

# **Veiled Alliances**

**Saga of Seven Suns, prequel**

**by Kevin Anderson, 1962–**

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**2249 A.D.**

## **Chapter 1**

**Chairman Malcolm Stannis.**

Alien ships filled the skies of Earth, like snowflakes in a menacing blizzard. With extended solar sails, weapons antennae, sparkling windowports,

and anodized hull plates, the warliners looked like a school of fearsome fighting fish.

"We always knew the Ildiran Solar Navy would come," muttered Malcolm Stannis, Chairman of the Terran Hanseatic League. He stared up into the sky from a high balcony in the Whisper Palace. "But I never expected anything like this."

Beside him, his adviser, Liam Hector, spoke in a scratchy voice. Hector was middle-aged, with hair so short it was only a bristle of brownish-gray, and he had no charisma whatsoever. Hector would never be Hansa Chairman—very few people had the skill for that—but he was reliable. "From what we know of the Ildiran Empire, Mr. Chairman, the aliens are obsessive about pomp and showmanship. This is intended to impress us."

"Or intimidate us."

"That too, sir." The two men continued to watch, but further words failed them.

The Terran Hanseatic League, or Hansa, was so widespread and influential in the solar system that it had become the de facto government of Earth, the Moon, industrial outposts in the asteroid belt, settlements on several moons of Jupiter, and the military base on Mars. Since his election as Chairman six years earlier, Stannis had come up with so many plans for the future of human civilization that he kept a journal, jotting down his thoughts so as not to forget his best ideas. Now, if only he could implement them all.

The arrival of a dramatic and alien military force had not figured in even his wildest plans.

Malcolm Stannis was in his early thirties, only recently elected to the post of Chairman, the youngest person ever to fill that position. He was a handsome man with dark hair, olive skin, deep brown eyes. He had trained his lips to remain in a firm, unreadable line at all times. He frowned no more often than he smiled, since either expression revealed too much information about his inner thoughts. Though not vain, he dressed with care in impeccable dark suits that fit him like a glove and were as comfortable as any other man's casual clothing.

The people had applauded the unanimous vote that made him Chairman of the Hanseatic League. With all the politics, arranging that vote had been no small feat for Stannis, considering the others who vied for the position, the squabbling power brokers, the shifting alliances. Stannis had convinced many voting members to select him on the basis of his own merits; when that didn't work, he bribed the ones he could and blackmailed the remaining ones when he had to. Whatever the means, he currently led the Hansa, with all the power, prestige, and opportunities the position entailed.

The Ildiran fleet's arrival, however changed everything. For the good of the Hansa, Stannis was glad the job had not fallen into the hands of one of his less-competent rivals.

Despite the fact that he was Chairman, Stannis rarely appeared in public. King Ben existed to serve in that capacity. And today, the figurehead King would certainly earn the high stipend the Hansa secretly paid him—if he did what he was told...

From the Whisper Palace balcony, Stannis watched the ships in the air. Damn, this made him nervous. The Ildirans claimed to be friendly and had already helped some of Earth's far-flung generation ships, although the Chairman couldn't

understand why. He disliked not understanding motivations, especially in such a dangerous and complex situation.

Per his orders, the Earth Defense Forces were on high alert, an entire “escort” fleet transferred here from the Mars base in anticipation of the Ildiran representative’s arrival, but the ships were under strict orders to take no aggressive action unless definitively fired upon. The last thing Stannis wanted was an interstellar war started by some fool with an itchy trigger finger.

But they also had to be ready to defend Earth, to stand against a major sneak attack if the warliners should prove to be an invasion force. These Ildirans were aliens; *anything* could happen.

Hector pointed to the chaos of colorful warliners overhead, identifying one in particular. “There, sir. That will be the flagship bringing their military commander.”

Stannis fixed his gaze on the vessel as it detached itself from the rest of the grouping and dropped toward the designated landing area in the Palace District. “His title is *Adar*,” he corrected the aide, though he didn’t know what the term meant in their language.

As it approached, the flagship warliner appeared to dwarf the Whisper Palace, though it was only a matter of perspective—he hoped.

The King’s residence, the lavish seat of power from which the Hansa monarch issued the statements and rulings that were carefully written for him, had been designed to inspire awe. The cost of the Palace had been historic, nearly incalculable by any traditional economic formula, but the Terran Hanseatic League had experienced record profits. To demonstrate the Hansa’s continued success, Stannis’s predecessor had broken ground on another wing, expanding the gigantic structure; for the past decade, the Palace District had been a constant bustle of construction.

Even with its tall towers, gold-plated cupolas, multilayered fountains, fairy-work bridges, and banners flapping from every spire, the Whisper Palace did not seem as impressive as those exotic alien ships...

Crowds had gathered to stare in terror or elation at the Ildiran fleet. Wearing crisp, bright blue uniforms, the Royal Guard fanned out to impose order, herding the public into a designated safety zone as the flagship warliner came down. Though the Royal Guard put on regular parades for King Ben’s benefit and had drilled for the arrival of the Solar Navy, many of the soldiers’ faces were turned up to the sky, eyes wide, mouths open, gawking at the giant warliners just like any other civilian. The Chairman made a mental note to pass along his criticisms to the Guard Administrator... but only after all this blew over.

Stannis touched the bug-mic in his ear as the Royal Guard Captain transmitted on his private channel, “Mr. Chairman, the plaza landing area is cleared and secure. Royal Guard in position and ready to receive the Ildiran *Adar*.”

Stannis acknowledged. “Nothing sloppy, Captain. This is going to be the most important hour in your life.”

“I understand that, sir.” Muffled in the voice pickup, the captain snapped to his troops, running them through their paces.

Smaller Ildiran ships flurried around the descending warliner, while the rest of the ornate battleships remained overhead, like peacocks loaded with exotic

weaponry. Malcolm Stannis reserved judgment, for the time being. He still didn't know what to make of the benevolent Ildiran "rescue" of the Earth generation ships, or what the aliens wanted from the human race.

Almost a century-and-a-half before, a tired and crowded Earth had dispatched eleven massive, slow-moving ships out into the starry emptiness—more emptiness than stars—like arks for the human race, searching the Spiral Arm for new habitable planets. When Malcolm Stannis reviewed the old history and understood the ships' vanishingly small chances for success, he was amazed that investors and governments had been convinced to fund the project at all. Carrying optimistic (or perhaps naïve and reckless) colonists, those eleven ships had plodded off in different directions like messages in bottles tossed out into a vast, empty sea.

The generation ships flew out on a one-way trip, and Earth had never expected to hear from them again. For 144 years, they were all but forgotten. And then five years ago, one of those wandering generation ships had blundered into a scout from the Ildiran Solar Navy—humanity's first contact with any intelligent alien race. Taking pity on the tired and bedraggled colonists-without-a-colony, the Ildirans rescued them, delivering that first ship, the *Caillié*, to a habitable planet.

After settling the colonists, the Solar Navy dispatched search parties to follow the last known courses of the human generation ships, and sent a contact mission to inform an astonished Earth what they were doing. In short order, they found ten of the eleven lost vessels, and now, finally, the Ildirans had sent a formal delegation to Earth.

Chairman Stannis realized that such a world-shaking event could cause economic and political upheaval across the Hansa, but he preferred not to panic. Instead, he saw it as an opportunity. And there could be many more to come.

But what did the Ildirans *want*?

"I'd better give King Ben a refresher briefing," he said to Hector, "make sure he is clear on how to act and what to say. He's never had to do anything like this before—I bet he's about to wet himself." Stannis drew a deep breath and turned away from the view of the alien ships. Good thing he was there to make the decisions. The Hansa needed a strong leader right now.

He hurried down the steps.

King Ben paced nervously in his opulent dressing room, a huge chamber with polished stone floors and veined marble columns supporting a ceiling ten meters high. His quarters were larger than a town meeting hall.

While waiting for Stannis to come for him, the King had done a decent job of dressing himself. He already wore his elaborate ceremonial crown, but the Chairman fussed over the long purple cape the old man had draped over his slumped shoulders, when the blue tunic had not proved loose enough to hide Ben's rounded potbelly. With his flowing beard, plump face, apple cheeks, twinkling blue eyes, and grandfatherly air, King Ben bore a strong resemblance to Father Christmas. He had a deep, rumbling laugh, a warm smile. The public loved him—as they were meant to.

Stannis leaned close to the King's ear. "Remember, say nothing important and agree to nothing. After we hear what the Ildirans have to say, I will write your reply."

As the Chairman arranged the folds of purple fabric and brushed the old man's beard for him, King Ben said, "What if I'm not ready for this, Malcolm?"

"You have to be." He stepped back, tugged down on the cape, and gave a nod of approval. "Today's events will forever change the human race. Those new stardrives the Ildirans promised us will open the whole Spiral Arm to colonization, and the resources will be a glorious boon for the Hansa." He wasn't sure the aliens even knew the value of what they were offering. Stannis narrowed his eyes. "You'd better not botch this."

King Ben drew a nervous breath, pressed his lips together as if practicing his expressions. Stannis watched the process as the old man composed his face, reviewed his lines, and got back into his character. "You can count on me. I may have been an unknown actor when your predecessor chose me to fill this ceremonial role, but I've done it well for the past few decades, haven't I?"

"Adequately," Stannis said. The King had outlasted two Hansa Chairmen before him.

"I know what's at stake today. I promise you, this will be my best performance ever."

"It better be." He shooed the King out of the dressing chamber. "Now get going—it's time for you to meet the Ildiran Adar. And don't forget your lines."

## Chapter 2

### Adar Bali'nh.

He had met and interacted with humans before, in small groups. He didn't dislike them, simply failed to understand them. But he was the Adar, supreme commander of the Ildiran Solar Navy, and the Mage-Imperator had honored him with this assignment to lead a formal delegation to the King of Earth.

Adar Bali'nh had studied all the information available to him. The competent computerized companion OX, a diminutive robotic servant and historian from one of the retrieved generation ships, had briefed Bali'nh thoroughly during their voyage from Ildira. After their many conversations, the Adar felt he understood OX better than he understood humans.

The Ildirans had numerous discrete kiths, like breeds. In general, they were similar to humans in appearance—at least the noble kithmen were—but Bali'nh did not let himself be fooled that humans were the same. All Ildirans were connected by an invisible web of telepathy, the *thism*, centered on the Mage-Imperator; the *thism* bound them into a tight community, allowing them to act with unity. Humans had no such connection; they were separate and alone. He tried not to pity them too much.

Bali'nh would discharge his duty, make the Mage-Imperator proud by treating King Ben with formal respect... but deep in his heart, Adar Bali'nh knew that

opening the Spiral Arm to these ambitious humans meant that his steady, predictable life was over.

The Ildiran Empire had changed little over the fifteen thousand years of its existence. Every event was chronicled in the Ildiran epic *Saga of Seven Suns*. His people did not react well to change...

As his maniple of forty-nine warliners descended toward Earth's capital city, Adar Bali'nh gave orders for all ships to deploy their grandiose thermal-radiating panels, and extend the colorful decoration on the warliners' hulls so that the Solar Navy provided a most spectacular show.

Seven groups of seven warliners spread across the sky in formation while the Adar dispatched his flagship to the designated zone in front of the Whisper Palace.

Below them, King Ben's residence was an ornate structure surrounded by parks, fountains, and statue gardens. Regarding the view from his command nucleus, the Adar could not put aside his racial pride. Even though this was an impressive place, Earth could not match Ildira with its dazzling seven suns that bathed the planet in constant golden light. Night fell here on Earth, and Ildirans did not like the darkness.

As the flagship landed in the Grand Plaza in front of the Whisper Palace, Bali'nh mused to the human-shaped robot, deciding to be polite. "So this is Earth. Your descriptions have not done it justice, OX."

The little compy turned his golden eye sensors to study the city before him. "I have not seen it for a long time, Adar Bali'nh. In fact, I never imagined I would see it again. Each generation ship carried a compy such as myself to serve as a teacher and historian to preserve the memories of home for successive generations. When I departed Earth aboard the Peary one hundred forty-nine years ago, the Whisper Palace had not yet been constructed. My knowledge is extremely out of date."

"Then we will both learn the current situation. Shall we go and meet Earth's King?" The two descended toward the departure deck.

Stabilizing fields kept the landed flagship balanced perfectly in place, barely kissing the pavement. Ordered ranks of King Ben's Royal Guards marched up to stand before the warliner as the ceremonial egress ramp extended from the bottom deck.

When the hatch slid open, Adar Bali'nh took a long breath of the air of a new world, felt the warm sunlight, looked out at the blue sunlit sky, and decided that Earth was a fine world after all. He could be comfortable here for their two-month official visit.

The Adar and OX walked down the ramp, followed by their own honor guard of burly, bestial-looking guard kithmen in full crystal-scale armor; many other Ildirans were observing via sensor screens aboard the warliners. The Adar believed himself to be perfectly safe.

Bali'nh stopped at the bottom of the ramp and faced the captain of the Royal Guard, who stood with his anxiety well-concealed. He extended his palm, fingers splayed in the traditional Ildiran salute, and then smiled because OX had taught him to. "I am Adar Bali'nh. With the blessing of our omnipotent Mage-Imperator, I have come to Earth to begin formal relations with your King."

The Adar's features were similar to those of humans, though squarer, stronger, and his skin was not pale pink, but rather a greenish-gold color. His black hair was long and flowing, shot with two bright streaks of white that originated from each temple.

He indicated the small compy. "I am also returning your competent computerized companion, whom we rescued from the generation ship, PEARY."

"You brought one of the old compies back! That's a nice surprise." The Guard Captain gestured behind him as his men stepped aside to form a long, open corridor in their ranks. "This way, Adar Bali'nh. King Ben will receive you in his Throne Hall."

Inside, the Whisper Palace was quite spectacular, the Throne Hall alone as cavernous as a warliner's cargo hold. The old bearded King sat on a high dais approached by a long succession of stone steps; his throne was situated before a broad window that looked out upon Earth's open skies. The clouds were turning golden with the setting of the sun, and Bali'nh wondered just how dark this city would get, but OX had assured him that humans kept the darkness at bay with artificial lights, just as any Ildiran splinter colony would.

Bali'nh stood at the base of the steps, looking up at the King. The Adar's red cape hung from his squared shoulders. He addressed King Ben in the manner that OX had taught him. "Your Majesty, in all the history of our empire, as is told in the *Saga of Seven Suns*, Ildirans have encountered no other intelligent race—until now. This is a sign of great things, and our Mage-Imperator offers to share Ildiran knowledge and technology. We welcome humans as our friends and partners into the civilization of the Spiral Arm. We are impressed by your boldness in sending out your generation ships on what was surely a very risky quest."

From his throne, King Ben cleared his throat, "Yes, they were quite brave, those pioneers. We thank you for rescuing them."

Bali'nh nodded again. "In the years since we first encountered the CAILLIÉ, we have located all but one of your generation vessels and delivered them to suitable worlds for settlement."

King Ben used a ringed hand to stroke his lower lip; he furrowed his brow as if deep in contemplation. "We owe you a great deal for all you have done for us, Adar Bali'nh." He leaned forward, as if noticing OX for the first time. "And now this compy from the Peary—what a relic! He must have fascinating stories."

OX took a half step forward. "Yes, your Majesty. Not only did I chronicle the voyage of the PEARY, but I discovered a greater purpose when I began learning from the Ildirans. Over many centuries, their Solar Navy has mapped hundreds of habitable planets, but their empire has no interest in colonizing those planets. In other words, Sire, all those worlds are untouched and unclaimed."

Bali'nh nodded. "There are many habitable worlds across the Spiral Arm. We do not lay claim to them. And the stardrive we offer will allow you to explore and settle new territories."

The King glanced to one side, and Bali'nh caught a glimpse of a man in the shadows of an alcove. The King's expression suddenly changed to one of worry. He said in a more uncertain voice, "We look forward to reconnecting with our lost



children. The first generation ship you encountered, the CAILLIÉ—how is that colony doing? You delivered those people to a heavily forested planet, I believe?”

“The planet is called Theroc,” Bali’nh said. “The CAILLIÉ refugees have adapted to the great trees and appear to be thriving on their new world.”

OX spoke up, “Perhaps someday, a representative from Theroc will come to Earth, just as I have.”

King Ben smiled. “We can only hope.”

## **Chapter 3**

### **Thara Wen.**

The planet Theroc was a paradise: skyscraper-high trees with golden scaled bark and immense interlocking fronds, thick underbrush, beautiful flowers, countless varieties of delicious fruits and vegetables. Many of the gorgeous moths and jewel-toned beetles were edible and savory. With such natural bounty, Theroc provided everything the colonists from the generation ship CAILLIÉ could possibly want. The people had been delighted to make their home there for the past five years.

Thara Wen ran through the underbrush tearing branches aside, crashing through the leaves. She screamed, but no one could hear her.

Thara tripped among the weeds, clawed her way through the branches, dodged around the bole of a huge tree, and stopped for a moment to catch her breath. She clutched her long, ebony hair, which was now tangled with leaves and the fluff of seeds. A small condorfly droned past her face, attracted by the beads of perspiration running down her forehead. It hovered there, staring at her with multifaceted eyes, then thrummed away.

Shaking with terror, Thara caught her balance against the tree trunk, heaved huge breaths, and then kept running. She longed to hide, but she needed to keep running. She raced deeper into the untracked forest.

And he kept following.

Thara wore only a simple shift over her thin body; she had no weapon, though if she had stopped to think about it, she might have found a sharp stick and tried to defend herself. She couldn’t take the time. Each second allowed Sam Roper to get closer.

He was strong and bloodthirsty, and she didn’t think she could fight him, didn’t want to fight him. He had chased her far from the colony village now, and Thara had no hope that someone would hear and rescue her—she was on her own. His loud voice, sharp as an axe, cut through the thick forest. “Thara Wen, come here, if you know what’s good for you, girl!”

Roper had short brown hair, broad shoulders, and eyes that never met another’s directly—the sort of person who was always there, but never noticed... the sort of person who had far too many secrets. “What are you worried about?” he shouted into the trees. “I won’t hurt you.” He paused for an edgy second, then added, “I promise.”

He had caught Thara on the outskirts of the village, grabbed her by the arm, pulled her into the trees, but she scratched his face, got away, then took off into the impenetrable Theron wilderness—the wrong direction. She was only fourteen and wasn't sure exactly what Sam Roper wanted from her; at the moment, it wasn't important. She could make guesses, but did not want to find out if any of them were correct. All she knew for certain was that her instincts told her to run.

She burst through a thick barricade of shrubs, barely feeling the thorns cut her bare thighs and arms. In an open meadow, she came upon one of the weed-overgrown cargo-box shuttles that had been dropped down from the CAILLIÉ years before. The thick jungle had swiftly reclaimed its territory, and by now vines had crawled up its sides; rust and moss covered the outer plates. No one could fly the craft anymore; the engines had deteriorated due to neglect, but the cargo box's hatch was partly open, and the dim interior had become a place for small creatures to make their nests.

Thara ducked inside, desperate for a sheltered place to hide. Armored insects as long as her forearm scuttled out in panic as she pushed her way in, knocking aside blown leaves and forest detritus. Avoiding the shaft of sunlight, she huddled against the hatch.

In the distance, she could hear Sam Roper still calling her, still taunting her. The man didn't expect her to respond; he was just doing this to frighten her—and he succeeded. She covered her mouth and her nose to muffle her loud breathing. She drew her knees up to her chin and shrank farther into the shadows, *willing* him to go away.

"Nobody out here to help you, you know," he called. "We're too far from the village."

She froze inside the dim, stifling cargo box, forcing herself to stay as still as she could, but she trembled uncontrollably.

Earlier that day, Thara had groused about the tedious chore of climbing trees to harvest the succulent shelf mushrooms high in the upper fronds. Now she wished she were back there with her friends, her family.

Something told her Sam Roper never intended to let her go back.

"Ah, I see you found a private place for us!" He was outside in the meadow.

Suddenly, Thara realized she was trapped. This landed cargo box was not a fortress, but a cage. She heard Roper coming closer, saw his shadow block the light from the main hatch. If he caught her in here...

She found the secondary hatch in the roof, hoping the hydraulics still worked. She activated it, and with a reluctant hiss and scrape, the hatch cracked open and tore the tenacious vines aside. She reached up, caught the opening, and scrambled up onto the top of the cargo box as Roper yelled at her. Thara caught only a glimpse of him before she dropped down the opposite side, out of the old craft, and ran deeper into the trees—the giant, powerful trees.

The forests on Theroc were vast, dense... mysterious. In their five years there, the CAILLIÉ colonists had explored only a small fraction of the surrounding areas. The continents were covered with lofty "worldtrees," a majestic, living network. As a young girl, Thara had always sensed something peculiar about the trees, something powerful, slumbering... not quite awake.

The forest grew darker, thicker, but right now, the man hunting her was far more sinister than this wilderness. As she left the cargo box behind, he burst after her with renewed energy, thrashing his way through the underbrush.

When she got far enough ahead of him, Thara climbed in among the upthrust roots of the trees, working her way through drooping fronds and dangling vines as thick as her arm. She knew she couldn't outrun him in the long run; she had to get to a place where he would never find her.

The thicket was impossibly dense, but somehow the branches moved aside, as if granting her permission to slip deeper into their embrace. Rustling vegetation masked the sound of her movements, and Thara worked her way into the labyrinth of roots and interlocked branches. Hidden behind a barricade of shadows, she crouched in the mulchy murk surrounded by root tendrils and a soft blanket of fallen leaves.

Through a tiny slit of sunlight, she watched a shadow move through a shaft of sunlight outside. A human figure: Roper. She saw his disheveled brown hair, his shining eyes.

The knife he held in his hand.

She bit her lip, and she wished she could keep her heart from pounding. Thara had to stay absolutely silent, and the forest helped her.

Roper stopped, looked around, and even stared directly at the thicket, but he didn't see her. After a long pause, he trudged onward, calling her name in a singsong taunt.

When he was finally gone from sight, Thara realized she had forgotten to breathe, and she sucked in a huge gasp. Tears poured down her face. Her entire body shuddered. She held onto the branches and roots around her and fought back the sobs, feeling safe at last.

Just then one of the roots wrapped itself around her ankle.

At first, she thought she was imagining it, but another branch seized her arm. The fronds moved like tentacles, curling around her waist, her neck; one curled across her mouth so she couldn't scream.

Thara fought against them, but the branches folded around her body like praying hands. One vine blocked her eyes. Thara couldn't see anything, couldn't breathe, couldn't scream.

The mysterious forest enfolded her, bound her in its impenetrable mesh. She shouted in wordless terror, but the wild cry came out only inside her mind—

To be replaced by a flood of images, cascading thoughts so strange that she couldn't comprehend them: Fragments from her own past, from the people of the CAILLIÉ, as well as ancient echoes of what had happened on this planet down through the ages.

The trees! The explosion of visions was coming from the trees! *Worldtrees!* The very ideas—never experienced by any human—seemed too intense to bear. The memory avalanche threatened to sweep her tiny identity away, yet deep inside Thara realized she was touching a sentience as vast as the forest that covered an entire planet.

*What is happening to me?*

Flashing through her mind, Thara saw forest animals, insects, human babies, thunderstorms, blossoming flowers, sunsets, shooting stars, a fall of rain, a giant

and ancient tree toppling to the ground at the end of an immeasurably long life... Sam Roper's knife... someone screaming. *Someone else.*

She was drowning in all the input. Her mind couldn't absorb any more, yet the kaleidoscope of images continued as if the insistent forest were trying to share everything at once. It was too much!

Suddenly Thara understood that all those images didn't have to be stored in her mind. Every experience, every sight, every thought, every moment of history was stored in the trees themselves, an interconnected encyclopedia of knowledge that had been gathered over countless millennia. The five years of experiences since human colonists had settled on Theroc were just the tiniest fraction of that incredible database.

Though still overwhelmed, Thara Wen was no longer frightened. She did not struggle against what was happening. Once she accepted it, the worldforest seemed to understand. The trees themselves granted her a benediction, then permission.

The branches and roots unwound from her body. They released her ankles, her neck, her eyes. She found she could move her arms now, and she sat up, blinking her eyes. The branches parted to set her free. She could walk away now, unhindered from the thicket where she had hidden.

Thara realized from the color of the sky that it was now dawn. She had no idea how long she had been in the thicket embraced by the memories of the worldforest... kept safe.

"The worldforest," she whispered. *What did it do to me?*

She reached up to run her fingers through her hair, and clumps of it came out in her grasp. Long, raven tendrils fell from her scalp and drifted down to the forest floor.

*What did the worldforest do to me?*

Gazing upward, she no longer saw just the scenery, the trees, or the underbrush—but the complete gestalt of the forest. And she saw much more.

It was all interconnected.

She brushed one hand over her head and face and realized that all of her hair had fallen out, including her eyebrows and eyelashes, leaving her bald, her skin smooth. And when Thara looked at her hands, she saw that the tanned skin was now a rich emerald green, as if all her cells had been impregnated with chlorophyll. She was smooth and green and strong.

