



— BOOK 1 —

TARAN EMPIRE SAGA

**EMPIRE
REBORN**



A K DUBOFF

EMPIRE REBORN
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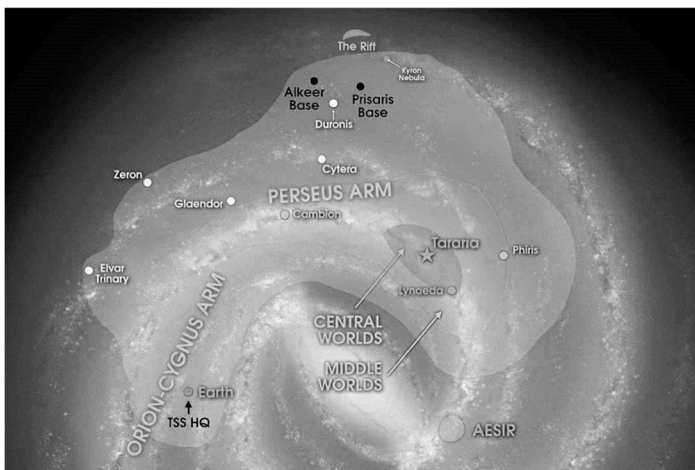
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THE CADICLE UNIVERSE




Tarans are the predominant race in the Cadicle Universe; humans are a Taran genetic offshoot. Most of the Taran sphere falls within the purview of the Taran Empire, governed from the planet Tararia by a council of High Dynasty families. Earth is one of several rogue colonies on the outskirts of the Empire, separated so long ago that they have forgotten their Taran ancestry.

The Tararian Guard is the primary military force for the Taran Empire. Its counterpart, the Tararian Selective Service, includes a specialty branch with Agents gifted in telekinetic and telepathic abilities. The TSS is headquartered at a base inside Earth's moon, and its iconic Agents are known in Earth lore as the mysterious 'men in black'.



CHAPTER 1



JASON SIETINEN SPED through the training course in his fighter with practiced precision, using the neural link to operate the spacecraft as an extension of himself. He couldn't help grinning; the idea to volunteer as a space combat instructor had been a stroke of genius to get him flying again without shirking his leadership responsibilities. *Stars, I've missed this!*

As he finished his demonstration run, he was about to address his students when a presence at the edge of his consciousness broke his euphoria.

Jason's sight narrowed and the jovial chatter on the comms faded to the background. Intense fear gripped him, despite his training. He'd experience the same foreboding sensation once before, though he'd never been sure if it was real—a prophesy or a waking nightmare. *No, we beat them. They're gone. This can't be right.*

The darkness pressed against his mind, closing in around him. Such immense power, sinister and all-consuming. Memories of the past vision rushed back and merged with his present perception. His surroundings melted away, leaving

only his heartbeat pounding in his ears. He was alone in the void, trapped by the crushing force. Something was coming...

And then it vanished.

Jason drew a deep breath of the crisp, oxygen-rich air to steady himself. *What was that?*

His students were still joking with each other on the comms, oblivious to what he'd felt. He wanted to tell himself it was just a bizarre manifestation of stress, but he'd learned to trust his instincts more than that.

"CACI," he addressed the onboard AI, "are you picking up any unusual readings?"

"Nominal," the synthetic female voice replied. Sensor data scrolled across the head-up display on the windshield, casting a soft red and blue glow inside the cockpit.

He reviewed the information on the HUD, seeing nothing of note. "What about any recently filed incident reports?"

"Specify parameters."

Truthfully, Jason didn't know what he was asking. He glanced at the young pilots waiting to take their first run in real fighters. If there wasn't immediate danger in the vicinity, then anything else could wait.

"Disregard."

He tried to suppress the uneasy feeling and return his attention to the lesson at hand.

"So *that's* how it's done. Easy, right?" Jason asked his students in a more upbeat tone than he felt.

"This is nothing like the sims," muttered Bret Hamlin, one of the Initiates. It was unclear if he'd meant to broadcast the sentiment on an open channel, but Jason wasn't about to let it slip by.

"In fact, it's *exactly* like the flight simulators. Though it might not look it while you're parked out here watching me do

all the work, give yourself a chance to get a feel for the controls. You'll be surprised." The sleek fighters, styled with tapered wings and rear fins suited for both spaceflight and in-atmosphere combat, were an ideal practice craft to help the pilots hone their skills.

"I think it's pretty spot on so far," Alisha Delroe chimed in, always the suck-up.

Her teacher-crush had been obvious to Jason from day one, but he'd made a point to not encourage her. Frankly, he didn't have the time or energy to deal with it.

"Sampsen, you're up. Just a maneuvering run, no targets. Don't be a showoff," Jason instructed. He'd learned that the best approach to keeping the lesson on track was to cut off the side chatter before it took hold. Let the students start a discussion on matters of opinion, and that would be all they'd talk about for the rest of the day.

Thankfully, Wes Sampsen did as he was told. His flight lines were loose and his reactions slow, but it was a decent initial run. Jason would rather see a student be too cautious out of the gate than try to act like a hotshot. Confidence could be built; breaking down cockiness was a lot harder.

"Nice work," Jason complimented the pilot trainee. "Delroe, go for it."

"Aye, sir," Alisha acknowledged with far more sultriness than was warranted.

With Jason's athletic build, chestnut hair, and striking teal eyes, he was used to getting that kind of attention, but it still made him uncomfortable. While his popularity had been well and good growing up on Earth, now that he was an active participant in the galaxy-spanning Taran Empire, he could never be sure if it was *him* or his family name that people were interested in. The Sietinen Dynasty was tantamount to royalty,

known to everyone throughout the expansive civilization, but Jason couldn't care less about their wealth and influence—that was his twin sister's domain. She played princess while he got to be the consummate soldier and leave the politicking to the people who actually cared.

