

**1**

Roik's standing orders were to kill all Mantari inferiors and destroy their urkams, but now he was worried. Sard's specific instructions demanded he find the seventh Ta-Buhn-Shar urkam. After fighting the Ta-Buhn-Shar leaders long ago in the Proximity Battles and the final battle of Golga, six of the nine Mantari urkams were decimated and the inferiors vaporized from existence. But the Ta-Buhn-Shar vanished and were never found.

Now his nakitam screen flashed the same fluctuating pequa readings, although lower in intensity, seen on all the conquered urkams. Huge clear monoliths, probably left by the Ta-Buhn-Shar, were the source of these readings. Repeated attacks and attempts to enter the monoliths were usually unsuccessful. Mantari genetic scans were evident on the fourth blue urkam of the uncharted system ahead. It was likely another offshoot urkam, but the possibility existed he had stumbled upon the ancestral home and hiding place of the Ta-Buhn-Shar. He crossed the dark iacin and leaned over the glowing nakitam screen. Like all the other Mantari worlds vast oceans enveloped the urkam and thin clouds traced the brown continents. He longed for his home urkam's heavy hanging mist and darkened swamps.

“ Hueta, bring the azicar over the central city.”

“ Yes, Proaska.”

Roik held the nakitam. “ Is this a stagnant civilization?”

“ With the exception of the power readings, no sign of progress, Proaska. It would appear they use animals for labor and transport,” answered Hueta.

“ Good,” he growled. “ Easy targets for the cluster azicars. All the inferiors will be taught the supreme lesson and they will suffer for the sins of their Ta-Buhn-Shar leaders!”

Roik leaned back in his chair as Hueta brought the vessel across the brilliant aqua horizon line. At seventy across units above the surface Roik still could not determine the extent of this urkam's civilization. His thin lip vibrated as he contemplated placing the azicar shooters against inferiors, whose only defense was probably rocks and sticks.

He hoped, as he soared through the blue skies below, they might see his cluster azicar in the sky. Incomprehensible fear would spread throughout the villages before the attack. He would not decimate the urkam directly, but institute a slow gradual destruction and allow the inferiors to suffer slowly. On the forward nakitam the azicar swooped over the ocean and skimmed the surface. The populated city formed complex tactical patterns on all nakitams. Unlike his home urkam's lofty towers above the clouds, the city's ground buildings were the work of fools.

Roik moved across the azicar's iacin to the larger forward nakitam. The little wooden structures along the shore annoyed him.

“ Situate the azicar near the city. Let them fear the wrath of the Realm.”

“ Yes, Proaska,” answered Hueta from his station.

The inferiors scattered on the roads and alleys as the azicar moved into position over the buildings. Roik's long pink fangs emerged along his thin lips. He hated the Mantari and took great pride in their fright. They moved like insects behind the shelter of buildings and into underground tunnels.

“ Miserable creatures. Look at them running in fear. Would a Creod turn away from battle?”

“ No, Proaska,” said Hueta. “ They are inferior.”

Roik waited until they had hidden. “ Let us continue the battle. Bring the azicar outside the city for embarkation.”

“ Yes, Proaska.”

Less than an across unit from the settled area, Hueta guided the azicar over a wide green meadow, surrounded by trees and a river wandering into the countryside. Roik strutted across the iacin and watched the forward nakitam as the azicar slowly descended. He then ordered two sevelts to accompany him to the outside portal. Inferiors deserved death, he thought, as he personally retrieved their fully charged shooters from the arsenal and tucked his own shooter in his side sheath. “ Let them suffer the

transgressions of the Ta-Buhn-Shar.” He checked the outside readings on the nakitam. Then he led them toward the portal. “ The same disturbing atmosphere as all the inferior urkams.”

“ No cloud formations, Proaska,” said the senior sevelt.

“ We will not have to be exposed to their azoz’s harsh light for too long.”

“ How do they exist in direct azoz light?” asked the other sevelt.

“ They are miserable creatures,” replied Roik as they reached the portal. He glanced at the trees through the transparency.

“ What would you expect from creatures who do not have the capacity to reproduce spontaneously as we do?”

“ Inferiors,” they answered.

Roik’s upper lip vibrated. “ They and most of their urkam life forms must merge and join their genetic material.” He pushed the portal lock sequence on the tiny nakitam. “ Of course there are exceptions, but not many, and surely no intelligent forms of life on this miserable urkam.”

“ Crude beings,” said the senior sevelt.

Roik's upper lip vibrated again and he nodded. He handed his sevelts sets of matrix shields for protection against the Mantari azoz. The brightness subsided once he placed the shield over his own matrixes. “ These creatures are interdependent beyond duty. Adjust your shields. Exposure beyond a few desaks can damage your matrixes.”

“ Yes, Proaska.”

“ Open lock.” The portal doors slid open and they moved inside the stabilizer locks. The urkam’s air whooshed through the side jets. Roik checked across the meadow grass and along the deep hued forest growth. His personal nakitam showed the inferiors and their animals hiding behind the adjacent trees. The portal slowly retracted once the air equalized and the shadow of the cluster azicar's silver disc hull extended across the grass. His preference was to attack these beings with his faster and smaller personal pzicar, but he did not want to deny his sevelts the pleasure of the kill.

“ Plot Mantari positions on your shooter scans.”

His nakitam displayed the woods and nine creatures behind a stonewall and trees. Some were positioned atop their animals.

“ Discharge shooters.” Three intense green bolts burst into the woods. One tree toppled and branches were blown apart. A few fires ignited and thick gray smoke rose above the trees. Some of the inferiors were knocked from their animals and their painful cries echoed back to the meadow. A quick scan showed five Mantari dead on the forest floor and two of the wounded retreated through the woods. “ Again!”

More trees snapped as if hit by the winds of a powerful storm. Roik motioned his sevelts across the meadow. According to the nakitams the remaining two inferiors were trapped at the end of the smoky forest swath. Roik leaped over two smoldering trees. In the bushes he spotted the two

light skinned inferiors, red saurine leaking from their ripped flesh. He aimed his shooter at the highest setting and thin green aptar lines enveloped the inferiors, producing a brilliant white glow before they vanished in a puff.

“ Two additional inferiors fleeing!” shouted his senior sevelt.

Roik gazed over the smoke columns. “ We will take them in personal combat!”

As he hurdled the debris, Roik sensed the sevelt excitement as he ascended a wooded knoll untouched by shooter fire. Two inferiors lay against a rock ledge, but quickly limped down a side trail. His sevelts easily overtook them. Roik’s serrated craw slowly expanded from his appendage graspers. He swung the craw across the creature's shoulder, opened its outer flesh and sent saurine exploding. The inferior screamed as Roik lifted it into the air by its chin. He thrust his craw through the Mantari's stomach, puncturing the inner cavity and back. The inferior's dark eyes rolled upward. It had died too quickly.

The two sevelts were more precise in torturing the second creature. Methodically removing the graspers from the inferior's appendages provided a more rewarding torture. Roik jabbed the tiny blue matrixes. The resulting pain was worth the chase. He let his sevelts continue the dismemberment as he walked along the rocks and instituted a full scan back to the main city. As the Mantari azoz shined through the trees, he longed for the swampy cover of the

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home urkam's hystia trees. Nakitams showed hundreds of creatures gathered in subterranean chambers below the city. Rounding up inferiors for transport to the Aragosta's the Hameon Saltra Games would please Sard.

