

## Chapter One

The music was loud, the stench was overpowering, and the lights were so dim it was difficult to see more than ten meters in any direction. But the most disturbing thing about this particular cesspool of a nightclub, Jenavian Vale mused, was that she might have been the only female of any species still wearing all of her clothing.

“Positive identification on primary target,” Thexyl said into her earpiece, his calm, coolly modulated voice a welcome change from the deafening cacophony these dregs considered music. “Off to your left and up forty degrees.”

Jenavian’s nose wrinkled at the acrid mix of smoke and alien body odor as she tilted her head to the side. Her target was there, all right, his bulbous body and four bloated arms plainly visible through the semi-transparent flooring of the second-level offices above. Qel Pasek, the primary supplier of weapons and illegal technology to the most dangerous terrorist organizations in Convectorate space...and he was all hers.

“I see him. Threat assessment?”

“I’m sure I don’t have to tell you how many concealed weapons are in that club. I’m detecting three other men in the room with Pasek and two more guards near the top of the staircase. There’s also a bouncer blocking entry to the VIP section.”

Jenavian snorted. Calling anything in this shithole a “VIP section” was like calling a penal colony an “all-expenses-paid vacation resort.” The name was a pitiful euphemism for a slave brothel, nothing more. Here the wealthiest filth in the criminal underworld could purchase a female of any species and do whatever they wanted with her while the audience below watched the show through the translucent walls and flooring. It was a particularly disgusting display of sadistic voyeurism she wouldn’t have believed without seeing it for herself.

“Is there another way upstairs?”

“No, just the one stairwell,” Thexyl lamented. “You will need to find a way past the guards.”

“Naturally,” Jenavian muttered, weaving her way through the crowd of inebriated dancers. “Any hidden weapon detection systems I should know about?”

“Nothing I can see from here. Still, you should probably avoid a firefight as long as possible. Pasek undoubtedly has an escape route planned.”

“Or five or ten,” she said. “I’ll figure something out—just give me a minute.”

Thexyl was right, of course. The last thing she wanted to do was draw unnecessary attention to herself before she was close enough to blow Pasek’s chubby little head off. Normally a free human casually strolling around an alien-infested space station like Briton Chalo should have attracted plenty of curious second glances from the locals, and a free human *woman* should have immediately captured the attention of every depraved wretch in the building. But Jenavian was a Convectorate Spider, not some helpless refugee or escaped slave. Her telepathic abilities allowed her to fog the minds of any sentient creature, convincing them that she was merely a part of the background din and unworthy of a second thought. Deceiving so many minds at once was a delicate trick, however, and while everyone she’d passed so far had already forgotten her face, the high-pitched screech of her pulse pistol would promptly shatter her illusion.

But that was all right. She had her silenced flechette pistol if she really needed it, and with a little luck and a lot of finesse, perhaps she could still get to Pasek without leaving a trail of bodies in her wake. The Widow hated messes, after all, and Jenavian had no interest in upsetting her superior.

The lone bouncer guarding the VIP staircase was a Merzeg, a vaguely insectoid race known for their piloting skills, single-minded determination, and of course the razor sharp hooks jutting out of their forearms. Unsurprisingly, his job kept him alert enough to see past her casual telepathic trickery, and he stared straight at her the entire time she approached. Apparently she would have to resort to something a little more conventional to slip past him...

“Dreega not welcome here,” he chittered in a barely understandable version of Convectorate Tradespeak. “Go back to floor like rest.”

“I’m here to perform for Qel Pasek,” she lied. “They told me this was the entrance to his private suite.”

He chittered again, this time with a distinct aura of irritation. “Pasek not interested in dreega females. Especially not ones wearing so much.”

Jenavian shrugged and crept within five meters of him. “I’m not about to give the idiots out here a free show. Now please, let me inside. Call your boss if you want; he’ll tell you he’s expecting me.”

“No,” the Merzeg said flatly, his forearm hooks sliding out in plain sight. “Leave now, or I cut pretty face.”

