

# Child of Chaos

The Chesan Legacy Series  
Book One

D.E. WILLIAMS



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In Memory of

MARY CELLINO

The definition of a Best Friend.  
Thanks for always believing in me.



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## ***PROLOGUE***

Marcus Sienne, Supreme Commander of the Odean Hierarchy, gazed around the dimly lit room at the grim faces of his closest advisors. Four men and two women frowned at the dark haired young lieutenant holding a girl child barely two years old. The lieutenant's life hung in the balance over the crime he'd committed, and he cast hopeless dark eyes in Sienne's direction. Left on his own, the Supreme Commander would have used the circumstances as a training exercise for his advisors, but thin gold bands imbedded in his wrists tingled as they conveyed an imperative message to his thoughts.

*Save the child at all costs. Save the lieutenant if you can, but you must save the child.*

Sienne bristled at the timing of the intrusion and the entity that sent the message. The bands had remained dormant through months of negotiations that had culminated in the self-imposed genocide of the Chesan race. Now, after the deaths of hundreds of millions, the bands awoke to urge him to spare one small life from that doomed planet.

"Lieutenant Tama," Commander Jalen broke the heavy silence. His bald head glistened in the dim light. "Are you unaware of the meaning of genocide?"

"I am aware of its meaning, sir." Lieutenant Ren Tama replied.

General Nall, a tall ebony-skinned man, stepped toward Tama. "Then perhaps, Lieutenant, you didn't understand the gravity of the mission to which you were assigned, or the strict orders you were under?"

Tama did not turn to face the General, but the little girl squirmed in his arms until her wide gray eyes could peek over his shoulder.

The Supreme Commander couldn't see the child's face, but he caught the General's offended look just before the little girl settled back into Tama's arms. Despite the gravity of the situation, the Supreme Commander suppressed a smile. The girl had probably stuck her tongue out at Nall.

Tama struggled to stand at attention with the child climbing all over him. "I understood my orders, sir."

"Then be so kind as to tell us what those orders were. Just so we're all clear that you understood," Nall said.

"My orders were to fly a recon pattern over the territory the shock troops had cleaned, perform low-altitude scans for any life forms, and if any humanoid forms were identified, to terminate *en silo rei*."

"Did your scanners pick up a humanoid form?" Commander Jalen asked.

"Yes, sir." Tama's deep voice remained steady. "A clearly humanoid life form registered two hundred clicks from the capital city, in a small village in the foothills."

"What does terminate *en silo rei* mean to you, Lieutenant?" Colonel Brenden Aren's voice dripped venom – a surprise since he and the Lieutenant had been best friends prior to the current incident.

The Supreme Commander's eyes swept to Colonel Aren, the youngest member of the advisory council –

another problem that needed a resolution in this meeting. Just nineteen years old, Colonel Aren had distinguished himself in battle and in politics – but Sienne had to find a way to bring that career to an end and exile his young advisor.

Anger flashed in Tama's eyes. He raised his chin before responding. "*En silo rei* is total sanitation of the area – *Sir*. Destroy the life form and any possible habitat or shelter. Take no chances that the life form might escape."

"Who gave you that order, Lieutenant, and when?" Colonel Aren asked.

"You did, sir, six months ago when you assigned me to the sanitation detail." Tama kept his eyes forward. His face reddened.

"Lieutenant Tama, what did you do when you saw the reading?" A petite gray-haired woman spoke. "Tell us every step you took before coming to this room."

"I landed the Stellar Hawk, ma'am," Tama replied.

Gasps and mumbled comments went forth from everyone except Colonel Aren. His jaw clenched and his electric blue eyes never left the lieutenant.

"The instruments indicated a life-form that was smaller than an average humanoid for that planet. So I disembarked and entered the building," Tama said. The little girl remained motionless in his arms. "This child was sitting in the middle of a residence floor, playing with a toy. I drew my weapon, but I – I couldn't pull the trigger. So I bundled her and her toy into my pack and stowed her in the cabin of my fighter then destroyed the residence and surrounding area with a missile. When I returned to the carrier she was asleep and I transferred her to a storage locker in the hangar dressing room until we docked in orbit around Odea. I realized the futility of trying to get her off the ship when they started checking packs for contraband taken from the planet. When the enormity of my transgression sank in, I sent a request on a secured channel to meet with the Supreme Commander. His diplomatic seal allowed me to smuggle her into this chamber in my pack. No one else has seen her."

