

# PART ONE: ARKHATI



It was with a mixture of awe and relief and a little sadness that I watched the tiny pearl-white bauble that was Arkhati Starhaven expanding to fill the entire field of the viewscreen before me. Part of me dreaded the idea of leaving the *Pinion* behind. The little ship with its crew of eleven—ten, now—had been my world for the last three months. It felt safe and familiar. But I now knew those feelings to be illusory. The explosion that had ripped through the cargo holds two weeks ago had compromised whole sections of the hull. The delicate membrane of air and warmth that sustained my life, and the lives of my crewmates, had revealed its astonishing soap-bubble fragility. All of us owed our continued survival to a combination of blind chance and brilliant Vardeshi

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engineering. In the ten days it had taken us to reach Arkhati, one system after another had threatened to fail. Whatever my misgivings about leaving the *Pinion*, the ship that had carried me away from Earth and my first home among the stars, there could be no denying that it was time to move on.

I leaned forward, ambivalence giving way to eagerness, as the starhaven swelled on the viewscreen. From a distance its starlit curves had seemed as ephemeral as blown glass. At close range, it was massive and reassuringly solid, acres of cold white metal and textured shadow. It looked like an elongated teardrop upended in space, its narrow end ringed with irregular protrusions like petals or feathers. Until now, my experience of Vardeshi structures had been limited to two shuttles and the *Pinion* itself; Arkhati was the first large-scale habitation I had seen. To my eyes it was both fantastical and a little frightening, a far cry from the crude blocky space stations currently circling Earth in low orbit. As Rhei Ziral, the ship's pilot, guided the *Pinion* with her customary deft touch toward one of the upper projections, I belatedly identified them as docking platforms.

“Ready to go?” said a voice beside me. I turned to find Zey Takheri, my closest friend among the Vardeshi, grinning up at me. With his enormous dark eyes and feathery silver-white hair, Zey was a perfect illustration of one of the first nicknames my people had given him, namely “Pixies.” He and I shared the title of novi, the lowest rank in the hierarchy of the Vardeshi Stellar Fleet, but Zey was

technically my superior due to seniority, a fact he never tired of pointing out. It didn't seem to trouble him that he had actually earned his title through the mandatory three years of training at the Fleet Institute, while mine was strictly honorary. He was just glad to have someone to share the novi work with. Our duties were largely menial, which was the only reason why anyone had thought a human might be able to perform them.

I flattered myself, though, that while the title might be only a courtesy, I had more right to it now than I had when I'd left Earth. When the *Pinion*'s communications network was sabotaged a month ago, I had been framed for the damage. After a humiliating sham trial, I had found myself demoted and confined to my quarters, a prisoner on the ship that had so recently begun to feel like home. With no way to contact Earth or my crewmates' homeworld of Vardesh Prime for mediation, I had been desperate for a way to exonerate myself and locate the real saboteur. The explosion in the cargo holds had forced my hand. I had proven my innocence the only way I could: through telepathic contact with Zey's older brother, Saresh, a senior officer on the *Pinion*. I was lucky that it had worked, and luckier that it had left my mind intact. Saresh and I had discovered that the real traitor was the *Pinion*'s commander, Vekesh. We had shared the truth with his second in command, Hathan, the third member of the Takheri family serving on the *Pinion*'s tiny crew. With Zey's help, he had subdued Vekesh and gained control of the ship, but not

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before Vekesh put both Saresh and myself in the ship's medical bay, him with a bullet in his leg, me with a deep graze on my arm from a second shot meant for my heart.

Vekesh had done his best to take down the nascent alliance between humans and Vardeshi. He had failed, but it was a close thing, and all of us—the crew of the *Pinion*, and the respective governments of Earth and Vardesh Prime, the Earth United Council and the Echelon—were still picking up the pieces. Over the past two weeks, with Vekesh himself locked safely away in his quarters awaiting trial on Arkhati, I had made my peace with my crewmates. They had been quick to offer the necessary apologies and explanations. I had been equally quick to forgive them. It helped that I liked them. I always had. They had been misled by Vekesh. They had misjudged me. That didn't make me like them any less.

