

# Chapter One

The planet wanted to die. Toran refused to let it. The torn crust roared defiance, spattering a fountain of magma and poisonous gas across a plain of cooled lava. Gouts of ash pulsed with a bright orange glow. The fury reverberated through his environmental suit's heavy boots despite his being on the caldera's rim, fifteen lengths distant. He tasted brimstone with every word he spoke, even with his helmet on. "Begin cradle deployment, Mak. Last one."

"Descending," the Qurl engineer's voice crackled in Toran's earphones.

The crystal cradle appeared through the boiling clouds like a pendant offered up to the fire. Toran struggled to maintain a calm demeanor for his mixed team of Qurl and Coshen engineers. Each had been handpicked. Politics notwithstanding, everyone trusted each other after months of grueling trials. There could be no missteps. Not now. Not with everyone watching.

Targaz Aki, his Coshen counterpart and an experienced volcanologist stood beside him. He pointed a gloved hand at the descending crystal. "*Disantirrz kur ecz mar.*"

Toran's earpiece clicked. "Disanti be with us," Targaz's burring voice echoed through the translator.

Toran stared at the scientist through his visor. He worked among the Coshen long enough to discern most expressions on their crimson plated faces. Targaz's visage might be mistaken for that of a tortoise, but what crinkled his lipless mouth was clear enough. Reverence. Best not to comment. The enigmatic Disanti were still gods to the Coshen, despite having failed them utterly. Gods perhaps, but stupid ones. Yes, the one ship the Disanti possessed was incredibly powerful with seemingly impenetrable shields. So was their only city, equally protected by an omnipotent energy barrier. Something had to give at the war's onset when the former was slammed into the latter. It ended up being the planet's crust. This horror was the cataclysmic result of neither the ship nor its city dropping their shields despite having time to do so. Yet Targaz still worshiped them?

The tethered cage containing the four Disanti crystals glinted in the firelight. A glimpse of their advanced technology displayed itself as enveloping gasses froze in place around the bus-sized cradle. He didn't know how the Disanti managed to make time slow around the artifacts, but he did find an excellent use for the anomaly. These crystals, remnants of an aborted planetary shield, eased the lava flow enough to install a cap without volumetric pressures flushing everything away. Slowing time bought time.

The whale-like belly of *Kar's Runner* emerged from the clouds next, its open bay lined with floodlights whose bright shafts pierced the swirling ash. The ship's crane had to be kept at a prudent distance from the cage for obvious reasons.

"Watch your tension," Toran cautioned. Being Cothra Qurl, Mak knew his physics, but this hole in Coa's crust had one exit left. The force behind this roaring geyser challenged the ship's stabilizers more than any previous insertion. He shared Targaz's rapt amazement as the Disanti crystals suppressed the towering gush of molten rock, bright globules suspending themselves around the cage. What kind of energy could do that? How did something with the appearance of giant quartz hexagons contain such power as to warp time itself? Science, he reminded himself. Not magic. Not gods. He couldn't tell this to Targaz. The Coshen looked ready to drop to his knees.

Natural forces fought against the encroaching stillness to no avail. The towering fountain became a sullen boil. Unscathed by the heat, the glittering set of crystals dipped into the writhing pool, quieting it further.

*Kar's Runner* sounded its horns.

"Contact," Mak reported. "Immersion."

The roar was gone. There was only the glowing orange surface thrashing in the night, partially obscured by ashen billows.

"All stations extend your rods," Toran ordered. Now for some science he did understand. This was nanotechnology brought to fruition in a material known as Stone. You could do almost anything with the stuff, including making it tough enough to seal a world-smothering caldera. He watched thick cables of

elastic material snake across the flat plain in too orderly a fashion to suggest natural occurrence. The heads flattened as they approached their objective, firelight glinting off the Stone's symmetrical veins.

The vent's glow faded, blinked, and disappeared. Used to the hiss and thunder, Toran found it hard adjusting to the resulting utter silence. He still heard it in his head.