Tama's confession brought an outburst from Sato, a squat man wearing a dark uniform. "Your disobedience has compromised the entire contract. Not only that, but it calls into question the integrity of the Hierarchy in fulfilling any contract under consideration. If this transgression got out, we'd be ruined."

Marcus Sienne studied Sato. With the planet's entire economy revolving around its ability to supply armies, assassins, advisors, and other military operatives who carried out orders with unfailing consistency, the negotiator had a right to be concerned – especially with a breach of this magnitude.

"The question now is one of options." Sienne kept his eyes on the child. "The third-party observers performed the remote scans and genocide was confirmed. Payment has been transferred."

"Yes, Supreme Commander, but that leaves us stuck between conflicting terms of the contract," Sato said. "The servant races on Ceyon were not to be harmed, enslaved, or otherwise enticed into the Hierarchy, whereas, the Chesans were to be exterminated."

"And Odea has no base record with which to compare this child's DNA or physiology to confirm that she is of the Chesan race and should die. The remote scanners were destroyed?" Sienne asked.

The gray-haired woman nodded.

"Then we can't go to the intermediaries for confirmation. Even if that option existed, we would expose our negligence and forfeit our fees. Without confirmation, are we to terminate what might be an innocent child accidentally left behind by non-Chesan servants?"

Sienne stared at the child. She stared back unafraid and Sienne's glare softened. A spark of hope ignited in Lieutenant Tama's eyes, then faded as Sienne took the child from his arms. Tama straightened to attention and kept his eyes forward. The little girl stared into the old man's face. She was such a small thing to cause so many problems. Sienne had fourth generation progeny of his own of her age. He never allowed their

caregivers to know they were his offspring, but he had access to the breeding records and knew each child of his genetic string. He watched them from a distance, and he knew their successes and failures.

“Perhaps the geneticists can make use –”

“No!” Sienne snapped at Reand, a red-haired female scientist from the genetics lab. “That I forbid. Our contract was for eradication of every Chesan remaining on the planet and we were strictly forbidden to acquire DNA samples from any inhabitant of Ceyon. We all agree those terms were explicit. We therefore cannot supplement our gene pool with this child’s DNA on the chance that she is Chesan. There will be no further discussion along those lines.”

“Yes, Supreme Commander.” Reand lowered her eyes.

“That does not answer the question of our liability under the contract,” Sato said.

Negotiators were a necessary evil, but that fact made them no easier to tolerate in Sienne’s opinion.

“That is true. We failed to fulfill the contract by one small child. The day of reckoning has passed and the planet has been sealed. No Chesans remain on Ceyon, but one may remain here.” Sienne carried the child away from the group. Things more dire than the child’s existence threatened the galaxy and Colonel Aren had to leave the Hierarchy to investigate them. The time had come to draw his prodigy colonel into a trap. “Colonel Aren, you spent months with the Chesan nobility before the genocide.”

“At their request, sir.” Colonel Aren spoke in a respectful tone, but the verbal venom he’d lavished on Lieutenant Tama now spilled from the electric blue glare he turned toward his Supreme Commander.

“Did they tell you why they chose to destroy their entire race?” Sienne asked.

He shouldn’t have asked the question. The Chesan negotiators had refused to disclose the information and threatened to walk away from the arrangements when pressed. The Hierarchy had backed off and agreed to let the matter lie. But the child’s life rested on the answer to the question – an answer Brenden Aren no doubt knew, but wouldn’t share.

Muscles tensed in Colonel Aren’s neck as he clenched his jaw. He came to attention, but his arms didn’t quite touch his sides. He’d favored his wrists during the entire meeting. Sienne knew the reason for Aren’s pain and counted on it to aid him in baiting the younger man.

“I will ask you once again, Colonel Aren. Did they tell you their reason for destroying their entire race?”

“Yes, Supreme Commander, they told me.”

“In detail?” Sienne ignored the shocked looks of his other advisors.

“Yes, Supreme Commander.” Colonel Aren’s back stiffened, as if he sensed the trap. But the perspiration on his forehead and the twitch in his jaw said he was in too much pain to concentrate on escape. “In great detail.”

