

VINAKTI DUET  
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Chapter One

"Legend says that the winds off the sand dunes can rip the flesh from a loxodon in less than an hour. Most humanoids don't survive more ten minutes in a dune hurricane." the red-bearded enforcement officer told the recruit who stood before him. "Take my advice, son, and don't get caught out there when the winds whip up."

"My body armor is designed to withstand almost anything, sir," the new soldier replied politely, a grin hidden behind his helmet's faceplate.

"The key word here is *almost*, trooper. Those winds are the exception your drill instructors don't know about."

"The pre-touchdown briefing discussed Damson's extreme climates, giving strong warnings about both the sand winds and the planet's aboriginals, Sheriff Sharpell."

"Aboriginals? Is that what they're calling the Sabulum this year? Those off-worlders don't even know how they survive out in that desert, let alone how dangerous they can be, boy." Sharpell smiled and gave a paternal slap on the Royal trooper's black armored shoulder. "So, just don't get caught in the sand when the winds begin to blow."

"I'll be careful, sir."

"You'll be dead."

With a stern look, Mickey Sharpell sidestepped the recruit and continued on his way through the sandy-colored stucco corridor that typified the streets of Samphire. He'd seen a few salvaged bodies -- just bones actually -- that had been recovered after one of the great desert's blows. He preferred to never see another, but knew as long as he commanded the law enforcement in the desert town, he would see the stripped remains again and again. He no longer suffered nightmares from those aspects of his duties, and belittled himself briefly for becoming too callused. Having vowed never to allow that as

a younger man, Sharpell found it increasingly difficult to react to the atrocities caused by some of the scum who sometimes inhabited his town.

Moving quickly through the blistering midday heat, Sharpell strode to a particular establishment, shuffled down the entranceway stairs and into the relative cool of the interior. As his eyes adjusted to the low light level, he quickly scanned the bar for initial hostilities. There were none. Few patrons huddled over their drinks, talking quietly, most seemingly unconcerned by the sheriff's arrival. He hurried to the bar where the barman, Big Mark, pointed toward the rear exit. Sharpell altered his course and made for the back door that he knew led to a small supply room, restrooms, and the cantina's only other exit.

As he stepped into the supply room the stench of stale beer stung his nose. Looking around he saw the two small desert-cloaked figures cowering in the far corner between several kegs of ale and compressed air. One of them stretched out on the concrete floor, unmoving, while the other leaned over, jabbering and fussing with a blood soaked cloth.

"Where's that med team?" Sharpell growled at his wrist comm.

"ETA in 2 point 4 minutes," a mechanical voice informed him as he stepped closer to the one meter-high Zante s.

"Want to tell me what happened?" he asked the small Zante, kneeling over its injured friend.

The Zante pulled wearily to its feet before responding with a fury of shouts, snorts, and assorted sounds that Sharpell had difficulty deciphering.

"Slow down. Slow down, now," he said, raising his hands as if to fend off the verbal attack. "Okay, so you were scavenging out by the Great Dune, right? And another sand prowler came along side you."

"*Rwabble ifnits farcunasa*," the Zante said.

"Looked different, eh? How?"

The little Zante spewed out several sentences about the odd lack of the usual markings on the other sand prowler, and how it had intercepted the prowler. On the floor, the wounded Zante moaned and rolled in pain, his eye lights dimming to an alarming level. Sharpell cursed under his breath.

"Did you see who was in it?" he pressed as the short Zante turned to his injured companion.

"*Wrinrshrot.*"

"No one ever sees 'em," he muttered, then raised his voice. "What's your name?"

"Houp," came the answer as two emergency medical techs banged loudly as they approached the supply room door.

Sharpell frowned, stepping back so the EMTs could do their job. Zantes were only the latest target in this 6-month Sabulum rampage. At least he assumed this was Sabulum doing. Who else would be so bold? Seventeen raids had been successfully held on various freelancers and respectable miners -- some Zante s -- but mostly interlopers looking for high-grade crystal in the deep reaches of the deserts of Damison. Sharpell had been watching the reports from areas outside his jurisdiction with interest, and this incident was the first that officially affected him. Five days ago, he decided his course of action, and knew how he would implement his plan.

Checking briefly with the med techs to be sure the wounded Zante would recover, Sharpell spun on his boot heels and left the cantina through the back exit.

Brafadan

Farand Tartas, husband of the Republic's Head of State, Delah Haldane-Tartas didn't like to admit that he was bored, but the fact was *he was bored*. Their three children were fun, especially with their nurse and guardian, Sontra taking care of the more messy aspects of child rearing, but that left less for him to do. His wife, Delah, as always, went where the affairs of State took her, often to formal dinners and ceremonies that left Farand feeling like he needed to fly his old space yacht, the Pevner, through the Macmillan Maw just to push the stiffness out of his stuffy head. He knew Delah could see his restlessness, and he knew his Vinakti-talented children could sense it, but he saw no way to escape.

Farand's brother-in-law, Dardin Haldane spent all his time at his Vinakti academy, rarely visiting the Republic's government seat. Farand's close friend, Cyril's spice mining operations seemed to be finally turning a small profit, and took all Cyril's time. After

restoring and modifying the Pevner with all the most modern technological wonders, his co-pilot and long time friend, LongSten Holdiwerr, had taken a long vacation, returning to his home world, feeling confident that the calm and smooth running of State left Farand in no need of his protection for a little while. Admiral Genotisis was involved with chasing the occasional Royals flare up and usually sent Farand out on anything that needed personal attention. Now the old war veteran had found a comfortable life with a female of his own -- and a female who did not run the whole damn galaxy, as Delah did.

Everyone had something to occupy them, except him. Farand Tartas frowned as he strolled down to the comm station to see if anything exciting was happening in the universe.

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Samphline Station, *Neutral Territory*

The small med tech finished her icy soft cider gratefully, set the glass on the table, and rose to leave. The slender woman who still sat at the table smiled at her, encouraging her to go.

"I'm sorry I can't tell you any more, Jenna," the medical tech said quietly. "Do you want to know when that Zante recovers?"

"Houp will come to me, Ellette, in his own time. Thank you. No, the drink's on the house."

With a shrug, Nurse Ellette turned and made her way out of the quiet bar, while the other woman, its owner, stood and stretched slightly, sniffing the air around her. Across the room, her bartender looked up from his preparations for the evening's patrons. Jenna straightened to her full height, just a few centimeters short of two meters, and slowly rotated, as if scanning an unseen horizon. Then, she fixed a stony gaze on her dark-haired bartender and stepped gracefully toward the bar.

"I haven't seen that look in your eyes in a long while," he said slowly.

"I haven't felt this feeling in many years. Things are going to get very interesting."

"You mean those new raids by the Sabulum?"

"Those raiders are not Sabulum."

Her voice held a steely edge Mark had never heard in his 7 years with her. The few early drinkers at the bar seemed to snicker in disbelief as she glanced at the staircase at the rear of her saloon.

"Dardin Haldane will be returning." She whispered as she moved past Mark who stood behind the old polisteel bar.

"You always know when he comes back to Damison," Mark said quietly.

She had been aware of his initial departure with Farand Tartas. She had felt his presence when he had returned to destroy Nerboa Udsont's den of thieves. And she knew why she could sense him. What she didn't understand is why he would bother with an unknown band of marauders masquerading as Sabulum raiders. She, on the other hand, had revenge to motivate her interest in whoever they were. With no more words, she headed for the stairs at the back, and climbed up to her office and home above and behind the Neutral Territory.

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#### Calystra - Vinakti Academy

Reds and oranges spiked through the intermittent clouds, the sun shooting shafts of light toward his Vinakti academy where his newest students shuffled out onto the worn bricks to face the new day. This sunrise on Calystra was probably spectacular, Dardin Haldane decided as he watched it from the upper limbs of a huge banyan-like tree not far from the old temple. Somehow he felt somber and listless on this cool tropical morning. This concerned him as he gathered his Vinakti calm about him like a protective cloak. The melancholy dissipated, replaced by his expectation of training another group of potential Vinakti heroes.

With the help of many people in many high places, with highest being his own sister, now Leader of State of the Republic, Dar had been able to amass several groups of students in the last year. Unable to give personal attention to each, he had devised a peer instruction system that not only provided instruction for the newer student, but reinforced what he taught the more advanced of his followers.

As he swung easily down through the huge limbs, Dar again felt a sensation that had been poking at the back of his existence for several days now. It was a feeling he did not understand, one that had no place, and he shrugged it aside for the business of the day. Landing near the closest of the bricks, Dar drew a deep breath and thought about Delah, Farand and the children. He hadn't visited them in months and happily recalled the gleeful look on the face of his nephew, Tomiken, when Dar had handed the 4 year old a detailed model of his own StormStar fighter as a birthday gift. Soon, the twins would begin their occasional visits to the academy, Dar knew, but that did not ease the feeling of disquiet and solitude in his heart.

Before him, Dar's students assembled for morning meditation. With an almost instinctual centering of himself, Master Haldane stepped toward them to begin another day filled with Vinakti history classes and mind focusing exercises.

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#### The Great Dune, Damison

The glare of the twin suns did not bother Ead Kenard. The stolen Samphine moisture suit he wore had an excellent polarized optic system, and he briefly wondered where those backward primitives had stolen such technology. Around him, several large mercenaries moved about his encampment, preparing for the day's work.

Last week's capture of the massive Zante sand prowler had been very profitable and had caused Kenard to smile as he watched his people moving their booty from the burned out prowler to their own. Foolish little vermin those Zante, he thought. They never called for help, never really tried to defend themselves. Here were easy pickings for the spare parts the Royals so desperately needed.

Still somewhat controlled by Royal forces and a Royal governor, Damison was quickly becoming the most profitable venture Kenard had attempted in years. He and his people just sat back and let the established scavengers like the Zante and the Sabulum do all the work, and then he intercepted the goods and smuggled them off planet. So what if a few locals got hurt. That would just keep others from resisting when they heard about his gang.

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Brafadan

Delah Tartas stepped down from the podium, turned to her right and moved toward the exit of the great hall, her two personal bodyguards falling in behind her. As the afternoon session had wound down, she had felt the usual fatigue, but now she felt a bounce in her step and anticipation in her heart. Before her, huge wooden doors swung open, disclosing the behind the scenes staging area of the assembly hall. One lone figure stood there, tall, straight, and familiar, and Delah had to resist her undignified urge to break into a run and hurry into his open arms. Once she had crossed the threshold, she stepped more quickly, grinning as she came.

"I sensed you as you came out of hyperspace," she said, wrapping her arms lovingly around her brother's strong neck and burying her face in his shoulder length golden hair. "You need a haircut."

"It's good to see you," Dar whispered, savoring her enthusiastic hug until she broke it off -- too soon for him.

"What is it?" she asked, eyes searching his face. "And don't tell me to ask you again later."

"I wish I knew. The Power drew me here."

"Are the children in danger?"

"No, nothing like that. Let's walk."

"Will you be staying for dinner?" she asked as she passed three lesser senators, and then continued in a low voice, "So, why did it bring you here."

"I'm not sure. It's a compulsion. And I don't think I'll be staying very long." Dardin looked down fondly at his sister. "How's Farand? And the kids?"

