

Prologue

The *Tassomon* waited in the void with a spider's patience. Long and slender, the warship had the appearance and size of a titan's scepter. Rose-colored swaths of torn stars outlined the warship's forward vanes, rendering a silhouette of grasping claws. The ship looked the monster it needed to be. This time the enemy wasn't human. The Coshen were much worse. Failing to conquer a world, they would send in a planet killer.

This fateful encounter hadn't happened yet. The vision was a probability fast approaching the present reality. The future remained an uncertain ocean. This possibility was the safest harbor in an unavoidable storm stretching across the horizon. The skies had been darkening for years, now. The dreamers swam carefully from one envisioned event to another, forging a path for their species to follow. Stepping stones for those unable to see the turbulent waters ahead. Guides helping their race turn seemingly inconsequential decisions into salvation.

No more doubts. We see where negotiation will fail us. Where caution dooms us. So we won't wait. Won't negotiate. This is the moment of our choosing. Not theirs.

Now.

An expanding blue halo of disrupted space time blossomed before the *Tassomon*. What emerged was less a ship than a work of art. The *Disanti Ka* - a glittering teardrop four times the size of its adversary. One might think the cosmic bauble belonged around a god's neck, not gripped by their sword arm. Crystalline facets threw back the surrounding nebula's glory in a breathtaking display. Appearances would change once the vessel wrapped itself in a jelly-like shield. Nothing the Qurls possessed would penetrate it in time to save their world from what came next.

Fortunately, the Coshen weren't without arrogance. The coincidence of an adversary being in the same place as their mighty warship's arrival was mathematically improbable to the point of not earning a moment's consideration.

Probability, however, was the providence of the Ipper Qurl. They could follow the future ripples in time and space as if in a pond, pointing back to a point of an impact still to come.

This pond. This hurled stone. A moment in time where the *Disanti Ka* had yet to raise its formidable defenses.

The Ipper Symphony, a collection of dreaming minds spanning two worlds, watched the *Tassomon* spit out a single bright object. Beams lanced into the orb as it traveled between the forward pincers, causing the Vortex to collapse into a dark whirlpool earning the weapon's namesake. The Qurl ship's blocky engines sprang to life, pulling them free before the spider became caught in its own webbing.

The projectile all but winked out as it sped toward the enemy ship, reaching a density even light couldn't escape. The *Disanti Ka*'s tapered prow dimpled, the glittering hull puckering in on itself. The magnificent teardrop collapsed an instant later into a jet of incandescence.

This is the path we will take.

No!

The Ipper Symphony paused. Such a strong singular voice in the Other Octaves. Even now. Enough to pierce through their unity. *Sleep, Yitzen. Enjoy what peace you've left.*

I don't want to be this Suria!

We know. Would that you could forgive us. But you won't.

One

“Yitz! Yitz! Wake up! You're having a nightmare!”

Gasping, Yitzen thrashed in a twist of quilts until she saw her sister's concerned face in the radiance of their bedside glow stone. She placed a hand over her beating heart beneath the blue pajama top. “Donya...I'm okay.”

Donya reached over to sweep aside a tangle of white hair from Yitzen's brow. "I'll get you some puma tea."

"Yuck, no."

Being sixteen, her sister of course made matters worse. Nightgown whirling, Donya ran toward the kitchen, setting off hallway lights as she did so.

A more mature female voice called from the adjoining bedroom. "Yitzen?"

Yitzen rolled her gray eyes. "It's all right, Mom. Just a bad dream."

"Again?"

Groaning, Yitzen pulled herself up against the pillow, hearing the sound of her mother's footsteps on the squeaking floorboards. "It's all right, Mom," she mouthed again in silence, knowing it wouldn't do any good now with Donya tromping through the house.

Yitzen glanced across her little sister's bed to the ocean-side window. It was still dark. A clock on the glow stone's stand between the beds told her sunrise wouldn't be for another chime. Lovely.

Her mother entered, her high brow wrinkled with concern below brunette curls. She tugged her worn brown robe tight against the morning chill and bent to touch Yitzen's cheek.

"I am not sick, and I'm not in Passion," Yitzen grumbled. "At least not for a few more months."

"Well you are sweating a bit, little fish." She gently brushed the swath of tall ivory filaments rising along the edge of Yitzen's ears. "Your ear fans are up. Were you dreaming?"