She walked through the dark trees, heading back toward the colony village, no longer the least bit afraid of Sam Roper.

She understood the gigantic trees now. "The worldforest and I are part of each other," she murmured. "Forever."

## **Chapter 4**

### **King Ben.**

The Ildiran military leader continued to observe the formalities with polite conversation, but as evening fell King Ben could tell the Adar was growing uneasy. Bali'nh shared fascinating stories about his service in the Solar Navy and described exotic planets across the Ildiran Empire, but he could not hide the sidelong glances he cast through the great windows of the Throne Hall to the darkening sky outside. When the chandeliers were lit and illumination glowed throughout the Whisper Palace, however, Bali'nh appeared to relax. King Ben couldn't imagine living on a world that never experienced night.

At the appropriate time, servants summoned them to the banquet, where a long buffet table displayed an immense array of Earthly delights, samples of many different cuisines, from meats and fish to fruits, puddings, grains and breads, pastries, and less pleasant items like salted seaweed and tart jellies. Although their biochemistry was supposedly similar to Terran, no one knew what might satisfy Ildiran tastes. Human protocol officers had wisely decided to offer everything imaginable and let the Solar Navy commander choose.

King Ben accompanied the Adar down the length of the buffet table and suggested some of his favorite dishes among the numerous samplings.

OX walked like a windup soldier behind them. "I spent much time with the Ildirans, Majesty. As far as I can tell, humans and Ildirans can share food without any concerns, except for possible indigestion."

Hearing this, King Ben chuckled. "Our food sometimes gives me indigestion, too." The others in the group laughed politely at the joke. So far, despite his initial trepidation, Ben thought this mission was going very well.

By now, the King felt much more relaxed to be in the company of his strange visitors. He decided he liked these Ildirans: they were alien enough to be interesting, but human enough that people could relate to them. Adar Bali'nh was certainly a gentleman, and the Ildirans had already done so much for the lost generation ships, not to mention offering the Hansa their stardrive technology, which would give humanity a practical means to expand outside of the solar system. He didn't know why Chairman Stannis would have any doubts about their motives, especially after today. The aliens were clearly friends of humanity.

The Chairman joined the many dignitaries for the banquet but remained at the edge of the crowd, calling no attention to himself. Nevertheless, Ben could feel the man's sharp, dark eyes upon him, measuring him, warning him, although he didn't think he had slipped up in any way. At least so far...

A string quartet played a selection of classical masterpieces.

The historian compy split his time between Adar Bali'nh and King Ben. Although OX wasn't specifically programmed to be a storyteller, he did manage to present the facts of the PEARY's journey and their interactions with the Ildirans in a highly interesting way. Ben felt like a young man again, before he'd been assigned this acting role; he was delighted to hear the tales of Earth's lost stepchildren.

After the meal, the compy asked the King's permission to make a brief presentation. "By all means." Ben sat back in his chair and pushed the empty plate away.

Adar Bali'nh signaled to his burly guards, who reached into hidden compartments of their armor, pulled out compressed datapaks, and placed them into OX's outstretched arms.

"Majesty, these logs were recovered from the ten rescued generation ships. They chronicle in detail the journeys of those vessels. As the only compy to return home, I have been charged with delivering them to you, so that human scholars can learn from all that we experienced during our many, many decades of travel."

King Ben accepted them with delight. "These will be fascinating, and enough to keep our historians busy for years! Thank you, OX."

Halfway down the main banquet table, Chairman Stannis picked up a glass of wine, sipped from it, then spoke in a loud, musing tone, as if no one else were in the hall. "I'm impressed with the Solar Navy's search, Adar Bali'nh. It is quite remarkable that you have found all but one of the original eleven generation ships. The BURTON is lost." He gave a quick shrug. "But, considering the dangers of uncharted space, I had assumed *most* of the generation ships would be lost by now."

Before the mood could turn sour, King Ben spoke quickly, smiling at Adar Bali'nh. "Chairman Stannis means no criticism of your abilities. We are most grateful for all the help that Ildirans have provided us."

The Solar Navy commander gave a curt bow. "We have searched for five years, King Ben, but we have not yet given up. Space is vast. The Solar Navy will continue to search for the final ship." He lowered his voice. "Although realistically, we do not expect to find the BURTON after all this time. We must assume it is not recoverable."

## Chapter 5

### Captain Chrysta Logan.

"So it's come to this," she said, facing down the mob in a corridor intersection below the BURTON's bridge.

When the trouble started, Captain Chrysta Logan was forced to abandon her calculations on the bridge, where she was doing her best to repair the propulsion systems from the bridge computers. The engines stubbornly refused to reboot after the severe ion storm that had battered and buffeted the old generation ship.

To buy time, she had fled four decks down, but it wasn't far enough. She had only so many places to run in the creaking vessel; at least a third of the decks were uninhabitable due to long-standing damage or conservation shutdowns.

Now, Chrysta studied all the angry faces, noting their wild eyes, flushed skin, and focused gazes. *Desperation*. She could tell they blamed her for everything, as they usually blamed their captain. She had served that role for only four years, but it did not look as if she'd last much longer.

In a sense, the people were right: she *was* responsible. Chrysta was the twenty-first captain of the generation ship, and therefore everything and everyone aboard became her responsibility. Her job, just like the job of the twenty captains before

her, was to shepherd the huge vessel across empty space, to guide them safely to a new home where they could settle and thrive—the optimistic, perhaps foolish, dream of their ancestors.

After a century and a half of fruitless voyaging, however, “thriving” was out of the question. Chrysta just wanted all of her remaining crew to survive, but she’d run out of options after a long succession of disasters—none of them caused by poor command decisions, if the mob had bothered to think about it, but they weren’t in the mood to listen. The angry people held weapons taken from the armory, while others made do with detached pipes or sharp-edged tools. A few of the dissenters seemed to think that simple fists and feet would convey the message.

No, the BURTON’s crew was not interested in discussing long-term solutions or continued sacrifice. Problem solving wasn’t on the agenda.

Chrysta touched her sidearm, a blaster set to stun, but was reluctant to draw it. These were her people, her crew, her friends... hell, many of them were even her relatives! She wouldn’t use the kill setting.

Unfortunately, not everyone out there felt the same.

She backed away, trying to keep her distance until they could cool off. Then she’d be able to explain the BURTON’s problems—*everybody’s* problems—in a rational way. “A captain usually gets more respect than this,” she muttered.

“Respect has to be earned, Captain!” yelled Dario Ramirez, a perennial complainer and finger-pointer. The man was good at riling up discontent and prodding sore spots, though he was rarely the first to volunteer when a situation called for hard work. Even now, Ramirez stood on the open platform above the corridor intersection, shouting down at the crowd—and nowhere close to the foremost mob members. *No surprise there.*

“You know this is mutiny,” she shouted.

“We’re not taking any more of this, Captain. The BURTON deserves a real leader.” Ramirez’s shoulder-length dark hair was wrapped in a purple bandanna; a thin mustache drooped along both sides of this mouth. Two of his followers—attractive young women—stood at his side, urging him on.

Although Dario Ramirez was the instigator of the current uproar, Chrysta knew he was not a leader by any stretch of the imagination and had little grasp of day-to-day administrative complexities. But Ramirez didn’t realize that yet. He wasn’t the sort of man to think more than an hour or two ahead.

“Be careful what you wish for, Dario Ramirez.” She drew and raised her sidearm. “Don’t expect me to feel sorry for you when it all blows up in your face.” She fired a yellow bolt that struck the bulkhead just to the left of the malcontent’s head.

Ramirez dove out of the way and yelled. The mob gasped, and Chrysta took advantage of the moment of surprise. She dashed down the corridor, hoping to find a lift that still worked.

After a century-and-a-half of fruitless searching for a viable planet, the Burton was low on resources and badly in need of repairs. Decades of poor management and turmoil had depleted the ship’s reserves of fuel or food, and many systems had already broken down. The descendants of the original crew were lost among the stars, no longer confident they would find a parklike new world. According to

their long-range scans, there was not a habitable star system within reach. At a minimum, they had another fifteen years before the next star was even in close observation range.

And then an ion storm had ripped past them like a flash fire, a surge of energetic particles rolling across space from some cosmic catastrophe. Many of the ship's electrical and life-support systems were fried. Barely limping along with emergency repairs, using spare parts stolen from other systems and hammered into place, their hope was at its fragile end. Aboard the Burton, the colonists had already lived for decades on minimal rations, reduced power consumption, virtually no comforts. Just surviving. As captain, Chrysta was forced to impose even stricter conservation measures. And the situation kept getting worse.

Eighty years after departure, the ship's compy was destroyed in an engine accident, which left the people aboard without an anchor, without a teacher. Many of the crewmembers, generations away from Earth, still tried to learn from the library databases, but they were outdated and of little practical use. So much of the information relied on planetary references that meant little to families so far removed from solid ground.

Several previous captains had been assassinated or forced to resign as the circumstances grew even more dire. Chrysta gave pep talks, hoping to rally the crew to work together for the common good—all for one and one for all—but spirits were low and emotions ran high. It was easier to blame her than to offer suggestions.

Even a captain could not control the sheer emptiness of space. She hoped that at least some of the other generation ships from Earth had found viable planets by now. The Burton certainly had no chance.

Chrysta ran down the corridor, hearing the shouts behind her. The weapon blast had cowed the mob for only a few seconds, and now they were after her again. Maybe she shouldn't have intentionally missed Dario Ramirez after all. "Oh well, maybe next time."

When the lift doors failed to open, yet another malfunction, she found an emergency hatch and slid down the drop ladder to the next deck. Chrysta ran as fast as she could. A red headband held her shaggy honey-blond hair out of her face, but sweat dripped down her cheeks.

A voice shouted over the intercom, "She's on deck five. Converge there!"

She remembered how much these people had admired her, at first. She was young and attractive with a likeable personality, a salty sense of humor. Half of the young men aboard the BURTON had a crush on her.

But when the ship's problems didn't magically get better under her command, the doubts had emerged. A clear case of buyer's remorse. One biting critic said that the ship needed a strong leader, not a beauty queen.

However, a strong leader needed the nerve and the guts to impose hard measures, asking the crew to accept more and more austerity because that was the only way. But the colonists were hungry and tired of rationing. They had had enough.

People came toward her now from two different corridors; some rode down a functional lift farther down the hall. Where had they found so many weapons? Her grip on the blaster butt was sweaty. The shouting mob came forward and threw



empty ration cans, a pipe elbow from a dismantled water system, a used-up battery pack. Chrysta ducked, and the debris clattered on the decks and the walls. Most of them, however, kept tight holds on their clubs, waiting until they caught her.

She reached the open door of an empty conference room and ducked inside, knowing she could barricade herself in there. With angry people in front of her and behind her, and more filling the halls each minute, she saw no place else to go.

Chrysta closed the sliding metal doors as a fusillade of hand-thrown projectiles smashed against the bulkhead. She punched the electronic lock controls to seal the door, a privacy setting for confidential meetings. Catching her breath, she wiped a forearm across her brow, adjusted the red headband, and decided the lock was not sufficient, so she fired her blaster at the control panel, melting it down in a surge of sparks. The blast also cut power to the room, plunging the chamber into total blackness, except for the faint glow from the cooling panel.

She hunkered down in the corner on the far side of the room, ready to wait them out. Outside, she heard the crew hammering at the sealed door, first with fists, then with hard and heavy metal. The blows echoed like cannon shots inside the sealed room. The mob did not sound as if it would calm down anytime soon.

Chrysta closed her eyes, although it made very little difference in the pitch black. This was bad, very bad. She clutched the blaster in front of her, pointed it toward the door. She waited...

She had never set out to become captain—no one in their right mind would, considering the bad shape the BURTON was in—but after being urged on by a small group of vocal supporters who called her “a hero in the making,” she had accepted the title, sure that she could do a decent job of it.

The ship’s previous captain had resigned in disgrace after serving only two years, following the failure of three successive life-support systems due to lack of proper maintenance, a scandal involving missing vital parts. He had surrendered the captain’s seat to Chrysta Logan, convinced that if he didn’t do so voluntarily, he’d be lynched. Chrysta should have taken the situation as a warning. Now among the unruly mobs, she had noticed many of the same people who had cheered her four years earlier.

She was a strong young woman, a success story with a cocky personality and no patience for fools. At seventeen she had lost both parents to lethal doses of radiation they’d received while rushing in to replace a piece of damaged reactor shielding that would have contaminated three decks. In truth, it had been her parents’ job to spot the problem before it became an emergency, but after their brave sacrifice, all was forgiven.

When her name was proposed as the next captain, the colonists onboard remembered who Chrysta’s parents were. Despite their impossible hardships, they clung to any faint hope and tried to remain optimistic. Unfortunately, they also had very short memories.

Now the noise outside the conference room door grew louder as the people brought more tools to bear—prybars, cutting torches. Someone breached the gap between the two halves of the sliding hatch by inserting a wedge and prying the doors apart to let a thin yellow shaft of light into the room.

Fingers appeared, pulling the door open farther. It wouldn't be long now. Chrysta held the blaster, unwavering.

The shouting crew were like baying hounds that had cornered their prey. Through the widening gap, she saw them shouldering one another aside, wanting to be the first to charge into the room. Cornered, Chrysta pointed the muzzle straight at the door and the crowd beyond. Either they didn't see the weapon, or they just didn't care.

The hatch gave way, both halves sliding into the recessed wall, and people surged in toward her. Chrysta's hand tensed on the firing stud of the blaster. What was that clichéd old phrase? This would be like shooting fish in a barrel. She could stun them by the dozens, massacre them before they reached her. But more would keep coming, and that would only enrage them more.

She felt moisture on her face, thought it might have been tears rather than sweat, and realized that her finger wouldn't fire.

"Damn, I can't shoot my own crew." She dropped the weapon on the deck.

The mob grabbed her and hauled her out of the conference room and into the corridor. A few people kicked her or roughed her up, but Chrysta had expected them to tear her limb from limb. Maybe they had a glimmer of respect for her after all...

Dario Ramirez stood in the hall, hands on his hips, wearing an expression of defiant triumph. Full of himself.

Chrysta coughed, felt blood on her tongue. One of her teeth was loose, and her lip was split, but she raised her head. "I did as good a job as anyone could. What will this accomplish?"

Ramirez chuckled. "Maybe I'll lead by example, Captain. I'll impose some *austerity measures* of my own."

Chrysta sat inside a small brig cell, bruised, aching, as annoyed with herself as with her turncoat crew. This holding chamber had originally been designed for temporary use—to separate squabblers or detain unruly people until they came to their senses. The colonists setting forth from Earth had been an optimistic lot, assuming that there would be no hardened criminals among all of their crew for generations; the BURTON simply did not have the resources for long-term confinement.

Chrysta didn't think she'd be here long either.

Out in the corridor, Dario Ramirez strutted back and forth, speaking loud enough that she could hear him through the grate that let in light from the outside corridor. He let ideas roll off his tongue, knowing she was listening; he seemed to like the sound of his own voice.

"Maybe we should just dump you out the airlock to save supplies. I have to think of the whole ship now, Captain, and what's best for the crew." He leaned close, putting his eye against the grate to peer inside. "On the other hand, we could use your body for fertilizer in the greenhouse domes. Why waste it out in space?"

"Good to hear a little innovative thinking, Mr. Ramirez," Chrysta said, controlling her sarcasm. "You should review the plans in my log. You'll find some good ideas there—to help pull the crew together."

“Oh, we’re going to pull together. We’ll survive long enough to reach a habitable planet.” The mutineer leaned closer so that she could see his smile. “It’s a shame that you won’t.”

“Don’t you have anything useful to do, Mr. Ramirez?” She sneered at him. “As captain, my duties kept me busy all day long.”

“You’re right. I’d better get back to the bridge.” He had had his fun and walked away down the corridor, whistling.

Chrysta leaned against the cold metal wall and wrapped her arms around her chest to keep warm. The brig cells were kept chilly in order to conserve energy. She let out a long sigh. “Now what?”

She saw no way out of this... unless a miracle happened.

Out in space, after more than five years of intense searching, a group of Ildiran warliners picked up the signal, tracking down the last of Earth’s eleven generation ships.

In a colorful and imposing swarm, seven alien battleships closed in around the battered generation vessel and broadcast, in English, that the BURTON was rescued.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Corey Kellum.**

The gas giant Daym was a swirling soup of clouds. Gaseous mixtures rose in fluffy strata of lavender, gray, and white from the planetary cauldron.

From the Ildiran warliner delivering a group of human refugees from the generation ship KANAKA, Corey Kellum saw the gas giant as a planet-sized opportunity, a business venture that just might become the greatest boon ever to his clan—if they could pull it off.

And it was about damned time for a lucky break. The KANAKA colonists had tried several different ventures already over the course of their long journey. They did well at making do. For decades, the clans had kept the KANAKA functioning with liberal use of wire and patch putty, innovative application of spare parts, desperate coaxing, and plenty of prayer. They knew how to make things work, even though their colony on the planet Iawa had been a flop, through no fault of their own, forcing them to pull up stakes and roam the stars again.

Even now, some clans stayed aboard the old *Kanaka*, still wandering, while Corey and his people accepted a new purpose, thanks to the Ildirans. *Skymining for stardrive fuel.*

Corey had no doubt they could make the clunky cloud trawlers run efficiently and at a profit. The Ildirans certainly didn’t know how to do so; the aliens had no business sense whatsoever, merely continuing their operations as they always had, without any thought for innovation, improvements, or efficiency. Clan Kellum could do much better.

The Ildiran commander of the warliner group, Septar Gro'nh, was a blocky alien with olive-gold skin and a gruff voice. He had not complained about his assignment to ferry a ship full of wayward human colonists to a new home in the clouds; he would also take the retired Ildiran crews back home.

"Corey Kellum, we are approaching Daym. Please prepare your people to assume the skymining operations." The septar was an unhurried man, but he made no secret that he was ready to return to Ildira. "You will all disembark on Cloud Trawler Number One for your briefing on our industrial operations. Once you have learned our systems, we will complete the transition and remove the Ildiran crew."

"We're fast learners, Septar." Corey grinned, but the military commander seemed immune to charm. "My best engineers have been studying your equipment for the past week." He did not comment on how inefficient the whole skymining operation seemed, from an objective analysis.

"Excellent," Gro'nh said. "Our people will be happy to go home."

"And my clan will be happy to *have* a home."

The Ildirans had informed the refugees of their activities back on Earth. After the Solar Navy rounded up the generation ships and let them establish colonies, setting up the colonies on new planets, the Ildirans had finally approached Earth. First they made contact to deliver the news about finding the wayward vessels; finally, the Mage-Imperator had just sent a formal delegation to establish diplomatic ties. Some members of the rescued generation ships would be given the opportunity to return to their home planet—either for a brief visit, or to go back for good.

But the KANAKA refugees had no interest in going back, especially when an opportunity like this awaited them. Earth was far away and long in their past.

While the septar returned to the warliner's command nucleus, Corey stared through the observation window, his gloved hands clasped behind his back. Like most of his people, he wore work clothes all the time, often adorned with flashes of color. It wasn't that they didn't know how to relax; they just never had the opportunity. Work was their life, so they may as well be comfortable.

Oliver Sung, a dark-skinned man with a leather cap and a pair of goggles dangling at his neck, came up to stand beside Corey. Oliver was a crack engineer, an optimist and his friend. "What do you see down there?" he asked.

Filling the view before them, the hypnotic and dizzying clouds of Daym seemed to go on forever and ever. "I see a giant-sized planet filled with clouds just waiting to be converted into stardrive fuel."

"Ekti," Oliver said. "The Ildirans call it ekti. You have to get the terminology right."

"We have to keep the equipment functioning right in order to produce the stuff. I don't care what label they put on it. Before you know it, we'll be marketing our own brands."

Entering the atmosphere of Daym, the warliner drifted down through layers of clouds as it closed in on the first of three cloud trawlers that harvested massive amounts of raw hydrogen and processed it into the exotic allotrope necessary for the Ildiran stardrives.

Drifting among the clouds at an atmospheric layer where Ildirans—and humans—could survive, was a gigantic, industrial city, domed on top, studded with antennae and data-gathering equipment. Long survey probes dangled down into the depths, like the tendrils of a jellyfish; light strips glinted from more than a hundred decks, marking the Ildiran living quarters, cargo bays, levitation engines, ekti reactor chains, and processing lines.

Corey let out a rude noise and shook his head. “What a wreck!”

“We’ll fix it,” Oliver said. “If they were efficient factories, the Ildirans wouldn’t be turning them over to us.”

“The Ildirans crew the cloud trawlers with ten times as many personnel as necessary. No wonder they never turn a profit. We can do it with a lot fewer people.”

According to Septar Gro’nh, Ildirans drew strength in numbers, regardless of the situation, and they disliked being solitary. Let them suit themselves. Corey appreciated this new start for the KANAKA refugees, and he prayed to the Guiding Star that this venture turned out better for them than the colony on Iawa had.

Long ago, the KANAKA had been the last of the eleven generation ships to depart from Earth. With budgets and patience nearly exhausted, the big vessel was cobbled together out of leftover parts and rushed on its way. Corners had been cut, the initial supply complement was reduced. Corey’s ancestors had the odds stacked against them from the very beginning.

Despite inferior workmanship and inadequate preparation, the resourceful colonists had held their ship and their society together. The hardships forced them to learn how to solve problems in unusual ways. They created a foothold colony in an asteroid cluster around a red dwarf, and then kept searching for a real planet. They lived with adversity, knew how to scrape together every tiny piece of material and put it to a new purpose.

When the Solar Navy had delivered the KANAKA to an available planet, the colonists celebrated, hoping their troubles were finally over. They tried to make a new home on Iawa, the first generation with their feet on solid ground for a long time—but a pernicious blight wiped out all their crops, infested their seed stock, and left them facing starvation. They were forced back into space, returning to their old generation ship, clutching at any straw. Some of the colonists grumbled that they were homeless again; Corey preferred to think of it as *footloose*.

By then, they had learned how to thrive under adverse circumstances. Rather than crawling back to Earth, they chose instead to wander and find some other niche to fill.

Through persistence, Corey had negotiated his way into a lucrative Ildiran business deal for a few hundred of his clan members. Upon learning that the Ildirans did not like to operate their isolated cloud trawlers, Corey had extolled his people’s abilities and offered to take over the ekti harvesting operations on Daym, the nearest gas giant to Ildira. “Why not let us give it a try? It could benefit both our peoples.”

And if that worked, they could even expand the operations, bring in more clans from the KANAKA...

The Ildiran military commander didn’t understand why the humans would be interested... but then, the Ildirans didn’t understand human ambitions at all. In

fact, they were rather naïve, even though their empire had been around for fifteen thousand years.

During the clan gathering of KANAKA refugees, Corey presented his idea. “None of this turned out the way our forefathers dreamed, and so anybody who wants to go back to Earth can do so. The Solar Navy has offered to take you there. As for myself, though, I’m going to become a skyminer. And if that doesn’t work, I’ll work on an ice moon, or live underground in an asteroid. I’ll make do.”

The response had been overwhelming: The KANAKA colonists didn’t want to slink back to Earth. In fact, they had no idea whether Earth would even take them. Corey’s people chose to go live in the clouds.

Throughout the preparation work, teams of engineers studied the Ildiran blueprints, analyzed the chemical process that converted hydrogen into ekti, used simulators to strip down and reassemble the reactor chambers. Oliver Sung had been one of the first to express his scorn, “Shizz! The Ildirans haven’t modified these things in centuries.”

Corey chuckled. “Good, let’s do an overhaul. Put on our innovation hats and come up with a trick or two. If we prove ourselves here, Ildiran skymines are harvesting ekti on dozens of gas giants, and we’ve got plenty of other KANAKA colonists ready to take the jobs.”

“Sign me up,” Oliver said.

Now, Corey’s people were full of hope when Septar Gro’nh’s warliner arrived at the first of Daym’s three cloud trawlers. The KANAKA refugees packed up their possessions and prepared to be shuttled over. Corey told the septar that they could probably all make it in a trip or two. “Our people travel light.”

Next to him, Oliver snorted, “That’s because we don’t have much left after so many setbacks.”

As the human teams and their families disembarked on the giant floating facility, the Ildiran engineering crews—crowds and crowds of them—came forward to greet Corey’s people. The cloud trawler’s chief engineer bowed before Corey. He was a squat Ildiran with a pug nose and tufts of wiry hair that stood out on above his pointed ears. “We grant you a great honor in turning over operations to you and your people. The three Daym cloud trawlers have produced ekti for four centuries. Currently, they are home to more than four thousand Ildiran workers. Are you certain your few hundred people can handle the operations?”

Corey chuckled. “Don’t worry, sir—we’ll take care of every piece of equipment as if it were our own.”

“It is yours, Corey Kellum. We hereby cede control of the Daym facility to your people, provided you continue to produce ekti for us.”

