

Void Dancer

Chapter One

Yitzen Tines gazed up at the other swirls filling much of her view. “So the humans call that gas bag Jupiter?”

“And this frozen mess we’re orbiting is named Io,” her wing mate, Tenzen Ranes, replied. “Sounds like someone getting their toes stomped on.”

She grinned at Tenzen’s jibe. “Do you think these humans even know we’re trying to free them?”

“Not by the way those United Nations ships keep trying to hunt us down,” Tenzen replied over her headset. The tone in Tenzen’s voice made it easy to imagine her friend’s sarcastic expression. “I’m sure they’re hugging the Coshen as newfound friends.”

“While not noticing the chains being slipped over their wrists. That’s Earth for you. Always picking the wrong side.”

An electronic chirp reminded Yitzen to scan the many screens floating around her head. Her autopilot dutifully swung the more important displays into view, second-guessing her as always. Which is why she named her inflight assistant Creepy. Fashioned from an actual pilot’s memories, the Remembrance was borrowed technology from the Me’Aukins who fought alongside her people in this war.

The scans from her drones remained as uninteresting as ever. She adjusted the capsule’s heater to a cooler setting, not wanting to get too cozy lest she suffer the embarrassment of Creepy jarring her awake. Picket duty was a long drawn out battle with boredom waged inside a weightless can where the air tasted metallic and the only real controls were the joysticks on her armrests. Everything else in the Dagger’s virtual cockpit was three-dimensional trickery piped into her helmet’s visor. She didn’t even have a canopy to look out of.

“Sooo,” Tenzen drawled.

“No, we’re not talking about me going home,” Yitzen cut in. She had known Tenzen since childhood. Their mothers were fast friends to the point of giving them matching names.

“*Itsa!* You haven’t seen family since the war started. Your brother’s death was eight months ago, Yitz. You need to stop blaming yourself and move on.”

“Leave it alone,” she warned. “Just because you saw my sister during leave is no excuse to keep lecturing me.”

“Donya is *very* upset with you. And not because of Haral, either. He died a hero. You’re the one acting the victim.”

Yitzen’s tapered ears pinned themselves back beneath her helmet’s hood. “I’m going to act like something else if you don’t shut up.”

“A *bitch* maybe? Come on, Yitz, you... Hold on.”

“Ten?”

“Contact.”

Tenzen’s abruptly flattened voice was enough for Yitzen to dismiss her screens. “Where?”

“Drone Six is picking up signs of a wedge-shaped vessel doing a high traverse over the gas giant. They might be trying to mask themselves in the radiation. Signature suggests we’ve got an Arrowhead class target. Range fifty-eight thousand and some odd. Moving fast using the gravity well and the crew isn’t bothering with sweeps.”

“Not wanting to be noticed, I surmise,” Yitzen said, bringing Drone Six’s display front and center. A red energy wake rippled across the swirling yellow clouds, accompanied by scrolling readouts agreeing with Tenzen’s initial assessment. “Okay, I’ve got it. Trail looks a bit erratic. They look to be limping.” She grinned. “Table scraps have arrived.”

“Orders are to report, not engage. They don’t call these Daggers coffin nails for nothing.”

Tenzen was right. Her t-shaped void fighter was no match for an Arrowhead. She’d lost two good friends learning that harsh truth. But this Coshen destroyer might be wounded, evening up the odds. She tapped at her virtual keyboard and watched three green arcs sweep along patrol routes on the far side of the moon they circled. “The other Daggers are too far away to assist.”

“Um, we’re supposed to call in a Black Fish to take this thing out. They’ve got better shields and firepower.”

“Those Strike ships are having enough fun beating up the main column. I want a shot at this thing before it gets out of our range too.”

“Are you at least going to forecast first?”

“Ugh, wish people would quit calling it that. The future isn’t some weather report. Sunny days can’t change into storms just because you think about them.”

“Fine. Other Octaves or whatever spooky stuff you Ipper want to call it. Pick a future that doesn’t see us getting blasted, okay?”

“I will if you would just shut up a moment.”