“Can you share those details with us, Colonel?” It was a request, not an order, but Sienne saw no relaxation in Colonel Aren’s stance.

“No, Supreme Commander. I cannot.”

The others turned to Colonel Aren in disbelief, but he didn’t acknowledge their stares. His eyes remained locked on the Supreme Commander.

“The Chesans swore you to secrecy?” Sienne asked.

“Yes, sir,” Colonel Aren replied.

“And if I were to order you to do so?”

Colonel Aren hesitated before answering. He seemed to grasp at last the manipulation that had placed him in jeopardy and fury gleamed in his eyes. His response would end his career with the Hierarchy, whatever he said.

“The answer would remain the same, Supreme Commander.” The young Colonel had sealed his fate with those words.

“You value an oath to a dead race more than your allegiance to the Hierarchy? More than the highest allegiance you’ve sworn to me personally?” Colonel Aren had to verbally acknowledge his insubordination for Sienne to do what he needed to do.

“We are bound by our oaths, Supreme Commander. Lies are necessary in an assassin’s calling, and deception is a powerful tool to the strategist, but I acted in neither of those capacities with the Chesan nobility. They required the oath before they would allow me to proceed with negotiations or carry out any other part of my mission. I did so, only because finite oaths are allowed by protocol, and this oath is binding for only thirty years.”

“Protocols do not supersede orders, Colonel,” Sienne stated.

“No, sir. But if my oaths have no value, how can the Hierarchy trust my words? Should I disregard the strict rules regarding oaths and ignore the severe punishments for breaking them?” Colonel Aren didn’t budge.

“This child’s fate hinges on the reason for the Chesan genocide. She could belong to any one of the servant races. I won’t condemn her if the reason involves only the Chesans and not the servant races. I tend to believe it involves only the Chesans, otherwise they wouldn’t have allowed the servants to leave.”

“Supreme Commander, that child must be destroyed.” Colonel Aren made the emphatic statement as though referring to a deadly bacterium.

“Can you look at this child and identify her as a Chesan solely by her appearance?” Sienne asked.

The Colonel hesitated. “If she was on the planet, her race must be assumed.”

“The child was found in a servant village, far from the capital.”

“That means nothing. Any member of the Chesan race could have taken a child to that village. A servant could have taken her from Chesan parents to save her.” Colonel Aren’s arguments didn’t fall on deaf ears. General Nall and Commander Jalen both nodded.

“And if she is a servant’s child? Do we ignore one non-negotiable stipulation in favor of the other? She may have been left by servants in their hurry to escape.” The Supreme Commander stared hard at his teenaged advisor, willing him to verbalize his insubordination.

“If she is one of the lesser races, then she is an unfortunate casualty of a desperate plan, sir. Assume her race and dispose of her,” Colonel Aren said.

“Colonel, I order you to explain the reason for the Chesan genocide plan.” This was the moment of truth for both of them.

“I’m sorry, Supreme Commander. I will not obey that order.”

Sienne let the built-up tension slide from his shoulders. He had what he wanted – Brenden Aren’s fate now rested solely with him as the disrespected officer. He would choose the punishment, and no review board or counsel could intercede to change the Colonel’s future.

The child sprang upright in the Supreme Commander’s arms and turned her silent stare toward the Colonel. He stared back at her for some time before tearing his gaze away. Sienne blinked. Colonel Aren never looked away from a stare. The young man’s boldness was one reason Sienne had chosen him as an advisor. Yet this child inspired fear in Aren’s paralyzing blue stare. The fact sent a chill up Sienne’s spine. Colonel Aren had just condemned himself to severe punishment, torture, or expulsion from the Hierarchy – possibly even execution – without batting an eye, but this child made him look away in fear. The Supreme Commander walked to the center of the room, where Lieutenant Tama stood. His words fell like heavy stones in the silence.

“We can assume nothing, Colonel. One way or the other.” He handed the child to the Lieutenant and she jumped into the younger man’s arms, her face all smiles, though she didn’t make a sound.

“If no one else has the stomach to do the job,” Colonel Aren said. “Give the child to me and I’ll see to it.”

The Supreme Commander straightened as if the Colonel had shot him in the back. “I’m sure any member of the Elstaar shock troops could provide that service, Colonel. Nor am I squeamish in such matters when the need is clear. However, I lack clarity. Can you give me a way to determine this child’s heritage without confirmation outside this room?”

