

EXCERPTS FROM

EMBERS



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Excerpt from Chapter 3

Embers

Antóa (Ánassa) Tásri-e Sóran-Kerís
Idre, raft Sel, year 1 of the Reaha Nuazkat

“His hair has come in darker than before,” I remark.

“I did not know him, so I couldn’t tell. I’ll add it to the observation notes,” answers the Idri medic. “The stem cells often seem to have a mind of their own during heavy-duty regeneration jobs. He may look younger than his biological age when the procedure’s over.”

I was a founder of the resistance and one of its pivots. So when I asked for this extraordinary favor, the inner circle of the Fedraktam Council granted it. Not, however, without making it plain that he will be terminated at the first sign of trouble, no questions or warnings. Nothing will be allowed to jeopardize the fragile new peace, after such numbing losses, with so much rebuilding needed.

I look down on him, immersed in webbings and instruments, suspended in the low-g capsule. I can see and hear the heartbeat and brain patterns, steady and nominal. Younger than forty-five? And here I am, fifty going on one thousand, every event of the last twenty years etched on my face and body. His chin is squarer, the cheekbones and nose sharper, the face of a man, not of the fragile-looking boy I loved so desperately that I flouted even Ferái. His eyelashes are back to their immoderate length and his shoulder-length hair is now copper – but wavy as I remember it. There are still patches of new skin on his face, chest, thighs, forearms, back. Broad shoulders, slim hips, tall, though not as lanky as... before. A man’s body to match the face.

He wasn’t allowed to reach consciousness during the procedure. Now we need to know what lives inside that frame. And the Fedraktam can still decide to execute him. I am responsible, of course. It was for my sake that he went down in flames.

“Bring him up,” I instruct the medic.

“Are you sure?” dhe replies after a short hesitation. “You know what the Fedraktam thinks.”

“We’ve been through all this before,” I retort. “I paid personally, the contract agreement holds. Reactivate the force field once I’m in the room. The toxin bead is embedded in his chest?” The doctor nods, hands me the chip for remotely activating the bead, then disconnects the field long enough for me to step inside the room.

“The red button,” dhe reminds me. “Once the toxin gets released, his heart will stop within a few beats.” As I cross the threshold, dhe quickly hands me a second package. “This just arrived from...” but the whoosh of the door drowns out the rest.

Once inside, I open the packet. In it, I find his mother's earring and his misedraht. The earring shows the cracks where it was welded back into one piece and a new moonstone glimmers in it. I feel my eyelids prickle.

I watch him as the sedative wears off. Half his life he spent fettered like a captive predator, how could he have borne it? He actually holds the record for tolerating prostheses, both length of time and extent. Such inhuman strength, all turned to bitterness. He showed no mercy to himself or anyone else, once he thought he had killed me. I see the brain waves get more complicated. Then his eyes open.

That unsettling blue gaze, that hasn't changed. My heart skitters in my chest. His eyes make a sweep of the room and finally fasten on me.

"You!" comes a ragged whisper. His heartbeat stutters, then starts to gallop. I reach over and turn off the monitors. I don't need any panic biofeedback, this will be complicated enough.

Excerpt from Chapter 7

Song of Songs

Ari'ven (Syradán) Tásri Sóran-Kerís
Orbiting station, Erganis sector, year 2 of the Reaha Nuazkat

Every time I surface into consciousness and feel her warm weight on my naked skin, I think I'm dreaming. My heart hammering in my chest, I sit up, catch sight of my hands in the dim light she always takes care to leave on – and I'm sure I'm dreaming. At any moment I expect to wake up and find myself on Fagrihte, teeth clamped so that I won't shriek from the pain in my stumps and corroded lungs while the maintenance robots go over me like insect swarms.

My mind still cannot quite encompass that she called in all her favors to bring me back, after I'd left scorched earth in my wake. I hold her, try to still my tremors, and beg every god and demon to grant me one more moment, one more breath in her arms... and if it's a dream, to let me die without awakening.

All softness has been burned away from her. When I caress her, my lips and fingers alight on scars. I don't have the courage to ask how she got them – nor the right. Now I know how she felt during the Girimdal Wars. And despite the awful weight of my need on her, back then she was a sprite, a bubbling brook. Now she never laughs or weeps, though she wields that astonishing strength of hers with the light, sure touch I remember so well. The long years honed her Sensor powers as well. I couldn't shield myself against her now even if I wanted to.

A deep line is etched on each side of her mouth, white streaks interrupt her nightfall of hair. To me, she's beautiful beyond description, beyond compare. I want her so badly that when she's not within sensing distance I feel the marrow drain out of my bones. Whenever she puts a hand on me, a sharp blade slits its way from my throat to my pubic bone. Each time she swells in my mouth and I taste the ozone of her approaching orgasm, lightning surges behind my eyelids. That I should once again please this woman with my touch! When I'm within, she pulses around me like a star core. Ripples of heat radiate from our point of fusion and I'm lost, lost, lost... a starship torn by tidal forces, a tree stripped by gales.