"The matrix is firming," Mak said with obvious relief. "Toran, I think we did it." The simple statement was underlined by background cheers.

"I think we did," he agreed. How many months had this taken, and how many lives? "Release your tether. Send my 'well-done' to the crew."

"Will do. We'll keep watch a little longer before heading up."

"I'll head in and check for seismic distortions. Toran out." He clapped Targaz's shoulder. "Let's go."

"Your models held true," Targaz congratulated, following him to the tunnel's hatch. "You will seek your princess now?"

Toran stared back toward the caldera. "I will. My end of the bargain is complete."

"The Riss *Ka* should come here to present her personally."

He clapped the Coshen on the back of his sooty suit. "One of your people took a shot at him the last time he visited, remember?"

"Bah. The fool should have used armor piercing rounds."

Toran couldn't help a sardonic grin. The war had cost House Roho their existence, and House Riss wasted no time scooping up his smaller rivals. Aki had been first, its *Ka* assassinated and the next in line suspiciously absent. Viron, House Riss's *ka*, had few admirers here. "Keep watch of things, Targaz. I'm heading straight to the palace to make sure he honors our deal."

Targaz's eye ridges creased. "He will not release your princess so easily."

"He will with the Qurl fleet ready to pounce," Toran ground out, shoving aside his own guilt over bringing her to this planet in the first place. "And we call her Suria, not princess," he added for the umpteenth time. "Our leaders are selected by nature, not by dynasties."

"Get sick and become a princess," Targaz retorted. "This is better?"

Toran simply smiled, hearing enough burring amusement in the scientist's tone to know he was falling once more to Targaz's sense of humor. Suria Yitzen Tines. The snowy haired dancer had caught his eye well before she was swept up in the fever of Change. Yitzen was a fierce spirit from the start. Her resulting metamorphosis added a Dathia's feral beauty to an Ipper's excitement. He should never have let her see the caldera in all its horror. Her guilt turned on her, breaking her mind. The vengeful Riss *Ka* saw his opportunity and took her hostage. It was anyone's guess as to her mental state now.

"I will notify the Riss *Ka* to expect you, Sur Toran," Targaz said, interrupting his darkening mood. "May she return to you unharmed."

Toran turned for the tunnel, putting his back to the triumph of a lifetime. This war wasn't over yet. His amber eyes narrowed. "She'd better be."

"House Aki will rise again."

Toran paused at the corroded hatch and wagged a finger. "Best you keep such statements to yourself."

"For now, Sur Toran. For now."

He returned to the blockhouse serving as one eight stations extending Stone rods out into the cap. It would take months before the planet Coa's wounds were bandaged to his satisfaction. Regardless, he had met the conditions of Yitzen's release. The disastrous venting had stopped. Cleaning the poisoned atmosphere was another matter. He growled at the pessimism dampening his mood. Targaz was right. Nothing about her freedom would be as simple as walking up to Viron and asking. If sincerity were a straight road, the Riss *Ka* was all curves.

He removed his helmet upon passing air filtration doors leading into the busy operations room. Fresh air cooled Toran's sweat streaked face, fluffing the matted ebony streak running down the center of his otherwise orange-haired scalp. Like Yitzen, he was a rare hybrid among his biologically specialized people. The light ginger filaments running along the top of his tapered ears proclaimed him an Ipper. He

could, however, heal wounds like a Shandi and sense molecular structures as well as any Cothra. Few came out of Change fever with more than one additional sect, giving him significant political clout. The only sect he couldn't claim was the Datha, whose warrior abilities wouldn't have suited him anyway. He remained one trait shy of becoming a Great, like Mikial Chora, who exercised the attributes of all four Qurl races. She was one of three Greats in history, and all of them were world changers.

