

THE LAST ENEMY [086-066-5.0]

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Synopsis:

No synopsis available

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For Jude, Jannettja, Tony, and Sophie;  
Fay, Mike, and Jeremy,  
And Jean.

Battles won, victories in progress.

A tribe is no more  
Than a thought  
Chaining the thinker  
To eternal war with those  
Fettered to thoughts  
Of a different sort.

Hissied-do'timan, Meditations on Blood

CHAPTER 1

Miati Ki hides in the rubble above us at the lip of the dry stream bed. I see only its right boot and the top of its energy pack. The sun is hot and the heat radiating from the desert sand and boulders flails my face and steals my breath. Only the dense humidity remembers that this was once a jungle. There are no birds, no flowers, no trees. Everything beautiful and gentle that once flew or grew here left this part of the Shorda countless lives ago. Still, the stinging greenflies have survived. They will outlive us all. Pina is eating the last of its share of the rations we captured. As it took its share of the rations, Pina made a joke, holding it to its lips. "This is the fruit of the Irrveden, for which the Mavedah fought, that we eat at the second repast." I laughed with the others at the words of the repast ceremony, from times when there were formal repasts, tables, and food. Back before any of us were born. When I was very young, before my parent's death, Yazı Avo would recite the ceremony at meals, when there were meals. I laughed, but Pina's joke made me want to cry. I hold to my ear the little receiver I keep in my pocket. Its screen is broken, but it still produces audio. The Mavedah station at Mijii Heights still sends, which means the eastern flank of the Front's invasion of the Shorda is still stalled. The music is that rapid effervescent confusion of human

and Drac folk music we call zidydrac and the humans call mancho. The recording was made before the war. I scan for the Amadeen Front's mobile station, or one of the others. Sometimes I can get the Black October station, but not today. Nothing new supporting the rumors of another attempt at a truce. Even if a truce should take place it would be only a matter of days before The Rose, Black October, or some other uncontrollable faction of the Front violates it, throwing us all back into war. Still, there would be a day, possible more, without death. Ki's hand makes signs to us. First the fist, one finger pointed down, then all three fingers together followed by a fist. Chaki Anta is back. There had been an explosion at the bunker. We all heard it, saw the smoke and dust carried by the wind over the lake. Qat Juniki told us about it before it died. A human had come out of the bunker, his hands above his head, and Chaki Anta took the man's surrender. The human's hands were held as fists. "I saw the wire," said Juniki. "I told the man to open his hands before he came any closer. I told him in English. I told him again. When he opened them, the world vanished." A walking bomb with a dead man's switch. Such a human way of killing. Juniki thought Chaki Anta had been killed, but now Anta is back. As I turn off the receiver I am relieved. Anta is an old fighter, a survivor of many raids and battles. It helps me to know that not everyone dies in this war. My relief is mixed with dread, for when Anta comes back, our killing and dying resume. We will soon move into a fight. No one says any of this but it is in everyone's eyes. We swallow the last of our ration bars. I see Pina take a touch of happy paste with its tongue. Its eyes close as the drug spins Pina away on a transitory cloud of joy. I look at my ration bar and wonder why food is so scarce but happy paste is everywhere. In the end we will probably die of malnutrition within the mist of a spittle dream. We looted the ration bars from the humans, but they are good to eat. They are viyapi rations the humans looted from us. Some of the human rations are good, too. I like the containers of fruit and the candy bars, but they are rare. There is something in plastic envelopes called scrambled eggs and ham that even the humans refuse to eat. For that reason, of course, scrambled eggs and ham are all that they have left. Their rations, like ours, are left over from the war. Chaki Anta slides and stumbles down the dust of the stream bank, followed by Ki. Anta's face is deep ochre, an old scar along the left side of its forehead. Although our commander smiles with its mouth, its deep yellow eyes betray all of the dead they have seen. Anta nods as it points toward the east with its battered energy knife. "Only a few left in that bunker at the foot of the bluff. I heard firing coming from inside. They were not shooting at me or at anything outside the bunker." Its brow climbs in an expression of hopeful possibility. "I think they were fighting among themselves." His cold smile becomes a cold grin. "We will get Taaka Liok a present and end them this time." Chaki Anta's eyes narrow. "We are the Twelve."

"The Front Twelve," we mutter back more out of habit than pride. Our eagerness drowned in oceans of blood years ago, buying presents for Taaka Liok with our blood. My whole life in the Mavedah has been spent

serving at the pleasure of this mysterious warmaster, who in turn serves at the pleasure of the Denvedah Diea. I glance down at the helmet in my hands. It carries on its once sand-red surface the scars of thirty years of death. Only five of those years are mine. The sensors and readout still work, but the voice link is scratchy. I can do without the voice link. Hand signals are silent, instant, clear, and do not send out electro-magnetic pulses for eager probes to pick up. Besides, I prefer to dedicate my hearing to my immediate surroundings. That is where the threats to my life lie. The helmet is military issue, of the Tsien Denvedah back in the war. It is twice as old as I am. The names of seven Mavedah soldiers are scratched in the surface exposing the dull brown fiber beneath. Ritan Vey Ada Nitoh Lioseh Akiva Ivat Mikotath Sed Tura Riwis Achavneh Enot Fal. We all know the stories of the great hero Ritan Vey, once second warmaster of the Tsien Denve of the Ninth Shordan, conqueror of New Aetheria. Only a few of us remember Enot Fal. Fal's first day after training saw it crushed beneath the treads of an Amadeen Front tank in the attack on Stokes Crossing in the Southern Shorda. I had no helmet of my own, so I claimed Fal's. I wonder who will get the helmet after I am gone. It is irrational of me, but I am afraid to scratch my own name into this pathetic monument. Besides, the seven names already there are burden enough to carry. We are the Front Twelve, Anta had told us long ago. Tsien Siay. The pride of the Okori Sikov. There are only five of us left now. Ragged, tired, and thin from meager rations. We were twelve at the beginning of the battle six days ago. When the last of us falls, perhaps there will be another twelve to replace us. Children, ancients, and fools. Onward marches the grand Mavedah. I slip my shoulders into the straps of my energy pack and adjust the piece of plastic foam between the pack and the small of my back to ease the chafing. Something I learned from a dead human. I glance sideways to see if my few remaining comrades somehow detect the treason that echoes in my thoughts. Anta is positioning its energy knife in the harsh sunlight to absorb that last bit of energy before we go. Miati Ki is strapping on its equipment, most of which was salvaged from dead Amadeen Front soldiers. How can we be so different from the humans, yet so alike? We can use the same weapons, wear the same rags, eat the same food, scratch the same rashes and slap at the same parasites. After decades of close horror, we even speak each others language. But, breathing the same air -- that is something that demands death. Varo Pina and Skis Adoveyna are waiting for the order, their eyes tired and yellow, staring at the top of the bank. I can see that Pina already sees its own death. I want to touch its hand, to tell Pina that we will survive, but my friend would reject my words. My friend Varo Pina knows it must die. It has talked about nothing else for days. I think it wants to get done with the experience. "I am calm about death," Pina once said to me. "Waiting for death is the strain." Once, in the dust of memory, Pina and I loved. Neither of us conceived. The humans have us there. If a Drac is certain it will be dead or otherwise unable to care for its young, it cannot conceive. To humans, though, the prospect of death and deprivation seems to drive them into a fertile frenzy. We are told that it is a primitive survival mechanism to preserve the species. They also live longer than Dracs, barring

traumatic intervention. I no longer have those feelings for Pina, and Pina has no feelings left for me. I wonder if any of us have any feelings left for anything. Without speaking, Chaki Anta puts on its helmet and signals Miati Ki and me to take the front. I do not hesitate. Instead I take my energy knife, climb the bank, reach the lip, and begin crawling through the rubble, checking automatically for remote sensors and probes. It has been a long time since any of us saw a working remote or probe, but we stay cautious. There are still scanners and missiles. Humans also have eyes and those big ears. I note the position of the sun. By the time we reach the bunker it will be behind us, burning our backs but glaring into the eyes of the humans.

I can see the bunker by peering through a crack in the ruin of a stone wall. The heat radiating from the wall washes my face. The fortification is to my front, the bluff farther on and more to my left. To my far left is a low hill. To my right stretches the lake named Sharing in both Drac and human languages. The lake was named a long time ago, before the war, back in a fantasy time when Dracs and humans were supposed to have lived and worked together. "Yazi Ro," the voice link scratches into my ear membrane. "Keep moving." My head is filled with so many minds, but my body follows Anta's orders as though it has its own will. I crawl from behind the broken wall, around a pile of still smoking wreckage, until I reach the body of one of the Twelve's fallen. A primitive projectile caught the Drac beneath its left eye. The back of its head is missing exposing an ochre goo that was once a brain. What do you leave behind, comrade? A parent? A child? Did you have someone who loved you? Does anyone care how you died? that you died? for what you died? What did you die for, my nameless comrade? If I meet my own death this moment, I am at a loss to say for what I died. I am an automation; a creature that responds to orders. Perhaps I die for glorious habit. There must be a grander way than that to record me in my line's archives, if they still exist. The language Dracon, however, is suited more to facts than fantasy. There are few ways to express an event except with truth. To spin dreams the language English was designed. Here lies Yazi Ro, dead because it couldn't go no mo.' Pooped, perhaps, from a penchant for proclivity. Yazi Avo, my parent, taught me my English. Avo once said that if there is ever to be peace, we must first talk. I laugh at this now. All either species knows how to do with words is to wound. My parent had a crippled foot, mangled in an Amadeen Front raid when it was not even half a year old. I look at the body of my comrade. The young one, barely an adult of five years, was given to the Twelve just before the battle to fill out our number. Young, but a good soldier, nevertheless. I saw its knife take down at least three humans before the bullet found its mark. A strange way to measure occupational proficiency. Two paces beyond the nameless Drac is a nameless human who must have been dead for quite awhile. I cannot tell if it is male or female. Its skin is swollen and black, the eyes crusted with thirsty greenflies, their swollen iridescent bodies like so many droplets of jade. Human dead turn black when they lie in the sun for a few days. The odor is beyond description. I make a wide path around it. To the human's side I see the white flash of an anksnake

beneath the body, out of the direct sun, feeding on the corpse's guts. They only go for decaying flesh, so I am in no danger from the snake. But it might have startled me. Had I cried out, or raised up, or used my weapon, that would have been the end for all of us. But I do not draw attention to myself and must pay attention to the instant. Again I face the bunker. It is an ugly fire-blackened shelter of poured stone. It has rounded corners, gun ports, and a huge hole blasted into its left front. To the right of the hole a deep red rose is painted, the sign of the Amadeen Front. The three remaining weapon ports are spaced evenly to the right of the hole. Between the bunker and my position is a field of rubble. I see a dark shape just for an instant. It runs from in front of the bunker to a position among some rocks part way up the bluff. I am not certain, but more than one human seems to be there. I glance to my left and wait until I catch a glimpse of Ki forty paces away. Ki turns its head toward me for a moment and I raise my hand and point. Ki looks forward, sees the rocks, and nods. It begins bearing toward the left and the rocks, while I continue toward the bunker. So many times have I faced death to do more death. And after the effort and sacrifice there are still more humans to kill, more comrades to watch die, more fire to burn, more things to destroy. The bunker ahead of me is part of a village that exchanged hands four times this year alone. How many hundreds or thousands of lives has this ruined heap of debris cost? I cannot even guess. And for what reason? It sits astride a road crossing with surfaces impossible to traverse by wheeled vehicles that no longer function. My knee strikes a small rock which clatters into a larger rock. I freeze. Motionless, no breathing, willing my heart to quit its pounding. I'm almost afraid to move my eyes for the notice their motion might draw. Still my gaze quickly searches the ground between me and the bunker. Broken walls, rubble, twisted towers of metal. I can see nothing threatening. The pebble had not made a loud noise, but if the humans have a listening post out or a sensor buried nearby, the noise would be loud enough. Without looking at it, my right hand steals down the length of my weapon one finger's breadth. It reaches the power switch, and I energize my knife. Neither the switch nor the weapon powering up make a sound, but I can feel the power pulse. I am grateful I took advantage of the time in the sun waiting for Anta's return to add to the charge. The touch gauge shows seventy three percent. My voice link crackles in my ear, startling me. It is Miati Ki reporting to Chaki Anta. "Anta," Ki whispers to the old fighter. "There are four of them in those rocks behind and to the left of the bunker. Their field of fire covers almost all of the ground in front of Yazi Ro." The words, once I allowed myself to understand them, made my skin writhe. Another crackle, then Chaki Anta's voice. "Ki, have they seen you?"

"No, but they see Yazi Ro. They are staring at Ro this moment, weapons trained. I think they wait to see the rest of us before they open fire."

"What weapons?" asks Anta. "Two rifles and a captured energy knife. I cannot see what the fourth has."

"Stay in place, Ki," answers Anta. "I'm coming up on your left with Pina and Adoveyna." By the breath of a kiz, I am fisher's bait! I fight down the urge to bolt and run. It seems insane. As the battle started there were hundreds in this sector. Now it has come down to four humans and five Dracs? Is this when I die, when it is all but over? "Stay in place, Ro," comes Anta's voice. "Give no sign that you are aware of the humans in the rocks."

"As you order, Anta." Fine words from my leader and a terribly brave response, but I've already given a sign by signaling Ki. How do I take that back? Perhaps no human saw it. Or if one of them did, perhaps that one mistook my gesture for something else. "Look, the Drac is saying hello." A mind in fear takes comfort where it may. I swallow against the moisture in my mouth. Human mouths grow dry with fear. Dracs fairly drool. I occupy my mind trying to figure out which is worse. To drool or not to drool, that is the question. My grip on my weapon has my fingers aching, but I cannot relax them in fear of the movement. I need to void. I know it is only the fear and I force the feeling away. Only the urge to void goes. The fear stays. There is no more communication on the voice link. With patience that threatens to tear my neck muscles, I turn my head so very slowly to my left, my eyes straining to see around the left frame of my visor. It takes forever, but once more I can see where Ki had been concealed. Instead of Ki, however, there is Pina. It is crawling very rapidly toward the rocks. Anta must have already passed. Adoveyna follows Pina without a pause. Will they take down the humans before the humans become impatient waiting for me to make my move? It is said that some humans pray to gods. I feel the lack. My view of Adoveyna is lost as it crawls behind some rubble. I slowly turn my head to face the bunker but I stop as I see something above and far behind where I lost sight of Skis Adoveyna. The small hill is little more than a support for shattered stumps and the remains of a few smashed dwellings, a thin smoky mist rendering everything in shades of gray. Earlier in the day the rise had been roasted and pulverized. Still, there was something that shouldn't be. A fifth human? More? Had I seen a piece of wire or cloth waving in the slight breeze? A stray beam of light reflected from --- "Anta," I whisper into the voice link. "Anta, to your far left, up on that hill, I saw movement."

"Where?" it asks, but before I can answer, the kow-kow sounds of a human rifle shatters the silence. The sounds are soon joined by Pina screaming into the link and the humans in the rocks opening up with the energy knife, the broad swath of its blade coming right toward me. Someone screams, "Kill them!" Quickly I roll until a large block of cut stone is between me and the knife, still giving the humans on the hill a view of me. Two of Anta's remaining knives fire at the rocks beneath the bluff while the third fires irregularly at the hill. I turn, place my back against the stone block, aim my own blade toward the hill, and press the trigger. I feel the tremendous energy

pulses as they warm my hands. When I am certain the humans are at least down, I jump up and turn to run toward the bunker. A deafening explosion erupts in front of me, blinding me for a moment, filling my lungs with choking dust and gasses. Before I open my eyes or check to see if I have all of my limbs, I realize that the fourth human in the rocks has a missile launcher. My eyes open and the sky above is gray with dust and smoke, cut with the green glowing blades of energy knives and the white streaks of pulse weapons. As the deadly silence ends, returning my hearing to me, the feeling comes back to my body. The first of it is a skull-cracking pain in my head, a stinging tingle all across my skin. I cautiously lift my hands to feel my head, grateful to find that it is still covered by my helmet. I sit up, then kneel as I pick up my weapon. It is still charged and operative. Without thinking, I climb to my feet and spring forward, the breath coming hard in my lungs as I braid my way among the broken stones and twisted metal. A loud kang sound from a piece of metal near my head catches me by surprise and I recoil from it, roll to my left, and come up aiming my blade at the bunker. There are two, no five flashes from the dark opening. The ground around me erupts with geysers of stone dust as shattered bits of metal buzz around me. An energy flash from behind comes close enough to sear the flesh on my left shoulder. There is at least one more human with a knife. I throw myself into a slight depression, whirl about, and fire my knife at the hill once more. Twice, three times, and I see my blade catch an energy pack. There is a blinding blue light, then nothing but a steaming hole in the ground. There doesn't seem to be anyone left firing from the rocks or the hill and I roll to my right, jump up, and wash the bunker opening with my knife. After I release the trigger, I squat behind some wreckage and check the hill as I touch the knife's charge indicator. Still nothing on the hill and my weapon is at forty-nine percent. I glance a little more to the right, and look at the rocks. They are black where before they were reddish tan. I see no movement. "Anta?" I call into my voice link. There is nothing but static. "Anta? Ki? Pina? Adoveyna?" I get to my feet and try again. "Tsien Siay, report!" They cannot all be dead. We have been at this far too long, endured too many things. If the human demons that spawned this hell have any sense of justice, all of the Twelve cannot be dead. With my chin I switch the sensor in my helmet to read thermal input. Looking at my visor I see a bright orange place on the hill where I laid on my blade causing the human's energy pack to go up. There is another bright orange place among the rocks where the second knife was. When it went up, the four humans went with it. Below the rocks there is a dimming orange dot, the cooling body of a dead human. In the rubble field below, where my comrades were hiding, there are another four orange dots, dimming, as the heat leaves their bodies. Before feelings crush me, I remind myself that the lack of an exploded energy pack sign means that in all probability, their knives still work. I must disable them before I leave. I am alone. For a moment I am confused about what to do. Should I rage and throw myself into the monster's mouth to avenge my dead comrades? Do I cower in terror, hoping that no one will notice me? Do I surrender and trust to the good intentions of the Amadeen Front? Do I simply abandon this

place, go back to Lurack and say, "Mission accomplished, Ovjeta. Everything is dead." --- I hear a sound from the bunker and I whirl around, my knife at the ready. The heat sensor shows two beings dead in the ragged opening. Further inside are at least six older dead and deep inside are two hot live ones, very close together. I realize I am standing in full view of the bunker, and I squat down, amazed that I am alive. Perhaps the two humans who are alive are wounded. For some reason they didn't take me out when they could. I want to call Anta's name again, see the bodies of my comrades with my own eyes. I rebel at relying on a mere instrument to tell me my comrades are dead. But what would be the purpose? Then, what was ever the purpose of any of it? How can a being tremble in fear of losing its life one moment and care not a dot the next? I stand in full view of the bunker, my weapon held at my side, and walk toward the opening, hardly curious at the form my death will take. At the opening I step over the lip of the hole torn in the wall and walk in. I pause inside and look around. It is still.

