

ARCHITECTS OF DESTINY
by
Amy DuBoff

ARCHITECTS OF DESTINY
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Part 1: New Beginnings

CHAPTER 1

I must leave tonight. I can't stay here any longer— Cris Sietinen ducked to avoid the electronic rapier swinging toward his head.

“Stay focused.” His tutor jumped to the side as he stabbed at Cris’ torso.

Cris parried the blow, a challenging glint in his cobalt eyes. “You haven’t hit me yet.”

“You haven’t struck me, either.” His tutor circled him, steel-blue eyes locked on Cris. “Get inside your opponent’s head, just as Marina taught you. Movements can deceive, but what’s in the mind can’t be faked. Trust your intuition.”

Clearing his thoughts, Cris prepared for a telepathic assessment. “It’s not intuition, Sedric. Science has told us that much.”

Sedric Almar sighed. “Telepathy, clairvoyance, call it what you will. You are one of the few with the gift. Use it.” He took a swing toward Cris’ right leg. Though decades past his prime, he still possessed the same youthful vigor as the day he joined the Tararian Guard. Now a trusted Captain, he remained a formidable opponent in any close-quarter combat, gray hair or not.

With his mind cleared, Cris reached out to read the thoughts grazing the surface of Sedric’s consciousness—catching a glimpse of his next move. Before his instructor could complete his swing, Cris deflected the attack. “If it’s such a ‘gift’, then why does everyone treat it like a curse?”

“Don’t be so dramatic.” Sedric jabbed toward the main sensor on the chest of Cris’ training jumpsuit.

As he dodged the attack, Cris brought his own blade to Sedric’s collar in one fluid motion. The sensor lights illuminated red. A kill hit.

Sedric held out his hands in defeat and nodded his approval. “Next time I won’t go easy on you.”

Cris took a step back to rest. “I can’t solely rely on telepathy to win. There must be a reason the Priesthood condemns the use of such abilities.” His covert lessons from Marina were defiant enough, flirting with the boundaries of legality.

Sedric reset his jumpsuit using the controls on the sleeve, and the sensors returned to blue. “It’s not our place to speculate about matters regarding the Priesthood. Not even yours, my lord.”

“But you have to wonder,” Cris pondered. “On Tararia and most of the colonies, there’s nothing but anti-telekinesis propaganda. Yet, an entire division of the TSS is dedicated to honing the abilities of those rare ‘gifted’ individuals, and the Priesthood does nothing.”

“The Tararian Selective Service is unique in many ways,” Sedric replied, dismissing the dispute with a shake of his head. He gripped his sword and took an offensive stance. “Now, we have a lesson to finish.”

Cris was resolute, determined to finally get an answer to the questions his teacher was always so eager to dodge. *This is my last chance before I leave.* “You spent a year with the TSS, didn’t you? You must have seen so much—”

A single crease deepened between Sedric’s dark eyebrows. “My lord, with all respect, your father doesn’t appreciate discussion of the TSS.”

Cris’ restraint slipped. “Of course he doesn’t. He wants me to ignore my abilities, just like he did. Why should I listen to someone who wants me to live a lie?”

“I’m sorry, I—” Sedric brought his slender sword to a resting position with the illuminated tip on the ground.

Cris fought to maintain composure, but his serene façade shattered. “You don’t understand what it’s like... to have all the privileges of being born into this family, and yet it doesn’t mean anything. He’ll never be happy with who I am, not after the son he lost years ago. Me? I’m just his

replacement heir to the Sietinen Dynasty—a tool to perpetuate our familial empire.” *A disappointing shadow of the brother I never knew.*

“You mustn’t think that way, my lord,” Sedric said with a gentleness that belied his hardened exterior.

Stars! Just a few more hours... Cris swallowed, his throat tight. *Then I can get away from Tararia and stop being compared to the impossibly perfect memory of Tristen.* “Shite, it’s no wonder he and Mother avoid me. I guess by now I should be used to seeing my instructors more than my own parents.” Cris met Sedric’s gaze for a moment before looking down.

Sedric put an encouraging hand on Cris’ toned shoulder. “You’re true to yourself, and that’s the best thing you can be.”

Like that’s done me any good so far. Cris undid the collar of his dark gray training jumpsuit, extinguishing the subtle blue sensor lights. “I’ve had enough for today.”

Sedric nodded, but his jaw was set in a frown.

Cris stepped from the black rubberized tiles covering the training arena onto the veined, white marble found throughout the estate. He set his sword in its rack along the wall next to the other training weapons. As he removed his jumpsuit, he stared out the window at the clear sky above the manicured grounds. He couldn’t wait to be out among the stars.

To Cris’ disappointment, when he glanced at the time displayed on the viewscreen integrated into the wall, he saw that it was only halfway through the scheduled lesson time. He sighed.

Sedric rested both hands atop the hilt of his sword. “Why the sudden interest in the TSS?”

Cris returned to the arena, wearing only the gray t-shirt and black workout pants that had been beneath his training attire. “It’s a significant institution, but all I ever hear are rumors. You were actually there. What was it really like?”

“Very different than anything here on Tararia,” his instructor replied after a moment.

“How so?”

Sedric scowled. “You’re trying to get me in trouble.”

“This is just between us, I promise.”

The Captain eyed him, still on edge. “First off, nothing of anyone’s life outside the TSS mattered. You could come from one of the High Dynasties or from the streets—everyone was treated the same.” He paused, but Cris’ pleading eyes drove him on. He smoothed his light gray uniform as if reliving a morning muster. “Though I was just in the Militia division, I had a few chances to meet the Agents. They have this presence that can quiet a room. Such power. I was always awed by their abilities. It was something timeless.”

Cris was captivated. *Unrestricted telekinesis... What can they do?* “So why did you leave?”

A grimace flitted across Sedric’s face, barely perceptible. “Many only attend for the first year. It just wasn’t the life for me.”

Cris examined his instructor. “If many leave after the first year, it must be easy to join. How do—”

Sedric let out a gruff laugh. “Oh, I see! I never should have said anything. Now you’re getting fanciful ideas.”

A disarming smile brought out Cris’ natural good looks. He ran a hand through his chestnut brown hair. “Please, Sedric? I’m only trying to broaden my knowledge of the outside world.”

His teacher scrutinized him. “There’s an open application process for Militia, but most Agent slots are by invitation. However, it is best if you permanently remove such thoughts from your mind.”

Cris composed his face, but the mischievous smile never fully left his eyes. “I was just curious.”

The old guard was not convinced. “You have a duty, my lord. Whether you like it or not, you are the Sietinen heir

and will one day be in charge of SiNavTech and the Third Region of Tararia. That is an extraordinary responsibility. I only hope that you will embrace that power.”

“Oh, I will, eventually.” *Just as I will embrace the power that I have within.* “But I’m only sixteen—that’s still a long ways off.”

Sedric was about to respond, but was interrupted by the door opening.

Cris turned to see who had entered. His gaze rested on Marina Alexri, one of his father’s Court Advisors; the intrusion did nothing to improve his mood. Marina was in her mid-twenties and pretty, but she had a frigid demeanor that could silence a room. Her station as his sole telepathy instructor was the one redeeming element of their relationship. He instinctively bolstered his ever-present mental guards, careful to bury his plans for that night. *Stars! What does she want?*

“Working hard with combat techniques, I see,” Marina said, gliding forward. Her dark blonde hair was pulled up into a complex bun with braids and twists, and she wore a rich emerald dress tailored to her slender figure. Her green eyes surveyed the room, missing no detail.

Sedric came to attention. “We were exploring the finer points of verbal battle, madam.”

“Naturally.” Marina smiled curtly. “Come, Cristoph. There is a matter your father must discuss with you.”

“It’s ‘Cris’,” he corrected, despite failing with his hundreds of previous attempts.

“As you wish, my lord.” The Court Advisor withdrew from the room.

When Marina was out of sight, Cris let out a slow breath and turned to Sedric. “I’m sorry for arguing. You’re a wonderful teacher. I don’t mean to be difficult.” His throat constricted. *You’re the only one I’ll miss... You always believed in me.*

Sedric beamed. “Think nothing of it, my lord.”

Marina returned to the doorway. “Come along. Your father is waiting.” She disappeared again.

Cris smiled one last time at Sedric before he followed Marina, trying to ease the knot in his chest.

“I’m surprised my father sent you to fetch me. Now you’re running errands for him?” Cris asked the Court Advisor as he approached. Since coming into the employ of the Sietinen Dynasty three years before, Marina was almost always posted in one of the administrative offices throughout the estate to oversee dynastic operations. Cris’ twice-weekly telepathy lessons over the last year were one of the few exceptions.

Marina’s brow twitched. “Actually, in light of a recent development, he wished me to terminate your telepathy instruction. I thought that best said in person.”

Those lessons had been the one thing Cris was reluctant to give up when he thought about leaving his home. If that was being taken away, there was truly nothing left for him on Tararia. “I see.”

“Such training was an unnecessary distraction,” Marina continued. “It’s time to focus on what matters.”

Except, what mattered to Cris was of no concern to the rest of his family. *All the more reason to leave now while I still can.* He shook his head and looked down.

The Court Advisor pursed her lips. “What are you hiding?”

Cris quickly suppressed the thoughts of his upcoming departure. “Do you really want to know?”

Marina rolled her eyes and set off down the corridor. “Come along. We’re late.”

Cris stood his ground. “On second thought, I’m not in the mood for another lecture. I think I’ll pass on the father-son chat.”

Marina spun around on her heel to glare at Cris. “How can you be so flippant? You know he’s busy. Someone has to

tend to all of the political and economic issues *you've* never bothered to understand—”

Cris crossed his arms. *Oh, don't I? Try quizzing me sometime and we'll see who knows what.*

“—and to oversee this Region, all while leading the transportation industry for known civilization... You should be more appreciative of the time you get with him.” She flourished her arms with exasperation. “Honestly, Cristoph, you become more insolent every time I see you.”

That's because I can't take feeling like an outcast in my own family anymore. “Sorry. I guess I just have insurmountable faults in my personality.”

Marina's eyes narrowed.

Cris glared back. “Since I'll apparently be berated anywhere I go, you may as well lead me straight to my father so I can get the worst of it out of the way.”

The Court Advisor let out a huff and resumed striding down the hallway.

No snide response? I'll count that as a win. Cris followed her at a safe distance.

As he trailed Marina through the spacious corridors of the Sietinen mansion's southern wing, he glimpsed the landscaped grounds of the estate through towering windows overlooking the city of Sieten below and the great Lake Tiadon in the distance. Sieten, the capital city of the Third Region, was nestled in the breathtaking foothills of the Bethral Mountains. Its temperate climate was pleasant in the peaks of summer and winter even without weather modification, making it envied by Dynasties throughout the five other Regions of Tararia. Though it was the only home Cris had ever known, he still felt the need to get away and see what the galaxy had to offer. *I'll come back eventually. I just want to find myself while I still have the chance.*

Marina and Cris arrived at the palatial outer administrative office for the Head of the Sietinen Dynasty. The

attendants and advisors throughout the room looked to be working furiously at various touch-surface computer consoles and desktop holodisplays, though Cris had doubts about how much was actually being accomplished.