He settled for being the most eligible Sur in his country of Kinset. Only one Suria would emerge, and he held the inner track in the race to woo her. Of course, the mystery girl had yet to pop, which was surprising given his Tasur and Tasuria were already in their eighties. This gave him an open field of foreign Surias to consider. But one who was out of her mind? Toran inwardly cringed at the prideful thought. Yitzen deserved better. *Better than what I put her through.*

He shoved the guilt aside and pasted a celebratory grin on his face. After all, his team had saved a planet and deserved their moment of glory.

Qurl and Coshen alike clapped him on the shoulders. Screens streamed data and graphs proclaiming the astounding feat rendered by a team comprised of former enemies. Toran bade them return to their positions, especially those who worked the control rods of the rectangular auto forge taking up most of the blockhouse.

"All eight forges are at capacity," a dark-haired Cothra supervisor reported between glances at his screens. "We're showing an even distribution of pressure beneath the cap." He grinned. "As you predicted."

"We predicted, Ker," Toran corrected. "How long to fill the central fissure?"

"Months." Ker replied with a resigned smile. "Also, as predicted." He clasped Toran's hands with a firm reassurance. "You're going to get our Suria back."

Toran nodded. "That's the bargain."

"Any word from her?" Ker pointedly looked at his ear fans.

He shook his head. "No, I still can't signal her. She's blocking herself from everyone, including me. The Ipper Symphony says she still lives, so there's that."

Ker nodded. "I've already put the shuttle through pre-flight. As your sect is fond of saying, good swimming Sur Toran."

"Good swimming to you, too," Toran returned. "Let me know if there's any change in our expectations." He knew a congratulatory speech was in order, but there was nothing in him other than a growing dread urged on by Targaz's warning. There was every chance of him coming back alone or worse, with a body. He pulled on his helmet and walked toward the air lock.

The hangar was more of an exaggerated garage, ceiling lights surrounded by swirls of ever-present ash. The one-man shuttle he boarded was a stubby brute capable of forcing itself through Coa's abrasive clouds and agitated winds. Fans howled back at the tempest as the doors slid aside, keeping the worst of the ash outside. His back pressed against the seat in a burst of acceleration over a tortured landscape.

"Sur One outbound to House Riss," he radioed to listeners orbiting overhead. His trip was now both official and out in the open. He let the autopilot set a course, seeing himself as a spark dancing among explosive kegs. House Riss commanded a considerable fleet, and with the Datha at their doorstep, it wouldn't take much to ignite things. Toran closed his eyes and tried to ignore the buffeting ride. Thanks to his original sect, he was not without some insurance. His ear fans rose. *Tasurian Octave. Mikial's Note.*  
<Toran Exalan.>

A probability formed in his mind of a female on the elder edge of her middle years. Black scaled battle armor wrapped around a warrior's physique worn from a lifetime of grueling experience. As with all in her original Datha sect, Mikial Chora carried her age well. The lines etched into her predatory face reflected an impatience radiating from behind those wrinkled amber eyes. Her russet hair was cut short to accommodate a helmet clipped to her belt. Long auburn ear fans faded into white tips. From what he could tell, the Great Tasuria was sitting at a command console on her flagship's bridge. Her countenance made him think of a teacher confronting a recalcitrant student.

<Mikial Chora. You were successful?>

<Yes, Tasuria. I am on my way to see the Riss *Ka* and retrieve Yitzen.>

Her tanned face darkened with a glower. <Do you have a display orb on board? I have a few things to say to that slippery shellfish concerning my Suria.>

Toran winced at the vindictive eagerness intertwined with her signal. Yes, she despised Viron and didn't hesitate to show her distaste for the Coshen leader. <Allow me to practice my diplomacy first?>

<I mean to see this mess cleaned up, Sur Toran. One way or another.>

*My mess*, Toran interpreted, hearing the blame. <There is a high probability he will refuse to hand her over.>

The Great Tasuria nodded and folded her arms. <I've reviewed the Ipper forecasts. If they hold true, I'll gladly punch a new hole in the caldera. I trust you to explain this to Viron in no uncertain terms.>