## 2

The young Tolten witnessed the attack atop his mighty alfraus. When he heard the reports of the ships, hovering like pointed swords in the sky and sightings of enormous green creatures stalking the meadows, he almost believed the ancient Ta-Buhn-Shar writings. Panic had spread throughout the city, yet he had no course of action as he approached the fires across the meadows. He did not dare go further, kicked his alfraus and galloped down the wooded trail back to the fortress. He wondered how Ta-Buhn-Shar allowed this to happen to his people?

The ground thundered near the edge of the village. Over the fluffy treetops the sharp edged silver Creod vessel circled and a beam ripped through the forest. The Tolten nudged his alfraus down the dirt road toward the red lathstone pillars on either side of the fortress gate. Some of his people had left the safety of the tunnels and now roamed the streets. The mob would become unruly once others, especially Ta-Buhn-Shar worshipers, converged around the fortress. He was the Tolten, of a small portion of Al-Bashar, but he had no answers as he rode through the open iron gates. The gray uniformed elneer soldiers, protected by black chest shields and wrap around helmets, raised their swords toward the

twisted blue fortress spindles. The mob was in the square as he rolled off the alfraus.

Paran appeared on the balcony and scampered down the stucco-lined stairs. “ Tolten, the people are demanding you stop the attacking ships!”

“ Where are the rest of my personal elneer?”

“ They fled underground when the cluster ship appeared.”

The Tolten's anger was suppressed only by his sense of duty. He started across the dusty courtyard. “ I have been at the meadow, Paran. I assure you nothing can be done.”

“ Tolten, how do we fight them?”

The Tolten reached the stairs and stopped. “ I need to talk to the Plafka and share the ancient knowledge.”

“ You have shunned the ancient knowledge.”

“ At this moment, I long for the ancient knowledge.” He grabbed the rail and bounded up the stairs.

“ What do I tell the people?” asked Paran from below.

He reached the top and looked at the terrified Paran.

“ You tell them the Tolten is conferring with the keepers of the ancient writings. Tell them all will be well with Ta-Buhn-Shar.” He looked across the courtyard. Hundreds of people stormed down the secondary road toward the fortress gates. The Tolten pivoted on the rough surface and crossed onto the highly polished gold veined, black tiles. The intricate wall carving from Shelbane and the captured gold crawler vases from the ancient hill peoples had little value now with Al-

Bashar threatened. He ran along the balustrade and glanced toward the red carpeted receiving hall below. Never in his short life had he given credence to the writings of Ta-Buhn-Shar, but Al-Bashar was under attack now, and only the Plafka had the ancient knowledge. He hoped the writing stored in chambers deep below the fortress, would save his planet.

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He leaped down the cold and damp stone stairs beneath the fortress. Moisture leaked through the rock crevices at a lower, constricted tunnel. Years had passed since he walked this passage. He raced across the slippery dirt as the tunnel straightened near an intricately carved gold door in the rough rocks ahead. He marveled at the artistic detail and vivid depiction of scenes from Ta-Buhn-Shar's battle at Golga. The bulky headed Creods depicted on the doorframe, were the same creatures now trying to destroy Al-Bashar.

He grasped the gold handle and pushed open the heavy door. The Plafka sat in white robes, tied with twisted red braids at the waist. With fingers placed at the temples, they mediated around a large clear pyramid. It was, larger but identical to his cruxle he had refused to hang around his neck. He had never trusted in Ta-Buhn-Shar and had doubts even now. The eldest Plafka turned his translucent blue eyes toward the Tolten. "It has begun."

“ Nevis.”

“ You have broken our resonation.” Two Plafka members helped him to his feet. As he shuffled through the room they started mediation again. Nevis’s voice was tired and raspy.

“ This is a scared room.”

“ Do you know what has just happened in the meadow?” Nevis rolled his eyes and raised his fingers to his temples.

“ Stop your resonating, old man and find answers for me!”

Nevis resonated for a few more moments before opening his moist, dark eyes. “ I know why you are now among us, Tolten. How often have you joined us in resonating to Ta-Buhn-Shar? The attacks are beginning as prophesied and now you demand help.”

“ You will help me if you value Al-Bashar.”

Again he placed his fingertips against the scraggy white hair wisps along his temples. He raised his strained voice. “ It has begun. The hordes... killing and maiming with their inconceivable power. Time grows short.”

“ Find the ancient writings, you old fool!” The Tolten clenched his fists when Nevis rolled his eyes again. “ What do the ancient writings say?”

“ The time has arrived... It is time. It is time...”

The Tolten grabbed the old man's slumping shoulders. “ Time for what? I demand you tell me what you are babbling about!”

His eyes were fixed. “ You must resonate. It is your only hope.”

“ Like you and the rest of them?” The Tolten lifted his clear cruxle. “ Resonate? Wear the cruxle of my ancestors? And for what? What has it given me?”

“ Trust the cruxle will lead to the final victory of the Awaited One.”

“ I am not the Awaited One! I am an Al-Basharian who questions Ta-Buhn-Shar. I ask how they could allow any of this to happen. I hate them. I hate the suffering they allow.”

“ No, Tolten. Ta-Buhn-Shar is your refuge, your hope.”

“ Then help me! Where is the ancient knowledge of our ancestors? ”

“ The unbeliever now trusts Ta-Buhn-Shar.”

The Tolten tightened his fist. “ Al-Bashar is about to be destroyed. I will trust whatever will save my planet.”

Nevis clapped his hands. “ Bring forth the word of Ta-Buhn-Shar!”

The Plafka broke the resonation. In unison they stood and placed their fingers against the smooth pyramid. The Tolten tightened his brow when Nevis wandered back into the circle and they began a low, humming chant. The heavy pyramid rose upward and burst a brilliant green light, like water in sheets, across the cracked chamber walls. The pyramid balanced in the cascade of light and the Tolten ran forward. “ What is this?”

“ Praise be to Ta-Buhn-Shar...”

“ I was not aware of this!”

“ Praise be to Ta-Buhn-Shar...”

The Tolten shielded his eyes. “ Who made this light that glows with no fire?”

“ Trust in Ta-Buhn-Shar,” said Nevis in a stronger voice.

A yellow outlined, red map of the village formed on the wall below the levitated pyramid. Every street and house was represented and a green webbed dome formed over the village. The Tolten turned back to the group. “ What is this?”

“ Protection,” said Nevis, his white bearded shaded red in the light. “ Provided by the ancient ones.”

“ This cannot be,” said the Tolten.

“ The hordes will return. More attacks will be thrust upon us, but we will be safe. Trust in Ta-Buhn-Shar.”

The Tolten studied the map’s detailed web and imagined the skies above the village. “ I will believe in nothing until I see it happen.”

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### 3

Sard held authority over the lives of one hundred thousand Creods aboard the Aragosta. His battle cruiser extended more than an across unit along the rusty hull. Against the starry sky a few green and red cruising lights flashed as the mighty vessel hummed through open space. No azicar could match the Aragosta's size or battle readiness. In the quietude he longed to watch his cluster azicars gracefully accelerate off the upper decks into battle. His fangs were fully exposed when he thought of the Mantari inferiors and how he had decimated them on Alta-Shar sixteen reifts ago. But Tark was lost inside the Ta-Buhn-Shar shrine. His brother would not share the glory once the Realm located and destroyed the final three Mantari urkams.