“Watch your lines,” Jason called to Alisha over the comms as she cut a little too close to one of the buoys that defined the flight lanes.

The training course in the void between Jupiter and Saturn was composed of markers leading past various enemy-simulation targets. For these preliminary practice purposes, the drones were inactive while the students got comfortable maneuvering out in the black versus inside flight simulators. Other training could get students competent with the controls, but only time in a genuine spacecraft revealed the psychological impact of facing an immense expanse where the nearest celestial body was a distant speck.

Jason had loved it from the first time his father took him out in a shuttle. Most days, he found the vast nothing calming—a reminder that he was a tiny piece of something grander than an individual could comprehend. It kept petty day-to-day problems in perspective. At this moment, though, he felt none of that usual comfort. Whatever he'd sensed at the start of the lesson was still out there.

“Easy, Delroe!” Jason warned again as Alisha made another dangerous turn.

Young trainees like her were all too common—trying to prove they were the next superstar who would set the bar for future generations. The Tararian Selective Service's training program was effective at reining in those reckless impulses, but it took years to mold someone into a TSS Agent who would be valuable to society. Early on, emerging telekinetic and

telepathic abilities had a way of getting in teenagers' heads. They felt invincible. Jason knew, in retrospect, he'd suffered from the same affliction at their age. Now, at twenty-six and a graduated Agent, he had sufficient life experience to recognize when others were acting stupid even when he didn't always make the wisest decision himself.

"That's enough, Delroe. Bring it in," he ordered. She'd come close to clipping too many buoys for him to allow the run to continue.

"Sir, I—" she started to protest.

"We're not trying to set any records today," he said in a firm tone. "Let Hamlin have a chance."

The comm cut out at the start of an aggravated sigh from Alisha.

There's one in every group. Jason shook his head. Not everyone was a natural, as much as they wanted to be. It sucked, but that was life.

He kept a watchful eye on Hamlin, and then the remaining seven trainees, as each completed a practice run. A few would need more hands-on coaching, but he was confident he could make decent pilots out of every one of them.

"All right, time to head back," he told the group when the last trainee had finished.

Jason activated the automated navigation control for a group jump back to TSS Headquarters. The pre-programmed protocol allowed close proximity subspace transit to the space dock on the far side of Earth's moon, out of sight from prying eyes. With the rise in space traffic in recent years, it was becoming more difficult to keep the base's presence secret, even with stealth shielding. Though it wasn't Jason's direct concern, he knew that a TSS team worked around the clock to keep the Empire's existence hidden, through various

technological, political, and private intervention means. A waste of resources, as far as he was concerned.

Blue-green light swirled around his vessel as the spatial distortion generated by the jump drive allowed the craft to slip into subspace. The hop to Headquarters was so short that he was only fully immersed in the ethereal light for a blink of an eye. As his fighter dropped back into normal space, the distortion dissipated like fog on a warm morning.

Before him was the impressive TSS spaceport, fixed via a gravity anchor to the far side of the moon from Earth. From a distance, the glow of the station's illuminated branches would merely be a faint point of light in the dark. But, up close, the dome-roofed concourses and central hub of the sprawling structure were an impressive sight to behold. Windows between the sculptured metal framework shone with a pearlescent finish, reflecting the onboard lights of the approaching ships. His heart swelled each time he saw it—originally, from the excitement of stepping into a futuristic society relative to Earth, where he'd spent the first sixteen years of his life; now, it was the welcome sight of home.

The team docked near the station's core on a short concourse dedicated to berthing the fighters used for training. Jason shut down his own craft and then watched the remote feed of each student going through the power-down process to make sure all connections were made and it was safe to disembark. All reports came up blue for 'good'.

"Great work today." Jason removed his flight helmet.

At the all-clear sign, the students piled out from their vessels. He met them on the broad concourse next to one of the curved windows overlooking the moon below, and they formed a semicircle around him. Their light-blue flight suits indicating their Initiate rank contrasted his Agent black.

“So, having now been out in the real thing, how does it compare to the sims?” he asked.

A cacophony of simultaneous replies ranged from “Amazing!” to “Terrifying”.

He smiled at them. “Looking forward to getting back out there?”

“Stars, yes!” they practically said in unison.

“Good. I want to clean up a couple of techniques before we go out again, but I think we can target another flight next week.”

There were grins all around.

Jason escorted them to an automated transport shuttle leading to the surface port at the bottom of a crater. The three-pronged port converged at a semi-circular lobby with a bank of elevators along the curved back wall. It was the singular way to get into the secure underground base deep within the moon.

They filed into an elevator car, and the doors slid closed; a pulsing white light gave the only indication of downward movement. Midway through the ride, there was a thud as the car passed through the lock separating the top half of the elevator shaft from the lower portion that extended into the shell surrounding the Headquarters structure. At the center of the metal sphere was the eleven-ringed base, each section self-contained except for access via the central shaft.

The elevator stopped at Level 2, the section dedicated to the Primus Division, the classification for the most powerful Agents and promising trainees. Jason and select others had been granted a Primus Elite distinction, but they operated within the broader Primus framework for administrative purposes. Different floors within the ring held a mixture of student housing, Agent quarters, common areas, and offices. It was a fully functioning city, filled with the best and brightest.

Most days, Jason couldn't imagine being anywhere else.

"See you in class. Have a good afternoon," he bid the students farewell before heading toward his residential wing, anxious to reflect on the strange experience with the dark presence. *Is it worth saying something to Dad?*

"Sir, may I have a minute?" Alisha asked from behind him.

Jason schooled his expression before turning back to face her.

"Of course." He tucked his flight helmet under his arm.