Toran's ears flattened. <I will be standing in the middle of the target zone when you do.>

Her smile was darkly sardonic. <You would, wouldn't you? No matter if they once tried exterminating us?>

<You already know my answer, Great Tasuria. My work avoided an unintended genocide. Besides, not all Coshen wanted this war. After all, it was the Disanti intending to do the same to us.>

Her expression eased into a smirk. <You Kinset Qurls and your pride. You knew this mission to retrieve Yitzen was futile, yet you came anyway. Viron wants his revenge.>

<She is alive, Great Tasuria. I will find her.>

<You had better.>

Toran sucked in a breath at the Great Tasuria's abrupt disconnection. Of course she was mad at him for pulling her Suria into this situation. Never mind Yitzen being his guarantee against not being blown to pieces on his approach to Coa. It wasn't the decision he regretted, but the consequences.

"I'll find you," he whispered to himself. Crazy or not, he was drawn to the girl. Of this fact there was no denial. Yitzen possessed a flame behind those gray eyes of hers. One capable of consuming them both if he wasn't careful.

The shuttle continued amid ashen skies, traversing an ocean covered in a sludge of pumice. The view wasn't much better when he arrived at the mouth of Riss Valley. A glacial mud flow suggested a river. The stubble of denuded trees mixed with collapsed roofs and scoured-out towers. Built into cliffs at the valley's end, the twin towers of Viron's palace remained largely intact. A colossal statue rose from a half-buried courtyard, its victorious hand-clenched pose rendered into an ashen mockery. Flowing muck slopped down the spattered cliffs from beneath a bridge linking the towers.

Toran descended in the semi-twilight, beacons guiding him to an inner mall converted into a hangar. Four gray-suited Coshen soldiers hurried him past shipping containers and makeshift camps. He removed his helmet once they were beyond a set of air locks. The acrid smell of burnt metal clung to his suit even after being rinsed and blown dry. It was too late to think about bringing a change of clothes, but hopefully an air of urgency would be carried along with the brimstone.

A second set of air locks admitted him to the west tower's plushier reception area where a scowling Coshen in full battle armor relieved him of the viewer. The orb was handed to a wizened old chamberlain adorned in a red-and-blue silken robe, the hair tassel on his crimson scalp tied back into a brief loop.

"A message for your Riss *Ka*," Toran explained, waiting for his throat translator to do the interpretation.

The official looked him up and down with a perfunctory sneer. "You will remove this...filth."

*And get paraded in my underwear?* Toran put the right amount of malice into his smile. According to Targaz, there were no half measures when it came to Coshen politics. They were bullies, pure and simple. "I am Kinset *Kae*. As a gesture of good will, I will forget this insolence." His lips thinned. "Once."

"I am Riss *Enthriff*," the Chamberlain sputtered. "You will—"

"Enough." Helmet in hand, he pushed the Coshen aside.

The soldiers drew pistols and forced him against the wall.

"Yes, do restart the war," Toran said with distain, using a forefinger to turn aside a barrel aimed at his head. He raised his ear fans for effect. "You seriously think this insult is not being observed?"

"The Riss *Ka* must not be kept waiting," the chamberlain grumbled in a less inflammatory voice, waving the soldiers back. The official motioned him to follow, though not without wrinkling the tiny plates

around his eye sockets in what Toran suspected was a look of contempt. “You will stand where I tell you, *Kae*.” He paused at a glass door emblazoned with a fist holding daggers. “Or there will be war.”

Did any of these idiots realize he had just saved their planet? Nodding, Toran followed him inside.

In truth, the war had never stopped as much as been put on hold. He kept the technicality to himself while his host led him into a chamber far removed from the on-going disaster outside palace walls. Rich inlaid woods decorated massive arches supporting a two-story vaulted ceiling, itself a constellation of inset jewels mimicking broad star fields. Columns of illuminated crystal buttressed the walls, ensuring the roof’s grandiose splendor remained clear of obstructions. Rich brocaded runners in off-orange hues flowed into to a central rug. Amber threads pulsed with every shift of his eyes. The room smelled ancient, with a hint of incense chasing away any remnants of the reality outside.