Cris spotted his father. He, like all Sietinens before, had the distinctive chestnut hair and striking cobalt eyes that defined the bloodline; carefully arranged marriages ensured the continuation of these traits. Cris knew his mother's Talsari heritage was nearly as pure as Sietinen, but the prestige of Sietinen was paramount.

Marina led Cris toward the elder Sietinen, who was absorbed in conversation with two advisors. To Cris' displeasure, Marina halted just beyond earshot of his father's conversation, leaving Cris to stand idly while the exchange concluded. How typical, after all the rush to arrive for the meeting, Cris would still have to wait. He glanced over at Marina. She returned his gaze with a decidedly hostile smile.

After a few minutes, the advisors were dismissed and Reinen Sietinen-Monsari turned to look Cris over silently. Gray touched his temples, bringing a sense of distinguished age to his handsome features. He wore a deep blue suit embellished with silver accents, the finest available. "Marina informed you of the change to your instruction, I presume."

"Hello to you, too, father," Cris replied. "Yes, she told me."

Reinen nodded. "Let's go into my office."

Cris followed his father into a smaller room off to the right. Reinen sat down on a sleek brown couch near the center of the room and gestured for Cris to sit in one of the upholstered chairs across from him. Behind them, a desk was framed by an arched window that stretched nearly the width of the room, looking directly over Lake Tiadon. The sun was beginning its descent, shadows emphasizing the features of the lush landscape.

“Why the sudden end to my lessons with Marina?” Cris asked as he sat down.

Reinen’s eyes narrowed the slightest measure. “You’ve already learned enough to guard yourself. There’s nothing further to explore.”

“Would a little object levitation really hurt anyone?”

His father leaned forward, stern. “The laws apply to you, too. We’re supposed to be setting an example as leaders.”

“Right, by supporting the policies that make it illegal to learn about oneself.”

Reinen grunted. “Maybe you should take the matter up with the Priesthood.”

Cris was about to brush off the statement, but there was a seriousness in his father’s tone. “What do you mean?”

“I received a communiqué this afternoon. The Priesthood has requested a meeting with you.”

Cris froze. “Why?” *Stars! Did they find out about my telepathy lessons?* His pulse spiked. Marina’s instruction had always stayed within the governing restrictions around telepathy, but if they suspected Cris had crossed the line into telekinesis, there was no telling what the meeting might entail. He gulped.

“The representative only stated that they want to interview you as soon as possible.” Reinen shook his head. “Whatever it’s regarding, it’s not the kind of attention we need.”

Cris was well aware how rare it was to be singled out as an individual. The Priesthood of the Cadicle oversaw all Taran affairs, governing even the High Dynasties and their respective corporations that were the pillars for inter-planetary society. The organization served as the critical moderator to regulate the Taran worlds, controlling laws, the flow of information, and the application of new technological advances. Even lending the tiebreaking vote on any matter brought before the six High Dynasties, the Priesthood’s authority was complete

and binding. But, given its roots as a formerly theological institution, the Priesthood had been unquestionably viewed as Taran society's moral compass for generations.

"Did you set an appointment?" Cris asked, holding his breath that it wouldn't impact his departure plans.

"No. They wanted the interview to take place on their island, but I refused. The representative said he'd get back to me with alternate arrangements."

Cris let out his breath. *No matter now. I'll be gone by morning.* Cris felt his father's eyes on him and looked up.

"You're getting older, Cris. People are beginning to take more of an interest in you."

"You mean dynastic heads are trying to marry me off to their daughters. I'm still way too young to have any interest in such matters."

His father sighed. "One day soon you will have to."

"But not yet."

"Cris, I— I just worry about you."

Why does he pretend? At least Mother just ignores me.

"Is that so? Forgive my incredulous tone, but it's just that you've never expressed much interest in me before."

Reinen seemed taken aback, his brow furrowed. "What makes you say that?"

Cris shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

"No, Cris, if something is bothering you, I want to know about it."

Cris sighed. "Now, when you say you worry about me... What do you mean—my political future? My future as the leader of this dynasty and as an executive of SiNavTech?"

"Well, of course. You seem disinterested."

That's because I am! "What about my feelings as your son?"

"I always assumed you were content."

"Content"... *What about feeling loved?* "Well, I'm not. I can't say I ever really was."

Reinen was silent for a long time. "I'm sorry."

Cris shrugged. *No he's not. He wouldn't have done anything differently.* "No matter now."

Reinen's expression was impassive.

"I know I'm not the one you wanted to be your successor." Cris' words hung in the air.

Reinen said nothing, but looked down, his face contorted in an attempt to hide his anguish.

"If there's nothing more, I'll return to my studies."

There was the slightest shake of Reinen's head. "No. There's nothing else."

That was your last chance to salvage any of your parental dignity. Without another word, Cris left his father's office and went directly to his living quarters.

Cris passed through the lounge area of his suite and stepped onto the generous balcony. A calm breeze ruffled his hair, cooled by the lake below. He breathed in the pure air. For a moment, he felt a twinge of regret. But, he knew staying on Tararia wouldn't do anyone good.

The idea of running away from his dynastic life first came to Cris more than two years before. He had been secretly preparing for the past six months, and almost everything was staged. All that remained was getting off the planet.

Cris returned to his bedroom and activated the touch-surface workstation on his desk. Settling into his chair, he began what had become a routine exercise of hacking into the secure central system for the Sietinen estate. Though not particularly easy, part of Cris' grooming had involved study of the complex system, so he knew shortcuts through the security blocks.

Once inside the system, he created an alias under the guise of a high-ranking guard and catalogued it in the central computer. Using the alias, he checked out a transport vessel at a secluded port on the southern side of the Sietinen compound. It would be waiting for him at midnight on the twenty-five

hour Tararian clock. He also set up a standard maintenance reboot of the central security system to correspond with his departure. If he timed it right, he could slip out undetected and be well on his way before anyone knew he was gone.

With the final pieces of his departure plan in place, Cris admired one final sunset out his bedroom window. By daybreak, he'd be in space.

CHAPTER 2

It was 24:45. The world outside Cris' window was dark. Only the glow from Tararia's two moons, Aeris and Denae, illuminated the sky.

Dressed in plain street clothes, Cris gathered his provisions. Only a select few knew the electronic frequencies needed to illuminate the normally invisible identifying Dynastic Mark on his arm or read his imbedded ID chip, so all he needed to do was blend in. If he looked the part, he could become anyone he wanted.

Cris was accustomed to slipping out to walk the gardens in the middle of the night, but never had the stakes been so high. *They'll put me on complete lockdown if I'm caught leaving. No second chance.*

He crept from his quarters into the corridor. As a precaution, he reset the door's electronic lock so there would be no record of what time he left. He peered into the dimmed hallway. Clear. He ventured toward the nearest exit. The security system reboot was still five minutes away, set for 24:50 and scheduled to take twenty minutes. To avoid triggering alarms in the meantime, he used the less monitored servant passageways. He encountered no one, to his relief, and was soon outside.

Cris broke into a light jog along the main path that ran the length of the mansion. He made it no more than ten meters when he caught sight of a surveillance light. *Hide!*

He dove off the path into some bushes. The branches scraped at his bare face and hands, but he found a hollow within the foliage. He quickly retrieved a scrambler from the front pocket of his travel bag and activated the device; it should be enough to throw off the guard's sensors. He checked the time on his watch: 24:52. It was within the reboot window for the central system. He would be fine as long as he stayed out of sight.

Cris nearly held his breath as the guard approached. He could make out the armored form through the leaves, made more imposing under the moonlight. The guard was walking slowly, inspecting a handheld. He stopped in front of Cris.

Stars! Cris' heart raced. He stayed motionless, barely breathing.

The guard tapped the screen on his handheld a few times, then muttered something under his breath. After another minute, he continued strolling down the path in the direction Cris had come from.

Cris breathed a sigh of relief. When the guard was well past, he carefully extracted himself from the bushes and looked around to make sure no other guards were nearby. No one else was in sight. He smoothed his hair and brushed off a couple of leaves that had affixed to his jacket.

Cris returned to the path and resumed jogging toward the ship port. Excitement welled up in his chest, but he kept it at bay. *I'm not free yet.*

He reached the port at 24:57. Half a dozen shuttles occupied a paved area amid the foliage of the grounds. Each craft was approximately six meters long, with streamlined aerodynamics specifically designed for breaking through the planet's atmosphere.

Cris was about to enter the port when he spotted a figure in the small shelter used by port attendants during the day. He froze. There wasn't supposed to be anyone there overnight. His entire plan rested on using an automated kiosk to check out the shuttle under his guard alias. Needing to interact with a person changed everything.

He bit his lower lip, thinking. *I can't turn back now.* Seeing no other option, he strode confidently into the port and headed straight for the kiosk. He kept his face oriented away from the shelter.

The kiosk was dangerously close to the building, and it didn't take long for the attendant to rouse.

“What may I do for you?” the attendant asked.

Cris kept his head turned to the side so the attendant couldn't see his face. *I have every reason to be here. I'm in control.* “Official business,” he said, faking a deeper voice. “You can verify my credentials on your own screen.”

The attendant crossed his arms. “I'd like to see some ID.”

Don't panic. Cris continued walking toward the kiosk with feigned assurance. “And I'd like to report you to your supervisor for impeding an official investigation. I don't think you want that on your performance record so close to review time.”

“Your ID, sir,” the attendant requested again.

Cris reached the kiosk. “I'll get it, hold it.” Before the attendant could protest, Cris brought up his shuttle reservation in a few quick taps. He entered the access key for his guard alias. “There, satisfied?”

The attendant glanced at the authorization on the screen inside the shelter. “It checks out.” He seemed unsure.

“So, do I need to have that chat with your supervisor?” Cris turned toward his assigned shuttle.

“No, sir,” the attendant said. “Have a good night.”

Cris let out a slow breath as he set off toward his shuttle. *We really need better security.*

The assigned shuttle was at the end of the row. Cris went to the far side of his craft and entered his specified passcode to open the main door. Once inside, he stowed his pack in a cargo area behind the eight passenger seats in the main cabin.

Cris moved to the cockpit to initiate the startup sequence. The touchscreen controls and holographic interfaces cast a cool glow in the cockpit. As the system ran its automated check, Cris strapped into the pilot's chair. He suppressed another wave of excitement.

When the shuttle was ready, Cris deftly lifted the vessel off the ground and launched it into space. Flight lessons had always been his favorite. He savored the exhilaration as the engine surged, feeling the power through the low vibrations in the controls. The muted rumble intensified as he pointed the vessel upward, locking in his destination. As he gained elevation, he became just one of many ships scattered throughout the night sky.

The acceleration of the vessel slowed as the sky turned from deep blue to black. Cris felt the artificial gravity automatically activate when the shuttle achieved orbit, settling his stomach.

