

# Vinakti Duet

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## CHAPTER 1

### Samphire Station, Planet Damison

“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 than 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.”

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“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 the off-world scum who sometimes visited 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 meter-high Zantes.

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

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The Zante pulled wearily to its feet before responding with a flurry 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 alongside 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 writhed 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 Zantes—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.

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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.

### **Planet 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 messier 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 as if 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, training new recruits and rarely visiting the Republic's government seat. Farand's close friend Cyril's spice mining operations seemed to be finally turning a profit, and took all Cyril's time. After restoring and modifying the *Pevner* with all the most modern technological wonders, his longtime friend and co-pilot, 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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### **Samphire Station, Neutral Territory bar and grill**

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 cautiously.

“I haven’t felt anything like this 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 seven 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 seem to 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.

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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*.

### **Planet 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 warriors.

With the help of many people in many high places, the highest being his own sister, now Head 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 students, but reinforced what he taught the more advanced of his followers.

As he swung easily down through the huge tree limbs, Dar again felt a sensation that had been poking at the back of his being 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 easily on the balls of his feet, near the closest of the bricks, Dar drew a deep breath and thought about Delah, Farand, and the children. He hadn't visited the family 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

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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, Vinakti Master Dar Haldane stepped toward them to begin another day filled with Vinakti history classes and mind focusing exercises.

### **The Great Dunes, Damison**

The glare of the twin suns did not bother Ead Kenard. The stolen Sabulum 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.

### **Brafadan**

Delah Tartas stepped down from the podium, turned to her right and moved toward the exit of the great hall, her two bodyguards falling in behind her. As the afternoon session had wound down, she had felt the usual fatigue, but now she felt a

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bounce in her step and anticipation in her heart. Before her, huge wooden doors swung open, disclosing the staging area behind the scenes of the assembly hall. One lone figure stood there, tall, straight, and familiar, and Delah had to resist her urge to break into an undignified run and jump 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” she said softly as they turned and made their way toward the executive elevators. “Tomiken is getting more—”

“Master Dardin!” a metallic, mechanical 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 that soggy, dreadful Calystra of yours for far too long a time—”

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“Hello, Aver3. Please, don’t interrupt us.” 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 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 taut and solid muscles beneath her fingers. Thinking how attractive Dardin had become, she wondered when he would find the right woman. 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.”

### **Samphire, 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,

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always left the place spotless. Looking in the cooler, Jenna found the pre-made meal Myra always made for her. There was enough for the bartender as well, and Jenna placed the containers and casually heated the food 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 bell. 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. She recognized that voice. Taking up her dinner, Jenna stepped into the main area of the bar.

"It's okay, Mark," she said while placing their 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 bartender 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 to pay the doctor," she said, taking up her fork. "But tell me, what happened out there yesterday? Was it the same ones?"

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 would rather have been scrubbing the floor of her bar, than waiting in the silence of the night. It beckoned powerfully to her in a way that made her very uneasy.

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The great desert called to her to take up her role as a Sabulum. The night told her that her true people needed her far more than these interlopers who inhabited the cities and outlying succulent 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, demonstrating 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 Far 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 Great Architect, who brings them the *Power* from their mother's side, because I sure don't have it.”

“It doesn't matter where or from whom it comes, 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 security fence that surrounded that area.

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Sensing Farand's restlessness, Dardin held back a moment before joining him at the edge. The two stood, silently gazing across the cityscape.

“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, watching 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 warrior. Mostly, Farand listened, knowing that his friend the Vinakti Master wouldn’t talk

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about every burden. Farand hoped 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 known galaxy.

### **Slavers' Camp, Damison**

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 north. If someone wanted to backtrack them, they'd never find their origins if they flew out from the planet's northern 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 computers and droid parts would certainly bring a good price, but what really filled his coffers were the Zante and Sabulum slaves he'd packed into the holds of Pan Pearsall's transport. The highest credits were to be found in humanoid trafficking.

In the encampment below, weary people prepared to get some rest after their busy night, after 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 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 carved 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, Brafadan**

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 steeling droid and computer components.

“Farand? Have a look at this,” he said softly, then requested a printout of the information.

### **Samphire Station**

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 awakened 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 in 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

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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 Dracon'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 this striking woman.

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

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“It will be returned. What can you tell me?”

“Two Sabulum girls taken. About her age.”

“Sabulum don't enslave 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 dark brown hair, Jenna stood on shaky legs and reinforced the calming technique. “Excuse me, please. I have to contact their parents.”

### **Brafadan**

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 led 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 farewell. 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 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, kissed her forehead, then turned to walk up the starship's familiar ramp.

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“Take care of each other,” she called as Farand's boots touched the interior of his beloved ship.

### **Slave Camp**

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.

### **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 clinic.

“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?”

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“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 physical 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 coma 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 that 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 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 Ocrova?”

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.

## VINAKTI DUET

### Slave Camp, Damison

“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 wenches.”

“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 Movinian pig devils—even the little ones.”

## VINAKTI DUET

“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 Samphire Station 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, Samphire Station**

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.”

## VINAKTI DUET

“Grady and Avalon coming in at three?” 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. You'll see his 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 the 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 nearby shelves.

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

## VINAKTI DUET

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 I got back.”