He was convinced he would find the Ta-Buhn-Shar, hiding like cowards on one of the last urkams. The Ta-Buhn-Shar had conquered the home urkam and retreated, leaving the Mantari inferiors to occupy the swamps and towers. The inferiors committed unforgivable atrocities, and slaughtered millions of Creods and the Ta-Buhn-Shar never intervened. Sard held them responsible for the acts of all inferior cohorts. He would not achieve the revenge he needed until every last inferior was removed from the Humea and the Ta-

Buhn-Shar found. But trying to motivate the complacent Upper Echelon, brought into place as a council after he drove the inferiors from the home urkam, resulted in increasing frustration. Sard no longer respected or would follow their orders. He wanted to remove them from power and rule the Realm himself.

He monitored his upper decks as he started down the incline. The Upper Echelon shunned him rather than acknowledge he saved the Realm from the inferiors. They wanted to maintain a steady course and not ferret out the remaining Mantari urkams. That strategy left the Realm later vulnerable to the Ta-Buhn-Shar. Sard reasoned the Ta-Buhn-Shar amperge, although safely harbored in some unknown corner of the Humea, would someday challenge his azicars again. The Echelon had forgotten the occupation, but the scars were carved into Sard's thoughts like wounds still weeping with Creod saurine.

His belt fram sounded and he took it with his grasper. "What is it?"

"Vagut Gamun, Roik is transmitting from his azicar," said Cromptf.

"Sard wishes to speak with him now."

Hiss pushed through the fram slots. "Vagut Gamun. This is Roik. I have news of another Mantari urkam."

"Their home urkam, Roik?"

“ No... This is not Mantari. A urkam they call Al-Bashar. We have captured inferiors and will present them to you, Vargut Gamun.”

“ Sard is pleased by this news. You will be honored for your efforts. This ror will be remembered in glory. Describe the inferior urkam defense.”

“ None. I offer up this urkam to the Aragosta. I wish Sard to have the satisfaction of inferior annihilation.”

“ Sard is in your debt. Your present position.”

“ Twenty-thousand across units. Hueta has imputed position into the Aragosta’s nakitams.”

“ We will eliminate Al-Bashar and every Mantari urkam until we find the Ta-Buhn-Shar and we will return in glory to the home urkam.”

“ I am your servant, Vargut Gamun.”

“ Sard never forgets loyalty.” He continued along the span and gazed over hundreds of bright hull lights below. His fangs touched his lips and he compressed his graspers without extending his craw. At last he would share the glory of battle. Soon the other urkams would fall, he would find the Ta-Buhn-Shar and engage in the final battle, predicted in the ancient Mantari writings. His serrated, curved gray craw finally extended beyond his graspers as he turned to his fram. “ Get me Anka.”

The older, weakened voice vibrated on the fram. “ Anka.”

“ I bring you news of another Mantari urkam about to fall.”

“ News of glory. Perhaps worthy of discussion in the Echelon Towers.”

“ Are you in your osil?” asked Sard. Silver uniformed sevelts dropped to their knees as he passed in the corridor.

“ Yes, resting the weary bones of an old sevelt of the Realm.”

“ I will join you. Prepare a Kontah potion.”

He heard Anka’s lip vibrate in jest. “ Do you still trust me to sustain a Kontah potion?”

“ We will celebrate more inferior deaths and prepare for the Hameon Sutra Games.”

“ If Sard wills it, then it shall be.”

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Sard touched the pad, and the wall opened from a tiny black pinhole and closed quickly once he was in the osil. Anka’s thin body frame was suspended in the shimmering, low intensity, blue Yestik Fields. At Golga his old friend was strong and able to participate in personal combat. His green body shell was now faded to a frosty blue and his matrixes were swollen and cloudy. Sard would not demonstrate pity. Anka had lived a long and valiant life, carrying out his duty gallantly. The Yestik Fields dampened and Anka slowly rotated upright.

Sard lifted an silver absorption cluster from the table. He gripped the sharp edges and moved the cluster to Anka. The Kontah seeped into his long grasper membranes and calmed his aggression. Anka held the edges. “Sard proposes death to the last vestige of the Ta-Buhn-Shar.”

“To the ultimate triumph of our race!”

“Sard will not cross what you say.”

“You and I, Sard. We have seen the battles. We have struggled on the home urkam and were first alerted when the Ta-Buhn-Shar first contacted the Danjios Settlement.”

Sard removed his graspers from the cluster. He sat on the rester and let the Kontah drain his thoughts. When he scanned again with his matrixes, Anka was seated in the smaller rester across the table. “Danjios was many reifts ago.”

“So were the first battles in the Alwyn Mountains. The Ta-Buhn-Shar placed Alpin Shooters on the surrounding moons. You were a proaska and I, a vargut. Only your superior battlefield maneuvers brought them down.”

“Six hundred and seventy five thousand sevelts fell and we lost those battles. Sard will avenge those deaths. We were forced back to the home urkam. We fought and still they pushed us back. Inferiors on the home urkam. Sard will never forget.”

“Eventually the invaders were removed and we recovered all the Realm settlements and urkams.”

“ The Ta-Buhn-Shar returned to fight Sard at Golga. But they fled.” Sard diminished his matrixes and leaned his head back.

“ Yet, Sard cannot find them, nor can his advanced azicars. Their amperge gone!”

“ The captured written works of the Ta-Buhn-Shar tells much. At my advanced age I hope to have time to ponder the inner thoughts of their civilization.”

“ Let them have their inner thoughts.” Sard kept his matrixes dull. “ Sard only wants them dead.”

Anka said nothing for a long time. Sard felt the hum of the vessel. “ Sard, all of conquered urkams have references to the Ta-Buhn-Shar. It is said the Ta-Buhn-Shar joins with minds. Their Saba is quite detailed. The actual Mantari designation is the Juriend-Dafna-Saba, which means: The ancient knowledge. I have read only parts of the Saba.”

“ The ramblings of inferiors,” said Sard.

Sard scanned his matrixes as Anka leaned toward him. “ Ramblings or prophecy? The words speak of the final battle... Perhaps the greatest battle.”

“ I tell you,” said Sard as he stood. “ They have you believing their stories!”

“ No, Sard.” He looked up. His voice was strained. “ Pay heed to what is written. Use the information in your battle planning. The Saba speaks of the Awaited One journeying to lead the Mantari against us.”

“ How would they know such things?”

Anka's matrixes wavered when he stood. He trudged across his osil and opened a panel in the dark wall. In his graspers he held a thick, frayed bound book. He set it on the rough edged table. "This Saba was confiscated before we won at Gan-Aeleid, the fourth Mantari urkam. The references to the Awaited One repeats throughout the writings."

"Sard finds the words of inferiors insubstantial."

Anka opened the book to a place marked with a faded gold ribbon. "From the First Millennium. *He will arrive from a distant land for the final battle. All depends on he who has been awaited. History's road leads to reflections of the final battle. What was will be again. Oh, Mantari people allow him to chart his way. He is the Awaited One, leading the unbelievers from the planet's heart. Let them fight one another-*"

"Silence, Anka! Enough of inferior thoughts!"

Anka slowly closed the book and rested it on his leg appendage. "Sard..."

"Is Sard supposed to reverse the Aragosta's course and hide on the home urkam? Should he run from this Awaited One?"

"It is prudent to know the words."

Sard stood abruptly. "What should Sard expect from a race that worships the Ta-Buhn-Shar? Predilections of weak minds. Having to convince themselves their inevitable deaths are something more than the cessation of life. This

manufactured glory takes the place of what they could achieve as a race. They are *inferiors*.”

Anka reached for the absorption cluster again. “ May the Juriend-Dafna-Saba go the way of its authors, the lost civilization of Ta-Buhn-Shar.”