"Truthfully, I think my husband is bored out of his ever loving mind," she said softly as they turned and made their way toward the executive elevators. "Tomiken is getting more --"

"Master Dardin!" a metallic voice cried with excitement. "Oh, Master Dardin! I can't tell you how good it is to see you. Why just the other day I was saying to Sontra

that you have been isolated on the soggy, dreadful Calystra of yours for far too long a time --"

"Hello, Aver 3. Please, be quiet." Dardin frowned at the clerical assistance android, then looked back at his smaller twin. "I guess Far just wasn't made for all this diplomacy."

"He'll be glad to see you. So will the twins. They have been very studious in their Vinakti lessons."

"And how about you?"

"Not so studious, but getting better," she admitted, looking hopefully up at him. "You seem to have put on a few pounds in all the right places. Been working out more?"

"My students keep me busy."

"These muscles aren't from any techniques you've taught me. What have you been doing?"

"Just a little harder physical routine."

Delah spun toward him and wrapped both her hands around his left bicep, grinning as she squeezed the taunt and solid muscles beneath her fingers. Thinking how attractive Dardin had become, she wondered when he would find the right girl. She continued up the corridor, laughing as she went.

"What's so funny?" Dardin asked as they came up to the lift.

"You need a social life," she said, pleasantly. "Maybe I should invite a few female guests to join us for dinner."

"Please -- don't start."

"I'm just teasing. Far will be as glad to see you as I am."

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Samphine, Damison

As the evening drew to an end, Jenna toggled the "Closed" sign into operation from behind the bar. It had been a good night, and several freighter crewmen still sat in the north alcove enthralled in the heavy wagering of a card game. Jenna didn't mind. She had a license to allow gambling on the premises. And she knew she would need to

be around for a while longer. Moving to the small kitchen at the back of her establishment, she began inspecting the area, although she knew that her cook, Myra, had left the place in perfect condition. Looking in the reefer, Jenna found the pre-made meal Myra had left for her. There was enough for the bartender as well, and Jenna placed the containers casually into the microslave while keeping one ear on the gamblers in the next room. A roar erupted, followed by cursing by several of the players, and Jenna knew that Bredagar had won again. If she didn't know better, she would have thought that the old Twiterk cheated, but she had investigated that to her satisfaction. Bredagar was one lucky humanoid.

As she brought the hot food from the oven, Jenna heard the sound of the front door below the voices of the remaining gamblers. The door hadn't opened very wide before it shut again, and Mark's voice boomed that the Neutral Territory was closed for the night. A high-pitched Zante's voice argued back. Taking up her dinner, Jenna stepped into the main area of the bar.

"It's okay, Mark," she said while placing her food on a nearby table. Then she addressed the darkly dressed little Zante. "Come here, my friend."

As the small Zante hurried across the big room, Jenna directed Mark to tap ale for herself and the newcomer. The Zante brought the two drinks to her table. With a kind smile, the woman waved to the Zante to take the seat across from her, and then lifted her glass in salute.

"Not a profitable week for you, Houp."

*"Negurffie suna utinni, Jenna-duba."*

"Will Octbibib recover from his wounds?"

*"Wratabel utsaffre ne gunda. Porutenni?"*

"Yes, I can help you get some money, if necessary," she said, taking up her fork. "But tell me, what happened out there yesterday? Was it the same ones again?"

An hour later, Jenna sat on the rooftop patio above her small drinking establishment. The moons had slipped below the horizon, and now she waited. She didn't like the time alone and would rather have been scrubbing the floor of her bar, than waiting in the silence of the night. It beckoned to her in a way that made her very uneasy. It called to her to take up her role as a Sabulum. The night told her that the sand

people needed her far more than these interlopers who inhabited the cities and outlying moisture farms.

With a deep sigh, she scanned the horizon without the use of mechanical apparatus. She didn't need them. The desert was a friend and would tell when her next visitor would come; a visitor who would tell her things she didn't want to hear.

### The Tartas Home

Delah and Sontra herded the three children from the room as Farand poured two long glasses of Websterian fizz. The twins had almost dominated the early part of the evening, demonstration their newest Vinakti controls to their Uncle Dardin, while Delah and Farand looked proudly on. Now, in the stillness of the room, Dardin envied Farand and his family and quietly told him so.

"Those hellions?" Farand laughed. "You know, I can't for the life of me figure just how they are so good at these Vinakti things when their old man hasn't got an inkling of the Power in him."

"You know that's not true."

"Yes it is. Dar, I've tried all of Delah's initial Vinakti lessons. I haven't got it."

"Farand- "

"You know I'm right. Thank the Maker that they get it from their mother's side of the family, cos I sure don't have it."

"It doesn't matter where or who it comes from, Far. You know that." Dardin accepted his drink and saluted his brother-in-law, trying to smile. "The important thing is that they do have it."

"Yeah, sure, kid."

"Let's go outside. The night air will do you good."

After slipping through a slider door and on to the patio of the Head of State residence, Farand walked to the edge of the rooftop and leaned over the ornate fencing that surrounded that area. Sensing Farand's restlessness, Dardin held back a few minutes before joining him at the edge.

"You know what would really do me good?" Tartas said after many minutes.

"Tell me."

"A good adventure. Something that would get my adrenaline flowing -- but without the danger of some of our earlier ones."

"Adventure without danger?" Dar muttered, gazing out at the millions of twinkling city lights.

"Well, I'm the father of three children, Dar, and just maybe I'm getting too old to go chasing you around the galaxy on some damn fool quest."

"You sound like my uncle talking," Dardin Haldane said with a thick laugh that ended in a sigh. "I haven't thought about him in a long time."

"Thought about who?" Delah asked, moving gracefully in the night to join them.

"My uncle."

"Sounds like ancient history to me."

"What does?" She smiled.

"We're just out here reminiscing about the good old days on Damison." Farand grinned, opening his arm for his wife to snuggle in.

Dardin turned to look out at the bright lights of the capital, feeling again the isolation his Vinakti duties had imposed on him. When he looked back, he found Farand and Delah smiling at him.

Through the evening, they'd talked about Damison, and LongSten, and laughed at the historically inopportune malfunctions of the Pevner. After Delah went to bed, Farand and Dar talked about losses and pains and the some of the evil Dardin had endured in his life as a Vinakti priest. Mostly, Farand listened, knowing that his friend the Vinakti Master wouldn't talk about every burden. Farand was hopeful that what Dar could bring himself to speak about would erase some of the shadows in his soul.

In the morning, Dar rose with the family and enjoyed a riotous breakfast with Delah, Farand, Sontra, and the kids, but felt his melancholy seeping back in when his sister left to attend to the business of the day. Sontra and the children had already gone to work on their studies, and the two friends found themselves alone for the day. After viewing the daily media / news announcements, Farand suggested they venture down to the main communications area and see what was really happening in the galaxy.

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### Slavers' Camp

Ead Kenard watched as his smuggler ships launched into the morning air. Each of the five small ships hung low in the sky and turned toward the northern pole of the planet. If someone wanted to backtrack them, they'd never find their origins if they flew out from the planet's pole. Kenard liked the plan and smiled a wicked smile as he watched the vessels vanish into the coming heat of the day. The spare computer and droid parts would certainly bring a good price, but what really filled his coffers were the Zante s and Sabulum slaves he'd packed into the holds of Pan Pearsall's transport. That was where the highest credits were to be found.

In the encampment below, weary people prepared to get some rest after their busy night, when they had taken their pleasures with the cargo -- part of Kenard's incentive program. Today they had packed them out.

He rubbed absently at his chin where a little Sabulum minx had landed a well-aimed punch hours earlier. In his anger he had made sure that she would never do that again. He hated wasting merchandise like that.

With a sigh, Ead Kenard made his way back to his camouflaged quarters, which had been lasered into the steep rocks and covered with resilient tarps. From the smell of the morning, he knew the desert would soon be filled with a blistering heat.

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### The Republic Communications Room

Dar stood at the back of the communications room, quietly observing the flurry of morning activity. The presence of the husband of the Head of State was enough to make the officers on duty nervous, he knew, and so he calmly blended his energy with that of the electronic equipment. Being less conspicuous, Dar watched and listened while Farand stomped up and down the banks of communications officers, disrupting procedures and being a general nuisance.

A shiver of Power-recognition touched Dar's being, and his attention was drawn to a console operated by a small red-haired woman wearing the rank of lieutenant. He stepped quietly to her and looked over her shoulder at the display screen. It showed a brief and routine report from Damison concerning a continued problem with a band of Sabulum raiders who apparently took live captives as well as stole droid and computer components.

"Farand? Have a look at this," he said softly, then requested a print out of the information.

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### Sapphire

Two days had passed, and Jenna had not heard from her courier. It sometimes happened, especially when one of the young ones was sent. Each evening she had camped on her second story patio, waiting for news, and each morning she had woken to the sounds of dawn, no wiser. On the third morning, Doctor Daniel McPherson called, requesting that she join him at his small medical facility on the southern part of town. He had a wounded Sabulum, he explained. When she arrived, Jenna found her second messenger, a young cousin called Ridger by his clan, resting in the auto-doc, his right arm missing and the shoulder encased with medi-plaster.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Jenna moved across the room that stank of interloper antiseptics and medicines, and knelt down beside the wounded Sabulum. Someone had removed his moisture suit, and his concealing desert clothes, and she briefly wondered if the valuable suit was worth salvaging. Then, carefully, Jenna touched Ridger's forehead, thumb on one temple and fingers on the opposite one. She concentrated. The young man stirred at her well-practiced touch, and his eyes fluttered open.

"Not Sabulum," he managed through bruised lips. "Elsbeth taken. Fraticia, too."

Steps sounded behind them, and Jenna glanced sideways at Dr. McPherson's approach. Using the brief seconds she had, she pushed healing and calm into her cousin's

battered body, stopping only when the physician touched her shoulder in greeting. Then she turned to him.

"Steve Davis brought him in about an hour ago," the doctor said, pushing Jenna away from the Sabulum with gentle fingers. "Found him and another one just beyond Fergents Gap."

"Another?"

"Dead. She's in the freezer if you want to see her. Do you know this one?"

"He's Dracdon's son, Ridger." She cleared her throat and turned to what the overweight McPherson had called the freezer.

Moments later she stood looking at the battered remains of Ridger's younger sister, Roylita. Her mind clouded with grief, Jenna turned and walked stiffly out of the morgue, and found herself face to face with Sheriff Mickey Sharpell. Gentle arms surrounded her, his soft beard brushing her neck as he held her close. After a short time, Mickey led Jenna out to MacPherson's office and set her down on a big overstuffed sofa. Not letting go of her, Sharpell waited for her sobs to slow and her tears to ebb.

Finally she sat upright, rubbing apologetically at the moisture spots on his tan uniform shirt. He handed her a soft cloth to dry her face, rose, and left the room. Quickly Sharpell returned with a tumbler of water and another dry cloth.

"Who are they?" Mickey asked as he eased himself down near the striking woman.

"They're brother and sister. Their kith will want their water."

"It will be returned. What can you tell me?"

"Two Sabulum girls taken. About her age."

"Sabulum don't enslave other Sabulum," Sheriff Sharpell muttered, almost to himself. "What's going on out there, Jenna?"

"Sabulum aren't responsible for this. Or so Ridger said." She drank deep of the cool water, took a long breath, and applied a calming technique her father had taught her. "I'm going out there, Mickey. I need to know what's going on."

"I hope you're not planning any of that Sabulum revenge violence."

"That's not my way, Mickey. You know that."

"I do. But I've never seen you cry before."