Alisha's helmet dangled from its chin strap in one hand while her other arm crossed over her stomach. The brows above her large, taupe eyes were drawn together with frustration she couldn't quite mask. At nineteen and in the Initiate stage of the TSS Agent training protocol, she was caught between newcomer and higher-skilled Junior Agent. It was a particularly frustrating time for students while they waited for the full extent of their Gifts to emerge. Jason's own telepathic and telekinetic abilities had developed quickly, but he'd watched many of his friends play the agonizing waiting game as their peers started to pass them by.

She waited for the other students to get beyond earshot down the hallway before continuing. "I wanted to ask about earlier. What, exactly, did I do wrong, sir?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You can't tell me?"

She frowned. "I was trying to be efficient with my trajectory. Look one target ahead."

"You were cutting within meters of the buoys. It wasn't safe."

"I knew I had the clearance."

"You were in an unfamiliar craft," he reminded her.

"Sir, you said yourself that they handle like the simulators. I've logged hundreds of hours in those."

She had him there. He took a measured breath. "I'll grant

you that. However, there's a difference between efficiency and being needlessly reckless. Generally speaking, you *never* have to get that close, even if you have the skill to do so. You have to find the balance between what will accomplish your objective and making sure you and your craft get home intact."

Alisha nodded and looked down. "I understand. I'm sorry, sir."

She still seemed annoyed, but Jason appreciated her willingness to concede. He bent his head to catch her gaze. "I should have been clearer in my instruction; it's not all on you. But next time when I say to take it easy, don't keep pushing it, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

Jason gave her a supportive smile. "It was solid flying, though. I'm looking forward to seeing what you can do."

Her face lit up. "Thank you, sir."

"Have a good night."

"You too."

Jason resumed the walk to his quarters. With soft copper and deep red hues complementing the wood paneling and gray carpet, the residential halls felt like a cozy home rather than a military installation. After ten years with the TSS, living in the underground base seemed as normal as his childhood on Earth. He did miss being able to go into the countryside—and the rain, oddly—but his assignments to various planets offered a suitable substitute.

He was almost to his quarters when he spotted Gil, one of his former roommates and fellow Primus Elite, heading his way.

"Hey, what's up?" Jason asked.

Gil rubbed the edge of his overcoat between his thumb and forefinger, a nervous tick Jason had observed many times over

the years. “What do you know about the attack?”

Jason’s thoughts flashed to the dark presence he’d sensed during the flight lesson. “What happened?”

“I was hoping you knew. All I heard was a ship went missing, and they just found a lone survivor.”

That didn’t sound related to his experience. “Who’d you hear that from?”

“A friend out on remote assignment,” Gil replied with a shrug. “I thought your parents may have said something.”

Jason sighed inwardly. “Contrary to popular belief, I rarely get information before anyone else.”

Gil cracked a smile. “Sure, downplay it all you want.”

Jason waved him away with his flight helmet. “I need to change. I’ll let you know if I get any details.”

His friend started to walk away. “Oh, and are we still on for the match?”

“Shit, is that tonight?” The video game tournament had slipped his mind. He knew it was silly that they still indulged in such an unproductive diversion, but it had become a tradition. And, it was nice to do something with low stakes.

“Dude, you can’t cancel again.” Gil’s shoulders slumped.

Jason ran through the mental list of everything that would be delayed by attending the game. Despite the sizable disruption, his friend’s pleading eyes got the better of him. “All right, I’ll be there at 19:00.”

Gil’s face lit up with a grin. “Prepare to be slaughtered.”

“That’s all the trash-talk you can manage? You don’t stand a chance.”

“I haven’t even gotten warmed up.” Gil held his arms wide in challenge while he strolled away backward.

Jason shook his head as he placed his palm on the biometric lock to his door.

He'd been in the same quarters since graduating to Agent five years prior. The warm shades decorating Headquarters' common areas carried into the living area, simply furnished to be both efficient and stylish—like most elements within the TSS.

Jason passed through the sliding door into the bedroom and tossed his helmet onto the double bed. He changed out of the flight suit and donned his standard black TSS Agent uniform, tailored snugly enough to show off his physique without being gratuitous. The t-shirt, slacks, and boots would fit with almost any outfit, but the knee-length overcoat with its narrow lapels and tapered waist gave the uniform its iconic look. Until recently, tinted glasses would have been a mandatory accessory—to hide the bioluminescent irises of those with Gifts. However, recent legislation to legalize the civilian use of those abilities had allowed the TSS and its Agents to become more accepted in society, no longer needing to downplay their abilities to set others at ease.

A quick check of his message inbox confirmed that there was no mention of the attack or any other crisis. Still, as a precaution, he decided it would be better to disclose his experience than not. Since his father was often in meetings as part of his TSS High Commander responsibilities, Jason opted for a text message: >>I sensed something odd during the flight lesson. It reminded me of what I saw in the nexus. We should talk when you get a chance.<<

With the message sent, Jason settled onto the plush couch in the living area to review some of his students' written assignments. He was just getting into it when his handheld chirped.