Corey’s response was automatic. “And we’re happy for the opportunity, Chief. Running these big factories won’t be much different from keeping our old generation ship functional. But this time we’ll be making a profit.”

Over the course of the next several days, while Ildirans gave tours and briefings of the operations, thousands of lower-level Ildiran workers commenced their orderly evacuation. They gathered in the cargo bays and boarded waves of shuttles back to Septar Gro’nh’s warliner; the journey from Daym to Ildira was a short one, but the preparations took a long time.

Soon enough, the gas giant would be in the hands of Corey’s people.

The chief engineer spent many hours showing Corey and Oliver the workings of Cloud Trawler Number One, answering questions about the technology, lecturing about the skymining life. Corey smelled the chemical fumes, heard the pulse of the reactors, sensed the rush of atmospheric gases flowing through the intakes and billowing out the exhaust stacks.

Although Corey was not an expert in alien moods, he thought the chief seemed forlorn as the large crew abandoned the ancient facility. Giving up his life's work, Corey supposed. "We are glad to return to the seven suns of our home," the chief said, though his tone did not match the words. "Living in extended isolation is difficult for us."

Corey rubbed his chin. "Then we can make you a deal. If this works out, other KANAKA clans will be glad to take over your skymining operations on other planets as well—after we prove ourselves, of course."

The chief engineer nodded. "That is definitely a possibility. First, though, the next few months, we will allow you to move to the other two Daym cloud trawlers. If you wish it."

"We definitely wish it." Corey knew how valuable the stardrive fuel was. Now that the Mage-Imperator had offered stardrive technology to the Terran Hanseatic League back on Earth, the demand for fuel would increase exponentially. He preferred to make long-range plans, and he wanted his people to be on the forefront of the new industry.

Several days later, after the last Ildiran crewmembers filed onto the final shuttle and departed, Oliver joined Corey on the deck. Both men waved at the enormous ornate warliner drifting among the clouds. The big ship cut through the cloud decks like a prowling leviathan.

Corey let out a long sigh of relief, finally believing that the aliens had turned over the huge facility to them. He and Oliver exchanged a high-five, then Corey hurried to the station-wide intercom. "All right, everybody—the Ildirans didn't want it, so we've got this facility all to ourselves. Let's get to work."

## Chapter 7

### Thara Wen.

The forest was different, and *she* was different when she came out of the wilderness and made her way back to the colony village. What had once been a blur of green and a tangle of branches and leaves, Thara Wen now saw as a mosaic of individual items—insects, twigs, specks of pollen, fallen leaves. Everything in perfect clarity and detail, everything connected. And the trees—the *worldtrees*—were a giant sentient mind, half slumbering, a network of roots and trees covering Theroc, interlinked with more connections than all the neurons in a human brain.

The forest had always been like that, but the human settlers here had never noticed. It was Thara who had changed, and she had matured far beyond her years. She could see it all now.

As she walked through the dense thickets, the underbrush seemed to move out of her way. Needing no trail, Thara glided along with the sunlight dappling her beautiful green skin. The color seemed natural to her now, a symbol of her connection to the forest.

She stepped out of the thick forest and into the main clearing where the settlement buildings had been erected. Some of the homes were prefab colony buildings dropped down from the CAILLIË supplies, while other buildings were constructed from local materials. One entire complex consisted of hollowed out chambers in the gigantic fungus conglomerations that grew like coral reefs from the worldtree trunks.

At the edge of the thick foliage, Thara paused in silence to watch the people in the village, some of them working, others looking concerned. They were familiar faces to her. She remembered them; she had known them all her life, both aboard the CAILLIË and here on Theroc.

*But now she saw more.*

She spotted Sam Roper. Two strong young men were holding him by the arms while he struggled. Roper was indignant, lashing out, cursing.

The elected village leader, Norris Brovnik, stood with his arms crossed over his shirt, skeptical. As he argued with Sam Roper, Brovnik looked up and was the first to notice her standing there.

Then others cried out. "It's Thara Wen! She's alive after all."

Roper struggled against the two young men holding him. "Let me go! See, she's alive—I didn't do anything to her."

Norris Brovnik shook his head. "Hold him. I still want some answers."

The dense trees masked her with greenish shadows, but when Thara stepped into the clearing, they could see that she was completely hairless, that her skin was green... that her entire demeanor had changed. She walked forward, amid many gasps of astonishment.

"What happened to her?"

Thara stretched out her hands to greet them all, but they seemed afraid to touch her.

The village leader ran his eyes up and down her body, amazed at the green skin. "You just vanished, Thara. We are relieved to see you safe—we've been searching for days."

This surprised her. "Days?" Was that how long she had been immersed in the tree mind?

"We thought Roper had done something to you. Can you tell us what happened?"

She looked down, opened and closed her fingers, then traced a fingertip along her forearm. "Something marvelous. I don't understand it myself, but the trees, the forest... the *worldforest* is more than you see. It's more than just alive. It is awake and aware, intelligent, full of experiences, anything that has ever happened on this planet. Memories from thousands of years, and from yesterday."

Roper looked up, his eyes shining. She stepped closer to him, not at all intimidated, and it was his turn to cringe away, but the two men continued to hold him. She was not afraid now—not of him, not of anything; she had no intention of



running away. Her voice was calm, and she felt the strength of the worldforest inside her.

"I know what Sam Roper tried to do to me." She stared at him. He opened and closed his mouth, but no words came out. "But not just to me. Through the eyes of the forest I also saw what he did to his other victims. The trees saw. The trees remember."

"You're lying! Look at her—she's obviously contaminated somehow. She's not thinking straight."

Thara ignored the man's outburst and looked calmly at Norris Brovnik. "Roper has an uncontrollable temper. We've all seen that. But he also plans, and stalks, and kills—then manages to cover his tracks. I don't think he understands the reasons himself."

"You have no proof!" Roper said.

Thara turned her back on him and instead looked at the other villagers. "Over the years, we know that some colonists vanished into the forest. There are hazards here on Theroc, without question. Some did die from accidents or predators... and sometimes the predator was Sam Roper himself." She paused. "I can show you where three bodies are hidden." She turned to skewer him with her gaze. "I can even recite their last words just before he killed them."

Roper let out a laugh that sounded like an uncoiled hinge. "Do you see how insane this is?"

"The forest sees everything," Thara said. "And it forgets nothing."

Though the skies were growing dark, she led the excavation team through the forest along paths only she could see. They carried illuminating globes, shovels and machetes, though they did not need to cut any branches out of their way. The forest cooperated with them.

With his wrists bound behind him, Sam Roper stumbled along, dragging his feet, trying to slow down the progress.

Thara guided the group unerringly to a small depression ringed by dead bushes. Roper suddenly looked pale in the harsh light of the illuminating globes.

"Gina Chadhar and Antonia Steiner," Thara said. "It was six months ago. They disappeared on the same day." She stopped and pointed to the depression. "Dig there."

Some of the adults in the group gasped or moaned. Gina's parents were among the party, and Antonia's brother had come as well. Thara said nothing else, just stood in silent accusation as the men used their shovels to clear away the brush, the dirt. The light shone down into the depression.

The diggers did not take long to find the bones. Two skulls, a pair of rib cages... two bodies dumped into the same shallow grave, and the lush forest growth had quickly erased all sign.

Though Thara already knew every detail of what had happened, now she heard the sounds of grief, the sobs of lost hope, the angry curses. Sam Roper was sweating, but he made no comment.

Norris Brovnik clenched and unclenched his fists. The muscles on his jaw rippled as he struggled to control himself. Even as Thara saw all the details of this

tragic tableau, she was aware of the rest of the forest, the night insects, the giant birdlike moths that flew above the canopy, the twilight-blooming orchids.

Brovnik looked at the exposed skeletons in the grave and whispered to Thara. "You said you knew of three victims? You'd better show us the other one."

When they dug up the third skeleton an hour's walk from the first graves, no one was surprised that Thara was right. Roper accused Thara of killing the victims, hiding the bodies, and now was framing him, but nobody believed him for a moment. He muttered angry comments that few people could understand, as if cursing at voices inside himself. His captors threw him to the ground in disgust, like garbage.

The village leader stood above him and pronounced a prompt sentence in a flat, impartial voice, as sad as it was angry. "Sam Roper, never has such a crime been committed on Theroc. When we came to this new world, we believed it was a fresh start. We had every reason to hope. We had everything we could want... but apparently we brought our demons as well."

The other people muttered, nodding. Thara remained silent.

Brovnik continued, "We've all read the library records. We know that such crimes were common enough on old Earth, and it seems we cannot escape them, even here." Now the village leader looked smaller, as if he wanted to be anywhere else, making any other kind of decision. Their colony on Theroc had thrived for five years. This was the worst thing that had happened under his leadership.

"We've not yet established a way to punish atrocities such as these. We never needed it before." His voice became so quiet that even Thara could barely hear him. "I was foolish to hope it would never happen."

Thara realized what she had to say, and her own voice was loud. She knew what this man had tried to do to her, what he had done to those other women. Even though fleeing from him had accidentally resulted in her wondrous transformation, she could not forgive him, nor could she allow Roper to harm anyone else.

"Leader Brovnik, take him to the top of the trees at dawn. The worldforest will know what to do."

At sunrise, the humidity in the air acted like a veil of tiny magnifying lenses that caused the air to shimmer. Mist rose from the lush canopy as the dense forest began to awaken.

Thara Wen climbed to the highest branches along with a contingent of colonists. Some people remained back in the village, not wanting to see, but others felt compelled to watch.

Sam Roper, stripped naked, was bound wrists and ankles, crouching on an exposed branch under the open sky. He kept muttering a mantra of "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." It didn't matter whether or not anyone accepted his apology; the villagers had made up their minds. He struggled against the cords that bound him to the branch, but he could go nowhere. Sweat poured down his face. His brown hair tangled over his eyes. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry."

Thara, Brovnik, and their companions watched from a high branch, but with little pleasure. The buzz of insects filled the air, drowning out the fainter rustling of worldtree fronds. A flock of languid rose-colored moths flapped by, their

wingspans more than two meters across. They circled the bound human figure curiously, then beat their wings, moving slowly away.

Suddenly, a wide, angular shadow splashed across the treetops. A large creature dove downward. The moths scattered in panic.

Sam Roper looked up and stared at the creature coming toward him.

Thara observed through her own eyes and through the senses of the forest. The most fearsome creature on Theroc—an enormous carnivorous insect with two sets of segmented wings, chitin-armored legs and body, glassy faceted eyes like a huge dragonfly that had been twisted through a nightmare machine. The few colonists who had ever seen one called it a wyvern.

Roper said in a whisper heard only by the forest, and in Thara's head, "Sorry," before the wyvern grasped him with pincered forelegs, tore him free of the bindings and snapped the branch in the process, then pierced him with spearlike mandibles.

Taking its prey, the wyvern flew off, snaking a long proboscis around the blood oozing from Roper's torn skin. In distaste, the creature tore him apart and discarded his broken body into the forest below.

Thara watched as the tiny figure plummeted into the trees. "Apparently, wyverns do not like the flavor of human flesh," she said without a hint of sarcasm.

Norris Brovnik shook his head and turned away.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Captain Chrysta Logan.**

She was captain of the BURTON again. It was a miracle, plain and simple.

The Ildiran Solar Navy had found the battered ship in the middle of open space and offered to take all the BURTON colonists to a nearby planet. Strangest of all, these aliens knew how to speak Standard English.

Dario Ramirez had panicked upon seeing the swarm of spectacular alien ships surrounding them. He liked to talk though and complain to anyone who would listen; he riled up already-angry people and hadn't thought much beyond that. He didn't have the mettle to handle the constant flow of decisions a generation-ship captain had to make.

After little more than two days on the bridge attempting to deal with the thousand things that routinely went wrong—especially aboard the decrepit old BURTON—he was overwhelmed. And that was just in a normal day's work.

When the alien warliners arrived, Ramirez simply could not handle the emergency.

The Ildirans were confused and unsettled to learn about the mutiny, that the official captain was "unavailable." To these aliens, questioning a commander was anathema.

A group of former mutineers had freed Chrysta Logan from the brig, having decided that she was the only one equipped to lead them through such a delicate

time. Though the alien warliners frightened them, they understood that the Ildirans could be their salvation, and they didn't want a short-sighted rabble rouser like Ramirez to screw things up.

Listening to the ugly, dissatisfied complaints, Ramirez had seen the way the wind was blowing, and graciously returned control to Captain Logan after the "brief misunderstanding," on the condition that she grant amnesty to the mutineers and not press charges against him personally or seek any form or retaliation.

Sitting in the brig, Chrysta had been in no position to be picky. Given another few days, Ramirez would have ejected her from an airlock. She accepted the deal. It was a miracle, plain and simple.

They had rushed her to the BURTON's bridge, where she tried to grasp the situation, which was unlike any crisis she had imagined. Chrysta bluffed her way through, refusing to let the unsettled crew see any crack in her confidence.

Seated in the command chair again, Chrysta chose her words carefully when she responded to the Ildiran warship commander. Too many questions. She volunteered little information about the BURTON, but remained attuned to the alien reactions, waiting to respond until she learned more.

"You are the generation ship BURTON, launched from Earth long ago," said the alien commander. "We have been searching for you for five years. We offer our assistance."

"We could very much use your help," she said. "You found us just in time."

Everyone on the bridge was jittery—partly from the Solar Navy ships, partly due to anxiety that their safety now depended on the very captain they had overthrown. She glared at them, but did not address the mutiny. They seemed meek, intimidated, afraid of what she would do.

But Chrysta had given her word—no retribution. Instead, she would lead them; she was brave and strong when facing the unexpected aliens. She didn't know how the Ildirans knew so much about the generation ships, but they seemed friendly, sincere. They even looked mostly human.

"And what is it that you want from us?" Chrysta leaned forward, staring at the image of the alien commander.

"To help you. We have rescued the other ten generation ships and also visited your Earth. We had nearly given up hope of finding you."

The BURTON was in such bad shape that she would accept their assistance regardless of whether she understood their reasons. The colonists didn't have much to lose, and now Chrysta owed the Ildirans her life.

Because the generation ship had been so severely damaged in the recent ion storm, even the Ildiran warliners were limited as to how far they could take the blocky old vessel. The aliens towed the BURTON across space to the nearest star system with a habitable planet. Dobro.

It was a pleasant world of wide open skies, dry grasslands, and a moderate climate. Centuries ago, the Ildirans had established a small settlement there, a "splinter colony," but their population was concentrated in a single primary town. On Dobro, there would be plenty of room for the human colonists to establish a new home... at last.

Chrysta Logan cleaned herself up and changed into her best, though still threadbare, Captain's uniform. She relaxed on the bridge, watching as the warliners delivered them to their new star system.

Still on their best behavior, her crew was quick to respond to her every command, hoping she would forget, or forgive, their previous rash actions. But her memory wasn't that short, and Chrysta reminded them with pointed comments whenever she could.

She sat back, crossed one leg over the other, and smiled as the continents and cloudy skies of Dobro filled their field of view. "Always support your captain," she reminded them. "Nobody aboard this ship is better qualified to solve problems. We're certainly lucky the Ildirans came along when they did, aren't we?" The crew remained intent on their stations.

Dario Ramirez was quick to agree. "Whatever you say, Captain!" He remained at a post per her promise, though his rank had been much reduced and his respect stripped down almost to nothing. Over the past day, he had volunteered whenever he could, making supportive comments; she thought he was simpering. "I'm sure we're all glad for a chance to start over on Dobro—a new beginning, a clean slate."

"No doubt, Mr. Ramirez." She wondered if he heard the sarcasm.

Ildiran cutters ferried eager passengers to the Dobro spaceport, while the BURTON's own shuttles and cargo transports were loaded with colony supplies and made ready for departure.

First, however, Chrysta wanted to meet the head of the Ildiran colony on Dobro.

She stepped away from the landed shuttle after making sure her red headband, her best uniform, and the smile on her face were ready. The man who came forward to meet her was tall and slender; he had long ivory hair, some of which was bound in colorful ties, while other clumps blew free in the breezes. His voice was quiet, his words well considered. His facial features were arresting and extremely attractive in an exotic sort of way. At the center of his forehead, a tattoo showed a circle with a central dot. A status insignia perhaps? When he glided forward, his movements were smooth, almost pantherlike. "Captain Chrysta Logan, I am the Dobro Designate."

She clasped his hand, shaking it briefly; he held onto it longer than was necessary. She felt a brief electric shock and wondered if these Ildirans controlled a form of telepathy or emotional magnetism. "What's a Designate?" she asked.

"I am one of the Mage-Imperator's sons, and I am assigned to lead this splinter colony. The welfare of every person on Dobro is in my hands. Including your people, now."

She finally released her grasp. "Everyone aboard the BURTON is in your debt, Designate. Especially me, because I am responsible for them. Let me be clear, you're offering us the opportunity to found our own settlement here, to live side-by-side with you?"

"Yes, Captain Logan. Dobro is large and empty—too empty. We have room for many more colonists." He smiled, showing off his white teeth. "You humans intrigue me."

"We can learn much from each other, Designate. And with all those wide open spaces, you could well do with an infusion of human colonists. We'll work together."

"I look forward to it," said the Dobro Designate. "It will be an interesting experiment."

Dario Ramirez came down on the fifth shuttle, while cargo units detached and dropped from the BURTON to land in the grassy plains outside the main Dobro settlement. All the people he had once roused to violence now worked together to unload the equipment and structures, including the modular dwelling units that had been in storage for so many years.

Like a puppy dog, Ramirez hurried up to Chrysta. "I'll go organize the setup of our prefabs and lay out the village street grid. It's all colony basics, Captain. We've been ready to go as soon as we found the right planet." He ran off, calling over his right shoulder. "Don't worry about a thing. You can count on me, Captain."

She watched him go, cold and annoyed. When he was out of earshot, she muttered, "If you think I'll actually trust you again, Mr. Ramirez, you are sadly mistaken."

## **Chapter 9**

### **Chairman Malcolm Stannis.**

It had been a very gratifying week.

Despite his initial reservations about the massive diplomatic force of the Ildiran Solar Navy, Stannis now saw many advantages to the alien presence. The Terran Hanseatic League was changed forever; never again would it be so limited. At times, the possibilities left him breathless, and he had already filled many more pages in his journal file of ideas to pursue.

With the maniple of warliners parked in orbit, Adar Bali'nh remained at the Whisper Palace as a guest. Since Ildirans thrived on pomp and pageantry, King Ben treated him to diplomatic banquets and parades in his honor. The Adar had even taken brief trips to the lunar settlement and the industrial colonies in the asteroid belt, though the military base on Mars remained discreetly off limits.

These Ildirans seemed so human, and, yet, having watched them closely during their time on Earth, Stannis could recognize that they were alarmingly different, with certain incomprehensible attitudes.

He still didn't understand why the aliens were so strangely, perhaps foolishly, benevolent—offering their remarkable technology and asking for little in return. When he ventured a cautious question to see if he could make Bali'nh confess some secret motivation, the alien commander would say only, "The Mage-Imperator commanded it." Bali'nh didn't think any other answer was necessary.

Stardrives! Faster-than-light travel would carry Hansa trade vessels across the Spiral Arm, and human colonists were eager to plant the Hansa flag on dozens, if not hundreds, of fresh worlds... all those planets, just there for the taking!

He had already established five blue-ribbon committees, and the Terran Hanseatic League was poised for significant expansion far beyond the solar system. With all the opportunities for commerce with the Ildiran Empire, and for resource development on countless untapped planets and moons, the potential for

profit and power was unimaginable. And Malcolm Stannis had a very good imagination.

Now, as the Solar Navy made ready to depart, crowds gathered in the Palace District for a huge sendoff. Cannons shot glittering confetti into the air, creating a multicolored celebratory blizzard. The forty-nine warliners gathered in the sky above the Whisper Palace, while King Ben and Adar Bali'nh made a final public appearance together. Stannis watched from an inner room, accompanied by Liam Hector, as the King and the Adar stepped out into view.

The King wore royal blue robes this time, delivering his speech of gratitude from the high balcony of the Palace. Beside him the Adar stood in full military dress spangled with incomprehensible medals and badges. His long dark hair blew loosely about his head, showing off his lightning-bolt streaks of white.

King Ben raised his hands and, on cue, a crowd let out a deafening cheer. "We gather to bid farewell to the Ildiran warliners—for a time. The human race owes so much to our new friends in the Spiral Arm." He turned to Bali'nh and extended a hand for a firm handshake, a human gesture that the Adar had been taught.

Adar Bali'nh offered the formal open-palmed Ildiran salute in response. "We are pleased to welcome you as our neighbors in the Spiral Arm, King Ben. We also established new homes for ten of your generation ships. May your splinter colonies thrive."

King Ben was grinning, and Stannis watched from an inner operations center, a corridor away from the speaking balcony. The Chairman was concerned. The King seemed too much at ease, as if he had forgotten the importance of every single word he uttered.

As another cutter loaded with human explorers rose up to the Solar Navy vessels, King Ben addressed the crowd, continuing to heighten their excitement. "While Earth builds new ships that incorporate the Ildiran stardrive, Adar Bali'nh has graciously offered to assist our explorers. We celebrate these brave pioneers who will find candidate worlds for us to colonize."

Three hundred white doves were released into the air, flying up above the crowd like liberated spirits. The crowd gasped, then applauded. King Ben stepped forward, clasping his hands in front of him. "Oh, this is a wonderful day! Earth will benefit so much by joining the Ildiran Empire. The Terran Hanseatic League will certainly profit from such a direct alliance."

Stannis's eyes flew open in shock. What the hell did the King think he was saying? "That wasn't in the script!" As he ran toward the speaking balcony, he shouted over his shoulder to his aide, "Mr. Hector, cut the sound system. Shut it down before the King gets us into any more trouble!" He felt sick and knew he couldn't run fast enough.

On the balcony, even Adar Bali'nh looked surprised by what the old man had said. "You wish Earth to join the Ildiran Empire, King Ben?"

The very idea was absurd. Red-faced and gasping, Stannis lurched out onto the balcony between King Ben and Adar Bali'nh. It took all his self-control to quell his anger.

The King tapped the microphone, puzzled to realize that the sound had cut off in mid-sentence. No one could hear what they were saying.

Stannis grasped Ben's robed arm, squeezing like a vise. He wanted to wring King Ben's neck, but his image was being broadcast to billions of people right now. "Please Majesty, let me *assist* you away from the balcony. We have encountered some technical difficulties." He hoped Adar Bali'nh would believe the clumsy excuse. "I'm sorry, Adar—the King isn't feeling well enough to complete his speech. It will be rescheduled. Please, enjoy the performance."

Liam Hector, bless him, had given orders for marching bands to come forward and play a loud and brassy fanfare in the main square.

Stannis dragged the King down the corridor and into a private room. The Chairman's face was hot, his heart pounding hard. Ben looked befuddled and apprehensive, knowing he had made a serious mistake and he was in a great deal of trouble. "What, Malcolm? What did I do wrong?"

The idiot didn't even know!

Finally, with the door slammed shut to give them privacy, Stannis raised his voice, "Do you have any idea what you just said? You—the King of Earth—offered to have us join the Ildiran Empire, to accept the rule of an alien leader! We'll have to apologize, backpedal, and hope there's no permanent damage."

The King looked away, his shoulders slumped. He was trembling. "Sorry Malcolm. I just got carried away." He heaved a sigh, spoke with more of a whine. "I don't like how everything's changed, all this added responsibility I suddenly have, spending every waking hour with an alien diplomat. I'm just an actor and a spokesman, not a leader—that's why Chairman Burke invented the role of King in the first place. I wasn't supposed to be much more than a mascot, somebody in charge of parades and handing out awards. All this pressure is just too much for me."

"That's an understatement," Stannis grumbled. "I have no idea how we're going to get out of this. Maybe the Adar didn't comprehend what you said."

"But Malcolm, even *I* don't understand what I said! What was wrong with it? Wouldn't it be best if we humans joined the Ildiran Empire, joined forces? They've offered us so much already."

Stannis pinched the bridge of his nose and turned away, closing his eyes. He could feel a migraine pounding in the back of his skull. "Oh, go to bed where you can 'rest and recuperate.' I'm going to be up all night trying to fix this."

Dejected, the King shuffled away. Stannis waited in the private room a long time before Liam Hector returned to announce the measures he had taken. So far there seemed to be no repercussions, but Stannis still felt nauseated. He shook his head. "Obviously, Liam, we can't let that old fool do any more damage! I will not stand by and see our power stripped away."

## Chapter 10

**Corey Kellum.**

*Circular repairs*, that was the best name for it, Corey thought.



After the Ildirans left, his technicians and engineers had rushed around like children on a birthday morning, eager to see how the huge facility really worked, despite the formal briefings. They compared the clean Ildiran blueprints with the actual configurations; they tinkered with the cloud trawler's power trains, the reactor lines, the levitation engines, the life-support modules, the food-processing systems. They carried electronic clipboards, studied holographic diagrams, and complained about the awkward Ildiran design.