"I honor my dead cousin with my water." Brushing back strands of her brown hair, Jenna stood on shaky legs and reinforced the calming technique. "Excuse me, please. I have to contact their parents."

\* \* \*

Brafadan, that same morning

Brown eyes burrowed into his blue ones. There was no doubt in her mind or his that he had to go. Delah knew that. Her Power-sense was strong enough to tell her that Dardin was being lead elsewhere for a while. With a nod of her head, she smiled at her brother, then turned to her husband.

Farand gave her his winningest, most roguish smile and gathered her small body into his arms for a final fare well. Neither noticed Dar turn away to inspect the Pevner's hydraulic ramp strut.

"Delah, if you really don't want me to go --"

"And you say you aren't Power sensitive." She grinned, reaching up to tussle his dark hair. "I know you're bored, so hurry up and get out of here, you scruffy-looking trenta-farmer. The sooner you drop Dar on Damison, the sooner you'll be back at my side."

"Thanks, Delah," Dardin said, then turned to walk up the familiar ramp.

"Take care of each other," she called as Farand's boots touched the metal of his beloved ship.

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Slaves

Elsbeth and Fraticia huddled in each other's arms, frightened to the very core of their being. Their captors had stripped them of their moisture suits, promising to sell them to the highest bidder. Elsbeth wasn't sure if the desert suits would be sold, or if she and her best friend were the chattel. She did not mention this to Fraticia, who shivered now both from cold and from fear.

"Fear kills the mind. From the mind comes the strength to endure." Elsbeth whispered close to the other girl's ear hoping the meditative chant would comfort both her and her friend.

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Ridger

Jenna watched the three well wrapped, tall figures move slowly out of the musky morgue and into the blackness of the Damison night. Beside her, Dr. McPherson released a long breath and turned back into his hospital.

"At least in here I can still help the living," he muttered as she followed him to his office. "I sure would like to hear the death knells they'll sing tonight. I hear they are absolutely inspirational."

Jenna didn't reply at first, a shiver of grief shaking her body. When McPherson glanced over his shoulder, he saw the slender businesswoman trembling and turned back to her.

"Sabulum songs of death are a private thing between the survivors and the Yaklickt."

"The spirit of the desert. Yes." He watched her closely as she gazed over toward the fabric screen that partitioned the surviving Sabulum from the rest of the little hospital. "Ridger is coming along fine, Jenna. Don't you worry."

"When do you think he'll be conscious?"

"Hard to say with desert people. They're so damned..." He glanced up and saw no change in her sad expression. He smiled, relieved that he had not offended her.

"Yes?" She encouraged. "You were about to say *enigmatic*, Doctor?"

"Sharpell said you know what someone's going to say before they say it. If so, you know that's not true. I just don't know much about them -- as a race. And even though you do, you're not telling."

"There's very little difference from you or me," she said, and began to walk toward the front of the building. "When do you think he'll be conscious?"

"I plan to keep him in an induced state of unconsciousness until I'm sure that infection is gone. Two, maybe three days. Where will he go when he leaves here? Back into the desert?"

"I'll make a few inquiries. The desert Sabulum will kill him. Without one arm, he's a liability to the kith."

"The kith?"

"You might say tribe or clan, Doctor. Please keep me advised of Ridger's progress."

"One more thing, if you don't mind."

Jenna turned and glanced at the aging physician. Then she frowned. McPherson suddenly felt heat well up from his loose collar, and his face glowed with the fresh blood of embarrassment.

"Your services will be paid for, Doctor. I have inquiries to make on that account as well." She stared hard into his face. "Just see to his healing and be very watchful of his state of mind when he awakes."

Before he could ask any more, the woman swept gracefully out into the blistering heat of midday, leaving McPherson to stand dumbfounded in his foyer.

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Onboard the Pevner

As Farand Tartas slid into his seat, he found the fit a little uncomfortable. This didn't feel like his spaceship, and he knew he shouldn't have let Delah talk him into including reupholstering as part of the last round of improvements to the Pevner. He wiggled his body slightly, hoping to find that old feeling without making Dardin aware of his actions. Fortunately, his Vinakti friend seemed intent on strapping himself into the co-pilot's seat. With a sigh mixed with contentment, excitement, and anticipation, Farand began the routine pre-flight routine. Beside him, Dar drew a deep sigh as well, centering himself for the days to come.

"So what do you think you'll find back on good old Damison?" Farand asked, powering up the nav computer. "The ghost of Bob Orva?"

Dar smiled slightly in Far's direction, but Farand saw the frown lines that seemed to be constantly with Dardin recently.

"I was only joking, kid."

"I know. It's just that I don't know what I'm going to find on Damison."

"And that's got you worried."

"I usually have a pretty good idea what to expect."

"No Vinakti dreams to light your way on this one?" Farand threw several more switches and the ship's engines hummed to life.

"Not so far."

"Well, whatever it is we'll face it together, just like we always have."

Dardin Haldane passed a fairly confident smile across the tight cabin to Farand Tartas, knowing that Farand wouldn't be with him on some of this one. But he didn't know why.

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#### Kenard's Conversation

"Mr. Kenard! Subspace coming in for you."

Looking up from his inventory ledgers, Ead Kenard nodded at the ancient communications specialist and waved him out of the tent. Setting aside the hand-held computer, he reached behind his locker without getting up from the canvas chair, and wrapped his large hands around his portable comm link. Setting this on his lap, he uncoiled the small cord that was wrapped around it and plugged that into the inventory computer. A small message rolled across the screen, telling Kenard that the message was scrambled to the right digital bit.

He frowned deeply as the cipher software told him the origin of the call. Flicking a toggle on the comm link, he spoke into the link.

"This is Kenard."

"I do not like to be kept waiting, Mr. Kenard," the familiar and elderly voice said. "In the future you will be more prompt in receiving my calls or your bonuses shall suffer."

"As you wish, madam."

"Now, about this latest shipment. These native girls are bringing in the largest profits -- poor dears. Seems that they have the fight and the stamina to put up with the more unsavory preferences of a few of my clients."

"They are desert hardened little witches."

"As you say." The old woman coughed harshly. "I want more."

"I've lost two of my people to them in an escape attempt. I'll have to raise the price."

"As you say. When can I expect the next shipment?"

Kenard drew a deep breath. He hated the answer he had to give. "They're from nomadic tribes, and it's sometimes hard to find any of them. They vanish into the sand. And when I do find some, they fight like Movianian pig devils -- even the little ones."

"The next shipment?"

"Maybe a week if I get enough for a full shipment. Two if hunting is bad -- Oh, I've shifted the base again. Have you gotten the repulsor battery replacements yet?"

"Sent them out five days ago. They should be in Sapphire by now." The ancient woman wheezed and gasped a ragged breath. "I want more sand people, Kenard. There's a good bonus for you if you can ship within the week. I'll call in three days."

The comm link crackled then went silent. Frowning, he slipped out the cipher plug and began putting his equipment away.

"AVERY!" He shouted and within six heartbeats, a bright-faced blond boy scrambled into the hot tent. "Tell Sulla and Tankern to scout the canyons of those high ridges to the east, and I want them on their way in less than an hour. I don't care how hot it is."

"Desert people, like before, Mr. Kenard?"

"That's right, boy. Now off with you."

\* \* \*

Neutral Territory

Big Mark Biazi brought out two more cases of imported ale from the lower stock room, whistling a nameless tune as he carried his load and stocked it behind the big steel bar. Toward the front of the large main room, his boss, Jenna served three newcomers, so he quickly completed his task and waited for her to join him. As he straightened after stocking the lower reefer, Mark came face to face with his tall employer, and grinned. She didn't wait on tables often.

"Two Novembren ales and a safari gin fizz," she said quietly and without a hint at displeasure about his being away from his post.

"Coming right up."

"Grady and Avalon coming in at 3?" she asked as Mark went for the drinks.

"Three big transports due in. I called Senora in too."

"Good. I won't be here tonight."

"Anything I need to know?" he asked, placing two bottles of dark green ale on a nearby tray.

"I'll be back about this time tomorrow." She frowned briefly. "If Dardin Haldane shows up, show him every hospitality, but answer none of his questions. Look for the Vinakti tattoo."

"Stay out of my mind, woman," Mark whispered as he grinned, finishing a bright blue, fizzing drink. He placed it on her tray.

Jenna absently balanced the tray through years of experience, spun on her heels and headed toward the front of the bar as two heavysset men stepped down the entrance steps. With a nod and a smile of welcome, she moved past them and delivered her drinks. When she turned back to the bar, Jenna found the two men standing in the center of the room, waiting, scowls on both wind-wrinkled faces.

"How can we help you?" Jenna asked, gesturing them toward the bar.

"We're looking for somebody called Jenna," the shorter of the two said as she approached.

Mark Biazi caught the words and turned to face the pair of dusty, poorly dressed men, and decided they had to be crystal miners from the look of them. He watched carefully as the two followed Jenna, who walked toward the back of the bar as she called for three glasses of ice water.

Reaching a quieter, more isolated part of the room, Jenna turned and waited for the two men to join her. Mark set three frosty glasses of water near her and moved cautiously away, pretending to be busy stocking shelves.

"Sheriff Sharpell said you could help us," the taller man said as he came to a stop near Jenna.

The second man rounded the first, scowling at him.

"This 'loper stole my sonic jackhammer."

"Did not."

"So you say. Sheriff won't do nothing about it."

"Steve, I did not take the jack hammer."

"What's your name?"

"Hersy. Jake Hersy. He and I are supposed to be partners."

"And you are..."

"Steve Davis."

"You brought in the Sabulum without his arm, and the, er, other one."

"That's the thanks I get. The hammer was gone when we got back."

"I see. Have something to drink and tell me about this disappearing jackhammer."

\* \* \*

Elsbeth

Elsbeth reminded herself again that she was a daughter of Ishack and mate of Dwater, strongest warrior of her kith. Even with Ridger dead, her father and her mate would come for her, and although Fraticia had not yet mated with Ridger, her center-family would rescue her as well.

Scrubbing the foul-smelling interloper food only made the young woman push the cleansing sand harder in to the surface of the black pot. How could they eat a loxodon? Who's kith had it belonged to, she wondered sadly and began quietly singing a lesser grieving song for this unknown creature. Someone had to sing the farewell, she knew,

but kept her voice low, afraid other Sabulum slaves in the camp would hear and misunderstand.

On the other side of the kitchen tent, Fraticia quietly took up the harmony for a little while. When the pot was clean, Elsbeth moved to her younger friend's side and wrapped her arms about her shoulders. They stood that way for a long minute.

"You're right, Els. Somebody has to sing the poor loxodon to its maker," Fraticia said with shaky words. "Will anybody know to sing for us?"

## Chapter Two

After several hours of skimming the fiery sands of the Warren Wastes, Jenna camouflaged her trusty sand skimmer with a tarp and began climbing the familiar rocks of her youth. Dressed in the heavy wrappings of a Sabulum warrior, she moved carefully from boulder to boulder, listening to the pumping action of her moister suit as it collected her sweat, purified it, and sent it to moisture caches in various pockets of her suit. The well-worn and familiar mask over her face trapped her moist breath, saving the precious body fluids she would have otherwise lost to the dry desert air, filtering out the fine dust of desert sand that she would have otherwise inhaled.