“Qurl Toran Exalan,” the chamberlain called out, the official’s announcement echoing over unseen speakers. “Kinset *Kae*.”

Crimson skulled heads turned. Lots of heads. Many of them wore hair tassels festooned with rings and glittering bands. The carpet ended at a dais seating a semi-circle of nobility. None of the ornate braids were as long as the black rope thrown over the shoulder of a simple gray uniform bereft of medals. The owner sat on an obsidian throne shot through with orange veins. Two younger males in similar plain uniforms stood behind him in imperious poses with arms folded. The seated Coshen lounged back in deep red cushions, his eye ridges crinkling with bemusement beneath broad brow plates.

“The black diamond and no farther,” Toran’s guide warned while handing him back the viewer.

Toran eyed the obvious mark on the rug as courtiers parted to let them pass. He came to a stop ten paces away from the platform. The rustle of conversation ebbed into silence. Many crimson faces were looking at him in what passed for awe on their plated visages. All except for the one on the throne who began a slow clap of his hands.

Viron spoke something in an amplified buzzing voice. He paused, then adjusted a necklace. “You do not understand human Standard?” he continued in Dessan.

Toran settled on a patient smile. The wily leader already knew this.

“Well done in any case, little prince.”

The Riss Ka gestured. To the left, a wall transformed itself into a display of the caldera’s final moments. The visual froze on the abrupt darkness save for the fresh seal’s orange glow. Quiet sighs rippled across the court, but none offered applause.

“You have met my expectations,” Viron went on. “Poor is the leader who does not know his subjects, yes?”

*Cute.* Taking credit as well as lingering over the idea of laying claim to Qurl kind. Toran was about to come up with a clever rebuke when his ear fans raised with an incoming tap.

<Mikial Chora.>

<Toran Exalan.> he responded. So, she was watching. Things were about to get interesting.

<Let him see me.>

He wordlessly set the blue display sphere on the carpet and stepped back. “May I present our Great Tasuria and Datha Fleet commander, Mikial Chora.”

Viron stiffened as Mikial’s visage shimmered into existence. Had he teeth, he would have bared them.

Mikial looked every bit the Great Tasuria in her midnight black dress uniform. She stood before a red velvet curtain emblazoned with the black spoked wheel of the Datha Qurl, the bottom spoke transformed into a stylized dagger. Every inch of her garb was covered by blood-red battle patterns, from the high collar to her long side skirts. Four belts crisscrossed her waist. One for each of the four Qurl sects whose capabilities she possessed. Combat braids knotted back her gray-streaked auburn hair, adding to her severe expression. She looked ready to step from the display and do violence.

The Riss *Ka* spread his arms. “Ah, Great Queen. You do not honor me in person, no? Where is this bravery such as your bold messenger displays?”

Toran flinched at the way Viron poured contempt into each word. Yes, these two hated each other, but rekindling the war wasn't what he'd come for. "I am here for Suria Yitzen," he broke in, earning a sideways glare from the Great Tasuria. "The breach is sealed."

"Bring her," Mikial demanded, his icy tone brooking no compromise.

Viron's face flushed a deeper red. He rose from his throne, glancing at the two younger Coshen before advancing off the dais to face her projection. "You would order me in *my* House? In front of *my* family?"

Mikial pointed toward the throne with an extended claw. "Be grateful I sent a messenger. Should I come down, your sons will be choosing a successor."

Viron's face managed an even brighter crimson. "Name your weapon."

Her expression displayed a feral impassiveness only a Datha was capable of making. "I choose the caldera," she answered with grave import, indicating Toran. "I can withdraw Sur Toran's team and leave you with an eggshell over a maelstrom." She paused, allowing her words to sink in. "His success is impressive but represents only the beginning of what must be done to keep the seal intact."