They made repairs to the main ekti reactors, while Corey inventoried the export cylinders for all the stardrive fuel they planned to harvest. If they got the cloud trawler running to his satisfaction, they were going to need a lot more containers.

His crew combed over the floating industrial facility, running diagnostics (and, more often than not, repairs) on system after system. Over the years, the piping, electrical conduits, sensor chains, power-distribution systems, and rerouted channels had grown like vines in a fractal rainforest. No one could quite figure out what half of the systems did, other than to hamper the ekti-processing efficiency. And when the teams finished working on one deck and moved on to the next, something broke down in the previous day's modifications, and they had to go back and start all over again.

#### *Circular repairs.*

Shoulder to shoulder, Corey and Oliver bent over an open maintenance panel trying to dissect and comprehend the intricacies of the systems. "The Ildirans must have had some reason for doing all of this nonsense," said Oliver, following a thick cable to a dead end. He held up the capped terminus, which did absolutely nothing as far as he could tell.

Corey shook his head and gave up in exasperation, extracting his fingers from the tangle of wires and connectors. In front of him, the holographic system grid showed a detailed map, and he tried to match the blueprint with what he saw with his own eyes. "Somebody must have thought it was a good idea, and then generations of Ildirans just continued the modifications without asking questions. This cloud trawler needs a full-blown overhaul. If our clans had run the Kanaka like this, we would have died twenty years out from Earth." He forced an optimistic grin. "Then again, Oliver, if the Ildirans knew what they were doing, they'd have no need for us, and we'd be out of a job."

In only a few weeks, however, they began to send shipments of stardrive fuel aboard Ildiran vessels. In spite of constant breakdowns and unexpected delays, the cloud trawler already produced ekti at the same rate it had under the most experienced Ildirans. After his crews installed one more round of enhancements, Corey expected the trawler to double its output within a month.

When Sara Becker announced over the intercom that an Ildiran cargo ship had arrived to pick up a load of fuel canisters, Corey told Oliver, "Keep tinkering with the reactor process monitors. I'm going to the control dome to monitor the cargo."

"And leave me with all the work?" Oliver said.

Grinning, Corey gave his friend a mock salute. "It's my way of showing confidence in your abilities." Taking a lift up to the control dome atop the big cloud trawler, where Sara was monitoring all the screens and calling his crew to prepare the fuel canisters for transfer. The Ildiran pilot radioed in as he approached, "How much ekti do you have prepared for us?"

Corey sauntered in and answered, "A full load, come and get it."

Sara Becker leaned over the comm and said, "Sorry we're a bit slow—the other two skymines were ready days ago."

"Nevertheless, your ekti output has exceeded expectations, Cloud Trawler Number One," said the cargo captain. "The Mage-Imperator will be pleased."

Corey switched off the comm and muttered, "I'm insulted they had such low expectations of us."

Sara shrugged. "Even I wasn't sure we could pull it off, Corey." She ran a quick display of the production output, and the repair-crew schedules.

"All operations running smoothly, I presume?"

Sara forced a smile, "Same as usual, Corey."

He rolled his eyes, "Come on, we can do better than that!"

"Not until we have the faster processing units installed."

"We're working on it, Sara. We're working on it."

Corey enjoyed tinkering with the systems and getting his hands dirty, but Sara preferred to manage the teams and operations, like pieces in a complex strategy game. He was impressed with how efficient she managed to be without seeming bossy.

Leaving Sara to her screens, he descended to the cargo bay where his workers were already loading ekti canisters onto the Ildiran cargo ship. The alien captain stood on a high deck, arms crossed over his chest as he oversaw the operations.

Corey waved and shouted up, "This agreement will work out just fine for all of us, Captain. You can come back in a week for another full load. We've got most of the glitches in the ekti reactors worked out, though we believe they're only running at a fraction of their realistic capacity." He climbed the stairs to stand next to the Ildiran captain, and they both watched a line of his men carrying the fuel canisters. "We've already increased production, you know, and we haven't even incorporated our major improvements yet. Before long, our people are going to run circles around your other cloud trawlers. We'll be ready to assume control over Number Two and Number Three within months."

"We are not opposed to efficiency and increased production, Corey Kellum. The Mage-Imperator is satisfied with our arrangement."

After the loaded cargo ship flew away, Corey returned to the lower decks where Oliver continued to work on the frustrating systems. Grease smeared the man's cheeks, and he shook his head in exasperation when Corey arrived. "Every time we open up a new compartment, there's another surprise. The Ildirans held this sky mine together with twine and prayers. Those levitation engines are a jury-rigged mess. It's a wonder the thing is still afloat—they sold us a lemon."

"Then it's a tribute to our ingenuity that we have it running so well, isn't it?" Corey said, grinning at his friend. "Anyway, we weren't in a position to be choosy. Would you rather be on Iawa watching our crops die?"

"Nah." Oliver laughed. "It's not in my nature to settle down in the dust. I'd rather be roaming above an untamed world."

The human families had settled in, accepting the new situation, perfectly comfortable in the enclosed quarters, drifting along on the breezes. This was definitely a new home for them.

The two men looked out at the ocean of gray and lavender clouds. Corey said, "This place... we've got room to breathe."

## **Chapter 11**

### **Captain Chrysta Logan.**

The new human settlement blossomed on Dobro.

Assisted by the Ildiran soldiers and the Dobro colonists, everything and everyone was unloaded from the generation ship with great speed and efficiency. Cargo boxes dropped down in a constant sequence. Passenger shuttles went up to orbit and back down, delivering people as fast as temporary shelters could be erected.

Chrysta was amazed by the diversity of the alien kiths. Worker kithmen were muscular and shaggy, while nobles and military officers were handsome and more human-looking. There were diggers, doctors, storytellers, and engineers, everyone with slightly different features and skill sets.

The builder kithmen assisted the human colonists in erecting structural frameworks—first large tents, then permanent structures. The work teams used the standard plans from the BURTON's databases, pouring concrete foam, raising hollow steel frameworks. Everyone pitched in, working together as if they had choreographed a complicated dance.

While the work was under way, Chrysta spent a great deal of time with the intelligent and attractive Dobro Designate. Together, they walked along a rise overlooking patches of crops the Ildirans had planted. With the cultivating machines aboard the BURTON, Chrysta knew they could greatly expand the arable land. The new colonists would have no trouble producing enough to feed themselves—after they settled in.

"Our ship has few remaining supplies, Designate," she said as they walked through rustling, brittle grasses. A line of hills surrounded the valley, and from there Chrysta and the Dobro Designate could see the untamed lands. "It's been a century and a half since we left Earth. Much of our vital seed stock was consumed by starving passengers, and we had to impose harsh rationing. By then the damage was done. We'll need your help to get on our feet again."

"You need have no worries here, Chrysta Logan," the Designate said. "The Dobro colony has sufficient reserves, and your people obviously work hard enough to form a rewarding partnership with us. I will offer any resources you need."

"You're a real life-saver, Designate." She smiled at him, then pushed her headband back. Distracted, she tripped on a tangle of weeds, but he caught her quickly. "A life-saver again! Thank you." Embarrassed, she freed her foot. "You know, I spent my entire life walking on metal decks and perfectly flat floors. I'm not used to this. You'll have to teach me the basics of living on a planet."

"We can teach each other." The Designate's eyes clung to hers. "I find you fascinating."

She let out a chuckle, “Are you flirting with me, Designate?” She, of course, had been flirting with him. And she wondered if that was even a concept the Ildirans could understand. She added quickly, “I find you fascinating as well, Designate. And all of the Ildirans. But you in particular, you’re... different.”

“As I told you before, I am a son of the Mage-Imperator.” When he smiled back at her, she wondered if he had learned the expression from her. His question sounded impulsive. “Would you care to dine with me, Captain Logan?”

She continued to walk through the grasses. “A business meeting?”

“No, a... personal meeting.”

“Then, I accept,” she said. “But you’d better call me Chrysta.”

As night fell on Dobro, the Ildirans lit blazers, glowing spotlights that illuminated the entire town as a defense against the darkness. She had learned that the main Ildiran star system was constantly bathed in the light of seven nearby stars, so darkness never occurred naturally. On splinter colonies like Dobro, Ildirans did everything possible to keep lights shining at all hours, even though the darkest night.

In the Designate’s residence, blazers filled the main dining room with a white-orange glow; his attenders had also set out fragrant candles that offered a softer flame, surrounded by arrangements of berries, leaves, and fruit that could either have been decorations or delicacies. Chrysta decided to follow his lead.

“So, do you have a personal name, or do I have to keep calling you Designate?”

“I am the Dobro Designate, and that is the totality of my identity. But, I am also called Rekar’h. You may use that, if it seems less formal to you.”

“Rekar’h it is, then.”

In small crystal glasses the Designate had poured a violet beverage. He did not tell her its name, but as soon as he took a sip, encouraging her, Chrysta drank as well. The liquid tasted sweet and spicy at the same time, heady... probably intoxicating.

She touched her glass against his. “This is called a toast, a celebration of friends meeting. Perhaps we’ll become better friends.”

He took another sip of his drink. “Our goals would appear to be similar, Chrysta. I feel there will be a bond between our two races, your settlement and ours, humans and Ildirans forming a tapestry that benefits both.”

Chrysta knew that the BURTON’s crew still carried raw wounds. Although they were relieved to have reached the end of their marathon, she needed to establish enough clout that no volatile group could ever overthrow her again. She’d been through one close call, and she still didn’t trust some of the mutineers. She had to ensure that she kept her authority, and she had to move quickly.

She leaned forward, took a chance. “A close alliance with you, Rekar’h—a very close alliance—would help me a great deal. It would also make our new town strong and stable, and my leadership unquestioned.”

His brow furrowed, wrinkling the circle tattoo. “Is there cause for concern?”

“Before the Ildiran warliners found the BURTON, we had some... tense moments onboard. I would rather not revisit them.”

“Indeed.” He led her out on the open balcony of his residence. The night air was clear and fresh, although the bright blazers drowned out any stars overhead. She could hear the eerie, ratcheting whistles of Dobro night insects.

“For myself,” the Designate ventured, “a union with the BURTON’s captain would demonstrate to the Mage-Imperator and all other Ildirans that we have established a profitable and permanent venture.”

She stepped closer, faced him, and took another sip of the delicious violet beverage. Later, she could blame the intoxicating effects of the strange alien drink, but that would be a flimsy excuse. “A union... you mean like a marriage?”

“Is that how you define it?”

She leaned even closer. “Of course, it would be a marriage of formality, only.”

He whispered against her face, “Yes... a simple bureaucratic alliance.” He touched his glass to hers imitating the toast. “To friends becoming closer friends.”

She folded her fingers into his, holding his hand. “Let me show you how it’s done, Rekar’h,” she said. “There’s much more to it than that.”

**2254 A.D.**

## **Chapter 12**

**Madeleine Robinson.**

With a last name like Robinson, Madeleine figured it was inevitable that she and her two sons would go exploring “desert islands” in space.

In the four years since Adar Bali’nh had delivered complete plans and specifications for the Ildiran stardrive, Hansa shipyards and factories had engaged in an unprecedented construction effort, building Earth trade and exploration vessels that could fly out among the stars.

And that was just the start.

Despite the emphatic shipbuilding mandate, however, Earth’s new starships would not be completed for years. In a special arrangement, the Ildiran Solar Navy had recently offered to deliver as many as fifty human exploration teams to various empty planets in the Ildiran databases. The volunteers could scout the virgin worlds for a month or two, then be retrieved and brought back home.

The Hansa encouraged ambitious scouts to sign up, offering generous “survey bonuses” provided they returned to Earth with detailed reports of an unclaimed planet. Every day now, shuttles and supply ships rose from the Palace District spaceport, ferrying hopeful explorers up to the Ildiran warliners that would take them to far-away worlds.

Some people were suspicious, but there were plenty of eager volunteers grasping at the chance, regardless of the risks involved.

Madeleine Robinson had signed up within hours of hearing the offer.

The chance seemed too good to be true—and exactly what she and her family needed. She and the boys had only to spend a few weeks on a random planet—like a camping trip far from any other human being—then write a report and receive a substantial bounty. After facing so many crises, Madeleine didn't know any other way her family could survive.

They were among the last groups to trickle aboard the final shuttles for the Ildiran warliners, but they were used to that; the Robinsons had never been first in line. Carrying their packs, Derek and Jacob jostled each other, as brothers always did. At seventeen, Derek had been forced to become the man of the family, but he was still too young for it. When Madeleine looked at her older son, she felt an ache in her heart that she hadn't done better by him. Jacob, thirteen, was still very much a boy at heart, but he'd had to give up his childhood after the accident, and all the blame.

Her boys were smart, good-natured, and resilient; they had learned how to be. She knocked a strand of her auburn hair away from her face and trudged behind them up the ramp. The two boys bumped shoulders, pushing each other one direction, then the other, as they jockeyed for position in line for the Ildiran shuttle. They pretended to be excited about the new adventure, but she knew they were both nervous.

Derek adjusted his duffel. "You sure we have enough equipment to last us for a few weeks, Mom?"

"We'll make do," she said. "This is all we have."

It was her understanding that the Ildirans would provide some supplies, depending on conditions on the planet. During their brief survey, the Robinsons would have to be self-sufficient on an unexplored world, but they had been taking care of themselves for a long time.

Beside them, TZ, their good-natured compy, shuffled along, carrying a load more than twice his size. Containers and packs had been tied together, stacked on the little compy's shoulders. His servos whirled as he plodded one step after another, never complaining. "As soon as we enter the shuttle, Madeleine, I can go fetch another load."

"I wish we had another load to bring, TZ."

"Thank you for taking me with you, Madeleine. I realize it would have been in your best financial interests to sell me."

"We'll never sell you, TZ. You're too useful." Realizing that sounded cold, she added, "And you're part of the family. Family has to stick together."

A long scrape marred the purple synthetic skin on the compy's left arm, where a fast courier vehicle had sideswiped him a few months ago. The frantic courier didn't want any police report made, any insurance claims filed, and he had paid Madeleine more than enough to pay for the repairs to the compy's skin. She had accepted the money, but used it for food instead. Now, noticing the scar on TZ's arm, she regretted her decision, but it was the only decision she could have made.

Her husband, Duncan, had been killed in a spaceport loading-dock accident two years ago, crushed by a runaway piece of equipment that had also killed two bystanders. The accident was horrific enough, until the investigative team determined that it was Duncan's fault. Because of his culpability, Duncan's benefits were stripped away, and Madeleine received none of the insurance

payment. Then the families of the two dead bystanders sued, and in the legal aftermath, Madeleine and her family had lost everything.

Now they needed to get on their feet again, to make a new start.

She was tired of people looking at her accusingly, blaming Duncan—and, by extension, his family—for the deaths of two innocent people. Didn't they understand that her family had lost just as much? No matter who had been responsible for properly securing the cargo equipment, her husband was dead. Derek and Jacob's father was dead. That was enough tragedy...

Aboard the shuttle, Madeleine took a seat beside TZ and looked wistfully out the windowport at the glorious Whisper Palace Square. It was easy to make up her mind: she and her two sons had nothing to lose.

As the shuttle rose into the air, she gazed at the lovely parks and trees, the blue skies, the patchy clouds. She hoped that their new planet would be half as beautiful.

## **Chapter 13**

### **Chairman Malcolm Stannis.**

Planning ahead, always planning ahead.

A Hansa Chairman needed to have vision, to see the big picture. When Malcolm Stannis took on the role, the Hansa had covered only Earth, Moon, Mars, and a handful of habitable rocks in the solar system, but now the possibilities were limitless. The Ildiran stardrive, along with their catalog of habitable yet unclaimed planets, changed the game entirely.

Sadly, it was clear to him that King Ben could not handle such momentous changes. Over the past four years, he had grown increasingly fallible, one embarrassment after another; before long, he would be a joke.

When the role of King had been created by Chairman Roseanna Burke, the position was never meant to be more than a symbol, a corporate mascot, a benevolent and seemingly wise ruler to whom the people could relate, a father figure in times of peace and prosperity. Definitely not a strong and stern leader to guide humanity through the incredible watershed events they were now facing. Worse, he kept making mistakes.

Stannis knew it was time for a change, or at least to prepare for the transition. Change was good, if handled properly.

Stannis had long recognized the need for King Ben's eventual replacement, and one of his first, unofficial, acts had been to begin considering the next candidate. King Ben was the first Hansa King, and no order of succession had ever been established; Stannis certainly wouldn't choose an actual illegitimate child of Ben's. The replacement had to be someone pliable, someone not inclined to take any initiative or make any of the seemingly innocent blunders that King Ben made.

Stannis would have to set a precedent for future Hansa Kings, find someone who could serve a long time, maintain stability through the tumultuous times ahead. Another responsibility to shoulder... but that was his job.

Stannis respected, and rewarded, competency and reliability, and the decision was his alone. A handful of people might have thought of him as a friend, although Stannis didn't reciprocate the feeling. "Tolerable acquaintances" was the deepest level of friendship he allowed. Despite greeting-card sentiments about the joys of friendship and family love, Stannis didn't feel he was missing anything. The Hansa was his family, his responsibility.

Stannis found that the more he dedicated himself to advancing his career, the more practical it became to sever personal connections. He gave up activities that lesser people considered relaxation, but which he saw as nothing more than time-killing distractions—cocktail parties, playing games, socializing. He did enough of it to maintain his connections, because he understood that such things were useful to foster the illusion of a personal touch. Some high-level bureaucrats would do personal favors for him that they would not have done for strictly business reasons. It was a necessary sacrifice, and he had taken care to learn those skills.

Stannis had worked his way up in the Hansa, a rapidly rising star. He'd served as Deputy Administrator of Lunar Operations when he was only twenty-five, taking over entirely by age twenty-seven. Then on to Europa for a year-long stint before being promoted to Director of all Outer Solar System operations. He got to know his fellow administrators in the Hansa, determining who was powerful and who wasn't, pinpointing major threats to his advancement and identifying weak spots.

When doddering old William Danforth Pape, finally announced his resignation as Hansa Chairman, Malcolm Stannis was ready to make his plays, call in favors, deliver veiled but clear threats. He publicly announced his platform that the Hansa needed the verve and energy of a young man, like himself, to inject new lifeblood into it. His sales pitch convinced the Board members, and those who had their own sights on the position were persuaded through ample compensation to vote for Stannis instead.

Upon his election, his parents and two sisters, from whom Stannis had been estranged for ten years, sent him letters of congratulation, either as a formality or more likely because they wanted something from him. He didn't care which; they were not part of his life or his position, and he ignored the letters.

Now, he still had so much to accomplish, so many major projects to do, and he continued to find the work exhilarating rather than exhausting. If only everyone else would cooperate and do their parts, the Terran Hanseatic League could accomplish great things.

For that, though, Earth needed a new King.

Stannis walked through the tiled corridors of the Whisper Palace, past the statues of wise-looking philosophers and great educators whom no one remembered anymore. The little compy OX walked beside him. Stannis kept his pace businesslike, not rushed, and OX kept up with him.

He was grateful that Adar Bali'nh had left the old compy behind, and the Chairman had found other tasks for him. OX's programming was easily adaptable, and the compy was completely willing and happy to serve the Hanseatic League and the King. His memories and experience were valuable.



Stannis stopped at a door with an ornate gold knob. He turned and looked down at the compy. "You are aware from reviewing our history that all important decisions are made by the Chairman with input from the appropriate committees. The Hansa's Great King is a mere spokesman, chosen specifically for likeability."

"I am aware of that, Chairman Stannis."

"With so many things changing, it's time to train a new prince. We selected this one from a large pool of candidates."

The door was locked, but security sensors recognized Stannis's identity and clicked open to grant him access to the isolated private rooms. He opened the door to reveal a large bedroom that would be any boy's dream. It contained shelves crowded with toys, games, and entertainment gadgets of every possible design, a complex gerbil maze with three rodents running about their business. Three separate access and display screens were embedded in the walls.

A sleepy-looking redheaded boy rubbed his eyes and sat up on his bed. He was eleven years old, with a disarming smile, freckles across his cheeks, and green eyes that sparkled with delight to see Chairman Stannis and the old compy at his side.

Stannis allowed himself a small fatherly smile. "Are we treating you well enough here, George? Are you convinced that the Hansa is offering you a better life?"

The boy locked his hands behind his head, leaned back on his large fluffy pillow, and feigned contented boredom. He looked at the compy, recognizing him. "Hey, you're OX! I saw when the Ildirans brought you back!"

"I am pleased to meet you, Prince George. The Chairman has assigned me as your new teacher. What would you like to learn first?"

The redheaded boy pouted. "Do I need a teacher?"

Stannis's voice was crisp. "You will be the next King of the Hansa, George. It's an important job and you need to learn many things—the most important of which is to listen to me *at all times*. No matter what else, you must always trust me and obey me. There are more rewards than you can imagine, but also tremendous responsibilities. I'm counting on you."

"Yes, sir." George went to his shelf, pulled down two of his flashy holosport controllers. "We should learn a game first. I'm bored."

"None of this is a game, George," Stannis said.

"I will begin the instruction forthwith," OX added. "Class is now in session."

## **Chapter 14**

### **Dobro Designate Rekar'h.**

Over the course of four years, the human colony town expanded greatly on Dobro. The Ildiran workers put in so many hours of labor that the human builders could barely keep up.

The children of the BURTON had their own playgrounds, and the colonists could explore the landscape and plan far into the future. Best of all, they had hope again. The colonists remembered how to sing and tell stories. They interacted with

the Ildirans and learned about their civilization, hearing tales from their race's gigantic historical epic, the *Saga of Seven Suns*.

The Dobro Designate felt that his splinter colony was thriving as never before. And he thrived as well.

Chrysta Logan had taken up residence with Rekar'h, and together they guided the two settlements in close harmony, as partners. He cared for her, and that surprised him. The humans had brought a panoply of new experiences and insights to Dobro.

It was a model settlement, and the colonists had no desire to return to Earth; in fact, the Mage-Imperator had not informed the Hansa of the Burton's rescue, yet. Dobro was quickly becoming a benchmark of what the two races could do together.

He and Chrysta spent the day together, inspecting new acreage where corn and wheat had been planted from the last viable seed stock salvaged from the Burton. Human crops, which had proved nutritious and also pleasant to Ildiran tastes, grew in many of the fields around the settlements.

But as they walked, Rekar'h could sense that she was preoccupied or troubled. Her footsteps were heavy, her expression distant. He wondered if she could be thinking back to the old mutiny aboard the generation ship, the colonists who had challenged her authority. With her close ties to the Designate, Chrysta should never need to fear further unrest.

He addressed her mood directly. "Chrysta, has something happened? You look concerned."

She paused, gave him a wan smile. "It's that obvious? I thought Ildirans couldn't read human emotions."

"I can read you." He stood stiffly, not sure what to do.

She leaned against him, resting her head on his chest and slipped her arms around his waist. "We have a problem—or maybe an opportunity. I never expected this to happen." An uncertain smile flickered on her lips. "I'm pregnant."

Each time he returned to Ildira and basked in the combined sunlight that flooded the peaceful skies, Rekar'h was reminded of what he had given up when he left to take charge of the splinter colony.

When he stepped away from the shuttle, returning home with his surprising and important news, he could not put aside the longing that weighed down his heart. The home world's sky was bright, the air fresh, the civilization so vibrant around him. Just looking at the dazzling Prism Palace, the Mage-Imperator's seat of power, he remembered his early life here, the joys of growing up under the seven suns, cradled in the safety net of the *thism* racial telepathy.

The Prism Palace was a graceful sculpture of crystalline domes piled on top of one another, stained glass panels, reflective spheres that surrounded a single central skysphere. No other structure in the Spiral Arm had ever been, or would ever be, so magnificent.

But ruling Dobro was his duty, and now—especially with Chrysta Logan there—he'd grown fond of the quiet, grassy world. He saw much merit in that place, a worthy outpost for the Ildiran Empire... even though it was nothing like Ildira itself.

The Dobro Designate closed his eyes as he stepped away from the shuttle and drew a deep breath. When he opened his eyes again to the brilliance, he was surprised to see his oldest noble brother waiting for him. “Prime Designate Cyroc’h! You came to see me yourself.”

The Mage-Imperator’s heir had long white hair, effeminate features, and a thin voice. “Welcome back to Ildira, brother. You look pale. I think you have spent too long in Dobro’s dim sunshine.”

Despite Ildira’s obvious marvels, Rekar’h felt obligated to defend his world. “Dobro is my home, Cyroc’h, despite its limitations. Yes, I miss the Prism Palace, but my own planet has grown brighter in recent years, thanks to the arrival of the humans. Much has changed, and I need to report to our father. I’ve made quite an astonishing discovery.”