I'm actually leaving Tararia. He relaxed just enough to smile. *But I still have a long way to go.*

Cris passed through one of the gates in the planetary shield and followed the course to the primary space station orbiting the planet. He sent a preset message requesting docking clearance. An affirmative response came immediately, and control of the shuttle was handed over to remote operators at the station.

Once the remote pilot took over, Cris allowed himself time to admire Tararia from above. *It's so beautiful from space—so peaceful.* Sieten was a mere speck of light on the western edge of the massive Third Region in the northern hemisphere, with the smaller Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Regions below it to the south. Across the sea to the west, he could see the edge of the crescent-shaped Second Region and the First Region to its south. In the sea between the Third and First regions was an island Cris knew to be the seat of the Priesthood. From space it seemed very small for someplace so important.

His shuttle was drawn into docking position and clamps locked onto the hull. Apprehension replaced his excitement as the small vessel shuddered under the docking clamps. It was the first time Cris had ever been off-world on his own, and

preparing for such an adventure was never part of his lessons. He set his jaw, determined to not let nerves get the better of him. *I need to find a ship.*

Cris gathered his pack and made his way down the gangway into the space station. He was struck by the metallic quality of the filtered air, a harsh contrast to the fresh breeze off the lake. The foreign feeling of the station was heightened by an intense energy permeating the structure, felt both in the air and through the metal deck plates underfoot. The sub-audible hum of motors and electricity felt oppressive at first, but he centered himself and soon let the vibrations wash over him. He moved from the gangway into the main corridor of the concourse, where smooth metal walls arched overhead toward the center of a massive ring. Gangways stretched out to ships along the perimeter, and several broad concourses branched out to other rings with even more ships. Cris admired the sweeping metal forms through windows overhead and along the sides of the passageway. Even more wondrous was the blackness of space beyond, with dazzling stars holding untold possibilities.

The space station was more populated than Cris had anticipated for the late hour, but he had to remind himself that space travel didn't follow the same schedule as his home time zone. People moved about their business in the corridor, paying no attention to Cris as he eased into the flow of the foot traffic. Everyone was moving quickly, and where there were no openings in the crowd, someone would shove their way through. Cris found himself jostled as he tried to navigate the steady stream of travelers.

Just as he was starting to get comfortable, he was pushed from behind. His bag came loose from his shoulder and almost fell to the floor. He took a few rapid steps to regain his balance, eventually catching himself on the wall of the corridor. He looked around.

A large man with cropped, thinning hair and a dingy jacket was cutting his way through the mass. Others stepped to

the side to make way without missing a step. It was orchestrated chaos, and everyone but Cris knew the rhythm.

Cris pressed his back against the wall, trying to get his bearings again. A couple of people glanced over at Cris, but he may as well have been a decorative plant based on their reactions. He took a deep breath. *Don't fight the crowd.*

With an assertive stride, Cris reentered the stream of travelers. He had two more near-collisions but managed to avoid any further incidents. Following overhead signs, he made his way to the nearest directory where he could access the status of all ships at the port.

The directory was located in a bay off the central corridor. It was surrounded by an even denser throng of travelers. Cris spotted what looked to be a queue and took his place in the group. After several minutes, he noticed that people kept cutting in to take an open station when one became available. His face flushed with frustration. *They have no sense of order.*

Another person pushed ahead to grab a terminal at the directory, knocking Cris to the side. Cris tightened his grip on the bag over his shoulder. *I guess I need to act like them.*

A moment later, when a woman tried to push past Cris, he firmly held his place. The woman relaxed and waited behind him.

Cris took the next available terminal. He pulled up the transport directory, first looking over the outbound passenger transports. There were over a dozen cruisers to choose from, ranging from economical to luxurious. However, those would certainly be the first place anyone would look for him. Cris closed out of the list. That left the cargo freighters, and he found there were at least six times as many of those. Far too many choices. He filtered out all of the ships with large-volume, hazardous, or unregistered cargo. After discounting any with scheduled departures in more than one hour, only two potentials remained. *I should check them out in person before*

making a final selection. He made a mental note of the docking coordinates for the two ships and cleared his search on the terminal, moving aside as someone lunged forward to use it.

Cris returned to the central corridor and made his way toward the docking location of the first ship. As he approached, he immediately felt uneasy, an instinct which Sedric and Marina always encouraged him to heed. Some members of the ship's crew were standing near the entrance to the gangway. They watched him pass, a touch of malice in their gaze. He moved on.

The second ship looked far more promising. Only a single man was near the entrance gangway, working on a tablet. He looked to be about sixty-years-old, and was somewhat grizzled. Attached to his belt was a red and white badge with his credentials, marking him as the ship's captain. Cris stood back and watched as another man exited the ship and engaged in conversation. *What are they talking about?*

Carefully, Cris reached out telepathically toward the two men. Though his abilities were not yet well developed, he was able to gather a few impressions. The captain seemed good natured, and he was on friendly terms with the other man. Cris dove deeper and saw some flashes of the ship's flight deck. The other man was plotting a course. He was joking with the captain. There was a sense of homesickness.

Cris pulled back. He tried to make sense of what he had seen and felt. *The ship's Navigator, maybe?*

The two men continued to talk for three more minutes and then parted ways. The other man carried a duffle bag as he walked away.

Did he just resign? This might be my lucky day. Cris walked up to the captain of the cargo freighter, trying to be unassuming. It proved harder than expected. "Excuse me, sir?"

The captain pivoted around to look at Cris. When he saw who had spoken, he rolled his eyes. "Fok, this is all I need. What do you want, kid?"

Cris was shocked by the tone, after the deference he had been given his whole life. *Remember, you're not that person anymore.* "I was hoping to buy myself a ride aboard your ship."

"We're not a passenger vessel." His annoyance was apparent.

"I can pay—"

"We're not a passenger vessel," the captain repeated.

Fine, then I'll put my education to use. "What about openings on your crew?"

The captain didn't respond at first. His eyes narrowed. "Not unless you know long-range navigation."

"I do." *It is the family business, after all.*

The captain smirked. "Right."

Cris looked the captain in the eye. "Let me prove it."

The captain scratched his stubble. He sighed. "All right, I'll give you a chance. What's your name?"

Cris was about to respond, but stopped himself, knowing he couldn't let anyone know his true lineage. "Cris Sights."

"I'm Thom Caleri, and this is the Exler," the captain said, gesturing to his ship. "Let's go to the flight deck and I'll see if you're full of yourself."

Cris smiled with trained charm and followed Thom onto the ship. The Exler was a small freighter compared to many. Built exclusively for space travel, it was long and boxy with a forked backend for the jump drive and a protrusion at the top for the flight deck and living quarters. It was to this upper deck that the gangway led; as with standard freighters, cargo would be offloaded to smaller transport shuttles using a bay in the belly of the ship.

Inside, the Exler matched its captain. There were scuff marks along the walls and some deck plates were missing the occasional screw, but the bones were solid. The flight deck was at the end of a short hallway leading from the gangway

entrance. It was a cramped room with only two seats. An expansive window spanned the far wall, giving a partial view of the space station and surrounding ships. Most of the controls looked to be physical buttons and switches. However, there was a horizontal touchscreen at the center of the room between the seats, supported by a console marked with the same SiNavTech logo found on all navigation systems.

“Have at it,” Thom said, pointing to the touchscreen.

Cris glanced at the branding on the navigation console beneath the screen and noticed it was an older model from around the time he was born. The interface would be slightly different, but the underlying firmware would be identical to the modern systems he had studied.

Cris tapped the touchscreen and it illuminated. A holographic spatial map hovered just above the screen’s surface. “Where to?”

“Gallos system,” Thom instructed.

Not exactly a tourist destination, but I’ll take anywhere other than here. “Okay.” Cris went through the time-consuming navigation programming sequence with expert precision, identifying an optimized route for the subspace jump that would take them on a direct course to the destination. He ran four different scenarios and after half an hour settled on a beacon sequence that would allow access to several space stations during the required jump drive cooldown stops along the way. He tested the course with a dummy lock to the first beacon, and it verified his route. “This is my recommendation. Transit time will be eleven days, including the cooldown times for the jump drive.”

Thom had watched him closely at every step. A navigation system was a sensitive piece of equipment for a stranger to access, but there was no other way to vet a new Navigator. “That looks right to me. Except add a few days to the time estimate to account for longer stops so we can sleep.”

“I’m happy to change the stopovers if you’d prefer—”

“No, the locations are fine. You did everything correctly.” Thom crossed his arms. “I’m just surprised someone your age has experience with course plotting. You can’t be much older than what, sixteen?”

“Is that a problem?”

The captain looked pensive. “I suppose not. That’s legal age for crew work.”

“Does that mean I have the job?”

The captain smiled amiably. “Shite, why not? Some company would be better than none. You can be my Navigation Officer for the trip to Gallos—for starters—in exchange for room and board. If it works out, we can negotiate a salary for the next run.”

It’s more than a little ironic I’d end up working as a Navigator after being groomed as an heir to SiNavTech.

“That’s a reasonable offer. I accept.”

Thom nodded. “Good.” He looked Cris over again. “I have three rules. First, no stealing from me or other members of the crew. Second, no picking fights. And lastly, I won’t ask you prying questions if you don’t ask them of me.”

That last one works to my advantage. “Agreed.”

The captain turned the palm of his right hand upward in greeting, the Taran custom for new acquaintances who had not yet earned the trust of physical contact. “Welcome to the Exler.”

CHAPTER 3

Amazed by his good fortune, Cris accompanied Thom from the flight deck into the belly of the Exler. The captain introduced him to the two other crew members, Dom and Neal—both thick, muscled men in their thirties who were responsible for the cargo hold—and gave him a tour of the ship. There was little to see beyond the cargo area, workout room, kitchen and common washroom. Though it was simply appointed and lacked many of the comforts Cris had grown up with on Tararia, the Exler was clean enough and mechanically well-maintained from what he could tell.

The last stop in the tour was Cris' new quarters. It was a tiny room with only a bunk, toilet, sink and storage locker. Cris smiled politely when he saw the space, and Thom left him to get settled in. When he was alone, Cris set down his bag and looked around the modest accommodations. *I need to reset my expectations.*

He sat down on the bunk to test it. The mattress was firmer than he would prefer, but it was sufficient. *I wanted to see what life was really like outside the Sietinen estate. It doesn't get more authentic than this.* He took a deep breath. *My entire life is changing.*

He gave himself a few minutes to clear his head and then made his way up to the flight deck. Thom was waiting for him. "Ready to head out?" Cris asked.

"Yes. All stocked and ready to get underway," Thom confirmed.

Cris brought up the saved beacon sequence he had plotted during his interview and set it as the active course in the navigation computer. He locked in the first segment of the trip, a series of five beacons. "All set."

Thom smiled. "Let's go." He strapped into his chair and triggered buttons and switches at the front of the flight deck. A holographic control interface illuminated over the front panels.