“ Sard will not challenge your position.” He activated his nakitam.

“ Let me anticipate your next move.” Sard scanned his matrixes. “ You are checking the tactical from Roik and you will send the report to the Upper Echelon.”

“ Sard will notify them of Proaska Roik’s discovery.” The red and yellow tactical showed Al-Bashar still far away. Sard touched the nakitam. The sevelts sat in the positions around the iacin rim.

“ Sard wishes to reach the Upper Echelon on the Osborn Channel.”

“ It will be done, Vargut Gamun,” said Juru at the contact station.

“ The Echelon will be elated by the news,” said Anka.

“ Sard is not so sure. His greatest concern is the Realm not being prepared. We must bolster our readiness!”

Anka released the cluster and faced Sard. “ Surely, they understand Mantari treachery. Only fools would not.”

“ How soon they forget the past. Sard does not think the members deserve the positions they hold.”

“ Bold words even for a Vargut Gamun.”

“ These are words Sard knows to be true. Lowering our guard would spell doom for all seventy-nine urkams of the Realm.” The nakitam slowly beeped and showed a depiction of the Osbort Channel’s shielded communication across the Humea to the home urkam. He visualized the three Upper Echelon members materializing from their offices above the clouds. “ Sard’s brother, Tark perfected the Osbort Channel. Sard needs Tark’s cleverness now.

“ We have linked,” said Juru.

“ Sard is ready.”

Anka’s osil shifted within the incoming signal and the sloping glass of the Echelon Towers formed along the wall. The pale magenta sky brightened above the gray, fluffy clouds. Both of the home urkam’s red moons shone near the dark horizon. The three most powerful Creods in the Realm conferred at a black triangular table. They were timid and did not have the military background to carry out proper decisions, but according to protocol, Sard fell to his knees.

“ You may rise,” said Iak. Sard loathed his dull, rambling voice. Iak had worked his way through the legislative chambers and understood politics, but new nothing of security. He only cared about presenting a polished image. “ The Echelon has been notified of your pending report, Vargut Gamun.”

“ You have submitted a report on some urkam mission, Vargut,” added Frohnd, the least powerful. He turned to the leader of the group. “ What do you think Bauchec?”

The little Creod stood squarely across the room. “ I want to know the details of this urkam contact.”

“ Sard is pleased to announce the sighting of the seventh Mantari urkam, Al-Bashar.”

“ I see.”

“ Another step closer to Mantari elimination.”

Bauchec’s upper lip vibrated and his matrixes swirled blue under the mesh. “ Do you really think this contact is a significant military security problem?”

Sard fought movement of his fangs. “ Excellency, surely you can understand the Mantari threat.”

Bauchec stepped closer. “ Threat? Maybe the Mantari and the Ta-Buhn-Shar have been threats in the past, but where are they now?”

“ The Mantari are a direct threat to the Realm,” said Sard in a louder voice. “ To deny that reality is to deny the security of the Realm.”

“ We, Vargut, will make that decision.”

“ And we agree,” said Iak. “ It is the opinion of the Echelon that continued Mantari campaigns are not profitable to the Realm.”

“ Yes,” added Frohnd. “ Our patience for your obsession and amusement is both costly and useless.”

Sard would have killed them with his claw had they really stood before him. “ The ability of Ta-Buhn-Shar to shield themselves is an enigma.”

“ Yes, yes, we understand all that,” said Iak, checking a nakitam on the table.

“ Ta-Buhn-Shar has been missing since Golga, countless reifts ago,” said Bauchec.

“ The inferiors are a threat,” stated Sard, turning away as the tops of his fangs pushed outward.

“ You persist in calling these creatures inferior,” said Frohnd.

“ All Mantari are inferior!”

Bauchec’s lip vibrated. “ Then how is it these *inferiors* allude you?”

Sard’s kept his back to them. His fangs were sharpened near his chin and his claw was ready to swipe the swath of death. “ The Humea is a vast-”

“ And where is the Ta-Buhn-Shar?” asked Bauchec.

“ Sard insists they have survived!” The Upper Echelon were fools, stuck in their tower, away from the tensions of battle and reality. Competent leaders were needed. Sard retracted his fangs and turned. “ Why do you discount the reports Sard has gained from each of our victories?”

“ Scurrilous reports,” answered Bauchec. “ If the Ta-Buhn-Shar still existed they would have come to the aid of their own urkams!”

“ The Saba of the Ta-Buhn-Shar speaks of a final battle,” said Sard. “ That time has not yet arrived, but the battle is predicted. We must be prepared. Sard intends to win the final battle.”

Bauchec again moved closer. Sard figured he could crush Bauchec's head quickly. " Ta-Buhn-Shar is a self-perpetuated myth. Like all myths designed to help combat the harshness of reality."

" What do you tell Sard? "

" Your orders, Vargut Gamun, are to destroy Al-Bashar, the seventh Ta-Buhn-Shar urkam. Like all the other conquered urkams, it will be colonized and a suitable atmosphere created. But when this campaign is over, you *will* bring the Aragosta back to the home urkam. The Mantari campaigns will be over and we will celebrate in the Assembly Hall with our people."

The Upper Echelon's contact vanished on the Osbort Channel before Sard could respond. His thin yellow tongue twitched between his exposed fangs. He tightened his graspers and flew about Anka's osil. " They fear Sard! They fear Sard's standing among his people! They will not push Sard aside and send him to remote regions of the Humea! Sard will never comply with these orders!"

" Defying the Upper Echelon is not an option."

Sard walked up to his old friend and scanned his matrixes.

" Sard is searching."

" Searching for what?"

" Power! Power over them! Power over his people! Sard deserves nothing less than total power for his victories. The Realm boasts of seventy-nine urkams. Soon to be eighty. All

due to the campaigns of Sard. While they stood sedentary in their precious towers, protected and shielded, Sard performed the risks of battlefield duties. Sard marched with his sevelts and never renounced the fight! “

“ What are you saying?”

“ Sard is saying, old friend, that when this Mantari urkam, Al-Bashar, is taken, Sard will indeed return to the home urkam as they have requested. But Sard will not submit to fools. He will return in glory to consume them! For Sard wishes nothing less than to take the home urkam and assume power over the Realm and its people.”

## 4

As Sard's shuttle azicar moved deep into the atmosphere, the nakitam screen showed a primitive city with no high buildings, and Roik's position in the meadow flashed on the tactical portion of the screen. This meadow would provide a good staging area where Sard could crush the inferiors. Air pushed out the side thrusters as the azicar descended vertically into the open area and nudged into place on the ground. He gazed out the portal, but the Al-Basharian azoz hurt his matrixes, and he quickly moved the protective shield into place. The portal whooshed open. Two sevelt contingents faced each other in anticipation of his arrival and fell on their knees when he walked down the ramp onto the urkam's surface.

“ Rise!” he ordered. “ Westiks!”

The contingent stood in unison and thrust their glistening westiks into the Mantari air. Sard scanned the meadow. Roik promised the sacrifice of seventy-nine inferiors, one for each of the Realm's urkams. He faced Sard and again raised his westik. “ Hail Sard, Vagut Gamun!”

Other sevelts marched the line of small, light skinned inferiors into the clearing. Some were beaten and others had gaping wounds, but all were able to walk. The cowards were

silent as they stood before Sard in the bright Al-Basharian azoz.

“ What have you prepared, Roik?” asked Sard.

“ Vargut Gamun, I present to you the enemies of the Realm!”