As the second of Damison's suns dipped below the horizon, Jenna reached her summit destination. Quickly, she pulled several meters of thick cord from her backpack. On one end of the rope she tied an ewitta, a whistle made from the bone of an old loxodon she had known well. With fond memories, Jenna secured the primitive, but effective device, straightened, and surveyed the panoramic view. Sapphire glittered its early evening lights across the still hot sands. Nothing marred the desert in any other direction -- nor should it have. Only a few solitary crystal miners and most of the Ishack kith were out here. And the Sabulum were only beginning to stir from their day of slumber.

Jenna drew a long, centering breath and then launched her ewitta into the hot dry air. Swinging the rope over her head, she carefully eased out the length of cord until the majority of it circled above her. She swung harder and the ewitta began its low,

compelling song, calling into the darkening sky. She swung the bone whistle still harder, trying to ignore the shrill, muscle-wrenching sound that emitted from the lox bone. Reaching what Jenna knew was the peak range of the calling whistle, she continued to swing the rope over her head for several more minutes to be sure that those who needed to, could hear her call.

Finally, muscles hot with the searing of the sonic whistle, Jenna slowed the device and carefully pulled in her lox bone, remembering to thank the spirit of the now-dead creature for the use of its remains. Knowing that it could be several hours before any of her friends responded to her, Jenna reached into her backpack and drew out a thermal cylinder of stout ale, popped the straw and took a long drink before setting up her small chemical signal fire on the 4 meter round plateau high above the high desert. That done, she sank down on a smooth slab of tan and orange rock and dropped into a light meditation, waiting.

\* \* \*

On the desert floor, two figures moved with practiced steps through the thick, heavy sawer-sand. Twilight had dropped to almost full dark, but neither man took time to admire the magical array in the night sky. Sulla Fredericks lead the way, carefully picking his way along what he suspected was a well-used sand people path. Behind him, Jamie Tankern tried to watch all horizons at once, letting Sulla do what he did best. Feeling the weight of the blaster at his side, he shifted his tranquilizing rifle uneasily into his left hand and balanced himself against the shifting sand under his feet.

Sulla pulled up short, but Tankern avoided colliding with him. Watching the tracker, Tankern listened to the breeze as well as sniffed at it. The partnership with Sulla had been an education, but he did not feel that he could track Sabulum as well as Sulla could. Tankern did have the satisfaction of knowing his chances of surviving the wastelands had increased four hundred fold since his association with the half-breed Sulla Fredericks, and so he no longer was bothered by his partner's lack of conversation. When Sulla was on the trail of game, he seldom spoke. With a trusted partner like Tankern at

his back, he could concentrate on the trail and not the potential predators that may consider him dinner. One oversized Dendertis dragon in his lifetime had been enough.

"Is that a fire?" Jamie Tankern whispered, pointing to the West.

Sulla squinted in that direction and quickly decided that it was a much stronger trail than the one he had been working. He gestured toward the slight flame that glowed on top of a tiny precipice in the distance, turned and started toward at a brisk pace.

\* \* \*

Elsbeth tucked the last of Fraticia's skirt behind the stack of polisteel transport canisters, making sure that none of her friend's hair, flesh or the vile clothing they had given her could be seen. With a quick prayer of safety to Kahammah, who created all, the young Sabulum woman finished pouring the pitcher of ale she had been sent for. Fraticia whimpered as Elsbeth left, taking the electric torch with her. She hated being left behind in this smelly dark storage tent.

Feeling satisfied that her young friend would be safe from these interlopers, at least for the night, Elsbeth moved cautiously through the row of camouflaged tents that rested next to the canyon wall. Now that her mind was at peace about Fraticia's safety, she tried not to think of her own fate. Not a virgin like Fraticia, Elsbeth had some idea of what the night might bring and tried to decide between the pain of rape and the indignity of surrender. Sabulum do not surrender, she reminded herself as she reached the headman's tent.

Outside the tent, two 'lopers, a guard and the boy Avery sat eating loxodon stew from metal bowls with their fingers. She wanted to ask them if they knew that eating from metal was dangerous and forbidden by her kith, but she stopped herself, remembering that these were her enemies. Straightening to her proud height, which was acutely small for her kith, Elsbeth looked the guard in the eye, challenging. Seeing the ale pitcher in her hand, he reached for his metal mug with greasy fingers and held it out for her to fill. The blond boy did the same.

"Intoxication is not for the young," she said, not filling Avery's cup.

The guard cursed at her, then filled the boy's cup from his own while Elsbeth watched in dismay. When the guard held out his mug for more, she filled it to the rim. This would never have happen in the kith. With a smile, the guard gestured her into the headman's tent.

As she entered, Ead Kenard looked up from where he sat at a small, portable table. Taking up his empty ceramic mug, he gestured for her to come fill it. Elsbeth moved carefully forward and began pouring the pale ale into the mug.

"You're a sweet looking thing, girl. What are you called?"

"Elsbeth," she said, looking with interest at the clutter of papers and small electronic devices on the metal desk.

"Come a little bit closer," he said and drank deep from the mug with one hand.

His other hand dipped down and swept up under her long skirt in one fluid motion, causing the girl to gasp with surprise. But she did not move as his hand grabbed carelessly at the flesh above her left knee.

"Good girl. Just stand still," Kenard muttered, his hand moving upward. Making contact with fabric, he stopped and tugged at the material a bit. "What's this, girl? None of you are supposed to wear underthings."

"Except during our cycle, sir," she said with false humility.

"You're on your cycle now?"

"Yes."

"Well at least you're not pregnant." Kenard gave a sick sort of chuckle and then drew a deep breath. "Avery! Come here."

Draining the other half of his ale, he gestured for Elsbeth to refill his mug as the blond boy came bounding into the tent.

"This one's riding the cloth pony." Kenard shouted at the small teen. "Get another."

The boy shot out of the tent, hiding a grin from his boss as Kenard glanced back at Elsbeth.

"You ever had a baby, girl?"

"Two."

"I've heard you people start young," He said with disgust. "Get out."

\* \* \*

"Okay, Dar. Prepare for sublight speeds," Farand said more out of habit than anything else. With LongSten absent from the co-pilot's seat, he just automatically called out his actions to whoever sat in the Pevner's cockpit. During the first chaotic years of the Republic's resurrection, too many people other than his Chadaga friend had occupied that seat, and he quickly had adapted the routine of verbal communications that he and LongSten didn't need.

As the stars slid into the brief lines and then into pinpoint focus again, Farand smiled to himself. Damison was not altogether a Republic-bound planet, but its somewhat stable government meant he could have a fun little adventure without getting his tail or his ship's shot at.

"You know, I was thinking," Farand began, selecting Sapphire's coordinates for the nav computer. "After we take care of whatever your Power-sense says you need to take care of, maybe we could slide over to Damison's capital and have a look around. I'm sure Delah could use a little update on what's happening on this little backwater planet."

Dar sat quietly frowning as he studied the fast approaching planet that glowed bright tan and orange on the daylight half. "I guess we could. Maybe. Looks like it's night in Sapphire," he muttered.

"Yeah, well it is a backwater planet, you know."

"It's sure not the brightest spot in this galaxy."

"You really should lighten up, kid." Farand stopped, silenced by the determined look on his friend's face. "If you feel that way, why are you wasting your time coming back to..?"

He turned his attention to the radio contact speaking in his headset, leaving Dar to glare out the cockpit window.

Several minutes later, the Pevner glided flawlessly down the computer prescribed flight path, through the desert darkness outside Sapphire. Farand concentrated on piloting his craft while Dar watched the moonlight washed landscape slip silently by. The feeling had crept in on him again, and with Far at his side for company, Dar blamed

the loneliness on the barren desert below him. His boyhood home had been here, and he wondered what had become of the burned out moisture farm he had left behind more than ten years earlier. And what of that old Vinakti warrior/priest, Bob Ocrova? What's about his place? Why had Dar waited so long to go back there? Vinakti relics could be waiting there. He could take them away from the room where he had first learned of his father's Vinakti abilities.

Deciding that the Zantes had probably scavenged both locations once they had been identified as obviously abandoned, Dar closed his eyes and began to meditate, dispelling the sadness of his past. After a few long deep breaths, he felt the melancholy fade. Still curious, Dar touched the Power and cast an unobtrusive mental probe in what he thought might be the general direction of Bob Ocrova's desert home. At first, he sensed nothing, which confirmed his old theory that Ocrova had situated himself in a place that either absorbed the Power or neutralized it somehow -- for his own protection against the Royal assassins. He suspected that Bob had somehow neutralized the presence in the Power, keeping himself hidden from the Regent and his minions until Dar could complete his Vinakti training.

The Pevner bucked once, forcefully, pulling Dar from his thoughts. Farand's big hands flew over the ship's controls.

"Nice flight path they chose for me," he shouted, glancing at Dar briefly. "Sapphire, this is the Pevner. We have somebody taking pot shots at my ship!"

"Ignore them, Pevner," said a gruff voice over the ship's radio. "It happens once in a while. No one ever gets hurt."

As if on cue, the ship bucked again.

"They're not exactly throwing daisies at us," Farand growled hotly as he angled his deflector shield while thinking of all the new equipment he had recently attached to the ship's hull. "This kind of thing happen often?"

"If you're damaged, report the incident to the sheriff when you arrive."

"You mean if I arrive," Farand muttered as a bright blast exploded against his front deflector. "Want to get in some target practice, Dar?"

Mildly surprised at the suggestion, Dar looked at his brother-in-law to find a wicked yet lopsided grin on the older man's face. He was about to reply when he sensed

a small disturbance in the air around him. Focusing, he quickly caught its direction. Dar snapped his head around, staring out into the dusk.

"Farand, bring her about and make a pass over that last mountain range again."

"Are you serious? That's where the snipers are."

"We're in no danger," Dar said sincerely. "I just want to have a look at something I felt in the Power."

"Sapphire space port," Farand said as his answer. "This is the Pevner. We're going to do a fast loop back and do a little site-seeing, if that's okay with you."

"No traffic behind you, Pevner. You're cleared to loop."

\* \* \*

As Jenna said farewell to her three visitors, she could feel a new presence in the area. Ishack's youngest son, Madagin signaled his two warriors to descend the plateau, but waited a moment before he turned to go. Tossing his shatti stick into his left hand, he stepped forward and embraced the woman with a long and loving embrace. Jenna stepped into his arms with enthusiasm, welcoming his rare show of affection. Somewhere close by, someone took a few practice shots at an incoming ship on the Sapphire flight path. A common game for the Sabulum, it bothered neither of them.

"Remember how you taught me to aim the 'loper's hand weapon?" He asked, squeezing her slightly. "Who'd have thought I would have lived to embrace a duba."

"Few would venture such a gesture, Madagin," she said quietly.

"You are too long without a man. I know a good duba from the Sinter kith who has lost his mate. I could speak for you to Ishack."

"That's not for you to say." She hissed through her teeth and playfully pushed at him.

"You are hard, Jenna, like a man," he laughed, reaching to squeeze her biceps.

Moving away from the Sabulum warrior, she turned her back, grateful for the mask's concealing cloth, yet pained by the truth in her childhood friend's words. Most women she knew, 'loper or Sabulum, had been married at least once by the time they had reached her age.

"I did not mean to offend, Jenna-duba. I know you will again serve the Sabulum by ridding us of these slaving interlopers. And I know my father will reward you."

"I only want peace between my two peoples."

"Then peace be with you, cousin. Come home soon."

