

READING SAMPLE

*Descent of the Maw*

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In a vaulted cavern far below the northernmost reaches of Lyonnae, fifth world of the Sirius trinary, the last colony of Makhás masters gathered to mourn the passing of the yeshe. Kirian Vall stared at the emaciated form of his father while his twin sister Selina wept quietly beside him. He lifted a hand to his chest in a futile effort to fight off the terrible ache, knowing this was the last time he would ever lay eyes on the amazing man he had loved and admired ever since he could remember.

The voices filling the cavern mingled and rose in a solemn show of respect, bringing a tight knot to Kirian's throat. Every one of the four hundred-thirteen men, women, and children as well as Rinzen, the grand being rising above them at the center of the lofty chamber, were alive because of Sundar Vall.

Over thirty years prior, the leonine Shitza had swept into the northern cities of the Ustagi white tiger clans to hunt down the great Khalama starships and the Makhás mystics who flew them. The Makhás portal had been ravaged, trapping their ships within the planetary grid while severing all ties with outside contacts.

To prevent a millennium of knowledge and technology from falling into the hands of the violent Shitza and their off-world reptilian masters, Sera Choden, the last incumbent yeshe, had refused to surrender and charged her senior masters with the weighty task of safeguarding their people. With a small band of loyal masters, she had drawn Chao Rong's forces toward the high mountain sanctuaries while Sundar and his colleagues hid the Khalamas and Makhás families in underground caverns beneath the Ustagi plateau.

The wrath of the thwarted oligarchy had been devastating. Entire cities had been razed, mountains blown apart in a massive effort to flush out the hidden ships. Sundar's colony had been forced to move several times, and as the bombardments continued, one by one, the other hidden colonies stopped answering their calls. The once thriving culture of the Makhás and their glorious starships had been reduced to the pitiful few struggling to survive within these cavern walls.

Kirian's eyes filled with tears as he looked at the withered figure dressed in the pale robes of the yeshe, hovering in the space at the center of the crowd. He knew his father had always blamed himself for not being able to save more than he had.

*You did so well, Dad, Kirian called silently. I'm proud to be your son. I'm sure Yeshe Choden is proud of you, too.*

In the face of such heart-breaking losses, Sundar's driving energy had kept every soul in the colony moving forward over the years, adapting, learning, making new families. He had pushed them relentlessly to perfect their skills, to study and speak Mothertongue, and to train the young ones early on in their abilities as Makhás. Sundar's greatest dream was to get them all safely off-planet and he'd spent countless long hours with Kirian and the other scholars poring over old texts, searching for the means of contacting old allies and reopening the ruptured portal.

But in spite of his unflagging dedication, the one thing the charismatic leader had not been able to weather was the loss of his beloved mate. When Pema Vall succumbed to the dank conditions of living underground, Sundar's heart dropped like a stone and his will to go on crumbled with his wife's last breath. For the past two years since their mother's passing, Kirian, Selina, and the rest of the colony had stood by and watched helplessly as the robust, energetic man faded to dust before their eyes.

Kirian sucked in a jagged breath, holding back the anguish, but when his gentle wife Minla slipped her hand into his, the dam broke within. He tipped his head back as the tears streamed down his face, squeezing her hand in a desperate welling of heartache. The concerned touch of his closest friend Arman Sijía brushed against his mind and gingerly backed away before Arman's clear, dominant voice somewhere to Kirian's left shifted into a new key, sending the signal to the group to prolong the elegy. Kirian knew the whole room would wait until he was able to join them for the final sending and he was grateful to Arman for giving him the time he needed to grieve.

As the sharp edge of pain passed, Kirian lowered his head. Taking a deep, cleansing breath, he added his resonant tones to the blending harmonics and raised his arms, holding his palms out toward his father. Following his lead, Sundar's oldest friend Kalden Ngari lifted his hands across the circle and shifted his tones around Kirian's to initiate the spinning matrix of the sending. As hands and voices rose throughout the wide cavern, a soft glow formed around Sundar's body which slowly began to dissipate with the shifting sound.

*Peace be with you, Sundar Vall.* The melodious voice of Rinzen sounded across the group's telepathic link the instant before the yeshe's form disappeared from the chamber.

Kalden raised his hand to call for closure and the toning was brought to an end. Kirian closed his eyes as the last reverberations melted away, leaving a mournful silence hanging in the room. Slowly the muted sounds of people moving about the chamber sifted into his awareness and he drew in a deep breath. Selina slid her delicate arms under his short, open vest and around his waist as he leaned down to pull her close in a tight embrace.

"Ah, Kiri, I miss him," the tiny woman sniffled against the soft fur of his ribcage.