“You already know that’s impossible, sir.” Colonel Aren replied.

“Precisely, Colonel. So give me options, not orders.”

“Only calamity will come from letting that child live, and the Chesans will have paid a horrible price in vain.” Colonel Aren lost any pretense of respect as he shouted.

Jaws dropped around the room. Did the man *want* to face an execution squad?

“I will deal with your insubordination momentarily, Colonel. You’ve forfeited your right to voice your opinion and this disrespect to my rank won’t go unpunished. Now, does anyone else have something different to add?” Sienne scanned the faces of his advisors. None said anything. Some looked away as his eyes met theirs.

“Sir.” Tama’s voice caught. “Would it be possible to place her in one of the Grid Academies? I know she’s young yet, but she could live with the refugee children until she’s old enough for testing.”

“A noble suggestion, Lieutenant, and one I would otherwise embrace. However, since she may be a Chesan survivor, we cannot use her to directly enrich our ranks any more than we can use her to enrich our gene pool.” Sienne waited for other responses. “Very well, since there are no other suggestions, I take the burden of deciding the child’s fate upon myself. All arguments will be considered, but the final decision rests with me. For that reason, and because of the possible repercussions should this failure be exposed, I’ll ask my advisors to report to the memory adjusters and have the last two hours erased from their thoughts. Please log your general testimony of Colonel Aren’s insubordination and Lieutenant Tama’s dereliction of duty prior to the adjustment. Colonel Aren and Lieutenant Tama will remain with me for the present. There is still the matter of their punishments - which I will also handle alone. General Nall, please have two squads of guards wait in the outer office when you leave – one for each of them. I will give orders to the Captain of the Guard when I’m done.”

As the older men and women left, the Supreme Commander ordered the two younger officers to stand at attention before him. He waited for Colonel Aren to move to the center of the room before speaking again.

“Put the child on the floor, Lieutenant.”

The little girl’s lower lip quivered. Nevertheless, Tama set her on the floor at the Supreme Commander’s feet. She remained silent, but watched the Lieutenant through tearful gray eyes. When he straightened, no emotion showed on his features and he didn’t glance downward.

Sienne took a moment to study the young men side by side. One dark, one fair. Both brilliant. Apart from this fiasco both men had impeccable and impressive service records. What had caused Tama’s sudden breach of obedience? Why had Aren’s friendship turned to seething anger?

Between them sat a mysterious dark-haired child with steel gray eyes that could penetrate his soul. No doubt the three of them shared a bond and a destiny that only Colonel Aren understood – and feared.

What Sienne planned for his youngest advisor would make Brenden Aren forget any fear he’d found on Ceyon. And the punishment that awaited Lieutenant Tama would remove any hesitation the young man would ever have in taking a life, if it didn’t break him entirely.

The bands on his wrists went silent once again. The child would live, but at what cost? Brenden Aren was no coward to fear a child or advocate her death without reason. Yet, the entity controlling the gold bands would never shield a known threat. Only the reason for the Chesans’ mass suicide could begin to explain any of it – and Colonel Aren wouldn’t give up that reason for another thirty years. Marcus Sienne, the man, hoped to live long enough to see how this tri-bond would play out in the future. But Marcus Sienne, the

Supreme Commander of the Odean Hierarchy, hoped he didn't live long enough to find he'd made an incalculable error in the judgments he'd pronounce.

## CHAPTER ONE

Tridia Odana, strapped securely into a passenger seat of the planetary transport hopper, watched the surface of Odea grow larger as the craft descended. The sprawl of Rodan Base and its sister city, Rodan, had always impressed her from the air. But not today. Today she'd spent an hour as a passenger in close proximity to angry prisoners. Blocking their rage had left her on the brink of exhaustion after the grueling Challenge Mission she'd just completed.

Eyes closed, she prepared her mind for the onrush of activity awaiting her inside the checkin station. Although she'd succeeded on the Challenge field, her true objective had eluded her and only one chance remained to achieve it. If everything went according to plan, the chance to obtain true victory and see justice done would arise inside the station. If she could steel herself for a bit longer.

The prisoners – her prisoners – would suffer proper humiliation when the Challenge Review Board received the highlights and reports of the mission. But the thought gave Tridia no pleasure. Larger matters and deeper motives fueled the conflict between her and the three men in the prisoner locker.

