

1

His power pervaded the Realm and he placed only loyal Creods in positions below his status. With the new Mantari campaign he risked defense of the home planet as well as the surrounding defensive outposts. The Ta-Buhn-Shar would face every azicar, freight barge, scanner, constructor craevic azicars, and moveable vessel of the Realm. He emerged quickly from the thacin. “Hueta, when will we reach Karbla speed? Sard wishes the Aragosta to lead this amperge.”

“Karbla speed in two desaks, Vargut Emnas.”

“Good.” He studied the forward tacticals from the upper iacin. The Vastak, now commanded by Roik, paralleled the Aragosta within a mass of assorted azicars. The Humea, depicted in a brilliant purple light was dissected by Tark’s diminishing yellow dotted signal. “What do you think, Elkan?”

Elkan was now seated in Sard’s command chair. The new Vargut Gamun’s matrixes swung toward Sard. “I have a new thought about your brother’s signals.”

“Sard wishes to hear your thoughts.”

“My rucapens have proposed a juxtaposed communications signal due to power intensity at the center of the Humea. I think Tark’s signal may have originated in another location than is indicated.”

“What do you suggest to Sard?”

“Send smaller pzicars at a faster speed around the Humea center to check the contact’s place of origin. Before the entire amperge travels in an irrelevant direction.”

“ Sard will consider your request. He must find this Mantari-Earth. Prepare battle-generated images and we will be ready for the Ta-Buhn-Shar. Hueta, how many waskams have we produced?”

Hueta displayed the long cluster azicars with four green side traction wheels. Sard modified the design after Golga, providing a quicker side motion and greater shooter power while hovering off the ground. “ Five thousand, two hundred and fifty.”

“ Instruct the craevic azicar that Sard demands six thousand before he reaches Mantari-Earth!”

“ It will be done, Vargut Emnas.”

“ And every azicar will provide Sard with detailed provision lists. All three million sevelts will be equipped properly.”

“ Yes, Vargut Emnas.”

Sard turned as Anka, covered with a warming fabric and seated in a transport rester, entered the iacin. His voice was weakened by disease contracted on the home urkam. “ Are... you ready for the Ta-Buhn-Shar?”

“ In the generated images,” said Sard. “ Are you able to accompany Sard to the battle azicar?”

“ In younger reifts, this illness would have been fought and conquered. Now it lingers with my age. But I will watch the battle on my osil nakitam.”

Sard sat in a station rester across from his old friend. “ Sard must be prepared. The final battle with the Ta-Buhn-Shar is the only important battle. Sard now understands how to combat them. From Mantari-Earth he will find this pequa passageway his brother speaks of. Tark will lead us to their home urkam and we will bring our entire amperge to crush them.”

“ Such words must be grounded in realistic truth, Sard. Bringing the amperge into this passageway may be beyond our capacity.”

Sard's matrixes dimmed. "If Sard is able to accomplish this with the help of his brother, he will arrive unnoticed and surprise the Ta-Buhn-Shar with all his power. And then their urkam will be his."

* * *

The stars surrounded his azicar. As he swung out over the Aragosta's rusty hull, red cruising lights blinked and the massive shooter batteries glowed an eerie green against the darkness of space. His nakitam showed the vast amperge's disposition. He peered out the span and thought how the Aragosta had faced the Ta-Buhn-Shar in the past. The white cylinders containing the generated battle images floated parallel to the Aragosta in the gray starlight. Constant training was the only way to prepare his sevelts for ground combat.

He quickly docked the azicar at the top portal and lowered the outside ramp. Sevelts fell as he marched into the thacin. He remained confident as he moved upward. Tark's messages convinced him he would finally locate the Ta-Buhn-Shar. Within a short time he emerged on the iacin. Generated battles raged on the many wide nakitams surrounding the circular vargut iacin. Cluster waskams hovered and maneuvered across a seemingly real landscape as energy bursts destroyed enemy positions.

"This battle has flaws," said Sard, scanning the tacticals. "A scampal accuracy rating."

"An improvement," said Elkan.

Sard slowly scanned his matrixes toward Elkan. "To fight the Ta-Buhn-Shar, Sard needs perfection."

"It will be done, Vargut Emnas."

“ What is the status of Sard’s order concerning the passageway from Mantari-Earth?”

Elkan stepped down to the tactical. “ The rucapens tell me inflated barges might work. But we are unsure of the passageway’s composition. We can successfully float our sevelts and equipment, but there are many unknowns. How do we gain exit and entry? How do we move on this passageway?”

“ Sard’s brother has spent many reifts alone on the inferior urkam. Sard is convinced he knows the answers to questions about the passageway.”

“ You may be correct, Sard. Your brother’s standing as a rucapen is unchallenged.”

“ Sard longs to see him again... Sard will go below now and join the battle.”

* * *

Sard placed the image helmet over his head and the ground battle formed around him. He strapped a large shooter over his shoulder and crossed the hardened soil as the smoke of battle drifted through the stuffy air. The cluster waskam’s sliver rods spread and he moved inside. He positioned himself in the center rester and checked his shooter panels.

“ Display inferior positions.”

The forward nakitam was overlapped with a full color terrain map, designed to simulate the fortifications on the Olcluys Ridges during the battle of Golga. The high ridges and sloping hill were packed with inferiors inside sunken bunkers. “ Battle Proaska, this is Sevine.”

“Sevine, proceed to fourth battle area. Merge with second battle group.”