Using a combination of the holographic display and buttons beneath, Thom undocked the Exler and used thrusters to direct the ship away from the space station.

Anticipation swelled in Cris' chest. *I'm leaving for real.*

When the space station orbiting Tararia was a distant speck, Thom activated the jump drive.

A hum filled the air as the drive charged. The entire ship began to vibrate, rattling every rivet. It felt like the ship was going to fall apart, but Cris tried to hide his worry. As the vibration crescendoed, a shifting blue-green aura formed around the ship. It grew steadily brighter and more solid, drawing the ship inward. For a moment, time elongated. The ship slipped into subspace.

Cris let out a slow breath as the rattling subsided. The view through the front window was nothing but shifting blue-green light.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Thom said.

"It really is." Cris had taken previous trips via subspace, but the mode of travel was still a novel experience. Even more rarely had he been able to look outside while in transit. *I could get used to this.*

The first sequence of beacons would take several hours to traverse. Cris and Thom settled in for the journey, keeping a casual eye on the navigation beacon locks to make sure they stayed on course. It was uncomfortably quiet.

As much as Cris wanted to be social, he knew his background was very different from Thom's. He had little way of knowing what might give him away as High Dynasty. *What's a safe topic?*

Silence was the safest option, but Cris' lack of sleep from his midnight escape began to catch up with him. He knew he needed some conversation or he wouldn't make it through the rest of the jump.

“So, Thom,” Cris said, breaking the silence, “what’s the craziest cargo you’ve ever had to transport? If it’s not something confidential.”

Thom smiled. “A herd of horses.”

“Horses, really?”

The captain nodded. “I imagine you haven’t been out to the far colonies. Some worlds that have taken a more agrarian approach to life. They prefer horses to hoverscooters.”

“Go figure.”

Thom chuckled. “It was messy business. Sweet animals, but I’ll take a depleted power cell over a pile of manure any day.”

Cris laughed. “I’m with you.”

“That was a long time ago.” Thom leaned back in his chair. “I now make it a point to steer away from any cargo that isn’t inanimate and doesn’t fit neatly into a crate.”

Thank the stars! I think I would have needed to find another ship. “A valid approach.”

“I’ve been doing lots of textiles transportation for Baellas recently.”

Clothing and home furnishings weren’t the most grand of the High Dynastic ventures, but important nonetheless. “Is that what we have onboard now?”

“Yes, but I’m ready to switch things up after completing this delivery.”

“What do you have in mind?” Cris asked.

“I heard about some new food distribution contracts with Makaris Corp in the outer colonies. It’d be steady work for several months at a time. I don’t particularly love it out there, but can’t argue with the pay.”

Cris nodded. “That does sound like good, steady work.” Food and water filters were a necessity everywhere. Makaris’ rank as the third most powerful Dynasty was only constrained by the reliance on SiNavTech’s navigation network and VComm for communications.

“I’ve learned that it all comes down to the specific contract terms. It doesn’t really matter what the cargo is when it’s all packaged up. In the end, all of the Big 6 are pretty much the same to work for.”

Cris’ brow furrowed in spite of himself.

Thom must have noticed Cris’ confusion. “The six High Dynasties,” he clarified.

“Oh, thanks,” Cris said as casually as he could.

“Haven’t heard that before.” *So they call us “the Big 6,” huh?*

“I had already pegged you for the inner colonies, but that confirms it.”

“Tararia itself, actually.” Cris regretted the statement the moment he spoke.

The captain nodded. “I’m not surprised. Well, out here, you’ll hear a lot of different opinions about the Big 6. Generally speaking, the farther out you go, the less favorable they will become.”

“Interesting.” *I’ll have to watch what I say.*

“Don’t get me wrong,” Thom continued. “Tarans in aggregate recognize the importance of the core services the Big 6 provide, but most worlds try to have their own identity. The descendants of the older colonies even look and sound different—an entirely divergent race from a native Tararian like yourself. To them, the High Dynasties and the Priesthood feel like very distant, disconnected, and often inconvenient overlords.”

But without those services fulfilled by the High Dynasties’ companies, everything would fall apart. “I could see that.”

“Since the outer colonies try to make it on their own as much as possible, they sometimes get neglected by the central oligarchy. It’s one of the reasons I was looking to pick up those Makaris contracts.”

“That’s good of you.” *My instruction always made it sound like it was equal access and opportunity for all the colonies. Maybe that’s not the case.*

“Well, first we have to offload this Baellas shipment. Need to take it one contract at a time.”

Cris smiled. “Of course.”

Thom sat up straight. “Hey, do you know how to play Fastara?”

Cris hesitated. *What in the stars is Fastara?* “I can’t say I do.”

“Hold on.” Thom searched through a cabinet near his seat and produced a deck of plastic playing cards. He removed them from their clear box and fanned them out. There were a series of symbols in different colors on the cards. “I’ll teach you. There’s no better way to pass the time out here.”

“Sounds great.”

Thom deactivated the holographic course projection from the navigation console and moved the most vital information to a heads-up display over the front window. The touchscreen top of the console became a perfect tablet for laying out the game.

“The objective is to win,” Thom said with a toothy grin.

Thom went over a series of rules that Cris tried his best to follow. There were a lot of contingencies based on the specific cards in play. After a few confusing explanation attempts, Thom dealt out the first game and walked Cris through an open-hand demonstration. Even with the coaching, Thom won by a ridiculous margin. They played three more rounds in the same manner before switching over to private hands. Cris was still terrible at the game, but he started to understand the mechanics. While reading Thom’s mind would have been an easy solution, it would defeat the purpose of the game—and, that kind of invasion was no way to begin a friendship.

The hours sped by with the rounds of Fastara. Cris was startled when the navigation system flashed, indicating their approach to the exit beacon in the sequence. They cleared the game and moved the display back to the center console.

With a shudder, the ship dropped back into normal space. The swirling blue-green dissipated and they were once again surrounded by blackness and stars.

Cris looked at the map. It was officially the farthest he had ever been from home. “Jump complete.” *They’ll have a hard time finding me now.*

“Now we take a break,” Thom said as he got up from his chair. “The jump drive only needs four hours to cool down, but we’ll stay here for eight so we can get some sleep. After this, we’ll do two jumps in a day.”

“That works for me.” Cris got up from his seat, feeling stiff after remaining stationary for so long. “Hey... Thank you for the job.”

“Everyone deserves the chance to start a new life,” Thom said. “Get some rest.”

Cris went to his room and got into bed. The ship’s engines produced the perfect background hum to lull Cris to sleep. *I’m free.*

*

An alarm sounded, echoing through the tiny metal room. Cris’ eyes shot open. A red light strobed above his door. *Stars! What’s going on?*

He rolled off his bed, clutching his ears to muffle the alarm. *Are we under attack?* The metal deck plates felt like ice under his bare feet. Wearing only pajama pants and a t-shirt, he stumbled toward the door. Something didn’t feel right.

Cris’ stomach turned over. He tried to take a step and couldn’t get traction. Slowly, he lifted off the ground. *The artificial gravity is shut off! Shite!* He continued to drift upward as he struggled. An acidic burn filled the back of his throat, a

combination of nerves and the weightlessness. *I'm going to be sick.* He grasped at the walls and managed to propel himself toward the toilet in the corner. No sooner had he raised the lid than his stomach emptied. He coughed and spat for a moment, only to be horrified to see the vomit rising upward without gravity to hold it down. He slammed the lid down to trap the contents in the toilet bowl.

Still feeling queasy, he gripped the wall and shimmied himself back toward the door. He hit the release to slide it open.

Red light strobed in the hallway, casting eerie shadows across the riveted planes. Cris' heart raced. *Where is everyone? Are we going to die?* His heart pounded in his ears. The taste of sick still in his mouth made him want to hurl again. He tried to suppress the feeling as he gripped the bulkhead outside his door to move toward the flight deck.

"Thom!" No reply. Cris inched along the wall, afraid to let go. He couldn't hear anything over the deafening alarm and the pounding in his ears. "Thom, where are you?"

Cris made it to the gym and opened the door. Empty. He knocked on the doors to Dom and Neal's rooms, but there was no reply. He kept pushing forward. As he approached the kitchen, the door slid open.

Inside, the three other members of the crew were floating comfortably in midair. Thom was grinning and Dom and Neal were laughing hysterically.

Cris stared at them in shock. "What...?"

Thom laughed at Cris' bewildered expression. "You didn't think you could come onboard without a little hazing, did you?"

Cris felt his face flush. "So there isn't an emergency."

"Not at all." Thom hit a button on the wall and the alarm silenced, though the red flashing light remained. "However, I am pleased to report that all emergency systems are functioning perfectly."

Bomax. Cris steadied himself against the doorframe, his ears still ringing from the alarm. “Well played.”

“So sullen! It was all in good fun,” Thom said.

Right. “Now can you restore the gravity? I feel like I’m going to puke again.”

Dom and Neal burst into another round of laughter.

Thom looked slightly apologetic. “Again? You planet-lovers never fare so well at first. Cleaning supplies are in the cabinet over here, if you need anything.”

No more servants to pick up after me. “Thanks. I think most of it was... contained.”

“Well, let’s get you back on your feet.” The captain glided toward the door.

Cris eased out of the way so Thom could get by, and then followed him through the hall toward the darkened flight deck.

Thom pulled himself into the pilot’s seat. Even in the challenging light of the red strobe, he easily manipulated the buttons and switches on the control panel. “This is why we have physical buttons rather than exclusively touchscreen interfaces,” he said. “You can run on backup batteries for days this way. Holographics are a massive power drain. And difficult to control in zero-G.”

“Ah, I was wondering.” *I can’t believe they messed with me like that.*

The red light was replaced by the normal soft yellow ambiance. Simultaneously, Cris felt himself drawn toward the floor, and he repositioned accordingly. He breathed a deep sigh of relief as his bare feet made contact with the ground once more. His stomach settled. “That’s better.” *I hope I’m cut out for life in space.*

Thom beamed. “Congratulations. You’ve been officially inducted.”

Yay. “I’m going back to bed.” He heard Thom chuckling in the flight deck all the way back to his room.

CHAPTER 4

Over the next several days, Cris embraced his place in the Exler's crew and set aside thoughts of his old life. By sheer will, he fell into the ways of space and vowed to leave behind his former existence. He spent long hours in the flight deck with Thom, hanging on every word of the captain's stories. As Thom promised, Cris was never asked intrusive questions and he never pressed Thom.

His daily activities were nothing like his schooling on Tararia, and Cris relished the change. By ship's day, he kept Thom company in the flight deck while they traversed the vast network connecting the star systems. It was the first real contact Cris had ever had with the impressive SiNavTech infrastructure, and he couldn't help but feel pride for what his family had built over the generations.

As the days stretched on, Cris incrementally improved his skills with Fastara. He could only win one in twenty games against Thom—if the captain got a particularly bad draw—but it was progress. Ultimately, the win rate didn't matter; life was good if the biggest decision he had to make was regarding which card to play.