She sheathed her claws. "Or would you prefer facing Datha Fleet? I understand most of your high families remain crammed aboard those warships. I would rather not imperil them. Would you?" Menace stiffened her narrow face. "Return Suria Yitzen Tines as you promised."

Toran blew out a breath. There would be no further bargaining. Judging by the way Viron stepped back, the Riss *Ka* knew it too. Yitzen or war.

The crinkles surrounding the ruler's dark eyes narrowed in defiance, but only for a moment. The Coshen made a flitting gesture with his hand. "She has run away." He waggled a bejeweled finger. "I don't believe she likes you." Viron rubbed his chin. "Doesn't like me, either. Odd sort of girl. I do think she is quite insane."

Toran's ears flattened. He didn't wait for an astounded Mikial to answer. "Then I will bring in a task force to find her."

"Agreed, Sur Toran," Mikial joined in. "I am certain the Riss *Ka* will give you full access. Including his palace," she added with a withering glare. "If you require anyone to be questioned, he will not interfere." Her lips curled back. "He included." She turned to address the fuming monarch. "Pray to your dead gods that we don't find a body." She leaned forward. "Pray hard."

"I will not tolerate your fleet within Coa's orbit," Viron snapped back, his body shaking beneath his robes. He raised a finger. "I will allow your princeling one ship."

"One Datha Line," Mikial countered with a frown. "Fifteen ships, Riss *Ka*. I do not wish to undo Sur Toran's good work by blasting my way in, but I will if I have to."

The Riss *Ka* stomped a foot. "*One* ship. Trust is not a hallmark of our relationship. I know your treachery firsthand when you ordered your princess to break our sacred Claim, so you will withdraw your fleet. Otherwise, I cannot guarantee what you will find."

Mikial's nails extended once again. "You *dare* threaten me with my Suria's life?"

"Three," Toran jumped in, seeing everything unraveling including Yitzen's chance at coming out of this alive. "I'll need three ships."

The two rulers stared at him as if he were a mouse dancing among giants.

"Well," Viron said with a shrug, relaxing his stance. "There you go. Three, then." He frowned. "The rest stay where they are, Great Queen."

"Just until my patience runs out," came her soft reply. "Remember, Riss *Ka*, you swore your surrender to my Suria once we patched your planet."

"And I will stand by my word...to her. Assuming the girl's sanity remains intact, of course."

Toran looked down, now seeing the threat unveiled. He might well be bringing back a corpse.

Mikial glared at Viron with deadly promise blazing in her amber eyes. "And I will stand by mine to end this one way or another." Her hologram vanished.

Toran bent and picked the orb up again, eyeing the Riss *Ka* as he did so. *You know exactly where she is, don't you, Viron.* "I believe she said everything necessary." He ached to say more, but not with Viron's two sons standing there.

Viron waved a hand. “Your Great Queen leaves you as she did her princess. Do not be concerned. The architect of our salvation from Disanti justice deserves so much more. The hospitality of my palace is yours, little prince.”

And you intend treating me the same as you did Yitzen, no doubt. He shook his head. “My apologies, but I must be elsewhere preparing my search teams, Riss *Ka*.”

“Of course.” Viron spread his arms. “But not tonight.”

“As the Riss *Ka* wishes,” he relented, not wanting to drag this argument into more threats. Viron was making it clear who held the upper hand here.

He half-expected a prison cell by the tone in Viron’s voice, but his guards led him to a spotless two-room suite. A warm plate of vegetables and meat waited on a marble table, along with a flask of wine. The finality with which the door closed behind him spiked Toran’s suspicions. He may be born Ipper, but embracing his Cothra abilities came with dividends.