After six days of battle, there is something obscene about so much silence. It allows too many things to be felt. They stand before me in a row: fear, sadness, outrage, emptiness, and hate. How I long to rest my head upon my parent's lap and beg Yazı Avo to quiet the buzzing in my brain. I take a breath; exhale. Another. It is not the moment before; that moment when I had living friends and living enemies. It is not the moment to come, when whatever it is that I must do has already been done. It is this moment. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to remember something comforting --- something perhaps even useful --- from the Talman. How little of the book I remember. My parent tried to teach me, but it was killed by the Front long before I completed my first year. I keep the golden cube of my parent's Talman suspended from a chain around my neck, but I rarely read it. After all, it was the masters of the Talman Kovah who proved that this war cannot end. No adulthood rites, no presentation before the family archives, not for Yazı Ro. Not for any of us condemned to Amadeen. Two humans are dead on the dusty cement floor at my feet. The older of the two caught the slice of my energy knife through the upper right quadrant of his head. The younger one is almost a child the way humans reckon such things. She was cut in two through the chest. Bodies. Nothing. Two more corpses upon a mountain of dead. There is a golden pendent on a golden chain around the neck of the young one. I expect it to be a cross, that sign of the human prince of peace. I see, instead, the cube of a Talman taken from some dead or captured Drac. My rage paints everything in reds and blinding whites. Instinctively I touch the trigger on my knife and watch as her head rolls free from her torso. I take the chain from the stump of her neck and look at the cube. It carries a line sign, but I do not know it. I look around inside the concrete and steel structure. Nothing but the mounts remain of the crew served weapons that had been bolted to the floor. There are scraps of cloth hanging over the weapon ports. Human curtains. They are made from the tan, white, and red camouflage cloth the humans use. There are chairs very similar to Drac chairs, and a table very similar to the one I ate from before my parent, my siblings, and my home were destroyed so very long ago. The inside is blackened and chipped from weapons firing. I am numb from fatigue and from the



pains in my head. I wonder how many human homes and lives I have destroyed. Some things are beyond counting. Something strange about the scene makes me pause. The chipping took place after the fire. The blackening is from burning, probably ignited by an energy knife. The chipping is caused by bullets. The Twelve had no rifles. The rifle fire had to have come from inside. Anta had said the humans might be fighting among themselves. Perhaps that is why so many of them were not in the bunker when we attacked. I take another deep breath, and as I do so I vaguely remember the sensor. I look at it again and the orange dots are now larger, the walls of the bunker reflecting warm from the sun and the energy weapons. Two of the humans are still alive, and the only thing to be served on Amadeen is death. Against the back of the firing gallery is a room. In it are six of the human beds, raised on legs, and draped with cloths. Three of the beds have bodies tossed across them. Three more bodies are crumpled on the floor near them. The ones on the beds carry knife wounds, the slashes and dismemberment unmistakable. The ones on the floor carry bullet wounds. Another room to the left off the gallery is for food preparation. Nothing alive in there. The ones alive are hiding beneath the bed on the far right. I place my weapon between my knees and hold it while I remove my helmet. The room smells foul, the human blood sickeningly sweet. Cement dust is in the air causing light filtering through cracks in the bunker to make dustbeams. The place is filled with greenflies, already feasting upon the pools of red human blood. Strange how the insects have an equal affinity for yellow Drac blood. The Talman says that only form changes, nothing ever dies. It looks like a lot of death to me. I look at the bed beneath which the two humans are hiding. There is a rifle on the tattered sheets, the stock shattered. The readout on my sensor shows one of the humans to be too small to be an adult. Of course, there are also very small humans called dwarfs and midgets who are just as deadly. Still, one of them might be a child. Prisoners? By the bloody book, why burden myself with prisoners? It is so much less complicated if they simply die. Would they take me prisoner, or would they render me into muck and thank their bloody gods. Perhaps they will, instead, kill me. It is time to ride the monster. I hook my helmet onto my weapons belt, the weight off my neck making my head feel light. Holding my knife in my right hand, I place my left beneath the end of the bed. "Now is when you must kill me," I whisper. I flip the bed over and bring my knife up to bear. All I can see is a single form. A human female from what I can see of her back. She is curled into a lump. She is not armed. "Get up," I order in English. "Get up and face me." She doesn't comply. Instead she shakes her head back and forth, a human sign of resistance. "Get up," I repeat. I reach down to grab her shoulder, my knife pointing at her head. Just before I touch her, I hear a baby cry. So easy to have a soft heart. So easy to say, here is a parent and child. Take pity, Ro. What has a mere baby done to you? Have mercy. How many Dracs have had their wombs ripped open, their barely formed children dangled by their umbilicals before the still living eyes of their parents? How many humans have smashed the heads of how many Drac children upon rocks and exchanged money bets upon how far the blood splashes? With all of my strength I grab her shoulder and throw her onto her back, her baby still

clutched in her arms. I lift my knife to cut them both in two, then I see the baby. It is a Drac baby only a few days old. The woman's eyes stare at my face. Tears make her eyes glitter in the half dark. She knows she is about to die. She knows the baby is about to die. "Please," she whimpers. "Please." What about the dead, I want to ask her. What about all of the dead? And how did you acquire a Drac infant, woman? Whose womb did you slit? Filthy, hairy, foul smelling thing, what right do you have to ask pity from me? I say none of it. I gesture toward the infant with my knife and say something very stupid. "It is not human." She shakes her head. "No," she answers. "It's mine." Mine. It's mine. I lower myself until I am sitting cross-legged on the floor, my knife across my knees. A howl begins from inside me, from deep beneath the core of my soul. It expands until it fills every crack and crevice of my being. When the pressure is more than will can contain, it explodes from my mouth. A bellow, a scream, a cry. I cry for them, the human female and the abandoned Drac infant. I cry for the Twelve, for my parent and siblings. I cry for the Planet Amadeen, and for one of its many weary soldiers, Yazi Ro.

## CHAPTER 2

"Its name is Suritok Nan. Its parent told me just before it died.

Fourth in its line, but its parent told me none of the line names. No one will be able to piece them together now." We sit outside the bunker on the rubble, the woman cleaning the face of the Drac child on her lap. I sit watching her, my mind far from a decision about her continued existence. Her skin is smooth and the color of mud, the hair on her head short, black, and curled. She too has ear flaps and that bulb of a human nose, all of those fingers. The Drac child's skin is the color of sunlight, its face smooth, hairless, and puffed with birth fat. I can see, though, that the woman only sees a child; that the child only sees a parent. It is something I cannot even imagine existing, but there it is. I look away. The woman and the child are not the only things that have been left undone. I must find the bodies of my comrades, take their Talmans, destroy their weapons. "Nan's parent," continued the woman, "it didn't even have time to tell me its own name before it died. The Talman it carried was gone." She moves her shoulders and lets her gaze fall. "Stolen, probably," she continues. "You can get over a hundred tags for a Talman and chain back on the Dorado." A hundred tags. Tags are script money issued by the Front. According to captured humans, a hundred tags is enough to buy a melon. So much for eleven thousand years of wisdom. I look at the Talman and chain I had taken from the girl I beheaded. They are still in my hand, a bit of human blood on it. Perhaps this was the one taken from Nan's parent. Probably not. I look again at the woman's face. Why should a human be so concerned about the heritage of a Drac infant? Perhaps her show is for my benefit. She thinks I might let her go. Her and her Drac child. After all, I let her live. So far. Perhaps she will do whatever she thinks will induce my compassion. Humans lie, and sneak, and trick: all skills we have learned from them along with butchery, cruelty, and

horror. I notice the power switch on my knife is still energized. The weapon's charge is down to fourteen percent. Stupid. Suddenly I am very tired. I want to find a safe, dark place, curl into a ball, wipe my memory, and sleep for a thousand years. I turn off the switch. "What are you going to do with us?" A decision seems to make itself. I stand, take a step, and stop next to the pair. Extending my hand, I hold out the Talman and chain to her. "It probably belongs to another line, but the words are the same." Tears, another thing we have in common with the humans, blur my vision. "The line died with the soldier who carried this." She takes it, nods her thanks, and places the chain around the child's neck. I do not ask her if she can read Drac.

I stay behind at the crossroads and watch the woman's back as she walks toward the north stepping over the rubble and around the holes, the baby still in her arms. The sun is almost gone, the sky red as the desert dust. I face the west and wonder what I should do. I should make my way back to the Sikov commander and report. They are all dead, Ghah Jov: Anta split from its crotch to its right shoulder by an energy knife; Ki, its pieces splattered across the ground where a rocket's blast carried them; Pina riddled with bullets, the tracks in the sand showing how it dragged itself across the ground before it died; and Adoveyna stretched out on the ground without a mark on its body as though it were sleeping. When I lift Adoveyna I feel the blood on my fingers. Ah, yes. I must report the village of Riehm Vo liberated. I should report as well the woman who I let return to her own people, in addition to the baby Drac I allowed her to take with her. I can imagine Jov's brow rising as it waits for the soldier before it to explain several counts of treason. Should I tell it the woman herself killed two humans who were determined to kill the Drac child? That was the firing Anta had heard when it scouted the position. Should I tell Jov that if I had, instead, brought her with me back to the Sikov, the woman would be executed and the baby thrown into a holding center for children with no lines to await training as future killers for the Mavedah? Jov could not see what was wrong with that. A few days ago I would not be able to see it either. But now I see Nan sleeping in love's arms, a rest so complete all I can do is quench my envy by letting them stay together. I cannot go back to the Sikov or the Mavedah. Let them believe all of us died. I turn and look at the woman in the distance. I believe she can protect the baby from her commanders in the Front, but she could not protect me. I would be killed, or forced to commit treason, and then killed. She stops, turns, and faces me. Lifting a hand, she waves it. A human gesture. I raise a hand and hold it as she faces north again and continues walking, the baby still in her arms. The road turns behind some ruins and she is gone. I lower the hand and look down at the energy knife in my other hand. I should have gotten the name of the woman. Those who change the entire course of a life need to be named. I glance up at the sky and see the sun reflected from one of the several orbiting quarantine stations that ring Amadeen. It hangs in the sky like an evening star. In it sit the humans and Dracs who monitor the instruments that detect and destroy ships that attempt to rise from the surface or attempt to land on the surface from space.

Far beyond that belt of death is where I must find my answers. There are none left on Amadeen. I will not see Jov to report the liberation of all this rubble. I must avoid the Mavedah. Instead, there is a traitor I must see. I pull the control block from the knife, crush it beneath my boot, and throw the knife far from the edge of the road. I turn to the west and walk, leaving my helmet and armor in the dust.

### CHAPTER 3

Zenak Abi's name is a curse leveled at those who would betray species and line to follow a fantasy. Yet I betray all to which I have sworn to find something my pain tells me must be there. I cross the Mavedah lines in the dark, the sounds of battle coming from the north. There is no challenge. The humans are far away from these posts and moments to sleep too precious. Later, at an unfamiliar settlement where no one recognizes me, I offer a Madah outcast some rations in exchange for information. The vemadah gives me the information I need and fades into the shadows. I gave it the Talmans of my dead comrades and the vemadah will see that their deaths are recorded for the benefit of anyone who might care. Anta's sibling, Trahn, may be still alive. The rest of them, though, came from the holding center for the lineless. The Twelve was their line. In the village of Namdas nestled in the foothills of the Silver Mountains, I see the market where farmers and merchants buy and sell things as though there is no fire in the sky. Namdas has only been hit twice during the past few years, both times by accident; shortfalls of missiles intended for the Mavedah headquarters farther to the east. I think to buy some of the sweet grain cakes there on sale, but I have no money and only my knife to trade. I keep my knife, drink at a well, and take the road into the mountains. As the hot dawn fills the sky, I see the house. It is in the woods above Namdas, high on the slope of Mt. Atahd. The smell of trees fills the air. The house is little more than a rouga, what the humans call a hutch or shack. In the dust outside the shack two Drac children play at killing. "Nu geph, Irkmaan!" growls the older child as it brandishes a wooden energy knife made from a drying board. The other child, holding a stick as though it is a rifle, sullenly falls down feigning a welcome death, its release from having to take the role of the human. When it resurrects and demands the exchange of weapons and roles, the older child refuses. A protest, another demand, the name kizlode is hurled followed shortly by a swift kick and the pair grappling in the dust. I am rooted to the spot by a memory of two years past. There was one of many truces in effect. Standing guard on eleven humans, holding them in case the negotiations for the proposed prisoner exchange actually succeed. The humans talk among themselves, one saying that he cannot see how the war can ever end. He tells his companion the wounds are too many, too old, and too deep. He describes how his children and the children of his friends play. For fun they play at killing Dracs the way these children before Neleh Ve's shack play at killing humans. There was no prisoner exchange that time. Tuva Culik, the compound warden, came running from its office, its skin pale with rage. Culik had heard that the humans had begun executing their prisoners. From Culik's belt

the warden pulled a pulse weapon and fired into the humans. The humans roared and charged the fence. I cut into them with an energy knife. Two other guards joined in and the four of us fired into the eleven unarmed humans until there was nothing left but a lumpy puddle of steaming muck. Afterward, silence. Then another message. It was a false rumor. The humans still honored the agreement. Tuva Culik had been wrong. We had murdered the eleven humans. When the Front heard about what we had done to their comrades, the rumor was righted. The humans executed forty-four soldiers of the Mavedah and the truce was ended. Culik had been proven right after all. "Tuka nue!" commands an adult voice weary with scolding. The children halt their war and face a Drac adult who is holding a bundle of hand washed clothes in its arms. It carries no weapons. "Neleh Ve?" I ask. Its eyes, the lids narrowed, study me for a moment. Without removing its gaze from my eyes, the Drac gestures with its head toward the house and says to the children, "Tean, benga." With the children in the shack, the Drac shifts the washing, resting it on a hip, leaving its right arm free. "I am Neleh Ve."

"Yazi  
Ro," I answer. "It is good to see children again."

"The battle cry of  
the childless," says Neleh Ve without changing expression. "Is there something you want?"

"I look for the Jetah Talman, Zenak Abi." Amusement  
touches Ve's lips. "What use has a soldier of the Mavedah with a master of paths?"

"Perhaps the path of the Mavedah no longer serves me." I  
frown at Ve and invite a wound with my question. "I have no weapons, no armor. How do you know I was Mavedah?"

"Your eyes, Yazi Ro. They  
belong to a killer." I take the wound and add it to my collection.  
"Zenak Abi," I repeat. "Where may I find the Jetah?" Ve gestures with  
its head toward the mountain. "Up there somewhere." I look up at the  
mountain, its peaks capped with snow. "It is a big mountain. Is there  
a particular trail I should follow?"

"Go and if Abi wants to talk with  
you, it will find you. Be warned, though, that the Jetah can defend  
itself."

"I mean the Jetah no harm. I only seek information."

"So said  
many who sought to slay the traitor." Neleh Ve turns and begins  
spreading its wash on the drying boards. I am dismissed. Neleh Ve has  
no reason to believe differently about me. There is no reason why I  
should concern myself about what it thinks. I feel the need, though. I

feel the need to tell Ve that I am no longer one of them. My only proof, though, is that I have killed no one today. I aim my steps up the mountain as the children in the shack resume their pretend killing. I still hear their voices as I turn on my receiver and listen to a little zidydrac before the music is interrupted to inform us that the village of Riehm Vo has been retaken by the Front. I think about the dead woman I beheaded and know that I have added luster to some Amadeen Front soldier's resolve to exterminate every Drac from the face of the planet. As the music returns, I place the receiver on a rock and leave it there, the music fading as I climb.