Madagin turned and boldly strode to the edge of the small plateau. Without a backward glance, he leapt from the rocks and began the steep descent. Not surprised at his youthful antics and show of bravado, Jenna strolled to the same edge and looked over the cliff into the darkness. Silence waited where the sound of Madagin's descent should have been.

"Madagin?" she called into the moon-shadowed crevices on the face of the cliff.

Jenna listened to the breeze in the night. No other sound broke the air.

"Madagin?" she shouted, disturbed now.

She listened again. Nothing.

Calming her inner self, Jenna surveyed the cliff with her mind, looking for some tremor in the life-force of the desert to tell her where her cousin had fallen. Then she felt his presence, and relief. He moved silently across the rocks, a true phantom of the desert. Smiling, she relaxed and savored the familiar feeling of the young friend who had shared many childhood adventures with her. She sent him a loving thought of farewell.

Suddenly, the quintessence of Dardin Haldane loomed in her mind. She could feel him somewhere close. He was *overhead*. Jumping to extinguish her fire, Jenna closed down her senses and began mentally reciting multiplication tables to camouflage her mind. She could hear the low drone of a spacecraft approaching.

Pulling off her desert helmet and filter mask, Jenna used her eyes and ears to search the nighttime sky, squelching her special abilities inherited from both her Sabulum mother and Vinakti-trained father. She found a large tramp freighter skimming the desert surface a few kilometers to the South. She sank to the rocky surface of the plateau, having no hiding place on top of the craggy table, and stretched herself out flat on her back. Taking several slow deep breaths, she told herself that she *was* the rock formation, and then blanked her mind.

Moments later the Pevner roared past, less than 75 meters above her.

\* \* \*

Elsbeth rolled in the threadbare blanket, waking to the distant roar of some large vessel, and shivered where she lay in the sand. Opening one eye cautiously, she could see the stinky Uleanian guard who sat silently near a small fire while he oversaw the half empty cage of captured Sabulum. The young woman listened to the sounds of the desert night, yet found no comfort in their familiarity. Night was the time of action for her people, and she found this odd reversal of night and day activities exhausting and confusing.

The roaring vessel's drone dissipated in the distance as Elsbeth rolled on her side and pulled the scratchy blanket over her shoulders with a sigh. At least the headman hadn't taken Fraticia, she resolved, so her day hadn't been a complete loss. The rising sun would bring that same challenge to her again, she knew, and she wondered what she could do to keep the interlopers from her friend.

Around her, the creatures of the land came out again to sing the songs the spacecraft had interrupted, and their songs played deep into Elsbeth's mind. Reminding herself of the interconnectedness of the All, she relaxed a little, wondering how her trial might benefit herself and others in the long run.

The slight but unmistakable drone of a spacecraft hummed in the distance again, and the Uleanian stirred from his place by the fire to step out from beneath the camouflage covering and study the night sky. Ead Kenard stepped sleepily out of his private tent, wrapping a hand-painted red bathrobe around his skinny frame as he came. Without a word to the guard, Kenard moved under the edge of the canopy and scanned the horizon with his eyes. Within minutes the drone peaked several kilometers away and then dissipated in to the night.

Elsbeth, Kenard, and the Uleanian guard each visibly relaxed and returned each to their own activities. Silently under the threadbare blanket, Elsbeth wept.

\* \* \*

"What ever it was, it's gone now, Farand," Dar said sadly, looking from the cockpit window to the man in the seat next to him. "You might as well head for Sapphire."

"Mind telling me what that was about?"

"I'm not sure. I sensed something for a moment, and reached out to it. I may even have touched it, but then it was gone."

"Oh, you're just probably hungry, or tired, or something," Farand muttered as he swung his ship around and put her back on the Sapphire flight path.

"I don't know..."

"Dar, that's the first time I've heard you say that in probably three years. You always know."

"I know," he muttered, unbuckling his seat and pulling himself slowly out of the cockpit area while Farand completed his maneuver.

"Hey. Where're you going, kid? Get back here and strap yourself in."

"I'll be fine," he heard Dar's listless words as the young warrior wandered down the ship's corridor.

Somehow Farand doubted that.

\* \* \*

Several hours after Madagin's visit, Jenna slipped out of meditation at the sound of pebbles tumbling down the side of her plateau. Drawing a slow breath, she located the sound's direction and in one fluid motion, she stood up, quietly rotating to face the sound. Knowing her friends were apt to play tricks, she scanned the whole horizon, listening carefully. Then, she smelled a loxodon and the undeniable but slight fragrance of interloper cigars. She ducked and tumbled on her shoulder as a shatti stick whipped through the air where she had just been.

"Not tonight, Caso!" Jenna called, laughing as she rolled to her feet, yet staying crouched on the flat rock.

"And why not?" called a husky female voice.

Turning to the sound, Jenna watched the silhouette of two Sabulum climb onto the plateau and come to stand within a meter of her. Straightening, she reached out to grasp the forearm of the closer person and was given a solid greeting in return. Without any signal, the three slid silently to the plateau's surface, legs folded beneath them, each facing the other two.

"Is this Quanto?" Jenna asked softly after quickly studying his helmet design and decorations. "I haven't shared water with you in too many years."

The third Sabulum bowed his head slightly, but did not speak. Jenna turned to Caso.

"Tell me about the 'lopers who make slaves of our people," she said.

"Will the telling lessen the grief that has come upon us?"

"Shared sorrow decreases sorrow," Jenna whispered. "Someone is coming who will avenge us."

"I have sent out watchers who have never returned," Caso began, settling her aging form more comfortably on the rock. "And from the North, Hadian's messengers report dozens missing from their kith."

"Dozens..." Jenna gasped, pushed backwards by the impact of the older woman's words.

\* \* \*

At first dawn, Jenna stretched her body, rose from her meditation position, and reached for the last few swallows of her ale. Finishing the hearty drink, she collected her few belongings and extinguished her small fire. Sipping half of the water from the collector pockets of her moisture suit, she then climbed down from her vigil plateau. As she reached her sand skimmer, she could feel the almost imperceptible rumble of a Zante sand prowler beneath her feet. She knew that she had to wait many minutes before she could determine its direction and used the time to pull the camouflage tarp from her skimmer and stowed it behind the passenger seat. Thanking the Creator for the opportunity to question other desert dwellers, Jenna stashed her backpack, fired up the skimmer, and set an intercept course toward the Zantes.

\*\*\*

"Been a long time since you've been in here, huh?" Farand Tartas said cheerfully as he strode down the five steps and into the musky cantina.

Beside him, Dardin moved like a wraith, floating easily beneath the long black cape he wore. A few inquisitive heads turned in the half-filled saloon, but no one seemed to take anything more than a passing interest in the two newcomers, except a few business girls who eyed both men with professional curiosity. One licked her lips invitingly while boldly staring at the muscular blond man in the black cape. He seemed to take no interest.

"It's been a while." Dar shrugged as his eyes swept the familiar room.

A different band played a different song, but Dar found himself listening to the memory of this place and thoughts of Bob Ocrova. Slight smells of exotic beverages brought back stronger memories as the two men stepped deeper into the cantina, and Dar felt as if he should be able to turn and see the old Vinakti warrior, as he once had, walking behind him. Suddenly an image came to his mind of a broken bone jutting out of the arm of a dirty miner lying on this same floor. Dar mentally shook himself out of his musings as he followed his brother-in-law toward the back of the saloon.

Farand casually slid into a small booth and watched as Dardin silently joined him, followed by a service girl. She seemed a little young to be serving liquor, Farand thought absently. Then he remembered that he was a father, and missing his children, slumped slightly in his seat. *Young people were getting too young*, he thought.

"I'm ready for some breakfast, kid. How about you?" He asked, as Dar surveyed the room with more than just five senses.

"What? Yeah, sure."

"Do you still have those quarter kilo laisarde lizard steak breakfasts, sweetheart?" He asked the server. "I know at least one of us has an appetite."

"How do you want your eggs?" The slim black haired server asked sweetly.

"Over hard. Break the yokes and cook 'em until you can bounce a fork off them."

"And you, sir?" She turned her green eyes on Dardin.

"Whatever he's having," he muttered, still watching the crowd openly. "And some sort of fruit juice. Could we please talk to the manager?"

"Tell him Far Tartas wants speak to him." Farand sat up straighter in his seat and gave the girl his most charming smile.

With a wink to Farand, the young woman turned and hurried away. Dardin said nothing, and Farand sat in an uncomfortable silence.

"Just like old times, huh, kid."

"Did you come here often?"

"Here, or a place called the West End. The food was always better here."

"Any regrets? Do you miss it?"

"Life as a trader? It had its moments," Farand said as the server brought their drinks and utensil. "Mostly those moments were few and far between. And too often lonely. Don't get me wrong, LongSten is a great partner to have around, but I think I prefer the company of one singularly interesting brunette."

"I know what you mean."

"No, you don't, Dardin. And I think that's what's bothering you."

"Nothing's bother --"

"Far Tartas, you old son of a living hell hole!" A baritone voice bombed. "I thought I threw you out of here years ago."

"I've been thrown out of better places than this, Swenzo," Farand retorted, grasping the fat hand that had been thrust in front of him.

"No doubt you have," the huge gray-haired man laughed, shaking Farand's hand like it was a pump handle. "What brings you away from the affairs of State and into the filthy reality of living?"

"My friend and I are doing a little research."

"The Royals around here usually leave well enough alone," the big man said as he grabbed a nearby chair and eased his massive frame onto it. "We haven't joined the Republic because as things are now -- we really don't need to."

"Our search is of a more personal nature," Dar said quietly.

"My friend here has taken an interest in some local trouble," Farand explained, glancing distastefully at the fruit juice before him. "Some Sabulum Raiders have been stirring things up a little."

"Heard about that," the fat man shrugged as the serving girl leaned around him with two platters heaped with food. "Most of my clientele are off-worlders. You know that. You'd be better off talking to Doc McPherson or maybe the Sheriff."

"Who's this McPherson?" Farand asked.

"He runs the local Medical Clinic. I heard my bartender say that he took in a wounded Sabulum a couple of days ago."

"Does the Sheriff know about this?" Farand asked, poking at his eggs.

"You'll have to ask him," Swenzo began, only to be interrupted by a loud group of angry voices at the front of the bar. "Got to go, Farand. Good to see you."

"Well, that was no help," Dar muttered, taking up his eating utensil.

\* \* \*

"Ever see a Sabulum before, son?" asked a voice from behind him. Dar turned slightly and glanced at the heavy, gray-haired doctor who stopped next to him.

"Got cold-conked by one about ten years ago," he whispered, returning his gaze to the motionless figure on the bed nearby. Despite missing an arm, this patient looked completely human, and Dardin briefly wondered if there were any physiological differences.

"And they didn't kill you? You must live a charmed life."

Dar passed a wry smile at the man then gestured at the sleeping form in the hospital bed.

"What happened to him?"

"Apparently he was trying to defend his sister from slavers. We don't know for certain. The two men who found them were burglarized by the same group while they brought him in,"

"And his sister?"

"Dead."

"He'll be fitted with a prosthetic, of course." Dar asked, touching his artificial left hand, a trophy from the Battle of Griesfaber.

"He'll probably kill himself as soon as he's able," McPherson said sadly. "Or the desert will."

"You know much about these desert people?" Farand asked, returning to the room.

"I'm no expert, but I do know that they will abandon anybody who cannot hold their own on the sands."

"Who is the local expert?" Dardin asked with an impatience in his voice that surprised Farand.