Cyroc’h folded his hands together and glided along. “Let me take you to him.” The brothers entered the Prism Palace’s bright corridors and walked beneath the immense crystalline domes. “The Mage-Imperator already sees and feels everything in our empire. He is connected to all of us through the thism.”

The Dobro Designate said, “Even so, some things are better explained in person.”

As they entered the central skysphere, Adar Bali’nh joined them, greeting Rekar’h. “The Mage-Imperator and I were just discussing the current explorations of the humans in the Spiral Arm.”

“I have news for him that will be of greater interest—about my experiences with the BURTON refugees.”

“You have taken one as a lover?” Cyroc’h asked. “As an experiment?”

A flare of indignation rippled through him, a surprising reaction. “Yes, but not as an experiment. I find her... completely engaging.”

Adar Bali’nh observed, “It would have happened eventually in any case, Prime Designate. They are an attractive species, and they find us attractive—at least the noble kithmen.”

The skysphere was a huge transparent vault filled with misty air, flying creatures, and a suspended ball of vegetation that floated like a verdant island near the apex of the dome. A holographic image of the Mage-Imperator’s benevolent cherubic face hovered overhead, surveying all who entered the Prism Palace. Below, in his levitating chrysalis chair, the enormously fat leader reclined, surrounded by a cocoon of cushions and flanked by six guard kithmen.

At the arrival of Rekar’h, the Mage-Imperator raised his head. “I have been sensing Dobro often, my son. I already know that you have mated with the female leader. A surprising but effective way to exert control over their people.”

The Designate nodded, feeling even more uncomfortable. “We administer the two colonies very effectively together.”

The Mage-Imperator shifted in his seat to make himself more comfortable, while small-statured attenders rushed forward to see how they could help; he ignored them. “I already know of the child, as well. That was most unexpected . . . and has given me much food for thought.”

Rekar’h gave a respectful bow. “I had not imagined it was possible for Ildirans and humans to interbreed, Father.”

Prime Designate Cyroc'h sounded haughty, as if he already knew as much as the Mage-Imperator did. "The Ildiran race is very flexible and adaptable. Our genetics prove that with our many different kiths. Is it so surprising that we could bond with a race that looks similar to us?"

"We will have to ask the scientist kithmen," Rekar'h said. "I was completely surprised when it happened."

While the Mage-Imperator pondered, they waited for him to speak. "You have made a very important discovery, my son. For many generations, I have conducted breeding experiments to develop new kith combinations with enhanced physical or mental abilities. I worry about the Ildiran Empire. We must prepare. Eventually, our people may need a powerful weapon."

Adar Bali'nh wore a grave look on his face. "A weapon against what, Liege? And how can the Solar Navy help protect us?"

"The future may hold threats not clearly revealed in the Saga of Seven Suns. Discovering the humans was a surprise, perhaps a beneficial one. And now, thanks to the Dobro Designate, we know that our people can interbreed with them. I wish to discover what possibilities this offers." He shifted in his chrysalis chair again, raising himself higher. "Therefore, I command a full investigation into the genetic potential of humans. Interbreed them with various kiths and see what the hybrid offspring have to offer. We must learn how we can use this new race."

Prime Designate Cyroc'h smiled. "For the time being, I suggest we let Earth believe the BURTON remains lost. That will free us to do as we wish on Dobro without diplomatic complications."

Unsettled, Rekar'h pondered his words carefully. They were discussing the situation in a clinical, emotionless way, but he realized he could not be entirely objective. Chrysta Logan was his lover, soon to be the mother of his child. She was not just a *specimen*.

"Father, your loyal kithmen on Dobro will mate with whomever you wish, but I do not know if I can ensure the full cooperation of the human colonists. They have different views on breeding. Perhaps we should use a lighter touch."

From the chrysalis chair, the Mage-Imperator's gaze became hard, and a thrill of fear went down the Dobro Designate's spine. "Find a way to make them cooperate, my son. That is my command."

Rekar'h swallowed hard and had no choice but to bow in submission. "As you wish, Liege."

## Chapter 15

### Thara Wen.

She had discovered how to become part of the sprawling, interconnected network of the worldforest, but Thara Wen was only the first—the first of many.

Thara often walked in peaceful solitude far from the village. She wandered among the trees and scaled the thick trunks all the way to the canopy, where she danced like a ballerina along the thin branches, bounding from one cluster of

fronds to another. But she never felt alone. Because of the vast forest mind, she was always in the company of a multitude of friends, all of whom watched her and watched out for her. Thara felt as if she lived between two different worlds, and she loved them both.

Over the years, other Theron colonists, both young and old, followed Thara's example and became part of the worldforest mind. She guided them into dense thickets of branches and leaves where the worldtrees could embrace them, commune with them, and change them. They were healthy, fit, and content as they emerged transformed with smooth emerald skin.

They had been nicknamed, appropriately, "green priests," though they studied and respected the great tree mind rather than worshipped it. Each green priest could touch the trees and fall into a trance, connect with the reservoir of thoughts and memories the worldforest had experienced over thousands of years, a marvelous ecological encyclopedia.

To Thara's surprise, she discovered that the tree mind was just as voracious to learn from humans—wanting to know their thoughts, their music, their history, their science, their legends. In an attempt to give back and share everything, both the good parts of humanity and the bad, green priests spent many hours each day providing input for the worldtree mind. Thara and her companions read aloud from novels, recited poetry, read epics, or simply told historical facts. First, the green priests gave the background on the eleven generation ships from Earth, including the CAILLIÉ that had settled on Theroc, but the green priests also gave a broader history of Earth. The worldtrees absorbed all the information and responded with great appreciation.

Because of her changes, Thara had a greater grasp of herself, of this planet and its ecosystems, and of the whole universe. She had never felt so utterly insignificant in all her life, nor so completely content.

Now, as she climbed down from a worldtree, her skin warm from spending the morning out in the bright sunlight above the interconnected boughs, she found the village leader squatting cross-legged on the ground, waiting for her. Norris Brovnik looked up and smiled. "I thought you'd never come down."

"I never want to." She hopped gracefully to the forest floor and stood before him.

"I have a request in my capacity as the village leader... the leader of Theroc, I suppose." He adjusted the white wrappings that covered his head. "We've received a message from the Hanseatic League, a communiqué from King Ben, delivered by the Ildiran supply ship that just arrived. He wants to learn how our people have thrived in the years since the Ildirans deposited us here."

"Why the sudden interest?" Thara asked. "I didn't think we were part of the Terran Hanseatic League."

"That's not entirely clear, and it never mattered before." Brovnik shrugged. "Now that Earth also has the Ildiran stardrive, they plan to spread out and establish many new colonies. Since we're the first human settlement the Ildirans helped establish, I suppose they want to look at our example. Or maybe the King is just curious to learn more about the Ildirans."

Two small condorflies circled his face, either in a mating dance or just being playful. Brovnik brushed them away, and they flitted off. "I don't see any reason why we shouldn't send someone to Earth. We haven't had any direct contact with

them for a century and a half. There's nothing wrong with maintaining relations with our home world."

"Not at all," Thara said.

"The Ildiran ship has offered to take our diplomatic mission back to Earth as soon as their shuttle is refueled. They will be ready to depart soon." She could tell Brovnik had more to say, but couldn't guess what it might be. Finally, the village leader blurted, "Thara, I'd like *you* to go on the expedition—as our official Theron ambassador to Earth. Because of your connection with the worldforest, you're the perfect choice."

That startled her. "An ambassador?" She hadn't given much thought to Earth for most of her life, and now that she was part of the worldforest, she'd never dreamed of leaving. On the other hand, maybe the people back there needed to know about the worldforest, to understand what she had learned.

"Let me ask..." She closed her eyes, inhaled the heavy, humid air, and extended her hands to touch the golden-scaled trunk of the nearest worldtree. She sent out her thoughts. The trees listened to her, and they answered.

When she released her touch, blinking her eyes as she recovered from the brief dizziness, she nodded. "All right. The trees are very curious about Earth. I'll go there as an ambassador for both the Theron colony and for the worldforest. But the trees have also asked me to do something for them." She slowly circled the huge trunk, reached up, and peeled back the thick golden scales to find a small treeling there, a separate growth that would spread out and detach, drop its own roots, and begin to grow.

"I must bring a special gift for the King." Thara cupped the delicate treeling in her palms. "A small piece of the worldforest to plant on Earth."

## Chapter 16

### Madeleine Robinson.

For two weeks, the Solar Navy warliners skipped across the star systems, hopscotching from planet to planet to deliver new scouts. Exploration teams took shuttles down to the uncharted worlds, launched survey satellites, set up mapping equipment. Madeleine wondered how she and her two boys could do all of the work themselves.

Chairman Stannis was impatient and wanted to have overviews of as many planets as possible, as quickly as possible. She realized that most of the first wave of scouts were either daring pioneers or, more likely, people just like her who needed to work. Although some of the scouts wanted to compare notes or tell tall tales, Madeleine and the boys kept to themselves in the small cabin assigned to them. She didn't feel like telling her story to listeners, sympathetic or otherwise.

Madeleine and Duncan had married young with dreams of seeing the world. But why stop there? Why not see the other worlds in the solar system, too? They traveled as much as they could on a shoestring budget. Madeleine fancied herself

a travel writer and used that as an excuse to justify their far-flung trips, although she never made much money at her work.

When Duncan got a job at a spaceport loading dock, it was supposed to be a temporary position so they could raise money for a trip to the Moon or Europa. But once Madeleine got pregnant, they needed the stability, so Duncan kept the job, worked his way into a permanent position with a solid salary and benefits. Madeleine worked several other jobs herself while taking care of baby Derek, saving up money so they could take other trips, although travel was an entirely different proposition now that they were parents instead of footloose explorers. She didn't mind.

After a few years she and Duncan decided they liked being parents well enough that they had a second child, Jacob. She continued to write the occasional travel article, though she had to content herself with exploring the solar system vicariously by reading the reports of other travelers. They still took a family trip each year, and when the boys grew old enough to take part, the Robinsons grew more adventurous.

Derek made up his mind that he wanted to be a cargo ship pilot or work on an interplanetary passenger shuttle. His father pulled strings with his contacts at the spaceport loading dock and got the boy signed on as a summer intern on an Earth-Moon shuttle.

But then Duncan had been killed in the accident, and all the sympathetic offers of help faded into awkward embarrassment. Then came lawsuits, financial ruin, further agony... and desperation.

And finally a new chance.

Septar Gro'nh was the captain of this warliner, shuttling human volunteers to uncharted planets. During the voyage, the Ildiran leader took the time to meet each party personally, and Madeleine found the Septar to be a soft-spoken, respectable man.

She and the boys were eating a quiet meal inside their cabin when Gro'nh presented himself at their door. "Madeleine Robinson, our warliner will soon arrive at your destination. Please make your final preparations."

"Already?" Madeleine set her spoon down.

Derek leaped to his feet. "I'm ready to go. I feel cooped up on this ship."

The Septar gave them a wry smile. "Ildirans enjoy being crowded together. We take comfort from one another's presence. But you... you will be very alone on that planet."

"That's the idea," Madeleine said, leaving her meal unfinished. "Thank you, Septar. We'll meet you in the shuttle bay. Hurry up, boys—gather our equipment." Derek and Jacob quickly packed their sacks, sealed up crates, and handed everything to TZ. Madeleine rounded up the last of the things that they had scattered around their temporary cabin. When they were ready, the compy trudged along with his burden of packages down to the shuttle bay.

The Ildirans had already provided Madeleine with a file that contained everything on record about the planet they would be surveying. *Llaro*: a dry and rocky place with a large habitable landmass, and the Robinsons would be there, alone, for seven weeks, until the warliner retrieved them. The Ildiran records

included only sketchy details on Llaro, because they simply weren't interested in the planet. Their vast empire had stopped expanding thousands of years ago.

The Ildirans generously offered a large shuttle for each survey party, camp supplies, and a fast one-person recon skimmer for mapping; a designated craft waited for them in the warliner's launching bay.

Madeleine regarded the alien vessel as they entered the bay. "Apparently, the controls are intuitive and have a standard configuration."

Derek grinned to see the sleek, half-dome-shaped ship. "Don't worry, Mom—I can fly it." The boys had spent a lot of time during the voyage playing in the simulator room.

Septar Gro'nh bade them farewell as they boarded their scout shuttle. "You will be alone down there, but we are scheduled to return in seven weeks. You have reviewed the information? I apologize that we are unable to provide you with any further data."

She raised her chin. "Don't worry, Septar. We'll find out what there is to know and then make our report. That's why the Hansa sent us."

He responded with a grave nod. "Nevertheless, exercise caution. You may be surprised by what you find—Llaro was once a home to the Klikiss race. If you search, no doubt you will find ruins of some of their ancient cities."

Madeleine caught her breath. Abandoned alien ruins? That detail had not been included in the reports. "The Klikiss? I thought you said the Ildiran empire had never encountered another intelligent race?"

The Septar considered his answer. "Not another living race. The Klikiss died out long before our empire formed."

From the shuttle's cockpit, Jacob yelled, "Come on, Mom! They're in orbit already."

The Septar gave a brief bow. "Good luck to you, Madeleine Robinson. We will retrieve you soon."

"Thank you... for everything," she said, then felt a lump in her throat. "For a second chance."

At his insistence, she allowed Derek to pilot the shuttle. She knew how much practice he had put in and realized it was also good to give him the responsibility. Sitting at the Ildiran controls, Derek was confident as he took them down toward the planet, concentrating on their course, staring through the broad windowport.

"See, I told you, Mom. The shuttle is as easy as piloting a hovercar back on Earth." He laughed. "Only there's not as much traffic."

As they descended, Madeleine glanced up at the giant Ildiran warliner dwindling in the distance, then turned her attention to the world below. Llaro.

"Find us a good place to make a base camp, Derek. You've got the whole world... and we're on our own."

The warliner was gone by the time they orbited back from the night side. Using their broad-range scanners, Madeleine took an initial survey of the continents, and before Derek spotted what might one of the ancient Klikiss cities. The Ildiran shuttle approached the surface.



By now, petulant because his brother did all the flying and his mother wouldn't let him take a turn at the controls, Jacob threw himself on one of the small bunks and gazed up at the ceiling while the compy stood by. "Just pick someplace and land!" Jacob groaned. "It'll probably be boring. Right, TZ?"

The skies were a lush pastel orange, splashed with highlights of lavender and lemon. The shuttle descended toward a cluster of incredible extraterrestrial ruins that looked like a cross between towering freeform skyscrapers and organic termite mounds from the African savannah.

The towers were lumpy, pocked with various openings... but apparently empty. The Klikiss city was abandoned, falling into disrepair. Madeleine saw no roads, ramps, or staircases, merely numerous protrusions.

"No," she finally responded to Jacob's comment. "I don't think we'll be bored."

## **Chapter 17**

### **Captain Chrysta Logan.**

As her pregnancy grew, she felt closer to Rekar'h, happier and more content with her relationship, her position, and her new life here than she had ever been aboard the damaged BURTON.

The Designate had recently returned from his trip to Ildira. As the two of them entered the human settlement along a lane between thriving grain fields, she held onto his arm and said, "This colony is becoming everything we've dreamed of. It represents the best of both of our races."

She touched the swell of her belly, and Rekar'h placed his hand on top of hers. He said, "Joining humans and Ildirans was the right thing to do. I have high hopes for our child—as does the Mage-Imperator. He gave me a specific mission, and I will need your help with the other humans. There are many interesting questions to which we would like to find answers."

Human and Ildiran children picked vegetables from long green garden rows. Burly Ildiran worker kithmen harvested tall stalks of wheat, while humans walked alongside, carrying baskets on their shoulders to gather up the grain. They worked well together, telling stories and jokes, each trying to comprehend their counterparts.

"What sort of answers?" Chrysta asked.

"My father is intrigued to know the possibilities of humans interbreeding with various Ildiran kiths. You and I should not be the only ones. The Mage-Imperator would like to encourage human interbreeding with Ildirans."

"I didn't need to have my arm twisted," she said with a smile, "but you can't just command it of our colonists. I have no objections, so long as the people choose to do so."

His expression showed he was completely serious. "From a scientific standpoint, mixing our various kiths with your human DNA could benefit both of our races."

"Hybrid vigor." She nodded, contemplating. "I can sense that our child will be wonderful. You and I are so much alike, destined to be partners... but frankly, we

don't find all Ildiran kiths as attractive as you are, my love. In fact, the soldier kithmen, the diggers, and workers look... brutish to us. Some might even say monstrous."

The Dobro Designate was troubled. "I am surprised to hear this. We see them all as Ildirans. Most kiths breed with their own kind, but there have been many successful mixtures. The form of the body is just an adaptation to circumstances."

"I'm just warning you that there will be resistance among some of the Burton colonists, and you can't force them." Her eyes sparkled, knowing how much joy Rekar'h had brought her. "But I will express my encouragement. If even a few of the people agree, they will provide examples to show that these partnerships can be viable. Then others will be more willing to follow."

Chrysta gazed at all the people working together. Her mood soured as she spotted a man with a drooping black moustache and long dark hair wrapped in a purple bandanna. During their time here on Dobro, Ramirez had begun on his best behavior, terrified she would execute him as an example, the appropriate punishment for mutineers as recorded in the Burton's ancient maritime records. Chrysta had been true to her word, but she had never stopped watching him.

Rather than accepting his second chance with good grace, Ramirez had begun to complain again. She'd heard reports that he was trying to convince others that she had led the settlement long enough and should be overthrown.

She would have to nip that in the bud. Dario Ramirez needed a reminder.

"I know someone who would make a great example for others to follow—someone with experience leading movements." She gave a quick snort, liking her idea more and more. "Plenty of weak-willed ones have done far worse things at his encouragement. Now he can be useful as a new kind of trailblazer."

The Designate looked curiously at her. "Are you certain?"

She raised her chin. "Bring your female soldier kithmen—the strongest, most powerful ones—and I'll take care of the rest."

Even Chrysta shuddered when she saw the monstrous females who came forward: muscular, with severe features, broad shoulders, and thick claws. Tufts of hair grew from their ears and chins, and their brows were heavy. They looked like ogres. *Perfect.*

She led them to Dario Ramirez, who worked with a small crew installing tiles in a drainage ditch. Ramirez pressed a hand to his back and wiped his brow, watching the labor more than getting his own hands dirty. His companions stopped working as they saw Chrysta, the Dobro Designate, and the female soldier kithmen approaching. Ramirez looked up with a nervous smile. "What? What do you want?"

She had long since stopped worrying about unrest among the Burton's crew. The mutiny had been a temporary insanity, best forgotten. Their diligence during the colony setup proved their repentance, and Chrysta simply didn't speak of the matter anymore. But she had not forgotten.

Ignoring him, she turned to Rekar'h. "This is Dario Ramirez, who wants to be a leader among our people. He will be your first volunteer." The two brutish females came forward, looking at the man skeptically; one of them poked him, as if testing how easily he might be damaged.

"I haven't done anything," Ramirez said, his voice a thinly veiled whine.

“Perhaps not recently,” Chrysta said. “But that is about to change.”

“You are going to become a new sort of ambassador, Mr. Ramirez. The Ildiran Mage-Imperator has encouraged our two races to join, and you will provide a shining example. These two soldier-kith females are your new mates.” Ramirez paled, and Chrysta took great pleasure in adding, “I hear they’re vigorous, energetic lovers.”

His mouth dropped open in horror, and he tried to bolt, but the two female soldiers held him by the arms. They lifted him off the ground and examined him as if he were a new plaything.

“Captain Logan, tell them to let me go!”

“Do with him what you will,” the Designate said to the soldier females. “Enjoy yourselves, but do not injure him. Just make certain you get pregnant.”

Ramirez wailed. “No, don’t do this, Captain!”

Chrysta looked at the man without pity. “For four years you’ve wanted to prove your loyalty to me, haven’t you, Mr. Ramirez? This is your chance, and it’s high time you pulled your weight in this colony.”

And it was a fitting enough punishment for a mutineer.

## Chapter 18

### Corey Kellum.

Corey took charge of Daym Cloud Trawler Number Three, which was in far worse shape than the others, with the most leaks and the least-efficient ekti reactors. Time to fix it. “I feel obligated to take on the biggest challenge,” he explained. He gathered his closest advisers and handed out reports that listed page after page after page of everything wrong with the creaking old skymine.

“Lucky us,” said Sara Becker, whom he had brought over to Number Three as his main administrator. She knew how to be a boss without actually acting like one.

“It’s nothing that can’t be fixed.” Corey tried to pull them along with his optimism and excitement. “This is what we’re good at. We’ll have this trawler in perfect shape in no time—so long as nobody objects to working around the clock?”

His engineering teams finished installing the new ekti reactor controls a full day ahead of schedule. Even so, Corey was disappointed—he had wanted to beat his estimate by two days. In the long run, however, the dramatically increased efficiency would make up for the equipment investment in less than a month.

Cocky, optimistic, and ambitious, he had been happy to take on the challenge, although he had underestimated the magnitude of the job. Nevertheless, he had grown fond of the wreck and swore that one day he would make this into the best, most efficient skymine on Daym. Not content with the lack of Ildiran imagination, Corey had rechristened Number Three the “*Redheaded Stepchild*.”

He met Oliver Sung at the engineering station to the large pumping chamber that drove vast amounts of Daym's hydrogen into the fuel-processing reactors. "Our teams did more than give this old skymine a facelift. She's got a whole new heart. Ready for the full-power tests so we can get the reactors running again?"

"Well, we didn't make all those changes for cosmetic reasons—let's see if it works."

Corey stepped back, put his hands on his hips, and looked at the jury-rigged controls. He could easily see which ones were old Ildiran systems and which ones incorporated human modifications. He glanced at Oliver. "Would you like to do the honors?"

His friend crossed his arms. "It's your *Redheaded Stepchild*, Corey."

He looked up at the pipes and girders that crisscrossed the ceiling of the pumping chamber. "Come on, show your stuff." He touched the activation plate, and diagnostics illuminated, green lights rising and falling. He heard the thrum of reawakened engines, the whir of pumps, the new reactor chambers taking in gulps of atmosphere, compressing, heating, supercharging.

"Listen to that purr," Corey said.

The levels increased, and the energy systems droned louder. Newly converted stardrive fuel began pumping into collection chambers, where it was further compressed. Both men could feel the smooth vibration through the deck.

Then the purr became a groan. Something snapped. A gasp of steam squealed out of a breached conduit pipe overhead. He and Oliver looked at each other and back at the panel, which suddenly glowed with red lights.

They both dove for the emergency monitors. An explosion erupted deep below in the reactor levels.

"Shizz, the reactor throughput was too much!" Oliver yelled, scrambling with the controls to shut everything down.

The entire cloud trawler lurched and tilted to one side. Alarms began to wail through the entire facility. Erupting stardrive fuel burst from holding tanks and vomited jets of orange flame out into the skies.

Corey ran an emergency shutdown panel. "It's not just the ekti reactors—those were the levitation engines! Three of the four are shot to shizz, or at least offline. We've got to get them running again."

Oliver's eyes went wide. "Those engines were the only things keeping us afloat." He called up the diagnostics, got a screen full of static, then hammered it with his fist; the new display showed blank sections on the cloud trawler structural diagram. "Four decks aren't responding—a big chunk of the lower levels."

At least fifty people had been down there.

His stomach lurched up to his throat, and he realized that the cloud trawler was in free fall, plunging down into the gas giant. "We've got a hell of a long way to go before we hit bottom."

"Look on the bright side—we'll be crushed long before that," Oliver said.

Responding to the emergency, engineering teams scrambled to auxiliary stations. "Can we lock it down?" Corey yelled. "Get one of those levitation engines active again."

"They're offline, Corey," shouted one of the techs. "We're dead in the sky."

Another explosion rocked the sinking cloud trawler, and chatter came from everywhere, through intercoms, shouted through maintenance shafts. Engineers were already tearing panels off, trying to realign the systems, snapping commands back and forth. “Major instabilities. We’ve shut everything down, but now there’s a chain reaction.”

“Which decks are destroyed?”

“How many people have we lost?”

“We’ll do a count later,” Corey interrupted. Most of the families were on the upper levels; the children on their school decks, the families setting up living quarters, the shop owners and restaurateurs on the market deck. But he was sure half of his teams had been lost on the primary industrial level. The ekki storage bay was completely gone.

A geyser of flames and smoke charged up a ventilation shaft, bursting out of filter plates. Workers ducked from the shower of sparks; one woman grabbed an armful of breathers from an emergency cabinet, passed them around.

“Stupid Ildiran technology!” one of the techs yelled. “Can’t figure out how to bring it under control!”

“They must have sabotaged it!”

“They didn’t need sabotage—this wreck was falling apart when we got here.”

Corey ran to another screen, saw the blip that showed their position in the atmosphere. “We’re dropping into uncharted layers. The atmospheric density is increasing by orders of magnitude.”

“In other words, we’re still falling,” Oliver said.

“Yeah, gravity will do that.”