Yitzen spread the fine pale filaments atop her ears as much as was possible beneath the white helmet’s confining cloth hood. Her friend was right about one thing. Of the four biologically specialized races in their Qurl species, she had been born into the spookiest. She ignored the itch of her cramped ear

fans and dropped into Other Octaves. Most Ipper had to descend into a dream state first, but she wasn't most Ipper. She could see the probabilities bubble up with her eyes wide open.

Her future self closed on the target, its wedge shape confirming it as a Coshen destroyer. This one was heavily damaged. Bright orange sparkles streamed from rents in its hull. Two of the four rear engines were out. Blast marks all but obscured the yellow beast emblem of House Roho emblazoned on the flat topside. She and Tenzen moved in for the kill, only to be met by a hail of missiles and energy weapons that overwhelmed the Daggers' meager shields.

No. Definitely not this one.

The probability collapsed as she chose an approach not landing them squarely in the Arrowhead's teeth.

They streaked past the wounded vessel at maximum range. Only missiles came after them this time, but the volley was enough to shatter both of their void fighters.

Not this one either, but she felt she was getting close. What would happen if she went in a lot faster? Maybe use the Coshen ship's damaged side as a shield?

She and Tenzen flashed by the enemy, relying on their autopilots to deal with weapons release in a split-second exchange. The Qurl fighters emerged intact from the resulting defensive barrage. A pair of their own missiles tore into the hapless destroyer.

"Tenzen, I've got an approach. Yes, it's an Arrowhead, and it's still got some bite, but we can hit them fast at long range. We'll let our autopilots handle missile release."

"We'd better call this in, sweets. Otherwise the Air Boss will mount our ears on his wall."

"The longer we sit here talking about it, the more this probability changes. We can get the drones to run interference if that will make you happy. We will come in above him where he's got the most damage."

"I'm telling you, Yitz, we need to bring more firepower."

Yitzen let out an exasperated growl. What cried out for vengeance inside her didn't care. "I'm sick of others paying my debts, Ten. You want me to pull rank on you, I will."

"No, *Suria*," Tenzen returned, drawling out the title Yitzen had been fated to carry as if it were a slap in the face. "Waiting on your word, *Suria*."

Ignoring her friend's derision wasn't easy, but time and chance wasn't on her side thanks to Tenzen's recalcitrance. Her fingers raced across a virtual plotting board to their target. "Creepy, you got these vectors?"

"Setting attack pattern now," the autopilot acknowledged in the feminine voice she had selected for it. "Suggest saving Drone Six for battle assessment."

"Do it. Rest will run as decoys."

“Acknowledged. Synching with Surian Two.”

“Synched,” Tenzen reported with lackluster enthusiasm. “Weapons free and switching to full auto.”

The second-guessing autopilot threw up a screen of her inventory. Four spines glowed green along the fighter’s stubby wings.

“Weapons free, Creepy,” she commanded.

“Weapons are free.”

The missiles switched to a bright red. Another screen displayed a string of eight blue dots flung before the Daggers as one might set fishing bobbins in a stream. They too went crimson.

Yitzen took a breath. No prediction was absolute. The future didn’t work that way. “Hang on, Ten. Here we go.” She lay back in her chair. “Creepy, assume full control and commence run.”

“Acknowledged.”

A giant’s hand pushed her deep into the cushions as the Dagger vaulted forward. Soon she could barely turn her head. Creepy switched her to a view making the hull seem as if it were made out of glass. She saw Tenzen’s V-tailed Dagger off her right wing with engines blazing blue-white plumes.

“Think...their optics...just picked us up,” Tenzen cautioned, her breath coming in gasps. “Getting sweeps.”

It was hard to move her chest with a giant sitting on it. “Good luck...getting a lock.” The Arrowhead might have an advantage in firepower, but Daggers were small and could absorb any signal thrown at them. And their hulls were as dark as the void.

The ride in was both harrowing and surreal. She could be playing a game, save for the crush of acceleration telling her this was very real. There was no wind to rush by a canopy she didn’t have. Her armored capsule was buried in the middle of the ship. Death, if it came, tended to be violent and quick. They’d never found all of Ves Chamen’s remains after her Dagger had been struck during the battle of Eight Jumps. Nicee barely had time for a pain-filled scream that still rang in Yitzen’s ears three months later. No, these Coshen slavers weren’t going anywhere.