"I know, Fluff—me, too," he murmured, dropping an affectionate kiss onto her silky white head. When he straightened again, he found that several people had stepped up beside them and were waiting patiently until he lifted his face.

"Are you alright?" Arman asked quietly, his golden-brown eyes watching him keenly.

"I will be. Thank you."

Arman nodded his shaggy head. "If you need to talk or go for a run—"

"Yeah, a run would be good," Kirian muttered as Minla ran her hand over his back and patted him softly in comfort.

"Don't worry about your classes for a few days. I'll keep your students busy," Asti Quli offered beside her burly husband Niyal.

"And I'll handle the transport team's practice for you and Selina."

Kirian glanced up at his friend and furrowed his brow. "But you and Niyal have a ton of work at the forge. We need your bells to survive, Arman."

"Don't worry—we'll manage."

Asti held up her hand before he could utter another word of contradiction. “Please, let us do this small thing for you.”

Kirian blinked, shifting his gaze from Arman to Niyal and Asti, and then on to Anil and Nandi Ngari, the primary caretakers and spark couple for Rinzen standing behind them. He realized with a start that no one had left the chamber and that quite a collection of people were hovering a respectful distance away—Kalden, Senga Shengeti and the other senior masters and teachers, most of his students and the adepts of his transport team, even a handful of surprisingly quiet children—and they all seemed to be glancing his way with an odd air of expectation.

“What’s going on?” he rumbled as Selina dropped her arms and stepped away.

The sound of small feet somewhere at the back of the cavern drew his eye to a young woman running toward them, her youthful features focused in an earnest expression as she clutched a bundle of cloth tightly against her chest. When she caught up with a slow-moving, limping older woman also making her way steadily toward Kirian, she dropped to a walk and matched her pace to the elder, straightening her arms to let the soft violet cloth fall into her hands.

Kirian took one look at the garment young Skamár held reverently in front of her and took an involuntary step backward. “No—”

The crowd parted silently to allow the most venerated member of their colony to pass. Tenzin Ngari had once been the spark for Rinzen before her mate passed away and was the last living master who held the vital knowledge for birthing a new ship. Her light blue eyes locked onto Kirian and held steady until she and Skamár stood beneath the towering man.

“Kirian Vall,” the elder began, her thin voice bringing a hush over the everyone in the cavern. “We said good-bye to a dear friend today. And now we need his son to walk in his shoes.” Skamár lifted the violet robe in her hands and peered up at him with wide, hopeful eyes.

Kirian swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. “I can’t fill those shoes,” he rasped as the ache inside started all over again. “Besides, the role of yeshe is not hereditary.”

“No, it is not, Kirian” Tenzin replied softly, watching him with kind understanding. “It is chosen by peers.”

At a loss for words, the tall master sent a beseeching gaze around the dozens of intelligent faces regarding him with such unexpected confidence. He shot a pleading look to Arman who simply nodded and crossed his arms, watching him with calm conviction. Turning at last to Minla, he found her beautiful silver eyes gazing at him with tranquil pride.

“This is not an easy task,” Tenzin went on. “We know it’s a great burden we’re asking you to bear.”

Kirian dropped his eyes to the elder master with miserable resignation. “Why me?”

Tenzin’s brows rose and she smiled quietly, studying his face.

“Because we all respect you,” Anil’s mellow voice rang out. “Your father respected you.”

Niyal waved a hand into the air at the sparkling ship rising up from the cavern floor behind them. “There’s no one more dedicated to protecting Rinzen,” he shouted fervently.

“And all the rest of us,” his wife added, laying a hand on her husband’s shoulder.

Yells of agreement rose and rippled throughout the vast room. Two of Kirian’s top students raised their fists, voicing their support. “It’s true, Master Vall! You’re the best!”

“We trust you, Kirian.” Arman’s steady voice cut through the buzz of the crowd and brought them all to a deferential silence once more. “Everyone knows you’re our best chance at survival.”

Kirian dropped his head and closed his eyes, humbled by the faith these people seemed to find in him. With Sundar gone, he could see that they needed the same kind of anchor he was desperately searching for himself and with a heavy heart, he slowly lowered himself to one knee in front of Tenzin, his long snowy hair falling in a river around his face.

The elder’s small hand came to rest on his head and swept down to caress his cheek. “Thank you, Yeshe Vall. We’re in your debt.”

Kirian cringed inside at hearing the title he associated with his father, but he kept his unease from showing so he didn’t dishonor their wishes any further by expressing his self-doubt. Without a word, Minla stepped forward and picked up an edge of the violet vest lying across Skamár’s hands, lifting until the silky length fell to the floor. The young adept took up the other edge, holding it high in the air, and together the two women

slipped the sleeveless garment over Kirian's right arm and then his left. As he raised himself up off the floor, the vestments fell gracefully to the top of his boots, but the featherweight fabric felt as heavy on his shoulders as a thick coat of iron.