As she unfastened the buckles holding her to the seat, one of the men shouted her name with a curse. She looked through the transparent static field separating her from the three men shackled to the wall and belted into their seats. Her signature noose that bound their necks and ankles caused them to bend almost double – and they had ridden in that uncomfortable position all the way from the desert training field. Small wonder they were furious with her.

“Rage all you like, vermin dogs. You lost your chance and your prestige. Now you belong to me for a week. And I can promise you it will be the longest week of your sorry lives. Then you will face the Tribunal.” Tridia spoke with such an edge to her voice that she momentarily silenced the men. Then the moment passed and they returned to cursing her, screaming at her back as she exited the craft.

Normally, Tridia made a striking sight wherever she went, tall and slender in her bright red jumper with a jet-black braid of hair that hung to her knees and moody silver-gray eyes. But returning from a four-day Challenge Hunt, the disheveled red jumper smelled of dirt and four days of dried perspiration. The single long braid threatened to come loose from its band and was so coated with sand and dust that it appeared almost as gray as her almond shaped eyes – eyes badly bloodshot from heat, dust, and lack of sleep. Even so, she managed to keep her back straight and her steps sure as she approached the counter. She couldn't falter in any way, despite the exhaustion seeping into her very being. The exterior of the invincible warrior must remain intact at all costs. And it cost Tridia dearly not to wince under the crush of thoughts hammering at her brain.

The senior clerk attended her while others worked on clearing out an assortment of soldiers fresh from other Challenge missions.

*Triumphant again, Colonel Odana? Now is it to be "Commander Odana"? Seventeen years old, and cocky well beyond those years. No matter; the White Level Challenge will cut you down to size.*

Tridia heard the old clerk's sarcastic thoughts, but his face remained impassive as he accounted for her hand weapon, power packs, and knives. Base regulations forbid personal weapons beyond the checkin station.

Tridia glanced away with boredom stamped on her face. The old clerk held a grudging respect for her, but he often hoped to see her fail. He wasn't alone in the sentiment. Many others over the years had hoped for her to return to the station as a prisoner. Tridia never let on that she heard any of their private thoughts – never let the senior clerk know he'd given her valuable information on her opponents and their weapons. She'd been warned at an early age that the geneticists would haul her away to their lab for study if she exposed her telepathy, so she kept the ability to herself.

She signed the electronic form the clerk presented to her, then entered her identification into the Challenge Grid computer. A message flashed across the screen: "Congratulations, Commander Odana. The Review Panel awaits your report." Tridia left the counter, making only momentary eye contact with the clerk. She strained her mind to block the mental voices bombarding her from the fifty or so people in the lobby area. Her prisoners would arrive soon, and she had to be in sight when they did.

A particularly rowdy pair of hunters stepped away from the counter. Dressed in jungle camouflage, they'd just returned from their own Challenge mission. Tridia recognized them as Green Level apprentices with nasty reputations as hunters. Tall and muscular, they moved with an arrogant swagger intended to attract as much attention as possible. Many people watched them cross the room – the women with curiosity, the men with disdain or admiration, depending on their maturity level. Tridia despised the two hunters with a loathing she reserved for bullies who tormented weaker opponents. As a Commander, she couldn't participate in Apprentice Challenges, so they would never face her in the field, but Tridia enjoyed the idea of stifling their arrogance. Any other time she would call them to attention and dress them down for their behavior, but more important considerations required her strained faculties. She would have let them leave without a fuss had guards not led their unfortunate prisoner into the station just as Tridia crossed their path.

The two hunters taunted a teenaged girl who limped in flanked by armed guards. The girl's Yellow Initiate's jumper was filthy with mud and stains from the jungle's voracious vegetation, the right sleeve torn and bloody. Dried blood caked her right cheek, mud and leaves tangled her blonde hair, and a green rope bound her hands in front of her.

"Oh, little bird, we're going to have fun tonight!" One of the green-clad hunters said. "You will be cleaned and dressed and entertaining us until the wee hours."

"That's right, little bird," said the other, stroking the left cheek of the petite blonde. "And if you're especially good, we might let you go back to your dorm before the week is up!"