“Forty thousand,” Tenzen called out. “Launch warning!”

“Six inbound,” Yitzen acknowledged, her threat display describing a half-dozen lines arcing toward them. Less than she had seen in her chosen probability. No surprise, there. By now the future would be a bubbling froth with so much going on. There was an old Ipper saying about staring so long at the horizon and failing to see the rocks in front of you. Or, in this case, missiles. She would judge her accuracy by the simplest of tests. Survival.

Visually, the battle was underwhelming, due in part to an immensity of scale. Jupiter still filled her vision with an angry ochre sky, and Io’s icy crescent barely moved behind them. She couldn’t see the

closing projectiles nor the ship firing them. Her only cues were physical – the disquieting vibrations and alarms adding to the press on her body.

“Twenty thousand.”

“Copy, Ten,” she forced out. “Good swimming.”

“Good swimming, Yitz.”

Everything happened. Sharp clicks announced the release of her four spines. Bright dots raced ahead, joining Tenzen’s spread of missiles. Her engines abruptly cut off, followed by a startling *clang*. Hopefully those new armored clamshells would prove themselves by protecting her engine outlets. Especially since the Coshen had recently started wrapping ball bearings around their warheads. Now she was little more than a speeding missile herself.

Four miniature suns flashed ahead, the detonations fading into orange spheres before disappearing altogether. Decoys doing their job on four of the inbound projectiles. Except that there had been six incoming...

Everything went white. Dazzled, she felt the Dagger lurch hard, its fuselage rattling from impacting shrapnel getting through shields. Warnings hooted, but the most critical displays showed her capsule and engines intact. “Ten!”

“Busy,” Tenzen’s curt voice replied. “Capsule’s intact.”

Yitzen whooshed out a breath of air. “Same here.” *We’re alive.*

More explosions ahead. Was this her missiles finding their target? “Creepy, give me Drone Six visuals.”

A screen dutifully popped up, showing the image of an arrow-shape slewing sideways from a fresh rent. One of eight spines had gotten through.

The return of a thrumming vibration told her she had her engines back. She scanned the trouble boards. Good life support and propulsion, but rudder control and rear sensors were in the red. Nothing she needed to care about. “Tenzen, report. How you doing?”

“Lots of major wrong. Port-side weapons stations, thrusters, and one engine. All down.”

Yitzen caught Tenzen’s silhouette in Io’s reflected light, and it didn’t look good. “Your left wing’s been shot off. Call for pickup.”

“Acknowledged. Check your back end. It’s been chewed on too.”

She glanced back at her V-tail and saw tattered stubs. “I see them. Engines and maneuvering thrusters are good.”

“Six is showing our target drifting in a slow tumble. One of our spines got a hit.”

Yitzen turned her attention back to the main screen, her brow furrowing. “You see the extra heat signature off to their left?”

“See it. I think they’re abandoning ship.”

Oh no you don’t. “I’m swinging back.”

“I’m going with you. It could be a trap.”

“Not in that wreck, Ten. Stop worrying, I’ll keep my distance. Make your rendezvous.”

“Leave it. Probably just a lifeboat.”

Yitzen shook her head and swiveled her Dagger for a lateral burn along her flight arc. Stars whirled as she put Tenzen’s void fighter to her stern. “If we don’t get to go home, they don’t go home either. That’s how it works.”

“Surian One, this is Surian Three,” a new contralto voice broke in, her voice broken up but discernable.

“We’re in range of the other girls,” Yitzen observed. “Hey there, Senna.”

“Did you two make a pass at an Arrowhead? We’re picking up all kinds of signals from your side of the moon.”

“We finished kicking it into a grave,” Tenzen explained. “Yitzen is going after a possible lifeboat. I’m too shot up to follow.”

Yitzen winced, already hearing the disapproval in Tenzen’s voice. And here it comes. Senna Garren was their senior pilot and still acted as if she were teaching them to fly.