"That depends on who's asking," McPherson said quietly, gesturing toward his office door, a stern look on his aging face.

Grudgingly, Dardin moved with the medic, with Farand following. Daniel McPherson's boots scuffed roughly on the shiny concrete floor all the way back to the reception area.

"Now, gentlemen, would you please identify yourselves." McPherson pointed at the computer in the corner, and Farand stepped up to the device with a casual and confident air. "And then tell me why all these questions?"

Before Farand could activate the machine to ID his palm, he heard McPherson gasp. Spinning on the balls of his feet, Farand found the doctor staring at the tattoo on Dardin's right wrist. Half hidden by the folds of Dar's black sleeve rested his Vinakti brand, and the doctor stood, mouth opened for a long moment.

"M-Master Hal-Haldane," McPherson stammered, waving Tartas away from the computer. He gave a little nervous laugh. "I guess you'll want to talk Sheriff Sharpell. And probably that half-Sabulum witch, Jenna, who owns a bar called *Neutral Territory*. Funny, I didn't believe her when she said you were coming back to Sapphire."

"Said we were coming, did she?" Farand asked, suspicious nature surfacing while a feather of Power-encouragement tickled Dardin's mind at the mention of the woman's name.

"Why call her a witch?" Dar asked, staring deeply into the doctor and listening through the Power.

"Oh, there are a couple of really spooky local stories about that woman, about how she has the healing touch and can radiate peace to control a hostile crowd. She sure calmed that boy in there. A lot of the locals go to her for all kinds of help."

"What kind of help?" Dar asked, knowing through the Power that the woman held the clue he was looking for.

"You know, local things. Sunburns, minor abrasions, headaches, influenza, and domestic quarrels. In business and mining disputes, I hear she's a wise arbitrator. A lot of local business people go to her rather than file claims in small claims court. They say she's fair too, despite her Sabulum heritage."

"Sabulum heritage? Is that a problem?" Farand asked, frowning.

"For some, especially farmers and strip miners." The doctor gave an apologetic shrug, then shook a thick finger at the two men. "Desert people make a living off the many unfortunates who the desert takes because of their own stupidity."

"And you think we're about to become-"

"Far, never mind." Dar spoke sharply. "The Neutral Territory. Where is that?"

"You know where old Parking Bay 49 use to be in the Spaceport?"

Farand and Dardin both nodded. Farand's skin crawled uncomfortably, and Dar was slightly aware of his friend's reaction to the casual reference to their shared past. He keenly felt the Power's flow and knew this was the right direction. He would trust the Power to take him where he needed to go.

"Neutral Territory's about a hundred meters outbound of there." McPherson continued.

"Near the West End tavern?" Farand asked.

McPherson laughed slightly. "It used to be the West End."

### Chapter Three

By eleven o'clock, the Great Dunes were far too hot to work in, and Ead Kenard decided to let his slaves rest during the heat of the day. Waving at the head guard, he pointed at the plasisteel lean-to, then watched as the fat-assed Uleanian roughly herded the dozen Sabulum women and children into the little bit of shade that the shelter provided. All the sand people had wrapped their faces with makeshift rags against the sun and sand, so Kenard had some difficulty discerning the female he wanted disciplined.

Stepping out of the relative cool of his tent, which hugged the rocky crag, Kenard moved slowly in the incredible Damison heat. As he neared the slave pen, he could make out the lithe form of the young woman who had been found that morning hiding in the supply tent. But she wasn't the one he wanted. Near her, a taller Sabulum woman hovered protectively, and Kenard watched as that one's eyes darted continually around the compound like a trapped animal.

With a guttural laugh, Kenard realized that one acted like an animal protecting its young, so he decided that the two needed to be separated. Just then the tall one's face turned directly at him, and he recognized her and her hate. This was the female who had brought his ale the previous night, the unclean one. A shiver of disgust traveled Kenard's spine, base to neck and back again.

Most of the Sabulum had shuffled into the lean-to by the time Kenard reached the gate of the enclosure, so he pointed at the tall woman while calling the head guard's name. The Uleanian lumbered over to the shelter and used his stolen shatti stick to separate Elsbeth, pushing her with the flat side of the sharp metal ax at the end of the pole. Although she did not resist, Kenard could see the fire of rebellion in the woman's eyes. He smiled. Such fire was the stuff his dreams were made of, and he wondered how long he would have to wait to enjoy her charms. As she approached, the guard nudging her toward him, Kenard could ascertain the woman's fully curved and mature body beneath the filthy clothes. This also had a certain appeal. Sometimes virgins were too damned scared or completely motionless. The problem was where to put this one until he was ready.

The chunky Uleanian halted the sandy haired woman a meter in front of Kenard.

"What are you called," he demanded.

"Elsbeth of Ishack." She stood defiantly, balanced on the balls of her feet like a fighter. "What are you?"

"You will call me Kenard-duba."

"You are no duba," she hissed, tall and proud, hate in her eyes. "A curse will fall on you for that inaccurate claim."

"Oh? And just what makes a person a duba?" Kenard asked while looking her up and down, deciding she was too dangerous.

"A duba is a warrior who helps the kith. A duba serves a kith and makes sacrifices for others. You are a 'loper. An off-worlder."

Elsbeth suddenly tensed her muscles to spring, but found the Uleanian's blaster in her back. Abandoning the idea for the moment, she glared at Kenard in silence.

"You hate me. Enough to kill me?"

"I serve my kith." She menaced cryptically.

Waving the guard back a few paces, Kenard folded his hands behind his back and slowly walked around the light-haired woman. The tunic and skirt she wore were of the same colorless open weave cloth that all these coarse aboriginals wore. He could smell her dirty body as he stepped down wind of her, and found that exciting in a confusing way.

The guard took another step back as Kenard rounded the Sabulum woman and laughed quietly when Kenard placed a well-aimed kick behind her knees that sent Elsbeth sprawling to the hot white sand. The fall knocked the breath from her.

"You and all the rest of your kind will address me as a duba, with all the courtesy and respect that goes with that rank." Coming round to where the woman lay, facing away from him, Kenard lowered his boot until it pressed Elsbeth's head into the sand. The Uleanian rumbled a laugh.

"You are no duba," she managed as he applied more pressure.

"You will address me as Duba."

The pressure increased. Elsbeth's nose sank into the sand and she breathed through the side of her slightly opened mouth, fighting her anger and stretching for the Calm of All. The grit pushed at her right eye, burning as it scraped her skin.

\* \* \*

After a fruitless trip to the sheriff's office where they were told that Mickey Sharpell was out working with a traffic fatality, Farand led Dardin through more dusty Sapphire streets. Ten years had passed for them, and Dardin felt acutely aware of the changes those years had seen. No longer a starry-eyed farm boy, dreaming of adventure, impatient to begin life, Dardin Haldane felt the weight of the warring years, the battles, and the evils. He thought briefly of the previous night's nightmare. After all these years, he could still feel the jolts of the murderous blue lightning of Royal tortures. He'd woken stiff and disoriented, yet knowing that these were only shadows in the past.

As he walked in silence, Farand leading the way through the heavy foot traffic, Dar found himself recounting the many nemeses his Vinakti abilities had brought him to face. Impassively, he pushed the matter from his mind and tried to concentrate instead on the more positive aspects of his adult life. He found few he could call his own. His joys came from his sister Delah, Farand, and their kids, and from the too few truly successful Vinakti priests his academy had produced.

Farand's pace slowed considerably as he rounded a corner, and Dar took a more active interest in his surroundings. The adobe buildings and the interconnecting arches seemed familiar, somehow, and Dar glanced at Farand, expecting more information. The man continued moving, carefully making his way through the crowd. Dar sensed no apprehension from his friend but looked around again. Something was definitely familiar, he decided.

"If the ship's as fast as he's boasting, we sure to do well," Bob Ocrova's voice whispered through Dardin's memory and his eyes unfocused as if in a dream.

"Bay 49," Farand said over his shoulder. "Looks like I did a little more damage than I thought."

Before him, the spaceship bay had a condemned sign plastered over the floor to ceiling number. Dardin felt uncomfortable, wondering if years ago Farand's ship had caused all the burning and scarring, or if there had been another cause for the devastation of this old bay at the end of the spaceport. The ruins seemed to date back that far.

"Well, they're not making a shrine to us out of this place," Farand said with a chuckle and moved on.

"We're in Royal territory," his companion muttered.

Dardin was slow to go, remorse with yesteryear shadows clogging his emotions. The place was part of his adventures in the days before his world had gotten so serious. Those were the last few hours of Bob Ocrova's life, when Dar had begun his journey as a Vinakti apprentice. Dardin's mind flashed his first ever impression of the Pevner, back then a piece of space junk. Pushing aside the memory, he turned and hurried down the street after the Pevner's owner.

As Dar came abreast of his friend, he caught Farand's eye, and saw that he was smiling.

"Great memories, huh?" Farand grinned.

"How much farther?" He grunted in reply.

"Just around this junction, if I remember right." Farand took five animated and long strides and then pointed at a signboard that pierced the cloudless Damison sky.

Green letters on a brown background announced the entrance of *Neutral Territory*. Dar's senses tingled as if he'd touched a low-powered force field of Power. Below the sign, well-worn beige stone steps descended from the street level into the establishment. Without a word, Dar moved toward the nearby entrance, an almost trance-like look on his face.

"Hey, kid!" Farand called, gripping his arm and pulling him up short.

Dardin continued trying to move in that direction.

"Dar!" Farand shouted, and then grabbed the blond man's arm. "Are you just going to walk in there? Let's have a quick look around."

"There's an amazing amount of energy around here..." he murmured, sliding his arm out of Farand's tight hold. "It's okay,"

"Then shouldn't we be careful?"

"It's not that kind of energy." Dardin smiled one of his rare smiles. "There's almost an intentional peace prevailing here."

"That's a change for us."

"Yes, it is."

The two men walked casually to the steps and descended the stairs in an easy manner. Seven steps down, a set of massive wooden doors waited. The hand carved plaque affixed to the left door read:

*Peace awaits within these walls*

*And within yourself lies Neutral Territory.*

*Leave all hatred outside.*

"Don't you just love extremists," Farand chuckled, reading over Dardin's shoulder.

Dardin pushed the big door open and stepped into the cool of the tavern, Farand skeptically at his heels. The big main room was surprisingly well light, an unoccupied dance floor to their right with a vacant bandstand. To their left was a small dining area with booths and tables half filled with patrons. A long polisteel bar covered the remainder of that wall, stretching almost to the end of the huge room. Over one third of the bar area was occupied by happy, talkative drinkers. Standing tables littered the rest of the open area, many of them occupied, and at the far end, a staircase ran up the wall. Below it, a tall and very pretty server carrying an overfull food tray emerged from what appeared to be a small kitchen.

Dar liked the way the place felt.

Walking casually to the bar, Dardin caught the big barman's eye and gestured to him as Farand came to stand at his side. The men and women around them shuffled amiably to make room for them.

"Who'd believe this," Farand whispered. "With all the scum and villainy of Sapphire -- and I know because I was one of them. This place feels like a family get-together."

"Don't bank on that," the deep-voiced barman growled. "Any one of these folks might cut your throat, steal your boots, and leave you for dead - out there. In here, you behave or you leave. Now, what can I get you?"

"Might be hard to enforce that rule," Farand muttered.

"Two ice waters," Dar replied. "We're here to speak to Jenna."