She sighed. Bluffing had never been her strong suit, especially when dealing with aliens whose brains were half the size of her fist. She really didn’t want to hurt this dolt unless she had to, though, and now—

It started as a faint but familiar tingle deep in the recesses of her mind, but soon it transformed into a full-blown shiver racing up and down her spine. Her breath caught in her throat and she backed away from the staircase. It had been months since a psionic tremor had shaken her telepathic web like this, and she’d never expected to feel another one in a backwater shithole like Briton Chalo. But the sensation was unmistakable, and it could mean only one thing.

There was another psychic nearby. And suddenly her mission had gotten a lot more complicated.

“Is there a problem?” Thexyl asked into her ear.

“There’s a Fly inside the club,” she murmured as she backed away from the stairwell and licked at her unexpectedly dry lips. The worst of the tremor had faded, but she could still feel the residual psychic waves cascading all around her. She closed her eyes and concentrated, tracing them back to their source...

“Curious,” her partner replied, his voice calmer than it had any business being. “Are you certain this person is inside the building? I can’t imagine there are any human children here.”

“It’s not a child,” Jenavian told him, frowning. No, the vibrations were definitely too strong for a small, undisciplined mind. Whoever this was, he was much more than a random undiscovered psychic adept. She just couldn’t understand how anyone with this much raw power could have evaded the Spiders for so long—all but the smallest fraction of the Flies they captured were children, typically less than ten years old.

“Are you going to abort the mission?”

“No, we’ve just added a new objective.” She glanced back upwards through the flooring to Pasek’s suite and let her optical implants feed Thexyl the visual data. “He’s up there with Pasek. Can you tell me anything about him?”

“Judging from the heat signatures, one of the men with him might be human. If so, his heart rate is accelerating rapidly—he may know that something is wrong.”

“But how—?”

The words died on her lips as it all fell neatly into place. Precious few psychic children escaped the notice of the Spiders long enough to grow into adulthood, and those that did never would have received the training necessary to spin their own telepathic web so they could detect another psychic. That, coupled with the fact Pasek sold his weapons almost exclusively to terrorist organizations, meant that realistically the silhouette above her could only belong to one man.

One man, one traitor. The only Spider who had ever defected. The man who had very nearly ruined her life.

And after four years of searching, she had finally found him.

“Markus,” she breathed as she sprinted forward. “I’m going in.”

Thexyl might have responded, but Jenavian was no longer listening. She yanked her silenced flechette pistol out of her wrist holster and charged back towards the stairwell. The Merzeg panicked at the sight of her weapon and frantically reached for his own, but his long, crooked fingers never even had the chance to curl around the grip. In the course of a split second she shot him in the head, kicked his corpse out of the way, and plowed through the door behind him.

By the time she’d sprinted through the corridor and up the closest set of stairs, she’d already pulled out her pulse pistol and thumbed off the safety. Two more guards were waiting at the top of the staircase, and this time she didn’t bother with the pretense of subtlety. She gunned both of them down before they even knew she was there, and within seconds the first panicked screams from the nightclub patrons thundered up through the floor.

Her telepathic illusion shattered, but at this point it didn’t matter. She stormed through the double doors of Pasek’s suite and rolled inside, fully prepared to shoot anything and everything inside that so much as twitched. Two wide, heavily-armored Krosian guards were standing there with their rifles pointed directly at her, but Jenavian barely registered them or the fat, six-armed Claggoth cowering behind a hideous green desk. Instead her eyes were locked on the muscular blond human man standing on the edge of the balcony at the back of the room. He was smiling.

“It’s been awhile, Jen,” Markus Coveri said. “You ready to do the right thing yet?”

“Drop the gun,” she snarled, falling into a crouch and leveling both pistols at him. “It’s over.”

“I’ll take that as a no,” he muttered. “But that’s all right, I can wait. See you around.”

He reared back and leapt off the balcony—and an instant later, the entire room exploded in a storm of pulsefire.