“Surian One, you will disengage immediately!”

“We are long past flight school, Surian Four,” she snapped back as her restraints dug in again.

Of course Senna wasn’t going to back down. She never did. “Not long enough, Suria, for me not to kick your butt if you go in alone. Break off!”

“Challenge accepted, Sen. We’ll see who kicks what once we’re back.”

“Nobody’s giving awards for shooting up a lifeboat.”

No, but it will make me feel so much better. Yitzen switched her attention to the task on hand.

“Creepy, get me within cannon range on the pass. Set sixty cycles on the burst rate. And notify me if that Arrowhead so much as burps.”

“Acknowledged. Warming cannon bore.”

She watched her target close as her Dagger performed a decreasing spiral toward its prey. The Dathia inside her was in charge now, and the beast wanted blood. Yitzen cut outside communication. Let Senna and the rest complain to the void.

It took fifteen moments to get back to the stricken Coshen warship. The view from her sensors was satisfying. The Arrowhead hemorrhaged gases and debris from a tumbling hull. “Creepy, center on the new signal off the left wing.”

The scene switched to an oblong shape seemingly flung out from the wreckage. The bright spec abruptly winked out.”

“Too late,” she said with a hiss. “Target it for manual fire.”

Red brackets locked on the object. Moments later the metal lozenge brightened again.

“Running isn’t going to save you, either. Creepy, we getting any fire control signals from the main wreckage?”

“Negative sweeps. Thirty-one thousand and closing.”

Her ear fans rose beneath her helmet, searching for the probability where a clutch of missiles waited to see how stupid she was. All she got back was an expanding flash of gas and molten metal. And it didn’t belong to her.

Yitzen’s finger flipped up the joystick’s trigger guard. The nice thing about a Dagger was it being built around a huge plasma cannon. The weapon could punch holes into anything, provided you could get close enough without the same happening to you.

Distance closed. Twenty thousand. Ten. One. Now she could see the hapless craft in her gun camera. It had the appearance of a big twin-engine can. A lifeboat as Tenzen had guessed.

The aiming reticle began flashing. She squeezed the trigger. *Nobody gets to go home.*

Her Dagger shuddered. The cylinder in front of her disappeared within a cluster of bright bursts. She streaked by an instant later, catching sight of little more than glowing globules. Yitzen opened communication again. “This is Surian One. Target destroyed. Coming back for pick up.”

“Lifeboat?” Tenzen asked quietly on their private channel.

“Target.”

“We’re not supposed to be doing this sort of thing, Yitz. You know how the Me’Aukins are about their honor.”

“I said *target*.”

“Fine, target, then. *Aven’s Runner* is inbound to pick us up. Senna and the rest are joining up. I’m getting reports that the Coshen convoy lost everything when they popped out into our minefield. We even bagged a couple tri-arrow capital ships.”

“I bet nobody’s complaining about that.” Yitzen groaned to herself. Yes, the Me’Aukins were a problem with their obnoxious insistence on a code of conduct when it came to organized murder. Her own warrior sect, the Datha, had one simple guideline. Be the last one standing. Trouble was, the Me’Aukin clans were centuries ahead when it came to void travel. They had helped build her current base of operations, the *Corias Charrid*. The carrier was the largest ship in the combined fleet and also the only Qurl vessel to be commanded by a Me’Aukin Flying Pair. So yes, there were rules.

She joined the four Daggers whose pilots made up her all-female Surian Guard. Yitzen doubted she would end up in too much trouble. Dathia were a rarity among the Datha, the big males loving to dote on their few overly aggressive females. Which, of course, made she and her Surian Guard all the more prized. Belligerent too, but that was what challenge matches were for. She loved Senna, but sometimes it became necessary to remind her who was in charge.

Aven's Runner blinked in shortly after Yitzen lined everyone up for recovery. The utility ship looked like an elongated fat oval wrapped in blue gossamer, its *maeth* field supported on two slender whiskers fore and aft. The speedy arrival spoke to the greatest advantage the Qurls held over Coshen fleets. This ship could have been parked over the home world of Dessa and still been punctual. Yes, it had taken the first Datha scout nearly six months to reach Earth, but once there it became an anchor for the fleet to jump in an instant later. The Coshen possessed nothing comparable, and were probably trying to figure out how they kept being outmaneuvered. Now it would cost them dearly. The days of fighting a defensive war were over.