He laughed coarsely. Life among the Challenges meant if you lost, hunter or prey, you paid in some way. It kept the weak and unprepared from attempting Challenges they knew they couldn't win. But Hierarchy rules applied even in the Challenges. Tridia stepped over to the young woman without speaking and examined her wounds. The cut on the girl's face would heal quickly. The gash on her arm, however, required a medic's immediate attention.

"What is your name, Initiate?" Tridia examined the deep wound and the infected area around it. Plant spores encrusted the exposed flesh.

"Lera Cal," the young woman answered. No more than fifteen years old, two years younger than Tridia. The girl's voice quavered and her eyes grew large. Tridia shut out the inevitable awe Lera Cal felt when she recognized her rank and her face.

“Where else are you injured?” Tridia asked.

“No place that shows,” the hunter who had stroked the captive’s face replied, trying to step between Tridia and the girl.

Tridia narrowed her eyes and placed her fingertips squarely on the man’s chest. She spoke in a low tone. “When I want a response from you, Apprentice, I will address you directly. Is that understood?”

“He didn’t mean anything by it, ma’am,” his partner tried to intercede. The fear in his mind revealed that he recognized Tridia. His companion ignored him. The babble in the room hushed as others noticed the group and stopped to watch. General anticipation replaced the multitude of thoughts she’d barricaded from her mind.

“I did not address you, either, Apprentice.” She cast a quick glance in the second man’s direction.

“This is none of your concern,” the first man stood to his full height, a head taller than Tridia, and flexed his arms. The fabric of his sleeves stretched. “We have the right to a week with our captured prey. A week where she’s *our* property.”

“J’Lel, you idiot!” the companion spoke again. “Don’t you see the red jumper? You’re outranked! Don’t you know who this is?”

Recognition not forthcoming, J’Lel glared at his friend.

Across the room, four guards hustled three outraged men through the prisoner’s entrance. Clad in dusty tan jumpers with bright blue insignia, the men spat curses at anyone in sight until they noticed Tridia.

“You brood-fodder!” one of them yelled.

“We’ll get even with you for this,” a second one shouted. “You’ll have to be alone sometime.”

“All it will take is one turned back,” the third said.

“You won’t last a week with us,” the first man said. All three laughed.

Tridia smiled a small, cold smile. She had them.

It seemed to dawn on the guards and the captives all at once that they’d walked into a tense situation. When Tridia didn’t look around or answer their threats, the male captives ceased shouting. The guards drew their weapons.

“Colonel Odana, are you engaging in an unauthorized Challenge?” The ranking guard, Captain Anton Heilen, held his blaster at his side.

As the head of the Challenge Grid Guard, Captain Heilen had absolute authority over her in any matter related to or arising from a Challenge. He’d known Tridia for most of her life and showed her a lot of respect, but he wouldn’t tolerate a breach in this area. Heilen would take her into custody in a heartbeat for a gross infraction of the rules, but he wouldn’t do it without giving her a chance to explain.

“You know it’s unlawful for a Colonel of the Red Level to Challenge or accept a Challenge from an Apprentice of the Green,” Heilen said.

“Captain Heilen, you’re far more astute than you’re behaving.” Tridia didn’t take her eyes from J’Lel as she leveled the jibe. “Those are my captives in your custody. I’ve logged my mission and now rank as Commander. For your information, I’m endeavoring to teach this Apprentice his place in the Hierarchy. It’s my right – and my responsibility.”

“As you say, Commander.” Captain Heilen acknowledged Tridia’s explanation, but held his weapon ready all the same. Tridia rarely – overtly – started an incident, but the incidents involving her almost always came to bad endings for everyone else, and Heilen wasn’t taking a chance on getting caught unprepared in the middle of a fight.

A change came over J’Lel with the mention of Tridia’s name. His eyes widened as he stared down at the fingertips pressed against his chest. All aggression drained from his stance.

Tridia let a hard smile linger on her lips as she sensed his thoughts. J’Lel had heard about this technique,

known as the *deathstrike*, and of the few who could master it. With a flick of her wrist she could stop his heart. Rules allowed her to use the killing attack as long as she could start his heart again before death or physical damage became permanent.

“What would you have us do with your captives, ma’am?” Captain Heilen asked.