The jumps toward Gallos grew monotonous. By the end, Cris was ready to see more than the four rooms where he'd spent the majority of his time for the last two weeks. Though some of their stopovers were near space stations, Thom insisted it wasn't worth the docking fees to berth. They were confined to the Exler until they reached their destination.

The final jumps went by quickly, knowing they were nearing the end. When they dropped out of subspace after the last jump, Cris' heart leaped with excitement as he glimpsed the distant outline of a sprawling space station. *Gallos. Finally.*

He had learned from Thom that the Gallos System was a commercial hub for the surrounding colonies. Its central space station dwarfed even the massive port at Tararia. There

were rambling offshoots in every direction, seemingly constructed to meet ad hoc demands for expansion over the years. The result was a daunting labyrinth of corridors and gangways where Cris imagined a person could get lost and never be seen again. He gulped.

“We have a docking reservation where our client is meeting us,” Thom stated. “I’ll go to the Makaris field office later today to talk about a distribution contract.”

“What should I do?” Cris asked.

Thom rubbed his chin. “Are you interested in staying on with me?”

He’s been good to me, even if it’s been a little boring at times. I can’t imagine a much better setup. Cris nodded. “If you’ll have me.”

“I can offer you continued room and board, plus five percent of my profits.”

That’s probably a terrible deal, but I don’t need the money. “That works.”

Thom seemed surprised. “Okay, well good. You’ve been great company. It’ll be nice having you around.”

I guess that really makes me an official member of the crew. “Do you want me to come with you to the Makaris meeting?”

“No, best leave that to me. Take some time to wander around and enjoy yourself. We’ll head out in a couple of days.”

They finished docking with the station and Cris was soon left to fend for himself. He took some time to shower in the shared washroom and change into clean clothes before venturing from the Exler.

The space station was a completely different environment than the port at Tararia. It was immediately apparent that the pace was slower, with individuals and small groups strolling as they talked business or caught up on personal lives. Cris found it easy to walk off the Exler and wander down the corridor without coming close to anyone else.

At first, he couldn't resist sneaking a few telepathic probes on the passersby. Most minds were preoccupied with business dealings or the other mundane aspects of life. He was tempted to look deeper and stretch the skills he kept in check around his friends, but he held back. *It's not polite to pry, friend or not.*

And while telepathy was a practical skill, what he really desired was to learn telekinesis. Thus far, all of his attempts at object levitation had been non-starters. He knew he needed instruction, and a spaceport in the outer territories might be his best bet to find a teacher to get him started. As much as he'd like to join the TSS and get official training, reaching out to them would give away his position to Tararian authorities—granting him a one-way ticket on a transport back home. Keeping a low profile was his safest option, even if it meant taking longer to reach his goals.

As he made his way down the hallway, foot traffic slowly picked up. After a short while, he found himself at an intersection with what appeared to be a central mall. Shops lined the broad corridor, with merchants barking their wares.

There were significantly more people in the shopping district compared to the docking area near the Exler. People with every variety of skin tone and feature, dressed in all manner of clothing styles, were going about their business. The hum of conversation filled the space, making it feel lively without being frantic.

Now this is what I had imagined. Cris looked around in wonder. The colorful storefronts with illuminated signs and attention-grabbing holographic gimmicks stretched on for as far as he could see in both directions, broken up only by other side corridors to the various docking wings. *There's so much to explore!* He made note of the shops near the Exler's docking location so he could find his way back, then arbitrarily set off down the mall to his right.

As he strolled, there was a slow change in his surroundings—so subtle that he didn't notice at first. The vibrant colors and flashy ads gave way to metal signs with static typography. The wording on most of these signs was vague, such as "Sundries from far and wide" or "Trade, Barter and Pawn." The people also changed. Though still covering the spectrum of physical traits, their clothing was more worn and they appeared to be constantly evaluating the value of everything they surveyed.

Cris was so taken in by the freedom to wander on his own that he didn't realize he was growing increasingly anxious under the scrutinizing gaze of the shopkeepers and their patrons. When he finally became aware of his surroundings, he realized he stood out from the few people left roaming the corridor. *Maybe it's time to get out of sight for a while and do some shopping.*

One of the shops off to Cris' left caught his eye. The printed sign boasted discount ships and parts. *How discounted? Maybe I could buy my own ship one day and have real autonomy.* He decided to investigate.

The entrance to the shop was an open doorway two meters wide. Inside, on both walls of the shop, tiered shelving rose to the three-meter-high ceiling. Other shelves were positioned perpendicular to the wall, forming a maze of forgotten artifacts. Random ship parts were nearly overflowing from the shelves, and some larger items rested on the floor. The disorganization and compact layout were unappealing, but Cris was too intrigued by the dream of eventually having his own ship to care.

The perpendicular offshoots from the shelves prevented a direct view deeper into store. With no proprietor in sight, Cris headed toward the back. He weaved through the shelves until he came to an open area.

A young woman was lounging on a metal counter, her long legs crossed with one of her booted feet bobbing in the

air. She looked to be a few years older than Cris, and had dark hair with fuchsia highlights that was pulled up into a sloppy ponytail. Long bangs fell over her maple eyes. When Cris approached, she looked up. She appraised him and smiled. “Well, hello there.” She slid off the counter.

“Hi,” Cris replied. “Do you work here?”

“I do.” She looked Cris over again. “What can I do for you?” She shifted her weight to one hip and stood akimbo. Though she was fairly tall and thin, her revealing clothing emphasized every curve.

Cris tried to keep his eyes on her face. “I saw on your sign that you have ships for sale.”

She nodded. “That’s right. In the market for anything in particular?”

“Just browsing for now. How much for a basic craft with a jump drive?”

“Well, let’s take a look at our inventory.” The woman sauntered around to the back side of the counter and grabbed a tablet from underneath. She placed the tablet on the counter and activated a holographic projection of the inventory list, which included images of the crafts and some basic features. She drummed her fingers on the counter. “Need room for passengers? Traveling with anyone?”

“Not really. Just me.” Cris looked around the equipment in the shop. Some of it was worn, but much of it appeared to be almost brand new.

“Okay, let’s see...” After flicking through the list of ships, the woman selected one and brought up a more detailed display on the projector. “This would be your best bet. For something entry-level.”

The ship was only ten meters long and had the aerodynamic look of a craft designed for atmospheric entry. While it would be functional, Cris doubted he could stay sane in such a small space for any prolonged period of time. “How much?”

“76,000 credits.”

There’s no way I could spend that much without drawing suspicion. “Not bad, but it’s a little more than I was hoping to spend.”

The woman shrugged. “Well, you’re paying for the scrubbed ID, of course.”

“Of course.” *Stars! These are ships for smuggling.* He realized with dismay that the new equipment around him was likely scrap from stolen vessels.

“How would you pay?” the woman asked. “We might be able to work out a deal.”

The discomfort that had been pestering the back of Cris’ mind since he entered the shop washed over him full-force—a wave of ill intent that now seemed impossible to have missed before. “Really, I—”

He was cut off by the woman turning to yell deeper into the store. “Merl! We have a customer.”

The sound of creaking metal drew Cris’ attention to his side. A man with arms nearly the size of Cris’ torso emerged from a hidden doorway, blocking the exit path.

Simultaneously, Merl emerged from a back room behind the counter. He was two heads taller than Cris, all muscle, and had geometric tattoos on the side of his face and going up his bare arms. With his eyes fixed on Cris, he approached the counter. He put an arm around his slight companion. “Oh, Danni, you got us a good one.”

“He’s pretty, isn’t he?” Danni said. “Traveling alone. And he comes with a nice bank account.”

Shite! This is bad. Warnings flashed in Cris’ mind, sending a chill down his spine. *I don’t think they just smuggle ship parts...*

“How much do you think we could get for him?” Danni asked Merl.

“Looks like good breeding,” Merl replied, evaluating Cris. “Probably at least 50,000 credits to the right buyer.”

The man from the side room took a step toward Cris.

Run! Cris bolted, ducking past the towering man who had come to block him in. He felt the breeze from the man's arms trying to grab him, but managed to make it through. After tearing around the maze of shelves, he ran full speed as soon as he was in the open corridor. He didn't slow until he was again surrounded by lively merchants and bright ads.

Cris stepped off to the side of the hall. He leaned forward, hands resting on his thigh—shaking and his breath ragged. He found an open stretch of wall to lean against. *I should have seen that coming.* Reading everyone's minds might not be polite, but perhaps some way necessary to protect himself.

He took a couple minutes to calm his breathing and racing heart. Despite his excitement from earlier, when he looked out at the crowd again, he felt like everyone in the port was staring at him suspiciously. *I think I need a break.*

The Exler seemed like the only safe place. He took a direct route back, thankful he had paid attention to the docking location. When he made it to the ship, he was about to go into his room when he saw that Thom was in the flight deck. He continued down the hall and poked his head in. "Hi Thom."

The captain looked up with surprise. "Back already? I figured you'd be partying all night."

Cris collapsed into his Navigator's chair. "It was a lot to take in at once. I think I'll just turn in early."

Thom raised an eyebrow. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just... acclimating." *Probably best if he doesn't know how inexperienced I really am. There's no way I'm traveling alone any time soon.*

Thom nodded. "Yes, it's quite different out here than around Tararia."

I'll say... Cris sighed inwardly.

"And even more so in the outer colonies where we're headed."

Where we're headed? Cris perked up. "Wait, you got the Makaris contract?"

Thom smiled. "I did—and a good one. Fifteen months, with scheduled stops on a service route. We'll have supply pickups every two weeks at stations, so you'll have plenty of time to get used to everything."

"Perfect." *All this will start feeling normal eventually, right?*

"I got us a little something to celebrate." Thom pulled out two small glasses and a bottle of a dark brown liquid from the cabinet by his chair. "I know you're not quite of age, but one drink won't hurt you." He filled the glasses and passed one to Cris.

Stars! It would be rude to turn him down. Cris took the glass. *Besides, I could use a drink.*

Thom downed the contents of his glass in one gulp.

Cris took a cautious whiff of the liquid. It seemed more like a cleaning supply than anything fit for a person to consume. *Here it goes.* He took the full glass into his mouth and swallowed. It burned all way down and left his stomach feeling warm. He coughed a couple of times, feeling the burn up in his sinuses. "Wow, that's..."

"That's real liquor. Not like those 'liqueurs' and sparkling shite everyone drinks back in the central worlds."

Everyone drinks those because they actually taste good. "I appreciate the introduction to the real stuff." *And now I know what to avoid as much as possible.*

"It'll knock you on your ass if you're not careful." Thom poured himself another glass and offered Cris some more.

Cris hastily declined. "I'm sure it can." Without warning, he started to feel a little light-headed and tingly. *This stuff acts fast.* "I think it's bedtime for me."

Thom seemed disappointed. "All right. Sleep well."

Cris rose. “Thanks for the drink.” *And thank you for taking me in.*

* * *

The news was not what TSS High Commander Jason Banks had hoped to hear. “What do you mean he’s ‘gone?’”