The runner's field faded as the ship's mottled aquamarine hull glided beneath them. *Aven's Runner* came to a stop, centering what appeared to be an attached saddle below them. Yitzen felt the tug of magnetic grapplers drawing her down.

"What happened to report contact and do not engage, Suria?" Senna's voice inquired crossly as the last fighter settled. "Your tail is in tatters, and Tenzen lost a wing. You both could have lost a lot more."

Yitzen sighed. Senna had become a scolding big sister after Vess and Nisee's deaths. But did she have to use the public channel?

"Suria?"

"I heard you, Senna. If they didn't want us fighting then they wouldn't have strapped spines on our wings. We can discuss this later in the gym."

"I wasn't trying to challenge you, but if you insist then I accept."

"No playing Three Cuts, Sen," Tenzen chimed in. "Admiral Donald wasn't happy about all the bloodletting the last time we went at it. Besides, our Suria is getting too good with knives. Let Yitzen work for it for once."

"I suggest Five Steps and she can't use her ear fans," Maya's melodic voice chimed in. "Fifteen favors on Senna getting the most throws."

"Senna outweighs her, silly." Wen chimed in. "I'll only give four."

"I'll do fifteen," Tenzen offered. "Height and weight isn't everything. Yitzen knows Rha Keeran fighting dances better than her back hand, which Senna will get a taste of if she's not careful."

“She’s not the only one who can perform that style,” Senna retorted. “I’ll take you up on your bet, Dathia.”

“Fine,” Maya agreed. “And who cares if our Suria uses her ear fans. Not after she barbequed those shellfish.”

Yitzen grinned at the banter. Maya Tekavar and Wen Ovel were acclimatizing themselves nicely to the team. They’d even picked up a nickname of “the twins” due to the similar way they tied their dark hair up in combat braids. “As a point of interest, Coshen aren’t shellfish. They just have these red skin plates giving them the look as if they’re wearing shells.”

“And no lips,” Tenzen added. “They also smell more like suitcases on a hot day than shellfish.”

“You and Tenzen should know,” Senna said. “You spent enough time with them.”

“All part of the plan,” Tenzen replied. “And nothing I prefer to be reminded of.”

“As it’s classified anyway and not up for discussion,” Yitzen reminded them, not needing those memories either. Having to play traitor in order to draw out their enemy, though successful, had led them from one tragedy to another.

Further chatter was cut off by the momentary blink of *Aven’s Runner’s* jump. Yitzen endured the momentary disorientation her Ipper heritage brought to the experience. Jupiter no longer filled the void. Instead, her senses told her they were looking down on Earth’s system from a position high above the planetary plane.

“Surian Flight, prepare for release.”

“Acknowledged, Ramp Master,” she returned, noting the great bulk blotting out the stars next to them. Even with its lights out, the *Corias Charrid* was a sight in itself. If *Aven’s Runner* was a whale, the carrier was a leviathan capable of ingesting the cargo ship into one of four forward bays with room for more. A streamlined behemoth with a slight hourglass figure, the *Corias* gave the impression of a prowling hunter. Sinuous bulges along its length suggested the ship was about to spring on some hapless prey.

Yitzen glided off the runner, her Surian Guard trailing her in two columns. She kept Tenzen’s battered craft beside her. Just in case.

“Surian Flight, this is *Corias* Approach. You are cleared to Bay Four. Do you require assistance?”

“No tug needed,” Yitzen replied after waiting to see if Tenzen thought otherwise. “One and Two are weapons dry and request expedite. We’re pretty banged up. No medical emergency,” she hastily added, not wanting to set off a panic.

“Expedite granted. Welcome home, ladies. Surian One, you are to report to the Flying Pair upon arrival.”

Yitzen blew out a puff of air. “Acknowledged, Approach.”

“Told you,” Tenzen said in a syrupy voice on their personal frequency.

