

T.S. Alexander

A NOVELLA OF THE HALLAR

A person with long dark hair, seen from behind, stands in a dark room looking out a large window. Their right hand is pressed against the window frame. Outside the window, a large, blue and white planet, resembling Earth, is visible against a dark, starry space background. The planet is partially obscured by the window's frame. The overall mood is contemplative and futuristic.

ELLANDRA

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A STORY OF THE HAILLAR DOMINION

By T.S. ALEXANDER

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FOREWORD

Before the Aldeean siege, before humanity's first contact, a younger Ellandra unravels an enemy plot on one of the Dorien worlds.

A new diplomate joins Haillar's Embassy in Caldeor, one of the oldest and most traditionalist driang worlds. A woman with a hidden agenda. A woman who didn't exist fifty days ago.

Assassination attempts, battles in space, betrayals, friendship and honour. ***'Ellandra'*** has all these and more.

This Companion Novella precedes the events in Queen's Avatar, the Haillar Universe trilogy. It is a standalone piece of work which reads perfectly fine by itself, the events being completely unrelated to the main plot.

The novella is intended to be a lighter introduction into the Haillar Universe, a taster for the main series, but also to be an enjoyable read by itself.

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CHAPTER 1

Dorien Sector - twelve Terran years before the Aldeean Siege

“Make way for Dersinomer, esteemed Archon of the planet Caldeor.”

I took two steps to the left, barely avoiding a crash with the standard-bearer. The overdressed *driang* ignored me entirely and stepped through the gate, his master following through equally nonplussed. Six guards wearing ornamental cuirasses, but very functional pikes marched in step behind them. The closest one threw me a scathing look as if my presence on the portal dais was an offence to the departing bureaucrat.

I let them pass, then stepped back on the ramp descending toward the middle of the hall. The Caldeor exchange was an airy chamber decorated with warm colours, conveying a feeling of freedom somehow appropriate for an avian race like the *driang*. The bird staring at me from an alcove at the end of the ramp was anything but warm, though.

“Place your hand on the identification crystal,” grunted the border guard, adding belatedly: “Please.”

The *driang* were our oldest partners in the Dominion, yet a bunch of arrogant assholes, nevertheless. Oh, they were respectful enough in their dealings with Sen’Haillar upper echelons, but their courtesy did not extend to ordinary Dominion citizens. And a freshly minted Third Level Legate was a Haillar as ordinary as they came.

While putting my right hand on the reader, I handed my employment token with the left. The officer inserted it in a slot on his console and peeked to a screen invisible from my side of the desk.

“Name?”

“Ellandra Deluan.”

“Age?”

“Twenty-one cycles.” *And change*, I added silently in my mind. No need to share this latest thought with the surly avian.

“Where did you come from?”

“Tao Bellona, the Dominion’s Capital”

“Reason for your visit?”

“I was assigned as junior legate with the Haillar Embassy on Caldeor.”

I’m sure the avian had all this information on the screen in front of his beak. He pinned me with a fixed birdlike stare nevertheless, as if my very presence there, in front of him was breaking the law. I watched him back with wide, innocent eyes, trying to look as harmless as I could possibly be. I was the naïve Haillar girl taking her first steps on her own into the world out there.

The guard was unimpressed. These planet’s border officers probably went through specialised training specifically designed to make them look unfriendly. Or

maybe they were naturally ill-disposed towards any trespassers, especially of the non-*driang* kind.

“I need to see the contents of your duffel.”

Wordlessly, I emptied my bag on his desk. A pair of robes, a jerkin, breeches, toiletries. Nothing conspicuous, not even a reading tablet. I was expected mistrust, and I came accordingly prepared.

With a sour face, the officer handed me the token and waved me through. I took great pleasure meticulously refolding my belongings to the avian’s great annoyance. Sometimes I could be as petty as any other wronged Haillar woman. But I prided myself I was able to always pick the appropriate time and place.

“Miss Deluan?”

“Ellandra! Ellandra Deluan!”

That would be me.

My mind was wandering, so I missed the initial call. I hadn’t used my original surname for quite a while, so I momentarily failed to react. *Wake up Ellandra, your training break is over!*

The person calling me was a young Haillar male, only a few cycles older than me. I stopped and turned, measuring him discreetly. He was tall, at least a head taller than me and looked to be trim and fit. His dark blue eyes were his most striking feature, bright and shiny, nicely complemented by blue facial patterns and hair accents. A shade of midnight blue I’ve rarely seen in a Haillar. Not what I expected when meeting a diplomat attaché on one of the most reclusive *driang* worlds in the entire Dorien Sector.

“Ellandra? Welcome to Caldeor. I’m Sandrial Avrido, a fellow low-level assistant with the Diplomatic Corps, odd job man for the local Haillar Mission and your brother in misery for the foreseeable future.”

Most definitely not your run of the mill career diplomat! And an underwhelming recommendation for my future workplace, if I ever heard one.

“That bad, huh?”

“Well, I’m exaggerating a bit. It has its moments, such as being sent to welcome you, for example.”

I gave him a long glance, shaking my head. Really? Trying to flirt with me moments after we’d met?

“It’s not that bad” continued my guide on a more serious note, “but definitely not the choicest assignment in this galactic sector. You might have noticed that our hosts have a real knack for making foreigners feel unwelcome.”

We exited the Exchange, and I had my first glimpse of this *driang* world. An airy cityscape dominated by high rises, not surprisingly for an avian race. Millions of cycles ago the *driangs*’ forefathers used to be daylight predators, like falcons and

eagles on the Haillar worlds, and to date the entire species was still fond of dazzling heights and open vistas. Too bad their views were not as broad when it came to any cross-species interaction.

“Our enclave is within walking distance, so we can have a pleasant stroll and get to know each other at the same time. Allow me to take your duffel, my Lady.”

I was perfectly capable of carrying my bag, yet more than willing to pass it to my new acquaintance. Who was I to discourage my colleague’s chivalrous behaviour?

“So, legate Avrido, have you been on Caldeor for long? By the sound of it, you’ve been around for ages.”

“I apologise if my words gave you this impression, Mistress Deluan. I really do. Bickering is a time-honoured tradition at the Caldeor Haillar Mission, as no doubt you would soon have the opportunity to discover yourself. No, I haven’t been here for long. I joined less than a cycle ago, just before the last Festival of Darkness.”

More like half a cycle ago, in this case. The Festival of Darkness was an ancient tradition celebrating mid-winter on our long lost homeworld. We were now close to the Festival of Light which was only twenty-odd days away. A time of joy and celebration for all the Haillar, wherever they might be. I wondered if I’d still be around in twenty days, for this messy situation should be over by then, and whoever thought it was a good idea to sell us out should be dead.

The Haillar mission occupied the entire ground floor of a low building in one of the less travelled parts of the trade district. Though low was a relative term. On Dorien or even Tao Bellona, a fifty-odd floors tower will be considered reasonably tall. Here it was dwarfed by slender skyscrapers rising hundreds of strides into the air and crisscrossed with open bridges. Either this planet was entirely wind-free, or the *driang* idea of a good time was facing the gale on a narrow perch, without a railing or any other safety. Of course, they could fly, so it wasn’t as bad as it sounded.

Our arrival was met with a perfunctory nod by one of the two troopers guarding the door, while the other ignored us altogether. The talkative one sported the Order symbol on his chest, while his comrade was attuned to Chaos. Dorien household troops both of them, likely a bonded pair. Some of the best guards in the entire Dominion.