There are trees on the mountain, great towering things with craggy black skin and reddish green leaves as wide as my hand is long. Among the rocks and grasses are flowers, berry bushes, and blossoming vines that reach high into the trees. The air is cooler and there is a breeze. I can hear the sounds of battle, but they are distant, not as loud as the dark brown furred shade nit at my feet. Its sound is a chip-chip and it sits within a thicket on its hind legs, its thin black tail wrapped around its legs, making its sound, warning me not to approach. I search my pockets. The creature defends its territory. It is not begging me for ancient battle rations. Still, I find an end of ration bar, pinch off a piece, and toss it to the nit. It springs back, increases its cry in volume, and paws at the air with its front legs. I back away a step and, after a moment, the creature quiets, leans forward and sniffs at the piece of food. Darting out to pick it up, the nit rushes back to the safety of the deep thicket. As it eats I turn and look around me. Something inside me is outraged at this corner of Amadeen that has missed the warring. Where is the justice that claimed the lives of Anta, Ki, Pina, and Adoveyna, yet lets a bloody shade nit live? I cross my legs and sit where I am. I have no argument with justice. I lost my belief in such things long before my parent died. My argument is with reality. My comrades should not be dead. Instead we should all be here on the side of this mountain, cooling ourselves in the shade, tossing bits of food to the nits. There is a pain in me so intense that I cannot afford to let it claim me. Suddenly I feel something dig into my back. "I see I have a visitor," says a voice from behind me. "Let me see your hands, child, and do not clutter them with weapons, I beg you." I sit up and hold my hands out to my sides as I condemn myself as a fool. "Zenak Abi?" I ask. With steps as silent as the mist, it moves slowly around me until I can see it. The Drac is old but looks to be strong. It wears pieces of camouflage uniforms, human trousers, a Drac jacket and boots, a soft human brimmed hat. All that remains of a Talman master's robe, the blue stripe at the hem, it wears draped around its neck. In its hands it holds a long walking stick. "I am Abi. Who might you be?" I lower my hands to my sides and climb to my feet. "I am Yazi Ro." I think for a moment and then add, "I used to serve in the Mavedah. The Okori Sikov of the Ninth Shordan." The old one's brow rises in amusement. "Eh, a proud band, the Okori Sikov." Abi lowers the end of its staff to the ground. Grasping it with both hands, the Jetah rests its weight on it. "And what is a hero of the Okori Sikov doing so far from the fighting?" I feel the heat coming to

my face. "Your mockery is out of place, old one. I come here for answers, not to provide you with entertainment." It grins at me, the broken edge of its upper mandible quite visible. "Perhaps I cannot remember the answers," Yazi Ro, "unless I am entertained." I turn, see the trunk of a fallen tree, and go to it. I sit down, cross my arms, and rest my elbows on my knees. I do this to avoid slitting open the old fool with the knife hidden in my boot. I feel twice the fool for coming here. Perhaps my questions have no answers. Abi squats down before me, leans the stick between its neck and shoulder, and studies me. The longer the Jetah stares at me, the more foolish I feel. Just as I am about to rise and flee from the mountain, Abi says, "What is your question, soldier? Ask it honestly and I will provide you with an answer as honest as your question." I remain quiet as my anger wrestles with my thoughts leaving nothing clear. My question? Who knows what my question is? Why is there a war? Why is peace impossible? Why was I born into the center of this holocaust? Why are my comrades dead? Why is my parent dead? Why is life and the world excrement? I can feel the tears dribble down my face. My question. What is my question? My mind is blanked by the futility of it all. "Very well, old fool. Why do you wear human trousers?" Zenak Abi's face becomes very serious. It nods once, then levels its gaze at me. "The purpose, child," Abi says in English, "is to cover my ass." I am stunned, then I laugh. Through this crack in my grief all of the laughter I had confined for years exploded. When I could see again, Zenak Abi, too, was laughing.

#### CHAPTER 4

Abi leads me high up the mountain, deep into the frozen cleft between two peaks where the boulders stand on the ground like so many frost giants. The snow is fresh and ankle deep. I am not used to the cold and I feel my muscles growing numb, my thoughts coming slow and thick. It is the beginning of dark by the time we reach the entrance to Abi's cave. Before I enter I look down from the mountain toward the east. There the gentle hills of the Shorda spread to the horizon. Dull glows of red and orange beneath the haze show the death machines have not yet run out of fuel. They make me feel the fool yet again. So much blood, so much pain, so many years. If the fighting could have been stopped others would have stopped it long ago. Who is Yazi Ro to stop a war? Ro who still has bloody hands. I turn and enter the cave, pulling the cover cloth down behind me. Inside it is much warmer. We sit on boxes and other containers salvaged from some ruin. One side of my container is cut, allowing me to sit on a springy seat of leafy branches and rest my back against the side opposite. Abi cooks cakes on the griddle it has made, filling the chamber with the smells of wood smoke and sweet spice. "Have you heard anything about the new truce?" I ask. "There have been rumors. Nothing from the broadcast stations. Some say a rumor is all it is." Abi slides two of the cakes onto a large leaf and hands them to me. "Before the truce could be signed, the Tean Sindie attacked the negotiation site, took everyone hostage, executed all of the humans, and admonished the Mavedah negotiators never again to negotiate with the monsters of the Front. Some tea?" The Tean Sindie;

children of the racehome world; the "pure Mavedah" whom no one seems able to control. They could have let the truce happen for a few days. Just a few. I eat my cakes hot, allowing the warmth to radiate from my center to my limbs. It is quiet in the cave. Safe. I do not feel that I have to stand guard every second. Next to life on the dirt, the security I feel within that frozen mountain is strangely obscene. With my belly full and my muscles relaxed for the first time since the founding, I put the Tean Sindie, truces, and Amadeen out of my mind and let sleep overtake me. At first I awaken, see Abi sitting on its crate, then drowse as images of love and war flit through the edges of my perception. A last look at Abi reading a book, then I give in, too weary to resist my dreams.

"The Selector," hisses a voice. Choi Leh stands there above the children paying no attention to the sounds of firing outside. Leh is massive, a horrible burn scar on the left side of its face, its left arm limp and dead at its side. Choi Leh's leather clothes and boots are worn, his armor and weapon scarred. Ravin Nis, the Jetah of the lineless children, watches Choi Leh, eager to please, terrified not to. We all want to please the Selector, but our reasons are different. If we are chosen to fill the ranks of the Mavedah, we will eat. Leh steps down from the dais and begins to walk among us, its stride long, and determined. The word passes among the children in whispers: "Mavedah. Mavedah."

"This one," says Leh nodding toward Vulrih Apisa, the largest of us. Hateful Apisa is cruel and a bully, but now its face is proud. "See here," says its expression. "I was the first chosen. I do matter. I am something." Ravin Nis takes Apisa by the arm and points toward the dais. "This one," says Choi Leh, pointing at another, Nis following with whispered instructions to go to the dais. Choi Leh picks four more, then pauses before Bikudih Ri. Ri is small but eager to please. Leh lifts its good arm and smacks Ri's head, sending the child to the floor. Choi Leh waits a moment watching Ri cry then moves on. At last Choi Leh stands in front of me. I know I am very young, not as large as most, and the Mavedah Selector must doubt me. There will be a test. It looks down at me, its burns more horrible now that they are close. "My face," it growls. "Do you see something in it?"

"It is burned," I answer, still looking into its eyes. They are dark, more brown than yellow. "Do you find it beautiful?" Leh asks. "I find it ugly." Choi Leh takes a swing at my head, I squat, and as the arm flashes above my head, I drive my head into Leh's middle, right where I think its belly slit is. Leh cries out as it falls to the floor on its backside. Leh holds its middle, gasps, springs to its feet, and gives me another look. "This one," Leh tells Ravin Nis, then the Selector moves on. ..

I awaken, sit up and look all around for threats. There is no one but the Jetah Talman, Zenak Abi. It is still reading, but it speaks. "It is time, Yazi Ro, to ask me your question. The one that is not



about my trousers." I lean forward, rub my face, and take a breath. Letting the breath escape, I lean back in the chair. Question. Do I even have a question? "I am not certain what to ask, Jetah." Abi marks the book with a strip of blue cloth, closes it, and places it on his lap. Its eyes search me out. "What do you know of me?"

"You are insane and a traitor." The Jetah's brow mounts a puzzled frown. "I would think, Ro, that I cannot be both." I look down and clasp my hands together. It is not important, I think. They are only words; the most traitorous things of all. "Jetah, it is said that before there was a war, you lived with the humans."

"True. Many of us did. The university they had in Hulon on the Dorado continent was Amadeen's largest center of learning before the war. I taught there and had many human friends, teachers, and students. Does that make me a traitor?"

"No." I lean forward and point with my hands at the air. "I cannot imagine such a time." Abi holds a hand to its chin and purses its lips. "You carry your years like a chain. How many? Ten, eleven?"

"I am seven, Jetah."  
"Seven," repeats Abi, shaking its head after the manner of a human.  
"When I was your age I had already graduated from the Talman Kovah in Sendievu."

"On Draco?" I ask in surprise. Everyone I had ever known had been born on Amadeen. "Of course. I came to Amadeen at the age of nine. That was eleven years before the war." Abi grins at me. "You look astonished, Yazi Ro." I frown as I do my addition. "You must be over fifty years old!"

"Fifty-three on Draco. A little older in Amadeen years. My age doesn't set any records." I stand and pace before Abi. "Almost everyone I know is under ten. My parent was killed when it was only four. There are a few Mavedah warmasters in their twenties. One warmaster I met, Olta Cius, was twenty-nine at the time. It was the oldest Drac I ever met, until now." Zenak Abi wipes a hand over the top of its head, sighs, and says, "We have established, Yazi Ro, that I am insane, traitorous, and terribly ancient. However, at this pace we will both be too old to retain a coherent thought by the time you get to your point." I halt my pacing and look down at the Jetah. "Then, here it is. I have heard two things in the camps. First, it is said that when Zenak Abi studied the paths it did not see all paths locking Amadeen into this war. It is said you found a talma to peace." Abi rubbed its chin and held up a single finger. "Half true. All paths do not prove this war necessary. I proved no path to peace, however."

"There must be a way!"

There must be an end to this."

"I would like to think so, young one,"

Abi says in a mocking tone. "Still, there is nothing that raises your fervent 'must' to the level of scientific possibility." I see Abi's amused face and ask myself: is the world nothing but bloody games played with pain-filled living pieces? My frustration overcomes any pretense at old-fashioned courtesy. "You and your blue stripe have had thirty-two years, you old wheeze! What have you been doing all this time?" I find our faces only a handlength apart and feel something poking me in my middle. I look down and Abi is holding one of the human projectile hand guns. It is pointed at me. I stand and take a step back. "Sit down in the chair, Yazı Ro. You will find it much more comfortable." I do not move. "Very well, I will find it more comfortable. Sit!" commands the Jetah, brandishing the pistol. I sit in the chair, my gaze on Abi's eyes. The Jetah smiles, aims the gun at his own head, and pulls the trigger. A click, and nothing. "Out of ammunition," it says, almost in apology. "To answer your question, what I have been doing for the past thirty-two years is trying to keep myself and a few friends alive. We've spent the decades one step ahead of the agents of the Mavedah and the Amadeen Front, hiding in places such as this."

"I found you easily enough." Abi smiles and says, "If you will invoke your vast powers of memory, Yazı Ro, you will, I think, recall that it was I who found you." Abi gestures with its gun at the walls of the cave. "As for my work, Yazı Ro, where do I hang my charts? Where are my screens, my computers, my colleagues and assistants, my subspace link to the Talman Kovah? All of this time, young one, you had a better chance at achieving peace than did I."

"Peace?" I ask, even more confused. Abi nods as it tucks the useless weapon within its jacket. "You could have put down your weapon and stopped killing. That would have decreased the number of dead bodies you have been generating. I couldn't even do that because I wasn't killing anyone. What is the second thing you heard?" The rumors my comrades would pass among one another as we would sit talking around a faltering glow disk at night. Are they all only words? Audio blips with which we fill time until the next mission? Is this the monster, the thief of victory, of our discussions? "I heard, Zenak Abi, that you know a way through the blockade. You know how I can get off Amadeen." Finally I get the old fool's attention. It clasps its hands and crosses its legs after the manner of a human. "If I could perform such a miracle, Yazı Ro, where might you go? What would you do? A vacation? Perhaps some shopping in Sendievu?" The answer came to me as I spoke the words. "I would go to Draco, stand before the Jetai Diea at the Talman Kovah, and demand they find an end to war for this sorry world."

"Ah, peace is it? And would you kill to achieve this, little Niagat?" Again I feel the heat coming

to my face. "I am not here to trade myths from The Talman, you old. .  
. one. What I will do to achieve peace is my concern alone." Again  
Zenak Abi mocks me with its smile. "There are many who would be clean  
of Amadeen, Yazi Ro. Parents, both human and Drac, who want their  
children safe. There are the wounded who cannot get the treatment they  
need. There are all of those who are starving, multitudes who no longer  
want to wallow in death. Supposing that I can perform this miracle, why  
should I ignore their pleas in favor of yours?"

"Zenak Abi, the danger,  
the wounding, the starvation will all end come the peace."

"Come the  
peace." Abi stands and walks until it is standing over me, its face no  
longer mocking. "And you, young killer, the blood of humans still on  
your hands, are you the one to convince the Ovjetah and the gentle  
masters of the Talman Kovah that they are mistaken? That their years of  
study, training, and experience are for nothing? That they simply  
overlooked a path that you in your youthful ignorance and brash pride  
have found? The Talman Kovah advises the political, business, military,  
scientific, and philosophical institutions of hundreds of worlds, and  
here comes a ragged Mavedah killer, barely an adult but bereft of  
adulthood, to demand that they accomplish that which they already know  
to be impossible. Tell me, Yazi Ro, why they would even allow you  
within sight of the front entrance?" I turn my face away from the Jetah  
and look into a deep shadow. A thousand times I am the fool. In the  
center of my being there is this conviction that the horror on Amadeen  
is so wrong, in itself that should force a path into existence, a talma  
along which Amadeen can achieve peace. A thousand times a fool. On the  
edge of my lips is the word "unfair." This war, the horrors, the  
impossibility of peace, unfair, unfair. I do not say this aloud, for  
doing so would invite another little homily from The Talman. I do not  
remember the story or from which koda it comes. Something about one of  
Maltak Di's little games. One of the lessons of the story, though, is  
that a belief in fairness is evidence of either brain damage or  
stupidity. Tears again. Perhaps there is no end to this. My parent, my  
friends, my comrades are dead, in a parade of corpses with many  
regiments yet to follow. Do I rejoin the parade or hide like Zenak Abi  
on some mountaintop? Can I live knowing so many are dead, so many are  
dying? My ghosts would sing too loudly in a place as peaceful as this  
cave. It is from the humans we learned about ghosts. No kovah, steeped  
in scientific path detection, would accept a fancy such as ghosts. Yet  
I have heard them. I see them now. I care for no one's opinions on  
what I know until that one has carried its own blade on Amadeen. Abi  
places its hand upon my head, and it is warm. "Lean back," he commands.  
"Lean back and relax. I'll introduce you to a little something I picked  
up from a human." I lean away from the Jetah's hand and frown at its  
smiling face. "What are you going to do?"

"There is a problem with you.  
Perhaps I can help."

"A disease?" I ask. Abi laughs, thinks for a moment, then says, "Perhaps something worse, Ro. First, I am going to relax you. Next I may find a way for you to achieve your greatest wish. Somewhere along this path I will probably get you killed. Now lie back and relax." Peace or death. Either one is more attractive than the present. I lean back, close my eyes, and allow the soft strokes of the Jetah's hand to lull me toward a strange sleep. Long before I get there I hear a strange noise: a motion of leather across paving stones. I try to move, to place myself at the ready, but I cannot move. I am helpless before my own thoughts.

## CHAPTER 5

There is a gray light that becomes a mist swirling around the trunks of trees, reaching upward toward me. It surrounds me and the features of everything fade into oblivion. I try to call out, but there is no sound. There is a smudge of yellow deep within the mist. I stare at it and watch it grow until a horizon appears, the outlines of humble dwellings etched against the clouds. I am back in Gitoh, watching as the blades of green light reach to burn another human gunship from the sky. The grating sounds of the alarm blocks seem to vibrate my bones. "Ro! Ni tean! Ro!" My parent rushes into the room and jerks me away from the window. In the center of our home, Yazı Avo cries and speaks angrily to me. It pulls me to its chest, squeezes me tightly, and nuzzles my neck. "I am sorry, Ro. I was so frightened. Please listen. When the alarm blocks sound, you must stay away from the windows and doors." I tell Avo that I am all right and nothing will happen to me. The fighting was far off. I won't get hurt in my own home. Later I learn that my friend Idoh watched almost the entire battle from its window before a stray pulse from the gunship turned Idoh into pulp.

There are moments with my parent, reading and reading again our three old books, an embrace, sleeping safe in the arms of Yazı Avo. On the edge of the new spring comes The Battle of Gitoh, so many Amadeen Front soldiers cutting through us because only a few Mavedah were there to serve the air defense weapons. The smoke, screams, and flames. The silence. Pushing Avo's lifeless body off of my own. Only a charred corner from one of Avo's books remains. I cry my cries and I cannot understand how anyone, Drac or human, can listen and not take pity on the children. Long after my cries end, a soldier of the Mavedah comes and takes me to a track wagon. There are other children in it. All of us are alone. When the track begins moving, taking us out of Gitoh, no one says anything to us. A few of us huddle together and cry. Most of us sit watching, waiting for the next horror, hoping the next time to be better prepared.

The kovah for lineless children, the Selector before us. The terrors of training, the endless battles, fights, attacks, ambushes, maimed and dead comrades, the few I know and the multitude I do not. I carry my own knife into the cries of human children. I see them, their

large dark eyes filled with tears, their faces twisted with grief. They cry their cries and they cannot understand how anyone, human or Drac, can listen and not take pity on the children. There is nothing to be served by trying to explain to them. They will have to learn for themselves.

There is a broken doll in the dust before the burning fortifications at Butaan Ji. A little girl a step away, her dead eyes staring up at the sun. A man sitting next to her, singing strange words in a cracked voice. The pain in the song's words need no translator. He turns his head and looks at me, his eyes wet, pleading, his voice forcing out the song. He is not wounded and he has a weapon. The weapon remains on his lap. I lift my knife and give him a splash through his chest. He falls to the ground dead and I wonder why he did not try to save himself. In my mind I still hear the song he sang.

The night mission to attack Steel Town on the Dorado, looking down from the exit bay of the ancient combat flyer. The surface below is covered with clouds but they illuminate here, there, and here again as explosions below make the clouds glow. In the distance there are other glows, and still more. Wherever I look down upon Amadeen it is exploding or burning, and we are to go into that. As we begin our dive, Pina reaches out and holds my hand. The nameless commander of another unit sees us and looks away, something guilty in its eyes.