“It will be done, Battle Proaska.” Sard gripped the controls with anonymity, condensed the tactical and shut down the interior lights. He used the instruction he had received as a youth and wove erratically across the rock-strewn slope. A few shooter bursts impacted behind him. He located the source, a placement midway up the ridge. The entrenchment was clear when he magnified the placements on the tactical. Without use of the internal systems, he aligned his red beam pointers and fired. The explosion ripped apart the rocks and killed all sixty-two Mantari.

“Sevine, what is the meaning of your actions?” asked the Battle Proaska.

Sard quickly brought his waskam into position with the group on the slope. “Sevine was responding to enemy fire.”

“Into line and await disposition!”

Sard’s fangs moved downward. He would have replaced the Battle Proaska had he not showed his anger. “Your orders, Battle Proaska.”

More inferior energy bursts dug up the slope. One waskam was hit. “You will begin a circular assault on the main fortification. Let us see if your battle courage continues. Join the others in firing at the Mantari secondary defenses.”

“Sevine wishes an alternate plan.”

“Are you challenging me, Sevine?”

“Waskams should only be used as cover in this operation. Send your main assault force up the slope with mobile launched bursters.”

After a short silence, the Battle Proaska’s voice shot through the helmet.

“ Perhaps, *you* would like to lead such a force. Leave the protection of your waskam and show your courage as a Creod!”

Sard’s lip quivered as he immediately opened the waskam wall. He stepped into the dimly lit, rocky slope. “ Let the ground assault begin!”

“ Have it your way, Sevine. I will give you twenty-five sevelts for your bold plan. And if you fail, you will be held liable and subject to Yestik punishment.”

Sard did not answer as he peered through his visor. The silver uniformed sevelts appeared through the hazy darkness across the plain. He activated the helmet tactical. The inferiors were directing most of their fire toward the main Creod waskam group across the plains. He turned as the sevelts marched up the hill. “ Separate into three groups. Our mission is to destroy the main pequa batteries on the ridge.”

“ We understand, Sevine,” said the leader of the sevelts.

Sard looked back toward the hovering waskams, positioned on the plains. “ Battle Proaska, have your waskams attack enemy positions as cover, but maintain your distance for your own protection.”

“ You will be judged on your plan,” answered the Battle Proaska.

The waskams rose upward, remaining secure in their position, and sprayed the ridge with green shooter bursts. Sard faced the sevelts and waved them up the slope. “ Arm your shooters. We will destroy this inferior position!”

Bursts from the ridge were directed at the waskams as Sard moved up the rocks ahead of the sevelts. The images of the inferiors along the ridge seemed real. He longed to fight these inferiors with his own graspers.

“ Battle Proaska, you will now bring your waskams over the ridge.”

“ Your orders, Sevine?” asked the sevelt leader.

Sard stared down the slope, wondering if the Battle Proaska would comply with his request. Then he scanned back to the sevelts. “ When the waskams rise over the ridge, we will take the center inferior position!”

The waskams passed overhead and Sard ordered the sevelts up the slope. Pequa bursts continued from the Mantari position, but the waskams returned the fire as Sard moved ahead of the sevelts over the rocks. Some sevelts hesitated, but most followed.

He counted three shooter batteries from his position behind the rocks. As he turned to his sevelts a strong shooter burst knocked him from the rocks. He steadied himself and shouted into his helmet. “ Prepare yourself for the inferiors. Glory to the Realm!”

With his fangs exposed Sard removed his westik and charged the Mantari inside the thick bunker walls. Several inferiors fell back as he vaulted the heavy surface and thrust his westik through an inferior’s midsection. The red saurine ignited his hatred further and as his sevelts joined him at the wall. Sard unleashed a brutal westik demonstration upon the inferiors. Body parts splattered across the wall and dirt floor.

“ Shooters deployed!” The resulting pequa bursts sent the inferiors scurrying down the tunnel. A cheer sounded among the sevelts and Sard smacked his tactical button. “ This is Sard.”

His contact with the Battle Proaska was at first met with silence.
“ Sevine, your tactical assault was lacking in planning.“

“ And you have failed to take aggressive action! You will face the Yestiks on the Aragosta’s iacin!”

The frequency was open for some time. “ *Vagut Emnas?*”

“ Inferiors must never be given the opportunity to attack. You will report to the iacin at once and receive you humiliation.”

“ It will be done, Vargut Emnas.”

“ Sard,” said Elkan, overriding the frequency.

“ Did you witness Sard’s attack, Elkan?”

“ I did. Your aggression is unmatched... But I have news.”

Sard removed his helmet and stood alone in the imaging room.

“ What news do you have for Sard?”

“ Your brother Tark. He has contacted us with a second and third message from Mantari-Earth.”

“ Sard will return to the Aragosta. This is a glorious day for the Realm. Let us cross the Humea to Mantari-Earth.”

2

Sard leaned forward and listened to his osil's fram.

“ This is Tark. I have now passed my eleventh orbit of Mantari-Earth around its yellow azoz. I fear this urkam may destroy itself with Azarik weapons. Division abounds everywhere on this urkam although two competing groups hold most of the Azarik weapons To use such weapons against their own kind shows a remarkable lack of destiny as a race. Truly inferiors.

Using the Mantari power source below this urkam, I have suspended a cravel from my nakitam and pequa flow has successfully been transmitted without their wires. It is my goal to make these inferiors dependent upon me for their pequa flow. Already they burn fuels taken from below the surface, but risk altering the atmosphere of this urkam.

