

# CHAPTER 1

WIND HAWORTH HAD RISEN EARLY, EAGER TO FACE THIS DAY.

She sat on a stone bench inside Haworth housing's broad courtyard, calling up the day's tasks on her handheld: Main Air, meet shuttle at Inport—

*He's finally arriving.*

Overhead, past the courtyard's transparent ceiling, the big outdoor day lights flickered on. For one moment, Wind could make out the higher, thicker dome skin of Baseline Settlement outside the clan's housing blister—three layers protecting her from Mikuhr's airlessness. Above the courtyard dangled dozens of ceiling streamers, the thinnest no more than gossamer ribbons.

Even the heavy narrative hangings helped young airflow techs study fluidic patterns inside Baseline Settlement. Wind liked sitting here simply to watch the thin streamers dance. Like flickering flames, they revealed unseen air currents, working together with the heavier hangings—just as she wished her own people would work with the occupying Federates.

*He's coming today. Maybe he can help with that.*

Her broad green sleeve had gotten draped over her handheld. She pulled it away to eye her list once more: First, a fast check of Main Air's master board. Report any anomaly to Occupation Governor Dardy as well as her clan great-aunt, Dowda Haworth. Second, in the time slot when she normally met with Governor Dardy—

*He's arriving today!*

The handheld let out a *blat*, and Wind nearly dropped it. She touched the screen to receive the incoming message: *Get in here, girl.*

Wind gathered the green robes she wore on duty and hurried to Dowda Rava Haworth's office.

Oddly, Dowda Haworth was not sitting behind her desk. The Dowda wasn't tall, but she stood there aggressively upright, as if she would like to challenge the Federate occupation force. Her hair, straight and black, dangled to her waist, and her black eyes gleamed. Though selective breeding made her look thirty, or possibly forty, she was one hundred and eight.

Beneath another set of streamers in the office, a stranger lounged in the comfortable side chair. His face was long, and he had black hair and eyes—all traits typical of her people. She saw those same features each morning as she washed and dressed. But through her mind's shields came an eerie, unfamiliar chill. Although his face looked unlined at first glance, fine wrinkles surrounded his eyes. He had to be even older than the Dowda, maybe the oldest person Wind had ever met.

That meant he'd been an adult before the world had fallen to Federate forces. He might even have been tube-born in the Golden City. He would not call himself Mikuhran—but *Shuhr*.

"Come in and shut the door," the Dowda snapped.

Wind cautiously strengthened her mental shields and walked into the office, sending the door closed behind her. On the chamber's opposite side, shaded by a light-filtering pane, hung a tapestry woven with bold geometric designs—a treasured artifact of the lost home world of Ehret.

Since the Dowda had spoken aloud, Wind took that as her cue. She should not subvocalize mind-to-mind in front of this stranger, who might take it as an insult. Early childhood memories assaulted her: When she'd been a child growing up on green Thyrica, the Shuhr—City people, like this man—had stalked her nightmares. A female City scout had even eyed her for several seconds one day before deciding, apparently, she was not worth the trouble to torture and kill in some hideous experiment.

Wind took her position at the Dowda's left hand.

"So you're the one." The stranger spoke with a sneer.

Wind stared back at him, still unauthorized to answer. The old caste rules came crashing back: When a powerful telepath spoke aloud, he meant it as a grave insult. Wind kept her emotions as passive as she could. If she provoked him, he might kill without a second thought.

He finally stood, and words slithered into Wind's mind. *A Caldwell. You're bringing us a Caldwell.* Chilly disdain overlaid those silent words.

So that was it. Several weeks ago, Wind had queried the Federacy about a local spiritual issue. To her delight, she'd learned that they were sending to this planet a Na'marr or priest in training to respond to her query. Better still, it was a man she already admired. Kiel Caldwell.

*He's arriving today!*

This time, the stranger wanted an answer. Wind used submissive vocal speech. "Sir, I did not request him specifically, but I'm glad he's coming. Surely you've heard the rumors. New wisdom, encoded in the ancient holy books—found by a Mikuhran. Can you imagine how that could raise our standing in Federate eyes?"

*Who cares about Federate eyes?* He kept staring, lips unmoving. In her mind's eye he appeared as a blur of raw power. *Other than you, I mean? You abandoned us. You are not welcome back.*

She gathered her courage. Here, in front of her clan aunt, the highest local leader in Baseline Settlement, it might be safe to argue. *I abandoned no one. I was deported as a five-year-old, stolen from my home, brought to a world where I was seen as an enemy.* Catching herself, she suppressed the old anguish. *Sir, we share the Sentinels' ancestry. Those holy books are ours too—*

*A Caldwell!* He closed a hand down at his side, as if gripping something invisible. Among Golden City Shuhr, that had been a threatening gesture. *We danced with that family for ten generations. Such fun, dangling their own prophecies in front of them.* He widened his lips in an awful smile. His teeth looked as if they'd been artfully stained blood red. *Don't say you weren't warned.* He turned his face toward the door.