The woman at the bunker and her Drac infant. A field of death and destruction, a killer of the Mavedah who can no longer kill for a continuation of this madness. The infant's name is Suritok Nan. The woman did not tell me her name. I let her go no longer able to see what I had to see to kill. What will her little Drac infant become? Perhaps it will be the key to a future peace between the Dracs and humans. Perhaps it will invent a potion that renders all species into the same family. More than likely it and its human mother were killed within moments of leaving me. In my center I see things of mine. Love is a small thing. Pity smaller still. Hate is larger. It is a mountain, its crest black against a sky of fire. Towering above it, though, is this thing that makes me sick, the thing that makes me stupid, less than an adult. It is a lumbering, clumsy, raging monster bellowing "Look at the suffering, the waste! Things should not be this way! It's unfair!" This is what makes Yazi Ro a fool. If I get to Draco and stand before the Talman Kovah, putting this planet's pain on display for the masters, is there anything I can achieve other than laughter or impatience? I will only howl at reality and thrash myself bloody upon its disinterested plane. What can there be left, then, for Amadeen?

The mist clears, returning me to Zenak Abi's cave. There is an ache in my eyes, the taste of dust in my mouth. There is a man before me. He is short and very serious-looking. He stands next to the Jetah, both of them warming themselves at the fire. They are discussing me yet their words come from very far away. A feeling fills my throat. The human. There is something very wrong with Zenak Abi talking with a

human as if they are old comrades. The Jetah holds a small package. The human holds a smaller package. I sit up as the wrongness of what I see becomes clear. The human is standing there without guilt. He is not cowed, apologetic, filled with remorse, wary, nothing to suggest the weight of the crimes he carries or the awful debt he owes to the Dracs in the chamber. A part of my intellect knows that it is possible that this particular human might be innocent of any crimes. This particle of reason, though, cannot weigh against the universe of my hate. And still they talk. The sense of their words has to do with sending Yazi Ro -me -- to Draco. There must be a confusion, but they repeat it: Yazi Ro to go to Draco. "Why?" I try to ask, but my word is slurred, sounding like the whimper of one of the dogs the humans brought to Amadeen. Abi faces me. "Eh, you are back on Amadeen, are you? Take a few deep breaths, Ro. Work your muscles. You've had a sedative."

"Sed --?" I push myself up from the chair, my arms and legs strangely heavy and slow to respond to my commands. "What sedative?" I grasp the back of the chair as the chamber seems to whirl. The feeling passes and soon my head clears. "This should be plenty," says the man holding the smaller package, a thick envelope. "The price has been going down as the demand falls off."

"Yazi Ro," says Abi, "this is Thomas. He is going to arrange for you to go to Draco." The world takes on another spin and I drop back into the chair. "Draco?" The things that went through my mind are still with me. "Why?" I gesture with suddenly numb fingers toward my head. "This thing that happened, the dream, it showed me what a useless gesture going to Draco is." I look around feeling that perhaps my head is none too clear. "What happened to me?" I point at the brown thing with the serious expression. "Why this human? What is he doing here?"

"In answer to one of your questions," says Thomas, "it's called mind fusion. In an electro-chemical sense Zenak Abi's brain and yours became one for a moment." He removes a small silver disk from his jacket pocket and shows it to me. "This is the gadget. It's a neural field amplifier." Replacing the disk in his pocket, he says, "The sedative should wear off in a couple of minutes."

"I took nothing. No sedative." Abi holds up its hand. "I applied it when I stroked your head." I should feel outraged but I am too tired, too confused. The Jetah of peace carries a gun and drugs those who seek its help. When I want to go to Draco, I cannot. Now that there is no purpose, I can. Perhaps this is a test; some sort of examination to see if I am worthy to join their cult. If I pass the test I get to join some secret society of the fungus-brained. Abi and the human shake hands and upon the completion of the human ritual, Thomas leaves the chamber. The Jetah adds some wood to the small fire and speaks to me. "I apologize, Yazi Ro, for administering the sedative without your permission. It was

necessary for me to see as you see. I needed to know if I can trust you."

"Trust me? For what? A voyage to Draco? There is no reason to go to Draco." I hold my hands to my head. "Is that not the lesson in this dream you and the human thrust into my brain?" Abi turns from the fire and studies me for moment. As the Jetah thinks, it walks to its chair and sits. Abi clasps its hands together and leans forward, resting its elbows on its lap. "We put nothing into your head, Ro. The process allows you to have singularly instructive dreams. What the amplifier allowed me to do was to take your neural event field and place it within mine. It enabled me to remember, see, and feel as do you. As to your question, it is pointless for you to go before the Talman Kovah and threaten to throw a tantrum if they don't discover a path to peace. That is what your own brain told itself, and I agree."

"Then what?" I ask, gesturing with my hand toward the entrance through which the human withdrew. "Why would you and this friend of yours have me go to Draco?" Abi looks at the package in its hands. "There is a chance, Ro. I do not have the means to ascertain how slim a chance it is, but there is a chance for this peace you want. Before the quarantine cut me off from communication with the Talman Kovah, my work showed that there are event chains that are not proven to end in war." I shake my head. "I don't know enough about anything to see any light in that." The Jetah mentally pushes aside a mountain of explanation with a wave of its hand. "There is a chance for this peace. Bring my work to the kovah and suggest they consider it in the light of the new book of the Talman accepted by the Three Hundred and Eleventh Jetai Diea, there is a chance."

"The Talman?"

A new book?" I almost wanted to laugh. I waved my golden cube at the Jetah. "Here you are excited over one more myth being tossed on the pile. I thought I was a fool until I met you, you old wind." Zenak Abi leans back in its chair, studies me for a moment. "This myth just might interest you, young one. It was written about us -- those on Amadeen -and it was written by a human." I look down at the golden cube of pages that I wear because of a weakness: a vague attachment to my parent. The Talman, book of paths, the stories of Dracs from the advent of a god of fire eleven thousand years ago to what? The Jetai Diea, the most brilliant Talman scholars and scientists that exist, have added a new story to The Talman. A story written by a human. On proper Drac worlds, where rites of adulthood still are conducted, the young have to memorize it and be able to recite this new koda as part of the rites of adulthood. What does a human have to say that is worth memorizing by countless future generations of Dracs? "Zenak Abi, what is the name of this new koda? It would be the Koda Nusinda, correct?"

"Yes. The book has been entered by the Jetai Diea as the Koda Nusinda, The Eyes of Joanne Nicole."

"Do your mysterious sources say what is so special about this particular human's eyes?" The Jetah puts on that mocking smile once more. "I am told she was blind and, therefore, could see better than the Ovjetah of the Talman Kovah."

"Blind." I stare at the Jetah while my mind envisions my presentation before the Jetai Diea. Here is what I have for you today, my masters: the work of a demented old traitor with outdated files and no equipment, inspired by a blind human, and brought to you by a Mavedah killer who never stood the rites yet who knows that the effort is wasted before it begins. Too often my bitterness does my thinking for me. "What was so special about her eyes, Zenak Abi?"

"She saw the path to end the war between the Dracon Chamber and the United States of Earth."

"Leaving just one minor loose end," I added.

"Amadeen." Zenak Abi looked into the flames of his fire for a moment and says, "Her name was Joanne Nicole. This woman took a quadrant-wide war that was killing billions and left one that was killing thousands. She entered with hundreds of worlds at war and departed with one world at war with itself. For this she was branded an enemy by the Dracs, a traitor by the humans, and imprisoned. Your sneers will be of more meaning when you, Yazı Ro, have done as much." I close my eyes and wonder at the currents and eddies of the universe, swirling and tossing fragments of life this way and that, toward ends that are forever unknowable. Am I tied to this new book of The Talman and to the humans? How is that combination tied to peace on Amadeen, if it is. Or is it all a wish, something of vapor that will vanish with the first breeze? I sigh and let my hands rest upon my lap. "What would you have me do, Abi?" Abi holds up its package. It is not much larger than a book and wrapped in waterproofed colthi skin. "Bring my work to the Talman Kovah. When you return to Amadeen, bring me a copy of the Koda Nusinda, The Eyes of Joanne Nicole."

"Bring it back to Amadeen?" I ask, my brows climbing my forehead. "If I should make it to Draco what makes you think the dirt of this planet would ever again see my shadow?" The Jetah turns its head and looks once more into the flames. "You'll come back, Yazı Ro. There is nothing more certain."

## CHAPTER 6

At night another human called Rick Macfarland and a young Drac named Dulo Rin guide me along frozen, wind carved trails until we cross the mountain. Toward the dying stars the rest of the Silver Mountain range reaches to the horizon, each pair of glistening peaks enclosing a tiny sanctuary where a few beings, Drac and human, subsist in relative peace. Here and there on the mountain sides and in the patches of



valley green, are the scars left by bombs, knife slashes, and fires. I see many scars in various stages of healing, though, the feathery pillow trees and lace vines softening the sharp broken edges of destruction. In time Amadeen can heal itself, if the beings upon it somehow end the horror. After a few hours climbing down, we are again in trees. At a place half of the way down the mountain I see a small settlement through the trees, shacks and hootches hidden by brush among the trees, Dracs and humans living together, their children playing. The children are still playing at war, but there are both Dracs and humans on each side of the battle; progress of a sort. These are the friends Zenak Abi talked about trying to keep alive. Deep in the woods I see eyes watching us. There are armed guards throughout the forest. Dracs and humans. Could it be possible that Dracs and humans used to live and work together? Would it be possible for them to do so again? Does peace require that I erase from my mind all of the horrors I have witnessed? Can Black October put aside the assassination of Amadeen Front Chairman Gordon Rose? And the slaughter of Rose's mate? And his three little girls? Can the Mavedah or Tsien Sindie forgive the gutting of the Amadeen Chamber deputies? The Ft. Lewis Massacre? The death of Yazi Avo? There is a small voice in the back of my brain. It asks me, "Are you worthy, Yazi Ro?" I know the voice. It is Dekiban Lo, Jetah of the Nokbuk Kovah, the Mavedah training academy where the Selector sent the lineless children it chose. One would gasp with exertion, and Lo would be in the poor kiz's ear with, "Are you worthy, Mikla Namik?" Another would cry in pain, and Lo would shout, "Nias Toh, are you worthy?" One would drop from exhaustion and Lo would whisper, "Are you worthy, Yazi Ro?" There is a mission before me, one more in an endless line of missions. I have time, however, to judge this one before I perform it. Is this effort to bring peace to Amadeen or is it just to risk my life in a meaningless attempt to achieve a fantasy? If it is the latter, then it is no more than what I have already done countless times. If it is the former, there is still that question without an answer: Are you worthy, Yazi Ro? There is the whine of an assault lander. As it falls slowly from the night sky, it shows no lights. I reach out and tap Dulo Rin's shoulder. It turns, Rin's features barely visible in the starlight. I point toward the sound and the Drac turns back and continues down the trail. "That is your ride," it says. "We must hurry. They won't wait forever." As we approach the small lander, there is a question in my heart. Who are the corrupt ones from the quarantine force that will take me off Amadeen? Will they be human or Drac? I have seen humans trade and barter among themselves and with the Mavedah soldiers who guarded them. Humans are corrupt and corruptible by nature. They shamelessly offer bribes to anyone who might serve their wants. I cannot imagine that kind of corruption in a Drac. As we approach the open ramp of the lander's entrance I can see three beings at the bottom of the ramp. There are no lights showing. Rick hands the thick envelope to one of them, then fades into the shadows. I look around for his Drac companion but Dulo Rin is gone. Two of the lander's crew turn, walk up the ramp, and enter. "Are you the passenger?" asks the one with the envelope. "Yes," I answer. The one with the envelope holds out a hand toward the ramp and I begin climbing toward the

darkness of the lander's interior, satisfied somehow because the extended hand was human. Inside the remaining two members of the crew greet me with impenetrable expressions and impatient gestures. They are Dracs. I am to hide in a compartment beneath the floor plates in the small cargo bay. There is a plastic foam mattress and a blanket at the bottom of the compartment. There is a plastic container for water and another for waste. "These are our bargain no-frills accommodations," says one of the Dracs. The other picks up a floor plate from where it was leaning against the bulkhead and says in English, "Hop in and I'll check with the captain about the in flight movie." I do not understand their jokes and I do not join them in their laughter. I would not laugh in any event. They are Dracs, corrupt, and I am filled with shame. As I sit on the foam mattress, the two Dracs and one of the humans slip the plates into the deck and bolt them down, the noise hurting my head. When the silence comes it is dark and I am left alone with my fears. Will these corrupt humans and Dracs simply dump me in space, divide their dishonest gains and never be discovered in their murder? Will I be captured by the quarantine force and be punished? If there is trouble with the flight, will anyone have the time to remove the deck bolts and set me free? If I make it to Draco, will I be ignored, my pleas to address the Talman Kovah disregarded? Or will I be scorned and cast out as one who never stood the rites before its line's archives? I feel a vibration through the mattress, and soon a sharp whine assaults my hearing. My hands cover the sides of my head, but the whine seems to come from everywhere. A sudden jolt followed by a brain numbing roar, and I feel myself being pushed into the plastic foam. Soon I cannot hold up my head and my arms feel as though they are made out of stone. Still the pressure increases until I cry out from the pain. With all my strength I push myself until I fall over on my side. I fall on the foam but with such force my head feel like a split melon. I am paralyzed for an eternity, my breaths ragged and shallow, the air growing deadly cold, the blanket out of reach. Am I worthy? This is no longer my question. I have never been in space before and I think I am going to die.

## CHAPTER 7

At the orbiter, feeling more dead than alive, the two Dracs drag me out of the hidden compartment, dress me in a brown one-piece uniform, and smuggle me out of the lander as part of the lander crew. Without speaking they hurry me through passageways, down stairs, across hanger decks, and through more passageways. In moments I am in a pale green uniform disguised as a member of the orbiter crew. A Drac and a human I do not recognize take me through more passageways until we reach a gigantic hanger deck housing a sleek black swept-winged craft five times longer than the lander. The human pulls me into an alcove and holds out a black and gray uniform while the Drac takes turns at preparing some kind of identity badge and keeping watch. "Do you have any skills?" asks the Drac. "We need to place you in the crew." I think for a moment and say, "I know how to kill and stay alive." The Drac smuggler gives me a cold look and the human interrupts by asking, "You can do maintenance on all kinds of Drac sidearms, can't you?"

"Yes, as well as a considerable variety of human weapons." Another cold look, this time from the human. The Drac enters a number of codes into my badge, tests them with a small light set into a stick, and nods at the human. The human faces me and says, "My friend here has diddled with the data and entered you as a member of the crew of the Tora Soam." The Tora Soam. The ship is named for the most destructive Drac traitor who ever carried Aydan's Blade. What insanity could cause such a bizarre misapplication of honor? "Do you understand?" urges the human. "Yes. Where is this ship?" I ask. "Off station." Seeing my look of confusion, he points toward one of the view ports. "Out there, in orbit with the station about a hundred clicks away. Gavey clicks?"

"I understand." He nods his head toward the ship that fills the hanger deck. Several dignitaries and their attendants are standing together, talking and waiting. "This is one of the Soam's shuttles. When the crew starts to board, we'll attach you to a friend of ours who'll get you on board and settled in. Our friend has found you an open slot to fill. In case anyone asks, tell them your real name and that you are in Maintenance Six, Ordinance. This's a diplomatic ship to Draco -- only couriers and paper wizards -- so nobody should need your services. You'll have your own quarters and rations, so stay out of sight, keep your mouth shut, and you'll do fine."

The smugglers' friend is Binas Pahvi, one of the Tora Soam's fourth officers. The money Zenak Abi paid for my passage does not exchange hands. Instead the human hands Pahvi a heavy container of Amadeen's sole export: happy paste. I can imagine a trail of spittle dreams from Amadeen across the galaxy to Draco. Pahvi has what the humans call devil eyes. I am kept out of sight as much as possible, but I think nearly everyone on the crew knows what is going on. Perhaps they all receive a share of Zenak Abi's payment. Perhaps they don't care. It is an attitude I do not understand. Those who have the grit of Amadeen in their pores learn that death trails uncaring steps. It is the first of many reminders that war makes its own race of children, aliens to those who have not had the same parent. Those crewing the orbiter and the Tora Soam are not warriors with missions. Instead they are laborers and technicians for putting in time pay.

The ship's armory is a small compartment opening onto the weapons bay and onto the armorer's quarters. It consists of a workbench and lockers filled with tools and supplies. The tools have no wear on them, the supplies have never been opened, and most of the ship's complement of weapons is still in sealed shipping bags. The weapons that are unpacked and assembled are either filthy, out of power, or both. This obscene lack of preparedness is nothing to me. I have no stake in the mission of the Tora Soam. I stay in my tiny quarters and while away the time with human and Drac theatricals on my monitor. When I can no longer stand the shows, I play the games offered on the monitor until I feel my brain turning into excrement. In desperation I begin unpacking,

cleaning, and powering up the ship's sidearms. It is good work and I find more meaning in it than in my mission to the Talman Kovah.

There are both humans and Dracs among the Drac diplomatic mission and among the crew. All of them are young, humans and Dracs both. Too young to have fought on Amadeen before the quarantine, too young to carry the scars of the USE-Dracon War. They serve the joint quarantine force keeping the fighting on Amadeen out of sight and the blood off the boots and sandals of the politicians. There is one member of the crew who did serve on Amadeen before the quarantine. It is the captain and pilot of the Tora Soam, Aureah Vak. Vak is almost as old as Zenak Abi. It has been thirty years since it fought on Amadeen, but I see its eyes every time I look into a mirror. Too old to fly combat now, the pilot ferries passengers from Draco to the Amadeen orbiter and from the orbiter to Draco. Yet the war Vak fought is still alive to its ghosts. Before first watch every cycle Aureah Vak comes to the armory to clean, oil, and test its sidearm and the small pistol it keeps in a hidden boot holster. Both weapons are human projectile pieces. Vak will not let me touch its weapons although the cleaning and repair of such things is supposed to be my work. As one weapon is disassembled for cleaning and inspection, the other is loaded, cocked and on the workbench close to Aureah Vak's hand. Vak's gaze never leaves the weapon it is cleaning, but I am certain the captain knows exactly where I am and what I am doing. On the captain's fifth visit, it speaks beyond its usual curt greeting. "There is something familiar about you, Yazi Ro. Do you remember meeting me prior to this flight?"