"If you mean the other kind of dreaming, no." Yitzen felt the top of her fans with a frown. Sure enough, they were rigid, reaching the crown of her head as if she'd been broadcasting. "Sorry if I woke everyone up."

"You were screaming, dear."

Yitzen pressed her brow against her mother's reassuring softness. "I don't know why."

Her father's voice boomed from the other room. "Get her some tea."

“Already am, Dad!” Donya called out from the kitchen.

“Tastes like rotten fruit,” Yitzen protested.

“The Shandi healer said it would help you, daughter,” he returned in an uncompromising tone.

“Yes, Dad.”

Her mother fluffed the pillow behind her and helped Yitzen sit up straight. “Maybe you’re just nervous about tonight’s performance.”

Yitzen made a show of glancing toward the trophy wall on her left. “I doubt that.”

“*You* nervous about dancing?” Donya said with a giggle, balancing a brimming mug of tea in one hand as she returned. “I put some fera seeds in for taste along with extra cream. Makes it less bitter.”

“She’s a better cook than I am,” their mother complimented as Yitzen took the drink.

Donya gave Yitzen a quick kiss before plopping on her bed. “It’s just another way of doing chemistry.”

One sip assured Yitzen that her sister was once again successful with her concoctions. “Chemist or cook. You really have to make up your mind, minnow. Your career evaluations should be starting soon. That’s no small deal considering all the choices a Cothra like you has.”

Her mother smiled at the banter. “Listen to our lucky Ipper girl here. Everyone else in her sect is becoming a navigator, but not Yitzen. She gets to go off and dance her heart out on another planet.”

“With Minsa, the most famous dance troupe of all,” Yitzen finished between drinks. “They’re not just going to perform on Corven, either. They’re coming here to Me’ Auk, and are heading to Dessu as well. A three planet tour. Might even get to see these new aliens I keep hearing about. Maybe even dance on their world too.”

“I haven’t heard much good about these Coshen,” her mother said, dampening Yitzen’s enthusiasm. “They want to hurry us into some sort of alliance with them giving the orders.”

Donya wrinkled her nose. “I’ve heard they look like boiled shellfish.”

Yitzen laughed. "If so then they'd smell better than most humans I know."

"So why are you so eager to go back to Corven?"

Yitzen caught the hurt behind her sister's question and blew a kiss her way. "Most humans aren't so bad once you get to know them." Having spent a year there as an exchange student, she felt qualified to make such an assurance.

"But why do you have to leave again so soon? You just got back from Dessa."

"*Seven* months ago," Yitzen clarified. "Going to Dessa was a necessity. You should know that. Nobody becomes a Four Beat dancer without attending Ipper Dance in Kinset."

"Drink your tea, daughter," her mother reminded, giving her a final hug before turning for the door. "Your father and I will be eating breakfast at the farm. We'll be out on the lower shelf this morning testing my new oxygen processor. Hoping to squeeze at least a half a chime's worth of more air from the canisters."

Donya fell back on her bed with a sigh. "You owe me two chimes worth of sleep."

"Your tea's wonderful," Yitzen offered by way of another apology.

"Get a boyfriend and you won't have so many bad dreams."

Yitzen stuck out her tongue. "No time for that. Besides, if anyone's landing First Promise, it's the dark haired beauty who made this tea." She held up her arm. "Not someone as pale as a ghost."

"All you Ipper look that way." Donya sat up again. "And you're hardly the only one with white hair. You're just a bit, um, tall for your sect."

"A bit? I'd be mistaken for a Dathia if I wasn't so light skinned."

"You're nowhere near as tall. Barely over seven hands. Besides, you don't have claws and bulgy muscles like them."

Yitzen wiggled her fingers. "Creation be thanked." She gulped the remainder of her tea, its soothing effects warming her reedy body.

"Feeling better?" her father's voice inquired from the hallway.

“Yes, Dad.” She looked up from the empty mug as he walked in. If anyone had muscles in this family, it was him. A middle aged Cothra, he stood at least three hands taller than she. Most of his work kept him out in swift currents working the shellfish beds. Standing there in a one-piece tan work outfit, he looked the epitome of her country’s majority sect. He shared mother’s brown hair, but his ran straight back without so much as a twist or curl. It made him look as steadfast as an anchor. She accepted his kiss on her cheek with a smile. “You’re already making me homesick.”