Inside, we came into a large atrium, brightly lit by a transparent ceiling, an enormous window into a verdant open space. So, this tower had an empty core made into an internal glasshouse. A place where the residents could relax in the open and fly up and down at their leisure. A common *driang* architectural feature, though again modest compared to the aerial jungles I’d seen elsewhere. I couldn’t imagine the falcon-like avians living in this place being very happy to fly in a relatively confined pit, even if wide by Haillar standards and fifty stories tall.

“I’ll take you to the Diplomatic Office to meet the others,” said my guide. No doubt The First Legate, Ambassador Hardun, would want to talk with you and give you the house rules.”

“Don’t worry,” he continued seeing my panicked expression. “It was intended as a joke. Delora Hardun is not that bad. For a Senior Diplomate, at least.”

Was that supposed to be encouraging?

The Diplomatic Office was an open plan working space with two lateral partitions at either end. Crystals and screens were arrayed on every desk, and a dozen men and women were busy doing whatever the embassy officers were supposed to do. My alleged day job, I assumed.

“I’ll introduce you later. Let’s meet the First Legate, to begin with,” said Sandrial taking a left turn, while nervously glancing to the opposite partition.

“What’s happening? Do you keep a *flagar* beast in there?”

“Good guess! That’s the lair of the Winter Witch.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The offices of our esteemed Ortens Sen’Galahad, our local Resident Adept.”

On a foreign world, the Resident was effectively the head of the local Sen’Haillar Chapter and hence the head of all the *eka* wielding adepts working on the planet. While the First Legate was nominally leading the diplomatic mission, the Resident was on point for any military issue. He or she also took care of anything related to the interests of the local Suzerain House. In our case, the Sen’Dorien House.

It was a rather complicated arrangement, both between the First Legate and the leading Adept and between the Sen Haillar Houses and our hosts, the *driang*. The birds were fully independent masters of Caldeor, yet nominally under the protection of one of the Haillar queens, and hence retainers of her House. A millennia-old arrangement that suited the *driang* quite well, for never in sixty-odd thousand cycles had a Haillar queen interfered into the affairs of a Nest.

Shouted words erupted briefly from the Resident’s office, and a stout elderly woman stepped out abruptly heading directly towards us. The other side of the argument remained invisible in the confines of her sanctuary. Such a shocking lack of restraint was almost unheard of for my race. The Haillar always took pride in being calm and composed, no matter the circumstances.

The woman, First Legate Delora Hardun, stopped short of entering her office and turned to us with a scowl on her face.

“Legate Assistant Deluan. I was expecting you, although much earlier today.”

I wasn’t aware I was late, so I threw a confused glance towards Sandrial. I must have looked as helpless as I intended, for my guide was quick to defend me despite his apparent reluctance to confront his boss.

“Miss Deluan was almost on time, First Legate. She was indeed briefly retained by the *driang* gate controllers, but if anything I’m the one to blame, for insisting us to walk all the way from the Exchange.”

I was impressed. Not only dashing but also a real gentleman ready to take a blast in defence of a lady. I must admit, such thoughts were entirely inappropriate for a woman of my station, if perfectly normal for someone my age.

“That would be all, Assistant Avrido,” said the ambassador, sending my friend away. “Miss Deluan, I’d like to have a word with you for a moment.”

I followed her in her rooms, closing the doors behind me. Whatever she had to say, I doubt she wanted to be overheard by all her subordinates. I was surprised if she wasn’t concerned about losing face, after the odd display earlier on.

“Miss Deluan, you must realise your posting here is entirely unusual,” began the head of the Caldeor mission. “As a matter of fact, you, a recent graduate with no practical experience, are the last-minute replacement of a junior diplomat I happen to know and respect.”

Oops, not exactly my best introduction! I suspected that Verdid was aware of this but couldn’t care less. A minor inconvenience for me to deal with.

I tried to protest my innocence, but the Legate stopped me with a hand gesture.

“Please don’t bother. I’m good enough at my job to have a hint of who you probably are, and why you showed up here at this particular time. I might even agree with the reasons, but this doesn’t necessarily mean I had to like this entire charade.”

I very much doubted at least one of her statements, but I was glad she was aware of the coming storm. Providing, of course, that she wasn’t the one that brought it on Caldeor in the first place. I strongly doubted that was the case, but one never knows. People change.

“I’m here to help,” I respond curtly. It was a non-answer that could have meant either that I agreed with Delora, or that I didn’t have a clue what she was talking about. Evasion was always better than an outright lie. Much easier to keep track of what you said if you didn’t need to remember the falsehoods.

“I have no doubt about it”, replied the ambassador in a dry tone. “On this note, tomorrow morning you’ll accompany me to a discussion with the esteemed Archon Erdolminer, the *driang* in charge with sub-orbital defence and most ardent supporter of the *Huynar* development. I guess you’ll find this discussion informative.”

Delora Hardun fixed me with a hard stare for a moment, then started to fiddle with a com crystal letting me know in no uncertain terms that this interview was over. I considered for a moment telling her everything, telling her that we had actually met before. Telling her that we were even friends, some other time, in some other life. But people do change, and there would be time for remembrance later, when this crisis would have come to pass.

“Let me invite you to a cup of tea and also an opportunity to meet some of our colleagues. The attendants will take your luggage to your quarters. No need to worry about that.”

A cup of tea was just what I needed, so I took Sandrial up on his offer. In any event, getting to know the diplomatic team was the next priority on my agenda.

The canteen doubling as a tea parlour was within the embassy. A lovely little terrace open to the internal garden reminding me of some of my favourite places on Tao Bellona. The place was half full, as it was close to the customary early-evening meal, at the end of the office time.

“This is the finest and only place on Caldeor where we can come together for a tea or a meal,” my new friend informed me. “The birds are not keen on inter-species interaction, so all places outside are off-limits to us. They don’t serve anything edible, in any case.”

I could see how this would quickly become tedious, though at first glance the place looked charming enough. Details like this could make life annoying and probably accounted in no small degree for my compatriots’ misery. Well, at least today my presence could bring a sense of novelty, the break in the daily routine that could be enough to lighten their mood.

My favourite embassy assistant led me to an occupied table, where three men and a woman were already sipping copious amounts of *sejuna* tea.

“My dear friends”, started Sandrial. “Please meet Ellandra Deluan, the newest member of our band of exiles and now officially the most junior Legate in our team.”

I took a seat and poured a generous portion of tea, then looked around, quickly assessing my new colleagues. Two middle-aged males, one very prim and proper, the other one a solid guy, probably ex-military. A young man, slightly older than Sandrial, possibly another assistant. The woman, likely a decade older than him, with light teal bangs and discrete face patterns.

“Are you coming directly from Tao Bellona?” asked the solid Haillar in a pretty blunt way. Another way of saying: *Are you coming straight from the academy?*

Well, I did arrive from the Dominion Capital, and being a fresh graduate was my cover story.

“Indeed, my dear sir. Forgive me, I don’t know your name and Corps designation.”

The protocol would require for all of them to introduce themselves and provide their Diplomatic Corps status. But in this case, as I was clearly the most junior person, some believed they could dispense of the customary introductions.