In this year they orbit contact devices around the urkam and these inferiors have begun travel at the edge of the Humea. Contact exists through wireless sound and the odd images have been generated from other primitive nakitams. These beings are self-absorbed and weak. They can be easily seduced and overrun. When I have made progress I will use my fram again. “ Long live the Realm!”

“ The message is many reifts old, “ said Elkan.

“ Then you say Sard's brother's fate has already determined.”

“ Possibly”

“ He is a brilliant rucapen. He may conquer this inferior urkam without the aide of a amperge or a sevelt force, ” said Sard.

“ What worries me is the general location of Mantari-Earth. More signals have compacted rapidly as we approach. This contact is imaged on the nakitam.”

“ Sard is activating the nakitam.”

“ Here it is,” said Elkan.

Tark, wearing yellow coverings, was alone in front of a small iacin’s flashing lights and surrounded by a rock-lined cave. He sat on the iacin counter near a nakitam screen. *“ I would hope the Realm may retrieve this message. In past messages I have related traveling over a Mantari constructed ocean between urkams. Never have I marveled at such a feat. The ocean appears as a liquid but contains curious pequa levels. Their vessel is powered by swiftly moving eves convairs and I wonder if these inner fields can be duplicated.*

They call each urkam orbit on Mantari-Earth a year and count them from the birth of a Mantari seer. One thousand nine hundred and sixty-eight orbits have elapsed since the seer’s birth.

This urkam is plagued with war, unrest and killing of leaders. Azarik weapons were almost used again five of their years ago and would have resulted in the death of millions of inferiors. The spread of these weapons has not stopped. I am very much shielded underground should they destroy themselves.

I have successfully completed a pequa beam from this altered pequa source under the urkam. I will not be ready to contact leaders of this urkam for many reifts. But I will lure them up here by transmitting pequa flow without their crude metal lines. Then I can begin the control. Long live the Realm!”

Sard stood upright when the contact ended. “Sard’s mind will subdue the inferiors and he will travel across their Humea passageway.”

“Sard, there is a problem. I wanted to wait until you were finished,” said Elkan.

“Sard will return to the Aragosta now.”

“It’s Anka.... He is dead.” Sard looked away from the nakitam and his fangs expanded along his mouth. “His last words according to the sevelts asked that you destroy the Ta-Buhn-Shar.”

Sard’s fangs were fully extended. “Sard will carry out his orders and the Realm will reign supreme in the Humea.”

* * *

In the portal bays Sard stood before every sevelt on the Aragosta. The front vargut formation surrounded a polished metal cluster containing Anka’s remains. His old friend would soon sail forever among the azoz. His extolling Anka’s life did not reflect weakness, but only facts. Any further contemplation and feelings would remain private. He placed his graspers around the cluster and walked to the outside portal locks. The doors opened and he set the cluster inside the projection tube. He closed the tube and backed from the portal.

He ordered the doors closed, the lighting dimmed, and the nakitams focused on the tube. Slowly the air gushed out of locks. The outside portal doors slid open and the tube moved into the azoz-smattered sky. Once a short distance from the Aragosta, the tube opened and the cluster brightened in the azoz light as it spun through space. With Anka’s remains went part of Sard’s own life.

In tribute, the Aragosta's warning blizens sounded as the sevelts marched behind Sard and the varguts from the bays. When they reached the thacin he requested Elkan accompany him to the iacin. The red light swirled around Elkan's matrixes. "The Realm owes Anka a debt that can never be repaid."

"Sard will repay it in Mantari saurine."

"I suppose that is true," said Elkan as they rose.

"Sard wishes to know if you have imaged the voyage across the Mantari passageway."

Elkan scanned him for a moment before replying. "We have tried the simulations, but what your brother describes cannot be simulated. An ocean of pequa. The rucapens do not understand it."

"Tark will. Assume we will know how to traverse that sea. Moving everything will surprise the Ta-Buhn-Shar on the other urkam. They will never expect this type of attack."

"Nor their Awaited one."

"This talk of the Awaited One bores Sard. He will take them as they hesitate and then rid them from the Humea for all time."

"You have control of the Realm, Sard. The Ta-Buhn-Shar remains hidden. We risk a great deal by crossing this unknown sea."

"You question Sard?"

"I only want what is best for the Realm."

"Then Elkan," said Sard as they arrived at the iacin. "You will not question Sard again."

3

“ Finally after all the many orbits around this azoz I have two inferiors with me today.”

Sard, although relieved another contact had finally arrived, was astonished to see inferiors standing with his brother in the underground cave. A larger Mantari in an odd brown uniform stood next to a deformed creature in a transport rest. “ Sard would have killed them.”

“ He will use them,” said Elkan.

“ The seated Mantari has been injured. His name is Allsworthy and was highly placed on this urkam. I have plans to work with him to construct the means to send the generated pequa flow signals around the urkam. I also plan to control all imputes into Mantari nakitams on the urkam. To do this I will use Mundy, a sevelt to Allsworthy. He controls rucapens and materials and has access to leaders. The Mantari on this urkam call themselves humans but are still descended from the Ta-Buhn-Shar.”

“ The inferiors do not understand Sard’s brother’s language and do not have the intelligence to construct translators.”

The standing inferior said something in his own language. “ *Oh, yes. Mundy says this work, what we are constructing in the cave, has been hidden from the rest of his varguts and proaskas. A rucapen named Raster understands what I wish to do here, but only Mundy and Allsworthy know*

of my presence on the urkam. They will provide me all I need to conquer them and their urkam”

“ Tark tells them yet they do not understand,” said Sard.