Agent Jarek’s image on the viewscreen, almost indistinguishable from real life, looked uncomfortable. “His parents didn’t want to talk to us. We were able to glean that he slipped out in the middle of the night a couple of weeks ago.”

Shite! We should have been keeping a closer watch.

“We need to find him. As soon as possible.”

Jarek frowned. “He could be anywhere, sir. We checked all the registries for passenger ships, but there was nothing. If he’s on a cargo freighter, there are hundreds of possibilities, multiplied exponentially by transfers at another port. I think we need to wait it out until we get some kind of lead.”

Banks rubbed his eyes under his tinted glasses. *This is a disaster.* “Fine. Make some contacts out there to keep watch for us. We’ll wait it out.” *Let’s hope we find him before the Priesthood does. I don’t want to risk a repeat of last time.*

Part 2: Awakening

CHAPTER 5

“Game.” Cris laid down his victorious hand of Fastara.

Thom threw down his cards in disgust. “That’s five in a row. I’ve created a monster.”

“Oh, come on now. Be a good sport.”

“Constant loss kind of takes the fun out of it.”

Right, like it was awesome for me when we first started playing. “You had a good run. This was bound to happen eventually. After all, I have had a year of daily practice.” Cris grinned. He knew he had just been lucky with his last several draws—he and Thom were equal in their playing ability, despite the recent winning streak. *I can’t resist getting in a few jabs while I can.*

They were nearing the end of another delivery cycle on their Makaris contract. After only ten months with Thom, Cris could hardly believe he’d ever had any other life. Since his initial mishaps, he had become comfortable with the customs of nomadic space life. With dozens of stopovers in space stations, he had learned how to identify the good areas from the bad, and he was proficient at using covert telepathic probes when needed.

To his relief, the food distribution work offered far more variety than the initial, dull trip to Gallos. They traveled for no more than two days at a time without making a stop to offload, which helped the time pass.

Privately, Cris had kept up with his studies and physical training in the Exler’s small gym, not wanting his skills to atrophy; however, it was because he enjoyed it, rather than feeling like it was something he had to do. He kept steady watch for news about his parents back in Sieten, but heard little. There was never an announcement about his disappearance—that would have been a disastrous political move—but he figured there must be private detectives looking for him. The prospect was disconcerting, but he tried to feel

confident in his ability to remain undetectable. He was the Navigator for a cargo freighter, and as far as anyone else was concerned, he was born to fulfill such a duty.

The navigation system beeped. They had reached the last beacon in the sequence.

Thom jumped at the chance to clear the cards from their play surface. “Thank the stars! I need some time away from the onslaught.”

Cris shook his head and laughed. *He’ll get over it.* He checked the lock on the exit beacon; it was solid. “Aldria, here we come.”

The Exler dropped out of subspace. Ahead of them, in the distance, was one of the smaller stations in the sector. They had previously been there four times on their delivery rounds. Unlike many other stations, Aldria was predominantly a stopover for merchants, rather than serving as a residence for any sizable population.

They went through the docking protocol with the remote attendant. As soon as the clamps were in place, Thom rose from his seat. “I’ll handle the offloading. Go get some of that fried thing you like so much.”

Because it’s delicious! “Best in the outer colonies.”

“So you’ve told me every time since we first came here.” Thom shooed Cris away with his hand. “Now go, before I change my mind.”

Cris eagerly complied. There were few things he missed from his home, but fried leeca was one. It was common street food on Tararia, but the Sietinen family chef had made it for him one time and he was instantly hooked. He had stumbled across a vendor in the Aldria Station on their first stopover and was thrilled to discover that the rendition thoroughly lived up to his memory.

The vendor was on the opposite side of the station. Cris took his time taking in the sights, happy to stretch his legs in a manner other than on a treadmill. They stopped at stations

frequently enough, but rarely was he afforded free time to idly gaze at wares.

Even after a year of travel, he was still amazed by the quantity and breadth of products available in ports. There was a gadget to fulfill every need—both real needs, and those invented strictly for the sake of sales. It was difficult to imagine all of the inventory selling, yet the system perpetuated itself. Cris was struck by the scale of it. *I'm only here at this one moment. How many millions of people pass by just out of sight in space every day?* Thinking in those terms put his own miniscule existence in perspective. *But I'm not no one, as much as I try to blend in. Even with all those countless people, most would still know my birth name. That recognition means something.* It was humbling.

Cris took a wrong turn at first, but eventually found the fried leeca vendor's red cart. A rich scent of frying dough wafted down the hall. The cart was a freestanding box a couple meters square and just tall enough to stand inside, with a half-open wall to the front. Its crimson color made Cris think of his favorite flower patch in the Sietinen estate's gardens. He beamed at the proprietor as he approached.

She was a sturdy woman of middle years, named Roselyn based on the credentials displayed in front of her cart. There was a warmth to her that reminded Cris of the nanny who had cared for him until he was six. She tilted her head and gave Cris a slight smile in return. There was a hint of recognition in her burnt umber eyes. "You're back."

She remembers me? I guess I couldn't stay completely anonymous forever. "I could never pass up the opportunity to get a taste of home."

"It's been almost two months, hasn't it?" Roselyn asked as she rotated the contents of the basket in her fryer within the cart.

Cris nodded. "Yes, sadly. Our rounds only bring us here every nine weeks."

Roselyn frowned. “What a shame. I’ve missed that adorable smile of yours.” She winked at him.

Stars! Is she flirting with me? He smiled politely and took half a step back. “I’ll take two orders, please.”

“Absolutely. I’ll have a fresh batch ready in a couple minutes.” She flipped the contents of the basket again.

“I’ve been looking forward to it all week.”

Roselyn inclined her head. “You flatter me. Are you here for long?”

“Just for a few hours to pick up our cargo, then on to Elarine,” Cris replied with a dour expression. *My least favorite of all the ports.*

“Elarine...” The vendor’s brow furrowed. “I’ve heard of it, but never been.”

“Don’t bother. There’s nothing to see. It’s small and unremarkable in every way.”

Roselyn grinned. “Looking forward to your visit, then?”

“Can’t wait...”

“Well, I hope this makes it easier for you.” Roselyn removed the basket from the fryer and placed six fried patties onto a plastic plate. The golden dough of the leeca was still sizzling. She set the plate on a ledge atop the front opening to her cart. “Four credits.”

Cris pulled the physical currency chips out of his pocket and gave her five credits. Electronic transfers were far more common, but he feared the faked credentials on his alias bank account wouldn’t hold up to thorough scrutiny. As a precaution, he had adopted the practice of using chips instead.

He blew on a piece of leeca to cool it and took a bite—warm and savory with just the right touch of sweetness. It brought him back to his early life, before preparing for his future responsibilities became the sole focus. *I did have this as a kid. I guess it wasn’t all bad.* “It’s excellent,” he said while still chewing.

“Enjoy,” Roselyn said. “Have fun in Elarine.”

Hah. “Thanks.” He waved goodbye and began wandering back toward the Exler.

Cris finished up the leeca while casually strolling through the port, reflecting on some of the good times from his childhood on Tararia. He wandered by some shops and looked at completely impractical, unnecessary items. As he browsed, he even noticed oversized pulse guns that couldn’t possibly be legal and some openly displayed narcotics. *It really is different out here.*

With romanticized thoughts of Tararia still floating through his mind, Cris was on his final approach to the Exler when he happened to overhear the Sietinen name mentioned in a conversation. It had been so long since he’d heard the name directly—rather than a generic mention of the Big 6—that it caught him off-guard. He stopped and looked around to identify who was talking. After a moment, he spotted two merchants drinking at a walk-up bar. Curious, Cris walked over so he could hear the details.

“You’re right, the entire government system is corrupt,” the first merchant was saying. “Regardless of what the highest Dynasties like Sietinen and Vaenetri say, the Priesthood runs the show.” He took a sip of a green liquid from his glass. “But it doesn’t matter who’s in charge. Nothing happening in the outside worlds matters to any of them.”

Cris had heard numerous similar conversations over the last year. Each one was a series of unflattering generalizations about the High Dynasties and how no individual could possibly ever care. He was sick of hearing it. *We’re not all like that. I’m different. The Priesthood is the real menace, not the Dynasties.* He was about to walk away.

“Real conflict is headed our way, but they do nothing,” the other merchant said. “I’ve been to the outermost territories recently. It’s brutal, and it’s only getting worse.”

Cris hung back. *That’s new...*

“They’re certainly not going to tell us what’s going on out there,” the first merchant agreed. “Meanwhile, countless people are starving and being taxed to death.”

“No shite. All of those purists think alike. It’s about maintaining power and getting richer, not helping people.”

“Thank the stars for the TSS! I hear at least they have the decency to tell their first-year trainees about some of what’s going on in the rest of the galaxy. Give people a chance to get out of whatever hole they were born into.”

“It’s hardly enough. We’re all foked.”

The first merchant gulped the rest of his glass. The second did likewise.

What kind of conflict are they talking about? Cris knew it wasn’t his place to intrude, but he was feeling inspired after his recent reflections on Tararia. He stepped up to the merchants. “The High Dynasties do care about their people. You shouldn’t be so dismissive.”

The merchants stared at him, taken by surprise. Both burst into uproarious laughter.

“How naïve!” the first merchant exclaimed.

“Generation after generation it’s always the same shite. They ignore us out here, and that’s never going to change.”

“There is always hope for change,” Cris countered.

The merchant scoffed. “Hope, maybe, but that doesn’t mean it will ever happen. The Dynasties and Priesthood control everything, and we’re nothing to them. You or I can’t do anything about that.” He turned back to his companion with an indifferent smile, shaking his head.

Perhaps there isn’t anything he can do, but I am in a unique position. “Then someone already high up has to bring about change,” Cris said with renewed vigor. “Someone who doesn’t share their predecessors’ ideals.”

The merchants shook their heads, laughed again as they turned to face Cris.

“You’re still here?” the second merchant jeered as his drink was refreshed by the bartender.

The first merchant sighed. “The problem *is* the people with influence! Everyone has been born into their position, and no one would give that up.”

I would. There have to be others. “The Dynasties are only as powerful as the people let them be.”

“If that’s the case,” said the second merchant, “then the Dynasties are doing a foking good job of keeping the populace placated through lies.”

Some passersby took notice of the debate and stopped to listen.

We don’t lie to anyone. “I’m sure people are told what they need to know.”

The merchant’s expression became completely serious. “What about a war? Is it right to keep the war a secret?”

What war? Cris hesitated. “Someone thinks so.” *Have they kept secrets even from me?*

The merchant shrugged and waved his hand, brushing Cris off. He tried to crack a smile. “Then what does it matter? Whether it’s the Priesthood or someone new, it’d still come down to one group deciding what others should know.”

Could there really be a conflict going on that I don’t know about? “But what if it really is for the best? Knowledge and power often come with a price. Perhaps it is necessary for a few to bear the burden.”