“I’m Ajden Halora, Second Legate,” responded the ex-soldier, then probably remembered his manners and continued pointing to his colleagues. “My friend Quars Mendina, also Second Legate and young Prion Alora, one of our Assistants. The lady is Amiren Klern, responsible with Mission logistics, no Corps designation.”

Each of the three nodded in turn, acknowledging their introduction. They seemed to be a regular bunch of Mission staffers, the older males mid-rank officers, the younger, embassy assistants. No rising stars, no laggards either.

“Tell me my dear”, intervened the supply officer. “What are the latest rumours from Bellona. We receive daily news, of course, but rarely visitors. And we well know the most interesting bits are not in the Lore House reports, neither to be discussed by com portal.”

The lady was fishing for some gossip, at the same time alluding she was well attuned with the Capital’s grapevine. Unfortunately, I wasn’t, so I had no clue what exactly she was looking for.

Seeing my confusion, the clerk realised she had to be more specific.

“I mean, any end in sight for the Interim? Not that we complain about Queen Reith Sen’Dorien, but as you know, Caldeor is her Sister’s. Things haven’t been the same since the death of the old Chaos Queen.”

This was a flimsy excuse if I ever heard one. It couldn’t matter one way or another for the Embassy on Caldeor which of the Dorien sisters was managing the House’s affairs. As a matter of fact, I was pretty sure that Reith Sen’Dorien, the Order Queen, was a better administrator for the Haillar affairs on this planet than her Chaos sister, its nominal Suzerain.

“Nothing was officially agreed, but I’d be surprised if it lasts long beyond the Festival of Light,” I responded. Typically, the time between a queen’s death and her re-ascension was roughly sixty days, and more than half of this time had passed since the date Xendara, the last embodiment of the Chaos Queen, had passed away.

My curious colleague nodded wisely, as if I was sharing some unique insight. I wondered how well connected to the Capital she was, or if all of this dialogue was just an attempt to impress Sandrial. She was definitely more interested in looking at him than in whatever piece of trivia I had to say.

CHAPTER 2

Back in my room, I unpacked my duffel and arranged the contents in the various drawers. While doing this I realised that the seal I placed when slowly repacking my belongings in front of the border guard was now gone. Apparently while I was introducing myself to various people someone had taken the time to check my luggage.

Well, good luck to them! I didn't have anything suspicious in my bag, or better said nothing that didn't look like it belonged there.

I took a seat at the narrow desk and placed the framed image of my fictitious family in front of me, within an arm's length. A plain crystal and carbon rectangle, not unlike millions other cheap memorabilia sold pretty much everywhere on the Dominion worlds. Reaching into my Core, I let a tiny tendril of *eka* raise and touch the object, overwriting its atomic structure with an entirely different pattern. The frame image started to flow like wax, rebuilding itself into a crystalline structure, lit with the tell-tale halo of a long-range communication portal. I might not be an expert in Matter manipulation but reforming a device back into its initial configuration was simple enough.

One more *eka* push sent a signal to the other end, promptly acknowledged moments later.

"I'm in," I informed the Spy Mistress laconically. Verdid was not prone to chit-chat when in business mode, something I learned to respect a long time ago.

"Any insights?" responded my comrade and friend in an equally concise way.

"The ambassador has a dysfunctional relationship with her Resident Adept, and somebody was curious enough to mess with my things. Nothing conclusive, I'm afraid."

"I was informed another suspicious communication occurred today between the Huynar Station and the *kreussa* fleet hidden half a light day away from Caldeor. The fifth of its kind we know about, and the third in the past couple of days. Whatever happens, expect to happen fast."

I acknowledged the message and cut the discussion short. I didn't have a couple of ten-days. I might not even have a day to sort out who was bringing a mercenary fleet at Caldeor and for what nefarious purpose. Was it just a *driang* power play, or something much worse than that? Caldeor was far from the Wall, far from the frontlines of the Scourge War, and their ships couldn't possibly hope to cross half of the Dominion undetected. Yet, someone thought the *kreussa* could. The lizard race was a neutral party in theory, though various factions continuously allied with our hated Enemy and with us, in an ever-shifting pattern of loyalties.

Well, I guess the first step to gain an answer to my questions was meeting a certain Archon Erdolminer, the esteemed *driang* responsible for Calderon's orbital defence.

I watched myself in the mirror to check how the other saw me. I wasn't a vain person, or at least I didn't think I was. I was still adjusting to my new role, and I had to feel comfortable in my own skin.

The girl in the mirror looked back with huge black eyes rimmed with purple. Matching facial patterns adorned my face, almost the same shade as the eyes and the accents in my hair. I wasn't accustomed to such prominent marks, but I must admit they looked good and I could understand why Sandrial seemed to be inclined to flirt with me.

I might be a vain person, after all!

Focus Ellandra Deluan! Tomorrow you'll have a long day in front of you.

The esteemed Erdolminer, as any high ranking Caldeor bureaucrat, had its working offices close to his nest at the very top of one of the downtown high rises. Did I mention that the *driang* had no use for elevators in their residential towers, seeing them as a sign of decadence inspired by us, the alien races? Any visitor had to climb hundreds of rather steep stairs or suffer the indignity of arriving by air in one of those transports designed to carry supplies, not people. Any self-respecting *driang* would always fly to his business meetings. A pity that neither First Legate Delora Hardun nor I had wings.

I didn't fly often, but I had no problem doing it. There were no flying contraptions on the Haillar worlds, nor any other form of mechanical transport, for that matter. We didn't need them. Why clutter our streets when anyone can travel by portal to a gate within walking distance of any destination? It wasn't the same on most worlds populated by other races, places where *eka* devices were not so widespread. Even less so on Caldeor, given the reclusive nature of these charming birds.

So, flying it was, and if our image would suffer because of this, so be it!

We boarded the transport early in the morning, only the two of us, Delora and me. The pilot was a surprisingly social avian, who chatted incessantly about his experiences on different worlds. Apparently, he was well travelled, including a cycle spent on Dorien, the Haillar world giving the name of this Sector. The place of the Chaos Queen's Palace of Glass and hundreds of other marvels.

His words, not mine.

While the trip was more pleasant than expected, our reception was as frosty as it could possibly be, considering Delora's ambassador status.

The esteemed Erdolminer was a plump bird, the first overweight *driang* I've ever met, and I've seen my share. For Flame's sake, they were supposed to be falcon-like avians, not turkeys! Yet Erdolminer looked like a turkey and behaved like one too, full of bluster and self-importance.

“Caldeor is a world almost as old as the Dominion,” he boasted. “We are one of the most important planets in the Dorien Sector, and for sure strong enough to be self-sufficient.”

“Of course, Honoured Archon,” responded Delora. “Caldeor is an influential power and an important partner for the Haillar and for the House Sen’Dorien in particular. This is one more reason for us to be concerned about its security and always ready to come to your support.”

“Your support is welcome, Ambassador, and has been so for sixty thousand cycles. Caldeor respects the Suzerain Queen and thrives under her shield. But we are not a World of the Wall, to be permanently under the threat of a Scourge attack. We are a peaceful colony thousands of cycles away from the frontlines. For us, the only threat is posed by the occasional pirates and smugglers, not by a worldwide siege. By arming the Huynar Station, we’ll project our power in space, and thus relieve Haillar resources better needed elsewhere.”

“Haillar patrols that cost Caldeor nothing.”