No time to mull over a decision; he could see the extent of the destruction. Corey ran to the intercom, calling his operations chief in the armored control chamber in the top deck. “Sara, the damage is too great. Get everybody off this wreck. Evacuate the cloud trawler.”

Sara Becker answered immediately. “Plans already underway, Corey. I sure hope we have enough emergency ships to carry everybody. I sent a distress call to the other two cloud trawlers, but it’ll take them hours to get here. Daym is a big place.”

“Use any vessel—scout craft, cargo ships, shuttles. Get people off this wreck, and let’s hope rescue comes before their fuel and life support runs out.”

While the engineers and technicians ran with repair kits to any station where they could help, families from the upper decks rounded up anyone who needed assistance, then made their way to launching bays and scrambled aboard ships.

Sara Becker announced over the intercom. “Remain calm, but get your asses moving. The chiefs of the other two cloud trawlers are sending retrieval ships to snag our lifeboats. Do us all a favor and get yourselves to the top of the cloud layers. Once you launch, be sure to activate your ping signals and calculate how long you can last after you reach the open sky. The rescue craft are going to have to triage who needs to be picked up first. We need to know which ships can sit tight while the others are rescued.”

The people crowded aboard any escape craft they could find, whether or not there was enough room. They would have to survive until rescue could come—

maybe a few hours, maybe a few days. The *Redheaded Stepchild* wouldn't last that long.

Corey stayed down on the engineering deck. "We've got to get at least one of those levitation engines running again so we can stay afloat through the evacuation. Is that so much to ask?"

The outside temperature rose as they fell deeper. Even over the hubbub of explosions, alarms, and evacuation announcements, Corey could hear the outer walls creaking and groaning as the gas giant squeezed in on them. Sooner or later, the *Redheaded Stepchild* would reach an equilibrium point—but anyone aboard would be dead by then.

Grease-stained, sweating engineers hauled at valves to shut off unnecessary systems, scrambling to channel all available power to a single levitation engine. "Doesn't anything work around here?" one of them yelled.

"Not anymore. Too much damage!"

Evacuation crafts launched out of the bays and shot up through the thick murk like emergency buoys, and still the *Redheaded Stepchild* kept sinking. Explosions continued to rock the decks from side to side. Steam blasted from burst pipes, and Corey knew in his heart there would be no salvaging the cloud trawler. "I'm heading to the control chamber to help Sara get everyone out of here."

Oliver hunched over a groaning compressor. "I'll keep working on the levitation engines, maybe squeeze a last gasp from one of them to buy us time."

Oliver dropped down into the hot and smoky bottom decks, while Corey raced to the top of the industrial dome.

Upon reaching the control chamber, he could see the outside atmosphere through the thick viewing panes. This deep into the planet's sky, far from Daym's sun, layers of fumes and gases smothered the cloud trawler in darkness. Lightning skittered across the clouds; sooner or later a blast would strike the *Redheaded Stepchild*. As if they needed more problems.

The walls around them screeched and groaned. Sara said, "The hull's starting to buckle."

"I guess we should have used more duct tape." More evacuation ships flew away, rising up. "Take one of the evac ships and get out of here. I'm recalling the engineering teams right now—no way we can fix this hunk of junk."

"I'm the Ops Manager." She wiped perspiration from her brow. "I stay until the last of the crew gets away."

"The hell you are. I'm counting on you to organize the rescue and retrieval effort as soon as the emergency response ships get here from the other two cloud trawlers. Can you think of anyone better to do that?"

"No."

"Then go! I'll handle the last operations here." He practically shoved her out of the control chamber. She kept her balance even on the uncertain, quaking decks, and bolted for the nearest launching bays four decks down.

He hit the intercom and called throughout the facility. "Oliver, time to surrender. Make sure everyone gets out of here. This skymine is going down and there's nothing we can do about it."

## Chapter 19

### Derek Robinson.

After nearly seven weeks on Llaro, the excitement of exploring a strange, alien world had become mere drudgery, but Derek didn't complain—at least, not openly. He was expected to be the mature one, the man of the family, with their father gone.

Following the accident, then the recriminations, and all the sudden dead-ends in his life, Derek had realized he was no longer a kid. A pile of new responsibilities weighed on his shoulders like a boulder on a high-gravity planet. It wasn't fair that his life had changed so much; it wasn't fair that he had to go on without a father; it wasn't fair that so many people looked askance at the entire family because Duncan Robinson's carelessness had killed a couple of innocent bystanders as well as himself. None of it was fair. But complaining about it and feeling miserable didn't help.

His brother Jacob hadn't figured that out yet.

Llaro was a fascinating and wild planet, unlike anything the Robinsons had ever seen. The Hansa had provided them with supplies and survey equipment, but not enough for them to do a thorough job. The Ildirans gave them everything else they needed.

Their mother had chosen to set up their base of operations near the alien ruins; no doubt the Hansa Colonization Office would find that site most interesting. They had expanded the camp with extra tarps, a supply tent, and a few comfortable portable chairs. TZ did his best to keep the camp neat and organized, but Derek and Jacob often thwarted his efforts.

Though their mother took regular long-range recon flights, mapping all the topography within range, seven weeks wasn't enough to do more than the briefest survey of a planet. In fact, it wasn't even enough time to get a good look at the ruined Klikiss city, but the boys knew how much was at stake for their family's future, and they worked hard. The Ildiran ship would return soon to retrieve them.

Madeleine Robinson was constantly mapping out grid squares and writing survey reports, logging points of interest, using her best descriptive abilities in her journal. The compy catalogued geological samples, collected data, and wandered within a kilometer of the camp to gather native plants and preserve insect specimens.

They had discovered plenty of amazing things here. Llaro was not the garden spot of the Spiral Arm, but it wasn't too bad. A human colony could certainly survive here, and the settlers would face no more difficulties than any other place on Earth.

The Hanseatic League was certainly getting their money's worth from them, Derek thought. Maybe if the family got a bonus, they could stop hanging by a thread, stabilize their lives, and find a new home—preferably in a place where people didn't remember the cargo loading accident, someplace where he and Jacob could make new friends. He could dream, couldn't he?

The nights were warm and dry, but the nearby abandoned Klikiss city seemed so lonely and mysterious that they slept aboard their shuttle, rather than camping under the stars. The lumpy Klikiss spires seemed eerie and haunted, perforated with entry holes and a labyrinth of underground tunnels—empty, dusty, and dark tunnels.

It was hard to resist.

Their mother roused them at daybreak, and the family sat together for a quick breakfast prepared by TZ before she checked the fuel cells and packed up for the day's recon flight. Sometimes she let Derek take the survey craft, but today was her turn. Only one person could ride in the small recon skimmer, and she used it to cover a lot of territory while she left the boys back at camp to organize samples and finish their chores.

Standing outside the main shuttle's boarding ramp, Madeleine stretched and rolled her shoulders, since she'd be sitting inside the cramped skimmer for most of the day. "Be careful while I'm out on the scouting run, boys. I left a list of things for you to finish before I get back at nightfall."

"You worry too much, Mom," Derek said. "I'll watch out for the troublemaker here while TZ goes out and gets more interesting rocks." He tousled Jacob's hair. Jacob responded with an annoyed scowl.

The survey skimmer lifted off the dusty ground, coughed out a few clouds of combusted chemical smoke, then soared off with a high-pitched whine. The boys stood, watching and waving, though Derek doubted their mother could see them as she gained altitude and set off on a new heading.

As soon as the engine whine faded into distance and the compy trudged off with his sample case, Derek looked at his brother. "Ready to go into the ruins?"

Without answering, Jacob sprinted toward the mysterious and compelling alien towers. For days now, they had ventured into the tunnels, poking around for any artifacts that the Klikiss had left behind. Derek secretly dreamed of making some discovery that could bring great wealth to the family, an alien treasure that museums and private collectors would fight over. He could imagine them bidding higher and higher.

Although if they found anything, Derek doubted they would be allowed to keep it. He suspected their survey team agreement contained a clause that any discoveries belonged to the Terran Hanseatic League, but that didn't stop him from looking, and hoping.

The Klikiss didn't use stairs or ramps in their city. The two brothers had to scramble up the lumpy surface of the towers, climbing the polymer concrete walls to reach the lowest openings to get inside. In their packs, they carried bright hand illuminators of Ildiran manufacture. The black silence of the deep tunnels could get oppressive and frightening.

As Jacob ran ahead, he marked their path with phosphorescent paint on the walls. At a large nexus of tunnels he chose a passage that sloped steeply downward into the underground catacombs. "Come on Derek. We've never looked in this section."

Before they got too far from the sunlight outside, Derek lit his blazer and held it high; his brother did the same. As they ventured forward, the hand blazer cast



looming shadows on the flowform walls. Exploring farther, they marked each intersection and kept going downhill.

"It's like a haunted house in here." Jacob moved his illuminator back and forth to make dramatic shadows on the tunnel walls.

Derek made a loud scary noise right next to his brother's head, causing him to jump. Jacob slugged him. "Cut it out! That's not funny."

Laughing, Derek swung the beam of his blazer and spotted a gleaming black hook that protruded from one crumbling resinous wall. "Wait a second... what's that buried in the wall?"

Jacob poked at the piece of uncharacteristic black metal. "Let's dig it out and see." He pulled a rock-sampling hammer from his pack and tapped the resinous concrete, breaking it away to expose a metal claw, a mechanical pincer, part of a larger object embedded inside the wall.

"Looks like some kind of machine," Derek said. "Klikiss machinery—it could be valuable."

The two of them chipped away and pulled chunks of Klikiss concrete aside to expose an articulated arm connected to the claw. When they dislodged a key piece of rubble, the rest of the wall crumbled inward, collapsing in a small rockfall to expose a sealed chamber. A large machine made out of black metal stood there, like an angular beetle more than three meters tall. Its head plate was shaped like a trapezoid, studded with round spheres, like eyes... far too many eyes.

"Whoa!" Jacob said. "Is it one of the Klikiss?"

"No, it's a machine. Look at that thing!"

It looked back. The red spheres in its head plate began to glow like eyes awakening. Power thrummed from inside its abdomen, and the beetle-like machine began to vibrate. The pincer hand twitched, opening and closing. The black machine swiveled its head plate toward them.

Derek took two steps back into the main tunnel, grabbing his brother's arm and pulling Jacob to a safer distance. The hulking robot twitched several other limbs that looked like the arms of an insect protruding from its main body core. It stirred, shifted, then lurched backward to free itself from the remaining concrete with such violence that it bumped into the fractured wall. The stones crashed down from the ceiling in a great shower of dust and rocks.

"Run! Cave in!" Derek yelled. The brothers retreated a dozen steps, then paused again as the debris stopped falling.

The reactivated black robot stirred once more, shrugging off the rubble that had buried it, standing tall. It made no move toward them. "Well... at least it's not trying to kill us," Jacob said.

"Yet," Derek added.

Ignoring the intruders, the robot turned back to the exposed chamber; it used powerful mechanical claws to pull down huge chunks of the concrete resin, revealing more of the sealed vault. After the busy robot removed another section of wall, more of the fragile supporting rock collapsed.

Inside the revealed chamber, Derek saw several more black robots. A group of them had been buried or cocooned there. He held his breath.

The robots' scarlet eyes reactivated. Dozens of the robots had been trapped in the grotto, and now they were released.

"Maybe we'd better get out of here," Derek told his brother. They backed away as the robots started moving, freeing themselves. All of the scarlet optical sensors turned toward the two boys, glowing brighter.

Derek and Jacob dashed uphill out of the underground tunnels, following the phosphorescent markings. They had been exploring inside the tunnels for hours, and Derek couldn't believe how far they had come. Now, bursting out into the cooling air of sunset, they scrambled back to their camp.

By this time, the survey skimmer had returned and Madeleine Robinson was pacing the camp perimeter, calling for them, obviously worried.

"Mom! Mom!" Jacob cried, running pell-mell with Derek to the shuttle. "We were in the ruins. We found some robots!"

"Klikiss robots," Derek added, not to be outdone by his brother. "And they're still active."

"They look like giant beetles. The first one we uncovered came alive, and it dug up even more robots."

"And they were all moving, coming out after us." Behind them in the gathering dusk, the Klikiss ruins looked shadowy and ominous.

Their mother knew the boys didn't imagine things, and the panic must have been plain on their faces. She had her sidearm, a traditional protective weapon used for security on an empty and unexplored world. As night began to fall, she drew the weapon and turned to face the city, but no hordes of black robots emerged.

"It's too dark to go investigate now," she said. "We'll have to be careful tonight and lock down the shuttle."

Before daybreak, TZ marched into Madeleine's sleeping quarters and spoke loudly enough to reuse Derek and his brother; they had slept only restlessly, tense with fear after their previous adventure. "Madeleine Robinson, please wake up," the compy said. "It is urgent."

She was up in a flash, rolling off her bunk and pulling on a crew jacket to cover her night clothes. "What is it, TZ? Are we in danger?"

The compy's optical sensors shone. "You should make your own assessment. The explanation may be complicated." TZ strutted toward the shuttle's main hatch, opened it and extended the ramp.

As dawn light diffused into the sky, they could all see that the camp was full of beetle-like robots, hundreds of them standing around the perimeter. Some had climbed up on the surrounding rocks to look down on the supply tent, the Ildiran shuttle, the sample crates they had stacked up to be reloaded for their departure from Llaro. The small recon skimmer had been entirely dismantled, the engines pulled out, large pieces of hull, wings, and cockpit strewn about on the ground.

Madeleine said, "I think we've got a problem."

Derek said to his mother in a low voice, "We were scared yesterday, but the robots didn't actually attack us."

Jacob was pale, his eyes wide. "Look what they did to the skimmer! They could take us apart in a second."

"If they're remnants of the Klikiss race," Madeleine said, sounding determined and calm, "then we're obligated to try to communicate. This could be the most

important find of any survey crew.” Her voice was strong, but Derek could tell that she was frightened. She took two steps down the ramp and spoke soothingly to the black machines, “We don’t mean any harm.”

The nearest black robot made a clicking, buzzing sound, and incomprehensible noises came out of the speaker patch. It raised its two forelimbs, but did not make a hostile move.

“We’re just here looking around,” Derek said, not at all sure the machine could understand. “We didn’t mean to intrude.”

The compy said, “I am receiving their signals, Madeleine Robinson. They are trying to communicate. They are curious... especially about me. They correlated part of my database, and I have granted them access to our records in the ship. I hope that was all right.”

Madeleine’s eyes widened in alarm. “Next time ask first, TZ.”

The foremost black robot spoke in a resonant, oily voice. “I have access to your files. Communication is now facilitated.”

“Who are you?” She said. “What do you want?”

“I am Exxos. We are robots created by the Klikiss race. This planet was our home... one of our homes. All the Klikiss worlds were our homes.”

Madeleine glanced at her sons, then back to the robot. “What happened to the Klikiss? Why is the planet deserted? Are they extinct? And why were you buried in the city?”

The robot head plates twitched, their red optical sensors glowed. Derek was sure they were communicating silently with one another. Finally, Exxos said, “We don’t remember.”

## **Chapter 20**

### **Chairman Malcolm Stannis.**

The Hansa Chairman tried to get comfortable in a chair that was far too ornate for comfort. He sat alone, silent, and unnoticed in a high balcony box that overlooked the great gallery of King Ben’s Throne Hall.

Green marble pillars adorned with gold filigree gleamed in the sunlight that streamed through the stained-glass windows. Everything was spotless; Stannis wondered briefly who cleaned it all, who polished the gold work and the stones. A team of bustling compies? Human workers?

King Ben held court daily, but Malcolm Stannis rarely bothered to observe. Most of the King’s obligations were trivial and ceremonial, to accept or receive awards, greet ambassadors, sign showy documents that the Hansa Chairman had already carefully vetted through his lawyers.

Ben was not allowed to go off script and certainly did not make his own decisions. He had been reminded again and again in the years since the arrival of the Ildirans. As Earth’s reach had expanded across the Spiral Arm, the old actor had become increasingly befuddled, finding it hard to keep track of the details. He was clearly out of his depth.

Stannis had tolerated the old man's foibles while Prince George underwent his indoctrination, although Ben's botched speech with Adar Bali'nh had forced the Chairman and his representatives to do some awkward backpedaling before the aliens accepted that the King's unwise statement about joining the Ildiran Empire had been merely a slip of the tongue.

The whole Terran Hanseatic League had been invigorated by the changes in the past four years. Earth's economy had thrived with the promise of new trade with the Ildiran Empire, and humanity was excited by the prospect of new worlds to colonize, along with the fast stardrive that would take them there. Exploration teams were even now bringing back reports of amazing resources, exotic landscapes, intriguing new frontiers.

The Chairman himself had trouble keeping track of it all, but the challenge energized him. King Ben, on the other hand, was ready to buckle under the strain; Stannis did not know how long he could last. OX had stepped up his efforts to prepare young George to take on the royal role. Chairman Stannis didn't want to move too soon, however; an abrupt transition would introduce further turmoil into the Hansa, so he tried to prop up the old King as much as possible.

In the past four years, the Ildiran Solar Navy had brought back reports, even some representatives, from the ten rescued generation ships. The BURTON remained lost, and Stannis never expected it to be found. Some of the colony ship descendants wanted to visit their fabled home world, although most chose to remain on the new planets the Ildirans offered them. Stannis was glad to have ready-made outposts of humanity. He planned to bring them into the ever-increasing fold of the Terran Hanseatic League, expand the great commercial network. He had no doubt they would see the advantages.

Today, Stannis was interested in the unusual visitors due to arrive—ambassadors from the first colony the Ildirans had fostered, populated by people from the CAILLIÉ. He expected the meeting to be colorful and unorthodox, well worth an hour of his time. King Ben had been nervous and full of questions. Stannis had told him to take a deep breath and do his job.

Now as the great doors to the Throne Hall swung open and an honor guard filed forward, the royal crier announced, "Visitors from the planet Theroc to greet King Ben of Earth." Stannis sat forward, looking down on the scene.

They entered: a tall, athletic young man and two young women, all three clothed only in loincloths; their bodies were ornamented with gaudy shoulder pieces and belts of spiky feather-like adornments that appeared to be prismatic insect wings. A ripple of conversation passed among the political functionaries in the Throne Hall. The court ladies, dressed in formal gowns, drew back with wide eyes, and the men straightened, blinking. Their fascination was not just because the visitors were nearly naked or that their bodies were smooth and hairless, but that their skin was a vibrant and unblemished green the color of grass and leaves.

The trio of Theron ambassadors walked forward with a smooth grace, ignoring the whispered reactions, looking ahead only at King Ben seated on his high throne. The green-skinned visitors moved like acrobats, showing none of the usual awe for the legendary King of Earth.

The taller of the two females came to the base of the steps. "King Ben, I am Thara Wen. I represent the sovereign world of Theroc."

The King was fascinated by the unorthodox visitors and gave them his well-practiced benevolent smile. "A sovereign world? Do you not wish to be part of my kingdom? We invite Theroc to become a signatory to the Hansa Charter and enjoy the benefits of human history and civilization. We would welcome you back."

Thara Wen bowed her head slightly. "No, Sire. We came to greet you and to re-establish contact with our distant cousins, but our forefathers left Earth a long time ago to found their own colony—to face their own hardships and control their own destinies. It is only by good fortune that we encountered the Ildiran Solar Navy and, through them, re-established ties with Earth. That does not change the original decision our forefathers made."

King Ben actually stood from his throne and walked down the stone steps so he could be closer to Thara Wen and her two green-skinned companions. "Of course, of course, if that is your wish," he said. "We're so glad you're home."

Up in the high balcony, Stannis furrowed his brow, uneasy about what must be going through the King's mind.

The male Theron held a potted plant, a many-branched tree of some sort. He handed it to Thara Wen, and she cradled it in her palms as she presented it to the King. "Sire, we give you this precious treeling, one small offshoot of the great and wise worldforest of Theroc."

Ben accepted the potted plant Thara Wen offered him. He poked at the tangled branches that thrust out from the root cluster in the pot. "Wonderful. We shall have it planted in our gardens immediately." He held the plant, then looked from side to side for a functionary to take it from him. Finally, a courtier hurried forward, relieved him of the gift, and scuttled away.

King Ben raised his voice, "Although many colonies have expressed their desire to rejoin the human community of the Terran Hanseatic League, if you truly want to fend for yourselves, then I grant Therons their independence for all time." He raised both hands, as if expecting a response from the crowd.

Stannis lurched to his feet in the balcony. What the hell did the King think he was doing?

Thara Wen smiled. "I thank you, King Ben, and all of my people thank you."

The Chairman ran to the stairs, but he already had a sick, sinking feeling. According to reports, Theroc was a lush and pleasant world, rich with resources, countless possible exports. And King Ben had just given it away!

The old man took Thara Wen's green hand in his own and raised it high, clasping her fingers. Breathless and furious, Stannis rushed through a side doorway, but by the time he reached the rear of the crowd of dignitaries, business representatives, and media reporters, they had burst into resounding applause.

As the people continued to cheer, Stannis realized he couldn't make a scene now. He bit back his urge to correct the King. Damn it, this was the last straw!

During a short reception that followed the visit of the Theron ambassadors, Stannis bided his time. He talked briefly to the others, but most of the crowd clustered around the three so-called green priests.

Like a targeted missile, Stannis worked his way toward King Ben, who was surrounded by sycophants. The King nervously met Stannis's gaze several times but always looked away. Finally, standing close to him, Stannis said in a low voice, "King Ben, we need to talk—in private."

“But Malcolm, can’t you see I’m in the middle of a reception?”

Furious at this *actor* trying to brush him off, Stannis imposed a clear calm on himself. He could have called in the Royal Guard, commanded them to haul the King away, but he realized that wasn’t the right approach. Not at the moment. By now his anger had grown completely cold, crystallizing inside him. The Chairman saw his way forward, knew the pieces he would have to put in place. Decision made. Now he just had to plan.

“It can wait, Sire,” he said before turning to leave. “We’ll have a conversation like two men, but for now I’ll leave you to your reception.”

## Chapter 21

### Captain Chrysta Logan.

As the mother of the first halfbreed human and Ildiran child, Chrysta worried about how difficult the birth might be. She was due to go into labor any day.

Despite her concerns, she was anxious to stop carrying the baby. Chrysta was an active person, and the late-term pregnancy was slowing her down; her feet were swollen, her joints ached, and she had to pee all the time.

Not only that, she dreamed about holding the baby. Against her expectations, the motherhood instinct had grown strong within her. After her parents died from the radiation leak when she was only a teenager, and the community aboard the generation ship had helped to raise her. In actuality, Chrysta Logan had raised herself—and had made something of herself, eventually becoming captain.

This Dobro colony was the best outcome that the BURTON could ever have asked for. The people had earned a safe haven after all their tribulations. Chrysta couldn’t take credit for everything, of course, but the generation ship colonists did recognize that her close relationship with the Dobro Designate was primarily responsible for their pleasant situation.

She and Rekar’h spent virtually all their time together. They made joint decisions for the combined settlement, discussing possibilities for expanding the colony to accommodate the new mixed human and Ildiran families they hoped to encourage. As soon as the baby was born, the Designate had promised to take Chrysta to Ildira where she could see the Prism Palace for herself and meet the Mage-Imperator. She greatly looked forward to it.

New construction projects had been started in the human section of the colony town. The initial prefabs were methodically being replaced with permanent structures, but that didn’t constitute a genuine city. Having seen library images of skyscrapers on old Earth, Chrysta Logan wanted tall, impressive buildings here in their own colony.

And Rekar’h issued the orders, commanding the construction of a tall building as a gift to her.

So, in the center of the human settlement, builders were erecting a five-story administrative complex. The framework already stood tall, a landmark in the town.

Girders and crossbeams formed the floors and walls; inside the structure, work crews finished the rooms, framed windows, installed electrical systems.

"That new tower is going to be something we can be proud of," Chrysta said. "A symbol of our joined colonies." She and the Designate strolled along the street, talking to the workers, looking up at the construction underway. She felt very happy.

"The Logan Tower," Rekar'h said. She laughed, then realized he was serious.

From three stories up in the building's framework, a single figure pushed forward, shouting in a ragged voice, "Damn you, Captain Logan!" He held onto one of the support girders. "I've been looking for you."

Startled, she and the Designate looked up. Chrysta recognized Dario Ramirez by his distinctive purple headband. She not seen him since assigning him to breeding duties with the soldier females. Chrysta wasn't a vengeful person, but she had taken some satisfaction from the females' reports to the Designate that Ramirez needed to be coerced into doing his duty, repeatedly; they confessed that they found him disappointing, but both of them continued to follow the Designate's commands as frequently as possible.

With her sharp eyes, Chrysta could see that Ramirez was haggard, his cheeks sunken, his eyes wild. As he railed at her, he drew one of the Burton's blaster pistols, just like the one Chrysta had used to defend herself during the mutiny.