When he lifted his head, Arman's clear voice rang out into the cavern and was quickly joined by every person present, this time the rich sound melding into a high chord full of energy and hope. The burst of sound lasted just a few short minutes before it dissolved into hoots and cheering for the new yeshe with excited squeals from the youngest members of the colony, surprising Kirian yet again with such an honest outpouring of support.

Minla slid her arm around his waist and lifted her face to plant a kiss on his mouth, smiling broadly as she ran her palm down his chest over the shimmering vest. "It suits you," she said warmly just as Asti and Niyal stepped up behind Tenzin and their beaming daughter.

"I'm soooooo glad you didn't disappoint this young lady," the lanky scholar teased. "She stayed up most of the night to finish a robe that would fit your altitudinous frame."

"Motherrrr," Skamár complained through clenched teeth.

"Are you kidding? I knew you'd kill me if I hurt her feelings," Kirian shot back at his fellow teacher, bringing a chuckle from Niyal and the other well-wishers gathered around them.

"Good to hear someone else is afraid of her besides me," the smith sniggered loudly, earning a playful swat from his scowling mate.

"Thank you for the hard work you put into this, Skamár," Kirian offered with a nod to the talented young adept before a large hand landed on his back. As he turned, Arman pulled him into an affectionate hug, gripping him tightly until the tension in Kirian's body began to drop away.

"It'll be alright," Arman's deep voice soothed against his shoulder before letting him go. "You'll see."

Kirian twisted his mouth, giving the big tawny man a doubtful look when Arman abruptly cocked his head, listening intently to something above the chatter in the cavern. Alarmed, Kirian threw his hand in the air and sent out a quick mental call.

*Hold, everyone! Arman hears something!*

The noise in the room ceased instantly as all ears tuned in to see what the bellmaker's sharp senses had picked up. For several minutes there was nothing to be heard beyond the soft breathing of several hundred people, but then the unmistakable sound of explosions somewhere up on the surface vibrated throughout the wide cavern.

Kirian's arms instinctively tightened around Minla as he and Arman exchanged a tense look.

"It's been eight years since the last attack. I thought they'd given up," the bellmaker growled. "Why now?"

"I don't know, but we need to find out if they actually know where we are. Is the cavern between Lhari and Cona beneath the eastern plateau still viable?"

"Last we checked, yes. It's a mess, but the space and side chambers are big enough to hold us."

"Then listen through the warding stones to make sure it's not being hit. If it's clear, send a broadcast out to everyone in the colony to tell them where we're going."

"Right," Arman acknowledged and disappeared from sight just as another distant explosion reverberated throughout the cavern.

"Kalden, Senga!" Kirian yelled over the sea of heads looking to him for direction. "Take your teams to check the wards up in the ruins of Zhari as well as those in Dasa, Chana, and the Tangra Valley sanctuaries and find out if they're bombing randomly or just above us. Remote view—don't go to the surface. We don't know if they have sensors to pick up your presence."

"We're on it!" Kalden confirmed, signaling to a couple dozen people around him before they disappeared from the cavern.

"Niyal, go to the forge and transport all your supplies and equipment to Rinzen. Asti, grab the manuscripts. Minla, take your group to collect the stores. That's a big job—do you need help?"

"No, we've got twenty on our team. We'll be quick." His wife raised her face to his and gave him a quick kiss before she waved to several other adepts and popped out of sight.

"Anil, Nandi, get Rinzen warmed up for us. I want all my transporters on the ship *now!* Ask someone else to get your personal belongings. Ket, Neri," he called to his students who came running up with wide, earnest eyes. "Your job is to make the rounds

after everyone's on board to make sure no one is left behind. Show me how fast you can transport. Everyone else!" he bellowed, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Two minutes—grab your personal effects and get yourselves onto the ship. Go!"

As people disappeared all over the vast cavern, Kirian finally looked down at the tiny grinning woman standing in front of him. "And you—the devil woman who got me into this," he snarled affectionately, reaching down to grab both of her slight arms, shaking her gently. "Get your scrawny hide onto that ship before I—" With a soft peel of laughter, the elder dissolved out of his grasp.

Placing his hands on his hips in the middle of the vacated cavern, Kirian turned toward the towering ship, letting his head fall back so he could see her entire form. The glorious vessel was beginning to glow.

*Time for a new hiding hole, Rinzen. I'm sorry. It's not much of an existence.*

*We'll do what we must for now.*

*I want to see you flying through the stars again.*

*It will happen one day. I believe in you, Kirian Vall.*

With a frazzled sigh, the new leader of the Makhás masters formed the proper sound matrix in his mind and transported himself onto the last Khalama starship.