"No, captain," I answer.

"Strange. You are too young, but it is almost as if you were one of my comrades in the Tsien Denvedah as we died on Amadeen." I say nothing as his gaze moves until it stops on me. "Were you in the fight against the pirates around the Aakava System four years ago?" Without waiting for a response, the captain looks back at the cleaning bench and finishes assembling its weapon as it says, "There are stories about members of the quarantine patrol and command smuggling certain humans and Dracs off of Amadeen. The smugglers do not care about the species, as long as the price is paid." Vak loads the weapon, cocks it, and places it next to his small pistol. Reaching over to the small pistol, Avi takes the pressure off the hammer, removes the clip, and ejects the round from the chamber. In a moment the gun is so many pieces undergoing cleaning and inspection. I am certain that the captain knows the truth about me, and there is no purpose to be served in running or killing the captain, supposing that could be done. Still, I say nothing. It is Vak's game and I let it make the moves. "What do you want, Yazi Ro?"

"Want, Captain?" The pilot's eyes glare at me. "You are not stupid, denmavedah." Now I know it knows. "Answer me my question, Ro. More than anything else in the universe, for what does your heart crave?" It matters not if I reveal myself to this one. Vak knows about me. What it does not know is how the endless fire of Amadeen has left me. The

word is strange in my mouth. "Peace. More than anything else my heart craves peace." The captain's aged brow ascends as Vak looks at me with surprise on its face. "Not vengeance? Have you lost no friends? No family? Was there no one you loved?" I stare at the deck as waves of images assault my mind. My parent, so many comrades, the last of the Twelve. And someone -- another one -- I loved. Night patrol near Douglasville on Dorado's southern coast. Lota Min crawling ahead, I following. Japu wanted us to probe the enemy position and search for a weakness. In the dirt, knees and elbows raw. Then it happens. One of us makes a noise or crawls too close to a Front listening post. Perhaps a remote probe. The humans, sometimes they begin firing to keep us awake or on the off chance that someone might be near their positions. Very wasteful of ammunition, but this time they catch us. The sky fills with blinding white fire crossed with the bright green streaks of human tracers, the deafening crunch of sonic warheads. Dazed, half blinded by the flares, I see Min crawling into a crater using only its arms. A roar fills my hearing as I see the destruction of a beam disrupter racing toward me. A huge hand comes from above and flattens me into the dirt. In panic I crawl toward the crater, the beam disrupter sizzling the air above the back of my neck. At the lip of the crater a sonic warhead exploding drives my mind into darkness. There are worlds to move before I can open my eyes. Dirt from my face, something heavy across my legs. I can feel something sharp digging into my back. My arms and hands are numb but I manage to clear the dirt from my eyes. My helmet is gone. I open my eyes and see the stars looking back at me. There are no flares, no firing, nothing but a slight breeze from the distant shore and the rasp of Min's breaths. There is the twisted barrel of a weapon blotting out some of the stars, its cooling vanes crumpled like so much foil. I turn my head and see that its tracked undercarriage shares the crater with us. I turn to look at the weight on my legs. Lota Min's body is lying across me. Min's head is back, its eyes closed. I struggle until I get my arms to push me up until I am sitting. I whisper Min's name but I hear nothing but the breaths, raw and rapid. I gently hold Min's head as I move my legs from beneath it. As I move I pray to the universe to keep Min from crying out. The universe answers and Min seems to take no notice of the movement. My legs free, I lower its head to the ground, crawl to the side of the crater, and crouch to see the surrounding terrain. Slowly I move my gaze around, peering into shadows, watching for lights, movement, differences in the night's weave. I move to the other side of the artillery piece and look again. "Ro." Min's voice is weak, my name on its lips a blade into my heart. "Ro?" I look around once more then crawl to Min's side. "Be still. We are not safe." I look over Min's body. Below its waist, centered on its groin, there is a hole as large as my head. It is as though a great hand had scooped out Min's reproductive organs and the tops of its thighs. The light from the stars reflects from the surface of the blood pooling there. There are tears on my face as I raise a hand and stupidly hold it in the air, not knowing what to do. "Yazi Ro. I have so much pain. Am I hurt badly?"

"Oh, Min."

"The truth." Min

grabs my arm and squeezes it gently. "The truth, Ro." Badly? My eyes fog with the tears. This one time the entities who dispense fairness and injustice must soften and change this absurd result. But what did that human say about the negotiations: If nothing changes, nothing changes. "You are hurt, Min. You --" I cannot say it. I have said the words so many times to strangers, comrades, friends, lovers, even to a few humans. Min whispers, "I am dying?"

"Yes."

"Where is happy paste

when you need it?" it gasps. I place my hand over Min's as I see its other hand steal to the Talman hanging from its neck. "Not now," Min pleads. "There are too many things unsaid, undone. Not now." All I can do is hold its hand, perhaps say one of the unsaid. "You take my love and my heart with you, Min."

"Do not leave me, Ro." Before I can answer,

there is a noise. Nothing subtle, no slight change on the wind this. It is a note followed by another, the music soft, haunting. The notes move across the battlefield, into the shadows and depressions, each sound drenched in tears and blood. I am immersed in sadness, yet I push it aside to let my fear stretch its wings. It is, after all, a human playing the sad wooden pipe. Min opens its mouth to ask about the sound, but I touch my finger to its lips and whisper, "Silence. The humans are very close." The song on the pipe is beautiful in its suffering. The musician's tears caress each note as it steals out over the broken land. The human has lost someone and I find myself aching for the creature's pain. The notes grow louder and Min grasps my harness at the throat and pulls me down until its lips are close to my ear. "You have my love. Ro." Min brushes my ear with its lips. "Go now. Hide." Min releases my harness, I brush its face with my lips, and begin to crawl toward the savaged artillery piece, picking up my helmet as I move. Perhaps the musician, absorbed in the sad song, will pass us by. Beneath the carriage of the destroyed weapon I put on my helmet, adjust the sensor, and watch the rim of the crater. Soon a head appears, the body beneath it propelling it tangent to the crater. Closer and in my sensor I see the human from the waist up. It is a male in full combat armor. The armor is scarred and painted black with streaks, dots, and broken lines in orange, brown, and turquoise. Around the man's neck is a small beaded bag with a primitive design of a bird on it. The human has a Drac energy knife slung on his back. Both of his hands play the wooden pipe into which he blows. There is a leather cord leading from the pipe to his neck. If I only had a weapon, I whisper to the universe. My weapon and Min's, though, are both somewhere outside the crater, damaged probably beyond all repair. I hold my breath hoping that Min will stay quiet. Perhaps the human's helmet sensor does not work, or his sensor is not energized, or in his grief he is not paying attention to it. He might pass us by. The sad song suddenly stops. More quickly than I can

see, the human drops the pipe, allowing it to dangle by its cord, and the energy knife swings down and seems to leap into the human's hands. He sees Min. I hold my breath and my skin tingles as I look around me for a weapon. I cry in frustration for I cannot find even a rock. A shielded light illuminates Min's shattered form. I glimpse between the carrier slides of the carriage and see the human holding a thinlite. The human slings the knife and speaks, his words not English. He speaks to Min, then raises his hands and speaks to the stars. Finished with the stars, he reaches down, takes his musical instrument, and plays a strange tune as he does a bizarre little dance. My fear eases slightly as I decide that the man is some sort of witch or healer trying to help my comrade and lover. Just as I allow myself a breath, however, the song and dance stop, the knife is in the human's hands, and he uses it to sever Min's right foot from its ankle. Min screams and the human sings once more at the stars. The song continues as he moves the razor thin beam through Min's left ankle. Then Min's wrists, then fist-sized pieces of leg and arm until Min is raving from the pain. Soon though Min falls unconscious, but the human does not stop cutting until there is nothing left but a pool of bloody lumps at the bottom of the crater. Done with his task, the human leaves, and the flute once more sends its haunting notes over the battlefield. I stumble from my hiding place, my eyes red from rage. To Min I swear that the humans I kill from now on I will render into liquid one pain racked cell at a time. Revenge. Blood-soaked, shattering, screaming vengeance. Yes, I have served at the feet of that deity. I tortured to death enough humans to crew my nightmares for eternity. "Captain," I say to Aureah, "I am choked with revenge. It eats at me until there is nothing. You ask me, though, what I want most. More than anything else, captain, I want an end to the horror. I want to see the last of it. I want peace. It has to be. It has to be." I feel tears on my cheeks and I am confused at their appearance. Vak's glance drops as it assembles its weapon, loads it, and places it in its holster. The captain stands, glances at me and says, "Yazi Ro, I have inspected the weapons bay and I have seen the weapons you cleaned and repaired. Would you consider remaining a member of this crew? You could make a home here. It wouldn't be much of a home, but if you had better you wouldn't be here." There is a strange ache in my chest. In the locker next to my cot there is Zenak Abi's package to the Jetai Diea of the Talman Kovah. What obligates me to deliver it? My word? The illusion of peace? I can toss the package into the waste, forget about it, and become a space traveler. With credentials from serving on the Tora Soam, I could finish the cruise and then sign on with another ship traveling to mysterious, exotic worlds. The war will become an unpleasant remembrance. And what is Zenak Abi's work but another illusion? If the greatest scientists who study and plan the paths of circumstance cannot find how to accomplish peace on Amadeen, how could a renegade, traitorous, pistol packing Jetah master with no equipment find the answer? One more spittle dream in a universe of illusion. "Consider it, Ro," says the captain as it turns and leaves the compartment. Before I can answer or give my thanks, it is gone. I feel myself uttering a very human sounding sigh. There is nothing to consider. Perhaps once I make my delivery to the Jetai Diea I can

consider a berth on a ship and a new life. Until then I am still owned by Amadeen. And it was, after all, my word.

## CHAPTER 8

The customs officials in Sendievu examine my badge coding and pick through my belongings, eventually passing me through after Binas Pahvi passes one of the officials a small package. I no longer care how far the corruption extends. Once through, I ask directions, shoulder my bag, and begin walking the streets of Sendievu, this fabled city of silver and glass. The Talman Kovah is a squat structure of tans, browns, and pale blues with a huge white dome rising from its center. Its entrance is busy with Dracs, humans, and members of other species entering and leaving, each individual seemingly fixed on his, her, or its self importance. I stand, watching from a beautiful park that extends toward the south down a gentle slope to a wide river lined with flowering trees. Along other streets are establishments selling food, clothing, gifts, furniture, books, appliances, toys, and land. Many of the establishments are either human or offering human goods. There are posters showing humans and Dracs embracing in friendship and at least one theater showing Drac translations of human plays. Peace, plenty, prosperity, and fellowship purchased by cutting Amadeen off from the universe. I cannot get out of my mind how much destruction I could cause on this street had I my energy knife. I lean against a smooth-barked tree, lavender fronds spreading out over my head, shading me from Draco's Sun. There is a human in the park. He is very dark, very old, and very crippled, his head hair long and gray. He sits in his wheeled chair staring at the kovah. Thrust into a holder welded to the metal chair is a sign that carries a single word: Remember. Three Drac children run by the human, laughing, taunting him, calling him names. The human does not react. The children have been there before. How long has the human been sitting there? Since the quarantine? Is he all that is left of a larger demonstration three decades ago? Is he just another drool, his brain crisped on happy paste? I do not know why he angers me. I look away and see two lovers walking a path among the blue flowering trees and furry green thickets, the sticky secretions on the splays glittering in the sunlight like so many faceted gems. There is a strangely beautiful scent on the breeze. Two Dracs walk from the kovah's entrance, cross the street into the park, and sit on the edge of a fountain. They laugh at something, take things from a pouch, and begin eating. One glances over its shoulder at the human, turns back, and again they laugh. The human does nothing but stare at the entrance to the kovah. My gaze falls to the wrapped package in my hands, Zenak Abi's claim to being a functioning Jetah master. It is a waste, a mist chasing a shadow. In a moment I will be thrown out of the kovah, Zenak Abi's decades of pointless work will be in a rubbish bin, the blood will continue to flow on Amadeen, and the nameless human sitting in his wheeled chair will still be staring at the Talman Kovah, waiting for the mist to catch the shadow. No, I think, I am not angry at the human. I am angry at what makes his existence inevitable. I push myself away from the tree and aim my steps at the Kovah.



In the reception kiosk is Hidik Ibisoh, a clerk receptionist wearing the robes of a student. The cloth of the robe shimmers and falls like cloudy water. The hall surrounding the kiosk is tall, very wide, made of polished goldstone, and illuminated by skylights. Although the sounds ought to echo from every side, the hall is curiously quiet, even the sounds of my footsteps muted. The clerk examines me and my clothes once more, then returns its gaze to Zenak Abi's package. With one hand entering items into its data absorption mechanism, Ibisoh touches the package with the tips of two fingers as though the bundle had been dipped in excrement. "To what does the work of this unknown Jetah master apply?" asks Ibisoh without looking at me. I put aside several comments and answer. "War."

"War, indeed." The clerk's eyebrows rise as it glances at me. "What is it that you do, Yazi Ro?" it asks, condescension dripping from every syllable. "Someday very soon I would like to show you."

"Indeed," the clerk says as it glances at me with a frown. In a moment the wall of arrogance repairs itself. "And the reason the Jetai Diea might possibly find this work on war of interest?" I want to take that clerk's superior demeanor and grind it off with the treads of an Amadeen Front tank. I look away, wrestle my wrath down to mere hostility, and return my gaze to Ibisoh. "I imagine the only interest any of you will find in Zenak Abi's work is in how much energy the recycled remains of this pack of papers possesses. Give me a receipt to show I delivered it." I see a touch of fear in the clerk's eyes rapidly replaced by contempt. Ibisoh fingers some panel that flashes different colored plates and produces a small sheet of transparent film. Picking up the film, the clerk hands it to me. I look at it and there is an almost invisible dot in its center. "What is this?"

"Your receipt." That smug look appears again. "You can read it with any modern computer or compatible reader." I point to the inkstone and scribe on Ibisoh's desk. "Write me something on a piece of paper. The one who must read this has no modern computers or compatible readers." The clerk looks at the scribe and laughs out loud. "Yazi Ro, honored visitor to this hall, this stone and scribe are antiques. I have them here only for decoration." I no longer attempt to keep the impatience from my voice. "Then write with something else, Hidik Ibisoh, if handwriting is numbered among your vast array of skills."

"Is there a problem?" asks a gentle voice from behind me. I turn and see a tall Drac in a dark blue robe edged with silver. On one of its fingers it wears a ring after the fashion of the humans. The Drac's expression is one of detachment yet helpfulness. Behind it are four more Dracs, two of them carrying a small gray case each, the remaining two carrying weapons. Hidik Ibisoh jumps to its feet, snaps out an abrupt bow, and

says, "My many apologies, Ovjetah. Honored as I am to see you, this . . . person requires a handwritten receipt and I have nothing here with which to produce such a document." Ovjetah. There is only one creature in the universe allowed to carry that title: master of masters, presiding Jetah of the Jetai Diea, First Jetah of the Talman Kovah. One of its predecessors, Tora Soam, helped seal the fate of Amadeen thirty years ago. The two Dracs with the weapons concentrate their attention on me. The Ovjetah reaches out a hand and one of its assistants places a modern scribe into it. The powerful Drac in the dark blue robe hands the writing instrument to Hidik Ibisoh, who takes it with trembling fingers. "Do you need paper, as well?"

"Yes, Ovjetah. I would appreciate some paper. My thanks." Ibisoh looks close to death from embarrassment. One of the Ovjetah's assistants hands the clerk a pad of paper and informs Ibisoh that it may keep both the paper and the scribe. Ibisoh bows again, sits, and begins writing out my receipt, its face darker still from embarrassment. The Ovjetah faces me, bows slightly, and says, "I am Jeriba Shigan. As my Uncle Willy would say, welcome to my store." I frown at the word "uncle," the human name for a parent's brother. Still, I bow in response to the greeting. "Yazi Ro, Ovjetah."

"The greeting comes hard to you, Yazi Ro." I stand and nod to Shigan. "Bowling is not the custom on Amadeen." It is as though an electric current passes through the beings at Hidik Ibisoh's kiosk. The two guards advance their weapons in my direction, and although they are not aimed directly at me, it would take only a slight degree of movement for me to split their sights. Jeriba Shigan shifts its gaze to the clerk and Hidik Ibisoh lifts Zenak's package. "Yazi Ro came to present the work of Jetah Zenak Abi to the Jetai Diea. Its work concerns war," Ibisoh concludes lamely. The Ovjetah studies me a moment longer, steps toward the kiosk, and holds out its hand. The clerk places the package in it, and Shigan turns the package, looking at it. "Zenak Abi is alive?"

"When I left Amadeen, Abi lived. The Jetah's current state of health I do not know. It is not a certain thing on Amadeen."

"Amadeen's uncertainty is the universe's, Yazi Ro." Jeriba Shigan opens the package and fingers through a deck of narrow papers, each sheet crowded with tiny rows of handwriting. "Hand slips," says the Ovjetah. "I haven't seen these since I was a child in my uncle's cave No electricity." Looking up at me, Shigan asks, "Where are you staying?" "I am not staying. My obligations are limited to delivering that pile of papers and seeing that a copy of the Koda Nusinda gets back to Zenak Abi." This time the Ovjetah's brows climb in surprise. "I wasn't aware that the existence of the Nusinda was common knowledge, nor that commerce between Amadeen and the rest of the galaxy was quite that free."