“ The enemies of the Realm are accepted.” He dragged his westik from the sheath and faced the inferiors. A few whined in their low alien tongues. Sard’s upper lip vibrated as he lifted the westik’s sharp edge and whacked the nearest inferior’s shoulder, slicing off its appendage. Red saurine splattered over the grass. The inferior wailed and others raced forward, but alert sevelts cut them down. Sard swiftly lowered his westik again, severing the screaming inferior’s other appendage. The useless creature fell to the ground, squirmed and slithered on the grass. “ Suffer the sins of your race, inferior!!”

“ Carry forth your destiny!” shouted Roik.

Sard’s sevelts wielded their westiks with great efficiency before the first inferiors expired. The cries for pity amidst the raw flesh energized him. He joined the sevelts in the saurine-drenched slaughter and hacked the inferior’s heads and appendages. A few stray moans soon faded to a deathly, victorious silence. Roik, his silver uniform smeared with red saurine beads, stepped over the carnage. He began the words of the ancient ceremony. “ Vargut Gamun, I have the honor of presenting the urkam, Al-Bashar to you.”

“ And what is the foremost desire of the contingent, Proaska?”

“ The desire of the contingent is to take this urkam for the greater glory of the Realm.”

“ Sard accepts your challenge.” He grabbed his fram and summoned the Aragosta. “ Sard has accepted the challenge of his sevelt contingents. Begin the destruction of Al-Bashar, but save this main village until the end. Sard wishes to inflict his own form of terror.”

Instantly, compressed green pequa pushed through the distant high thin clouds. Along the horizon, debris trails rose into the sky and signaled the beginning of the carnage. Sard gazed up the tree-lined hill to building with a strange blue tower. Roik fell in homage. “ You have my loyalty as a vargut of the Realm.”

“ You have lived the destiny of a proaska and Sard is proud to call you brother.”

“ I am in service to you alone, Vargut Gamun.”

“ You may rise... Sard wishes additional placement information on remaining Al-Basharian positions.”

“ It will be done, Vargut Gamun.” He motioned to one of his rucapens. A square nakitam was carried across the meadow. Sard studied the red and yellow depiction. “ Five main cities around the urkam. Thousands are dead!”

“ What about the other inferiors, Roik, have they been brought on the Aragosta?” asked Sard as he placed his saurine covered westik back in its sheath.

“ Inferiors have been placed in Yestiks for the Hameon Saltra Games.”

“ Excellent. Sard needs amusement for the voyage to the home urkam.” Roik followed him away from the sevelts. “ During what is to come, Sard also needs your undying loyalty, Roik.”

“ I will give my life for you, Vargut Gamun,”

“ You may need to,” said Sard. The sevelts opened up their shooters and vaporized the inferior corpses. Sard brought Roik away from the drifting, pungent odor. “ Our next campaign will not be directed against the Mantari nor the Ta-Buhn-Shar.”

“ I don’t understand.” Roik matrixes dulled. “ Do we have a new enemy, Vargut Gamun?”

“ Our enemy is an old enemy. An enemy who thinks in outdated terms. An enemy that will not give the Vargut Gamun the respect he deserves. Our enemy is powerful and resourceful. The enemy must be squeezed from a position of power.”

“ And who is the enemy, Vargut Gamun?”

“ The enemy is the Upper Echelon.”

Roik’s matrixes froze and his voice sputtered. “ The... *Upper Echelon?*”

“ Sard will choke the shipping lanes and recruit sevelts of the Realm to do his bidding. Sard will extinguish the weakness and create a new sense of purpose, worthy of our heritage. Sard asks you to join him.”

Again Roik fell to his knees and lowered his head. “ I await your orders, Vargut Gamun.”

“ You have gained favor with Sard. Your orders are to accompany Sard to his shuttle azicar. With the decimation of Al-Bashar, begins the restoration of the Realm.”

\* \* \*

Sard pushed the green shooter plugs and pulverized the inferiors fleeing on the road. Watching them scatter produced as much excitement as the Hameon Saltra Games. Roik let the shuttle azicar hover over a group of village ankitas. The inferiors would huddle inside not knowing when death would strike them. In a sweeping formation Sard kept the shooters open and tore a vaporization line between the ankitas. Smoke billowed upward and fires ignited as the inferiors crawled outside. Sard faced his nakitam. “ Release bursters.”

Four gray bulbous sacks floated from the azicar, bulged and broke apart. The deadly red quama gas settled over the village. On the closer screen images villagers choked and would now suffer a slow death over next few rors until they finally perished in their own saurine.

“ An inferior race, Vagut Gamun.”

“ Any resistance reported?”

“ None. No sevelts lost. How are did the Ta-Buhn-Shar ever challenge us?”

“ They led the inferiors. I do not underestimate the Ta-Buhn-Shar, Even now.” His fram sounded. “ Yes.”

“ Vargut Gamun this is Hueta... the decimation of the first village has not taken place.”

“ Carry out your orders!”

“ We cannot. The villagers have a Yestik Field protecting the area.”

“ Impossible. These are inferiors. They lack the capacity for such progress.”

“ Our shooters are ineffective. They bounce off the field.”

Sard banged his appendages on the console. “ This is the work of the Ta-Buhn-Shar. Tark would understand, but Sard’s brother is dead... Sard will confront the inferiors in forward combat like his ancestors in wave formations. Gather the sevelts in the meadow. Prepare to slay the enemy, he is ours!”

## 5

At dawn, atop the fortress spires the Tolten watched the mass of Creods advancing like huge animals over the grass ridges. The Plafka's shield protected the fortress from the energy out of the sky, but would not stop the hordes from marching through the gates. Hundreds of his elneer soldiers were ready inside the courtyard gates. The elneer had placed additional loyal Mantari along the fortress turrets and barrier walls. They leaned forward with crossbows and spheres, probably in abject fear of encountering the powerful Creod weapons. And where was precious Ta-Buhn-Shar? While they had left the defensive shield, would they suddenly reappear from their long imposed exile and prevent this suicidal battle? His personal elneer guard, eyes glossy and beard stubble dark in the morning sun, gazed over the ridges. "Paran, what hope do we really have?"

"I do not see any hope, Tolten. They are armed and will do what their sky weapons could not do. Perhaps you should formulate surrender terms."

"Surrender to be tortured and murdered?" In the meadow, where he rode his alfraus every morning, thousands of silver uniforms moved onto the dirt road from

the tall grass. Even from a distance, their blue mesh eyes, embedded within the oversized green heads, were clearly visible. “ Then we will all go down together.”

“ Or flee the ancient catacombs...”

“ I will flee only if there is no hope.”

He drew his sword from the clean leather holder. All the years of competition in the fortress would never prepare him for this battle. He studied the morning shadows across meadows one final time, imprinting the images in his mind should he die on this day. He marched with Paran down the darkened spire steps, lightened occasionally by an open window. The elneer soldiers cheered when he reached the barrier wall. Gripping his sword, he walked stiffly to the wall overlooking the soldiers in the courtyard.

“ They want your leadership, Tolten,” said Paran.

The Tolten faced the soldiers in courtyard and along the barrier wall. “ Ours has always been a planet of peace. Friendship and love have been our values, but we now face an ancient foe from the sky. That foe has chosen to stake out Al-Basharian soil. I accept their challenge.” He pushed his sword upward. “ We will fight the hordes in the meadow, on the river plains and at the fortress walls until we have vanquished their shadows off the sacred soil of our planet!”

“ Your commands, Tolten?” asked Paran.

“ Elneer masters, stand by your bows.”

