

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.”

“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.

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.”

“Rwabable 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 he 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.

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.

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. 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 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 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,” 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—”

“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, 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 doorbell. 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. 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. 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 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 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.

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 stealing 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 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.”

“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.”