"Zenak Abi knows about the new book, and so do I. As for anyone else, I cannot say. As for communications with Amadeen, money speaks."  
"The eagle squawks and money talks," says the Ovjetah. It smiles as it leafs through the handslips. "My Uncle Willy, again." Handing the papers to an assistant, Jeriba Shigan says, "Yazi Ro, despite your protests, you will be staying for a few days. If for no other reason, it will be to obtain the copy of the Koda Nusinda for your Jetah. As of this moment there are no print copies available." I turn from Shigan, take the scribe from Hidik Ibisoh and write on a piece of paper from my own pocket. "I am writing the name of an officer of the Tora Soam on this paper; Binas Pahvi. The ship is in for the next few days. Send the copy to Amadeen in this person's care and it will get to Zenak Abi." I hand the paper to Jeriba Shigan. "If you give him enough money."  
"Money?"

"There is a considerable amount of corruption involved in keeping the quarantine, Ovjetah. Did that not appear in the diagrams when the Talman Kovah sealed our ancestors and the humans into the hell of Amadeen?" Jeriba Shigan's gaze fixes itself to my eyes. "You will remain on planet at least until this work has been evaluated, Yazi Ro. Inform Hidik Ibisoh of your whereabouts in case you are needed. That is my order." Jeriba Shigan turns abruptly and marches into one of the several corridors that open onto the hall. I look at the clerk. "Can the Ovjetah order that?"

"Yazi Ro, Yazi Ro," says Ibisoh, shaking its head. "Jeriba Shigan is the Ovjetah of the Talman Kovah. If it decides to eat you, it is the function of the kovah, the deia, and the people of this planet to see that you appear properly cooked, garnished, and displayed on a platter at the appropriate repast." Finished tittering at its own joke, Ibisoh says, "Understand that we can find you if we need to." I turn and leave the kovah, somehow grateful that the human with his "remember" sign is still there. I cross the street into the park and stop when I am within a pace of the human. In English I say to him, "I have just dropped off one fool's plan for peace on Amadeen. While they chew on it they want me to stay in this city. You look like someone who can tell me where someone on a fool's errand might find a bed for the night." The human stares at me for a moment, then bursts into laughter. He laughs as though for the first time in many years. "You hit that nail on the head, friend." He places his hands on the turning wheels and twists the chair until it faces west. "C'mon. I know just the place."

The place is on the outskirts of Sendievu on the banks of a waste canal servicing a number of industrial plants. The traffic from the city's spaceport and from its two airports scream overhead regularly. The shelters on the banks of the canal are small, decaying, and in many cases thrown together from pieces of discarded rubbish. It is Amadeen without the fighting. In this section of the city are a few beggars, a number of humans, and many Drac vemadah, those who would not fight. The

vemadah are not all old, for their children carry on the exile. The old human's name is Matope. Once a professional soldier and sergeant in the USE Force Assault Infantry, he lost his legs on Amadeen. He thinks it curious that the humans treat their wounded veterans the same as the Dracs treat their traitors. He allows me a corner of the room he shares with a childless Drac named Koboc. There are cushions there and a clean blanket. Koboc was a seventh officer in the Tsien Denvedah, by reputation the elite shock troops of the Drac military. Koboc is blind and wears its red uniform jacket. Before the war, Koboc studied in the Talman Kovah to become a Jetah master. Its studies not completed, Koboc was offered the military and chose to serve rather than carry the brand of the vemadah. In time Koboc served with the Tsien Denvedah on Amadeen. It was shortly after earning the rank of seventh officer it determined that the war did not serve talma and resigned to the vemadah. It was while cast into the Madah on Draco that an angry citizen attacked Koboc, throwing acid into its eyes. Koboc recites poetry outside theaters in the hopes of contributions. Zenak Abi is one of Koboc's heroes. I have my crew pay from the ship and I contribute by purchasing some food. We talk that night about Amadeen, the dead, the maimed, and the hopes of a few of those who still live. Koboc asks me who taught me my English. I tell them about my parent, about its treasure of three books, all of them in English. To read them, as a child my parent learned English from Front prisoners. When Koboc and Matope sleep and visit their individual shadow hells, I look out of the window toward the Talman Kovah. I cannot see it, but the spires and domes of Sendievu form a glittering backdrop to the ponderous dark industrial buildings near the canal. Millions of beings out there, working, playing, learning, eating, loving and moving on with their lives free from thoughts of Amadeen or the dust left over from an old war. When I sleep that night I dream of Douglasville and the human with the flute.

## CHAPTER 9

Late in the morning I open my eyes and see that Koboc and Matope are gone. The Drac tapping its way to the theater district, the human at his vigil in front of the Talman Kovah. I eat some of the grain cakes from the night before, gather up my things, and leave the canal district, uncertain about where to go. My papers from the Tora Soam can get me a berth on another ship, but not if there is some kind of security alert against me. There is a part of me that feels guilty about not carrying Abi's copy of the Koda Nusinda back to Amadeen, but returning to the nightmare seems more like insanity with each passing day. I walk the streets of the city, see the people, look at the homes and businesses. At one moment I want to become a part of this world at peace. At the next I want to hurt them, destroy them, for their lack of pain. Near noon I am in the park across from the Talman Kovah. Again Matope is in his chair, his "remember" sign above his head. I want to tell him that he is just one more fool in an army of fools, but I cannot even convince myself of that. I remember the captain of the Tora Soam asking me what I wanted. "More than anything else in the universe, for what does your heart crave?" I told Aureah Vak "peace." I ask myself if

it is truly peace that I want. Is it peace, or as the Talman story showed, something else. I reach up and work the catch of my Talman, dropping the tiny golden book into my palm. With the paging pin I look at the titles then turn to the Koda Itheda, Aydan and the War of Ages, the dialog with Niagat.

"Aydan," spoke Niagat, "I would serve Heraak; I would see an end to war; I would be one of your warmasters."

"Would you kill to achieve this, Niagat?"

"I would kill."

"Would you kill Heraak to achieve this?"

"Kill Heraak, my master?" Niagat paused and considered the question.

"If I cannot have both, I would see Heraak dead to see an end to war."

"That is not what I asked."

"And, Aydan, I would do the killing."

"And now, Niagat, would you die to achieve this?"

"I would risk death as does any warrior."

"Again, Niagat, that is not my question. If an end to war can only be purchased at the certain cost of your own life, would you die by your own hand to achieve peace?" Niagat studied upon the thing that had been asked. "I am willing to take the gamble of battle. In this gamble there is the chance of seeing my goal. But my certain death, and by my own hand --- there would be no chance of seeing my goal. No, I would not take my own life for this. That would be foolish. Have I passed your test?"

"You have failed, Niagat. Your goal is not peace; your goal is to live in peace. Return when your goal is peace alone and you hold a willing knife at your own throat to achieve it. That is the price of a warmaster's blade."

I look up from the tiny book and see Matope sitting beneath his sign, his unblinking gaze on the entrance to the Talman Kovah. Aydan, the ancient Jetah master who made war into a science, would have granted Matope a warmaster's blade. Koboc would rate a blade, as well. But are you worthy, Yazi Ro? You who want to shake the dust of Amadeen from your feet? You who dream of painted houses, full food bowls, and children who sleep without nightmares? You who would take a ship to strange worlds and live a life of adventure, joy, and profit? Are you worthy, Yazi Ro? What do you want? Zenak Abi looked into my mind and saw me delivering its work to the Jetai Diea and saw me returning to

Amadeen, its copy of the Koda Nusinda in hand. Somehow I feel that all of the questions I have are already answered. "I have the sharp edge at my throat, Aydan," I whisper as I walk toward the entrance to the kovah. "Where is my blade?"

## CHAPTER 10

As I enter the kovah, the hall is a nest of harried students, administrative and security personnel, as well as Jetah masters rushing this way and that, some shouting, some not, all with worried faces. One of the masters stops in mid-stress, stares at me for a moment, and asks, "Apologies, stranger. Are you called Yazi Ro?" I manage to get out a single nod and the Jetah grabs my arm and pulls me toward a hall. "This way! This way! The Ovjetah has been waiting!" I pull my arm free but continue to follow. "Your name?" I ask. "Vidoz Ru," says the Jetah. "Please hurry." We reach the end of the hall and I follow the Jetah into a car where we continue to stand as the doors close and the vehicle accelerates and shoots deep beneath the street level of the city. Jetah Ru looks at me and demands, "Where have you been? The locator has been out since before midnight."

"I stayed with friends. The clerk who was in the kiosk yesterday assured me that no one would have any trouble finding me."

"I am certain, Yazi Ro, that you were not registered by your host." I shrugged knowing as I did so that I had picked up the habit from the humans I had known. I do not regret it. Often a shrug is all the answer there is. "I did not know that it is a requirement, Jetah Ru, and I doubt that anyone even registers themselves, much less an overnight guest, in the canal district." The Jetah looks at me in horror as it silently mouths the words: "Canal district!" With less silence it continues. "Thieves, killers, traitors, humans, addicts twisted on happy paste -- you could have been killed!" Before I can point out my obvious health, the car slows, stops, and the doors open revealing the gleaming white interior of a security corridor. Four armed guards watch as we stand in a blue light before the doors. Ru states its name and I follow with my name. "There is a knife in this one's boot, Jetah."

"And your point is?" prompts Vidoz Ru impatiently. The light dims and the guard closest to the entrance gestures with its weapon toward the doors. As we approach the doors, they slide open allowing me to see blue robed student technicians serving banks of computer instruments beneath ranks of towering screens projecting the mysterious scribbles, numbers, and diagrams dear to Talman masters. As we enter it I see that the chamber is huge and hewn out of the bedrock of the planet itself. In the center of the activity is a raised dais surrounded by touch panels. Seated there is Ovjetah Jeriba Shigan, its face clouded with concern. Vidoz Ru stands before the Ovjetah and mumbles something to it. Shigan stands and looks around the Jetah at

me. Its look carries both relief and regret. "Ro, come. There is not much time." Jeriba Shigan nods its thanks to Vidoz Ru, leaves the dais, and walks rapidly toward a door, automatically followed by its two assistants and two guards. I follow and as I do so I notice everyone in the chamber looking at me. I pause long enough to return the stares. Several of them look away in embarrassment. Most do not. Somehow I feel my ghosts being stirred. I turn, see one of Shigan's assistants motioning at me, and follow the Ovjetah's party through the door.

The Ovjetah's personal office is stark, unadorned, reminding me more of Zenak Abi's cave than the setting for such a powerful being. There is a work table, a computer terminal, and a few chairs. The uncolored bedrock of Draco's Irrveh continent forms the chamber's walls. Jeriba Shigan seats itself and looks at me, its hands clasped together. In its eyes is either fatigue or a terrible sadness. "We have been processing Zenak Abi's work all night. Most of today we have been performing the verifications, collating the peripheral effects and assessing the possible effect limits." I feel my brow climbing. "Ovjetah, is it important to what you wish to accomplish with me that I understand you?" Jeriba Shigan gestures with its hand, dismissing all. "The material you brought to us allows us to see a possible talma to peace on Amadeen." The Ovjetah's assistants and guards remain standing, hence I do the same. Even so, there is a question gnawing at me. "A possible course to peace was something Zenak Abi saw from its cave on Mt. Atahd." Shigan leans back in its chair and places its hands upon the desk. "We cannot do better here despite our facilities and the wisdom of the Jetah Diea. It is because of the nature of the problem." Shigan thinks for a moment and looks up into my eyes. "Yazi Ro, there are countless paths from the present to any desired future. To find the path or paths that will actually result in the changes necessary to produce the desired result depend on many things: logical possibility, practicality, and the decisions of the goal choosing entities involved. Understand that paths involving logical possibility can be proven as effective or not."

"A path is either possible or it is not," I respond.

"Yes." Shigan crosses its legs after the manner of a human. "Paths involving practicality -- the current state of applied knowledge -- can also be proven as effective or not for any given point in time." The Ovjetah raises its eyebrows toward me. "Either something is technologically possible," I say, "or it is not." Shigan nods and looks at one of his assistants. "Muta, Yazi Ro exhibits a better understanding of the subject than some students we have been teaching." "Most discouraging," responds the assistant. Shigan shifts its gaze to me and motions toward one of the chairs, indicating that I should be seated. After I lower myself into the chair, somewhat surprised to find that it is constructed to human proportions, the Ovjetah continues. "The third consideration is paths involving desires, obsessions, and choices -- attempting to predict what certain beings will or will not do. Such questions trade in probabilities rather than certitude. In the aggregate, behavior can be predicted with a high degree of accuracy. The

accuracy decreases as there is an increase in the importance of individuals whose decisions influence or control the decisions of masses."

"The Amadeen problem," I conclude. The Ovjetah nods once and says, "We cannot prove that certain paths are closed, given our present understanding of the facts. We cannot, however, prove any of them effective. All we can do is take the path exhibiting the highest probability of effectiveness and try it." The Ovjetah smiles slightly as its eyes focus elsewhere for a moment. "Give it our best shot." Shigan again fixes me with its gaze. "I ask that you go on a mission for the Jetah Diea. I ask that you try this path."

"A mission? Me?"

"The most probable trunk path, the one with the greatest number of possibly effective branch paths, involves you, Yazi Ro, taking a package to a human named Willis E. Davidge. He resides on an independent colony world in the Fyrine system."

"I deliver the package and then?" I prompt.

"And then we see what happens." Shigan stares at me, waiting for my answer. "I hold my hands out, "That is all?" Shigan shrugs just like a human. "That is your only obligation, but no, that is not all. However, too much information from me may corrupt the path. Your source of further information will be Mr. Davidge and others."

"I deliver this package and I am free to go wherever I choose."

"Yes." I lean forward and hold out a hand toward the Ovjetah. "After making the delivery I won't be stranded there or forced to do anything else?" Shigan clasps its hands over its belly. It takes a deep breath and says, "You will have an account that will compensate you for your services, and will take you wherever you may want to go if you leave Friendship. The only things you will do will be done by your own choice." The Ovjetah smiles and looks toward the assistant called Muta. "Perhaps this kid is sharper than a pound of wet leather." After completing this bizarre observation, Jeriba Shigan stands and steps away from its desk. "Yazi Ro, in fairness I will tell you that Zenak Abi's work includes the results of the mind fusion Abi did on you. The reason you are here is because you are the proper piece of an enormously complex puzzle. It is likely that there are pieces similar to yourself on Amadeen, but you are the only one Zenak Abi found. This is why Abi sent you to Draco and to the Jetai Diea." I stare at Jeriba Shigan as I reconsider my commitment to peace, the edge of Aydan's blade scratching at my throat. It is as though I am being moved through events by an unseen hand. I do not know what Abi saw when it took my mind, but it is as though I am a lock to which everyone but me possesses a key. "Am I truly free, Ovjetah? Am I free to make choices or have these choices already been made?" Jeriba Shigan's gaze falls to the floor, then climbs slowly until it looks into



my eyes. "Your question has occupied Talman masters for thousands of years. My own teacher had a way of cutting through the layers of convoluted philosophical discourse -- what he called mental meat beating -- to get to the core of a matter. To your question he might say that, just for spite, you can choose to prove everyone who thinks they know how you are going to choose wrong by doing the exact opposite." Shigan frowned a moment and added, "Actually, he'd probably tell you not to worry about it."

"He?" I ask. The Ovjetah nods. "My Uncle Willy. That is to whom you are to deliver the package: Willis E. Davidge."

"A human."

"More so than most." The Ovjetah frowns for a moment, rubs its chin, and looks at me. "If you accept this mission, Yazi Ro, I should warn you: he really hates being called Uncle Willy." Before I make the choice, I already know that I will go. My fear, though, is to spend my life for nothing. To achieve peace I think I could take Aydan's test and feel complete as the blade drops from my hand. But what if my efforts -- my life and death -- amount to nothing more than Matope's pointless demonstration outside the kovah in the belief that it might somehow contribute to the coming peace. Late that day I tell Jeriba Shigan my fear. It answers: "I have seen Matope every day that I have attended the Kovah, as student, master, Jetah, and Ovjetah for over twenty-five years. Without him and those who used to be with him keeping the problem of Amadeen a festering sore in my side, I do not know how open I would have been to consider the reluctant mission of a rude illegal visitor from Amadeen, and the work of the traitor who sent the visitor to me. Matope has helped keep the problem of Amadeen present in my mind." Before I get in the car that will take me and my package to a planet called Friendship, I stop by the park and tell Matope about the possible path to peace, my mission, and what the Ovjetah told me. The human's eyes grow moist, but he does not leave. "Show me peace, Yazi Ro, and I'll go home." I shake hands with him and get into the car.

## CHAPTER 11

The ship is the Venture, a new commercial freighter owned by JACHE.

An English name on a Drac ship. Although designed to carry freight, there are several passengers, three humans and eleven Dracs. I do not have to work my way on the ship to Fyrine IV. Instead I have an individual compartment lined with endless luxuries and little to do. There is an information terminal in the ship's passenger lounge, and I code for Fyrine IV. The view from space at the planet's closest point in its orbit around Fyrine shows a planet shrouded in an almost permanent cloud cover. With the cloud cover removed, I see ice caps, and in between, land masses separated by gray oceans. The closer aerial view

of the planet shows that there is vegetation, brownish green forests, vast plains covered with reddish blue plants, everything constantly whipped by the planet's ceaseless winds. At the planet's most distant point from the sun, the entire world is covered in ice and snow. I ask and the planet Friendship is in the midst of its winter. I had seen snow before, in the northern Dorado when the Mavedah attempted to invade the continent from an unexpected direction. We lost many when the force was trapped by an unexpected storm. Fyrine IV's winter covers the planet and lasts throughout most of its year, which is almost two standard years long. Both JACHE and Earth IMPEX attempted to seed the planet and make it productive, but the effort was abandoned both times because of the expense and because of the war. Despite its hostile environment, after the war it was settled by both Dracs and humans. The article ends with population, government, and economic notes. A little under three million in population, every species I ever heard of and several I do not know exist live there. There is no coercive governmental body, such things as protection, disputes, criminal reparations, and insurance handled by private commercial and voluntary organizations. For more information I am directed, among other places, to the article on Willis E. Davidge. The article on the Ovjetah's Uncle Willy only states that he is a former USEF fighter pilot, he wrote the first English translation of The Talman, and that he currently resides on Friendship.