He tossed his helmet on a chair and pressed a palm against the door frame’s metal knob. A moment’s breath and specialized glands along his forearms and palms activated. Technology’s love for energy and ordered circuits would stand out in otherwise dormant-looking metal such as this. Sure enough, he detected the telltales of an electronic bolt holding fast. He could free himself on a whim, but there would still be a matter of guards and he was no Datha. It was enough to know he could exit quickly if he needed to. Toran flopped on a couch. His next report was going to be embarrassing.

*Surian Octave. Mikial Chora. <Toran Exalan.>*

*<Mikial Chora. Three ships, Toran? Three?>*

*He sighed. <I picked a number. If you come in firing, he’ll have her killed.>*

*He sensed a softening in her criticism. <So, you do care about my little runaway.>*

*<Just my Kinset pride.>* He tried joking, recalling her earlier dig. Toran grimaced and dove into the awkward part. *<Speaking of which, I believe I’m now a hostage as well.>*

*<Of course. You are.>*

Braced for outrage, he was both surprised and relieved to feel Mikial’s laugh lacing her return signal. *<Viron hopes to add you to the stew and buy himself maneuvering room. Time to stir the pot.>*

*<Great Tasuria?>*

*<Don’t worry about the arrow, young Ipper.>*

He smiled at Mikial’s cryptic statement as her probability faded in his mind. She referenced a popular parable where an Ipper beat a Datha in an archery contest. All because the Datha kept worrying over his aim while the arrow was in flight, altering the probability of a bullseye. The Ipper knew better and let fly without further concern. Of course, this was a tale about Other Octaves, or as people began calling it, Ipper forecasting. The smallest action might change the future. Hence, Mikial didn’t want him knowing too much, nor was he plunging into Other Octaves himself. Yitzen may practically swim in it, but he had trouble finding his own reality.

Thinking of her prompted him to try once again to reach out to the elusive Suria. He was one of the few who knew her personal Note. *Yitzen Tines. <Toran Exalan>*

Whispers of silence. He might as well call her name across an empty ocean. He leaned back against the cushion, not wanting to shuck his outfit and succumb to a bed’s vulnerability. Not with arrows in flight. Toran tried to sleep.

*He watched himself rise from the bed and cut power to the door’s auto lock. The bolt opened with a metallic snick. Two Coshen in orange servant coats beckoned him out. Behind them, two gray uniformed soldiers slumped against the far wall. A specter’s shadow glimmered, momentarily revealing feminine outlines.*

Toran woke with a start. He glanced at a wall mirror. His orange ear fans were standing on end, their black tips stiff as brushes. There were dreams, and there were Ipper dreams. He’d experienced the latter. *Courtesy of the Ipper Symphony*, he guessed, sitting up. Hoping he was right, Toran scooted from the bed and crept over to the door. His hands closed over the handle. He crimped the thread of current feeding the lock as a Shandi might close a blood vessel.

The bolt slid back with a metallic snick.

According to Yitzen, no Ipper forecast was one hundred percent accurate. The future didn't work that way. He held his breath, ready with an excuse for any guards while pushing the door open. There was a soldier outside, but the Coshen collapsed before his startled amber eyes, joining a companion on the carpeted floor. Toran caught the briefest glimpse of ebony hands vanishing beneath the edge of a Dathia diffusion field.

A Coshen in orange servant's attire rushed up. Behind him shimmered another spectral figure.

"Come," the servant beckoned. "Quickly." He indicated a hand-sized gray cube in his hand. "This will not keep us undetected for long."

Another's clawed fingers protruded from thin air to grip his wrist. "Now, Sur Toran," a female's contralto voice whispered. One he thought he recognized. "Tenzen?"

"Senna, actually. Yitzen's Surian Guard." She pointed to a blur beside her. "That's Tenzen. Now let's hurry. We've not much time."

Nodding, he joined them in a sprint down the hall, the two ghosts flanking him. Toran looked over his shoulder at the slumped Coshen. Like their male counterparts, Dathia were able to electrocute victims using bio-electric glands buried in their palms and wrists. "You didn't kill them, did you?"