Pasek and his men splattered the doorway with enough firepower to liquefy a zabrium wall, but Jenavian was no longer there. She threw herself into a tight roll and tumbled straight into the middle of the room. For any normal, unarmored person—and especially one without the thick skin of a Krosian or the hardened carapace of a V’rath—it would have been a suicidal maneuver. But while she might not have been draped in her full combat armor, she was hardly unprepared. She reached down to her belt and tapped the controls for her personal shield

generator as she barreled forward, and the normally invisible, skin-tight protective barrier sheathing her body pulsed with a harmless but brilliant flash. The two Krosian guards reeled backwards, their light-sensitive eyes completely overloaded, and their trail of fire continued to arc wide of their target. Against a human opponent, the trick would have probably only bought her two or three seconds; against a Krosian, it still wouldn't earn her more than four or five.

Thankfully, Spiders rarely needed more than one.

Her overcharged pulse rounds burned their armor as easily as a thermal blade through aluminum, and their employer desperately flopped his massive, bulbous body behind the closest couch for cover. Not that it mattered—Jenavian had no intention of wasting any more time with these wretches than was absolutely necessary, and she didn't feel like leaving the local forensic analysts any more evidence of her presence than she had to. And so instead of firing haphazardly at the furniture, she leapt out towards the balcony and lobbed a single sonic charge over her shoulder.

The detonation reduced the entire second level to dust in a microsecond, but by that point she had already leapt down and rolled onto the quickly-clearing dance floor. The patrons' initial shock had long since given way to abject terror, and even the ones carrying concealed weapons had already begun fleeing for the exits and plowing over anyone in their path.

This definitely qualified as a mess. Jenavian could only hope that the Widow would forgive her the moment she hauled Markus back to the Nidus. Realistically, she could probably blow up the whole station at this point and no one in the Intelligence Ministry would care. If Markus really had been working with the Mire terrorist organization since his defection, then the information he possessed would be absolutely invaluable.

And the Widow would make sure it was ripped out of his mind, one dirty little secret at a time.

But first, Jenavian had to actually catch him, and considering he was already near the west exit, that wasn't going to be easy. She discharged her weapon at the ceiling to clear a path as she sprinted forward, and for the most part the alien mob steered clear. She vaulted over a pair of overturned tables as she lowered her weapon towards the door, waiting for Markus to pop into the open where she could get a clean shot—

The attack came so swiftly, so unexpectedly, that she had absolutely no chance whatsoever of avoiding it. In one moment she was leaping over a table en route to the exit, and in the next she was soaring backwards across the room like a flicked juumba beetle. Eventually she crashed down on top of a hoobel table, and her pulse pistol flipped out of her grip and skittered off somewhere into the crowd.

Jenavian swore under her breath as she clutched at her chest and tried desperately to suck air back into her lungs. Apparently four years on the run hadn't dulled Markus's powers in the slightest. She'd assumed they would have atrophied from disuse—after all, for him to have evaded the Spiders so long he must have been extremely careful about when and where he used them. But he'd just hit her with enough force to shatter half the bones in a normal human body, and without her psychogenetically enhanced skeletal structure, she probably would have been dead.

Gritting her teeth, she flipped off the table and back to her feet. Psionic powers or not, he wasn't going to escape her again. Not this time.

She burst into a flat sprint, bowling over or sliding past any of the patrons who got in her way, and soon she was standing back outside the club sweeping her eyes around the wide, bustling corridors in a vain effort to track her prey. She did have one thing going for her, at least:

she knew that Markus wouldn't bother trying to go to ground and hide. This wasn't a conventional chase where the fugitive could simply attempt to wait out the authorities; the Widow would summon half the Convectorate fleet to blockade the system if she thought it would get back her lost operative. No, his only chance was to flee the station before the net closed in around him, and that meant he had exactly one place to go.

"He fled out the east exit," Jenavian said between breaths. "He'll be heading for the docking bays—see if you can cut him off."