In the passenger lounge is a wide observation port through which the ship's passage between the stars can be seen, their crisp brightness dulled slightly from the drive distortion. Few passengers seem to use the facility, and I kill the main illumination in the lounge and stand before the port, my reflection dim and ghostly red from the safety guide beacons mounted near the deck. Beyond the red ghost is the universe. As the parade of stars marches steadily by, deeply hidden thoughts steal into my awareness. Were the woman and her Drac baby placed in my path to move me onto a particular path headed toward a certain goal? Am I free to change my direction, or does the path anticipate my question and my illusion of freedom. Was my meeting with this Davidge forged along with the creation of the universe. On its face it seems improbable. But I am far past the face of things. My guts tell me that something out there has already made my choices for me. An image of Pina climbs in front of my eyes and is soon joined by Min and the Front killer with the flute outside Douglasville. My parent. As Yazi Avo's image fills my sight, it blurs from my tears. A war between grief and rage fills my feelings and I find myself sobbing out loud. The compartment suddenly becomes very bright. I turn and see a human with his hand on the light panel. The human is smooth headed, very pale, and wearing an expensive suit. "I apologize," he says in excellent Drac. "My name is Michael Hill. I heard what sounded like crying." I turn away, dry my face with my palms, and say "I am Yazi Ro. Memories. Nothing more." A long silence, then the human says, "If you've never been in space before, Ro, staring at the stars from a dark compartment can be quite disturbing. It has a tendency to call out the shadows you least want to see. Have you been out before?"

"Once." I glance at the human and feel myself smiling. "I had no access to an observation port, though." The human walks across the deck until he is next to me, both of us looking through the port. In the bright lights of the lounge our reflections mute the stars. "I find a star field humbling," says Hill. "What are the passions of an individual, a nation, or a single world against all of that? I represent the largest, most powerful industrial power in the quadrant." "Earth IMPEX," I interrupt. Michael Hill nods. "IMPEX has employed entire populations and transformed worlds across the galaxy. Billions of beings owe their fortunes and even their existence to IMPEX, yet I often wonder if there is anything that can be done by an individual, a corporation, or even an entire species, that would be noticeable next to that." Michael Hill nods toward the stars, faces me, and grins. "If you want to hear God laugh, make a plan." He nods at me, turns, and leaves the lounge.

After eating with the other passengers, I sit in my compartment thinking about the universe, war, and stopping a war. Does anything I, the Ovjetah, or this Willis E. Davidge do make any difference in a universe where countless stars are born and die every moment? Yet there is the ghost of that man I killed at Butaan Ji, the father of that dead little girl. He wasn't awed by the infinite reaches of space. The universe was already done for him. The entire cosmos would have been saved had only one life been spared, yet the life was gone and the universe was dead. From my couch my gaze finds the locker in which I placed Jeriba Shigan's package to its teacher on Friendship. A piece to a puzzle, the solution to which might keep the universe alive for some parent. Perhaps for a child. I open the package to the human. It is a manuscript made of paper hastily bound with flash film. Its title is The Koda Nusinda, The Eyes of Joanne Nicole. I start to read and it is the story of a soldier, her command shattered by a superior enemy, taken prisoner, and made vemadah. Blinded in a raid where she saves some Drac children, her darkness is manipulated by Tora Soam until she sees neither as human or Drac and can see how the United States of Earth and the Dracon Chamber are rulebound into the war. I see it before me. The Timans have an instinct which is to manipulate more powerful species into destroying themselves. They led the humans and the Dracs to Amadeen where a war was started that would be impossible to end short of the elimination of both species. Yet this human soldier found how to step outside the rules and end the war by detaching the combatants from the problem of Amadeen, and from the influence of the Timans. The principle is to determine the rules governing a situation and then devise new rules, a talma, that encompass and nullify the old set of rules. I wonder how to step outside the horror of Amadeen's rules and encompass them with a set that would bring peace. Joanne Nicole, with her special sight, could not see a way to peace on Amadeen. What can this Davidge find? Too much of it, though, is burdened by my own sight. Joanne Nicole abandoned her child, yet it was this child who wrote the Nusinda and brought it before the Jetai Diea as the first Ovjetah of Earth's infant Talman Kovah. Joanne Nicole was a very lonely woman, and

I feel as alone. Is it the fate of all soldiers, I wonder, to be lonely? The warbling sound that signals the ship converting to normal speed tears me from my reflections. The signal halts and a voice informs us that the ship's destination is now within visible range. I go to the passenger lounge and look through the observation port at the tiny white disk of the planet Friendship, my head mired in thoughts of freedom, war, and significance.

## CHAPTER 12

As the Venture descends through the atmosphere toward the port of First Colony, I can feel the powerful winter winds buffeting the hull being met by the slightly delayed reactions of the steering jets. Eventually the buffeting ceases and the roar of the landing jets grows for a moment, then the ship is motionless and silent. We are down. I see Michael Hill as we disembark. He is talking to another human and three Dracs on the apron of the underground landing bay. He sees me, nods, and returns to his conversation. I shoulder my bag and look at the underground port. There are three other ships in the brightly illuminated enclosure and spaces for eight others, each space separated by transparent walls. I look around and everything is expensive, new, clean. The ground crew servicing the Venture wears crisp orange uniforms. Another crew wearing green moves lifts into place to unload the ship's cargo containers. I see several species on both crews. The passengers not pausing to talk move toward an open blast door. Next to the door is a Drac in a pale blue suit and robe combination. When I reach the hatch, the tall Drac smiles, bows, and says to me, "Yazi Ro?" I stop. "I am Yazi Ro." The smile grows wider. "I am Undev Orin, retainer to the Jeriba estate. Through this door into the terminal area Jeriba Zammis, child of Shigan, awaits you. I will notify Zammis that you have arrived and guide you there." I nod my thanks. "Where are the customs officials?"

"We have no customs prohibitions or duties on Friendship, hence," Orin holds out its hands apologetically, "no officials." The terminal waiting area is a mix of strange rhythmic music and banks of flowers and potted trees. The open area is filled with comfortable couches, each couch complete with computer, entertainment, communication, and refreshment facilities. Orin leads me toward a private enclosure located behind opaque dividers near the center of the waiting area. Inside the enclosure Jeriba Zammis stands with its back toward us watching a transparent column of opaque red plastic blobs flow and change shapes as they ascend the column through a translucent yellow medium. Zammis is tall and clad in a strange combination of clothes: trousers and soft leather boots after the fashion of the humans, yet an abbreviated Jetah robe for an upper garment. Undev Orin bows and says, "Apologies for interrupting your meditation, Jetah, but Yazi Ro is here."

"Meditation?" Jeriba Shigan's firstborn turns, its brow touched by a momentary confusion. The brow ascends as the confusion terminates.

"You mean this," Zammis says as it gestures toward the column of blobs. "Hypnotism, perhaps, Orin, but not meditation. It's something new from Earth added by the port administration. I may acquire one for the estate. Look into it."

"At the first opportunity," responds Orin as it holds out its hand toward me. Jeriba Zammis's gaze snaps from Undev Orin to my face as it issues an almost imperceptible bow. In return, I do not bow at all, a gesture Zammis ignores as though it expected the attitude. Although partially hidden by its strange attire, I can see that Zammis is a physically powerful individual. "My parent has charged me with bringing you to see Willis Davidge. The Ovjetah neglected to inform me as to the nature of your visit, but it did mention the planet from which you originate." Taking a step toward me, Zammis's face assumes a threatening expression, its voice hushed and charged with menace. "Please understand that everyone on Friendship considers Willis Davidge to be possibly the most valuable being in the universe. If anything should happen to him --- anything --- we would not understand." I reach out my hand and poke Jeriba Zammis in the chest causing it to stagger back a step. "I have carried death in every pocket since I was born, Jeriba Zammis. Threats are not frightening; merely tedious. Still, should you make another such threat, my response will not be quite so measured." Undev Orin, attempting to insert itself between us, says hastily, "Yazi Ro, I believe the Jetah simply wanted to remind you that you are not on Amadeen now." My heart forces the words from my mouth: "I am always on Amadeen." I turn and face the column of red blobs, ease my breathing, and think what I would do if circumstances required me to take a loved one and throw it into company with an insane killer. Slowly I take my bag from my shoulder, remove the copy of the Koda Nusinda, and face the Jetah. "My mission, as you call it, is to deliver this copy to your Uncle Willy. The next move will be his." Jeriba Zammis studies me for a moment, looks at the manuscript, then raises its gaze and asks, "Did my parent warn you about calling Davidge Uncle Willy?"

"Yes." Zammis looks at a time readout above a blank entertainment screen in the corner of the area opposite the column of blobs. "We were supposed to pick up a relative as well, but Falna was not on the ship from Earth."

"Estone Falna," adds Orin with obvious pride. "Graduated jetah do from the Talman Kovah, 'do Timan from the Ri Mou Tavii on Timan, magna cum laude from the University of Nations College of Medicine, deputy of the Jetai Diea. It will someday follow Jeriba Shigan as Ovjetah."

"Possibly," says Zammis as it faced me. "Orin's enthusiasm often obscures its view of reality. If Falna wanted to become Ovjetah, it should have remained at the Talman Kovah. Instead it hops from planet to planet collecting degrees. As Orin mentioned, among Falna's many accomplishments is graduating from the University of

Nations College of Medicine. I suppose we'll have to address Falna as 'doctor' now." Jeriba Zammis frowns and glances toward the passenger concourse. "I can't understand why it wasn't on the ship from Earth." "It didn't say it was going to be on that ship. There is another ship today from Draco," offered Orin. "Perhaps it will be on that."

"Falna is coming from Earth," replied Zammis. "Why would it be on a ship from Draco?"

"The Talman Kovah is there. The Jetai Diea. Its mentor, Jeriba Shigan," pointed out the retainer. "In any event, Falna did say it wasn't certain when it would arrive and it would make its own way out to the estate."

"Nonsense," states Zammis. "If we have to meet every ship from everywhere for eternity, there will be a familiar face here to greet Estone Falna." Zammis nods toward my garments. "Are those the warmest clothes you have?" I frown at the question. "Yes."

"Very well."

Zammis turns to Orin and says in English, "Let's get it in the air, Flash. Do we have enough time to hit Binswanger's, bring Yazi Ro to the estate, and still have Alri Gan make it back to the port to meet the ship from Draco? Should we send another car?"

"I'm sure we have enough time, jetah." Zammis nods. "Excellent. Tell Gan to make for Binswanger's." Turning to me, it says, "You need something warmer."

"I am warm enough." Orin and Zammis both laugh, and after a pause, Orin glances at Zammis. "Binswanger's?" Zammis nods. "Binswanger's." Orin bows and leads us out of the waiting area to a set of thermal doors made of glass. Outside the doors is a brilliantly illuminated tunnel, different kinds of vehicles passing by the doors. Innocent looking clouds of ice dust hang in the air as they move by the glass. A sleek, gleaming red vehicle is parked in the tunnel, waiting, and inside the doors another retainer, Alri Gan, waits. Gan wears a hooded coat with two additional coats draped over its arm. Orin takes a coat, helps Zammis on with it, then puts on its own coat. They are thick, covered in some kind of leather with hoods and gloves attached. I think that I would suffocate from the heat in one of those, then Gan signals the doors to open. Before I take a step, I am stunned by the cold. My breath steams and I feel the surface of my exposed skin burning. The areas of my body that are covered feel as though they are being pierced with knives of ice. Gan hurries us into the vehicle, and I sit in the warmth, my eyes tightly shut, allowing the soft upholstery to cuddle me as I hug myself. I hear the doors close and the whine of the engine, then feel a gentle pressure as the vehicle accelerates and grows even warmer. I risk opening my eyes and see that Gan and Orin are seated in

front and I am in the rear with Zammis seated on my right. I look through the window next to me and we are out of the tunnel flying far above the frozen, wind punished cityscape of First Colony. There are buildings the tops of which poke through the otherwise unbroken blanket of snow and ice. A shudder rattles my body and I turn to see Jeriba Zammis examining me. "Binswanger's?" it asks. I nod in defeat. "Binswanger's," I answer.

Alri Gan lands the craft in a tunnel at the base of a huge structure that looks like an enormous glittering ball sitting on the ice. In one last blast of cold, we leave the craft and enter the place where we are met by the owner, a thin, balding human named Abraham J. Binswanger, who escorts us and waits upon us personally. Binswanger's is a many leveled wonderland of riches, each level connected to the others through a complicated web of moving walks and sliding stairs. To me it seems like the land of the Irrvedan seemed to Uhe and the starving ancient Mavedah, like the Promised Land must seem to the humans. Coats, hats, boots, shirts, sleeping clothes, undergarments, child clothes, baby clothes -- all of it new. Scents, jewels, furniture, pictures, machines for transportation, entertainment, work, and business, tools, farming implements and supplies, flowers, equipment and uniforms for sports, and towers and towers of books, none of them ever having been opened. I touch the books and ache to fill my mind with the contents of them all. Before entering Binswanger's establishment I never saw a new book. Here I think I feel something of what the ancients must have felt when they discovered the universe. There are copies of the English translation of *The Talman*. I turn a copy over and on the back is a picture of the human, Willis E. Davidge. His hair is dark turning to gray, great streaks of gray in his beard. In the picture his mouth is open in laughter. Next to those books are maps and brochures advertising tours of the cave where, during the war, USEF fighter pilot Willis E. Davidge and Drac fighter pilot Jeriba Shigan made their home and Shigan's child Zammis was delivered by the human. I point at the brochure and turn to Jeriba Zammis. "Is this Zammis your nameparent?" Zammis looks at the brochure and grimaces. "It's terrible how they've commercialized the area. Yes, this was my nameparent." It looks at me, eyebrows raised in resignation. "That's why Uncle found another cave far from here, and why we moved the Jeriba estate closer to it." "Another cave? The human still lives in a cave?" Zammis smiles and nods as its eyes focus on treasured memory. "Yes," it answers. "The human still lives in a cave." I look back at the leaflet and see that part of the tour includes the original grave site of Jeriba Shigan. This fighter pilot, then, was the nameparent of the Ovjetah of the Talman Kovah. "We have all of these on reader buttons, as well," offers Abraham Binswanger. I look at him, confused. Undev Orin reaches into a pocket and withdraws a small flat plastic box. Orin opens it and inside are several multicolored discs, each one the size of a fingertip, as well as a player mounted with a screen. "You can get a reader and quite a few buttons for what a book costs," offers Jeriba Zammis's retainer. "I want the book," I answer. Jeriba Zammis faces Abraham Binswanger and says, "He wants the book." While Undev Orin arranges for the purchase of the

book, Zammis, Binswanger and I move on to the department for clothes. In the end I am clad in completely new garments from the skin out and have outerwear that seems capable of withstanding a bath in liquid nitrogen. Mentally preparing to high grade the purchases, keeping only what I absolutely need and can afford, I ask Binswanger the price of it all. He holds out his hands, smiles, and says, "It has all been taken care of."

Back in the craft, Jeriba Zammis says that it will take into midafternoon before we reach the Jeriba estate and there are business matters that need attending. In moments Zammis is talking with a business colleague, working through a computer index, and writing notes all at the same time. By overhearing conversations I manage to learn how Jeriba Zammis earned its blue stripe. Zammis is a financier, Jetah of Colony Reserve. When there is a lull in the activity, I turn to Zammis. "My apologies for interrupting, Jetah." It looks up from its work and faces me. "Yes?"

"Do you do any business with Earth IMPEX?"

Zammis's eyebrow rise. "Of course. It's the second largest mineral exploration and development corporation in the quadrant. Why do you ask?" I think of the stars, and my tears. "I met someone on the ship. A human named Michael Hill. Do you know him?" The brows come down. "I know him very well. He represents IMPEX on Friendship. I've done business with IMPEX through him for ten years or more. He is very well respected among those who do interplanetary trade in First Colony. Is there a difficulty?"

"No." I return to looking through the window, remembering Hill's comment about making plans and hearing God laugh. The vehicle streaks away from the city, far from the flashing lights of visual directional beacons. Soon the other traffic is left behind, as well. In moments we are over a steel gray ocean, its angry waters whipped into frothy caps by an incredible storm that the craft's computers neutralize into a calm passage. In moments I close my eyes and sleep.

## CHAPTER 13

Considering the power, wealth, and influence of the Jeriba line, the estate is quite modest. Perched on a high cliff overlooking the ocean, it reminds me of a miniature castle. It has only eight or ten attendants and retainers and cannot maintain much more than twenty or thirty guests in luxurious splendor. The room I am given and the repast both are magnificent. The welcome, however, is restrained. In addition to Zammis, in residence are Jeriba Ty, Zammis's adult child and the estate manager, and Jeriba Haesni, Ty's child. Estone Nev, the fighter pilot Shigan's aged sibling, is in residence, as well. Nev is almost sixty years old and is the retired Ovjetah of Friendship's Talman Kovah. They all look upon me and my mission with mistrust. After stiff introductions are passed, Zammis excuses itself to do some work, Estone Nev retires to do its meditation, and Haesni puts on its outerwear to



run down to the cave to tell Uncle that he has a visitor. Ty remains. "Yazi Ro, I apologize if we seem protective of Willis Davidge, but the value we place upon his life is incalculable. If it weren't for him, the Jeriba line would be ended and this world would be a much different place. As I came to adulthood under Uncle's care, the line of my parents back six generations lived in a cave, grew and learned line, life, and Talman from Willis E. Davidge. My child, Haesni, does the same now." I hold out my hands. "I am here at the wishes of Jeriba Shigan to deliver a manuscript. That is all."