His grin brightened her heart. “Hope so. Don’t worry. You’ll have fun on Corven.” Her father glanced out the door. “Speaking of which,” he continued in a conspiratorial tone, “how about you swim down and surprise your mother?”

Yitzen nodded with enthusiasm. “I’d love to!” Her mother would never have suggested such a daring swim, but this was what she loved so much about her father. He enjoyed a challenge, and didn’t mind involving her in one either. Perhaps this was why she’d become the youngest Four Beat dancer in the country.

He squeezed her arm. “Good. You can find out from Wharf Signal when we’re about to go outside.”

“I’ll be there,” she promised.

“Mother’s going to kill both of you,” Donya warned after he left. “You know she doesn’t want you swimming the strait.”

“Ipper can’t drown, minnow.”

“Yes, they can. Just not often enough to have any common sense.”

She rolled her eyes. “You are certainly sounding like Mom.” Yitzen scooted off the bed, her morning schedule getting interesting. “You wouldn’t be getting your beauty rest disturbed so much if you’d taken Haral’s room down the hall after he got married.”

“I didn’t want it because you said it was too lonely.”

“Maybe a bit less now with all the fish,” Yitzen joked. Their parents had turned the achingly empty space into both an aquarium and tinkering nook. She sighed and sat next to her sister. “I’m sorry about screaming my stupid lungs out.”

“You’re just jittery. I mean, not everyone dances before our Tasur tonight and goes flying off to an alien world the very next day.”

She shrugged. “I’ve danced on Dessa for Kinset’s rulers as well and that didn’t bother me.” She bumped Donya’s head. “Leaving you will, though.”

“I’m going back to sleep before you have us both crying.”

“I’ll dim the light,” Yitzen offered while gathering up clothes to wear. She pulled a pair of blue pants and a heavy white blouse from the closet across from the beds. Next came a hip-hugging belt and deep blue side skirts in case anyone needed a reminder of what sect she belonged to. *Race*, Yitzen corrected inwardly. If she was heading back the human world of Corven, it was best to use their terminology. They liked to think they had the answers to everything.

Yitzen tucked Donya back into bed, dimmed the glow stone and then headed to the bathroom across from Haral’s old room to change. The mirror reflected a face designed for mischief, something her sect excelled in. Granted, she looked as if she’d poked her head out of a snowbank, especially with the gray eyes, but startlingly white hair got you noticed in a crowd. Especially when you sported ear fans. She was more hips than breasts like most Ipper females, but knew how to bring attention to the right areas. Seventeen, and already being pestered to land a male. ‘You’re not getting younger, Yitzen. You should take more interest in relationships.’ Ugh. Bad enough she was getting the same advice from both the Shandi and her mother, but now Donya was starting to gripe at her. All she wanted to do was dance, swim, and otherwise have fun. What was so wrong with that?

Swimming. Itsa! Almost forgot. Yitzen slipped her shoes on and tiptoed into her bedroom again. She eased her green swim bag from a cabinet and tried sneaking out, only to have Donya blearily wave at her. “Sorry,” she whispered, shutting the door behind her.

She caught up with her parents just as they were about to exit the living room's porch door.

"Please be careful down there."

Her mother wagged a finger. "You too. Stay away from the main channel, daughter. Don't want some skathe gobbling you up."

Her father told her after all? So much for the surprise. "Telling an Ipper to keep out of the water? Really, Momma."

"You packed your knife?"

"Yes, Momma."

"Make sure Donya takes a lunch to school."

"I'll make one now, Momma."

"And Kade wants to see you, so don't forget. Otherwise I'll have his mother mad at me for your rudeness. He just left the hospital, after all."

"Tenzen and I are seeing him at tenth chime, Momma. Of course I wouldn't forget."

"Wonderful. Have Tenzen tell her mother I said hi."

"Yes, Mom."

Yitzen let out a breath after they left. No doubt her mother was trying to advance things between her and Kade beyond mere friendship. Maybe she shouldn't have spent her last Passion with him and raised her mother's hopes. "Making sandwiches isn't fun, either," she grumbled. She rummaged in her swim bag and found a spare silver favor. She slapped the coin on the kitchen table and slung the bag over her shoulder. She wasn't letting her morning compress from fun to frantic.