A text message from Tiff illuminated on the matte surface of the palm-sized device. >>What are you up to tonight?<<

Jason knew from experience that it was a thinly veiled booty call. He slid open the handheld, which activated its smooth screen, and typed back, >>Stupid amounts of work, and Gil roped me into gaming.<<

>>Booo! I was hoping to unwind. It's been a bomaxed day.<<

>>Same here, but can't tonight. I'll block out tomorrow evening.<<

>>Ugh, fine,<< she agreed. >>But only because I actually like Gil.<<

>>Your infinite understanding will be noted for future generations to admire.<<

>>I'm the best. Don't you forget it!<<

Jason smiled. >>Never would.<< He paused. >>Hey, you didn't hear anything about an attack on a ship, did you?<<

>>Yeah, actually,<< Tiff replied. >>There's been some chatter this afternoon. Prisar is handling it, I think. Why?<<

Prisar is near the Rift, but... His brows furrowed. >>No reason. Just heard about it from Gil, and I wondered if there was more to it.<<

>>Not that I know of.<<

>>All right. I'll see you tomorrow. Usual time?<<

>>Yeah, see you then. Now, get to work!<<

>>On it.<<

He closed out of the chat and frowned at the screen. Prisar was the TSS base closest to the Rift, and anything having to do with the former war zone set him on edge. Still, the threat related to the Rift was supposed to have been resolved. *Unless my vision all those years ago wasn't about what I thought it was, and there's something else lurking out there...*

There wasn't anything more he could do about it until he spoke with his father. Until then, plotting how to win the

tournament would be a welcome distraction.

— — —

It wasn't often that TSS High Commander Wil Sietinen found himself perplexed, but this particular set of information defied explanation. He had been studying the report from the Prisar base for the better part of the evening and was no closer to understanding the strange incident.

"Wil, come to bed." His wife, Saera, was standing in the doorway to their bedroom. Based on the scowl twisting her beautiful features, she wasn't pleased that he'd brought work home to their quarters—not that she hadn't done the same on numerous occasions in her capacity as TSS Lead Agent.

Wil leaned back on the couch with a sigh but didn't close the report. "It doesn't make any sense."

"You can deal with it later."

"I'm not so sure," he replied with a frown. "This salvage ship attack is too bizarre to be a coincidence, given the proximity to the Rift." Ever since the end of the Bakzen War thirty years prior, the Rift had been on his mind. The spatial tear was formed when a planet was destroyed in a massive telekinetic assault. Despite the TSS' attempts to heal the wound, a sliver of it had remained—and was slowly growing again. He and others had been keeping an eye on it from afar, hoping nothing more would come of it. *I should have known better.*

Wil gestured to the report on the viewscreen and waited for Saera to get the gist of the contents.

"This can't be right," she murmured.

"I can't find any evidence of it being falsified. In the event it *is* genuine..."

“Stars...” She sunk down onto the couch next to him.

“We can’t take any risks with the Rift. We need to be ready to respond if this situation develops.”

“Do you think this has anything to do with what Jason alluded to in his message?”

If it does, we’re in more danger than I can imagine. He took a steady breath. “This attack was days ago, though.”

Saera smoothed her hand over her auburn hair. “Have you spoken with him yet?”

“No, I wanted to finish going through this first, since I’d rather keep the conversation rooted in observable facts.” Wil knew firsthand how visions from the nexus were cryptic and difficult to interpret. Years ago, when his son had visited the nexus, they had interpreted what he’d seen to be a sign of the coming revolution within the Empire. At the time, it fit, but it could have meant anything.

Wil stared at the impossible report on the viewscreen. “I’ve always feared that what he saw was actually another impending threat. Though Jason has never said as much, I think he’s wondered the same. I don’t know why else he’d bring it up now.”

Saera groaned. “Because things can never be easy for us.”

“Hey, we had a few years without a galactic-scale disaster to worry about.”

“Not funny.” She continued reviewing the frustratingly sparse information—so far, only a transcript of an interview and a single image.

“Have you evaluated scan data from the area?” she asked.

“I was just about to.”

Saera leaned forward, fully engaged. “Then let’s figure this out.”

— — —

“We have a problem.”

The telepathic warning intruded into Jason’s mind, snapping him awake. Beyond his father’s mental presence, his bedroom was quiet and dark. Jason rolled onto his back and threaded his fingers through his hair, trying to shake off the haze of sleep. He’d only made it into bed an hour prior, after having quite the heated competition with Gil. *“Can’t it wait until morning?”*

“It’s about the Rift.”

Jason bolted upright, his heart pounding. *“Is it related to that attack?”*

“Yes, a salvage hauler was destroyed.”

“By what?”

“We’re not sure,” his father replied.

Jason’s mind raced. *I’d hoped I was just being paranoid.*

The sector around the sealed spatial rift had been unoccupied for decades. Salvage ships had been instructed to stay clear of the area, though it wasn’t a surprise that at least one had gone in search of valuable scraps left over from the Bakzen War. Perhaps a rival had attacked the ship, but he suspected that his father wouldn’t have woken him in the middle of the night if the explanation were that straightforward.

“Meet me in my office,” his father instructed. *“The threat may have come through the Rift.”*

Jason threw back the sheets on his bed. *“I’m on my way.”*

He hurriedly dressed and grabbed his handheld from the charging pad on his nightstand. *Shit, we don’t need another conflict.* He slid the device into the inner breast pocket of his black overcoat and jogged to the door.

The hallways in TSS Headquarters were all but abandoned in the wee hours of the morning. Sconces lining the paneled walls were dimmed to half-brightness for the night, giving Jason the opportunity to let his senses adjust to wakefulness. As much as he and the other Agents in the TSS liked to believe that the organization's charter was now driven by academic excellence, alerts like this in the middle of the night were a reminder that their duty was to protect the Taran people, first and foremost. There would always be new threats to vanquish, and they needed to be ready for anything. Their skills were too unique for anyone to take their place.

The familiar comfort of the environment helped settle Jason's nerves as he jogged to the central lift connecting the facility's rings. He took the lift to Level 1—the administrative center for TSS Headquarters—and hurried to the TSS High Commander's office down one of the four primary corridors radiating from the dark-tiled central lobby. For most, getting called to the office would either be a great honor or a sign of impending punishment for a major indiscretion. For Jason, being the son of High Commander Wil Sietinen, a veritable living legend, it was a place for a casual family get-together as much as anything else. Tonight, however, was definitely not a social call.