Rekar'h grabbed her, pulling her away, while Ramirez swung the blaster from side to side, aiming it wildly.

Bestial Ildiran construction workers charged toward him, scuttling along the girders with primate-like grace and speed. They pounced on Ramirez before he could shoot, twisting the blaster away.

Seeing him subdued, Chrysta stood straight, although she unconsciously placed a hand across her belly. Ramirez was a fool. Out of pride, she was glad she hadn't ducked or scrambled away in panic.

In a haughty, angry tone, she called up, "What right do you of all people have to complain, Ramirez."

"I have every right!" In the grasp of his Ildiran captors, Ramirez went slack, then found a burst of strength and pulled his arm free. The workers wrestled with him.

And the blaster fired.

Chrysta felt as if an asteroid had crashed into her stomach. She cried out, stumbled backward from the force of the impact. She smelled an awful stench of burned fabric and roasting meat. She didn't understand, couldn't believe it—until she saw the gaping crater in her abdomen, a wound impossibly large.

She fell.

Up above, with a roar, one of the Ildiran construction workers tore a crystalline blade from a sheath and yanked the man's head back with nearly enough force to snap his neck. He raked the glassy blade across Ramirez's throat, and as blood sprayed out, shoved the man's body off the girders. He fell three stories down onto the flagstoned ground.

Chrysta barely heard or saw anything. She felt no pain, but she couldn't move either. Half of her seemed to be missing. Somehow, she was on the ground.

Rekar'h was shouting. His voice sounded so close, and as she blinked her eyes and looked up, she saw him hovering over her. Tears streamed down his beautiful pale face.

She realized he was cradling her head in his lap, holding her, rocking her back and forth. "Chrysta, Chrysta!" He raised his voice, "Find one of the human doctors!"

She tried to say something, but no words—barely even a breath—drifted out of her mouth. Her throat felt so dry.

Rekar'h was sobbing, and she didn't want him to feel sad. She couldn't understand why he was crying. "My love," he said. "My love, and my child."

She didn't think night could be falling so swiftly, but the world went dark all around her. Why weren't they lighting the bright, warm blazers? The only thing she could see was a pinpoint directly in front of her—the Designate's beloved face. Then that too turned to blackness, a hole so deep that her soul fell forward into it.

The last thing she heard was the Designate's voice howling in the purest distillation of anguish. "No!"

## Chapter 22

### Corey Kellum.

Another explosion on the sinking cloud trawler cracked open an ekti storage canister, belching out flames that were quickly smothered by the superdense gases deep within Daym's atmosphere.

Sealed inside the control chamber at the top of the dying facility, Corey could not guess how many crewmembers had been killed. According to the boards, all of the evacuation pods had been launched. He sent a silent thanks to Sara Becker, hoping the majority of his crew had successfully evacuated.

He had brought every one of those people over here, convinced them that he could fix the third cloud trawler... and he had let them down. Now their hopes were crashing and burning all around him.

The *Redheaded Stepchild* was out of time. The facility had sunk even deeper, and the thick gases were dark around them, although the fires of the burning decks lit up the nearby cloud layers. Static lightning rippled around them. The outer hull plates and the bulkheads groaned and began to buckle as the pressure increased outside.

Strange shadows flickered across the wide viewing windows, and Corey stared with a mix of wonder and terror at a cluster of bloated gas-filled sacks, eerie tentacled things—living creatures!—that floated around the doomed cloud trawler. A flash of nearby lightning illuminated sluggish jellyfish beasts filled with fluorescent internal organs: protoplasmic bags that drifted along, consuming chemicals or alien plankton in the cloud layers. Their tentacles streamed out like lightning rods, drawing in electrical energy from bursts of static discharge.



No one had ever gone this deep into a gas giant; there could be no telling what sort of amazing miracles, or nightmares, the *Redheaded Stepchild* might encounter down there. He didn't intend to find out.

Corey's head pounded, from guilt and desperation as well as from the crushing atmosphere. His eyes felt as if they were about to burst. "We're reaching critical depth," he gasped into the intercom. Thank the Guiding Star the intercom still worked!

The comm was a chatter of panicked voices.

From down in the smoke-filled engineering deck, Oliver replied, his voice muffled through a breathing mask. "Still no luck on the levitation engines, Corey! There's no power to them. They're just adding extra weight."

The remaining people aboard were stranded and doomed, unless they could find a way to shove the cloud trawler higher up into the sky, lifting it to an altitude where they could be rescued.

He yelled into the intercom, "I want any options you can think of—innovative, even crackpot, ideas. Now's not the time to be shy."

A staccato patter of gunshot sounds erupted as the continuing pressure popped rivets out of their connecting holes, and the metal projectiles ricocheted against walls. Several of the people yelped or dove out of the way. The images on the communication screens blurred into static; a few winked back on.

Down in engineering, Oliver looked up at the imager, sweat streaming down his face. "All right, Corey, I've got an idea... but I'm not crazy about it."

"Crazy's all we've got left, Oliver. What is it?"

"We could pipe some of that supercharged stardrive ekti from the reservoir tanks into one of the levitation engines. It might be enough to give it a jump start."

"Levitation engines aren't designed to operate on stardrive fuel."

"They aren't operating *at all* right now."

He had a point. "Will it work?" Corey asked.

Oliver's eyes were wide and he stared at the screen. "Probably not."

Corey took a quick breath and made up his mind. "Do it anyway. At this point it's only a matter of time. If we get the levitation engine active, I can guide us upward from the control chamber."

Oliver's voice was ragged. "Better seal yourself in, Corey... just in case anything goes wrong."

"Sure, I'll be here safe and sound." Corey muttered, "Not that it'll do me any good." He activated the controls, sealed the hatch. The armored control chamber was now a self-contained bubble as the rest of the cloud trawler heaved, shuddered, and died around him. "Ready, Oliver... and waiting."

"Got it rigged—no time for finesse, but it should work. In theory anyway. Twenty percent chance."

"Pretty good odds, compared to zero," Corey admitted. "Make it happen."

"Right, Captain." Oliver's voice sounded resigned. "Give me two minutes."

Corey went to the reinforced window of the control chamber and stared out at the depths, knowing he was about to die. He thought perhaps he'd see more of those exotic jellyfish bags, or something even stranger. It was small consolation to know that he was in a place no human being had ever seen.

"Sure isn't very friendly down here."

Then, flashes of static discharge illuminated the cloud decks, and he spotted shadowy shapes drifting among the dense mist—gigantic crystalline spheres, perfectly geometrical, studded with pyramid-shaped protrusions. The strange and impossible globes tumbled through the sky and approached the ruined skymine, as if... curious.

Corey stared. They were too perfect to be natural. Lightning bolts arced from the tips of the pyramid protrusions. He realized what he was seeing. “My God, they’re ships!”

But what sort of ships could be this far down in the depths of a gas giant? What could possibly survive down here?

Fire and leaking fuel continued to ooze out of the crumbling *Redheaded Stepchild*. Five more of the spiked globes closed in like a cluster of sinister bubbles coming to investigate a trespasser. Corey doubted that these ships had come to rescue him and his crew.

“It’s got to be now, Corey,” Oliver said over the intercom. “Hang on!”

Corey ran back to the comm. “Wait, there might be—”

“Ekti is flowing into the levitation engines. Supercharging, igniting...” A very long pause. “Oh, no.”

As the crystalline spheres drew close to the cloud trawler, the levitation engines exploded, unable to withstand the stardrive fuel. Gouts of flame and jets of compressed debris and molten fuel spewed out in all directions—striking the spiked globes.

The whole skymine lurched and tumbled. Enclosed in his armored command chamber, Corey pounded on the comm controls. “Oliver, are you all right? Anybody?”

He looked up to see the alien spheres pummeled by the debris and shockwave. They glowed incandescent, and arcs of building energy sparked from tip to tip of the pyramids. The energy gathered into a single discharge, a weapon! He realized that the explosion in the levitation engines might have appeared to be an attack on them. And whatever those strange, deep-core beings were, they were firing back.

The directed beam blasted the *Redheaded Stepchild*—ripping the cloud trawler apart.

As the impact threw Corey to the deck, he kept screaming, at the aliens, at Oliver, at the insanity. But nobody was listening.

The remnants of the *Redheaded Stepchild* broke apart, crushed in the high-pressure depths that snuffed out the burning fuel, but without all that weight the armored command chamber was like a soap bubble. It rose from the depths, accelerating.

Below him, the alien spheres launched a second blast at the cloud trawler’s wreckage.

Corey cried out, pressed flat against the deck by gravitational forces like an iron-heeled boot stepping on his chest. The thick, transparent windows began to crack. Thin fracture lines stuttered like lightning bolts across the panes.

“Rising... too... fast,” he gasped.

Finally, like a projectile fired from large artillery gun, the command chamber rocketed up through Daym’s upper cloud decks, tearing through the white and lavender gases until it reached equilibrium at the skymining level.

He knew everyone was dead on the cloud trawler, everyone he had left behind. Oliver, his engineers, the technical crew that had stayed, trying to save them. The Redheaded Stepchild was completely destroyed, partly from the explosion of the levitation engines and then finished by those crystalline alien globes, whoever—or whatever—they were.

Corey was drained and shaking, grieving for everything and everyone he had lost. But alive. The only one.

Safe.

*Safe?* he thought.

## Chapter 23

### Madeleine Robinson.

It was a standoff with the hundreds of black Klikiss robots. The awkward silence grew heavier, more sinister.

“What happens now, Mom?” Derek asked. They stood together on the shuttle’s extended ramp, facing the mechanical army that surrounded the camp. The sheer number of metallic beetles was intimidating.

Jacob hovered near his mother, obviously frightened. She pulled him close, but did not tear her eyes from all those glowing red optic sensors that shone from the beetlelike robots.

“Just because they’re big, strange, and scary doesn’t mean they’re going to hurt us,” she said, trying to convince herself as much as her sons. The mysterious robots extended sharp, powerful claws.

TZ piped up, “The Klikiss robots don’t know how to proceed. To the best of their knowledge, they have been dormant since their creator race vanished. They are surprised and somewhat unsettled to find us here.”

“We’re the ones who found *them*,” Derek said. “Somebody else sealed them up in those underground tunnels. We rescued them.”

Madeleine ventured forward as far as she dared, stopping at the bottom of the shuttle’s ramp; she wasn’t willing to walk among the Klikiss robots. All around the camp, Exxos and the rest of the black machines stood in silent communication with one another, discussing—planning?—in a language she could not hear.

After a long silence, the leader of the robots spoke again in his crisp metallic voice. “Now that we are awakened again, we wish to investigate. Your race is new to us.”

Like a choreographed troupe, the numerous robots straightened, extended their segmented limbs, opened their grasping claws. Exxos continued, “We need to acquire information.” With a lurching step on his clusters of fingerlike legs, the robot came closer to the shuttle. All of the Klikiss machines moved forward as well, closing in. “Acquire information by any means.”

Exxos reached toward where Madeleine stood with her two sons.

She had had enough. “Derek, Jacob—get inside the ship. We’re leaving!”

The boys didn’t need to be told twice. They ducked back into the Ildiran shuttle.

TZ suggested, “Perhaps I should stay and converse with them, Madeleine Robinson.”

As panic set in, she pushed the little compy up the ramp and inside. “Come on, TZ—hurry.” Once through the hatch, she withdrew the ramp. As Exxos and the robots reached the opening, she sealed it. With her last glimpse of the outside and the haunted alien city, she saw even more black robots streaming out of the ruined Klikiss towers.

Derek had already thrown himself into the piloting seat and activated the controls. The Klikiss robots closed around the ship, like a crowd pressing in, their red artificial eyes glowing. Madeleine shouted, “Forget the checklist boys—we’re getting the hell out of here!”

With a shudder that skittered down her spine, she heard scraping sounds against the outer hull, an increasing clatter as the robots searched for a way into the ship. “If we don’t go soon, they’ll damage the hull, and we’ll never make it to orbit!”

“Go, Derek! Let’s go!” Jacob yelled.

Derek punched the rocket engines, and the shuttle blasted exhaust, dust, and debris in all directions. As the fuel chambers heated up, the flames were bright and white. The hot burst scattered the robots below, knocking them aside as the shuttle lifted off the ground.

Several of the Klikiss robots had tumbled aside, but they squirmed and scrambled to right themselves. More waves of black robots pressed in, like ants from a stirred up colony.

“We got ‘em, Mom,” Jacob said.

“We got out of there alive—that’s the important part. I doubt we damaged those things,” she said. The black robots had been buried in the rocks for centuries and had survived intact; a blast of exhaust probably hadn’t destroyed them.

Looking down through the expanding exhaust cloud, Madeleine could see the burned remnants of their campsite that they had left behind. The samples, many of the records... but she had backed up most of the data onboard the shuttle. She hoped it would be enough to satisfy the Hansa. Would they accuse her of overreacting?

*Had she overreacted?*

She tried to control her pounding heartbeat as Derek guided the shuttle up into Llaro’s pastel sky. Madeleine kept trying to understand what the Klikiss robots had truly intended to do. They had dismantled the survey skimmer and could just as easily “dismantle” humans to study how the biology worked. From her perspective, the threat had been absolutely clear. She worried that they’d damaged the shuttle’s hull or the engines themselves when they pressed up against the craft, trying to get inside. At any moment, she expected to see flashing red lights on the diagnostic panels.

Derek flew them high above the dry landscape, finally reaching the starry black emptiness on the edge of space. She let out a quiet sigh of relief. “We can catch our breath and just cruise along in orbit while we wait for the Ildiran ship to pick us up. We’ve got life support and supplies for a few days.” According to the schedule, the Ildiran warliner was already en route to retrieve them.

“Fine with me,” Derek said. “I’ve seen all I want to see of that place.”

They could have gone to the other side of the continent, selected a new campsite, and continued their work for a few more days. It wasn't likely the Klikiss robots would find them... but how many robots remained on the planet? Madeleine wondered where the black machines had come from. She was just glad to be safely away from them.

For three days, the shuttle drifted in high orbit above Llaro.

Ever since the death of her husband, Madeleine's life had ricocheted like a metal ball through a maze, bouncing one direction then another, reacting, trying to salvage the situation, then bouncing again. She'd hoped this exploration mission would be a ticket to stability again. The boys had nearly been killed—and it had been her decision to bring them out here. "I'll make it up to you, boys. I promise."

Derek looked at her, perplexed. "We're all in it together, Mom. We did what we needed to."

Before she could say anything, the long-range sensors detected an Ildiran warliner approaching the planet. "Looks like the Septar's here to pick us up," Jacob said.

Madeleine picked up the comm and sent a message to the great warliner. "Boy, are we glad to see you."

The response was crisp, without any sense of humor. "Shuttle, prepare to enter docking bay."

Septar Gro'nh came to greet them himself as they emerged from their battered shuttle. He waited for them in the warliner's huge landing bay, curious to hear their report.

Jacob bubbled with excitement. "You won't believe what we found down there! We barely made it out alive."

Madeleine stepped away from the shuttle and paused, feeling a chill as she saw jagged scrapes and scratches on the outer hull. Her throat went dry. If those claws had grabbed onto her arms, or seized one of her sons...

*Had she overreacted?*

Septar Gro'nh greeted her. "I'm pleased that you have returned to us intact and safe."

She gave a snort. "If you Ildirans like stories, we've got a good one for you. Old alien ruins and big black robots and—"

Gro'nh crossed his arms over his chest. "Yes, Klikiss robots are the only remnants of that lost race. We have uncovered them elsewhere, but they tend to keep to themselves. They have assisted us at some difficult construction sites. We have no enmity toward them."

"I think they tried to kill us," Derek said.

"You may have misunderstood their intent."

Remembering how frightened she had been, Madeleine raised her voice more than she should have. "Why didn't you warn us about the robots, if you knew they existed? All you said was that Llaro had abandoned Klikiss ruins. We could have been better prepared. Why didn't you warn us?"

The Septar did not seem concerned. "They are part of a different story, not ours. Perhaps human historians and archeologists can learn more about the Klikiss

saga at some later time.” Apparently not interested in talking further, he excused himself and returned to the warliner’s command nucleus.

After Madeleine, Derek and Jacob found their temporary quarters, TZ dutifully helped put away their packed belongings, unfazed by the entire incident.

Madeleine had a heavy heart, and both of the boys looked restless and disappointed. Derek threw himself on one of the bunks. “Has this whole expedition been a flop, Mom?”

On the bunk across from him, she pulled her knees up to her chest. She was relieved to be heading away from Llaro, but she didn’t want her sons so discouraged. “No, Derek. We have my reports and plenty of images—not the thorough package I wanted to give to the Hansa, but the discoveries we made will be valuable to archeologists at least. I did keep all the records, the survey grids, the geological maps, and with all those ruins, scraps of alien technology, even those robots themselves, somebody’s going to pay us a hefty finder’s fee.”

The boys looked relieved to hear it. Jacob kicked Derek in the knee with a stockinged foot. Derek jabbed his brother with his elbow. Yes, Madeleine thought, *things were getting back to normal*.

“Maybe we’ll even earn enough money to make another try at this.”

## Chapter 24

### Chairman Malcolm Stannis.

King Ben claimed to be exhausted and feeling under the weather—an obvious excuse to avoid talking with Chairman Stannis. No doubt Ben had made himself sick with anxiety, fearing a severe reprimand from the Chairman... and with good reason.

But Stannis did not plan to raise his voice, would not shout or threaten. He was past that now. A stern lecture or angry scolding would accomplish nothing. The decision was made.

He arrived at the King’s chambers to find the old man already in bed, probably hiding, but King Ben had no choice but to receive his visitor. Stannis walked in calmly, carrying a tray that held a white porcelain pot of steaming tea and two cups. Not what the King expected at all.

Looking like a startled rabbit, Ben sat up against his pillows. “Malcolm, you brought tea!”

“Chamomile tea.”

“One of my favorites—it’ll calm my stomach.” Surprised but pleased, Ben smiled as Stannis set the tray on a bedside table. “My digestion has been off lately. Too much stress, I suppose.” He swallowed visibly, stroked his long white beard, then looked away. “I thought you might come here to scold me again.” He sounded like a little boy.

Stannis picked up the pot of tea and poured a cup for the King and one for himself. He said in a soft voice, “There’s no need for us to shout at each other, Ben. But you do know I’m upset with you.”

"I know, I know. I get caught up in the moment. There's just too much to keep track of. I really don't mean half the things I say." He waved a hand in the air.

Stannis handed him the cup and picked up his own. "Unfortunately, you aren't just a babbling old uncle. You are the King, so every word you say means something."

"I realize that." King Ben's voice grew even smaller. "But reaffirming Theron independence was the right thing to do. If they don't want to join the Hansa, we don't have any claim on them." He seemed to be begging the Chairman to understand. The King took a drink of his tea, and his nervous hands made it rattle against the saucer. "The colonists on that generation ship left Earth a century and a half ago, and they always intended to be self-reliant. We can't renege now."

"Of course not." Stannis raised the cup to his lips and sipped the hot tea. "Perfectly understandable." He swirled the cup around, took another drink. "No one could argue with your logic."

The King wrapped his hands around his own cup, smiling. With painfully obvious relief, he gulped the tea. "I'm so relieved, Malcolm." He frowned down at the hot liquid in his cup. "Are you certain this is chamomile?"

"Yes, Ben, I made it myself." Stannis took a third drink, standing aloof next to the King's bed.

"It has a strange flavor... bitter."

"It tastes fine to me." Stannis shrugged. "But then I've already taken the antidote."

Ben's eyes widened. He looked down at his cup, and his hands started to tremble and convulse. He opened and closed his mouth, but Stannis knew the old man didn't have anything important to say. King Ben began to choke.

He dropped the cup to the floor, where it shattered on the stone tiles next to the bedside rug. The tea leaked out in an expanding puddle and was absorbed by the fabric of the rug.

Stannis watched and waited. According to his research, the poison was quick and supposedly painless—a last little favor he gave to the King in appreciation for his thirty-three years of service.

Ben dropped back against his pillow, where he continued to spasm and twitch, but he went quiet and motionless within minutes. Stannis waited a while longer just to be sure, then left the royal chambers.

"Sleep well, my King," he said.

Someone would find the old man soon enough.

## **Chapter 25**

### **Dobro Designate Rekar'h.**

They buried Chrysta and the unborn child on a grassy hillside overlooking the colony town that she had helped build.

Chrysta had died in his arms and his heart had died with her, along with his dreams, his plans. Rekar'h had loved her, understood her... but he did not

understand the rest of these humans, or what drove them. And he certainly did not love them—not after what they had done to her.

Stunned and lost, he tried to take comfort in the *thism*, but the Designate no longer found comfort in anything. He had blocked the rest of the world away.

Their baby was murdered as well—the first successful joining of human and Ildiran. The madman's weapon blast had burned a hole so large in Chrysta's abdomen that the medical kithmen could not even tell whether the child would have been a boy or a girl.

Rekar'h hunched over her gravesite on the grassy hill, ignoring the surrounding night. Harsh blazers from the Ildiran settlement and the human colony town washed illumination across the starry sky, shedding enough light that the Designate could huddle alone and stare at the holographic gravestone he had placed there for Chrysta. Normally, the darkness should have made him uneasy, but now his pain drove away any hint of fear.

Chrysta...

The grave marker held a shimmering image of her face taken from preservation imagers, and he could see how beautiful she had been: her honey-blond hair, her perfect features, the quirky and somewhat secretive smile that she had whenever she was about to tell him something.

He reached out to touch the grave marker. "I studied your culture, Chrysta, and I think this is what you would have wanted." He drew a deep breath, felt a shudder go through his chest. "But what I wanted was to spend more of my life with you... and our child, maybe our children. They could have been the first of new hope for our races, strong and beloved hybrids, the best of both of us." His voice grew harder. "Now everything will change."

The murder of Chrysta had sent resounding shockwaves through his psyche, through his heart. None of these others mattered to him.

He would accomplish the Mage-Imperator's commands in a way that would guarantee results. He did not need to be compassionate or flexible, only to ensure that humans and Ildirans interbred, that their genetics were studied carefully, viable halfbreeds documented and measured; all kiths had to be studied.

It could have been so much easier...

Now, he would see to it that the breedings occurred in an organized and well-documented fashion, with no room for compromise, no room for mercy. The humans, all captives now, would do as he commanded, as the Mage-Imperator commanded. What the Burton refugees wanted meant nothing to him anymore. Chrysta Logan was the only human to whom he had felt close, and she was gone. The rest of them were just experimental subjects.

Designate Rekar'h straightened from where he knelt, looking at the lights in the human town. By his order, armed guard kithmen surrounded the perimeter, keeping the humans separated from Ildirans. The once-happy colonists were cowed and most definitely not forgiven. He blamed them all.

Carrying blazers now, Ildiran soldiers walked through the human settlement. They had rounded up all of the BURTON colonists, marking and tracking them, keeping them contained. Worker kithmen had spent the past two days planting posts, stringing wires and bars, transforming the human settlement from a colony to a camp.



He reached down to touch the holographic image of Chrysta's face. "I'm sorry for everything that happened," he whispered, but that was the last glimmer of remorse he allowed himself. The rest of his compassion had been snuffed out along with her life. He did not even consider a middle ground. "This is how it must be."

When he returned to the camp, the guards had completed their latest perimeter sweep. Survey craft flew overhead, shining down pools of illumination to make sure no human tried to flee. The Dobro Designate would not give them the opportunity to run out into the darkness and hide.

"We have confiscated the last of the human weapons, Designate," said the chief of the guard kithmen. "We even seized tools that could be used against us."

"Good. And you have also taken away all personal possessions, all mementos? Remove every last trace."

From the brightly lit area near the fence, he saw the humans staring at him with wide eyes and frightened expressions. Mothers held their children close.

By the Mage-Imperator's command, the surge of emphasis that the *thism* had wrapped around him in his greatest weakness of grief, Rekar'h had been altered. Now he saw these captive humans only as healthy breeding subjects. He walked among the BURTON refugees, unafraid. Seven armed guard kithmen strode beside him.

They had to understand the changed situation. They had to know there was no longer any hope for them. Looking at them, he spoke loudly; the anguish in his heart made his voice raw. "Humans!" Most of them were silent, a few whimpered in dismay, but he had no sympathy. "No one knows you are on Dobro. No one from Earth will ever look for you here. No one. Earth believes your generation ship was lost on its voyage. Your derelict vessel will be towed out to the fringe of the Dobro system, where it will never be found."

His voice was a ragged whisper, mimicking regret that he did not feel. "Things could have been so much different between our races, but now you and all of your descendants must pay the price for this terrible crime." Anger roiled from him like the winds of a dry storm. "We could have been friends and allies, but your own violence ripped it from my fingers!"

He glared at a small, dark-skinned human boy, no more than ten years old, who had large brown eyes. For a moment, with a ghost-memory of Chrysta, he let the tiniest glimmer of compassion touch his heart, but the *thism* made him stronger, and he crushed it under the bootheel of other emotions. "Henceforth, you will serve the Mage-Imperator's interests. All of you are now material for our breeding experiments. You will interbreed with Ildiran kiths as *I* choose. If you do not cooperate, we will use force."