A hundred elite soldiers in brown leather cloaks raised black polished bows over the fortress walls. The forward

Creods, silver uniforms reflecting the sun, swayed in unison as they marched toward the fortress. He longed to puncture their green shell bodies with his sword, but as he prepared to give the order, he kept wondering why Ta-Buhn-Shar would not end the pending carnage.

\* \* \*

Sard marched ahead of his sevelt columns. The urkam leader's osil was visible across the clearing. Nakitam scans showed Mantari sevelts packed behind high gates and along the upper walls. Again, he grabbed the fram from his belt. "Hueta, hit them again! Shake them!"

"It will be done, Vargut Gamun." Shooter fire moved through the sky, but the green pequa scattered over a rounded area above the village. "The treachery of the Ta-Buhn-Shar! Only they could have left this in place."

"Do you orders stand, Vargut Gamun?" asked one of the proaskas behind him.

Sard checked the enlarged view on his nakitam. The inferiors were visible on the upper wall fortifications. Sard's standing order was for the sevelts to loop their ladders and slay the defenders. The inferiors would not survive and his sevelts would have a taste of Mantari saurine. He clipped his fram and waved his grasper.

"To the ground!"

As the proaskas relayed the order down the column, staimbics whizzed above. Several sevelts fell. Others plucked the staimbics from their shells. Sard stormed out ahead of the column and personally fired his shooter along the wall, brushing the inferiors back. Even though his shooter functioned under the shield, he wanted to enjoy the ground combat. He drew his westik and held it high. “Death to all inferiors! Death, that they should shed Creod saurine!”

He charged through the village gates toward the fortifications ahead. His sevelts carried the ladders by him and hurled the weighted clawed anchors over the high blue walls. The inferiors stopped shooting their staimbics. A second sevelt group smashed ramming rods against the front gates. He followed his sevelts up the ladders and over the top. The inferiors, huddled under the canopy, retreated along the wall. As he led his sevelts forward and swung his westik wildly, he relished the invigorating sound of metal slicing through Mantari flesh. One of the Mantari sevelts rushed him, yelling and cursing in a foreign tongue. He hacked off a portion of the inferior’s head and lanced the body of another approaching defender.

The dead were scattered on the walkway and stairs. Sard was about to move behind his own sevelts, when one of the inferiors leaped from the overhang. With his fangs fully exposed, Sard swiped his claw into the Mantari’s arm and the creature dropped his sword. He pierced the inferior at the waist and then gnawed at its appendages. Parts of the

Mantari's body fell to the stone and Sard chewed on the red ripped flesh.

Ahead, his sevelts chased the defenders off the upper wall and down the stairs as more Creods broke through the main gates. A mass of inferiors staggered back. His sevelts could now attack from two points. As he turned, one of the inferiors, dressed in a bright red uniform spoke in a loud Mantari voice at the end of the wall. Sard activated his appendage nakitam and heard his words.

The Mantari held a thin westik in his hands. "I am the Tolten! You have come to destroy my people!"

"You are inferior... you and your race of inferiors deserve to die!"

"Better to die than to submit to you..." The Tolten bravely moved closer, gently swaying the westik. "I will kill you."

"Sard respects a brave sevelt. Even an inferior sevelt. Sard may spare you."

The Tolten waved his westik. Sard easily smashed it, but the Tolten retrieved it, and again he lunged at Sard. Sard's upper lip vibrated as he swung his grasper into the Tolten's protective bones. The Tolten fell onto the stone walkway, holding his mid cavity. Sard placed his westik blade against his light skinned neck. "You are part of a worthless race..."

"Kill me so I won't see your sickening form."

“ A brave inferior. A worthy competitor. Sard will use you, the leader of the fallen Mantari, in the Hameon Saltra Games. Or perhaps you will rise and have your sevelts surrender like the cowards they are.”

“ Never... You are all butchers!”

In the courtyard his sevelts rumbled forward, swinging their westiks as they mowed down the inferiors. The Tolten rolled and scrambled. Before Sard could catch him, he had disappeared down the stairs ahead. “ Sard will find you! And I will cut your inferior shell into a thousand pieces!”

## 6

The Tolten, fearing the end of his world, leaped down the torch lighted stairs. Staying above would accomplish nothing as his elneer were killed in the courtyard below. He would turn to the Plafka for answers. The air dampened and he emerged in the flickering torch lit corridor's moist rock walls. As he ran, the rocks shook from the battle above. He heard Nevis resonating through the open chamber door. The other Plafka were seated behind the pyramid in the darkened chamber. "Nevis! Nevis! The hordes are in the fortress!"

Nevis slowly looked up. "The time grows short."

"Do something," said the Tolten as he grabbed him.

"Nothing can be done. You must leave. We have found the ancient answers and passageway out."

"No... my people..."

"Your people are dead. There is no hope other than following the ancient words and leaving."

"And where are they?" yelled the Tolten. "Where are they now?"

Nevis placed his hand on the Tolten's shoulder. "That is not important. You are the survivor and may be the Awaited One."

"Ta-Buhn-Shar mythology... There is no hope."

“ I tell you what I believe to be the truth.” Nevis held his arm and walked him toward the wall. He nodded to the other Plafka members still resonating by the pyramid, but turned when the huge walls separated. A soft tone, pink, filtered light spread gradually across the inner walls. The rose edges of a straight canal, filled with an odd luminous green fluid brushed the edge of the chamber floor.

“ How can this be? I am not aware of this!”

“ From a time of the first Tolten. This is your salvation,” said Nevis.

The canal extended to a long, curved shore of rich green hued liquid extending to the black horizon. “ Who built this?”

“ Perhaps you have been faulty in your judgment of Ta-Buhn-Shar.”

“ I question everything about Ta-Buhn-Shar.” He wandered away from the Plafka and walked along the slab to the glowing canal. A distant white vessel hugged the shore of an endless green sea. Would the boat somehow travel to other lands and reach Ta-Buhn-Shar?

“ Trust in Ta-Buhn-Shar,” said Nevis.

Down the canal the warped white bow of the vessel rocked in the luminous green fluid. “ How do I pilot such a boat? Where is the wind?”

Nevis lifted his clear cruxle. “ This cruxle is ancient and contains simple messages if you believe.”

“ It’s transparent. Nothing is written on this.” The Tolten grabbed the cruxle and tucked it in his jersey. Then he started down the canal.

“ Accept and trust,” said Nevis as he followed “ The words will come once you believe.”

“ Bold promises.” The Tolten’s anger at Ta-Buhn-Shar intensified as he neared the boat. “ I don’t understand how the total death of a planet can be condoned. Is this Ta-Buhn-Shar’s compassion?”

“ Trust and accept.”

“ I shall do neither. Ta-Buhn-Shar, if not mere legend, must be held accountable for the destruction of my planet.” Nevis said nothing as they approached the edge. The Tolten studied the upper rail and flat perforated silver sails. A thin white plank extending over the glowing sea connected the deck with the slab. “ Am I to just walk onto this vessel and trust that Ta-Buhn-Shar will safely deliver me to paradise?”

“ You are young. You can chart a new life.”

“ And where are the supplies? How do I eat? This is a death sentence.”

Nevis dropped to his knees and sat back. He crossed his legs and lifted his fingertips to his temples. As he entered a deep state of resonation, The Tolten had an odd compunction and stepped on the plank. Something beckoned him upward. A wide grainy surface covered the deck. Lower stairs were situated about further down the boat. He jumped onto the deck and a burst of colored

particles shot through minute holes in the sails. The boat lurched and coasted as the plank vanished into the green glow.