“Not directly, Ambassador, but under the Dominion’s Accords, we do provide resupplies and cover the planet-side costs of your crews. But I admit such costs are meagre. This is mainly about our national pride, about being able to defend ourselves from any local threat, without support from the Dominion.”

This was precisely the type of drivel a Scourge drone would utter, and for a moment, I was sure my worst fears were confirmed. Yet, I fed a tendril of *eka* towards the driang official and I couldn’t feel a thing. No sign of Scourge tampering, no sickening corruption. Erdolminer opinions were his own, and the avian was either as obtuse as it looked, or otherwise involved in his own plot.

“I fear your stance might put your entire planet at risk, Archon,” continued my boss relentlessly. “Non-*eka* orbital defences had proven to be of limited use in the past, due to the light speed limitations and the sheer distances involved. A fixed platform would always remain a stationary target, while any potential attackers could dance around whatever you can throw at them.”

“That’s not the case here, Madam Ambassador. My colleague Krestellar, the esteemed Head of the Huynar project, assures me the defences he plans to acquire were tested and are every bit as effective as your *eka* weapons. The *jalmaar* consortium selling this prototype are long time business partners of exceptional repute.”

The *jalmaar* were indeed known to be outstanding engineers, and half of the new technologies adopted in the Dominion originated from them. Yet I never knew them to be involved in building weapons, and especially doing so behind our backs.

“In this case, Esteemed Archon, maybe Master Krestellar would not mind arranging a demonstration. If some of these weapons are already on the station, I’m sure it won’t be a big inconvenience to organise a test. Your business partners

shouldn't mind either, for if the weapons are as good as advertised, hundreds of Dominion worlds would be interested in buying them."

The Archon paused for a second, contacting an underling and asking him to relay our demand. Surprisingly, the answer was received only moments later.

"Your request is acceptable, Madam Ambassador. Station Head Krestellar would be waiting for you and your colleagues tomorrow at noon, and everything would be in place for a demonstration."

That went surprisingly well. I must admit I didn't expect the *driang* to be so cooperative, especially considering the string of concealed messages our spy network detected earlier this week. Addressed to a *kreussa* fleet, and not to any *jalmaar* consortium.

The transport took a sharp turn and landed on its designed pad, at the back of the Haillar Embassy building, next to the entrance for supplies deliveries. We thanked the pilot and jumped on the slightly raised platform.

"At least this morning wasn't a total waste of time," muttered Delora in a lighter mood. "Tomorrow the two of us, Ortens Sen'Galahad and a squad of guards will pay this Krestellar a visit and see for ourselves the miracle weapons he intends to install in orbit. Maybe adept Sen'Galahad can also make a little demonstration and convince our hosts that dispensing of the Haillar support might not be such a good idea."

The thought of the local Resident competing with an automatic defence system was slightly ridiculous. For sure this wasn't something the First Legate was seriously considering, other than as a barb for the local Resident.

I was about to respond when something triggered my instinctive defences. I reacted without thinking raising an Order shield, the first response that came to my mind. The energy blast hit the edge of my defence, dissipating across a barrier made of compressed gases frozen in space and time.

"Look out!" I shouted before the ambassador even had a chance to realise something was happening. "Get down and stay behind me. We are under attack."

I modified the shield into a perfect semi-sphere, as a precaution against an attack from a different angle. It didn't come, but a hail of heavy projectiles slammed into the front side of my shield instead, flattening against the air barrier as hard as diamond.

Somebody up there was quick to react and equipped to deal with unforeseen circumstances. Most of the energy shields offered limited protection against kinetic impacts, so an alternate attack stood a fair chance to succeed. It happened that a well-made Order shield was one of the few defences equally effective against both types of weapons, and that I luckily picked this particular response. It wasn't of course impenetrable, for no defence really was. Still, it seemed the attackers lacked the type

of weapons that could bypass this barrier, and they couldn't mount the firepower needed to overload it.

For the time being, we were safe, but I had no idea where the shooters were. Hence I was in no position to remove them and had to resume myself to maintaining the shield, while blindly sending *eka* feelers into the buildings ahead.

I needed to try something else.

As if on cue, the two embassy guards turned around the corner and sent a couple of serious blasts of Light and Darkness towards a specific tower, some five hundred strides away. Ah, a Sen'Vollar bonded pair!

I was about to join the military adepts when the attack I thought might never come eventually happened. Somebody opened fire from behind us with an even more powerful kinetic weapon, the blast coming low, almost parallel to the ground. My barrier proved its worth, but the unsuspecting guards stood no chance. Heavy penetrators caught them squarely at chest level, passing through whatever protection they had. The men were literally raised into the air and thrown against the embassy wall, shredded by the high calibre fire.

Such an attack was too powerful to be stealthy. The source proved to be a flying transport, so similar to the one that brought us earlier on, that I initially believed it was the same. A roaring explosion coming from the direction of the landing pad informed me that wasn't the case, and that the *driang* pilot who had the misfortune to carry us today was one more victim of this cowardly attack.

My own blast enveloped the enemy gunship moments later. I used Order again, mindful of the potential for collateral victims. My favourite weapons were not at all adequate for this place, but Order was one of the most controllable aspects. This didn't make it less deadly, not to mention notoriously difficult to avoid for any non-Haillar target. The enemy vessel froze for a moment, metal, glass and organic matter all turned into crystal. Crystal doesn't fly though, so the statue of the former gunship fell like a rock, shattering in a million crystals.

The penetrator fire suddenly stopped, and an eerie silence fell like a curtain over the battleground, in direct contrast with the racket surrounding us mere moments ago. I kept my shield in place and pushed my *eka* forward, searching for the first team of assassins, the ones targeting us from stealth. I fumbled blindly through the buildings in the general direction of the initial attack, in particular the tower targeted by the embassy guards. I couldn't find anything. Whoever was shooting from the high rises was long gone, and I had nothing on them that would allow me to follow. Sen'Haillar adepts could sometimes blast an enemy with precise hits across enormous distances, but we were no magicians. We needed a handle, a marker, something to guide our attack. I didn't have anything on our ambushers, so finding them became a matter of chance. And chance was not with me this time around.

"It's over, First Legate. Let's go inside", I said.

We entered the Embassy and were welcome by a lady in white. It wasn't hard to deduce it was Ortense Sen Galahad, dressed so alike her House's liege queen, that one would have thought she was the mirror image of the Lady of Frost.

Up until the time she started to speak. While the Ice Queen was always measured and calm, this Caldeorean rendition was the complete opposite, closer to Fire than to Frost.

"This is all your fault, Mistress Hardun", she said fixing the First Legate with a baleful glare. "This is the consequence of not listening to my advice, of stubbornly trying to placate the locals, of letting pass slight after slight. To what end? Being targeted in plain sight of the planetary authorities. Being shot at in the middle of the street. Haillar adepts died today, Legate. Good people died, and their blood is all on your hands."

"They died doing their duty, Mistress of Frost", I said. "You do them no honour by blaming their death on anyone else other than the very people who planned this cowardly act."

"You!" shrieked the white-clad harrikan. "Who are you, by the way?"

"Ellandra Deluan, Legate Assistant, my Lady."

"You, Legate Assistant? You are a spy, nothing but a rogue, a snitch hiding into the shadows. You are here illegally, Miss Deluan. As the highest-ranking Sen'Haillar on this planet, I am to be informed of any arriving adept. You failed to do this, and in doing so you broke the Dominion law. Make no mistake, I wouldn't let this pass. I will report you to the Order Queen, and to the Ice Lady herself, and not even Verdid Sen'Aesir would be able to protect you."