*Sir!* Wind flung caution aside. *I made no secret of that invitation. Governor Dardy thinks that some people at Federate Regional Command might even—*

*They'll toss away Dardy and all the Sentinels, just like the rotten meat they are. Soon.* The stranger raised a finger. A small cyclone emerged from its tip, whirling upward to tangle the streamers in a knotted mess. She'd never seen anyone do that. The stranger lowered his hand and subvocalized again. *The Sentinels should have joined us when they had the chance.* The knot of streamers briefly held still, then revolved the other direction.

The man glared at the Dowda. *The Federacy's time is ending. At Qe'leb, the power is almost ready.*

The Dowda cocked her head. "Qe'leb?"

Wind spread her hands. "Sir, there can be peace. Here on Mikuhr, we're actually speaking with our Sentinel relatives. That's unprecedented. It's—"

*And you believe it can last.* The stranger smiled, showing his teeth again.

Disquieted, Wind raised her arms. "I have to, sir. We must work with the other Whorl worlds, or else none of us—the gifted, I mean—will survive. This world is . . . dying. There's nothing to live for here, not anymore."

"And this holy *Path* they follow." He spoke the word explosively, as if it were vulgar. "You bought into it, didn't you? That's why you asked for a priest."

"I do believe it," she said softly.

"So I see. And those prophecies?" Again, he seemed to be cursing.

Wind spread her hands. "Naturally, parts of the holy books make me uneasy."

He laughed shortly. "Prophecies. Boh-Dabar." He wriggled one hand, and she felt invisible icy fingers rake her throat. "An immolation of eeevil. Of Mikuhr itself."

Wind sucked down a deep breath and made her mental shields as strong as possible. "I'm hoping for some long talks with Na'marr Caldwell. He's arriving today. I'm thinking there's more to all that than the usual interpretations."

He ducked his head and glared at her. The icy raking stopped. "It could be him, you know. He could be this conquering general. The priest-warrior. Boh-Dabar is supposed to be a Caldwell. And you called him here." He looked from Wind to the Dowda and back again. "You both may live to regret it."

Wind shook her head. "No. I've read some of Na'marr Caldwell's writings. He's a compassionate man. A man of peace."

He pointed at her, and she saw that even his nails had been stained red. "Wind Haworth. Born Half-worthy, raised Federate. If my city still stood, you would be dead by now." This time, he stood and stalked out of the room.

Wind sat, feeling limp. She whispered, "Who was that?"

The Dowda also seated herself. “Friend of . . . a friend. You’re lucky to be sitting here.”

Wind nodded. The Shuhr branch of the gene-altered families never had lived by Sentinel Codes. They never tried to earn the Federacy’s trust by controlling their unusual powers. But the Sentinels, including Kiel Caldwell and the occupation force, had those powers and those Codes. That was why the Federacy needed them. Only Sentinels could protect other Whorl worlds from men like the one who had just left the room.

“I already owe the Sentinels my life.” Wind rubbed her throat with one palm, soothing the prickling nerve ends. She would not forget Thyrica, the green world where the Federates had taken her as a child when Old Mikuhr fell.

The older woman raised an eyebrow.

A pair of young faces flashed through Wind’s memory, clan cousins who had vanished two decades ago when the City scouts had come culling. “Remember Diff and Keena? What happened to them?”

Dowda Haworth waved off the room lights. “Don’t stir a pot if you don’t want to know what’s at the bottom.”

The strongest light in the office now came from a treasure, stolen by City people from some other Whorl world and sitting at one end of the Dowda’s desk. The thick, transparent jar was filled with layers of colored oils and lit by wicks inside thin glass bubbles. They burned slowly, dimming as they rose through the colored layers, leaving eddies of mixed hue in their wake—and once they reached the top, they sank rapidly. Through some trick of specific gravity Wind didn’t understand, they burned even brighter as they sank, leaving dimples in the layers’ surfaces.

Wind stared at a wick light as it sank, trailing an oily comet tail. “What did he mean, Dowda? About the Federacy’s time?”

The Dowda furrowed her forehead. “I don’t have a clue. And I’d better get to the bottom of it. The whole world-grabbing Federacy is nothing but a crock, but I’m responsible for Baseline Settlement, and anything on this world that frightens the Feds is likely to get us all killed—even their Sentinel pets in the occupation force. Your average Fed on Tallis or Bishda is scared to death of Sentinels. Almost as scared as they are of us. Ironic, isn’t it?”