“ Nevis, what have you done?” Nevis remained in resonation and the Tolten took the cruxle in his hands. He still saw no writing on the clear surface and almost hurled it overboard. Instead, he dipped his knees and rocked the boat again. Sweeps of brilliant colored dots passed through the sails and illuminated the night. “ Why am I doing this?”

He looked back to the Plafka room and bent his knees. As the boat gained speed he stared at the cruxle. Then he grabbed the solid mast and continuously shook the boat. The pink shoreline and Nevis’s form moved farther away as the particles trailed overhead. Trust was something thrust upon him like a drug placed in a drink. He might make a find a future life if he did not die on this lifeless sea.

## 7

Sard and his sevelts were crunched in the constricted tunnel. In the course of torturing one of the inferiors he learned of rooms below the fortress. With most inferiors either dead or in transit to the Aragosta's Yestik areas, Sard wanted to swipe his craw across the Tolten's neck.

Light shone onto the rocks ahead and the sevelts pointed their shooters inside a doorway. One of the sevelts popped back into the tunnel. "We have found the chamber, Vargut Gamun! Unarmed inferiors..."

"Is the Tolten inside?" asked Sard as he ran

"We do not see him," answered the sevelt.

Sard ducked through the door and displayed his westik before three aging Mantari seated in front of clear pyramid matching the monolith on Alta-Shar. The old Mantari watched his sevelts enter, but kept their fingers perched at their temples. Sard knew the Ta-Buhn-Shar resonating ritual. "Do you pray to the Ta-Buhn-Shar to have a quick death?"

"In death we all join Ta-Buhn-Shar," said the one closest to him.

“ Where is the Tolten? Sard wishes personal combat.”

“ I am Nevis,” said white bearded inferior. “ And we have not seen the Tolten. We assume he is dead.”

“ The rest of you inferiors: *Stand!*”

“ We are the Plafka, the Tolten’s advisors,” said the third member. “ You have no business being here.”

Sard advanced rapidly and sliced the inferior’s neck with his claw. The old Mantari’s head tumbled across the floor and saurine beaded on Sard’s silver uniform. “ Sard will kill you all!”

“ Creod butcher!” shouted Nevis.

“ Look at the body of the coward you called friend. Do you wish the same fate?”

Nevis stepped closer. “ I am but an aging Al-Basharian and I despise your Creod ugliness.”

“ Insolence!”

“ Let us kill him for you, Vargut Gamun,” called out one of the sevelts.

Sard removed his shooter, touched the pad and green aptar light danced about the room, surrounded the inferior, and he was gone. “ No one challenges Sard!”

“ Your orders, Vagut Gamun?”

“ Sard’s orders are to chop the remaining inferior’s body into small pieces and place it in the Yestik food bins for consumption by the other Mantari. And then destroy this room.” He dipped his head as he moved into the darkened hall and pulled out his fram. “ Roik!”

“ Yes, Vargut Gamun.”

“ Roik, Sard has not located the Tolten. Prepare shooter batteries for complete vaporization of this urkam when Sard returns.”

“ It will be done, Vargut Gamun.”

As he hunched over again and started back, he heard the wailing of the last Plafka member. His upper lip vibrated. Near the stairs, his sevelts hurried down the tunnel with the collected body parts in a transport bag. Other sevelts pointed their shooters back into the room. A bright blue light lit the hall. A few explosions shook the rocks as Sard's fram sounded.

“ Vagut, Gamun, this is Hueta. Defensive shield has fallen.”

“ Excellent. Sard grows weary of this place.”

“ What of the Tolten?”

“ The Tolten will not survive the vaporization of this urkam's surface. Sard will return now and begin the vengeance attack.”

\* \* \*

Sard leaned back in his shuttle azicar rester and let his matrixes settle. The stench of Mantari dead and the bright azoz were only a small part of his annoyance with this urkam. The clustered ankitas, their mating rituals, and lack of progress demonstrated their inferiority as a race. Creods

lived alone and joined with no one. Life started from within when at the proper time. Every last one of these vile creatures deserved death and the entire civilization needed to be erased from the Humea. As the shuttle azicar neared the Aragosta, he thought about the Tolten. Not taking him on the Aragosta made conquering this urkam a hollow victory.

More important was the attack on the Realm, itself. Detailed planning was required and time needed to form secret alliances and deals. Sard's respect was strong throughout the Realm. It was simply a matter of doing whatever was necessary to topple the Upper Echelon from power.

The small azicar wafted at the portal locks, the doors closed, and pressure gushed into the area. Sard placed his shooter back on his belt and stood. He said nothing to his sevelts as he marched to the azicar portal. The portal slid open and Sard walked into the bays. Sevelts fell to the ground, but Sard headed for the thacin tube's red light. He was surprised to see Anka in full uniform.

"Glory to you, Sard, Vargut Gamun," he said from the floor. Sard helped him stand. "Again, you have performed with honor."

Sard nodded and the thacin opened. "Sard wishes to be brought to the iacin."

The tube sealed and Anka stared at him as they moved upward. "You have conquered another Mantari urkam, yet you act as if you lost the battle."

“ Sard failed to apprehend the Al-Basharian leader.”

“ This urkam will be destroyed and later colonized.”

Sard said nothing and did not even scan the older Creod’s faded matrixes. “ And as far as what the Upper Echelon might order, I believe you have taken the proper course of action for the Realm.”

“ The Echelon knows nothing of battle. Let them sit in their towers and issue useless orders. Like any remaining life on Al-Bashar, time is running out for the Upper Echelon. Sard is ready to move against them.”

The tube opened at the iacin. Sard walked ahead of Anka, pushed the sevelts aside and positioned himself at the weapons console. The nakitam showed all shooter batteries fully charged. Sard personally set the coordinates on the Tolten’s fortress.

“ Vargut Gamun,” said Roik from behind. “ I congratulate you on your by victory.”

Sard stared at the yellow schematic of the fortress and the blue circular areas of impact. “ Sard will only be pleased when there is no life left on this urkam.”

“ Another message has been received from the Upper Echelon.”

Sard looked up from the nakitam screen. “ What do they want now?”

“ They specifically wanted to stop the destruction of Al-Bashar.”

Sard's fangs slid along his mouth. "Fools. They will get what Sard decides to give them! Hueta, set up Osbort Channels near the main power bundles. Sard wants a deliberate interference with the Echelon contact."

"It will be done, Vargut Gamun."

"And the shooters?" asked Roik.

"Keep the shooters charged. The Tolten and any survivors have been granted a reprieve until Sard speaks with the Upper Echelon."

Anka scanned his old friend. "This is the first act of rebellion."

"Sard will not be dictated to as if he just left his birth shell and is crawling through the swamps."

\* \* \*

Sard faced Anka next to the giant, humming orange piles as the Osbort opened. The consoles and nakitams were slowly transformed into a choppy image of the chambers at the Echelon Towers. Bauchec leaned on the triangular black table. The tips of his pink fangs were visible. "What is the problem with this Osbort?"

The other Echelon members hunkered behind Bauchec as Sard dropped to his knees. "Sard, apologizes for the Osbort." He wanted to kill them all with his westik. "The Aragosta is experiencing problems with its power bundles."

“ The Echelon would hope you will not experience difficulty in returning to the home urkam immediately!” yelled Bauchec.

“ The Aragosta is immobilized. Rucapens and sevelts are trying to rectify the problem.”

Iak moved around the table. “ Are you saying you will be delayed in returning to the home urkam?”