One half of the wooden double-doors to the office stood open. Jason's father, mother, and three other senior Agents were waiting inside. All were dressed in Agent black, though many weren't in their full uniform. The buzz of energy in the air was palpable, with so many of the most powerful Gifted soldiers gathered in one place. Jason's skin tingled from the thrill of being in their presence—the extraordinary potential waiting to be unleashed. It wasn't like that being around all Agents, but the close bonds between this group elevated them;

they were more than the sum of their parts.

After Jason entered, his father telekinetically closed the door with a wave of his hand.

“What do we know?” Jason asked.

“Not enough. I’ve already been over the situation with everyone here, and we’ve agreed you’re the right person to bring in—especially considering that message you sent me.” The cerulean glow from his father’s bioluminescent irises stood out across the room in the dim light, the vibrant blue contrasting the shade of chestnut hair he’d passed down to Jason and his twin sister.

“It was almost like a flashback of my vision from the nexus. But it’s never resurfaced like that before.”

“A darkness on the horizon.” His father exchanged a significant glance with the others.

“Yeah.” Jason slowly closed the distance to the Agents gathered around the desk. He’d gotten used to his parents holding the two foremost leadership roles in the TSS, with their longtime friends occupying positions as Division Heads. The inner circle, responsible for the safety of the Taran Empire. Jason had had to earn his place as a trusted Agent among them, regardless of his pedigree. He took the position seriously, and he knew there were few circumstances that would necessitate an urgent meeting like this. He braced for the worst.

“It’s too soon to say definitively if your experience is connected to the salvage hauler attack,” his father continued. “What we *have* been able to establish is that the ship shouldn’t have been out where it was.”

“And there were no other ships in the area, which makes it more complicated.” His mother, Saera Alexri, was uncharacteristically solemn, with a tightness around her jade eyes, also casting a natural glow to evidence her advanced Gifts.

In her role as Lead Agent, she'd always maintained grace and levity, even when faced with dire situations. For her to look this concerned set Jason even more on edge.

"No clues?" Jason asked. "I heard something about a survivor."

"Yes, there is one," his father replied. He leaned against his desk, crossing his toned arms. "And his story would seem far-fetched if he hadn't also delivered proof."

"A merchant ship picked up his escape pod from the salvage hauler *Andvari*," explained Michael Andres, the lead trainer for the Primus Elite Division in which Jason had studied. He was one of Jason's parents' oldest friends, and his position as their next-in-line leader in the TSS had been secured through his loyal service in the war and the transition years that followed. "The response was initially handled by the Tararian Guard, but they've admitted they're out of their depth on this matter."

"For only the second time ever, to my recollection," Wil quipped.

Ian Mandren and Ethan Samlier—the Division Leads for the Sacon and Trion Agent classes, respectively—smirked at the comment. They never missed an opportunity to play up the TSS' rivalry with the Guard.

Appreciative his father was trying to ease the tension, Jason cracked a smile. He'd been the Agent assigned to respond to that previous call for help, and it had been deeply satisfying to watch the Guard soldiers gawk at his open use of telekinesis.

Michael didn't seem to share their amusement. No surprise there; he was always focused and serious when there was a task at hand. Still, when Michael worried, everyone worried. And right now, he looked more terrified than Jason had ever seen him.

“There’s more data, but this image is most illustrative.” Michael activated the holoprojector integrated into the High Commander’s desk, displaying a three-dimensional rendering of...

Jason squinted at the image as he tried to figure out what it was.

The tangle of looping lines had no clear point of origin, snaking across the image and fading into the expanse beyond. A dense knot at the center appeared to be gripping something. Upon closer inspection, Jason was able to make out the form of a vessel.

“Holy shit! Is that the salvage ship?”

The realization gave a new sense of scale to the image. The vessel had to be at least two or three hundred meters in length, which meant the ethereal tentacle-like web around it stretched for kilometers in every direction.

“What is this?” Jason asked, almost breathless. *This isn’t anything like what I saw in my vision.*

“That’s what we need to figure out,” Saera replied. “The image was captured under unusual circumstances. For simplicity’s sake, it’s a transdimensional snapshot—showing a structure that extends beyond what we know as spacetime reality.”

“It’s foking massive. I’ve never seen anything like it.” Michael shook his head. Jason always wondered how Michael had been able to adopt the curses used by native-born Tarans rather than those he’d grown up with on Earth. Maybe with the benefit of time, it’d rub off on him, too.

Right now, though, Jason was finding it difficult to choose the right words in any language. He looked around incredulously at the solemn faces in the room. “A transdimensional space kraken? This is a joke, right?”

His parents and Michael grunted, having spent enough time on Earth to get the reference, while the two other Agents' brows furrowed slightly.

"I wish it was a hoax," his father said. "Believe me, when this landed on my desk this afternoon, I wanted to disregard it. But I've been over everything, and the image is genuine. I just wish I knew *how*."

Jason nodded. This wasn't the time for jests, even though that was his preferred coping mechanism. He was a trusted member of his parents' advisory circle, and he needed to demonstrate that he held that status because of competency rather than an expectation of birthright. The Sietinens were under enough scrutiny, as it was, for filling influential roles generation after generation.

"What are the next steps?" he asked.

"A conversation with the survivor. Preliminary reports indicate that he suffered some kind of telepathic assault from the... entity." His father looked at him. "That's why I asked you here, Jason. I'd like you to perform a telepathic evaluation and see if you can find anything others missed."

"Sure," Jason agreed, though he had no idea yet what that might entail.

"Transportation arrangements are already underway," his mother said. "You can leave as soon as you're ready."

He nodded. "Anything in particular you'd like me to ask about?"