However, they had fallen out of favor with the Echelon. The Vardeshi were a proud people. Possessed of technology infinitely superior to that of Earth, they were inclined to see themselves as superior in other ways as well. They had labored to eradicate poverty, disease, and inequality in their territories. Humanity, on the other hand, was still mired in war and bigotry, “the darkness within,” as the Vardeshi called it. There had been a presumption on both sides that if the alliance failed, it would be our fault. Vekesh's treachery had been a mortifying reversal for his people. While I spent my days on Arkhati resting, healing, and discovering the anthropological delights of a deep-space settlement no

human had ever visited before, my crewmates would be defending their actions to the Echelon in a sequence of formal hearings. The stakes were high; if the Echelon ruled against the *Pinion*'s crew, I would be continuing my journey toward Vardesh Prime on a ship crewed by strangers. For many reasons—friendship, and loyalty, and something even more compelling—I hoped they ruled in our favor. At present, though, it was anyone's guess what the outcome would be.

But that was a question for another day. For now, I had my friends back and a starhaven to explore. I shouldered my duffel bag and grinned back at Zey. "I'm ready. Let's go."

Most of the crew would remain on the *Pinion*, initiating shutdown procedures and assisting the equipment transport teams from Arkhati, but Zey had been cleared to escort me onto the starhaven. So had Sohra, the *Pinion*'s Systems specialist. Pensive and mild-mannered, with long dark hair and blue eyes that made her look at times startlingly human, Sohra was another whose friendship I had come to prize. The three of us walked down together through the ship to helix one, the lowest level, which housed the largest cargo bays—including the two that had decompressed—and the shuttle hangar. Beyond the hangar doors was another door whose function I had never known. Now Zey punched in a code and the panel slid back to reveal a chamber lined with the same globe-shaped lights familiar to me from the *Pinion*. "Are we on the starhaven?" I asked eagerly.

Zey laughed. "We're in the airlock." I followed him to

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the end of the chamber, where another panel slid open at his touch. The room beyond it was dark and vaulted, lit from below by a scattering of blue and green lights. Zey made an expansive gesture with the hand that wasn't holding an overnight bag. "Now we're on the starhaven."

I tilted my head back, trying to take in the scope of the chamber. I had the impression of a series of levels above our own, but I couldn't make them out in the dimness. Zey and Sohra went confidently up a ramp that climbed along one side of the enormous room toward the second level. I followed them, but I had gone only a few steps when an impossibly familiar voice behind me said, "Hey, Stranger."

I swung around and said incredulously, "Kylie?"

It was unmistakably her: Kylie Braswell, my closest companion from my two weeks of accelerated pre-launch training in Switzerland. She stood grinning at me, her blonde highlights gleaming in the eerie underwater lighting. She wore faded jeans and a yellow and white track jacket I recognized from the Villiger Center. How she had come to be here before me I didn't know. It didn't matter. I dropped my bag and threw myself at her, overcome with relief and gratitude. Her arms closed tightly around me. How often in the last three months had I longed for the touch of a fellow human, for a real hug, rather than the cautious embrace of someone inconceivably stronger than myself? I leaned into her warmth and solidity and the scent of her shampoo. It was a long time before I let go.

Finally I stepped back. "I can't believe this. What are you

doing here? How did you get here before me?”

“I launched in the second wave, remember? I was only two weeks behind you to begin with. We were due to arrive tomorrow, but the Council wanted me here to meet you when you docked. Dr. Okoye thought it would be good for you to see a familiar face. So we pushed our speed a little and got in last night.” She picked up my duffel bag. “Come on. I’ll take you to my rooms. They’re fantastic. It’s like being royalty or something.”

“Shouldn’t I be staying with my crew?”

“They’ll be close by. All the visitor quarters are grouped together. And this way we can share a kitchen. It’ll be easier all around. Trust me, there’s plenty of space.”