I doubted somehow that the Order Queen, not to mention the Queen of Frost, who didn't have any stake on Caldeor, would get themselves involved in sorting out this procedural issue. My lack of concern must have shown, as Ortense Sen'Galahad continued her tirade.

"This place has devolved into anarchy over the past fifty days. I can hardly wait for the Suzerain Queen to take back her rightful place and set everything in order."

I found the idea of Ortense reporting my transgressions to the Suzerain slightly ridiculous. I knew for a fact that the Chaos Queen had never met the Caldeorean Resident, and that she would never approve bullying in any case, no matter how entitled the bully believed herself to be.

Nevertheless, I reigned in my temper and bowed to the Sen'Galahad, as a junior practitioner to her superior. I had no intention to get caught in the local infighting, any more than I already was.

The Resident adept dropped the issue and waved me off, as not being worthy of her ire. She turned instead back on Delora.

"You and I need to come together and sort out this mess, Legate."

I entered the canteen and got an altogether different reaction compared to my low-key arrival yesterday. By now, everybody seemed to be up to speed that something happened outside, yet no one had all the details.

My arrival was met with hushed whispers and furtive looks, as the few people who already knew me were making their colleagues aware of my presence.

“Ellandra!” exclaimed Sandrial, coming from the back where he was having tea with one of his friends, Prion I believe. “You are a woman of mystery, Miss Ellandra Deluan. Or should I call you Lady Ellandra Sen’Aesir, as befitting your station.”

One of the common mistakes people make was assuming that any adept working from the shadows was automatically a Sen’Aesir. Yes indeed, the Spy Mistress was Verdid Sen’Aesir, and indeed a large proportion of her cohorts were people from her house, but by no means all of the shadow agents were adepts of Dream.

Yet, I wasn’t here to correct peoples’ misconceptions, but to find out who was plotting against the Dominion while putting Caldeor at risk. And if anyone in this building knew something about this.

“Ellandra Deluan works just fine, Sandrial. I’m still your colleague and still Legate Assistant in this embassy, same as yesterday.”

“If you say so, my lady, if you say so.”

Was that Legate Halora, the ex-military man who forgot to introduce himself yesterday? Gone was his vague air of condescendence, and this time around his face was displaying a genuine smile. Soldiers and adepts often fought side by side, and in fact, most adepts I knew had also been soldiers at one time or another. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Legate knew well the two guards who lost their lives today. Active and retired warriors were often close, especially in an isolated place like this.

I joined Sandrial and his friend, who promptly led me to their table.

“If you are still one of us, Ellandra, then you will do us the favour of joining this group and pay for your meal by recounting step by step everything that happened today. This is what junior legates on Caldeor normally do, sharing everything they know with their friends. Without leaving out any detail.”

I wasn’t about to feed the full story of my life to the embassy’s grapevine, but I could give a brief account of the events today. I could honour the memory of the people who died, the chatty *driang* pilot who loved to travel and the two Sen’Vollar adepts who valiantly came to our help and paid the gesture with their life. All killed by a coward, in an undeclared war, against an enemy we couldn’t see.

CHAPTER 3

All the way to the Caldeor Exchange, I argued with myself.

I should have shared everything I knew with Delora, for I owed her that much. If anything good came from the attack yesterday, it dispelled any doubts that the First Legate was clean. That she was the same woman I remembered, and I was honoured to call my friend in the past. In a distant past, from her perspective. In a blink of an eye, from mine.

I should have told her who I am. I should have told her the entire truth ...

But I didn't say anything yesterday, and this morning it was too late. Our duty came first, and both of us had a crisis to focus on, leaving the sentimental reunion for later.

We were close, the two of us, forty-odd cycles ago. At the time the Legate was a fresh academy graduate, starting her career with a prize assignment, as Diplomatic Corps attaché on Tao Bellona. At that time, I looked different. I had the same age as now, but my hair was fiery red. I had discrete carmine facial patterns and light blue eyes. I had a different name.

I was Xendara Ashar, newly ascended Queen of the Sen'Dorien House. The Chaos Queen.

Delora Hardun, Del in her youth, was the appointed liaison between the Diplomatic Corps and my House. A bit of an assistant, a bit of a spy, for the Corps weren't above keeping tabs on the Haillar Queens. After all, forewarned means prepared, and the diplomats wanted to be a step ahead in any crisis.

I worked with Del a lot, and we became friends. I shared with her bits of my past, she shared with me her plans for the future. She wanted to be a career diplomat, to build bridges between the Haillar and other species. She dreamed of discovering a new race someday, the first new race the Dominion had come across in the last two thousand cycles. She wanted to bring them into our confederation and help them every step of the way. We used to joke about this improbable dream, and I made her promise that when the time comes, and she'll negotiate the Accords with this fabled new species, she won't forget to involve the Dorien House. That we'll do it together, her as a Dominion Ambassador, me as a Queen.

Dreams of the past ...

Time had gone by, and she was now towards the end of her career, Dominion's First Legate on Caldeor. Xendara had died, and the eternal Ashar raised again, as she had done a thousand times before. This time as Ellandra, the purple-eyed avatar. Queen once again, as of three days ago.

I lied yesterday in the cafeteria. A white lie but a lie, nevertheless. I didn't come by portal from the Capital. I came directly from our home system. I came from the Ka Loren Forge, the place where I suffered the same ordeal as I did a thousand times in the past. The place that shattered yet another Adept, remaking her into a Queen.

We arrived at the Exchange late in the morning, a rather large group of aliens by this planet's standard. An odd group, too ...

Del had brought five Diplomatic Corps officers, including herself and me. Not to be outdone, five adepts led by Ortens Sen'Galahad were marching by our side. I wondered if the two of them did it on purpose, if they negotiated between themselves equal sizes for their respective groups. Rivalry can be so ugly, so silly sometimes.

Or maybe the size of our group was the consequence of yesterday's attack. Maybe Ortens wanted to play it safe by bringing in five adepts. Six, including myself.

Despite their general dislike of strangers and professed self-sufficiency, the driang had an *eka* gate opening on her orbital station. I guess even the most stubborn supporters of weaponizing Huynar recognized that a defence station impossible to supply in a time of need wasn't such a good idea. Hence the Haillar gate.

We were waved through the portal and emerged in a dim-lit chamber, high into Caldeor's orbit. An equally impressive group was waiting for us:

"The Archon had informed us of your request, Ambassador," said the forefront avian in a strident voice, reminiscent of an eagle's cry. "I'm Krestellar, the master of this station, and I welcome you to our nest in the skies."

Krestellar was as different of the esteemed Erdolminer as two birds of the same species can be. While the Argon was plump and soft, Krestellar looked fit and hard as a rock. While Erdolminer was a pompous turkey, the station master was a genuine bird of prey. His words were welcoming enough. His stance was anything but.

"We thank you for your hospitality, my Lord" answered Del. "We are most grateful for your quick response and, rest assured, we'll do our best to disrupt your station as little as possible. As I understand, you already have test weapons on the station, and a demonstration would be in order."

"A brief demonstration can be arranged," responded the avian stressing the word '*brief*'. "Our partners were most pleased with the prospect of expanding their business, and your visit here might be exactly what they needed to achieve this desirable outcome."