“ We cannot fully view you,” said Bauchec, stepping around Iak.

“ Should Sard try the contact again?”

“ I only tell you not to destroy that urkam. We have decided the Mantari campaigns have come to an end. You will be elevated upon your arrival on the home urkam and reassigned to a more peaceful command.”

“ Sard is honored.” He lowered his head so they could not see his fully exposed fangs.

“ You will become Vagut Gamun in the Sourtine Sectors.”

Being relegated to the Sourtines would leave him in an isolated region of the Humea with no military power. As a military gamun he would be planted among settlers and traders. “ It will be done.”

The Osbort went dead. Sard pummeled the console and hurled a huge corner chunk across the room. His yellow tongue twitched as he slammed three sevelts to the floor on his way to the thacin. Anka stepped inside before the tube

was sealed. They moved through the grainy red light. “ Sard will kill them all!”

“ Demeaning.”

“ Sard will crush them and their cohorts out of existence!” His crow swept through the thacin field. “ They threaten the very existence of the Realm’s security!”

“ I am sorry, Vagut Gamun.”

“ How dare they send Sard to the Sourtines? They do not understand Sard’s support within the Realm. Let Sard’s allies see the injustice of such an act! Creod sevelts and proaskas will be honored to fight with Sard again! He will only need two amperge azicars with the Aragosta. Maybe a few freighters. Sard will cut their food lines and halt all azicars moving in commerce with the home urkam!”

“ Bold plans, Vargut Gamun.”

“ Yes, old friend, bold plans. You will summon Elkan for Sard. Elkan helped planned the Mantari campaigns. Find him. Bring him back for his final campaign.”

“ It will be done, Vargut Gamun. And what of Al-Bashar?”

“ Sard grows bored. Let Roik and Hueta have the glory. Sard will seek the Mantari and the Ta-Buhn-Shar again. Let us test what you have read in their Saba. Prepare for the final battle and the Awaited One.”

## 8

Loftus walked the deck by night as he had for one hundred and fifty-three days. His beard, although trimmed, spouted gray hairs amidst the auburn blend. Exactly one week ago, during the pale green day, a vessel passed only a few miles away. Loftus ran to the railing and called across the endless energy sea. Although he was not sure of the true distance, both he and Zach thought they saw Kath, Deluca, and John aboard that boat traversing the passageway at an astounding clip. The white hull soon faded behind the distinct trail of colored particles as night fell. He spent hours scanning the horizon after the disappearance.

“ See anything, Captain?” asked Zach, his beard dark and full.

Loftus turned as his friend started up the stairs.  
“ Nothing.”

Zach furrowed his brow. “ We can’t be sure this passageway leads to the same place. Or if we aren’t inside some dimensional warp. Those boats could have been passing through time and that’s why they didn’t hear us.”

“ That’s beyond my college physics,” he said, leaning on the railing. “ I almost wish I never saw the boat.”

“ Or we could arrive at the same place, but earlier or later. Impossible to say.”

Zach was convinced the air was recycled in a bubble following the vessel. At least they somehow escaped the Allsworthy's wrath back at Bathurst. Loftus thought back to Appleton and the destroyed cabin. Kath and John had lived quiet lives in Vermont and now crossed an unknown passageway constructed by predecessors of the human race. He hardly believed it himself. “ How much food is left down there?”

“ Weeks, maybe years. It's packed.”

“ I'd give a million buck for a good steak,” said Loftus. He folded his hands and grinned.

“ Or a cold beer,” said Zach.

“ *Yeah.* And see the sun and stars, not this stage production out here.”

Loftus sat under the railing wall. Through his Buhnsharf he saw the colored particles spew through the sails. His dreams had ceased since the voyage began, but he never stopped thinking about his early life on Alta-Shar and the attacking Creods. He figured he would never see Earth again and was uncertain if he would land near the Buhnsharf or perhaps enter a new world.

\* \* \*

“ Captain...” Loftus opened his eyes. His bushy haired friend nudged his ribs. “ Captain, I see something.”

“ What have you been drinking?”

“ No, really. Looks like bumps on the horizon.”

Loftus grabbed the railing, hoisted himself up and peered into the darkness beyond the luminescent sea. “ I don’t see anything.”

“ To your right, behind the sails.”

Loftus followed Zach around the sail supports. Across the energy a pinpoint glow arced upward like the glow from a fluorescent tube. “ Well, well this looks mighty interesting.”

“ Maybe it’s another slab,” said Zach.

Loftus stroked his beard. He wondered if Deluca and the others were also swept toward this luminescence. “ Or more Creods...”

“ Smaller lights...”

“ Yup, I see them.”

Zach raised his head upward and yelled into the night. “ Land ho! I had my doubts whether we’d survive this. And don’t give me the old Loftus luck story.”

“ It is the Loftus luck. No doubt about it.”

“ I feel like bloody Columbus,” said Zach, rubbing his hands together.

“ Yeah, well, Columbus had mutineers, Zachy.” Loftus patted his old friend on the shoulder and leaned forward. Maybe Kath had come through this area, too. He knew he was rationalizing when he thought the boat was docked

along a similar pink slab shoreline ahead. “Imagine the technology of this passageway... We’ve talked about it since we left Bathurst. To traverse the galaxy like this is *extraordinary*.”

“I still say this Ta-Buhn-Shar had a lot to do with it.”

“I’m sure we’ll find out,” said Loftus. A distinct array of lights formed a horseshoe pattern on the darkened mountainside. The sails creaked and the colored particles swept outward. “Look, we’re turning. Like it was preprogrammed.”

“From the mountains.”

Loftus propped his elbows on the rail and rested his chin on his folded hands. The charged particles looped over the sails and formed pulsing line above the passageway, and finally connected with something atop the mountains. As the boat was drawn closer, Loftus identified a lighted trail along the mountain gap surrounding an energy filled fjord. “Well, at least there’s or was some kind of life ahead.”

“Movement along the lights, Captain.”

“I see it.”

“Must be our welcoming committee.”

“Why is it I’m getting that old time feeling again? You know that feeling?”

Zach closed his eyes. “Yes, sir.”

A lighted trail extended from the protruding rose hued dock and up the dark mountain. At least a dozen beings with glowing red eyes, marched toward the dock. “Oh, boy.”

“ What the hell is this?” asked Zach.

The black, velvet shelled beings, no more than five feet high, had tapering necks, oblong heads, and glowing red eyes. “ Only eyes? They must be machines.”

“ Goons,” said Zach.

After his dreams and the experience with the alien at Bathurst, Loftus tried to reassure himself these faceless creatures were benign. The rigid beings marched in a line along the dock as the particles, still aimed high into the mountains, acted as a rudder, steering the vessel closer to the dock. Loftus cupped his hands.

“ My name is Tom Loftus, can you hear me?”

“ Deaf goons,” mumbled Zach.

Somehow he sensed they understood his words, but as the vessel moved along the dock, his consciousness was seized with innate knowledge. Instinctively he knew this docking was part of instructions given millenniums ago. Inside the mountain, even though he could not see it, was a bright cavern and the creatures staring at him were called Grebes.

“ Nonverbal communication.” Following his thoughts, Loftus leaped over the rail and onto the slab. Zach landed next to him. The Grebes immediately divided into two groups. He studied their featureless human outline as they surrounded him and retreated like cadets in a military parade. His thoughts were cloudy as he tried to understand why they were headed for the cavern. Zach shrugged his

shoulders. “ The old Loftus luck, it’s either really good or really bad.”