“ Inferiors...”

Mundy said something to Tark and then into the fram.

“ Shall I translate what he says?” asked Elkan.

“ No inferior words will be brought into our language. Let them babble, they fall into Tark’s trap.”

“ I have been advised by Mundy that he is humbled in my presence. This inferior is a coward and will do anything I say. He says he looks forward to the day our races can work together side by side on Earth. He is a fool.”

“ Never shall the inferiors work with us!” cried Sard. “ Sard will annihilate them all when he arrives on Mantari-Earth!”

“ Huge amounts of pequa flow has been liberated from the urkam’s natural sources. They will be seduced to give up their organic fuels.”

“ Inferior!” yelled Sard. He banged the table and spoke into the fram.

“ Roik! Roik!”

“ Yes, Vargut Emnas.”

“ Sard wishes you to ready the best pzicar for immediate flight. Plot arrival time at Sa-Karbla speed to Mantari-Earth.”

“ It will be done, Vagut Emnas.”

“ I have also begun my work simulating not only the images on their nakitams, but on creating the illusion of reality. I will fabricate the inferiors and things that never were-to seduce them. But work on this proceeds slowly. Long live the Realm.”

“ Long live the Realm,” repeated Sard as the contact ended.

Elkan stared at him. “Sard, who will volunteer in the pzicar at such a speed?”

“Sard will arrive ahead of the amperge.”

“We can’t risk your being killed.”

“Sard will meet his brother and prepare to cross the passageway.”

* * *

Elkan was not alone in his opposition against Sard making the separate pzicar flight to Mantari-Earth. While no one would openly challenge Sard, he heard the undercurrents. They feared for his safety at such high speeds. But Sard wondered how long Tark could carry out his charade against the inferiors and he deemed it essential for preparations begin to invade across the passageway. According to his proaskas in the portal bay iacins, the pzicar was ready for travel across the Humea. As he leaned away from the pzicar opening, Elkan moved into the open bays.

“Sard is pleased you have not defied what is to be done.”

“The pzicar is ready. I feel you understand the risk of such high speed, Vargut Emnas. Nor do I feel I have the means to stop you.”

“That is wise. And Sard has no intention of dying.”

“The high speeds are risky...”

“Sard will not die nor will he worry about such things. But he will arrive to help his brother. Before the Aragosta and the amperge reaches Mantari-Earth we will be ready for passage against the Ta-Buhn-Shar.”

“Bringing such large azicars onto a urkam and through a passageway may not be possible, Vargut Emnas. We may have to travel by conventional means and find the Ta-Buhn-Shar’s home urkam.”

Sard's matrixes dimmed. He looked away and contemplated searching the skies for the urkam. " Reifts could pass or we may never find their urkam and the Ta-Buhn-Shar. With this passageway the Realm has a chance."

" I understand, but you will be in my thoughts."

" I look forward to your arrival, Elkan."

Sard reached into the pzicar and lifted the helmet over his head. The tacticals bright readings danced in the upper corner helmet nakitams. Elkan and the upper bay iacin were shaded through the visor. Elkan fell to his knees. " May you have the fate of the ancient Emnas and may the richness of Humea be yours."

" Rise."

" Sard will be victorious. He will find the Ta-Buhn-Shar and the greatness of the Realm will be complete." He turned and studied the long black pzicar.

" Sard is ready for departure."

" Pzicar is operational," said Roik from the upper iacin.

Sard scanned his face as well as the other sevelts and proaskas gathered along the rails. " Sard does not deny he faces a journey with risk. If he does not survive Elkan will continue the journey to Mantari-Earth. The Ta-Buhn-Shar must be found and conquered. Sard cannot lose any more time." He turned to Elkan. " Do you understand, Elkan?"

" Yes, Vargut Emnas."

Sard dipped his head below the opening and crawled into the smaller pzicar iacin. Hunched over, he positioned himself in the center rester, surrounded by smaller nakitams and panels. On the screen Roik stood with Hueta and the others in the portal bays iacin. Roik fell to his knees when he

realized Sard scanned him on the nakitam screen. “ You will be victorious, Vargut Emnas.”

Sard pushed several buttons and the pzicar portal was slowly sealed. His matrixes adjusted to the lower light as he stared at the portal doors.

“ You are sanctioned for movement to portal locks, Vargut Emnas,” said Hueta.

“ Sard is ready.”

He was now filled with the same exhilaration of battle as the control beams brought the tiny pzicar toward the sliding portal doors. Anka’s cluster, now spinning into infinity, filled his thoughts as he stared at the inside of the portal locks. The bolted window spans showed a few bright azoz. He activated a full view of the Humea on the forward screen and the tactical of his course to Mantari-Earth was depicted on the lower screens as a broken yellow line across the purple space. Travel in the pzicar was estimated at one hundred times faster than Karbla speed. Yet, such speed required clear conditions and an accurate, steady course.

The shadows of the portal doors cut across his silver suit as the pzicar rolled inside. “ Portal locks are ready to be equalized,” said Elkan, now in the iacin with the others.

“ Sard hears you.”

The doors rumbled shut. With the darkness the panel’s orange and yellow nakitam lights glowed brighter. The air rushed back into the bays and the pzicar’s drivers gently hummed. Before him the outer portal doors retracted and the pzicar with a light bump, floated into space. For a short time it drifted away from the *Aragosta’s* darkened hull. On the rear nakitam scan, the fully charged shooter batteries glowed in the belly of the azicar.