Tridia didn’t glance away when she answered, but kept her eyes locked with J’Lel’s. Certain spoken protocols must be met for her plan to succeed. Captain Heilen was one of the few men on the planet she respected without reservation, and she regretted involving him in the scheme, but she couldn’t do it without him. She drew a deep breath and started the exchange.

“Captain, is there a penalty for retaliating on a Challenge?” Tridia asked.

“Yes, ma’am, as you know,” Heilen answered.

“What is that penalty?”

“Loss of two ranks, fifty lashes across the back, and six months in hard labor servitude.”

The male captives fidgeted at the edge of Tridia’s peripheral vision.

“And Captain, is there a penalty for the threat of retaliation made before witnesses?” Tridia continued.

“Yes . . . Commander.” Heilen faltered as he answered. The realization of where this conversation would lead hit him with a sudden shock. He knew what was coming and couldn’t stop it. Tridia felt for him, but kept speaking.

“And what is that penalty?” she asked.

Captain Heilen glanced at the prisoners. His thoughts revealed one of them meant a great deal to him.

“The penalty is . . .” Heilen hesitated, no one moved or spoke. “The penalty is the loss of one rank, forty lashes across the back in the Public Square, and three months hard labor servitude.”

“Captain Heilen, may these penalties be combined?” Tridia asked.

“If the offenses are egregious, Commander, the perpetrator may have the penalties combined against him at the insistence of the victim or victims.”

Without taking her eyes from the motionless J’Lel or removing her fingertips from his chest, Tridia raised her left knee and unzipped a pocket on her pants leg. She removed a small silver disk in a clear case and held it up for all to see.

“I told my prisoners I had this disk before our Challenge started. They were most anxious to obtain it from me. Sloppy work on their part that they failed. It’s a security disk from the Square taken after the midnight shift change eight weeks ago. Three assailants beat an officer until he was unconscious. They beat him because he’d bested Commanders Ka’Tain and Ia’Lon the day before in a Blue-level Challenge. The victim of that incident won’t be able to make a request for combined penalties, as he is in the hospital with injuries that may leave him unconscious for months, if not forever. However, they threatened me within your own hearing. Is that not correct, Captain?”

“That is correct, Commander.” The Captain spoke without much heart.

“What does ninety lashes do to the body, Captain?” Tridia asked. Her voice could have dropped the room’s temperature by ten degrees. She knew the answer to the question as well as the Captain, but the prisoners needed to hear it.

“No one has ever survived sixty. . . Commander.” The anguish behind Heilen’s whispered voice reached through Tridia’s barriers.

“I have no wish to deprive the Hierarchy of soldiers. However, since I cannot let these offenses go unpunished –“

“We have a right to Tribunal,” the three captives shouted, almost in one voice.

“Silence!” one of the guards barked.

“Since I cannot let these offenses go unpunished, as a Commander I may choose a lesser penalty without

the necessity of Tribunal,” Tridia continued.

“I demand my Tribunal.” Ka’Tain, a muscular bully built like an assault tank, said in a panicked voice.

“Captain, does the Tribunal have the authority to offer a lesser penalty once the evidence against the accused has been substantiated?” Tridia asked.

“None,” Captain Heilen replied.

The silence in the lobby became absolute.

“And if they accept my lesser penalty now, there is no appeal?”

“That is correct, ma’am.”

“I still want –” Ka’Tain grunted, as if one of his companions landed a swift elbow to his gut.

“Shut up, you fool! We’re in this mess because of you. Commander Kyle won that Challenge fairly. I won’t be whipped to death for your stupid pride and temper. If you hadn’t insisted on following him into the Square . . .” a second prisoner, Wa’Ren, addressed the guards. “I accept the lesser penalty.”

“We acknowledge your acceptance, Commander Wa’Ren, however, you are all accused together. You must all accept the same penalty.” Captain Heilen looked to the other two men.

“I accept the lesser penalty.” The third prisoner, a burly soldier, spoke with resignation in his voice.

“We acknowledge your acceptance, Commander Ia’Lon,” Captain Heilen stated.

Tridia concentrated on her peripheral vision. She hadn’t insisted that the guards bind her captives upon removing them from the transport, but each one appropriately dangled her noose from his neck. Ka’Tain rubbed his ribs. Everyone waited for his statement.

“I accept the lesser penalty.” He spat the words at Tridia, but she didn’t turn to look at him.