The barman grunted and turned away, reaching for tall glasses.

"The owner appreciates customers who can afford to drink something as profitable as ice water," came a deep voice from Farand's right. "Hard to keep a business running if the customers don't eat or drink."

"We haven't had dinner," Dardin began. "How's the food?"

"Much better than the last owner's swill." The red-bearded man nudged his empty drink to the inner edge of the bar for a refill. "Join me for dinner?"

"We're here to see someone named Jenna." Dar said casually.

"She probably won't be down for a while," he remarked, stretching out a hand in greeting. "I'm Mickey. You're new here."

"She'll be down in a few hours -- maybe. She was gone all night," the barman said quietly to Sharpell, placing a couple of frosty glasses in front of Farand and Dardin. "Is there anything else for you, gentlemen?"

"A couple of laisarde stews, on my tab," Sharpell said suddenly, and then added in a quiet voice, "Apparently you didn't see the tattoo on his wrist, Mark."

"Dinner's on the house, gents!" Big Mark said suddenly, pointing toward the back of the big room. "May I recommend the best seats in the place? Sheriff Sharpell will show you the way. Serita, fetch these drinks for the gentlemen."

After a quick exchange of confused glances, Farand and Dardin were escorted in silence to a spacious semicircular booth toward the back of the chamber.

"Interesting turn in the hospitality," Farand muttered as he slipped into the spacious booth's seat. "Maybe you should flash that tattoo in the open more often."

"I thought I had it hidden." Dar flopped down across from Farand.

Their drinks were deposited in front of them by the pretty serving woman, who promptly disappeared only to be replaced by the pleasant smiling face of the local sheriff.

"As I said before, boys, care to join me?" He chuckled as Dar scooted deeper into the booth, making way for the red haired man.

"We were looking for you earlier, Sheriff," Farand began amiably, reaching for his water glass. "Your dispatcher said you were dealing with the coroner."

"And so I was. A nasty accident. Nasty." Red eyebrows furrowed together momentarily, and then he glanced down at the seat beside him, near Dardin, and looked up, a boyish grin on his freckled face. "You know that's the second Vinakti tattoo I've had the luck of seeing in my lifetime. I sure would like to see you in action."

"Whose was the first?" Dardin asked, hoping another Vinakti's existence was about to be revealed.

"Oh, good. Here's mine!" Sharpell said suddenly as a second server appeared and laid a plate full of tubers and broiled white meat before him. "The stew I ordered for you is really Jenna's house specialty, but I'm afraid my old stomach just can't handle the spices like it used to. I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

"Whose tattoo did you see?" Farand asked, trying to sound casual.

"Old Bob Ocrova's before he blasted out of here years ago with that space tramp, Farand Tartas."

"You talk like you knew him," Dar said as he glanced at his friend.

"You're somewhat a celebrity to anyone who follows off-planet politics, Captain Tartas." Sharpell smiled, as he broke apart the white meat with his fork. "But I remember the day Bob Ocrova broke old Talented Al's arm just for pushing a young farm boy to the deck."

"He drew his blaster first," Dar said defensively.

"Lot of good it did him, huh?" Sharpell tested his meal. "Ah, just like I like it. What brings a young Vinakti Master back here,?"

"My face hasn't seen the media coverage Farand's had." Dar read the honesty of the man through his Power and sighed slightly, causing Farand to relax a bit. "How do you know me?"

"Jenna warned me that you were coming. And that tattoo," he replied and glanced in Farand's direction. "I did a little research."

"Half the town know we're here?" Farand spat sarcastically. "Did she say why we're here, too?"

"Farand." Dar cautioned.

"Deputy Zeiger told me you were interested in the recent increase of Sabulum raids," Sharpell began between bites.

"That seems to be the focus," Dar muttered. "What do you know?"

"Well, officially, there has been nine reported abductions, but when I talked to Jenna yesterday, she seemed to think there would be at least twice that many."

"That's when she told you we were coming?" Farand asked.

"She only mentioned Master Haldane," Sharpell said between mouthfuls. "And that was several days ago."

"We didn't even know we were coming several days ago," Farand snapped, eyes wide and angry.

"Easy, Farand," Dar breathed. "Sheriff, Doctor McPherson hinted about a few wild stories about this Jenna woman and said to talk to her. How does she figure into these Sabulum raids?"

"Well, first off, she doesn't believe that it's her desert people doing the raiding."

\* \* \*

Upon waking to the dim light that marked the end of the day, Jenna ate a fast breakfast and then stepped out onto her rooftop patio to enjoy the coming of the Damison night. *Was he downstairs*, she wondered, but did not want to open her senses to confirm Dardin Haldane's presence. She felt uncertain. Fluctuating between anticipation and anger, excitement and offense, she found it difficult to dress, anticipating their first meeting as adults. Too long she had known of this day, and too many times she had fantasized about how she would stomp up to him like a true Sabulum warrior and demand a blood payment for her father's death. Yet she knew she would not. Other matters demanded attention. She went back inside her home.

Deciding on a comfortable long brown tunic, belt and beige mantle, Jenna dressed slowly, armed herself inconspicuously, pulled on soft desert boots, and walked back out onto her patio again. Looking up and out into the starry space beyond the planet's atmosphere, Jenna drew a deep breath and moaned low.

"Papa, I'm not ready for this," she whispered, but in her mind she could almost hear his familiar and loving voice saying *Trust in the Calm*.

With a sigh of resignation, Jenna went into the apartment, opened the door that led downstairs to the tavern, and was assaulted by the sharp sounds and smell so familiar to her. She locked her home above Neutral Territory, then descended the staircase. She carefully scanned the establishment with her eyes as she usually did, listening with a critical ear to the band she'd recently hired. Her glance at Big Mark, behind the bar, was met with a slight smile and a nod of his huge head that told her all was well with the business. Then, Mark bit at his thumbnail, their preplanned signal. This gesture sent waves of anticipation mixed with anxiety through Jenna's being.

*Haldane was here!*

\*\*\*

After Sheriff Sharpell had finished his evening meal and had left, Dar had slid around in the big circular booth so that he had a better view of the establishment. Sharpell had said that this was the owner's usual booth, and Dar had quickly seen why. The vantage point was exceptional, except that he couldn't see the kitchen door or much of the staircase that went up to a second floor. After dinner drinks had arrived and had slowly been drunk, he and Farand waited, talking about old times and possible futures for Dardin's Vinakti Academy. He had admitted that he felt relieved to be away from his teaching duties. Farand had not shown any surprise. The evening slipped away, the crowd enjoyed themselves with very little problems and no interventions from the big man behind the bar who seemed to control it all.

Soon after the clock behind Big Mark's bar had slipped another hour over, Dardin noticed a change in the feel of the tavern's customers. Some seemed more relaxed, but not because of the alcohol. Others acted more jovial, laughing more freely in the somewhat smoky air. Even Farand had stopped picking at his fingernails. Sensing the energy around him, Dardin could find no specific explanation for the change in the atmosphere. The only addition had been the appearance of a tall woman with curly brown hair who moved around the big room, talking with patrons and clearing the remains of drinks and late meals.

Her smile was sweet and genuine for every being she talked with, Dar realized as he watched her move gracefully among the clientele. Big Mark also watched her with the loving eyes of a doting uncle, Dar thought, amused by the possibility. Next to him, Farand had grown silent, and Dar became aware that Farand was watching him watch the willowy woman. Dar felt mildly surprised by Farand's lack of witty remarks, but didn't mention that. He was too interested in the woman.

"What do your Vinakti senses tell you about that one?" Farand asked in a serious tone.

Startled out of his focus, Dardin frowned and replied, "It never occurred to me to check."

After a focusing breath, the Vinakti Master cast his heightened senses across the sea of bar patrons, carefully sorting out each life-force he touched until he was certain he had eliminated everyone else in the room. Having completed the necessary round of the bar, greeting the more regular patrons, Jenna strongly sensed that she was being touched by the Vinakti's thought and stammered to a stop in mid sentence with one of her servers. She quickly calmed herself, against the strong presence in the room and in her mind, then finished her conversation.

"I can't read her," Dar said with wonder, frowning with self-consciousness. "It's like she's not there."

"Like she was using a scrambler?" Farand asked.

Praying that the Vinakti couldn't read her heightened pulse rate and respiration, Jenna stopped behind the bar to pour herself a glass of mangda juice.

"Exactly," Dardin replied, watching the woman step unchallenged behind the bar. "She's definitely the one I'm looking for."

Forcing herself to approach the two men who waited in her booth, Jenna carried her drink across the room. They were talking to each other as she advanced, giving her an extra few moments to gain control of her shaking hands. Tartas, Jenna decided, didn't look too different from when he used to drink and gamble at the West End, where she had worked as a cook. Haldane, she felt unsure about. He had been nothing more than a teen when she had last seen him, the day he and Bob Ocrova had blasted off the planet. The handsome blond man in her booth was a hard muscled warrior, unlike the scrawny boy

who she recalled had been called "mouse" by his friends. This Dardin Haldane was a completely different being, radiating the Calm with a confidence that caused her to stare at him, fascinated.

Hollow blue eyes looked up and met Jenna's when she was two meters away from the booth. She gasped as waves of unhealed sorrow crashed over her, causing her steps to falter in a dizzying reel of lightheadedness. She stumbled.

There was no joy in the man.

Seeing her distress but not knowing he was the cause of it, Dardin launched out of his seat, reaching to help her. Jenna put up her hand, palm out, and managed to avoid his touch.

*NO!* Rang in Dardin's head, and he sensed that she wanted no physical contact with him.

Jenna reinforced her mental block like her father had taught her as she shuffled the last few steps to the table, while Haldane stopped himself, straightened and watched her amazingly graceful recovery. Setting the tumbler of juice on the table, she caught her hand on the edge of the table, sat in the booth, and focused on the dark haired man who still sat there.

"Captain Tartas," she said in a raspy voice, hoping to sound casual. "When was the last time you had any really good Sabulum tortilla pie with ice cream?"

Tartas let out a loud blast of laughter as Dar stared, intrigued by the lovely woman who had almost fallen at his feet. He sensed that she might be using the Power, yet not using it at the same time. He could see the subtle traces of concentration on her pleasant face. And yet, there were no sensations of Power manipulation. Could it be something else, he wondered, watching her, amazed at her instant composure.

"Please, sit down, Dardin Haldane." Jenna waved casually at Dardin's vacated seat and then slid into the curved seat beside Farand Tartas, using his body to buffer the incredible presence of Vinakti Power.

Dardin wondered how she knew his name, since she didn't look or feel familiar. She automatically reached out to read Tartas's emotions and found befuddlement. Pouting, she sweetly said, "You don't remember me."

Farand's face screwed up and down and around in an effort to recall the woman who had easily landed at his side. Glancing at Dardin, Farand saw his confusion and laughed out loud.

"I'm sorry, but I don't," Farand managed through his chuckling.

"Let's see... You like your eggs over hard, break the yokes and brown them until the fork bounces off of them. Steaks done to medium rare. You're the only being I ever saw eat a whole tortilla pie with ice cream -- on a bet -- and manage to keep it down." Jenna made a sour face, still focusing on Tartas as she worked to regain her composure. "I hope your meal tonight was a few notches above what you've had here in the past. I had the good sense to hire a real chef."

"I remember now..." Tartas grinned. "What did you do with all that gorgeous long hair of yours?"