Cabin lights were bright in the starry darkness as the pzicar drives now revved loudly. He watched as he moved away from the Aragosta.

“Preparing for increased speed, Vagut Emnas,” said Elkan.

“Sard hears you.”

“May the glory of the Realm be with you forever.”

“Long live the Realm.”

The Aragosta blurred and Sard realized the contact signals would cease with the increased speed. Communication would now only involve interception of his brother’s incoming contacts. His body was pushed sat against the pzicar rest as the driver sound levels shook the vessel. The forward sweep fields extended along the pzicar’s course, and as the azoz formed lines blurred across the nakitam, he realized his amperge was already far away. He rode the initial acceleration with his graspers gripped on the stabilizers, but did not dare switch anything to his own control. The acceleration would continue for almost a desak. His mind was set on finding the Ta-Buhn-Shar and enduring the increasing speed was a trade Sard accepted easily.

4

Both John and Loftus shielded their heads with fabric turbans. In the hot sun atop of the camino, Loftus panned the long sand slopes, dotted with occasional rocks and scrub brush. The landscape had not changed in the fifty-seven days since they passed through the garrison doors. The sacks of grain had shriveled and water was limited to a single half filled, wire bound barrel. Loftus licked his cracked lips.. “ It never changes, this land... Where is the Nescrans?”

John held the reins and looked toward the horizon. “ At night the stars tell me we are moving in that general direction.”

Loftus looked over his shoulder at the flattened grain bag. “ While I think we can continue to limit our intake, I worry about the guampas. We will run out of food unless we reach the Nescrans soon.”

“ Days, maybe a week. I only know this journey from long ago and from the stories. I had a full caravan and supplies when I traveled.”

“ We must speak with the Eskars, convince them of the impending attacks, and find Aba-Shar.”

“ And will do they do?” asked John.

“ I don't have answers. I only trust that Ta-Buhn-Shar will make it happen.” Loftus' Buhnsharf briefly cut the light into a small arched rainbow in late afternoon sunlight. “ Somehow this will lead me to Ta-Buhn-Shar.”

“ You speak as if you have seen Ta-Buhn-Shar.”

“ No... I only understand where they take me...” He gazed to tanned dunes in the distance. “ Another barrier.”

“ Dunes... I don't remember dunes.” John slowed the guampas when the camino swerved in the sand. “ I know this is the right direction. Mountains border the Nescrans. I remember riding in from the dry land toward the blue mountains in the distance.”

Loftus handed the smaller water container to him. “ We have to be sure before we head over the sands.”

“ I'll check the stars again tonight,” he said, choking on the water. He cleared his throat. “ Perhaps the climate has dried since I passed through this way.”

Loftus took in the water and climbed from the camino onto the hot sands. He raised his fingers to his temples and resonated. With his eyes closed, his mind focused on his strong feelings. “ The journey may be hard but we will survive.”

“ And what do we say, Tom? What do we say to the Eskars or even the Tolten?”

“ We will say the right things. I'm convinced.”

“ I have never resonated,” said John.

“ You will not resonate until you are ready. I was a guy, John, who trusted no one and believed in nothing other than taking chances and the having the thrill of adventure, but I now have a destiny beyond my control.”

“ I believe that... And I trust what you say will come to pass.”

* * *

John continued to stare into a sky laden with star patterns Loftus did not recognize. Loftus was concerned by the guampas's swollen hoofs.

Continuing across hot sands in the morning would only worsen the swelling.

“What do you see?”

“The stars tell me that we are very close. I don’t know why we haven’t seen the mountains.”

“So, we are on course...”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Good because the guampas won’t make it much further and we need the water. Are we ten miles, fifteen?”

“No more than fifty miles. We should see the mountains from the dunes tomorrow...”

They walked along the camino and leaned against the carved wheel.

“I have trouble fathoming from where I’ve come... I know the passageway changed time and space, but I still long to be back on Earth.” He followed the star trail high above the desert. “I would go back to Appleton if I could.”

“Why did you leave?” asked John.

“Most men aren’t driven the way I was driven. I needed the adventure and had to prove myself in the Panthers.”

“The most elite division of DSS.”

“It was. Maybe something else drove me. Something from my early years that I was not aware of until I had the dreams.”

John pressed his lips and continued looking skyward as he spoke.

“Deluca had long talk with mother at Bathurst. When she first told me about Alta-Shar and the passageway... I didn’t believe it.”

“Neither did I. But it’s true.” He lifted the Buhnsharf. “Look at this. Molded from antiquity as a clear, seamless piece to unlock the secrets of Ta-Buhn-Shar.” He stroked his heavy beard and let his mind drift. “Yeah, I

would go back to Appleton, build another cabin in the hills and just disappear. Live away from the city and the confusion.”

“ I’m afraid that land is in another time and place. Mother must have aged and probably grown more cynical.”

Loftus’s face tightened. “ My time with your mother is in the past.”

“ She never stopped loving you,” said John. “ And she thought she would never see you again.”

“ I had so much to say.” He squinted at the stars. “ I only wish I could have talked with her. *Once...* that’s all. ”

“ Maybe someday you will.”

5

He shuffled on foot for days after the guampas collapsed. The water in his container barely swished along the sides as he slid through the towering dune's burning sand. The wind pelted his face with tiny stinging grains and the constant sizzling sun tracked him from the cloudless sky.

John motioned him slowly from the top of the dune. His raspy voice was barely audible through the winds. "The mountains..."