A murmur of agreement passed through the small crowd watching the discussion.

What does he know about the war? Cris was about to reach out to the merchant’s mind to see what he could glean, but a jeer pulled his attention back to the present.

“What do *you* know? You’re no one!” The merchant’s eyes narrowed as he focused on Cris.

Cris looked around the crowd. “Everyone can do something.” *I might not love politics, but maybe I can do what no one else has been willing to do.*

The merchant shook his head. “The Dynasties and the Priesthood have been this way for as far back as anyone can remember. There’s no point in talking about change. Anyone who does would likely end up the same way as the Dainetris Dynasty—ruined and all but forgotten. When it comes to matters of Tararia, civilians have no influence.”

Cris examined the expectant faces in the crowd. “Then the remaining Dynasties have to listen. With their help, the Priesthood could be brought down.”

The merchant recoiled, eyes darting. “Watch what you say—the Priesthood hears everything.”

No wonder the Priesthood has so much control. People shy away at its very mention. “I don’t fear the Priesthood.”

The merchant froze, his gaze fixed on Cris.

Cris looked at the ground. *Stars! What am I doing?* He glanced up, noticing all the people around him looking on with a mixture of wonder and apprehension. *I have to end this.* “I’ll be on my way now.” He turned away from the merchant. “Excuse me.” He pushed his way past the onlookers before the merchant could protest. As he retreated, he thought he saw Thom standing in the crowd.

Cris rushed back to the Exler. *Is the Priesthood really concealing a war?* He went straight to his quarters and sat down on his bunk, his mind spinning. *Who is the enemy? Over what? Why would everyone on Tararia keep it from me? Do they even know...?* Never before had he heard rumors of a war. The occasional spat, surely, but not a war. He tried to rationalize the claim, but got nowhere. After several minutes, he caught himself. *It doesn’t matter. I’m trying to forget that life.*

With a deep sigh, Cris forced himself off his bunk. He figured he may as well distract himself by preparing the next route for their upcoming deliveries.

An hour of sporadic work passed in the flight deck. Though some questions still churned in the background, Cris soon felt much more settled. However, he became anxious again when Thom entered, looking concerned.

“What is it, Thom?” Cris asked. *He never looks at me like that.*

The captain shifted uncomfortably on his feet. “I— I was just surprised to hear you say those things at the bar earlier.”

Cris dropped his eyes to the floor, thinking back to the encounter with the merchants. “I’m sorry for my behavior, Thom—” *It was so stupid of me to say those things!*

Thom shook his head. “You were just speaking your mind.” He took a deep breath. “But, you can’t threaten Tararian authorities like that. People can complain and wish things were different, but what you said about bringing down the Priesthood—that’s just foolish.”

Yet, he must know I’m right—that they’re the root of Tararia’s problems. “I understand.”

“Good.” Thom looked around the small room, not meeting Cris’ eyes. “Now, can we just move on?” Cris nodded, but Thom still looked distraught when he left the room.

Cris’ heart began to race. Something about Thom’s demeanor had changed. *Stars, of course! Only someone from a Dynasty would dare speak out against the Priesthood in public... and Thom knows it. Shite.*

For two days, he and Thom avoided eye contact, but they eventually returned to their normal routine. Still, the encounter with the merchant had moved Cris, and his subliminal thoughts turned to Tararia. He had the power to make a difference—in a way few others could. However, he couldn’t bring himself to go back. Yet. He wanted no part of

the current political system. But, with the right alliances, perhaps things could change one day. *For now, there is no place for me there. I still have so much to see.*

CHAPTER 6

Cris strolled through the Elarine spaceport, thankful to be on leave from the delivery routine. *Even a stopover at Elarine is better than being cooped up on the Exler.*

The selection of wares in the shops was limited and bland compared to those in the larger ports, but it passed the time. He wandered from shop to shop, keeping to himself. There were few travelers in the corridors, and most of the shopkeepers seemed disinterested until someone wanted to make a purchase.

As Cris came out of one of the establishments, he was startled to see two men watching him from across the hall. They were dressed entirely in black, with tinted glasses and sleek overcoats that hung to their knees—a stark contrast to the colorful merchants. He tensed. Something about them felt unusual.

He shook off the uneasy feeling and headed down the corridor deeper into the port, wanting to distance himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that the men were heading in his direction.

Who could they be? He thought for a moment. Stars! Are they my parent's detectives? Bomax, I probably gave myself away in that argument during our last stopover at Aldria. Pulse racing, Cris abruptly turned around to hurry back toward the Exler. To his dismay, the men followed.

I can't let them take me back! Cris broke into a run. He came to the central mall of the port and darted through the crowd, careful to avoid colliding with any of the travelers. When he came to an intersection, he nimbly stepped off to the side and sprinted around a bend in the hall in an attempt to evade the two men. He took a few more turns, but he soon found himself in a dead-end passage. *Shite! Where can I go?*

Cris halted. He was about to wheel around, but in the stillness noticed the pounding of footsteps right behind him.

Before he could turn, Cris was thrown to the ground, tackled from behind. With his arms pinned to his sides in a horrific embrace, he fell forward. Lurching to the side, his shoulder took the hit to avoid smacking his head on the metal deck plates. He rolled to his stomach, weighted down. Someone was on his back. Cris' hands found the floor, and he pushed up, throwing all of his weight sideways to flip his assailant to the ground and crush him against the deck plates. The attacker's grip loosened. Cris jabbed with his elbows and broke free. He scrambled across the hallway.

Cris expected to see one of the two men dressed in black. Instead, he saw a man of average height, robed in brown with his face hidden in the shadow of his hood. Cris recognized the golden symbol hanging from a chain around the man's neck, marking him as an associate of the Priesthood of the Cadicle. *The Priesthood*. Cris suddenly remembered the conversation with his father the afternoon before he left Tararia. *I never did find out why they wanted to meet with me.*

As the Priest recovered on the floor, the two black-clad men emerged from around a bend in the hall. There was a hint of shock on their otherwise stoic faces.

Cris was about to address the men when the Priest leaped to his feet. He pulled out a pulse gun from underneath his robe. "Give me all your valuables."

Trembling and sore, Cris grabbed ten credit chips from his pocket and threw them on the ground. "I have nothing else." It was the truth. His heart pounded in his ears. *Why would a member of the Priesthood be mugging people at a spaceport?*

"Hand over everything you have or die," the Priest threatened.

Cris looked more closely at the figure and caught a brief glimpse of piercing red-brown eyes under the hood. The eyes contained such intense sadness that Cris felt a twinge of

sorrow, despite his peril. But, the gaze was also one of complete fear. The gun hummed as it began to charge.

Cris looked back toward the two other men, but they remained at the end of the hall. He was on his own.

The Priest murmured something that Cris couldn't quite make out. He pointed the gun toward Cris' chest.

"No!" Cris held up his hands. *There's no escape.* He felt dizzy, a buzzing in his head. *I don't want to die.*

Undeterred, the robed figure fired.

It should have only taken an infinitesimal moment for the shot to reach him, but the beam halted just beyond the muzzle of the gun. There was no perceivable motion. Cris looked around, seeing the Priest holding the gun and the two people in black observing from a distance. The moment continued. *I can get away.* Cris dove to the side, but didn't fully feel the movement. He was in midair, falling, but he didn't feel connected to himself. Nothing stirred around him. He blinked.

Cris hit the ground hard. There was a flash as the pulse beam struck the empty wall.

The Priest spun to face him, mystified.

Cris could barely breathe. He felt charged, as if filled with electricity. He looked around with wonder—he was in a different place than he had been a moment sooner. *What's going on...?* He shoved his confusion aside as he saw the Priest raising his weapon once more. *This isn't a mugging—it's an assassination!* "Stop!"

As the Priest was about to fire again, Cris held up his hand in what he thought to be a futile act of protection. However, the motion threw the Priest backward against the wall—slamming him into the metal plating with enough force to dent the metal sheeting. He slid into a crumpled heap on the floor.

Cris scrambled to his feet. *Did I just do that? How...?* He turned to the men in black who were still standing

motionless at the end of the hall. “Who are you?” he stammered.

Without responding, one of the men walked over to the brown mound on the floor and nudged the Priest with his foot. Cris got a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach that the Priest was dead, but then saw that he had responded to the nudge. The man backed away, giving the Priest some room.

The robed figure rose unsteadily and looked around, dazed from the impact with the wall. When he caught sight of Cris, he backed away, terror evident in his trembling movement. After a moment, he noticed the two men in black clothing and he froze, apparently recognizing them. His eyes darted between Cris and the men. He said something to Cris, but Cris didn’t understand the language. With one more glance at the two black-clad men, the Priest passed them and fled down the hall. He didn’t look back.

The man who had nudged the Priest bent down to pick up the pulse gun from the floor. He placed it inside his coat and turned toward Cris.

“Who are you?” Cris repeated, still shaking. He took an unsteady breath. *Why didn’t they help me?* He looked the two men over and tried to assess their minds, but found only an impassible void. They appeared to be wary of Cris, but that was understandable after what he had just done. *Stars! What do I do? I can’t outrun them.* He took another breath. “Why were you following me?”

“Are you Cristoph Sietinen-Talsari?” the man finally asked.

“That depends. Are you here to kill me, too?”

The two men exchanged looks. “No, we’re not here to harm you,” the second man said.

“Did my parents send you to find me?”

“Have you ever done that before?” the first man asked, ignoring his question.

Cris was about to make an indignant remark, but stopped himself. “No.” He looked down. “I don’t even know what ‘that’ was.” *What’s happening to me?*

“No, your parents didn’t send us,” the other man said after a slight pause, coming to join his colleague. “If you come with us, we can explain everything.”

Cris shook his head, finding it increasingly difficult to remain calm. “After what just happened, I’m not in the mood for vague answers. And I’m not going anywhere with people who stood by and did nothing while someone attacked me! Who are you and why are you here?”

The first man nodded to the second. They each pressed their jacket lapel, which activated a projection of their credentials.

Cris examined the holographic images hovering in front of him. His eyes widened. *The TSS!*

“I’m sorry, we’re not allowed to intervene in matters regarding the Priesthood. We’re with the Tararian Selective Service,” the first man said. “I’m Agent Jarek and this is Agent Dodes.” He gestured to his partner and then deactivated his ID.

The Priesthood is so powerful that not even the TSS will stand up to them. Cris crossed his arms. “What do you want?”

“The TSS is here on our own accord,” Jarek continued. “We were deployed to your family’s estate on Tararia to speak with you, only to find that you were missing. Your parents probably have their own people looking for you, but it looks like we found you first. Just in time, it seems—especially considering what you just pulled off without any proper training in telekinesis.”

Cris swallowed hard. “And what was ‘it’? I have no idea how...” *What if I can’t control it? I could hurt someone—Thom, myself... And why does the Priesthood want me dead? Everything was going great. I fit in, I was normal...*

“We’re not the best people to answer that,” Jarek said.