"I need to know if this is connected to what happened a few months ago," his father stated. "If it is, and your vision..." He faded out.

"I understand." Jason didn't need further explanation. The attack may be a declaration of war.

CHAPTER 2

AS A RULE, Raena Sietinen didn't conduct business before breakfast—a fact her assistant, Jovan, seemed keen to ignore. “Whatever you have to say, I don't want to hear it until I've finished my coffee.”

“But, my lady, it's—” Jovan insisted, a flush coming through his dark complexion.

“Nope.”

“What's going on?” Ryan Dainetris, her husband, asked from deeper within their palatial bedroom suite. He approached the door, his black hair still dark from a shower, with a pastry in hand. His gaze landed on the very agitated assistant. “Oh. Good luck getting her to talk now.” He took a bite of the croissant.

“A ship was destroyed,” Jovan blurted out.

That caught Raena's attention. “Where?” She snatched the tablet from Jovan's quivering hands.

“Near the Rift.”

“Shit,” she whispered, reverting to the curses from her youth spent on Earth.

Ryan rushed to look over her shoulder, his luminescent gray eyes narrowed with concern. “What happened?”

“This doesn’t say. Only that the incident involved a salvage crew. There was just one survivor.”

“Stars...” He skimmed through the cryptic report. “Attack or accident?”

“I only know what’s in the document,” Jovan replied. “My lady, your father would like to speak with you. This report came directly from him when he couldn’t reach you this morning.”

“I’ll follow up,” Raena acknowledged. “Thank you.”

“I’ll be standing by.” The assistant bowed as Raena closed the door.

Ryan headed toward the viewscreen integrated into the wall. “I’ll start a vidcall.”

“No, I’m sticking to ‘coffee first’,” Raena stated. She flipped her chestnut hair behind her shoulder with one hand and took a sip from her mug. Running an interstellar civilization required dealing with a never-ending series of crises, and she’d learned that taking a few moments for herself and husband helped her keep a level head when it mattered. “Dad can wait fifteen minutes. If it was *that* urgent, he’d have astral projected to pester me.”

Ryan hesitated. “I always forget how easy that is for you.”

“Him and Jason, maybe. I’m out of practice.”

Ryan shook his head. “If you say so. Shall we?” He motioned toward their breakfast table on the terrace overlooking the sea.

Raena followed him outside, trying to suppress her concerns about the destroyed ship. Since Dainetris Galactic Enterprises, the corporate arm of her husband’s recently revived Dynasty, manufactured the starship involved in the

incident—as well as the majority of *all* new starships in the Empire—it could be a public relations nightmare if the ship’s destruction was somehow determined to be DGE’s fault. However, if her father was tipping her off, that meant the Tararian Selective Service had taken notice, suggesting that something bigger was in play. After all, the TSS High Commander didn’t send cryptic reports on a whim, parental relation or not.

“It’s probably a one-off,” Ryan said, sensing her mood.

“No, everything was going too well. There was bound to be a major issue.”

Ryan eased into his usual seat at the table. “I suppose settling into a normal routine would be too much for us to ask.”

She sat down across from him, smiling slightly. “I did try to warn you about my family.”

“Like we had a genuine choice about any of this.” He reached over the table and took her hand. “Not that I’d change anything—well, not with us, anyway.”

Raena gave his hand a squeeze, then released it so she could cradle her coffee mug in both palms. “I’ve accepted that drama is a way of life for us. That’s why I defend these moments.”

“And I love you for it.”

She leaned back and took a deep breath of the salty sea air rising from the vast ocean between the First and Third Regions of Tararia, the core planet of the Taran Empire. The terrace overlooked the northeastern coastline of the estate, four stories above the manicured grounds. Though picturesque, Raena hadn’t completely shaken her memories of the isle’s dark history when it had served as headquarters for the corrupt Priesthood, only overthrown five years before. Moving there to the newly renamed Morningstar Isle had been an intentional political move, but on days like this when bad news set the

tone, she couldn't help wondering if the place was cursed.

"You're still thinking about it," Ryan said telepathically.

"Resorting to mind-reading now, are we?" she jested back. While she could have easily closed off her thoughts, she'd vowed to never keep secrets from her husband. He knew her better than anyone—even her twin brother, Jason.

"If there really is an issue," Ryan continued aloud, "your parents will handle it."

She nodded. "They always do."

"Stars, the last time they took on a big project, they overthrew the Priesthood and got us a castle to live in!"

Raena almost lost a mouthful of sweetened coffee through her nose. Somehow, he always knew just what to say to keep her thoughts from going too dark.

She admired Ryan from across the table—not just his handsome features, but the depth of his generous spirit. Like her, he hadn't found out about his royal lineage until near-adulthood, and they'd grown into their roles together. Spending their childhoods as regular civilians had granted them a perspective that none of the other High Dynasty leaders possessed.

"Don't hold your breath for another castle," Raena said, taking a cautious sip of coffee now that her chuckling had subsided. "We're finally making headway redecorating this place and I don't want to start over. Besides, the TSS can't benefit us again or we'll have a riot on our hands."

"Obviously, I'm joking." Ryan took the last bite of his buttery pastry and dusted the powdered sugar off his hands.

"I know. But even so, we walk a fine line."

"Public approval ratings are high. People don't seem to care."

"That can shift at any moment. As it is, having members of

the Sietinen Dynasty holding the top spots in the TSS is a potential conflict of interest with political and military forces. All it would take is a spark to blow it into a big issue.”

Ryan tilted his head, casting her a look he'd perfected that told her she was starting down a needlessly worrisome path.

Raena took a long drink from her mug. “And *this* is why I don't get into business before breakfast,” she muttered.

“My love, let the TSS worry about the Rift. Your parents and brother can handle it.”