I looked at Zey and Sohra, who were watching with indulgent smiles. “You knew,” I said accusingly. “You knew she was already here.”

“We knew,” Sohra agreed. “Go get settled in. We know where to find you.”

“But isn’t there something I’m supposed to be doing right now?”

“Yes,” Zey said. “Unpacking. Go.”

I looked back at Kylie and laughed, giddy with excitement and surprise. “Well … okay. Lead on!”

It wasn’t actually Kylie who led us to her quarters, but a young silver-haired woman in an unfamiliar red and black uniform whose presence I hadn’t noticed before. “Station security,” Kylie explained as we walked. “We’ll have escorts everywhere we go. No one here has ever seen a human here.

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We're going to attract some attention. And after what happened to you, the Echelon isn't taking any chances with our security. But mostly I think they're worried about losing track of us. Arkhati is a big place."

"How many people live on the starhaven?" I asked our guide in Vardeshi.

I saw the flicker of surprise, swiftly controlled, on her face before she answered. "There's a permanent crew of about two thousand, and another thousand or so passing through at any given time."

"It's like a city," I said wonderingly.

I quickly discovered that, in terms of its size, Arkhati Starhaven was indeed like a city. It seemed to have been designed on the same spiraling, vaguely organic principles as the *Pinion*, but on a vastly larger scale. Enormous vaulted chambers like the one where Kylie had met me led into long, curving, segmented corridors that sloped unpredictably upward or downward. Twice we stood in small rooms that I took for elevators of some kind, although I couldn't see or feel any evidence of movement, and the corridors we stepped out into looked identical to those through which we had entered. I didn't see any of the thriving and colorful interstellar marketplaces my years of Vardrama consumption had led me to expect, and I wondered if we were being deliberately shunted into less-trafficked areas of the starhaven.

Kylie had been right: Arkhati was immense. I was glad I wasn't trying to navigate it alone. On my own, I would have

been lost almost at once, but more than that, something about the place made me uneasy. I knew the starhaven was centuries old, and I thought I would have known it even if my crewmates hadn't told me as much. There was a sense of accumulated age, of floors traversed by countless feet and door panels that had been touched by many fingers before my own. Time weighed heavily here. It was a feeling I associated with cathedrals and old forests on Earth. It was unsettling to feel it here, on a manufactured island in the depths of space. There were other things, too. The lights were a little too dim for my comfort; I found myself peering into shadows whose depths I couldn't quite make out. Now and then I caught hints of stale odors on the recycled air, traces of alien food and sweat that the atmospheric scrubbers couldn't entirely eliminate. All those faint impressions together spoke to what Dr. Okoye, the psychiatrist at the Villiger Center, would have called my animal self, whispering that I was a trespasser here.

We encountered a few dozen Vardeshi on our route, many in Fleet uniforms. I looked eagerly at each new face in turn. They generally resembled my crewmates: wide-set eyes, high foreheads, hair in every length from spikily short to a waist-length curtain, and every shade from brilliant snow-white to inky black. However, I saw an intriguing range of skin tones, ashy gray and powdery blue in addition to the typical alabaster white. Were those people from different planets? I wondered. Or was skin tone a cosmetic choice? I saw one or two excitingly novel hair colors as well,

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deep glossy red and vibrant gold. I knew those were artificial. I didn't know if they were meant to imitate human coloring. Most of those we passed ignored me and stared frankly at Kylie, whose messy bun and bright jacket marked her immediately as foreign. A few looked closer, and I saw two or three distinct double takes as they registered my uniform, then my bare right hand, lacking both the ink sigil denoting birth House and the gold one denoting marriage House, and finally my own exotic features. My hair was a duller shade of blonde than Kylie's, but my coloring—not to mention my height, which placed me at eye level with all but the tallest Vardeshi men—marked me indelibly as human.

As we walked, I began to notice small illuminated panels bearing helix markings at each corridor junction. I stopped to look more closely at one of the panels. "Helix seventy? How many levels are there?"