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

### **Slave Camp, Damison**

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 dishes only made the young woman push the cleansing sand harder in to the surface of the black pot. *How could they eat a loxodon?* Whose 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

## VINAKTI DUET

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 that poor loxodon to its architect,” Fraticia said with shaky words. “Will anybody know to sing for us?”

## CHAPTER 2

### The Great Dunes, Damison

After several hours of skimming the fiery sands of the Warren Wastes, Jenna camouflaged her rusty 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 moisture suit as it collected her sweat, purified it, and sent it to moisture caches in various pockets in 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. The suit also filtered 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 the summit, her 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 in the 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

## VINAKTI DUET

Jenna knew was the peak range of the calling whistle, she continued to swing the rope over her head for several more minutes to ensure 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 starry night sky. Sulla Fredericks took the lead, 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.

## VINAKTI DUET

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.

### **Slave Camp**

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 and terror 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 with their fingers from metal bowls. 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

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mug for more, she filled it to the rim. This would never have happened 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?”

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“Two.”

“I’ve heard you people start young,” He said with disgust. “Get out.”

### **On the Pevner**

“Okay, Dar. Prepare for sublight,” Farand said more out of habit than anything. 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 had quickly adapted the routine of verbal communications that he and LongSten did not need.

As the stars slid into brief lines and then into pinpoint focus again, Farand smiled to himself. Damison was not altogether a Republic-bound planet, but the 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 Samphire Station’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 its daylight half. “I guess we could. Maybe. Looks like it's night in Samphire,” 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...?”

## VINAKTI DUET

He turned his attention to the spaceport communications officer 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 Samphire Station. Farand concentrated on piloting his craft while Dar watched the moonlight-washed landscape slip silently by. That confused 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 vapor farm he had left behind more than seven years earlier. And what of that old Vinakti master, Bob Ocrova's desert lodge? 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 the location once they had identified it as 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 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 grumbled, glancing at Dar briefly. “Samphire Station, 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.”

## VINAKTI DUET

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*.”

“Samphire Station,” 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.”

### **The Great Dunes, Damison**

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 shattii 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,

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someone took a few practice shots at an incoming ship on the Samphire flight path. A common game for the Sabulum, it bothered neither of them.

“Remember how you taught me to aim the 'lopers 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 Sinter's 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 decent should have been.

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

## VINAKTI DUET

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, quickly followed by relief. He moved silently across the rocks, a true phantom of the desert. Smiling, she relaxed and savored the familiar feeling of the good 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.

### **Slave Camp**

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

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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 away 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.

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 into 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.

### **Onboard the Pevner**

“Whatever 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 Samphire Station.”

## VINAKTI DUET

“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 Samphire Station flight path.

“I don’t know...”

“Dar, that’s the first time I’ve heard you say that in probably five 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.

### **The Great Dunes**

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 shattii 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

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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 understanding 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.

### **Out on the Great Dunes**

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 stow it behind the passenger seat. Thanking *Kahammah* for the opportunity to question other desert dwellers, Jenna shifted her backpack, fired

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up the skimmer, and turned her powerful sand bike to intercept the Zantes.

### **Samphire Station, Musa's Saloon**

“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 unfamiliar room.

A different band played a different song, but Dar found himself listening to the memory of this place. He thought 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 are getting too young*, he thought.

## VINAKTI DUET

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

“What? Yeah, sure.”

“Do you still have those quarter kilo laisarde lizard steak breakfasts, sweetheart?” Farand 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 to 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 freighter captain? It had its moments,” Farand said as the server brought their drinks and utensils. “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.”

## VINAKTI DUET

“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 boomed. “I'm sure 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, jerking Farand's hand as if it was a pump handle. “What brings you back into the filthy reality of life?”

“Am 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.”

“It's personal,” 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.

“Has the local medical clinic. I heard he took in a wounded Sabulum a couple of days back.”

“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.”

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

### **Samphire Station Medical Clinic**

“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 seven 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.” He shrugged. “I don't know. The two men who found these two were burglarized while they brought him here. May be by the same crew.”

“And his sister?”

“Dead.”

“He'll be fitted with a prosthetic?” 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.

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“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 doctor, 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, as he gave a nervous little laugh. “I guess you'll want to talk to 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 Samshire.”

“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 arbiter. A lot of local business

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people go to her rather than file claims in small claims court. They say she's fair too, despite her Sabulum heritage.”

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

“For farmers and crystal 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 used 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 3

By eleven o'clock, the Great Dunes were far too hot to work in, and Ead Kenard reluctantly decided to let his slaves rest during the heat of the day. Waving at the head guard, he pointed at the plastisteel 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 shattii 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. 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 just a 'loper. An off-worlder.”

## DREAGANSTAR

Elsbeth suddenly tensed her muscles to spring, but found the Uleanian's blaster in the small of 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 *duba*, with all the courtesy and respect that goes with that rank.” Coming around 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.

## Samphire Station

After a fruitless trip to the sheriff's office where they were told that Mickey Sharpell was out working a traffic fatality, Farand led Dardin through dusty Samphire streets. Seven 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 evil he had fought. 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 awakened 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 with whom 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 apprentices and journeymen 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.

## DREAGANSTAR

“If the ship's as fast as he says it is, we will be fine,” 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 his younger 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.