"I'm already moving into position," Thexyl told her, "but you realize he'll know all our tricks."

"My tricks, yes, but not yours."

He didn't reply. He probably wasn't thrilled about going face-to-face with a rogue Spider—no sensible person would be—but he would do his job anyway. Thexyl was nothing if not reliable.

Jenavian turned and bolted off to her left towards the docking bays. The scores of assorted aliens lining the corridors screamed obscenities at her as she rushed past, but thankfully none of them tried to stop her. Earlier she'd been able to wipe her presence from their minds, but right now she was expending all her energy trying to track Markus's faint, residual vibrations still rippling across her web. He was close, very close, and with luck she might be able to overtake him before he got anywhere near her partner...

She spotted him diving into a narrow corridor thirty meters ahead and rushed forward in pursuit. Instinctively, she used a Spider technique to pump her muscles full of adrenaline and give her an extra burst of speed. She covered the distance in two seconds flat and raised her flechette pistol as she spun around the corner—

Something slammed into her legs and sent her careening forward in a wild, reckless tumble. She nearly broke her neck when she smacked into a metal bulkhead, and she screamed in pain even as she rolled away and bounced back to her feet.

"Careful—you might hurt yourself," Markus sneered. He was standing there not ten meters in front of her, pulse pistol in hand and aimed straight at her chest. "And we certainly wouldn't want that."

Jenavian grimaced as she finally got a good look at him. His features were just the same as she'd remembered—the green eyes, the thin nose, the perpetual stubble dotting his chin no matter how often he shaved. He'd let his blond hair grow out, and he sported several new and impressive scars on his forehead and cheeks, but it was still the man she'd spent almost every hour of every day training with since she was eight years old. The same man who'd abandoned her on Typhus IX while he ran off to join the most notorious terrorist organization in the galaxy.

"There's nowhere for you to run," she said. "Surrender."

He snorted. "Tough talk from a girl without a gun. I figured you'd be so blinded by rage that you'd blunder in here all by yourself. I guess you haven't changed much."

Jenavian winced when she caught a glimpse of her flechette pistol lying on the ground at his feet. He had every advantage, but if he'd wanted her dead he would have fired already. He must have felt like standing around and taunting her for a while yet, which was fine with her—all she had to do was keep him talking while Thexyl got into position.

"You're still buying weapons to help your terrorist friends blow up innocent civilians," she bit out, "so it doesn't look like you've changed, either."

Markus didn't even twitch. Now that she could see him, she was able to stretch out with her mind and press against his thoughts. She couldn't read them, not with his mental defenses up

in full force, but she could at least get a feel for his basic surface emotions. She'd hoped her jibe might trigger a surge of anger or at least irritation, but it hadn't. The only thing she sensed was the same maddening calm she'd felt from him that day on Typhus—the calm of an idealistic zealot absolutely convinced he was doing the right thing.

"I'd hoped you would come around eventually," he murmured. "I thought that maybe once you'd had time to digest everything you'd finally see I was right...but I guess not. You're still the Convectorate's little concubine."

"If you surrender, the Widow might have mercy," Jenavian pressed, taking a half step forward. If she could just keep his eyes on her and his mind focused on blocking out her intrusions...

"Mercy?" Markus said with a snort. "You can't be serious."

"She might just wipe your memory and give you a second chance. It's better than the alternative."

"Tempting, but I'll pass. Speaking of second chances, though, this is yours, Jen. It's not too late to come with me. We're closer than ever to freeing our people and winning this war."

Now it was her turn to snort. "Some victory. You hide in rat's nests across the galaxy and emerge only to blow up innocent people. You're despicable cowards."

A shadow fell across his face, and for the first time a genuine emotion pierced through his tranquil façade. Except it wasn't anger; it was more like...disappointment?

"I can only imagine what lies they've been feeding you about us," Markus said softly. "I'd hoped you were smart enough by now to see through them. We're talking about the future of our species, Jen. The future of humanity!"