“Then what do you want from me? You still haven’t told me why you’re here.” *Is there anyone I can trust?*

Agent Jarek studied Cris. “We’re here regarding your future.”

Cris tensed. “My future?”

“The TSS has been following you with great interest for the past few years,” Dodes said. He looked over to Jarek, who nodded. “We would like to extend an invitation for you to train with us.”

There was a time when that would have been a dream come true, but now... “I’m not sure what to say.”

“I know this comes as a surprise,” Jarek responded. “But, the TSS feels you have great potential, which is only evidenced by the abilities you’ve demonstrated today. I’m sure that our superiors can deal with any reservations you may have. If you’ll accompany us to Headquarters, our High Commander can answer your questions.” He glanced at the spot where the Priest had been. “And, we can offer you security.”

Cris looked down. He might not be so lucky if the Priesthood came after him again. *I still have no idea why they would try to kill me... I don’t want to give up the freedom I have now, but I need to learn about these abilities if I want to truly protect myself.* “What would I have to do?”

“Just gather your things and come with us. We have a ship waiting on the other side of the port,” Jarek said.

Cris nodded. “The Exler’s back this way.” *I have absolutely no idea what I’m getting myself into.*

Cris led the way to the Exler. He left the Agents at the foot of the gangway and went in to gather his belongings. He only had a handful more possessions than when he had left Tararia, but it didn’t feel right to leave it all behind. He sighed. He had to tell Thom he was leaving.

Cris found Thom in the flight deck, reviewing the ship’s inventory. “Thom?”

The captain looked up. “What is it?”

“Thom, something’s come up.” Cris swallowed, a sudden heaviness in his chest. “I’ve just been offered a training opportunity with the TSS.”

Thom searched Cris’ face. “Are you accepting?”

Cris nodded. “This is something I have to do.”

The captain sighed and stood up. “When?”

“Right now. I’m sorry.”

Thom nodded, processing the loss of his travel companion. “I understand.” He took Cris’ hand, shook it. “I always suspected you were destined for greater things. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Cris looked down. *He might not know my real name, but he always saw me for who I am.* “Thank you for everything. I couldn’t have asked for more.”

The captain smiled and patted Cris on the shoulder. “Best of luck, Cris.”

“Thank you, Thom. You too.” Cris turned to go.

“Oh, and here.” Thom grabbed his Fastara deck. “Take these.”

Cris smiled. “I’ll teach everyone who’ll listen.”

Before he could change his mind, Cris exited the flight deck and hurried down the gangway to meet the waiting Agents. With only his single bag slung over his shoulder, Cris felt bare and alone.

Jarek and Dodes led Cris away from the Exler toward their TSS transport ship. The Agents were unlike anyone he had met before. They moved with a sort of elegance, as though they were one with their surroundings. Even their tailored black uniforms, which were casual compared to attire of the Tararian Guard, projected a sense of regality, making Cris feel like he would be underdressed even while wearing his finest suit. There was also an energy about them that he couldn’t quite identify—a magnetism that made him have difficulty looking away.

Over the last year, Cris had become used to blending in and downplaying the authority that had been ingrained in him through years of tutoring. Now, even in the most refined state he could muster, he still felt insignificant compared to the Agents. *How long before the TSS changes me, too?*

As they passed through the spaceport, passersby looked on with wonder and gave the party a wide berth. On the rare occasions Cris had been permitted to visit Sieten, he had received similar looks from the city's residents. *There's a sense of awe, but in the same way someone admires a majestic animal that could readily kill its handlers. What will that make me, as both an Agent and dynastic leader?*

Cris' thoughts were interrupted by a glimpse of the TSS ship in the distance down the spaceport's corridor. He had previously seen TSS vessels while visiting a Sietinen shipyard—one of the ancillary businesses to SiNavTech. The TSS vessel stood out from the other crafts in the port by its iridescent hull and smooth lines. The materials for the hull were far too expensive for everyday civilian use, but the superior impact absorption was an asset for combat applications and for minimizing the structural stress of subspace travel. At eighty meters long, this particular craft was much smaller than those he had previously seen, though it made sense that the Agents wouldn't take a warship on a recruitment mission.

"How long will it take to get to Headquarters?" Cris asked as they approached the ship.

"About four hours," Jarek replied.

"I didn't realize it was located so close to the outer colonies," Cris commented.

"It's not," Jarek replied. "Headquarters is located in Earth's moon."

"Earth?" Cris asked, incredulous. "That seems like a strange place for TSS Headquarters."

"What makes you say that?" Dodes asked.

“Earth isn’t part of the Taran government, for one.”

“Which makes it a perfect location for training those with telekinetic abilities, doesn’t it?” Jarek pointed out.

“I guess it does.” *Far from the control of the Priesthood.* Like most children, Cris had learned the story of Earth as a cautionary tale. Over millennia, Taran descendants seeking to escape the perceived oppression of Tararian rule had fled to Earth and mingled with the native population born from ancient panspermia. Each group of Taran colonists had brought with them elements of the unique cultures from their home worlds, but they shared the common vision of a new start—leaving behind the advanced technologies that connected them to the rest of Tarans in an attempt to disappear. As the “lost colony” of Earth gave rise and fall to its own great civilizations, Tarans had watched their divergent brethren from a distance—but apparently from far closer than most of Earth’s population would have ever imagined. *Perhaps the location is also an homage to our lost relationship.*

“Headquarters is within a subspace containment shell inside the moon. Our space dock is fixed just above the surface on the dark side, so we keep to ourselves,” Jarek continued.

Cris’ brow furrowed. “Subspace containment shell?”

Jarek smiled. “A sustained subspace pocket surrounded by a really big wall. Basically, breaking into Headquarters would be extremely difficult.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Cris replied. *I guess if their ships are any indication, the rest of their tech is pretty advanced, too.*

“It all might seem strange to you now, but we like being a little hidden,” Jarek said as he led the way up the gangway to the ship.

It is pretty out of the way... “Wait, you said it would only take four hours to get there. Isn’t Earth in a sector that’s two or three weeks’ travel from here?”

Dodes smirked. “With a civilian jump drive, maybe.”

Is there another kind? “What does the TSS use?”

“We have a long-range subspace transit,” Jarek explained. “It works the same basic way as commercial vessels—locking onto SiNavTech beacons. But, rather than the short jumps used by cargo freighters and civilian transports, our ships can lock onto beacons at much farther intervals to expedite the jump. Since our drives don’t require cool-down, travel time is reduced by a factor of thirty.”

That puts the entire galaxy within easy reach. “I’ve heard theories about long-duration drives, but I didn’t know the technology was ever developed.”

Jarek nodded. “There are many ways the TSS is outside the mainstream. Travel technology is one of the big ones.”

They reached the top of the gangway. Inside, the TSS ship was simply appointed but comfortable. Gray carpet covered the floor of the hall, and metal wall panels were inset with tan accents. Jarek headed down the hall to the right.

The technology divide is so much bigger than I ever imagined. “I’m surprised I never heard about the extent of SiNavTech’s work with the TSS.”

“I’m sure you would have eventually,” Jarek said. “But it is kept pretty need-to-know.”

What else haven’t I been told? “I guess so.”

The hall ended at a lounge room. In the center of the space, there were four plush chairs upholstered in a matte black fabric, which circled a low table with chrome legs and a glass top. An expansive window filled the outer wall, and one of the side walls had a broad viewscreen.

“I hope this will be acceptable for the next few hours,” Jarek said.

It beats the flight deck on the Exler. “It’ll be fine, thank you.”

“Make yourself comfortable,” Jarek said and gestured toward the chairs.

Cris set his travel bag down on the floor next to one of the chairs with a good view out the window. He settled into the chair, and Dodes took a seat across from him.

Jarek remained by the door. "Excuse me, I'll get us underway." He inclined his head to Cris and left the cabin.

Dodes pulled a handheld out from his pocket and began looking at something on the device.

Cris took the opportunity to clear his head. He closed his eyes. *I never thought I would be joining the TSS. Especially not like this. I always thought growing my abilities would be useful and fun, but now I'm scared to see what I'll be able to do. I never wanted to hurt anyone.*

After a few minutes, Cris felt the low rumble of the jump drive through the floor. Unlike the Exler, the vibration seemed muted and controlled. He opened his eyes. The stars out the window slowly became masked by blue-green light as the ship slipped into subspace.

"It's nice to just be a passenger for a change," Cris said.

"I'll bet," Dodes replied, looking up from his handheld. "Relax while you can. The TSS isn't exactly known for easing people in gently."

"What should I expect?"

"I honestly don't know. You're a unique case. The High Commander wants to meet you, and he'll figure out where to place you."

Cris crossed his arms, pulling inward. "Is it because of what I did earlier?" *Do they also think I'm dangerous?*

Dodes hesitated. "Yes, but not just that. You have a lot more potential than most."

Cris looked down. "I didn't know I could do those things."

"Soon enough you'll be able to do a lot more."

Cris leaned back in his chair and stared out the window at the swirling blue-green sea of light. *I hope this is the right choice.*

“Did you really have another option?” Dodes asked in response to Cris’ thought.

Cris realized he had let his mental guard lapse and raised it again. “No, not anymore.” *Not now that I know what I can do.*

“We’ll take care of you, don’t worry,” Dodes said.

At least I’ll finally be around other people like me. Cris stared back out the window. *Maybe I’ll finally fit in.*

* * *

“Sir, we have him. It sounds like he wants to join.”

Banks leaped up from his desk and walked toward the main viewscreen to speak with Jarek. *Thank the stars, finally!* “Good. Did you have any trouble?”

“Yes, actually. Much more than expected,” Jarek said.

“Did he resist?”

Jarek’s brow furrowed. “No, he came quite easily.”

“Then how so?”

“He was attacked.”

No, don’t tell me... “Attacked? By whom?”

“An assassin from the Priesthood. They must have been acting on the same information about his whereabouts that we were.”

Bomax! What were they thinking? Banks was careful to hide his indignation. “How did he escape?”

Jarek looked away. “Sir, he ‘stopped time.’”

Banks tensed. “What?” *How is that possible? I know he’s gifted, but that...*

“I don’t know, sir. He seemed distraught. I asked him afterward, and he said he’d never done it before.”

If he really did... “It’s unheard of, pulling off that maneuver without extensive coaching.”

Jarek looked shaken. “I know, sir. I barely knew what I was seeing. I’ve only witnessed it once before. But that’s not all.”

Banks took a slow breath. “There’s more?”

“Then he threw the assassin against the wall telekinetically. I was struck by the power of it—absolutely astounding. There was a great measure of control, even though he claimed to not know what he was doing.”

“This development complicates matters considerably.” *I can’t possibly put him in with other new Trainees. Not with that level of ability.* “But he’s safe?”

“Yes, sir. Shaken, but unharmed.”

Banks nodded. “Good. We’ll decide what to do after I meet with him.” *After all of our careful planning, we’re back to making up a strategy as we go.*

“Yes, sir.” Jarek inclined his head.

“Dismissed.”