Loftus compressed his sun-scorched skin. In the wavy heat rising from this dune sea, a crisp purple mountain range rose from the horizon. He could only speak in a whisper now. "It has to be twenty miles... Maybe more..."

"My legs are weakening," said John, steadying himself on Loftus' shoulder as the wind whipped the sand.

Loftus kept head angled against the sand storm as he talked. "I know... my side is ripped... apart and it's so damned hot."

"I figure it could be a couple of days, Tom."

"I know." He faced John and the sand pinged his face. "Listen, if one of us goes, the other has to continue. No need for us both to die."

"Agreed," said John, pulling the turban down to his bleached eyebrows. The wind howled as he pointed to the mountains. "This way."

* * *

Loftus's eyes were clamped with sandy edges and sometimes he stared at the ground as he trudged forward. His boots dug into the hot sand with every step and the heated grains fell back over his bare ankles. The skin across his face was stretched across blisters bordering open, caked cuts on his parched lips. For at least an hour he had trailed John's form, outlined in the heat ahead, but now more steep dunes were spread before the mountains.

His voice was squelched by the dryness in his throat. Imperceptibly, he slipped and found himself face down in the sand. He spit the crunchy sand from his mouth and stumbled back to his feet. His hands burned as he lifted the empty water skin to his lips and then chucked it down the sand slope. Taking small steps, he crested the dune. John lay on his back twenty yards down the far side. Loftus cascaded down, but lost his balance, rolled and hit the dune hard. When he opened his eyes, John was a few feet behind. Loftus sifted the hot grains through his fingers as the sand pummeled the skin around his turban and he drifted out of consciousness. When he finally lifted his head his feet were partially buried. Rolling to the left the blazing sun cut into his eyes, but he managed to pull his feet out of the sand. He breathed quickly as he sat up. John's shoulder and arm were submerged under the dunes.

He tensed his forearms and crawled forward. Adrenaline kicked in as he scooped out the mound over John's shoulder. " We have to... go... Nes...crans." When John did not stir, Loftus clasped his wrists.

His son babbled as Loftus pulled him along the sands. " Over... It's over."

Loftus thrust his hands under John's arms. His own voice was barely audible. " No... No. We won't give up."

" Too hot... No water..."

Loftus growled as he hoisted John up. His blistered lips cracked and stung. John muttered as Loftus dragged him up the next dune. He pushed his feet into the sands and saw the stretch of dune waves extending to the purple hills.

" Help me! Help Me!"

Loftus fought to keep his balance. Where was Ta-Buhn-Shar? With each forced step across the loose sands he wondered if Ta-Buhn-Shar was a mere illusion, the work of the mind's rationalization of life. He trudged within an all-encompassing pain, convinced he would die with his son in the desert. John's limp body was his last link to Kath.

He traversed the dune with his eyes closed, amazed at his own stamina. All perception dwindled, as did the pervasive pain. He was not sure whether he was still moving as everything brightened around him. An evolving image formed across a flat area. The outlines of the rectangular pool he had envisioned in the Maurg Noma materialized and the familiar pale rose slab below a thick batch of stars. The green pool, perfectly smooth, now mirrored the stars as crisp as a clear winter's night. He had not noticed the clear Buhnsharf towering over the far end. For whatever reason he was compelled to approach and climb that Buhnsharf.

The sky lightened to a brilliant blue with clouds puffy over the horizon. Now, in another place, he slowed on rocky cliffs overlooking a lush valley and prodigious waterfalls leading into clear lakes. Rivers meandered across brown plains to an azure ocean horizon below the clouds. He turned to tell John, but again found himself facing the backside of a sweeping dune.

John lay twenty feet behind him in the sand. Loftus slipped as he backtracked and held John's shoulders. "The... Nescrans... John... over the next..."

Nothing mattered now except scaling the next dune. He grabbed John's wrists again, but could not hoist him up and had to drag his son's body in spurts through the sands. He pulled and stopped, closed his eyes and resonated to find the land he had just visualized. The Nescrans was just over the top. But when he yanked on John's wrists, he lost his footing, and careened back. He was cognizant of each crash against the sand, but he felt nothing as he lay motionless and lost his thoughts.

* * *

The coolness of a clear mountain pool, shielded within smooth brown rocks and fed by a small trickling waterfall, encompassed his hand. He cupped his hand and sucked the cold water down his raw throat. After a coughing burst he took in more liquid. John was sprawled on the rocks only a few feet away. Loftus used his hands again and sprinkled the water over John's beard and hair. His son stirred but his eyes remained closed.

Loftus took in more water for himself. "John..."

His son's glassy eyes slowly opened and scanned the upper rocks.
"Where?"

"I don't know... I was on the dune. You were behind."

"More water..."

Loftus poured more water into John's mouth. John gripped his wrist. His moist blue eyes shifted toward the waterfall as he spoke in a whisper.

“ *Tell me this is a dream.*”

“ It’s no dream,” said Loftus, bracing his hands on the rocks. “ I don’t know what we’re doing here, but if we’ve reached the Nescrans we can find the Eskars and search for Aba-Shar.”

“ I remember nothing...”

“ John.” He leaned toward his son. “ I was traveling up the dunes, resonating to Ta-Buhn-Shar. That’s the last thing I remember.” Then he thought about his vision under the stars. “ No, wait. I was in a dream or maybe it was real. Along a rectangular pool within the same white slab from the passageway. I was under the stars and at the end was...”

“ The Buhnsharf.”

‘ You saw it, too.’

“ I did. You wanted to climb the Buhnsharf. You kept telling me you *had to* climb it.”