"The main structure has seventy-two," said our escort.

"So the guest quarters are at the top?"

She nodded.

"Just like on the *Pinion*," I observed. "What's at the bottom?"

"Crew quarters and docks. Your official tour is scheduled for this evening, after the formal reception." She sounded a little amused.

"Reception?" I repeated. I looked over at Kylie, whose blank expression indicated that she hadn't followed our exchange. "There's a reception for us?" I said in English.

“Oh, yeah. The official welcome ceremony. It’s dinner and then a tour or something. Here we are.” She stopped in front of a door, brushed her fingers across the panel to activate it, and keyed in her door code without hesitation. It was jarring to see another human operating Vardeshi tech with such facility. *You were never the only one*, I reminded myself. *It just felt that way*.

“I’ll be outside if you need anything,” our guide said as Kylie stepped inside.

I paused. “I do have a couple of questions. What are the water restrictions here? Are they the same as on the *Pinion*? And where do we sign up for showers?”

She was definitely amused now. “These are diplomatic suites, not novi quarters. You have a private shower in your room. And there are no water restrictions.”

I grinned. “Perfect.”

As I followed Kylie inside, I saw that she hadn’t been exaggerating. Her rooms were palatial. I stifled a laugh, thinking of my snug little berth on the *Pinion*, which was approximately the size of a storage crate by comparison. There was an expansive central room whose gauzy hangings and cushioned platforms resembled those in the *Pinion*’s lounge. Half-hidden doorways set into the walls promised other rooms, and I followed Kylie in turn to three different bedrooms, a sanitation room, the longed-for private shower, and a galley on whose gleaming surfaces a set of cooking gear identical to my own had been halfway unpacked. Each room was a little different from the last, but there was a

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richness of color and texture throughout that I hadn't expected. These were rooms for royalty, I thought, or at least for esteemed foreign dignitaries. I paused here and there as objects caught my eye: a green enamel table inlaid with amber spirals, a wall design of stone and pale wood tiles arrayed with geometric precision. I stopped to stroke a hanging the color of smoke shot through with glinting copper threads. It was unexpectedly soft beneath my fingers, silky even, though it looked more like linen. The contrasting shades called to mind the embroidered detail on Hathān's surcoat at officers' dinner a few nights earlier. I had had ample time to study the detail on his sleeve that evening while I was trying not to betray myself by looking into his face.

It had come as a considerable shock to me to discover during my brief telepathic contact with the eldest Takheri brother that I had fallen in love with the middle one. At a glance, there was nothing terribly captivating about Hathān. Saresh was the striking one in the family, at least to human sensibilities. Tall and slim, with long platinum hair and brilliant blue eyes, he was almost comically good-looking. Next to him, Hathān, smaller and slighter, with the monochrome coloring more typical of his people, nearly disappeared. I had seen at once that he was intelligent. It had taken me weeks to understand that his reserve concealed an acerbic wit, and longer to see the distinction in the narrow cast of his features. The light in his gray eyes was watchful and meditative and laughing by turns. Almost from

the start I had longed for his approbation. Not until I found myself a fugitive on a wounded ship, so desperate to clear my name that I would put my mental integrity at risk, had I understood why. And by that point he had already decided to hate me.

Of everyone on the *Pinion*, Hathan had been the most susceptible to Vekesh's poison. He had known Vekesh and respected him for years. I, on the other hand, was a stranger, a literal alien, invited for largely political reasons into a menial position—Ambassador Seidel, describing the title of *novi* to me, had called it “effectively a service role”—for which it was generally assumed I would prove inadequate. I had no relevant training and no facility with Vardeshi technology. From the start, he had been distant and wary of me. A sequence of badly timed encounters had caused me to slide even further in his esteem. His astonishment at learning me to be innocent of the charges leveled at me by Vekesh must have been nearly equal to mine at discovering my true feelings for him.