I never dared to hope she would join me in this wild gamble. Having her with me is bliss shot through with agony – I gave her my word I would not spare her and she's holding me to it with a vengeance. I keep a tight hold on my fear and temper, try to concentrate on the task at hand. All my promises to the people I love... this is my chance to fulfill some of them, at last.

Our uprising, against all odds, is gaining ground. In the end, the Gan-tem slavers and their business partners will give way when their ledgers show losses exceeding profits. We just need to hold out till then, make every battle count and keep the Reaha Nuazkat neutral.

But I have gnawing worries about my talge. Before, they were just weapon fodder. I called them by their names but no one kept count as long as the Idri kept growing them. Now, they

have become real people, with families. I prohibited the use of opaque helmets – if it were up to me, my fighters wouldn't wear helmets at all. Cooler heads prevailed on this, though I drew the line at wearing any armor myself. My misedraht will have to do as both shield and weapon. She's said nothing about this, though I hear the drone of concern in her mind.

Seeing the talge faces, with the marks that turn them into individual persons, made me realize that I was losing them at an alarming rate. That alerted me – that, and their partners' grief. After every engagement, laments in the languages of a dozen worlds rise from our makeshift bases like billowing black smoke. Combatants with minor wounds, who should have recovered, die. Their tissues are breaking down like flimsy fabric, the slightest infection or scratch kills them. I need answers, for their sake and for the sake of the slaves we're trying to help – and this time, I won't fail.

Excerpt from Chapter 11

Burnt Offerings

Antóa (Ánassa) Tásri-e Sóran-Kerís
The space yacht Ni'ván, year 3 of the Reaha Nuazkat

We emerge at the Kedi point. The space in front of us bristles with starships – frigates, cruisers, fighters ... and slowly lumbering, the last five Astal Nuazkat destroyers.

“Engage,” he instructs and our ships dive on the enemy fleet. They did not expect us, though surprise won’t compensate too long for the uneven numbers. Two of our squadrons take on their fighters. The other three start luring and herding the larger vessels, swirling like celestial butterflies. Our fighters target their power generators and command bubbles. Our boy weaves around our ship, sweeping the path fore and aft clear of obstacles even before they become visible on my screens. Exploding ships bloom silently like winter solstice fireworks over Imrái.

As we penetrate further into the thicket of ships, the enemy commanders identify our ship and start to converge on us. Blows buffet the *Ni'ván*. Inexorably, the hits begin to outweigh the misses. They pummel us with cannons and torpedoes, lunge at us with tractor beams and grapples. Each of them wants to be the one to capture or kill the Syradán of Erganis. He flows around them like water over rocks, one corner of his mind intent on our son. He does not bother to return fire. Instead, like a falling star in a gravity well, he aims our ship at the center of the enemy fleet.

“Distance?” he asks.

“Three more clicks,” I reply.

He loops between the turrets of a destroyer, twirls around two cruisers. A frigate looms in front of us. Our pilots swarm it, rip it to shreds with their space cannon. And our way is clear to the center of the fleet formation.

“Upon my mark, all fighters retreat to a distance of at least ten light ticks from this location, maximum speed,” he raps out. Acknowledgments flood through the comm. I count down, meet his eyes. “Mark,” he says. Our fighters start to peel away – and an agonized cry rings within my mind.

Díhe, pleads our son, díhe, mirán!

Withdraw! commands his father, his presence darkening. *You promised, my boy!*

I lean into the comm. “Go, my love!” A sob emerges from the comm and my son’s fighter spirals away from the *Ni'ván*.

“Take charge,” he tells me. “The shields must hold until...”

“They will hold,” I reply.

I divert all power to the shields, keeping the *Ni’ván* steady against the brutal bombardment from the enemy ships now thick upon us. He goes deathly still and withdraws deep into himself. Harnessing his full power, he starts to gather the local gravity field like a fishing net. Vast energies spiral around him. The interior of the *Ni’ván* crackles with blue lightning. His hair becomes a dark halo with glowing tips, his eyes tunnels of light.

I know what he intends. When he has them all within his grasp, he will release the bunched field, snap it like a misedraht. We will be torn apart, taking the enemy ships with us. He is holding on long enough to give our pilots time to withdraw to a distance where the ripples will toss them – but not break them. The light streaks that are our ships recede, become dots.

Are they safe? I hear in my mind.

Safe! I reassure him through the bond shimmering between us.

My son... He whispers across the distance. *Tell your sister...* He takes a moment to send me a tendril... the last caress. *Hold me, te’héyn!* And he becomes one with the vortex.

Control panels are short-circuiting. The bridge becomes a cave of sparks and smoke. The *Ni’ván* starts to slowly buckle under the pressure of the gravitational knot that he is tightening. The blue lightning leaps from its surface, ensnaring the enemy ships in a web of cold fire. I feel the energy spiking. And a hush descends inside my mind, the deep breath before the storm...