Loftus nodded and he pictured the Buhnsharf again. “ Something inside that structure... Maybe Ta-Buhn-Shar. I don’t know.”

“ Are they gods?”

“ I don’t think so. Advanced, but I don’t know.”

“ Resonation is like praying,” said John, wincing as he pushed himself up.

“ Maybe just communication,” said Loftus.

“ Why would they hide? What’s the reason?”

Loftus shrugged his shoulders. “ Maybe time has no meaning for them. They must have knowledge of a larger picture.”

John tried smiling through his torn lips. “ With you as the Awaited One.”

“ Maybe...” He held his own Buhnsharf as he struggled to his feet. Across the valley was clear evidence of a city within the fluffy green foliage. A massive dome protruded from the treetops and tiny houses lined dirt roads. He thought he saw guampas drawn carts near the river. “ The key to all of this is the Eskars and I’ll bet money that domed building in the center of the city is the Noma. They will know the word of the Saba. They’ll know what we should do.”

6

As morning broke, they were renewed with the fruits and berries along the cliffs. After lingering in the clear water, they were able to travel again. Loftus opted to parallel the tumbling waterfalls down the cliffs. The widening falls soft mist provided soothing refreshment. Hours later they munched more food on a rock overhang adjacent to a cataclysmic water surge, capped by a rainbow within the overhead spray. “Ever been to Niagara Falls?”

“Yeah, we went up there once when I was nine. Nothing like this...”

“I missed all that with you. But I didn’t know you were my son.”

“You would-”

“Have made a difference?” asked Loftus. He threw the large yellow fruit he was eating over the edge.

“Yeah.”

“I know...” Loftus placed his hand on John’s shoulder and then scanned the village only a few miles distant below the cliffs. More buildings were apparent near the spires and the streets crowded near a central square.

“I am sorry.”

“Don’t be, Tom. Let’s go.”

Loftus tapped him on the shoulder. “Not much further.”

* * *

They veered away from the falls on a trail leading into a dense forest at the base of the cliffs. The enormity of the falls was visible through breaks in the trees and tons of crashing water sent a continuous rumble through the woods. Not until late afternoon did they encounter a small caravan of white fabric wagons pulled by smaller guampas along on the packed dirt road winding through the towering trees. Loftus approached a dark bearded man in a paisley blue shirt and baggy red pants, and expressed his desire to travel to the city.

The man had a mellow accent. “ You mean Epac,” he said, looking over their wrinkled clothes and tanned skin. “ You have been in the Great Desert.”

“ We have.” He did not elaborate further. “ Can we ride in your caminos?”

“ What part of Epac? The inner or the outer?” he asked as several more men approached. “ They wish travel to Epac.”

“ Then load them,” said an older man, stout with short gray hair. “ We cannot be delayed any longer.”

“ Climb inside the camino,” said the bearded man as the others returned to their caminos. Loftus thanked him and reached for the support pole. “ The outer Epac borders the sea and the inner is the inner.”

“ The inner,” said Loftus, smiling.

“ Find a space between the supplies.”

Loftus pulled John up and they sat between huge grain sacks and a number of thin wood barrels. He rested his head against the softer grain sack as the guampas brought the wagon forward. In his mind he rehearsed what he would say to the Eskars in this land where Ta-Buhn-Shar was openly

worshipped. More than finding Aba-Shar, he dreamed of returning to the Aescrans and tracking down Kath. He closed his eyes and fell into a light sleep as the camino rocked through the woods.

* * *

“ Tom... Tom, wake up.”

Loftus heard people talking and the sound of guampas hooves clicked against a solid surface. He slowly opened his eyes to a series of bright torches along thick block walls. People walked briskly along the streets. He sat up.

“ Epac?”

John turned in the camino. “ This place dwarfs the Meade. Looks like Earth during the Renaissance.” He panned the city. “ We’re near what looks like the Noma. It’s across the square.”

“ Probably a central point,” said Loftus as he crawled to the edge. Arched open shops extended along the immediate walls, but fanned out into a gray cobblestone square several acres wide. He was drawn to the massive blue domed building below the upper twisted spires. The rose slabs matched the passageway construction. “ How did they get that material?”

“ Good question. I wonder if this thing connects to the passageway.” said John.

“ I find it significant the Noma is the largest building here.”

“ I never understood how the Tolten and the Meade were so *backward*,” said John.

“ He couldn’t control this place.”

The driver moved around the back. “ We have arrived in the enclave.”

Loftus crawled over the back rail and stepped onto the cobblestones.

“ You mean this square?”

“ Yes...”

John stepped next to him. “ We thank you for the ride into the city.”

“ And we wish you luck in your ventures here. Good fortune to you.”

“ Is that the Noma?” asked Loftus, pointing across the enclave.

The driver checked the wheel spokes and nodded. “ The Noma, of course.” He smiled. “ But you must remember your place.”

“ What do you mean?”

The driver raised his bushy brows in the torchlight. “ You’ll find out soon enough.”

Loftus gazed across the cobblestones to the dome several hundred feet up in the night. As the camino pulled away over the cobblestones, the wide rose stairs reminded him of the more prodigious stairway from Bathurst.

“ I know what you’re thinking,” said John.

“ What’s that?”

“ You think you’re going to walk inside that Noma and they’re all going to come running out to greet you.”

Loftus grinned as they started across the enclave. “ You don’t think there will be a party in our honor?”

“ With you, I’m beginning wonder...”