Yitzen's ear fans raised as an idea occurred to her that would help chase off the day's rough start. There was more than one way to get downtown. *Recreational octave. Bridge measure.* <Yitzen Tines.> Her highest probability for a reply formed around a middle-aged Ipper male wearing a loose black shirt and pants. He held a display in one hand, and a cup of murr in the other. <Calu Amera. Bridge

Recreation Signal. Good morning, Yitzen. Checking your performance schedule?>

<No. I'm not on Stage One until tonight. Is the zoom tube open?>

<Almost. I'll ask the Cothra to hurry their morning checks.> He grinned. <Just for you.>

She clasped her hands in gratitude. <Would you? I'm doing the strait and would like to see if I can make that run as well.>

<What time?>

<Two chimes, maybe.>

<Hope you make it around the Point. Current's high.>

<I will. Good swimming, Calu.>

<Good swimming, Yitzen.>

Her ear fans lowered. Oh yes, this was shaping up to be a great day. A daring swim, followed by meeting Kade and Tenzen. Next came dance practice, and finally the big performance before Tasur Pell Chora. It was a pity his legendary wife Mikial remained on Dessa, but the Great Tasuria was caught up with both those new aliens and the usual home world politics. Too bad.

Yitzen pulled her wristband off a hook charger at the door and went outside. She walked around the house's wide veranda to where she could gaze out over Temble Strait. It would be another chime before Me'Auk's primary sun peeked over the west rim, but there was enough light coming from the world's faint companion star to spread silver glitter across the waves far below. She breathed in the cool air, calming the remnants of an unseen anxiety in the quiet peace of a salty breeze. Tiny blue, white, and red specks moved out to sea from Wharf's inlet, heading toward the northwestern fishing grounds. She watched as the boat lights merged with a sweep of stars along the horizon.

The distant beacons reminded her to check the batteries on her swimsuit. The last thing she wanted to do was hit those icy waters without the mesh suit's heating pads. She unzipped her bag and retrieved her goggles for a quick check. Yes, everything was in the green. And there was her knife, a fang

from the skathe her pod had hunted down two years ago in a rite of passage. The scaled predator had been cruising the channel making a nuisance of itself. Couldn't have the beast eating tourists. Bad for publicity.

Arms folded on the faux wooden railing, she glanced at the other porches along East Loft, the neighborhood clinging to the side of Bridge like determined shellfish. A cozy alternative to the spread of homes and apartments across from downtown. Ornate lamps swung in the sea breeze over one of Bridge's great arches. The bridge was absolutely huge. Twenty-eight lengths long, you could see it from orbit linking Mikial's Holding with the mainland. A metaphor brought to life on a world Qurls shared with the Me'Aukin clans who invited them. Yitzen allowed herself a smug grin, being among the first generation to actually be born here. And the youngest Four Beat Dancer. Dancing tonight for her Tasur, no less. Oh yes, today was going to end up being wonderful. Time to get things started.

She tied the swimming bag to her back and headed around the house for the brief road leading up to the transportation level. Bridge consisted of three decks spanning the continents. The Me'Aukins lived on the western half, meeting midway in a crazy confluence of cultures. And that was before you sprinkled in the human tourists. Even Kinset on Dessa couldn't match the electricity of even a slow night downtown.

First, she had to get down to Warf, over a thousand spans below her. The fishing town hugged what shoreline the cliffs begrudgingly surrendered. Fortunately, there was a tramway beside the train terminal. The squeamish could turn the white pod's windows opaque, but she loved watching the steep descent. Almost as much fun as flying. Darkness hid much of the west wall - part of an ancient crater ringing the small continent. While the northern reaches had their skiing, down here you could soar airsails off the strait's updrafts.

The pod bumped and swayed its way down Bridge's shoulder, swinging around a turntable near the tunnel entrance through the mountains. Yitzen hopped off, breathing in the scents of ocean waves and freshly caught fish. The boardwalk was busy with humming transports and chatter. She wouldn't have

minded living this close to the ocean, but her mother turned her nose up at what she called living on a stone staircase.

She looked up at the lighted terraces. Her parents weren't Ipper. They didn't understand the pull of all this wonderful water. Even now she could feel her skin's minute glands rise in tiny bumps of anticipation. Communication was more of a sideline for her sect. Ipper were made for the sea. The one thing keeping her from leaping off the boardwalk was the cold. Temble Strait was not a place to swim in if you didn't have heating pads.