“Very well,” Tridia said. “You, Apprentice, stand here and don’t move.”

Tridia withdrew her fingertips from the young man’s chest. He didn’t flutter an eyelash as she turned to face the prisoners.

She inhaled and took her time to look from one man to the other. Their anger, fear, and anguish mingled with the anticipation of all those watching. Those emotions broke against the wall of her memories and made no impression. In her mind’s eye she recalled the young officer lying unconscious in the hospital, near death for days, now unconscious for weeks. Then another face imposed itself on her thoughts. His face bleeding and bruised from a beating he couldn’t defend against, the young man’s imploring gray eyes stared out of her memory. Her own anger fought for control of her senses and she checked a desire to kill the prisoners where they stood. Miraculously, no emotion seeped into her voice when she spoke again.

“For the crime of retaliation against a Challenge and for the crime of threatening retaliation, this is the penalty for all and each of you, Commanders Ka’Tain, Wa’Ren, and Ia’Lon.”

She looked at Captain Heilen. “Remove their jumpers, Captain. As of this minute they shall each have the loss of two ranks.”

The guards made the men disrobe down to bare skin. They would march naked to the barracks as a sign of disgrace. While they were in the process, Tridia continued. “Take them to the private cells and give them each forty lashes. No need to disrupt the Square. And when they finally get out of the medic chambers, they will serve three months of servitude – in the Kennels.”

“No!” The three men shouted. “No. You can’t.”

Their chorus of cries became a staccato of solos as each tried to appeal for intercession.

“Captain!”

“Sir!”

“Anton!”

“Commander Odana.” Captain Heilen, appalled by the sentence, paled as he spoke. “That’s extreme, even for a serious crime.”

“The sentence is spoken, Captain, it cannot be withdrawn,” Tridia said.

The listeners in the lobby looked at the men with pity, then at Tridia with disbelief. Their shock washed against her barricaded mind.

The naked men sobbed as the guards took them away. Tridia’s face remained as if etched in stone. Justice had prevailed. She’d found no satisfaction in their cries, nor any sense of personal retribution. She’d attained her victory without jubilation and rendered fair judgment despite her anger. The scales now balanced on debts she owed to the known victim and to the one known only to her.

“As for you, Apprentice,” Tridia turned back to her original target, who flinched as her gaze returned to him. “I believe I asked you a question.”

The man stood in a motionless panic. In his terror he’d forgotten the question. “Yes, ma’am.”

Tridia read his panic as easily as she read his plan to run away if she’d taken her eyes off of him earlier. Where the fool thought he’d go, even he didn’t know. But she tired of the game and needed seclusion.

“I asked you if you understood not to speak to me unless spoken to.”

With obvious relief, J’Lel replied, “Yes, ma’am. I understand.”

“See that it never happens again.” She turned back to the young Initiate captive. “What are your other injuries?”

“M-my arm, my ankle and my knee. I fell from a tree during the capture. That’s why they call me little bird.” The young woman glared at her captors. “A marset cat attacked as these two were passing under me. Otherwise I would have dropped them with a stun they’d have never seen.”

“Sprains and bruises?” Tridia ignored the narrative.

Lera Cal nodded.

“Those injuries will heal with time.” Tridia had gotten enough similar injuries of her own to give the diagnosis with confidence. “But you must go to the medic chambers now to have your arm attended. The infection from those moss spores is fatal if not treated immediately. When you’re released you’ll still be at the mercy of these men for one week. But this ordeal will also pass, don’t fear it. Whatever happens, remember it well. Don’t have the memory removed. Use it to make yourself stronger. Your day will come.”

Tridia looked up at the guard holding Lera Cal’s left arm. The man took a small step back. “Take her straight to the medic chambers, don’t stop for the general triage here. This can’t wait.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he responded.

Tridia gave the Green Hunters one final stare and spoke in a voice so low only they could hear her. “She’ll not be an Initiate forever. Sheer bad luck protected your arrogance this time. I wouldn’t count on it happening again.”

With that she left the lobby and started down the long hall toward the tubes that would take her to her private rooms. The relief pouring from the men washed around her like tepid water – uncomfortable and useless. They would think hard before abusing the girl when she was given to them.

Standing halfway down the hall Captain Heilen waited to confront her. His anger slammed through her weakened defenses as she approached.