“Yeah.” She looked out at the ocean. *It could have been me.*

She'd had every bit of the Gifted talents as her brother, perhaps even more. Though she'd technically graduated from the TSS academy thanks to some rule-bending by her parents, she wasn't an Agent and could never be, because it would conflict with her political position. When she was honest with herself, there was a touch of resentment there.

It felt unfair to have had to set aside that part of herself. Her paternal grandparents had done the same, but they'd already had full careers in the TSS to explore their Gifts. Conversely, her abilities training had been cut short at the age of only seventeen, when Raena had ‘taken one for the team’ and gone to study on Tararia. There, she'd trained to become the perfect combination of politician and businessperson, poised to take over the Sietinen Dynasty and the family enterprise, SiNavTech. She couldn't help wonder what she might have accomplished if she'd gone down the other path.

They finished breakfast in relative silence, content to simply be in each other's company. When the meal was complete, and all requisite coffee had been consumed, it was time to find out how serious an issue they were facing.

Leaving Ryan to his own business, Raena took the short trek down the hall to her cozy secondary office. Since she made

it a point to keep work away from their private residential suite, it offered a convenient place to go for urgent meetings. While her primary workspace on the other side of the sprawling estate was designed to impress visitors, this one was sparsely furnished for productivity, with the desk arranged so she could look out to her right through the window and feel like she was flying above the waves.

She settled into the padded swivel-chair behind the desk and opened up a secure vidcall over instantaneous subspace relay to her father, following the contact instructions in his message.

The viewscreen embedded in the wall behind the three visitor chairs resolved into the image of her father in his office. It hardly seemed like he'd aged since her childhood, still appearing youthful despite being in his fifties. His commanding presence, however, was the true representation—not just of age, but of the wisdom of someone who'd lived through devastation and would do anything to prevent future tragedy. He didn't talk about it much, but Raena knew the war had changed him. But he was her dad, and she couldn't imagine him being any other way.

"Hi," she greeted. "I got your message."

"Thanks for getting back to me quickly. I'm sorry to disrupt your morning routine." Even though TSS Headquarters was on the other side of the galaxy, the time aligned with Raena's since the former Priesthood's island served as the standardized clock across the disparate Taran worlds.

She smiled. "I'm fed and caffeinated, so I'm ready for anything. Now, what about this ship?"

Her father folded his hands on his desktop. "We'll know more soon, but I wanted you to be prepared in case it's what I

fear. Something may be coming through the Rift.”

Now that I wasn't expecting. She pursed her lips and took a calming breath through her nose. “I see.”

He gave a solemn nod. “Worse, it may be connected to that incident a few months ago.”

“Which...?” It took a second for her to make the connection to the recent tragedy in the Outer Colonies. “Oh.” A knife drove into her heart with the reminder. Several planets had been assaulted, displacing millions, and costing the lives of too many others. The circumstances were so different that she didn't see how they were related. “How? I thought that was resolved?”

“There was a little more to it than what the TSS shared with the High Council at the time,” he revealed.

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “What happened to transparency?”

“Information that has no actionability can cause more harm than good. It was a calculated omission, reserved until it became relevant.”

“And now it is, because of this attack? Why?”

“I'll get to that.” Her father took a deep breath and looked through the screen, giving the impression that he'd rehearsed what he was about to say. “As I told the High Council then, the TSS learned that a rogue group had been gathering Gate-travel tech. The Gate spheres open a temporary passageway for instantaneous travel between worlds, but they are genetically keyed so only people with a specific gene can pass through. They are remnants of a galactic war sometime in the ancient past between Tarans and two other powerful races.”

Raena's eyes widened; that was new information.

He nodded at her reaction. “I'd never heard about the conflict before, either; it seems the history must have been lost

to modern Tarans during one of the Revolutions, like so much else.”

An ancient war no one remembers? She swallowed.

“A few months ago, when the aliens discovered that Tarans were trying to use their Gate tech, they sought retribution by causing all sorts of problems in the Outer Colonies, which everyone has heard about by now.”

He paused for a moment before continuing, his face pinched with worry. “I don’t know how many classified details filtered down from the High Council briefing, but essentially the aliens opened more Gates and then initiated climate and topographical transformations using some kind of accelerated process for bio-optimization—like an advanced version of how we would prepare a planet for colonization. Except, having people already living on those worlds turned the tech into a devastating weapon.

“The TSS stepped in to diffuse the situation, at which point we had a brief encounter with representatives of the alien race, calling themselves the ‘Gatekeepers’. We apologized to the Gatekeepers, then they gathered up their remaining artifacts and left. We’d thought that was the end of it.”

She’d heard the overview from Ryan and her grandfather, but there hadn’t been that many specifics. “Wait, you spoke to them? Actual *aliens*, Dad! What were they like?”

He smiled, but the tension remained around his eyes and in his shoulders. “I wish I could give you a definitive answer, but I can’t. The Gatekeepers that we interacted with were some sort of hybrid, genetically engineered to look Taran. I don’t know what their true form is, only that they’re xenophobic and had created the hybrids as a means to covertly study us. Now, they claim to be gone for good, and I have no reason to doubt them. The attack on the *Andvari* wasn’t their doing.”

“So who, or what, was behind it?”

“That’s why I reached out.” He hesitated. “The Gatekeepers told us something else, which we omitted in the official debrief. They gave us a warning—that we’d violated a treaty, and that the ‘others’ wouldn’t be so forgiving.”

“In what way?”

“As in, would come to destroy us.”

Raena almost laughed at the sheer audacity of the statement. “That has to just be posturing, right? They can’t. I mean, Tarans inhabit planets spanning two-thirds of this galaxy!”