“And he came . . . ?” Wind glanced out the door, making sure the stranger hadn’t returned. “To warn you?”

“No.” The Dowda raised her head. “To try and enlist me. I was . . . a friend of one of his age mates, years ago.”

Wind had learned not to press the Dowda for stories. The ones she’d heard were too grim. “I can ask Governor Dardy to look into it. She’ll—”

“No, you won’t. Come here, girl.”

Reluctant but obedient, Wind leaned closer.

The Dowda reached out a finger toward Wind’s forehead. Nausea rose at the back of Wind’s throat as the Dowda blocked those memories from casual prying. Dowda Haworth’s otherness had the musty, metallic scent of an air recycling membrane, but Wind had grown used to it. She’d chosen this life, after all. Part of her job was protecting secrets—keeping Mikuhran secrets from the Federate Sentinel occupation force, and even more difficult, protecting a few Sentinel issues from Dowda Haworth.

Wind was the only Mikuhran who’d been carried away as a child but who’d returned to her home. She meant to invest her life in the peace-making effort. If standing between camps meant she would always be somewhat alone, so be it.

At least the Dowda seemed to have accepted her. Finally. It had taken five years.

The eerie sensation stopped. “All right, girl. Go. See if you can get us those parts for the blister’s main membrane.”

“On the list.” Wind raised her handheld. “Dowda, you never said you disapproved of my asking for a Path priest to talk to. Those are the oldest books known. If there really is hidden wisdom coded into them, that could be vital. We could be respected again.”

“Yes, or the gold-star families could simply close ranks on you, like they did before. And shut you out harder this time.”

One more painful memory stabbed her mind. As if by reflex, Wind fingered a small disk inside her right sleeve’s inner pocket.

“Go on, girl.”

Wind checked her wrist. Tiny time lights blinked up at her. “You’ll be at the Inport terminal, won’t you?”

“Oh, yes.” The Dowda raised her own handheld. “And I won’t be alone.”

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An hour later, Wind stood amid several clan Dowdas outside the Inport secure area, all of them robed in their official garb of brilliant green, black, purple, or orange. The Federate occupation force's new tower was a shining glass ray, poking through Inport's transparent blister skin and rising halfway to the big, white outer dome of Baseline Settlement. High above, a decelerating engine screamed. A shadow passed overhead, and a few seconds later, the scream dropped to a roar and then ended.

He'd arrived!

When Wind scattered her ayin shields, she felt unspoken rumbles of hostility around and behind her. Past the other Dowdas, a double arc of Marruth laurel trees stood stiffly upright, with silvery bark and tiny spring flowers. Wind had planted them, remembering all the greenery on Thyrica. She'd longed to improve this bare, domed settlement with trees. The trees might improve air quality, even while showing her people how others lived. Maybe if they found themselves in a more beautiful home, they would learn to care about crafting a real peace.

Those had been her dreams five years ago. Today, the Dowdas still looked and felt suspicious, glancing toward each other to pass subvocal messages. She could guess who they were discussing. Na'marr Caldwell's parents had led the attack that had devastated the Golden City and ended the Shuhr menace to other worlds.

But Na'marr Kiel was unlike the rest of his family. Ten years ago, back on Thyrica, Wind's Thyrian "Aunt" Genni had pointed him out, speculating . . . maybe . . . could he be the one they were waiting for?

Her Dowda nudged her. Wind looked down into the familiar face. *Keep it respectful*, she heard at the back of her mind. *Don't down-talk the other Dowdas.*

*Never!* Wind gave her head a slight shake.

Through a massive airlock, out of the secure hangar into the actual settlement, the orbital shuttle taxied on its repulsors. It looked like a blunted rectangle with its landing struts already extended.

*Look*, Wind sent her aunt. *He's going to offload out here, on our ground. I call that respectful.*

*Or pushy.* The Dowda drew up taller, almost to Wind's ear level.

The shuttle settled on smoothed black stone. A landing ramp stretched out of its side slot. There was a heavy *clang* as it touched down. A slit opened over the ramp.

The first man who emerged through the vertical hatch looked as tall as Wind herself, wearing a ministerial grey tunic over pale grey shipboards. Behind him came two heftier individuals wearing midnight blue Sentinel uniforms with gold shoulder stars, plainly—openly—armed.

Wind ignored them. She stepped toward the ramp and thinned her mind's shields. She sensed the Dowda following, like a faint, familiar shadow.