"Humanity has no future," she growled. "In case you forgot, the Dominion collapsed a hundred years ago, and its Sarafan overlords died with it."

"I'm not talking about the Dominion—I'm talking about freeing our people from refugee camps and slave mines. They deserve better than that."

Jenavian shrugged. "We had our chance to rule, and we fucked it up. Now surrender. I won't ask again."

This time he visibly flinched, and she could see the white lines on his knuckles from squeezing his pistol so hard. "I won't be a slave to the Convectorate again, Jen. I'd rather die."

"I can arrange that, too."

Slowly, solemnly, he shook his head. "I suppose I should be glad that you're the one who finally found me. I've been waiting for you to come to us for a long time, but if you won't...then maybe it's for the best that I just end this now."

"Maybe you should," she murmured. "I don't know what you're waiting for."

His thoughts flickered, and this time she managed to briefly slip past his mental barriers. His disappointment and regret washed over her, but beyond them she could see into his surface thoughts, his short-term memories, his—

Jenavian froze as a single image abruptly burned into her vision: a long silver starship, floating like a corpse in the middle of deep space, its engines and running lights dark. It was a vessel she'd seen countless times on archival holograms but never in person. It was a vessel that wasn't supposed to exist.

And yet somehow, some way, Markus and the Mire had found it.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry," he said softly, leveling his pistol at her head. "I never wanted it to end like this."

She stared up at him, her mind still frozen, waiting for the inevitable flash of light to send her into permanent darkness—

The flash came, but not from his barrel. Markus screamed as a burst of energy exploded in his back. He hit the ground with a dull *thud*, and his pistol clattered harmlessly away.

“Are you all right?” Thexyl asked, his shadowy reptilian figure slowly detaching itself from the opposite wall. His scales were already returning to their normal gray as he suppressed his camouflage reflex. “I wasn’t sure I’d make it in time.”

“Neither was I,” Jenavian said hoarsely, her eyes still fixed on Markus. His mind had closed to her again now that he was unconscious, but she couldn’t get the image of the derelict ship out of her mind...the ship, and everything it represented.

“I’m not sure why he hesitated so long,” her partner commented. “He had every opportunity to fire.”

“He didn’t want to. He’s still believes I’ll switch sides and join him eventually, the same way he believes the Mire is a bunch of noble revolutionaries and not mass murderers. He’s delusional.”

“Ah. Well, I’m certain the Widow will cure him of that.”

Jenavian pressed her lips together. “Right now I think we have another problem.”

Thexyl’s yellow eyes flicked down to meet hers, a patch of inquisitive blue shimmering across his scales. “And what is that?”

“I caught a peek at his thoughts while we were talking,” she said. “It turns out that Pasek wasn’t just selling the Mire weapons.”

“What do you mean?”

“He found a derelict ship somewhere, and I think Markus was going to buy the location from him.”

Thexyl’s serpentine head bobbed to the side. “I assume from your tone that we’re not talking about an old cargo freighter or pleasure yacht.”

“No. It was an old Dominion psi-ship, fully intact.” She swallowed and took a deep breath. “I think it was the *Damadus*.”

For a long moment her partner remained perfectly still, but eventually the blue shimmer in his scales transformed into a concerned orange. “I see.”

Jenavian grunted and waved a hand dismissively. “He’s probably mistaken. A million charlatans from here to Keledon have claimed to have found the *Damadus* over the years.”

“True enough, but either way the Widow needs to know about it. If the legends about that ship are accurate, then its discovery could drastically shift the balance of power. The Mire could potentially use it to resurrect the Sarafan.”

“I’m sure that’s exactly what they want,” she said gravely. “We can’t let that happen.”

A few additional specks of orange danced across his scales. “I suppose not. So then what are we going to do about it?”

Jenavian glanced down to the unconscious body of the man at her feet—the man who had once been her best and only friend in the entire galaxy.

“We’ll take him to the Widow,” she whispered. “And on the way, we’re going to learn everything he knows about the *Damadus*.”