He had already issued commands for the colonists to be separated into groups of males and females, who would be further categorized according to their racial types, the human version of "kiths," although their variations were far more subtle. Blood had been drawn from every single person in order to build a catalog of DNA maps.

The people shrank away, unable to believe what he was saying. One man gathered the nerve to argue. "But Dario Ramirez didn't represent us. We don't condone what he did to Captain Logan! He was a mutineer, a troublemaker, a—"

Rekar'h pointed to the man who had spoken, as if his fingers were spears. "His actions demonstrate your race's underlying flaw. No Ildiran would kill an Ildiran! How can we trust any of you? Where there is one, there could be others. Security measures must be imposed."

As he stood in the uneasy crowd, heavy shadows cast a veil across the stunned faces, even though bright blazers illuminated the camp. At the far edge of the crowd, he glimpsed a blond-haired woman who turned quickly away; his heart pounded as he pushed forward, thinking that he had seen Chrysta... but his eyes were deceiving him. When the blond woman looked back at him, not just in fear but in disgust, the Designate knew he would never see Chrysta again.

He raised his hand blazer high. "By order of my father, the Mage-Imperator, you are genetic fodder. We will have generations to determine your usefulness to the empire."

His eyes burned, and he knew he was finished. He had had enough. He turned and stalked away from the human breeding camp, left the fences as the guard kithmen hurried to keep up; they pushed the prisoners away so that the Designate's passage was unhindered.

Without looking back he walked to his brightly lit residence, the beautiful home he had shared with Chrysta... which was now empty.

## Chapter 26

### Sara Becker.

The clouds of Daym looked placid and calm, deceptively peaceful, as if the planet wanted to erase all evidence of the disaster.

After the destruction of the *Redheaded Stepchild*, Sara Becker tried to keep the clan survivors together as they waited for rescue. During the first hours of the emergency, Sara had organized the evacuation of the wrecked cloud trawler, following the emergency plans she herself had developed. Corey Kellum never knew half of what she did as ops manager aboard the facility, but he never questioned her abilities. Sara had always been happy to shoulder the administrative responsibility, pulled the clans together, and helped them to be strong and successful.

Now she had to save them all. The KANAKA clans had become experts at innovation, doing the impossible. And there was a lot of Impossible to be done.

Nearly a thousand workers and their families had successfully evacuated from the *Redheaded Stepchild*. Every cargo ship, scout flyer, shuttlecraft had been crowded with people; even levitating supply boxes were pressed into service. Most of the makeshift lifeboats were never meant to carry passengers, certainly not for any length of time, but the doomed cloud trawler gave them no choice. Against all odds, nearly everyone had gotten away... except for Corey Kellum and the few

dozen engineers who stayed behind as the facility plummeted into the murky depths.

It had been a difficult few hours before the first wave of scrambled rescue craft arrived from Daym's other two cloud trawlers, but the KANAKA clans always pulled together. Sara directed the operations from the cockpit of her own survey skimmer, ordering the retrieval ships to save the people in the levitating cargo boxes first, which had minimal life-support capabilities. After they filled their holds with evacuees, the rescue ships raced back to the nearest cloud trawler, delivered them to waiting relief personnel, then returned to round up another batch of castaways.

The ships retrieved all the lifeboats they could find, then scoured the clouds, dropping deep to find any desperate vessels without locator beacons. As soon as she had caught her breath, Sara refueled a small ship and went back to the disaster site herself. And refueled again, and went back.

They found no sign of Corey Kellum or his last few crewmembers. Though it had been three days, Sara hadn't given up hope—not entirely. She knew Corey was too tough and resilient to let a mere crashing skymine stop him.

The last rescue crews crisscrossed the cloud decks. Only six hours ago, a ship had found one cargo box that had gotten separated from the rest. Its batteries waning, life support nearly gone, the sealed cargo box with forty-seven people aboard had drifted deeper and deeper, almost out of communication range, but they had been snagged just in time. Though nearly comatose, freezing and suffocating, the survivors had pulled together to conserve every last bit of energy and air, believing someone would save them.

And they had been saved.

But three days...

Sara was nothing if not organized. Refusing to give up, she flew the scout craft accompanied by three other searchers in close radio contact, separated widely enough that they could cover more of Daym's empty skies. Lavender and gray clouds billowed all around them, but Sara saw nothing out of the ordinary. No signal. No wreckage. No sign of any survivors. She kept looking.

Back at the two intact cloud trawlers, some people had suggested withdrawing the search crews, but Sara insisted on continuing the full effort for at least one more day. Refueled ships with fresh crews had been dispatched, and they combed the open skies near the coordinates where the *Redheaded Stepchild* had sunk.

Still no sign. Nothing.

Sara was needed back at the other two facilities. Someone had to make arrangements for the crew and families that had been evacuated from the destroyed cloud trawler. Though the Daym system was near Ildira, no cargo ships were due to arrive for at least a week. It was going to be crowded for a while, but not intolerable.

Maybe the Solar Navy would disperse some of the KANAKA refugees elsewhere, yet again. Clans could work on different cloud trawlers on other gas giant planets. She hoped the disaster of the *Redheaded Stepchild* would not make the Ildirans reconsider their offer to let the clans run *ekti* harvesting operations.

Sara told herself that her people would find a way. The scrappy clan members would seek out any available niche, live in places that others would consider

uninhabitable, do tasks that even the lowliest Ildiran kiths did not want to do. “We can always cobble together a solution,” she muttered to herself as she flew along, dredging the optimism from deep within herself.

And like magic, as soon as she said that, she noticed a circular speck against the gauzy cloud banks—something floating.

She signaled the other flyers. “There! I’m detecting something.” She changed course and swooped in. As she approached, she saw that it was an armored sphere, floating at equilibrium. “It’s the control chamber—and there’s a survivor. I see somebody!” A man had emerged from the upper hatch and stood in the open air, waving. He appeared desperate and weak.

Sara dipped her wings as a signal to him, then circled around with hair-fine altitude adjustments, drawing as close as possible. When she used the voice amplifier, her words boomed out into the empty, echoing skies. “Hold on—we’ve got you.” She lowered a ladder from the bottom hatch of the search craft so he could climb aboard. “Is there anyone else?”

Through the voice pickup she barely heard him. “No. Just me... only me.” Though he was smeared with soot and grease, his hair bedraggled, his colorful shirt and pants torn, she recognized Corey Kellum. After one look at him, she transmitted to her partner ships as well as the distant cloud trawler, “We’ve snagged one survivor. Looks like we’ll need a medical team.”

The response came, both pleased and surprised. “You *found* one?”

“Yes—and it’s Corey.”

He was jittery and dehydrated, and she had to support him by the arm to drag him aboard. “Come on, let’s get you some water and some calories.” Slumping into a seat, he accepted the water and the energy goo she squeezed into his mouth. He looked weak from exposure, but worse than that—he seemed dazed and shaken to the core. His eyes had a distant, haunted look, and his mouth was partly open, as if an invisible hand had reached inside and torn out all the words that were within him.

“We’ve got you. You’re safe now,” she said in a soothing voice. He met her gaze but seemed to stare right through her. “Don’t you recognize me? It’s Sara—Sara Becker. Can you tell me what happened down there?”

“Terrible things...” he said in a low whisper, a private comment, as if he didn’t want anyone else on the planet to hear him. “Monsters... deep below.” A flicker of fear like a lightning bolt crossed his face.

Sara threw herself back into the pilot seat and raced toward the nearest cloud trawler. Corey needed medical attention, though he appeared uninjured except for a few scrapes and bruises.

He continued talking in a ragged, awed voice, “And I saw ships down there. Huge ships.” He spoke in an urgent voice, as if he didn’t expect Sara to believe him. “Giant spiked spheres, like nothing I’ve ever seen. Far, far below.” He kept trying to describe things to her that made no sense.

When Sara docked aboard the cloud trawler, a medical team was waiting on the open deck. Sara helped Corey walk away from the scout ship. “Giant spiked spheres,” he said again. “Alien ships. They opened fire. They destroyed the sky mine... killed everyone.”

"You're safe now, Corey," she said as the med techs helped him lie on a stretcher. "Just calm down. Rest." He collapsed as if he simply could not endure any more; he'd held on just long enough to give them that warning.

After the medical team was gone, Sara stood on the edge of the landing deck, looking across the vast ocean of purplish clouds. One of the med techs came up to her, although she didn't want any company.

"After all that man has been through, it's no wonder he's paranoid or mad," the med tech said. "Maybe he can give us the real story later."

Sara looked at the med tech. "Corey's not crazy."

"You don't really think he saw anything down there, do you? After so much stress, isolation, explosions, exposure, survivor's guilt—he's not thinking clearly right now."

She gazed into the cloud decks of Daym, the vapor swirls slowly shifted and parted, creating a transient canyon down into deeper layers of clouds. She saw a few ominous lighting strikes, caught a glimpse of shadows down there, like a bruise that spread and then faded. More mysterious flashes, probably static discharges from cloud friction.

Sara shook her head, knowing she was just letting her imagination go wild. In her mind, those placid, majestic skies now carried a sinister edge. Corey Kellum was not a man to tell tall tales, but there was no proof.

The chill breeze picked up. She turned and followed the med tech back into the shelter of the skymine. "I wonder if we might be better off harvesting ekti on other gas giants—if the Ildirans let us." She drew a deep breath and added, "Maybe we should just leave Daym alone."

## **Chapter 27**

### **Thara Wen.**

It was a sad and tragic day on Earth.

At daybreak, the news rippled like a brewing storm through the corridors of the Whisper Palace, reaching the sunny visitors' quarters of the three Theron ambassadors. First, servants and functionaries spread rumors, and then an official crier strode down the halls calling out in a loud voice heavy with grief, "The King is dead! King Ben is dead!"

Thara and her companions were already unsettled from the strange experience of Earth, awestruck by the giant Whisper Palace built of stone and glass and steel, larger even than an overarching worldtree. After living in close quarters aboard the CAILLIÉ generation ship, then building the forest village with prefab structures and new homes in the gigantic trees, Thara Wen had been unprepared for the vastness of Earth's cities—the buildings, the people, the wide-open spaces far from any dense concentrations of trees. It had been dizzying.

Inside the Whisper Palace, the tiled floors were cold beneath her bare feet, hard and lifeless. She could stand in front of the stained-glass windows and feel the magnified warmth of sunlight on her green skin, but it wasn't the same as sitting

on the high canopy among the sun-dappled fronds, reading or telling stories to the worldforest mind.

On their second day after arriving, Thara and her two companions had been taken to see one of Earth's forests. Their tourguide was proud to show them the natural wonders on Earth, although Thara found the forest lacking, the trees so small and silent without the connection of the worldforest mind she had come to expect from Theroc.

And now King Ben, the benevolent old leader who had shown such kindness to the people of Theroc, had perished in his sleep.

Malcolm Stannis, the Chairman of the Terran Hanseatic League, made a courtesy visit to the Theron guest quarters. He wore a dark and presumably stylish business suit that covered so much of him—the people on Earth wore so many clothes that they all seemed to be hiding something. Previously, Stannis had spoken little to her, and now he seemed rushed and harried, with other business to attend to.

"I'm sure you've heard the criers already," Stannis said. "King Ben died peacefully in his sleep last night. The doctors found him this morning with a calm expression on his face. He did good work for Earth and for the Hansa. We're glad you had a chance to speak with him before his passing."

Thara nodded. "He did a great thing by reaffirming Theroc's independence for all time. We cannot say how much we appreciate this."

A shadow crossed the Chairman's face, and his lips pressed together. She sensed he was suppressing more anger than grief, and she couldn't understand why.

Ignoring her words of thanks, Stannis said in a preoccupied voice, "Again, we are saddened by this unexpected tragedy. When you return to Theroc, please bear the message that the Hansa wishes to cooperate with your colony. With our common background, we should have very close ties."

"It will be several weeks before we arrive back home, Mr. Chairman," Thara said. "But we will share all that we have seen and learned."

Stannis was impatient to be about his business. He had spent all the time he intended to give them, and so after a brief, courteous farewell he hurried away into the Whisper Palace.

By noon, palace technicians and decorators had erected a formal bier surrounded by colored, prismatic panels, an enclosure where the old monarch lay in state in the middle of the Throne Hall. In repose, his long beard combed, his gray locks arranged around his face, King Ben wore deep purple robes. Large crowds were already filing into the Throne Hall of the Whisper Palace to bid farewell to their beloved monarch.

Feeling lonely and very far from the worldforest, Thara carried the potted treeling, which she had retrieved from the Whisper Palace conservatory. She took comfort in being close to even this small trace of the great trees.

She and her two companions were among the first to walk up the stone steps and pay their final respects to King Ben. She saw the old man's peaceful, benevolent face. "For a powerful leader of so many worlds," she said to the other two green priests, "he had a gentle heart and he did good things for us."

When they returned to Theroc, Thara would tell the story to all of her people, but the Ildiran ship ferrying them was not due to return for several weeks, and normal signal transmissions would take decades to cross the light years to the Theron system. They had no faster way to send the message.

Leader Brovnik would learn the news when it was time. Their independence was secure. Although Thara longed to share the information, she longed even more to be back in touch with the worldforest mind, where her thoughts could drift through the wealth of information inside the interconnected branches and roots. If she had been among the trees, she could have shared everything she had experienced, could have told the other green priests all she had seen and learned on Earth. Such things could not be changed.

As she and her companions walked past the body of King Ben, Thara absently stroked the delicate fronds in the potted treeling she held in her arms. One day, this little sprig would become a towering worldtree...

As her fingers touched the fronds and she concentrated deeply, thinking of the vast worldforest, she suddenly felt a jolt in her mind, the same connection she always experienced when she touched one of the great trees back on Theroc. Even though she was many light years away on an entirely different planet, the simple fact of touching this tiny treeling somehow connected her with the whole worldforest, just as if she were right there, surrounded by the gigantic trunks!

In an instant, she sensed the forest and the trees, vivid images inside her head. With her eyes closed, Thara could *smell* the scents of the underbrush, the sun-warmed canopy. She could hear numerous green priests reading poetry or singing to the trees... light years away, and yet so close.

And when she spoke aloud from the Throne Hall of the Whisper Palace, her words were carried through the connection among the trees, instantly emerging so that any green priest on the forest planet heard her immediately and clearly.

"King Ben is dead on Earth," she said.

Through her internal eyes and the senses of the trees, Thara touched dozens of other priests who perked up, hearing her news as clearly as if she had spoken across a room. "But before he died, the King granted Theroc its independence forever."

The green priests received her message and raced to tell Leader Brovnik down in the forest village. Thara was amazed to see the effect her distant but instantaneous message had. She was far away, but still connected, still part of the forest.

Leaving the somber wake, she and her companions retreated to a private, sunlit alcove at the edge of the Throne Hall. Thara could barely contain her excitement, and the others sensed it. They sat together, huddled as if in grief, resting the potted treeling on a bench in front of them. Breathless and eager to share the secret, she had them each touch the fronds.

"It's as if the tree's mind is in both places at once," she said. "By touching the treeling, my thoughts were there... and everywhere the trees were."

In her mind, she listened to one of the green priests talking to Norris Brovnik. "I could hear Thara Wen directly through the worldtree! Her message came instantly to me, even though she's far away on Earth."

Thara looked at her companions in the alcove, and their eyes shone as they understood the enormous implications of what they had just discovered.

"The gulf of space no longer has any meaning. The trees are like mental relays. No matter where we go, no matter on which planet or star system we happen to visit, we can communicate through the worldforest to other green priests, wherever they may be—as long as we have a treeling."

She looked across the vast Throne Hall and saw Chairman Stannis take his place beside the body of the King lying in state. He hung his head and spoke to the mourning crowds in a firm, serious voice, "We are here to bid farewell to our beloved King Ben." Through media imagers, his words were transmitted all across Earth, much the way Thara's thoughts were dispersed among the distant worldtrees.

The more she thought about it the more she grasped the significance of what she had discovered. Such instantaneous communication might change everything in a network of human colonies across incredible distances—but only green priests could communicate with the worldforest.

"If the Hansa plans to expand their operations and travel to many planets across the Spiral Arm, they would very much want to have such an ability," Thara said.

Yes, the Therons had their independence, but Thara wasn't sure what that meant. "Do I dare tell the Hansa?" she asked, looking at her companions. "With something so important, can we trust Chairman Stannis?"

She decided they would keep the news private, for now.

## **Chapter 28**

### **Chairman Malcolm Stannis.**

For the good of the Hansa...

The funeral preparations for King Ben were a distraction from his critical work. Even as he went through the motions, Chairman Stannis was preoccupied, pondering the myriad decisions and appointments he would have to make, the transitional committees he had to oversee, the public appearances he would be forced to make so that he could show the stability of the Terran Hanseatic League. Stannis considered the public role a nuisance; speaking before great crowds was supposed to be the King's responsibility.

While the people mourned and hundreds of pundits gave their eulogies and reminiscences of King Ben's long reign, Chairman Stannis had dispatched OX. "Go inform George. Circumstances forced our hand, and we'll have to move more swiftly than we had planned."

The little compy nodded. "I have done my best to prepare George to be the new King, and I will continue to instruct him after he is crowned. I believe he has the potential to be a wise and beloved leader, just like King Ben."

"Yes, just like King Ben," Stannis said without enthusiasm. "Make sure he knows his role."



The boy had willingly entered the bargain, allowing himself to be groomed and trained, and now he had everything he could possibly want. Stannis hoped he had made the right decision. It would be far too difficult now to find and prepare another candidate. The redheaded boy with the endearing freckles would have to do...

Stannis rubbed his chin, organizing his thoughts and prioritizing what he would do for the next several days. So much to take care of! First, there was King Ben's funeral. After that he could get on with more important things.

On Prince George's Coronation Day, the crowds swelled to fill the main plaza in front of the Whisper Palace. The people stood shoulder to shoulder, standing on tiptoes and craning their necks toward the high balcony of the newly finished King's Tower.

Adjacent to the Throne Hall and out of view from the spectators, George was surrounded by ten attendants bustling about, primping him, checking his hair, adding makeup, adjusting his clothes. For the unveiling of the new King, every detail had to be perfect.

OX accompanied the Chairman. The compy was an excellent teacher and had done his job well. Although Stannis did not usually attribute human emotions to a competent computerized companion, he thought OX seemed somewhat anxious.

"The scheduled beginning of the Coronation Ceremony was twenty-eight minutes ago, Chairman Stannis. The crowds outside are growing restless."

Normally, Stannis preferred to follow a precise agenda, but not today. "No great ceremony ever begins on time, OX. The King must be seen as more important than any of them." He looked out at the sea of humanity below and smiled. Every detail had been attended to. More than a hundred people were involved just in planning the sequence of events. "We promised them a great show, one even the Ildirans would admire. This will be remembered for a long time, OX. We have to deliver what we promised."

His aide, Liam Hector, came to report. "The Prince is almost ready, Mr. Chairman. Just a few finishing touches."

"Is the boy nervous?" Stannis said.

"I believe so, but not paralyzed by it. He'll be fine."

"Good. I want him to feel the edge, but to do his duty. OX, are you sure he's been prepped sufficiently for his debut? He can deliver the speech?" Stannis had been personally involved in composing the King's coronation talk. He had worked meticulously on every word the boy would utter.

The compy said, "I have rehearsed the script with him quite carefully, Chairman Stannis." Stannis thought he heard a hint of pride in the synthesized voice. "I believe you'll be quite pleased with my student, sir."

"I'm counting on it."

Outside in the Palace District, loud fanfare announced the imminent appearance of the new King. Inside the Whisper Palace, a long red carpet had been rolled out, leading up the stairs toward the beautiful new throne, a completely different design, more polished, comfortable, and modestly sized so that the young boy wouldn't look so awkward.

Only a few days earlier, King Ben had lain in state here, but all those depressing trappings were gone now. This was a bright, sunny day; every observer had to remember it as a new dawn for the Terran Hanseatic League.

A voice echoed from loudspeakers all around the square, “All hail Crown Prince Georgel!”

With a roar like a surging wave, the people cheered and applauded. The freckle-faced boy in fine robes and an ermine-lined cape, holding a scepter that had been resized for his height, walked forward. His expression was tightly composed; Stannis thought he looked regal, with only a hint of stage fright in his eyes. George proceeded forward exactly as he had been rehearsed to do.

Stannis watched the show from an observation gallery, and OX remained with him. He said to the compy, “The very future of the human race rests on how we handle the next few years, OX. We have to do everything right.”

After he ascended the stairs to his new throne, George turned and addressed the crowd. His young voice was carefully modulated with true conviction. “My mission is to keep the Hanseatic League strong and profitable—for the good of all mankind. I will use every resource available to me. I will watch over my people and see that they are fruitful and spread across the Spiral Arm to bring prosperity not only here to Earth but to countless new worlds—new homes for our race.”

He raised his chin and the people cheered. In a slow and ponderous display, as if weighted down by the sheer import of his actions, the gaudily robed Archfather, head of the corporate church, uttered the formal declaration, then placed the crown on the young man’s head, to deafening applause.

With the new crown seated firmly in place, King George leaned back in the throne and looked perfectly at home there.

Even Stannis was impressed. “Yes, OX, I think this new King will have a long and successful reign.”

From his seat, King George squared his shoulders and looked out at the crowd as if he noticed every single person in the crowd individually. A nice touch.

“We will have a satisfactory and constructive relationship,” Stannis said. “If he can behave himself.”

## Afterword

From its inception, the *Saga of Seven Suns* has been closely linked with comics. During the long development process for the huge series, the worldbuilding and creation of the character backgrounds, I hired excellent comic artist Igor Kordey to help me visualize the key elements. Igor designed the Klikiss robots, the Prism Palace, Ildiran costumes and kiths, Roamer skymines, the Whisper Palace, and the hydrogue warglobes.

I had worked with Igor before on a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* graphic novel, *The Gorn Crisis*, cowritten with Rebecca Moesta, for Wildstorm Comics, and Igor also painted the covers for my *Star Wars: Tales of the Jedi* comic series, *Redemption*. Rebecca and I also tapped into his talent and imagination to visualize parts of our *Crystal Doors* Trilogy.

After reading my original outline and proposal for the *Saga of Seven Suns*, Igor dove into the project and sent me faxed sketches of his concepts, which in turn sparked ideas

of my own, which led to more sketches and full paintings from Igor. Many of the Saga's storylines and characters grew directly out of these brainstorming sessions.

As I began writing the novels and continued my work in the comics field, I showed some of the development artwork to my editors at Wildstorm Comics. Since this epic science fiction series is so visual, I thought a graphic novel would make an excellent companion, and I sold Wildstorm an original graphic novel, a prequel to the series called *Veiled Alliances*.

Because Igor had other artistic commitments, we went with the artist Robert Teranishi to do all the interiors. Stephen Youll, who had painted the initial covers for the novel series, also painted the cover for the graphic novel. I thought it was a great story, and I was very pleased with how it turned out. Years later, however, the graphic novel is hard to find, and it never received wide distribution outside the U.S.

Having finished my Terra Incognita fantasy trilogy, I turned my imagination back to the Seven Suns universe so that I could begin work on the sequel trilogy I'd always kept in mind, *The Saga of Shadows*. But it's been ten years since I wrote *Hidden Empire*, the first novel in the Saga of Seven Suns, and I realized I needed some time and practice to get up to speed on the big fictional universe I had created.

What better way to get my head back into that universe, I thought, than to write something new? And I realized that the story told in the *Veiled Alliances* graphic novel was a perfect place for me to practice.

Since the majority of fans of the *Saga of Seven Suns* didn't have a chance to read the graphic novel, and I felt the story was important enough to revisit it. I developed it into a full-fledged original novella, a vital prequel that lays the foundations for all of the groups and conflicts that make up the Saga.

For me as a writer, revisiting *Veiled Alliances* served its purpose extremely well. I was thrilled to return to the Roamer skymines, the breeding camp on Dobro, see the origin of the green priests on Theroc, spend time with the old Teacher compy, OX, another scheming Chairman of the Terran Hanseatic League, and its first Great King. Writing *Veiled Alliances* also gave me a chance to drop in a few hints of what will be appearing in the Saga of Shadows, a next-generation story that begins twenty years after *The Ashes of Worlds*.

Telling a story with images and dialogue balloons is very different from having the freedom to describe scenes and write conversations without limitations. I was able to add a lot more character background and depth to the inner dialog and history. Readers may notice some variations between this novella and the graphic novel version—a rearrangement of scenes and timing, expanded or altered dialogue—but the story is the same.

I hope you enjoy it, and I hope it whets your appetite for the Saga of Shadows. I promise another spectacular galaxy-spanning story with many characters, worlds, creatures, and conflicts—as well as special effects as good as only your imagination can create.