Na'marr Kiel Caldwell had a face that seemed oddly square to Mikuhran eyes, and hair that was barely dark enough to be called brown. Slender, intelligent looking. But as he came closer, Wind sensed his nervousness. He gave the assembled group a respectful nod as he walked off the ramp. Wind glanced at the other Dowdas, all in their robes. Without trying to read the priest's actual thoughts, which would have violated the Privacy and Priority Codes, she thought she could guess them: Any one of this gathered group might be a war survivor, wanting revenge on his family for what his father and mother had done.

Was *that* what the Dowda's mysterious visitor had meant? If so, it was good to see him guarded by other Sentinels.

Within touching distance at last, Wind extended a hand. Na'marr Kiel clasped it and greeted her formally, using the ancient tongue. "Na'da Haworth, I come in the Name to serve you."

On Thyrica, his people reserved that language for worship. Here, everyone spoke it. Wind tried not to smile, but she felt her lips twitch. She'd waited to meet this young priest for so long. "You can call me Wind. I won't be offended."

Now he did smile. "Then it's an honor to meet you, Na'da Wind."

*He's finally here!* Somberly she passed his hand to the older woman and used his title in return for his use of hers. "Na'marr Caldwell, this is my clan aunt, Dowda Rava Haworth."

The Dowda gripped Na'marr Caldwell's fingers. Through those scattered shields, Wind felt the Dowda's distaste. The Na'marr's ayin abilities were reportedly weak, and the Dowda despised weakness. The man's vulnerability probably explained the bodyguards. One was a tall, muscular woman who stayed within an arm's length of Na'marr Kiel. One of her hands hovered over her belt holster. The other guard stopped far up the ramp, eyeing the crowd from a high vantage.

She couldn't blame them. This was no ordinary occasion.



Dowda Haworth turned aside, still clenching Na'marr Caldwell's hand. "I will introduce you. These are our other Dowdas." She tugged him toward those other robed Mikuhrans.

Nothing would happen, Wind assured herself. There hadn't been a significant disturbance in five years, and he'd come on a peaceful mission. Governor Dardy and her military husband had stayed in the tower, not wanting to provoke an incident. Clearly, the Dardys didn't want Federate Regional Command to pull out the Sentinel force and finish wiping Mikuhr clean of life—or to wipe it clean unannounced, Sentinels and all.

Behind the debarking group, four Federate peacekeepers stepped out of the Occupation's Inport building. They also wore midnight blue Thyrian Sentinel uniforms, and they raked the crowd with their eyes, also keeping their hands close to open-holstered sidearms. Wind wondered whether Kiel, the only priestly Caldwell family member, found their presence comforting or alarming. And what was that place the Dowda's friend had mentioned? Qe-something. She must ask Na'marr Kiel about it.

An unusually loud tremor rattled the arches that held up the big Baseline dome. Temblors weren't uncommon here, and Wind bent her knees, steadying herself. Mikuhr's intermittent quakes bothered her far less than the grinding poverty of body and spirit that had spread over this world while she grew up elsewhere.

Maybe Na'marr Caldwell could help with that too. The tall young man had treated the Dowda with perfect courtesy. Hopeful, Wind turned back toward the shuttle's ramp.

And saw . . . nothing. There was only empty space where Na'marr Caldwell had just been standing. Wind stared for a fraction of a second. Had she imagined it? But . . . but she'd seen him walk down. She'd shaken his hand. Maybe he'd sprinted back on board, when the tremor—

Within a second, both bodyguards whipped out their sidearms. The man high on the ramp dropped to a firing crouch. As they scanned the crowd, Wind realized something had gone terribly wrong.

The visitor in the Dowda's office . . . had he done this? Appalled, Wind hurried forward. The big Sentinel woman swung her weapon around toward her. Wind shook both hands free of her robe and held them out to her sides. "What happened?" she cried.

Another clan Dowda stepped away from the ramp. "I don't know. I looked north—"

Federate Sentinel forces sprinted in all directions. One ran right over a laurel sapling, flattening it. Another headed back toward the domed hangar, two toward the glass doors of Inport's command tower, another group toward the enormous airlock she'd just watched the shuttle glide through. Na'marr Caldwell's bodyguards and several other Sentinels herded eyewitnesses into groups for a round of fast mind-access questioning.

Thirty minutes later, all that had turned up was the fact that out of nine Dowdas and a dozen Federate troops, not one had seen what had happened to the Na'marr. Peacekeepers' infrared snoops showed his footsteps descending the ramp but going no farther. Inexplicably, everyone had looked away for one crucial moment, even both bodyguards.

In that instant, Wind's distinguished young visitor had disappeared as if someone had lifted him straight up out of Baseline Settlement.