"The esteemed Archon mentioned that the test would be scheduled midday."

"True," confirmed Krestellar. "You will have the opportunity to witness firsthand the efficiency of the weapons we intend to acquire. While I move to the bridge to direct the test, the esteemed Halstemar, representing King's Funds Oversight Committee, will lead you to the viewing gallery. This test is it's a first time for him, too."

Del inclined her head in acknowledgement, while I stood by her side still as a statue, the very image of an eager assistant waiting for the Legate's instructions. This time around the instructions were not for me.

“Second Legate Halora will join you on the bridge, my Lord. Unless, of course, you see an issue with this.”

It made sense to send Ajden Halora to meet the fabled *jalmaar* supplier, and at the same time keep an eye on the station’s control room. He was a senior diplomate, but also an ex-soldier and this made him the best person to keep an eye on our hosts for any evidence of deception.

The rest of us followed Halstemar, the Caldeor’s king representative, through a succession of corridors empty of life. Our destination proved to be an elongated lounge with a wall-sized mash of screens offering a stunning panorama of the planet below, complemented by the blue orb of a nearby moon. An artificial window created by the overlapping images of hundreds of station sensors.

I wondered briefly if behind Krestellar’s easy acceptance of our visit was the intention to fool us by tampering the image on these screens. If so, such a ridiculous scam was doomed to fail. Any of the six adepts present in the room, not to mention Legate Halora on the bridge, would be able to realise that something is wrong, that the scene being played was only an illusion.

“Is this the viewing gallery?” asked Del.

“This is the waiting lounge,” responded our guide. “The gallery is up there” he followed, pointing to a suspended catwalk, positioned at an angle that likely doubled an observer’s field of view compared to our current location.

Oh no! Trust the birds to set up the viewing gallery on a perch.

In wasn’t the only one to sigh and the bureaucrat continued in a slightly amused tone.

“Don’t worry, my friends. I was told that the Station Master provided an alternative viewing station for this occasion, one accessible to someone of your race.”

We made ourselves comfortable waiting for the start of the test. Del didn’t lose the opportunity to engage the king’s representative, fishing for some information while the rest of us spread across the lounge. I ended up next to the screen, watching the planet below. The world I had the duty to protect as its Suzerain Queen, according to the Accords, but also according to our sacred Sen’Haillar creed. Against the Scourge, against the *kreussa*, against the traitors in their own midst. Against my own race if the case may be, for the Dominion law was above the interests of any given species.

A strident signal interrupted my reverie.

“It’s time,” signalled Halstemar, heading toward a side entrance with my colleagues in tow. I followed through in a circular stairwell extending both above and below our level.

Time for the show!

I felt so secure in this group of officials that I didn’t even notice the incoming fire until one of Ortens’ people folded in front of me. Luckily the Sen’Galahad Resident

and the rest of her adepts were on guard and promptly overlapped their shields, protecting themselves and the rest of the diplomatic team.

Naturally, none of them included me on the list of people needing protection. After yesterday's events, they must have rightly assumed that I could be trusted to take care of myself. Yet, I was wool-gathering, and as a result, I was caught entirely off guard.

The shock of a penetrator throwing me against the rail worked marvels to bring me back to the grim reality. I raised a spherical shield and took stock of the situation.

We were effectively caught into a killing zone taking fire from both above and below. Heavy penetrator slugs alternated with energy beams and the hiss of several disruptors. Whoever planned this trap did it specifically with Sen'Hailar's weaknesses in mind. Specifically, our inability to shield ourselves against combined attacks, at least not for an extended period of time. At least not under normal circumstances.

Fighting on a semi-deserted station gave me an unexpected advantage. I didn't need to worry about collateral damage. Having taken my time to follow Halstemar's call, I was the last in our group, with no one else but enemies below me.

I gathered my power and sent a blast of Chaos towards the lower floors. *Eka* attacks are not visible unless the caster wants so. I didn't, so nothing spectacular happened, at least not at first.

Further down, atoms started to derail from their established patterns and randomly scattered all over the place. Positively and negatively charged particles swiftly changed polarity, then changed it once again, and again and again in a haphazard way. Matter disintegrated without warning and flew away in invisible clouds. In a matter of moments stairwell, people, two entire floors and a sizable chunk of the station wall simply ceased to exist.

The entire process released an incredible amount of energy, the unpleasant by-product of an *eka* blast. The reason it was a sledgehammer to be used in space and rarely employed at close quarters. I altered my defence field and channelled the exhaust into a controlled beam that drilled its way out of the station, leaving behind an atmospheric leak, but not a serious one. At least not compared to the havoc I made through the lower part of this structure.

Caldeor's King would be most unhappy with me partly destroying his orbital station and will likely threaten to complain to the Suzerain Queen. He would be even less happy with Krestellar, I imagined, noticing for the first time Halstemar's body, shredded by bullets. The poor bureaucrat was as much a victim of this ambush as the rest of us.

"Ellandra Sen'Aesir, or whatever your real name is," thundered a voice above me. "Are you entirely out of your mind?"

Oops! The Sen'Galahad witch was not at all happy with my heavy-handed actions below, despite their proven effectiveness. I must admit that she had done a pretty good

job herself, as the fire from above had trickled to infrequent energy blasts. The top side of the station was still in one piece, so maybe she had a point. Maybe I overreacted.

We stumbled back into the lounge, the lowest intact floor above the chaos ridden mess below. We lost an adept and a second one was badly burned by an energy blast he had failed to stop. However, two dead and a single walking wounded was a bit of a miracle given the amount of fire we took in the stairwell.

“My Lady, you are bleeding heavily!” said one of remaining adepts, a grizzled veteran sporting the symbol of Life on his tunic. “Take a seat and let me have a look.”

Two walking wounded, I guess. I completely forgot about the penetrator round I got early on, a clean shot through my upper arm. I poured some *eka* to limit the bleeding and took the medic’s advice. He was better suited to deal with this than I was, queen or no queen.

“Ellandra, what was that?” asked Quars Mendina, Sandrial’s friend.

The Second Legate’s question took me a bit by surprise.

“Huh? What was what?”

“What happened in there? What happened to the rest of the station?”

“What happened is an uncontrolled Chaos blast,” responded Ortens angrily. “Only a rogue like you could have considered using such a weapon on a space station.”

‘My blast was controlled’, I thought indignantly, or else none of us would have been around to discuss it. But there was no point in arguing with the Frost adept, and in any case, she was right. I should have reacted differently. I should have used a different aspect, a less destructive one. One that wouldn’t have transformed Caldeor’s only orbital station into a wreck.

I guess I had some reparations to make. I owed a brand-new station to the King.

We advanced carefully towards the bridge, luckily positioned topside, relative to the planet. I just realised that in my destructive spree I could have killed Legate Halora, should the bridge had been at the other end of the station. This, more than Ortens’ bickering, filled me with shame. I was indeed a loose cannon, especially when riled.

I wondered if the ex-soldier was still alive. I hoped to be the case, though I doubted it. Whoever had the gall to try murdering the ambassador and her entire party, not to mention King’s own representative, wouldn’t hesitate to get rid of a mid-level diplomat. Whatever his game was, Krestellar had a lot to pay for.

We made it to the bridge hatch and stopped on either side of the door.

“Cover me,” said Del to the Sen’Galahad adept, the strongest one of us, at least in name.