"It doesn't fit well in my moisture suit, so I cut it off." Jenna forced her eyes beyond Tartas and glanced briefly at the blond man in the seat next to him. Blue eyes stared back, and she quickly averted her eye. "Please, Master Haldane, turn down whatever Vinakti mind technique you're using to scan me. You're giving me a headache."

Startled, Dar stopped what he considered a gentle inquiry, as Farand looked his way, wondering what kind of talent this woman had that could read Dardin when Dardin could not read her.

"S-sorry," Dardin stammered, feeling like a clumsy teenager again.

Jenna's head cleared immediately.

"Thank you," she said, glancing around the big room. "Now, tell me what brings you into *Neutral Territory*?"

"You're an expert on the desert people," Dar began as his face heated with blood. "What do you know of the increase in Sabulum raids and abductions?"

"It's not the Sabulum. Dozens of my people have disappeared too. They're off-world slavers. Yes, Serita, what is it?"

The tall serving woman moved closer when Jenna addressed her, and bent to whisper quietly into Jenna's ear. A frown crossed the proprietor's face, not diminishing

her pleasant features, Dar noted, and then the woman turned in her seat and waved briefly at the barman.

Serita quickly moved away from the table as Dar continued closely watching the woman across from him.

"Sorry," Jenna sighed and drank briefly. "An interesting bunch, these people plunderers. They hit Zante sand prowlers for spare parts and hardware, and they steal Sabulum women and children when they find them."

"And your desert people haven't caught them?" Dardin asked. "I remember them as a vicious crowd."

"I'm told these slavers have recently moved in from Haidian's territory – a northern Sabulum tribe. From what Sheriff Sharpell says, they're careful and nomadic. It's as if they knew they needed to move on before their luck had dried out. They've just started harvesting my people, and there will be no mercy if the local kith gets a hold of them."

"Kith?" Dardin asked, hearing dark echoes in his mind, ugly stories from his childhood designed to keep him in his bed at night. He suppressed the memories and focused on the curly haired woman.

"Nothing dangerous," Jenna said quickly, aware of his apprehension. "A kith is a clan or tribe. And I need to get this information to my kith and kin. Forgive my bluntness, but what do you want with me, Dardin Haldane?"

Dardin glanced at Farand, only to see him shrug his shoulders slightly before busying himself with his mug of Endabian ale. Looking back at the woman, he found her gaze steady, her eyes bright and intelligent. *What color were they?* he wondered, *Purple or just very dark blue?* He decided he liked them, and his skilled senses whispered to keep her near.

"I honestly don't know," he said finally and heard Farand's chuckle. "Maybe you're supposed to guide us out in the desert."

"And make sure that we go after the right bad guys."

"Farand," Dardin warned, frowning.

"Hey, I only meant—" He stopped, seeing the intensity on both Dardin and Jenna's faces as the two stared at each other across the table. "Never mind. So, I suppose we're going for a walk in the desert tomorrow?"

"Around her, only mad dogs and Royalists go out in the midday sun." Jenna sneered, glancing briefly at Tartas. "I'm heading to my kith tonight, as soon as you two are done with me."

"Take me with you," Dardin suggested smoothly, radiating calm assurance toward the unreadable woman.

Farand felt annoyed that his brother-in-law had said *me* and not *us*.

Jenna frowned, feeling this ripple in the Calm and knowing it was from the Vinakti, but she'd expected as much. Glancing at Tartas, she pursed her lips in thought, realizing this was inevitable. Too many dreams had shown the three together in her kith, dreams she knew to be true. She imagined her shield reflecting Haldane's nudge of Power-backed persuasion and knew she had succeeded.

"I have seen pieces of this journey in my dreams," she remarked tentatively, glancing at Tartas. "My skimmer only fits two, and we'll have to walk some of the way."

"We can take the Pevner," Farand said, thinking that would end the discussion.

"No." Dardin and Jenna said simultaneously, and Dar continued, "The Zante s would dismantle it for parts if they got near it."

"My people would shoot it out of the sky."

"They already tried that, sweetheart." Farand smiled sweetly.

"I am not anyone's sweetheart, Tartas," she said coldly. "And if you were shot at while landing, that was just target practice. If they wanted to take you down, they would have."

"Not my ship, sister."

"I'm not your sister, either," Jenna growled, then turned to Haldane. "Can you ride a TrailMaker III speedbike?"

"Never tried." He shrugged, inwardly amused by her banter with Farand.

"Dar can handle any machine," Tartas put in. "He's a natural pilot."

"Is he? Tartas, are you the taller? I have an extra Sabulum moisture suit in my apartment that's too tall for me," she said, considering him a potential liability. "I'd rather have you wear it, because I think the Vinakti can take care of himself."

"And I can't?"

"You don't know the dangers of this desert," she said and drained her juice. "Can you stay awake tonight, Tartas? We'll rest after sunrise."

"I can stay awake, sister."

"What do you need to do to prepare?" she asked, as Big Mark approached their table.

The gray-haired barman handed Jenna a credit chip clipped to a signature pad, which she studied for a moment before giving back to the man, unsigned.

"Absolutely not. I told her that last time, Mark." Jenna frowned as she caught his sleeve and continued in a quieter voice. "I'll be out two or three days this time. Tell Mickey I'm taking these two to Ishack."

The barmen studied his employer closely, with lips pursed and worry lines running the length of his forehead. Dar could sense his desire to argue with her. Then Mark looked briefly at Farand and his frown deepened. When he turned his gaze on Dardin, he relaxed a bit and let out a slow breath.

"When?" Mark whispered, and Jenna looked from Tartas to Haldane for the answer.

The two exchanged glances and Farand shrugged.

"Whenever you're ready to go," Dardin replied.

\* \* \*

Dar prowled Jenna's parlor with eager interest, trying to discover as much as possible about her before she returned. In a nearby room, Farand was climbing into the black, rubbery moisture suit that Jenna had lent him, while she gathered a few supplies. The living room Dardin stood in was sparsely furnished, decorated only with a few handcrafted wall hangings and rugs. Sabulum in origin, he decided. The two sofas were made of open weave cloth of a muted rust color with plasisteel supports. Everything

seemed made of natural Damison materials. The rest was walled with bookshelves. The only evidence of technology was the small computer and communications desk that was part of the farthest wall. He felt drawn to the books.

Her collection of books impressed him. Considered potentially dangerous, books had become uncommon in the reign of the Royals, and many had been destroyed. As he perused the titles, Dar sensed he was nearing something important, but he didn't know what. He could hear Jenna running water in the kitchen, presumably for the trip. Interspersed in the shelves were a few unusual artifacts, old and undoubtedly Sabulum, Dardin decided, as he stretched out a sliver of Power to touch woman's being.

"Haldane, stop it!" She shouted almost immediately.

Returning to his examination of the shelves, Dar felt justified in the confirmation her sensitivity to his abilities. Then he spied a small, familiar-looking translucent cube, and his breath caught in his throat. Half buried behind a carved loxodon statue, this cube looked remarkably like his Vinakti teaching device that had been destroyed 3 years before. Anticipation filled Dar as he carefully reached behind the fat bone statue and touched the Vinakti artifact. It tingled with Power as his fingers surrounded it, and he slowly drew it out of its spot. As he began examining the cube, Dardin heard footsteps enter the room and looked up.

"Well, how do I look?" Farand asked, his arms raised up from his sides as he stomped in wearing the black, rubbery suit that covered every possible part of his body below his jaw line.

"Lumpy," Dardin responded without thought for his brother-in-law as he turned the translucent cube around in his fingers.

"Thanks a lot, pal."

"Farand, have a look at this."

In three steps, Tartas stood beside Haldane and stared at the object in the Vinakti's hand.

"I can feel the energy flowing in this, just like the one the Royal cavaliers destroyed. I bet it's another Vinakti teaching artifact. I wonder where she got it."

"And how she did," Farand added, watching Dardin turn the cube slowly in his fingers.

"My father gave it to me," Jenna said with angry tones as she hurried across the room toward the two men. Reaching Dardin, she snatched the cube from his fingertips with one unexpected and fluid motion. Her anger beat a prickly vibration on Dardin's brain, reverberating through his mind. With a scowl, the woman turned and gave Farand a disapproving eye, wagging her fingers at his chest.

"You've got that sealed backward," she said as the prickly sensation eased in Dardin. "You'll lose every drop of precious body fluid if you're caught out in a sand storm. Haldane, you used to live here. Give him a hand with that while I finish packing."

Jenna whirled on her heels and hurried away, leaving Dar to stare after her, slack-jawed. With a chuckle, Farand reached over and nudged Dardin's chin closed, and then glanced down at the moisture suit's fasteners.

"She's a piece of work," he said, noting Dardin's befuddlement. "Not many women in this galaxy would dare bark orders at the Vinakti Master."

"What? Yeah... I guess," Dar said, looking at the suit's seal. "Hey! You've got those closed backwards."

\* \* \*

Elsbeth wanted to get out of the scratchy blanket, get up and pace for a while. Two things stopped her. Fraticia had fallen asleep with her head on her shoulder, and even though Elsbeth's arm tingled from lack of circulation, she didn't want to disturb her. Nearby, the Uleanian did pace out his assigned post and that was Elsbeth's second reason for staying where she was. Kenard had promised her several nasty misfortunes if she caused any trouble - misfortunes that would befall Fraticia and all the rest of the Sabulum he had stolen. She couldn't allow herself to become the cause of more suffering, she knew, and tried again to sleep, thinking how ridiculous it was to insist that nocturnal Sabulum sleep during their usual active cycle. Beside her, the younger woman shifted in her sleep, and Elsbeth could feel the renewed blood circulating in her arm, causing the usual pricks and tingles associated with that. For a few minutes the sensation of the renewed blood flow took her mind off her other arm that throbbed with pain where

Kenard had broken it. She returned to counting laisarde lizards jumping over lenti cactus, hoping that sleep would come.

\* \* \*

Within twenty minutes of leaving Jenna's garage, Farand had shifted into a comfortable position in the passenger seat of her skimmer, and then promptly fell asleep. Jenna drove in silence now, having turned off the local radio program, and listened half consciously to the rumble of the speedbike as it followed close behind. As Tartas had predicted, Haldane had taken to the powerful speedbike with its giant Turbo Two repulsion engine like a young Sabulum to a baby loxodon. But without the glee. This bothered Jenna as she pushed her two-seat skimmer a little faster now that they were well away from the late night city traffic – and Sherriff Sharpell's traffic officers.

Behind and to her left, Dardin easily guided the monstrous speedbike, wondering for the twelfth time why a woman would own such a powerful machine. Then his mind went back to the Vinakti artifact hidden behind a loxodon statue. How could he approach her about it? he wondered, remembering how possessive she had acted toward it. And angry with him for just touching it! Just then, the woman in the skimmer increased her speed, and Dardin adjusted his to keep pace with her, noticing how Farand slumped in his seat.

Curious, Dardin reached out in the Power and touched his friend's mind, only to find Farand deep in peaceful slumber, dreaming about his children. Envy and regret touched his heart as Dardin switched his concentration back to keeping up with the reckless, speeding woman ahead. Grudgingly, he wondered if a wife and family were the cost he had to pay to bring the Vinakti mental disciplines back from near extinction, while his sister, Delah became a Vinakti baby factory. Often he'd found himself thinking of his niece and nephews as the heirs to the Haldane line -- never children of his own.

"Dare I even hope?" he asked the wind.