Yitzen shook her head and brought the formation in low over the sloping prow between the carrier’s towering forward vanes. A strobing square beckoned her down to the launch deck where a cradle clamped her in. The elevator dropped swiftly, passing through the hot pad’s crimson chamber to settle in Bay Four’s brightly lit hangar. She kept up with checklists as Creepy began shutting things down.

The cradle rolled her past yellow docking gantries. *And what excuse do I end up using this time?* Yitzen wondered. Talking to Me’Aukins wasn’t much different than walking through mines. Worse still, the Flying Pair belonged to Clan Weth, which possessed a proud if not hard-nosed military history. Reputation was everything to them.

The Dagger swiveled and backed into its dock where a reception team waited. The ones in brown jumpers were Cothra Qurl—the engineers who would have the unenviable task of patching up her and Tenzen’s Daggers. They were pointing at her damaged tail, which didn’t help ease her twinge of guilt. Three crewmembers in yellow suits rushed to the spot where she would emerge from her cocoon. These were Shandi, the sect consisting mostly of females who had other repair work in mind. Namely her.

“Bring me up and out, Creepy.”

“Egress initiating.”

Locks clicked open. She felt herself lifted above the upper fuselage where her capsule split open lengthwise to expose her seat.

Eager hands helped remove her helmet. “Please don’t move, Suria,” the Shandi brunette requested, her long fingers unsnapping the underlying hood. “Any pain?”

“No, Gelen,” she returned, reaching up to massage the snowy matt of hair beneath and free her ear fans. “Anything on radiation exposure?”

Gelen shook her head. “And you’ve all your limbs, so I think we can call this a good day.”

“Better than some,” she replied as Cothra technicians released her harness. She looked over at Tenzen’s fighter as it rolled into its dock. “Surian Two caught the worst of it.”

“And you caught the rest, Suria,” one of the Cothra said with a gesture toward the Dagger’s torn backside and pockmarked fuselage. “Anything get through to the engines?”

Yitzen clasped her hands in a gesture of gratitude. “No, the armored shells worked exactly as you promised.” She let Gelen help her out of the seat. She stretched as much she could in the white armor, grateful to be free of the metal prison. “If it’s any consolation, we finished off an Arrowhead.”

That brought out a few cheers and back pats, but Yitzen’s eyes were centered on Tenzen’s emergence from her warship. Her own mocha skinned hybrid features couldn’t decide between feral and cute, but her friend was unmistakably Dathia with a complexion as black as the void. Tenzen Rane was a massive woman who towered over Cothra and Shandi alike with the countenance of an annoyed predator.

Her medical team removed her helmet to reveal tight calico battle braids and amber eyes blazing at Yitzen with accusation.

Tenzen finished with her crew and vaulted the intervening railings between the docks, the metal grid vibrating beneath her boots. “Don’t you ever run off like that again!” she roared in a deep contralto, advancing on her. “What if the boat had been bait?”

“Now they’re chum,” Yitzen retorted, glaring up at her friend. Despite the drastic physical transition involved in becoming a Suria, she was a half a hand shorter than her friend’s formidable ten hands. Fortunately, she knew her way around Tenzen’s temper. Yitzen rapped at the Dathia’s banded armor plating. “You’d rather they run back and be part of the crew killing us later?”

Tenzen bumped her forehead against Yitzen’s paler brow. “Yes. I’d rather they take us both than spend the rest of my life staring at your memory statue.”

“There’re too many to look at as is,” Yitzen agreed in a softer tone. *And I should have been one of them.* She looked up at the ceiling. “The rest are getting disarmed?”

Tenzen nodded. “They weren’t so lucky on their fishing trip.” She handed Yitzen back her helmet. “You had better go see what the Flying Pair want. Knowing Tempa Co’Hagan, they’re not asking you up for tea.” She slapped Yitzen’s shoulder. “Play with Senna later. She was just being a little cautious.”

Yitzen hooked her helmet on her utility belt. “Of course she was, but I can’t have the twins getting the idea I need constant protecting.”

Tenzen’s lips crooked. “We’re your Surian Guard, Yitz. It’s what we do.”