“The distance is immense, yes, but we’re only talking about fifteen-hundred worlds or so. With the right weapon, in actuality, that’s not a lot of ground to cover.”

Raena’s stomach turned over. “Okay, but *why* would they do that?”

“For us violating the treaty—whatever it is. A treaty that we didn’t even know about until the Gatekeepers told us.” He shook his head. “I’ve been looking for months, Raena. I can’t find the original copy in any of the digital archives, not even with the Aesir. From what I’ve been able to piece together, there was a truce struck between Tarans, the Gatekeepers, and the other race involved in the ancient war. References to the agreement have given us the gist, but the actual verbiage is lost, as far as I can tell. So, I can’t tell you *how* we violated the treaty, because I don’t even have a copy of the rules.”

Raena bit down on her lower lip while she listened. “Dad, I don’t know what to say,” she murmured, truly at a loss for words. *Ancient, powerful aliens may be coming to destroy us?*

“So,” he continued, “we were told months ago that another race was coming for us. But, without anything to substantiate the claim, we’ve been waiting and watching. Unfortunately, the

attack on the *Andvari* is now the first evidence that the threat might be real.”

“What about the attack makes you think that? And how do you know it has anything to do with the Rift?” she asked.

“Proximity and timing, which means it’s still speculation.”

She could tell he was holding something back. “Why are you telling *me* rather than the High Council?”

He took a slow breath. “Because of what Jason saw in the nexus. Though your own vision wasn’t related to his, you’ve looked into the nexus like he did. Like I did. You understand how the visions don’t make any sense until suddenly they do. No one on the High Council has been through that experience.”

She nodded, her stomach knotting further as she recalled the mind-bending rite she’d performed during her first meeting with the insular branch of Tarans known as the Aesir.

“That’s how I know you’ll believe it, without me needing to explain, when I tell you that we were wrong about our interpretation of what Jason saw in the nexus. It actually had nothing to do with the Priesthood. In fact, it was about what’s now on the horizon.”

Her remaining calm evaporated.

Though vague and brief, insights received while gazing into the spatial anomaly known as ‘the nexus’ were profound; her personal truth in the cosmic energy web had been precognition about her life with Ryan on Morningstar Isle.

Over the years, she had spoken with her brother at length about his vision of a dark power spreading from the Rift. Her family had been convinced this prescience was about the Priesthood—a representation of how the Priests intended to harness the Rift’s power to ascend beyond their physical forms and seize control of everything in the galaxy. So, when her

family had helped dismantle the Priesthood, they had taken comfort in the knowledge that their actions had stopped the symbolic darkness.

Now, the realization that this whole time there'd been another threat brewing called into question so much she'd held as certainty. A group of people within the Empire—she could deal with that. But the Rift, the tear in reality filled with untold power? That was another matter entirely. Anything coming through the spatial anomaly was bound to be formidable in a way not even the TSS may be prepared to address.

“We don't know anything for certain,” her father reiterated. “I've sent Jason to interview the survivor of the attack, to learn what he can about what we may be facing.”

Raena sincerely hoped that he was wrong about all of it. Revisiting an ancient feud with an advanced alien race wasn't in her five-point plan for the year.

“All right, and if the attack *is* connected to this broken treaty and Jason's vision?” she asked.

“Then we might be going up against an enemy we can barely see, let alone have any way to fight.”

“How do you mean?”

He looked off-screen for a moment. “I'd rather not get into the specifics until I hear from Jason. I've already said more than I should.”

She nodded reluctantly. “Thanks, Dad. I appreciate the heads up.”

She knew he wouldn't have shared the information if she wasn't his daughter. Still, there were times she wished she didn't need to navigate the political nuances between the TSS and Taran government—that she could just be a nobody living with her parents in her childhood home on Earth again. Everything had been a lot simpler back then.

“I know this information is worrying, but I didn’t want you to be caught off-guard.”

“Yeah, thanks. You know how I’m good at compartmentalizing.”

“Which is why I knew you could handle it. How are you doing otherwise?” he asked. There was no mistaking that it was a question from her father, not the TSS High Commander.

Raena tried to quiet the thoughts swirling in her head. “Things are pretty good. Ryan and I have been busy getting the new DGE shipyards up and running. We also started a new scholarship program for technical studies that’ll feed into a job placement initiative.”

“That’s a great idea. And I heard the ship leasing program got rolled out.”

“Yeah, we’re still working out the kinks with that one. It sounds straightforward enough to hand a wanna-be captain a starship and guaranteed cargo transport contracts, but we’ve had issues with some of the dealers.”

He smiled. “I heard that, too.”

“I guess everyone would run a galactic corporation if it was easy, right?”

“Very true. I think you’re handling everything brilliantly, from what I’ve seen.”

“We’re trying, at least.”

Her father nodded. “Well, it’s good to see you. I wish this call had been under better circumstances. It’s been too long since we’ve spent time together.”

She smiled at him. “It has. You should come to the island. I think you’ll be impressed with the transformation.”

“I look forward to seeing it. We’ll schedule a trip after this situation is resolved.”

“I’d like that.”

He looked away from the camera again then back at her. “I’ll let you return to your day. Give our best to Ryan. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

When the call ended, the viewscreen briefly changed to the SiNavTech logo before automatically turning off.

Raena slouched in her seat. *Everything always comes back to the Rift.*

Even though it had been years since she’d visited it, she could still feel the pull of its power like she was there—intoxicating, addictive. The way it heightened abilities was both a blessing and a curse to Agents and others with Gifts; they could be stronger there, but too much time spent in its exotic depths made being in normal space feel empty. She didn’t want to imagine what kind of entity might permanently dwell in such a place of pure, unmitigated power.

She reached out telepathically to Ryan on the other side of the estate. *“An invasion might be coming. We need to be ready.”*