I wanted to step forward and come by her side, but the Resident didn't argue for a change, taking her place next to the First Legate. She threw a Frost shield in front of them both, and blasted the door without any comment.

Del and Ortens moved forward and stepped on the bridge. Right into the path of a monomolecular net.

CHAPTER 4

A monomolecular net was an insidious weapon.

It was designed specifically against any type of body armour, including *eka* shields, and took advantage of any gap in defences no matter how small. It worked by projecting a network of intelligent filaments that could contract down to the width of a molecule, if needed, and burrow through any chinks it could find, expanding back on the other side. Its range was mercifully small, five or six paces at most and then the smart network started to dissipate.

An Order shield could have been impervious if correctly done. A shield of Frost was not perfectly sealed, though adequate against most kind of threats. Not against a monomolecular net, shot point-blank by an angry bird.

Both Del and Ortense were stopped in their tracks by the shiny net splashing against the adept's shield. Splashing and passing right through. The Frost mistress had the presence of mind to throw an ice plate immediately behind the shield, but couldn't complete it in time, and in any event, it was just a temporary measure that only gained her a blink of an eye. Enough for me to shroud both Haillar in a cocoon of Order. They were both out of action though, the Sen'Galahad bleeding from a thousand shallow cuts, Del's chest churned into a mess of raw meat. Not far from them, a corpse laid in a pool of blood. Second Legate Halora hadn't survived, after all.

I was left standing in the open door, flanked by the two remaining adepts who were in any shape to fight. Quars Mendina and another diplomate whose name I couldn't remember found shelter further back, behind a bulkhead.

"Ah, the young diplomat turned hero, leading the charge," croaked Krestellar, his hand stretched towards us, monomolecular glove ready to fire. On either side of him, four burly reptiloids looked eager to use their high calibre weapons levelled our way. The *kreussa* were already here.

"Are they your fabled suppliers, master Krestellar?"

The avian issued an odd sound I belatedly realised was a chuckle.

"Quite the contrary, young lady. They are the customers, I'm afraid. And there is an entire fleet of them on the way, ready to make a point if needed."

I had expected a net in my face or maybe a hail of penetrators. The last thing I expected was to have a chat with this traitor over the bleeding body of my friend.

The station master appeared to be in a chatty mood, or most likely wanted something from us. Having removed any serious threats, I seemed to be the one he had chosen for stating his demands.

"Your meddling has complicated an otherwise neat transaction, Haillar. I had promised these gentlemen half of the funds received for arming this station, in exchange for their support. The issue is, now I don't have those credits, and after having to take care of your lot not even a fool like Erdolminer would be stupid enough to make the transfer."

So, this entire affair was just an ordinary theft, albeit a grand scale robbery by the look of it. A scam that looked increasingly likely to evolve into extortion, if I read the situation correctly. A step down from high treason and collusion with the Scourge, but only just.

I had to wrap this out as soon as possible. Del was bleeding to death on the floor, and the Resident didn't look much better. We had another wounded adept left behind.

"What do you want from us," I asked.

Krestellar gave an unspoken command, and the bridge screen came to life. A mottled assortment of warships looked to be suspended in space above a blue moon I recognised in an instance. The kreussa fleet must now be close, hidden on the other side of Caldeor's satellite.

"I need you to be a messenger of sorts, young lady. I need you to pass my requests to the Dominion authorities. I want them to double Caldeor's funds initially assigned for this station, or the entire colony below would suffer a terrible accident. I'll undertake to convince the King myself to cover his share, as per our original plan. Oh, and of course, if any Dominion carrier shows itself in the system, this planet burns."

Well, I had news for this pirate and thief. The relevant Dominion authorities were already in the system.

"Consider the Suzerain Queen informed," I say, gathering my *eka* at the same time.

An Oblivion blast is instantaneous, and there is no mundane defence against it. Furthermore, it has the added benefit of only affecting living matter. We couldn't quite afford to wreck the remaining part of the Huynar station, or we'd be left breathing vacuum in orbit around Caldeor.

An Oblivion blast is an ugly way to die, but I didn't have time to be nice. I was strong enough to make it mercifully quick. With a clatter, five heavy calibre guns and a monomolecular glove hot the deck in quick succession.

I crouched immediately by Del's side. Oh Flame, her chest was a bloody mess of shards of bone and raw tissue. I started feeding as much *eka* I could, feeling it wouldn't be enough. Next to me, the grizzled healer knelt and joined me, melding his Life tendrils with my own. I caught his eyes, and he shook his head sadly.

"Stay with me, Delora! Stay with me, my friend! Don't die on me, Del. Don't die, remember your promise."

Delora's eyes widened for a moment, pools of black on her pain-stricken face. I was the only one calling her Del, the only one knowing about her promise. The two of us together, bringing a new race into the Dominion.

"Xendara, is that you? But how, my queen?"

"I'm here with you, my friend. Hold on and let me help. Hold on and live, it's not your time to die."

I never lied, but in those moments, I knew myself to be a liar, for no one, not even the Life Queen could hope to bring Delora back. Not the way her chest was shattered. Not here, on an empty station, with no way to keep her alive while bones and tissues would be slowly regrown. Not here, surrounded by enemies and waiting for the *kreussa* fleet to act any moment from now.

Del grasped my hand, her fist clenched in my fist. A final hold, so much similar with the way we used to clasp hands when she was the Novitiate Delora Hardun and me a newly ascended queen, pretty much as I was now. Moments later her hand opened and fell weakly, as the last tortured breath left her shattered chest and her spirit raised to the stars.

I knew myself for being a fraud then and there. I kneeled next to the body of my friend on Huynar's Bridge, or whatever name the driang gave to their command centre. I was supposed to be the powerful one, the immortal defender of my race. Yet, I was unable to cheat death, no not really, not when it mattered. I even failed the people I loved.

I should have told Del the truth. I should have been by her side. I, the Chaos Queen, not the Sen'Galahad Resident. My friend was dead, and it was mostly my fault.

I was like a puppet on strings, playing the same act over and over again and each time hoping it would end differently. Each time to the same tragic finale. Everyone died, and I was the only one left standing, to start the life and death cycle once again.

"My lady, is it true? Are you her, are you the Chaos Queen reborn?"

I raised my eyes to the blood-drenched silhouette of Ortens Sen'Galahad, her white dress shredded by a hundred cuts, her shoulder a mess. I looked around and noticed the survivors. Quars Mendina, no longer prim and groomed. The other diplomat, miraculously unhurt. The two surviving adepts from Ortens' detail, one of them the elderly healer.

"I am," I said, gathering my last shards of will and slowly raising up. Turning to face the screen and the space panorama outside. The planet below, dotted with city lights and the blue satellite in the distance. Dozens of shimmering shards coming around the moon, coming towards us. The *kreussa*.

"I am Ellandra Ashar Sen Dorien, the Chaos Queen and Suzerain Lady of Caldeor. And I fear we have a marauder fleet to welcome." And a friend to avenge.

CHAPTER 5

There were hundreds of *kreussa* factions, spread all around the Dominion. Some of them allied with us, some with the Scourge, some supposedly neutral. None of them to be trusted.

Standing on Huynar's bridge, I couldn't tell who were the ones currently approaching us. I wouldn't be surprised if they belonged to a clan claiming to be allied with the Dominion. It didn't really matter.