To his credit, he had been quick to acknowledge his error in judgment. But he could hardly have done otherwise. I had learned early on in my journey that the vast majority of Vardeshi possessed latent telepathic powers. A scant few were Blanks, completely impervious to telepathic contact, or Voxes, in full and conscious command of their abilities. Zey was the former, Saresh the latter. It was for that reason, we assumed, that he had been able to access my memories in the Listening. For the Vardeshi, there could be no

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exoneration more complete than the word of a Vox. In the eyes of my crewmates, not to mention the Fleet and the Echelon, Saresh's declaration of my innocence was the final word on the subject.

Saresh had gone into my mind looking for the truth. He had found more there than either of us expected. He now knew my secret. I wished, at times desperately, that he didn't. Left to myself to choose a confidant, I would hardly have chosen Hathan's brother. I had to admit, though, that in the two weeks since Saresh had learned of my feelings, he had been perfectly discreet. He had to be; he was bound by the Vox code of ethics, which required him to keep in confidence any and all truths revealed during the Listening. I was grateful for the code, and for my knowledge, founded upon my friendship with Saresh and strengthened during my brief glimpse of his mind, of his fundamental kindness and integrity. Without those things, I would have had no choice but to abandon my crewmates and continue my mission toward Vardesh Prime on a different ship. The risk would simply have been too great. I could think of no torment worse than finding myself confined on a tiny ship with Hathan, months out in the darkness between starhavens, after he realized that I was in love with him.

Kylie's voice broke into my thoughts. "Picked a room yet?"

"This one," I said without hesitation. It was the smallest of the three bedrooms, though easily twice as large as my novi quarters, and had a shelf bed tucked against a wall. I

wasn't sure I could sleep any more without my shoulder pressed into a bulkhead thrumming with the pulse of distant engines.

As we wandered from one chamber to the next, I felt my tension beginning to ease. The lighting in Kylie's rooms was warmer and brighter than anything I'd seen elsewhere on the starhaven. I wondered if someone had thoughtfully adjusted the frequencies in advance of her arrival. The temperature seemed a little warmer, too. Those facts, and the fineness of the furnishings, confirmed what our nameless guide had said in the corridor: We were diplomats here. The reminder was a salient one for me. Under Vekesh's command, I had been an envoy of humanity in name only. In reality, I had been the lowest-ranking and worst-regarded member of a tiny staff, immersed in the petty concerns of shipboard life. With our arrival on Arkhati, my status had markedly altered. That meant elegant rooms and private showers, but it also meant different expectations. I would be representing my people on a wider stage now. All eyes would be on me and Kylie at tonight's reception, and my hard-won knowledge of the different Vardeshi factions told me not all of them would be friendly. I was intimidated by the thought, but not as much so as I might have been. In an odd way, Vekesh had unintentionally given me a gift. What would it signify if I dropped my fork or forgot a few names at dinner? Short of actually pulling out a gun and shooting someone, it would be hard for me to embarrass my people more thoroughly than he had already

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embarrassed his.

“This is the best part,” said Kylie, leading me back into the main room. At its far end a short flight of wide shallow steps led up to a terrace with a series of arched viewports serving as its exterior wall. The terrace was furnished with a scattering of the familiar padded stools and low tables, but I picked my way through them with hardly a glance, drawn toward what looked at first like an enormous piece of abstract art rendered in black and white. As I approached the viewports, the image resolved itself, and I realized what I was seeing: the bulk of the starhaven itself in stark white silhouette against the blackness of space. As I stood looking out, stunned by the scale of the place, a flash of movement drew my eye. A craft of a type I’d never seen, spindly and slender-winged like a dragonfly, was lifting off from one of the landing platforms far below. It drifted upward, aimlessly at first, gaining speed as it rose. When it flashed past the viewport, I realized it was much larger than I’d thought. Its iridescent skin, reflecting the stars and the moon-white surface of the starhaven itself, shone blindingly bright. It rose a little higher, then changed course abruptly and arrowed away into the night.

“Holy shit,” I said to Kylie, and we both started to laugh.