voices joined in the plea.

Alira sighed. She shouldn’t. Her better judgment told her to say no. But as the younglings matured, from would expect them to put aside silly games and take on added responsibilities. Once they took on from roles, duty would define their lives. Could she deny them the occasional fun?

Before she could change her mind, she reached into the molecular structure of her clothing and her body to transform both at the same time. While they watched, she stretched her body taller, slimmed its torso, and widened her shoulders to match her hips. Midway between, she pulled in her waist and shrank her feet to uncertain foundations beneath legs thinned to slender reeds. Her clothing shifted to darker pants of a coarse fabric that hugged her shape, while her arms, neck and face faded to dull brown beneath a loose, thin shirt that scooped deep to show off her chest. Cheekbones pushed out against her skin. Her growing jaw pulled at her chin. Coarse filaments, short and shaggy, pushed out of her scalp and tickled her ears. What color should she make it?

The younglings’ shocked expressions and their unanimous wash of gray snapped her out of it. She resumed her normal form and stood once more in her wide-legged pants and loose drape across her chest. “That’s what a real human looks like. Hope it’s the last one you ever see. Now it’s my turn. If the Iri are so small we can’t see them, how do we know they are there?”

“We can see them with special equipment.”

“Well, yes,” Alira said, “but how else do you know?”

No one spoke.

“You know this answer,” she encouraged. “Here’s a hint: close your eyes and listen.”

Her words prompted a unanimous reply and sparkling yellow flashes in their displays. “The song!”

“Yes!” Alira clapped. “The Iri sing to us in what are called ‘low frequency tones’ that comfort and soothe us, right?”

Heads nodded.

“Does anyone want to give one word to describe how the song makes them feel?”

They thought a moment, then began to offer replies.

“Happy.”

“Focused.”

“Hungry.” Several others flashed amusement at this.

Alira peered at Trumo. He’d been quiet throughout the discussion.

“Trumo, do you want to share?”

He shook his head, and she sighed. “Very well.”

“Na’ama Alira, did the Iri tell us the humans are dangerous?”

Alira cringed. “Would someone else like to answer?”

Kipa spoke up. "They didn't tell us. They only show us pictures in our minds or make us feel a certain way to let us know things." He swallowed hard. "But they do talk to the high cleric. Did they tell her we should be afraid of the humans?"

"No!" Alira said, leaning forward to emphasize her words. "The Iri told us no such thing. We don't fear humans, not exactly. But they do threaten the unammi."

"Why?" asked another.

Why indeed. Alira remembered the first time she'd asked her ama that question. "They aren't like us," she said, her rote response echoing her mother's. "The elders tell us they worship chaos, that they're unsettled, contentious. Exposure to them makes us question our established traditions."

"But I thought asking questions was a good thing," Trumo said.

"To a point, it is," she said. "Right now, for all of you in the educators' house, questioning helps you learn. Later, when you become frem, questions lead to discontent and uncertainty." She couldn't believe she was telling them this. Her questions fed her own unease, true, because the council and unammi elders offered no answers beyond repetitive rhetoric and dogma. When she mentioned this, the councilors treated her like a grain of sand in their eyes.

Kipa's voice broke her reverie. "That's why they Adjust us at our Rite of Decision."

The other younglings fidgeted, blue and teal sparkles flickering across their skin.

Alira frowned. "Correct. The Adjustment helps you to be content with your role. A frem's life purpose is to serve the people. You can't be effective if you doubt your choices." Oh, the hypocrisy. Of all the clerics who might teach this subject, she had the least right.

"But isn't the Adjustment like being mitigated?" Enfili said. "I don't want to be a mitigant."

This had gone far enough. "No," Alira said, forcing her display to calm. "The Adjustment nudges the initiate's mind only enough to remove any confusion. Mitigation is a much deeper process to reprogram the entire brain. It's a rare thing, chithe," she said, touching Enfili's cheek. "Don't worry. None of you will have to endure that. Now, we need to get back to our studies. Take your seats, please."

They scrambled for the best cushions. This wasn't over. Younglings didn't let things go as easily as the frem.

As easily as *most* frem.

She shelved the conversation in the back of her mind to simmer for the rest of the class.