My crew consisted of precisely one adept. Ortens Sen Galahad had stubbornly refused to leave my side, while the rest of the survivors fortified the hatch against any of Krestellar's crew still alive and willing to storm the bridge. Not that I expected many traitors left.

"My Queen, I'm yours to command."

When fighting in space, the Sen'Haillar always respected a basic rule: '*never handle eka alone, always do it in pairs.*' The reason for this was simple. The more destructive power was thrown towards the enemy, the more the adept's inner balance was affected. Until her mind could no longer cope with the stress and shattered. Many powerful adepts had ended up this way, mad with power and eventually destroyed by their own side. There was nothing more dangerous in a fight than one of your own losing control. It was the one thing that really scared us, for the capacity for destruction was limitless.

Problem was, Ortens and I made a poor pairing. Oh, it wasn't because of our earlier clashes or any lingering dislike we may harbour. Proper pairs involved adepts with matching affinities. Chaos and Order. Life and Oblivion. Fire and Frost. That's why my usual anchor was my sister queen. Reith Sen'Dorien, the Mistress of Order.

I could balance Ortens' use of Frost, that wasn't an issue. All adepts could wield the entire spectrum of aspects, yet only one is dominant. Mine was Chaos, but as a queen, I could handle enough Fire to counter Ortens' Frost. But there was no one around to balance me, something the Resident knew all too well. She couldn't gather enough Order to keep me straight if the need occurred. Nobody could, except for Reith. Let's hope it wouldn't come to that. After all, we weren't facing a Scourge assault, but only a bunch of pirates.

The second reason adepts fought in pairs was priorities management. From capital ships to single pair interceptors, stronger offensive talents were always coupled with defensive ones. It made sense for us to do the same. Ortens was a decently strong defender against both energy and kinetic weapons, despite her failure to block the monomolecular net attack. Frost adepts usually were, as their job often was to act as shields for their Fire brothers and sisters."

"Protect the station, Ortens, and let me focus on our dear guests."

Said guests chose this particular moment to make themselves known by sending a wide-band broadcast, addressed both to the station and to the planet beyond. I guessed

they had no way to know their allies' status, though clearly had been in contact with them recently enough.

"*Snake Heart* to the planet Caldeor. You are under attack, and your defence capabilities are severely damaged. As a steadfast ally of the Dominion, the *White Claw* clan comes to your support in this hour of need."

My earlier musings must have been closer to the truth than I thought possible. Last time I checked, *White Claw* was indeed listed as a nominal ally of the Dominion and a friend of the House Dorian. Unless they planned to switch sides from the very beginning, I doubt the lizards' original intention was to openly declare their identity. It would have been a quick hit and run, pirates and conspirators murdering anyone not involved in this robbery and disappearing with the funds. By the time the planetary authorities would have realised something was wrong, the credits would have already been transferred away by the very people entrusted to manage them.

Right now, somebody in the *kreussa* fleet, most likely the *White Claw* chieftain himself, was quick on his feet and modified the plans to fit the change in circumstances. Specifically, me ruining the station and inadvertently rendering the original scheme useless. By now, Caldeor's authorities were alerted that something odd was happening upstairs and no funds were coming.

The unnerving station alarm started to blare suddenly and markings indicating an external threat came to life on a newly opened partition on the screen. Incoming torpedoes.

I projected my mind swiftly outwards, on the way checking that our Frost shields were indeed adequate to deal with the incoming threat. I threw an *eka* net, the easiest way to identify powered objects in space.

There. A second wave of ships was approaching Caldeor on a different vector. The newcomers had just declared their intention by firing a random salvo, a warning shot more than anything else.

Apparently, *White Claw* were planning to portray themselves as the saviours, defending the helpless planet against the incoming aggressors, no doubt the same people who sabotaged Huynar. For a small fee of course, at the minimum equal with the spoils expected from the original heist.

No doubt, for this scenario to work Huynar needed to be destroyed during the upcoming battle between Caldeor's valiant defenders and the unknown marauders, no doubt another *kreussa* clan. Or even a second *White Claw* fleet for that matter, as bringing an ally in would have meant splitting the spoils.

I didn't usually have much sympathy for the bandits attacking my fiefs, and today even less so. The second fleet was clearly involved in a hostile action against the Dominion and, the Accords' response to this act of war was unequivocal.

I raised a wide curtain of *eka* in space, an invisible wall seconds away from the incoming warships. The most passive use of Chaos I could imagine. The least obvious

use of *eka* and also the most economical one. No, I wouldn't face any risk of losing my balance today.

The aggressor fleet slammed into the Chaos barrier and disappeared. There were no explosions in space. There were no last moment warnings between the invading vessels. No desperate manoeuvres to avoid their fate.

One moment the kreussa fleet was there, the next it was gone, simply vanished never to be seen again. Chaos was indeed the most devastating aspect a Haillar can wield, the very definition of total annihilation.

I turned to the screen and responded calmly, moments after the chieftain's message.

"White Claw, thank you for your warning, but no assistance in this matter is needed. The raiding force had been dealt with. There are no enemies left in Caldeor's space."

Silence reigned supreme for an interminable moment.

"What? How? Who are you, Haillar representing Caldeor?"

"I am Ellandra Ashar Sen'Dorien, The Suzerain Queen."

EPILOGUE

I'm back to the Caldeor's Exchange, facing the same rude border guard who checked my arrival not two days ago. Only this time around he throws a cursory glance at his screen then does a double-take, followed by a polite bow. I don't know what's written on the screen, but it's unlikely to be my real identity. Earlier on today, the King and I have agreed to keep my visit on Caldeor away from the public eye. I did have to promise a new orbital station in exchange for this favour, but I had planned to send him one, nevertheless. I owe him this, after ruining Huynar.

Sandrial was the one who escorted me to the gates. A very formal and polite Sandrial. Gone were the friendly smile and the flirtatious words. Gone were the offers to share gossip while having tea. I was the Suzerain, the eternal queen, so I was due adoration and respect, not friendship and love.

Some Haillar are like this, unfortunately too many. I never wanted adoration, I only strived for companionship. I'm not a historical character, I'm a woman of flesh and blood.

Yet friendship is so hard to find and so easy to lose. A fleeting moment in the endless sea of time, as ephemeral as the whisper of a butterfly wing.

I've lived a thousand lives, and probably I'll live a thousand more. My sisters' company remains the only constant, defending the Dominion my only creed.

THE END

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Haillar Queens & Great Houses

Name structure and etymology:

Sen'Haillar Queens: [Current Avatar Name] / [Personal Name] / Sen'[House Name]

House Dorien

Ellandra Ashar Sen' Dorien: Queen of Chaos

Astrid Reith Sen' Dorien: Queen of Order

House Galahad

Aerdig Tourin Sen'Galahad: Queen of Fire

Eurid' Favriel Sen'Galahad: Queen of Ice

House Vollar

Allisa' Asturien Sen'Vollar: Queen of Light

Eniad' Lorien Sen'Vollar: Queen of Darkness

House Shahr

Reissa' Ethun Sen' Shahr: Queen of Life

Neun' Norian Sen' Shahr: Queen of Oblivion

House Diessa

Darian' Faun Sen' Diessa: Queen of Spirit

Tellar' Oriel Sen' Diessa: Queen of Matter

House Aesir

Ossana Niam Sen' Aesir: Queen of Lore

Alian Verdid Sen' Aesir: Queen of Dreams



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