Loftus stared at the torch lit stairway under the thick, smooth columns and facade of the same material. It was similar to all those massive Federal buildings in Washington DC, but this was the largest building in the city. The absence of guards or anyone present outside was odd. His mind was taken

as if he were deep in resonance. “ I feel a strong presence here.” He again gazed upward as he climbed the stairs. “ This is a holy place. A sacred area.”

“ I think of that line from Shelly. ‘ The awful shadow of some unseen Power floats through unseen among us..’ ”

“ You feel something?”

“ Yeah...” The columns were not as smooth as he thought. Intricate carvings were etched the white surface and the pediments above. When he reached main building he ran his fingers over figures of men in battle helmets and shields. Hooded robed figures with wide sashes were carved along the upper moldings. But in the flickering light above the dark old doors unmistakable renderings of spaceships faced a weathered etching on the pediment.

TA-BUHN-SHAR

“ A whole religion revolving around a lost civilization,” said John.

Loftus sensed goose bumps crawling up his arms. A larger depiction of robed beings looked over the enclave. “ The lost ones.”

“ The place looks closed for business,” said John. He moved up to the door and pulled in the rusted handles. “ It is locked.”

Along the slab Loftus slowly raised his fingers to his temples. John followed his example and they sat in front of the doors. Loftus saw no vivid visions, but he did feel a pervasive reassurance. For several minutes he

remained in the meditative state and when he opened his eyes, he focused on the upper white stone carvings. A crisp sculpture of a Creod, an image closely resembling Tark, hovered over a Mantari warrior.

“ Why are you here?” a voice echoed along the portico.

Loftus looked up the pillars and toward the square. “ Are we at the Noma?”

“ Of course this is the Noma... You are Ashuns.”

“ We have traveled far to reach this place,” said Loftus, still not sure of the voice’s location.

“ Are you of The Elect?”

“ The what?” he asked.

“ I clearly understand that you are not of The Elect.”

John looked back at the doors. “ Are there a select group of people who enter the Noma?”

“ The Elect have been chosen. All others are Ashuns. Ashuns do not worship or read the Saba within Noma walls.”

“ But we are not from the Nescrans,” replied Loftus, joining John at the door.

“ I must go.”

“ Wait... The Saba was meant for everyone,” said Loftus. After a long silence, he paced the portico. “ In the Maurg we read the Saba!”

He heard movement inside. One of the huge doors cranked open and a short man with thin hair stood in a red and yellow robe embroidered with a likeness of a Mantari warrior in the center fabric. “ The Tolten sends his prisoners to the Maurg... but no one crosses the Great Desert.”

“ Worshipping Ta-Buhn-Shar is a crime in the Aescrans,” said Loftus.

The man's dark eyes were fixed on them both. He snapped his fingers and several guards clad in black armor, fit to the body, and mesh cage helmets surrounded them. Their serrated, hooked spears formed a sharp wall. The man in the robe stepped onto the slab. "I am Garold."

"Are you an Eskar?" asked Loftus, studying the blade's faceted contour near his abdomen.

"No, I am a Tendra. I serve the Eskars. You both are tattered."

"Time in the Great Desert," said Loftus.

"You will accompany us inside the Noma." He moved closer to Loftus and lifted the Buhnsharf into his hand. "Where did you get this?"

"I was given this Buhnsharf by my father when I was a youth."

"I see..." Garold inspected it closer. "Where did he-"

"I only knew he had it. But I've come to learn it is etched with tenets of the Saba."

"Etched for those who believe," said Garold.

"Yes, this is true."

"From afar he comes. The battles he has seen and the triumphs won and lost. He wears the key to past and now. Receive him. Do not bring him scorn..."

"From the Second Millennium," said Loftus.

Garold squinted his brown eyes. "You come with me. Both of you."

They followed him onto a shiny white tiled floor. The smaller stone foyer led to a longer corridor a few hundred yards long. Marble and rough gray statues watched over the corridor's length like sentries at the gate. Extended gold framed murals, painted with vibrant colors realistically depicted battle scenes from the Saba. They reached a domed rotunda several minutes later. A stone retaining wall bordered a garden with a trickling

waterfall over the rocks. Garold said nothing as he disappeared through an open doorway behind more statues.

“ Why The Elect?” asked Loftus, inching his way to one of the statues. The venous hands and fingers were human and the eyes looked intensely outward. “ I don’t understand why everyone can’t worship.”

“ This is as bad as the Tolten,” said John.

“ Well, these Eskars had better understand, and I only speak from what I feel in my heart, that this planet is doomed unless I find Aba-Shar.”

“ I only trust that what you say is true,” said John. “ How it can be accomplished is beyond me.”

“ I can feel it must happen.”

Garold smiled as he stepped around the statues. “ You will be given food and quarter to recover from your encounter in the desert... Any time in the Great Desert is not pleasant.”

“ We appreciate your efforts,” said Loftus.

Garold nodded slightly and motioned them down the next corridor.

“ No one crosses the Great Desert without the help of Ta-Buhn-Shar. I have spoken to the Gweshan, intermediaries between the Eskars and the Tendra. You will be received by the Eskars tomorrow. You and your Buhnsharf have aroused their curiosity.”

“ I have important questions.”

“ You will have the opportunity,” said Garold, walking beside them.

Food tables were set on long tables near more gardens and a steamy pool bubbled beyond. Garold held the edges of a smooth white rope, extending to the ceiling. “ If you should desire anything, please pull on this rope.”

“ We are in your debt.”

Garold stared at the Buhnsharf again. “ I feel it may be we who are in your debt.”