Yitzen made her way through the bustle of laden carts and opening stalls, her eyes on a blue peaked roof beyond the boardwalk. Point Inn. The favorite launching point for Ipper crazy enough to dare the channel.

Someone yelled her name, and the next thing she knew she had a hunk of freshly baked bread in her hand. Being a top dancer had its perks. She blew a kiss toward the Cothra baker and chewed through the crisp buttery crust with relish. Eating ahead of a swim wasn't smart, but neither was listening to a growling stomach. Far below the boardwalk her parents were probably halfway through breakfast themselves. Her ear fans raised.

Cothra Octave. Wharf measure. <Yitzen Tines.>

Yitzen paused. Of course they would be busy this morning with all the deliveries. She broke octave and tried honing her broadcast. *Cothra Octave. Wharf measure. Research note. <Yitzen Tines.>*

Still no answer. Grumbling, she continued walking, but kept her octave open.

Her ear fans flicked with an incoming tap a few moments later. Her mind filled with the probable image of a white-haired female close to her mother's age. She sat in a room surrounded by windows overlooking underwater fields lined with floodlights.

<Kamis NeneI. Wharf Signal. Minsa, Yitzen.>

<Minsa, Kamis. Any idea when my mother, Relen Tines, is going to be outside?> She waited for the other to sift through her screens.

<Not for another chime according to her calendar.> The Ipper Signaler grinned. <Paying her a visit?>

<Oh yes.>

<I'll give you a tap when she's out, honey.>

<Thanks, Kamis. Good swimming.>

<Good swimming.>

One chime. Yitzen looked up to mountain peaks glowing orange with the onset of first dawn. The trouble with Point Inn was that it only looked close. There was a wide inlet between the boardwalk and her destination, and it would take a half chime just to walk past the docks. Unless, of course, you took the direct route.

Finding a changing room wasn't hard. The Market didn't just cater to visitors out to have a good look at the bridge and eat fish cakes. They loved Ipper here, and having half-naked girls running around didn't hurt the tourism either. She exchanged her clothes for her swimsuit, the bright emerald mesh ensuring as much of her pale skin as possible made contact with the water. Heating pads curved in all the right places, ensuring her core kept warm while providing a modicum of modesty. Well, the Ipper idea of modesty, anyways. Humans tended to get all big-eyed seeing breasts, but that was their problem.

Her suit's batteries kicked in, sending ripples of bright green luminescence through the mesh weaves just for show. Yitzen affixed her thin belt with its skate blade and silver "idiot stick" in case she needed air. Her wrist band was water proof, but shoes and everything else got stuffed into the swim bag before she strapped it on again. Twirling her goggles, she continued to the end of the boardwalk, earning a few appreciative whistles along the way.

It was too early for a line to form at the diving board at the inlet's mouth, which also meant less time to brace herself for the icy welcome. She put on her goggles and hit the dark water with a gasp as the ocean embraced her. Two things happened at once. Her heating pads activated, chasing much of the initial shock away. The other reaction was purely physical as the multitude of tiny bumps along her skin

generated an electrical surge propelling her forward. All four sects could produce a charge of one kind or another, but none could have as much fun with it as hers.

Her goggles made sure she could see the rocky basin well enough to jet along the bottom without hitting any of the rounded granite. She surged hard, hurling herself at a pear-shaped boulder. Ladders were for the other sects. The trick to an Ipper landing was all in the belly and thigh glands. A determined push against the rock sent her up in a ninety-degree turn. She broke the surface, her momentum carrying her in an airborne arc to the wooden deck next to the inn. Yitzen's long legs easily absorbed the impact, her accompanying icy wave dousing the platform.

She didn't expect to find the inn's patrons out so early, but there they were standing in dripping tshirts with shocked stares. Three human males her age and younger. One still clutched binoculars halfway up to his face, water streaming from wet hair. The glasses slipped from his grip and might have hit the deck had they not been tethered around his neck.

The human's throat convulsed before speaking in human Standard as he gaped at her. "*Holy shit!*"

"*Minsa,*" she returned, brushing by them. Yitzen grinned and switched to their language. "Welcome to Bridge, boys."