A specter chastised him. "We are technically still at war. Side door to your left."

A chill washed over him at having watched someone die. Toran followed their Coshen guide into a utility closet, the four of them squeezing past stacks of boxes along a narrow service passage. He was hustled into a cargo elevator for a bumpy ride. Not down, but up. The smell of ash grew stronger.

They came out into a stinging wind, Toran immediately regretting leaving his helmet in the apartment. His charges pushed him into a wedge-shaped flyer with cargo webbing for seating.

A powerful female form in black armor materialized next to him. "Grab a handful and hang on!"

The second Dathia piled in after the Coshen servant, who slammed the hatch behind them. Dingy strip lights winked on as an engine rumbled. Toran held onto the webbing to avoid being pressed into the deck by their abrupt ascent.

"They can't track this hauler in all the ash fall," one of the Dathia explained. "If we're not shot down in the next few moments, we'll be fine." Her visor flipped up, revealing calico hair.

"You're Tenzen," he guessed.

"Yes. We met briefly aboard the *Corias Charrid*."

"Any idea where we're headed?"

Tenzen inclined her head toward the Coshen beside her. "Water plant run by House Nak. We'll be safe there. The Rissys are busy watching Aki right now."

The familiarity in her words caught him off guard. "You don't sound like you dropped in to save an idiot Sur."

Tenzen shook her head. "Senna and I arrived a few months ago looking for Yitz, Got close once, but they've moved her every few weeks."

He let out a breath. "So, she's alive."

Senna lifted her visor. "I suppose you could call it that. They've got her doing knife duels. Viron gets another House to bet outrageously against our girl. He comes in after she carves them up, offering to absorb their debts.

"Along with their House," Tenzen added. She indicated the silent Coshen. "It's how Viron got House Nak."

"He's...making her fight," Toran replied, trying to process the words against the Yitzen he knew.

Senna reached out to hold his balled fist. "Easy. She's half Dathia and good with blades, Sur Toran. *Really* good. Hasn't lost a fight yet."

"Yes, but does Yitzen even know who she is anymore?" Tenzen cut in with a less charitable demeanor. "She answers to the name 'Ghost' now."

For a moment the only sound was the rattle of ash against the creaking hull. Toran tried to keep the rage from his voice. "Why wasn't I told you were searching for her?"

"I think it has to do with Mikial not trusting you," Tenzen shot back. "Something about making her look the idiot when her Suria runs away from the High Tamerid."



“I’m the one at fault for convincing her to come,” he agreed, not wanting Yitzen to bear the brunt of her friend’s obvious anger.

“Yes you are,” came the deadly cool response.

“And he is now our on-site commander, sweets,” Senna spoke up with a sharp look at the Dathia. “A little respect if you please.”

“Don’t count on it,” the Dathia spat back.

“Ladies,” Toran cut in. These were Dathia. If he was to be their commander, he had to act the part. “I am answerable to the Great Tasuria, not you two. I expect no further killing unless it is to save a life.” He fixed his attention on the less subordinate female. “Acknowledge the order.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Tenzen sputtered.

“Acknowledge the order,” he pressed, having dealt enough with Yitzen’s temper to know it took a firm hand to control these girls when they were riled.

“Acknowledged,” Senna replied. She stared at her teammate.

Tenzen turned away with a growl. “Acknowledged.”

“This is a rescue, ladies. Keep this in mind, and make sure the word gets out to the other Surian Guard.”

Senna held up two fingers. “Just us. The others were on loan and recalled when Yitzen ran off.”

He tried to keep his exasperation from showing. “She did not run off, and I don’t want to hear otherwise. You obviously don’t understand the circumstances at all, much less appreciate their urgency.”

Tenzen rolled her amber eyes. “No, I just grew up with her. I don’t understand anything.”

Senna nudged the other’s shoulder. “Easy, Ten. Just do the job as I keep telling you.”

Growling, the Dathia sagged back in her netting. “Yeah, Sen. Easy.”