"You are a piece of a puzzle, Yazi Ro. I think you know that."

"Yes." Ty walks to a large window overlooking a distant point of land, its cliffs extending into the boiling waters of the sea. I walk until I am next to Ty. I see Haesni, growing smaller with each step, running toward the point. "Davidge is another puzzle piece, as is the manuscript you carry, Yazi Ro. A talma is being gathered, put in motion." Ty looks over at me. "May I be told the object?"

"Peace," I answer. "Peace on Amadeen." Ty turns and faces me. "You look as though you stand between beliefs." "Jeriba Ty, your parent's parent is the Ovjetah of the Talman Kovah. It has all of the science of the Deia at its disposal. Jeriba Shigan believes there is a possibility for peace."

"But you have doubts," Ty insists. "Even Shigan has doubts." I feel my shoulders shrug. "Jeriba Ty, I have waded through the blood of Amadeen ever since my birth. The knives there make cuts that cannot heal. If there is a path along which peace can be achieved on Amadeen, either I cannot see it or the Ovjetah's meaning for the word 'peace' is considerably different from my own. I have no scientific skills. I have yet to stand the rites of adulthood. I do not know why I am here." Ty studies me for a long time then glances toward the point. "There are the truths of Zineru, Yazi Ro. That is why you are here." It places a hand on my shoulder and says, "I will take you to see Davidge." As I follow Ty to the robing chamber, I feel the shame fill my face. I unclearly recall a Zineru in The Talman, but I cannot remember who it was, what it did, or what its truths have to do with me. I am too ashamed to ask Ty what it means.

There is a path across the snow and ice from the Jeriba estate to the point. As we walk it, the wind blows ice crystals around us in whorls and clouds. Somewhere from the past I remember my parent telling me the story of the teacher, Maltak Di, who asked its students about paths. It would draw two shapes and connect them with two lines. It would ask the first student how many paths there are between the two shapes. In a peculiar warp of mind, the years fade and I am in Avo's arms as it reads from the tiny cube that hangs from a golden chain around its neck.

"...how many paths are there from the circle to the square?"

"There  
are two paths, Jetah."

"Nyath, you may not stay; you cannot learn."

There were only two lines and poor Nyath could only see two paths.

The next student could see several paths if the two drawn paths were repeated turn-in-turn. Maltak Di allowed the second student to stay because it might be able to learn. The third student was told it must stay because it might be able to teach. The third student had said that, between the two shapes there was a number of paths without finite limit. From the estate to the cave there is an infinite number of paths. Down into the ocean, under the ground, through the air, into space, by way of Draco, by way of Amadeen. We walk the paths we see, however, because they are the ones we see. When a better path is discovered, perhaps the Jeriba line will walk it. First it needs to be found. Zenak Abi thinks it might have found a path from war to peace on Amadeen. Jeriba Shigan thinks it sees it, too. What does it have to do with an old human, a Mavedah killer, and the story of a woman called Joanne Nicole? Almost to the point, Ty leads us down a natural set of stairs opening onto a narrow ledge high above the rocks and boiling breakers below, the wind pressing us against the cliff. Around one turn and another, and the ledge widens a bit. I look down from the edge of the sheer wall to the rocks far below. A false step here and Yazı Ro would be no mo'. The height makes me dizzy and I press my body against the wall. "This is the entrance," says Ty. I turn from the deadly drop and face the wind and ice carved opening in the rock wall. Ty leads us into it. When we reach the back of the opening, Ty opens a door made of sticks and strips of leather and enters. Beyond the door is a passage. I feel the warmth from the cave beyond and suddenly am afraid. I think for a moment and find that my fear is that my life will be forever changed by entering this cave. Before taking any kind of path, I want to see its destination. The Ovjetah said, though, that knowledge of the path might close it. Is that because if I knew where the path leads I would refuse to go? "Hey!" calls an unfamiliar voice. I see a human walk around a turn in the passage. He is clad in ragged skins and has a cap made of the same skins on his head. His hair is long as is his beard. I recognize him from his likeness on the book. It is Willis E. Davidge. He looks at me and points toward the entrance. "Were you born in a goddamned barn?"

"What?"

"Close the door!" He shakes his head,  
turns and disappears down the passage. I close the door and follow, my  
path set.

## CHAPTER 14

We are in crudely made chairs sitting around the large hearth fire, which provides the chamber's heat and only illumination. The smoke from the fire is drawn through a crack in the chamber's ceiling, but the smell of smoke is strong in the air. Wood for the fire is stacked along the wall behind me and there are chests and large wooden boxes next to the beds behind the human's chair. The beds are made of skins thrown over piles of branches. Webbed nets, leather sacks, and other objects hang from wooden pegs hammered into cracks in the walls. Nearly everything appears to be handmade of wood, leather, bone, or plant fiber. Davidge sits in his leather and stick throne like some sort of primitive tribal chief. He looks over the tops of his reading glasses at me, then shifts his gaze to Ty and Haesni, returning it to the manuscript, the reading surface cocked toward the flames. "So, Yazi Ro, you taking this book to me is supposed to stop a war." The tone sounds mocking and I remain silent. Davidge glances up at me. "I don't suppose Shiggy told you how we're supposed to do it."

"Shiggy?"

"Shigan.

The Ovjetah? The guy who sent you here? Work with me, Ro; life is too short, especially for Dracs." I feel the anger rising. "No. It did not tell me how." The human wrinkles up his forehead and holds up his hands. "If we don't know how, what are we supposed to do?" Ty leans forward in its chair. "Uncle, perhaps you are supposed to figure it out for yourself."

"Damned silly. I mean, if Shiggy knows a way, why doesn't it just tell me?"

"The Ovjetah," I interrupt, "told me that knowledge of the path might close it." The human flips through a few pages and shakes his head. "Shiggy always was a little smart aleck." Davidge's eyes suddenly look up at me. "It was well?" I fold my arms as I accept two truths: Davidge does not like me and I do not like Davidge. "I am not a healing Jetah. The Ovjetah's fitness is not within my area of expertise." The human sits back in his chair, both of his hands resting upon the closed manuscript on his lap. "Did Shigan seem well?"

"I

detected no major wounds or consequential diseases, Uncle Willy." Davidge's head goes back a degree as he stares at me with very blue eyes. He nods once, opens the manuscript to the first page, and begins reading. As he turns the page he says, "That's a big stick you have up your ass, Yazi Ro. Try not to scratch the chair." Ty, its jaw clamped shut against its laughter, stands, grabs its coat, and walks to the entrance, barely nodding at me along the way. Haesni, less successful at suppressing its laughter, makes a snorting sound and hurries to the back of the chamber where the child vanishes into another passage. I

feel a cold draft against my legs as Ty opens the door. It stops as the door is closed. I hear muffled laughter coming from outside the cave. I sit fixed in the chair, glaring at the human, until I think I must look as big a fool as I feel. I stand, close my coat and put up my hood as I storm toward the cave's opening. When I go through the entrance into the cold, I look at my hand holding the door as a debate rages within me: Should I close it or leave it open? Leaving it open would be childish. It would, however, feel quite good. Perhaps to end a war I must work with this human, and warring with him over a silly door might close Zenak Abi's path to peace before it opens. It would, however, feel thoroughly good. Involuntarily I emit a growl and slam the door shut. As I turn away I hear Davidge's voice call, "Thank you."

In the harsh wind at the top of the cliff, my gaze on the tortured waters below, the questions stand before me. Is this human the great teacher of the Ovjetah of the Talman Kovah? Is this the mentor of the Jeriba line? Is that creature one of the founders of this planet, refuge of harmony between the peoples of the quadrant? I see something all too mortal. I know myself. I am no mountain of wisdom. Now I have seen enough of the human. No matter what Zenak Abi and Jeriba Shigan think they see, we are not the ones who will find peace for Amadeen. "You are disappointed." I hear Ty's voice coming from behind me. Without turning I answer. "I have seen the size of war, Jeriba Ty. I have felt its power, its complexity, its pain, its fear." I turn and face the firstborn of Jeriba Zammis. "In a moment of intense anguish I went to an old fool to find peace. That old fool sent me to another old fool who sent me here to yet another old fool."

"I don't think you always thought of them as fools." I look back at the sea. "After I met Zenak Abi, the traitor on Amadeen, I did not believe in its possibilities for peace. It was old, foolish looking, and ran with a pack of renegade Dracs and humans. I took on its mission because it was my only way off of Amadeen."

"You believed the Ovjetah, though," interrupted Ty. "Yes. I believed Jeriba Shigan. The Ovjetah did not look foolish and it had all of the wisdom of the Jetah Diea honoring it. A part of me believed that the Ovjetah might know a way to peace." I raise my hand and wave it toward the sea with a certain degree of violence. "Yazi Ro, take a copy of the Koda Nusinda to this great teacher, this giant of wisdom, on Fyrine IV. Put this manuscript together with this great mind and that act will take thirty years of blood and horror and bring it to an end." I look back at Jeriba Ty. "I believed that. That's how big a fool I am." Ty smiles sympathetically. "Poor Ro. You came to Friendship looking for a god and Willis E. Davidge turns out to be only a man." "And such an ordinary man," I add. "Is this what the machinations of the Ovjetah's talma would have me find?" Ty places its gloved hand on my arm and bursts out with a laugh. "I certainly hope so, my friend. Uncle gave you his very best I'm just plain folks routine." It looks at me, laughs again, and cocks its head toward the estate. "Come along. It's

almost time for the repast. Uncle will be occupied for hours and Haesni will be eating smoked snake in the cave. It will be good to have more company at the house. Falna should be there by now. The ship from Draco eventually came in and Falna was on it."

Falna, the child of Estone Nev's namechild, is at the table for the repast. It is tall, beautiful, and so brilliant I keep silent for fear of sounding like a kizlode. Although Falna is so far above my aspirations it might as well be back on Earth, I listen, captivated by its words. Once Falna's gaze meets mine and I see it smile as I turn away, my face hot with embarrassment. Also at the table are Jeriba Zammiss, Ty, and Estone Nev. As the most senior, Nev stands at its place and leads the ceremony of the repasts, something I had not seen since my parent's death. "This is the bitter weed we eat to remember the Madah at the first repast. Never shall we return." Estone Nev holds a small sheaf of grain to its lips and replaces it on the table. We all take similar sheaves from our places and touch them to our lips, returning them to the table. "This is the fruit of the Irrveden, for which the Mavedah fought, that we eat at the second repast." Nev touches a purple-gray fruit to its lips, replaces it on the table, and we do the same. "For the third repast we eat nothing, for this is the legacy of Mijii who burned its people rather than submit to the rule of the Mavedah." Nev ignites a small brazier filled with aromatic woods. It burns for a moment, touches the air with scent, and dies. "The night repast celebrates Uhe's victory and the unification of the Sindie. This is the night repast; let us celebrate." The servants bring out the foods, and I find a familiar human dish among them: spaghetti. Captured human rations had something similar looking in an envelope. The difference is that the Jeriba estate's version is edible. More than that, it is delicious, as are the more traditional foods. Even though I am far from starving, the hungry parentless war child within moves me to eat more than I need. After the foods, while I attempt to digest all that I have consumed, Nev, Zammiss, Falna, and Ty sip at sweet tea. With transparent pride Nev asks the child of its namechild about its studies. Falna amuses us all with stories of its recent time on Earth, the friends it had made, and the important persons it met. Ty laughs and says, "And Uncle feared that you might never even manage to commit your line to memory." Falna laughs as well. It notices my confusion and says, "I played a trick on Uncle when I was under his charge at the cave. I pretended to be very slow, clumsy, and unable to learn. Then I stood the rites of adulthood before the Estone archives, recited line and book, all without his knowledge. When he came to my parent to express his concern about my dimness, my parent explained to Uncle that Falna had already stood the rites and had earned its robe. The look on Uncle's face was worth a thousand academic degrees." When the laughter dies down, Ty announces to all that Yazi Ro is less than awed after its first meeting with Uncle Willy. Embarrassed by this declaration, I remain silent. There are no frowns or condemnations, though. Instead, Estone Nev smiles, and both Zammiss and Falna burst out in laughter. Nev puts down its cup and says, "Yazi Ro, you have some idea of the high regard in which we hold Uncle."

"Yes." Leaning back in its chair, Estone Nev's gaze turns inward. "When my sibling was stranded on this planet during the war, it was Davidge who delivered and reared Zammis's nameparent, teaching it the Jeriba line and The Talman, eventually standing with Zammis before the family archives, seeing its charge take on the robes of adulthood. Ever since, it has been the fate of every child on this estate to be subjected by its elders to this glow of adulation for Willis Davidge. As a result, by the time a child is old enough to be placed in Uncle's care, it is thoroughly encrusted with wonderment regarding this illustrious savant with whom it is to learn its line and Talman, and prepare for the rites." Zammis grins. "As his very first task, Uncle has taken it upon himself to blast off of his new student every last crumb of this wonderment. We call it 'the bath'." They then regale me with stories of the 'baths' taken by various members of the Jeriba and Estone lines, as well as the lines of several of the Jeriba estate's servants. In all, the human had reared and prepared for adulthood forty-one children. Jeriba Haesni, currently in the cave eating its smoked snake, is his forty-second. After awhile, the conversation turns to other things. Estone Falna, now having completed its post doctorate studies and residency, is now qualified to administer to humans, the human in the cave being of particular focus. Falna smiles at me as it explains, "Although Friendship's population contains many species, humans are only a small minority; perhaps eleven percent." "Medical care for humans," interrupts Ty, "is therefore less than it could be. We have always worried about Uncle falling ill, the only help available being inadequate. Falna wanted to improve the odds."

"Uncle is sixty-three standard years old," continues Falna. "Earth's medical wisdom suggests that the human should slow down."

"Falna, have you brought the new skis Uncle asked for?" asks Ty. "I brought them. So much for slowing down."

"Skis?" I ask. Zammis explains that it is a winter sport he tried first when on Earth fifteen years ago. It involves clipping slippery boards onto one's feet and sliding down the side of a steep, snow covered mountain. Zammis brought the sport, an instructor, and the equipment back to Friendship, and Uncle fell instantly in love. After some searching, Zammis and Uncle Willy found in the mountains above the estate a valley protected from the winds where they had a towing arrangement rigged that would pull them to the top of one of the mountains. The sport grew from there until there are now eight ski areas on the planet and a ninth planned. While I ponder this improbable recreation, Zammis asks Ty about the estate's agricultural preparations for Friendship's short growing season, and the conversation fades into seeds, fertilizers, composts, cultivation and a fog of other things I do not understand. As they talk I think again about Ty's words to me earlier, that I am here because of the truths of

Zineru. It still embarrasses me to admit my ignorance of Zineru's story in the midst of this assemblage of Talman scholars. I leave the table, go to my rooms, and settle into a very comfortable couch to read my Talman. I work the catch, drop the cube from its cover, and pull the paging pin. Turning to the Koda Sinuvida, I squint as I attempt to read *The Story of Zineru*. The writing is very small, and I could struggle my way through it if I needed. Such is unnecessary. I have Davidge's English translation in big, paper book type. I clip my Talman back into its holder and retrieve my copy of the translation and settle back in the couch. In the translator's notes I read that the Koda Sinuvida was the last of the books of *The Talman* written on Planet Sendie. The next book was written in space on the generation ships that eventually settled Draco. Zineru wrote its book in a much earlier era, a time of sea going ships and military denve armed with swords, spears, clubs, and arrows. There were also athletic competitions between different denve, different cities, and different schools. As Maltak Di used to use puzzles and illusions to teach its students, Zineru used games, athletic events. Zineru's passion was the multiplicity of truth: the many meanings of truth and truth's many kinds and forms. Its favorite lesson was to have its students take a game and study it, applying all of the lessons of talma, to devise a means of winning through superior theory. The students would study, interpret, and explore the reduced extremes of all of the rules, the plays, even the conditions of the land and weather where the contest was to be held. They would study the physical form and determine how best to utilize players in running, throwing, and so on. They would work out their new plays, devise their strategies, assign the best of themselves to the various positions, and then they would inform Zineru that they were ready to play. The Jetah would then employ the least successful team of nonprofessional kovah players it could find and set this team against its students. Without fail Zineru's students would be annihilated, and the Jetah would tell its battered theorists the lesson: "The learned student has much to contribute to the game. However, the hard truths, the ones that cannot be manipulated, will be told to us by the players. The players have seen and felt the metal; the students have only theorized about it." Zineru's truths. The work of the Talman Masters has much to contribute to the peace of Amadeen, but the hard truths, the ones that cannot be manipulated, will be supplied by the killer, Yazi Ro. The masters have only theorized about war. Yazi Ro has walked in the blood. I think of the offer made by the captain of the Tora Soam. My account has enough to get me back to Draco and from there it is only a matter of waiting for the ship. It would be work. Could I stand circling around Amadeen, though, while the ship is at the orbiter? Could I stand it if in my head there is the slightest doubt about the futility of the peace talma? Could I do that knowing in the dust and blood of Amadeen there is a child looking up at my reflection, cursing me for not taking the chance to end the horror? I get up from the couch and walk to the transparent wall of the room that looks out upon Friendship's night. There are shielded lights below me, illuminating the house with a faint golden glow. Beyond the lights the wind-torn landscape is dark, the silhouette of the point standing out indistinctly against the whiteness of the

ocean's foam. I wonder what would happen if the pieces of a picture puzzle found out that the picture they are supposed to make is different than the one they intended to bring into being. Would the pieces go ahead and make the new picture, not knowing for certain how it will look, or would they rebel and make no picture at all. I decide to talk to this puzzle's other piece in the cave. I go down to the main hall and find that the others have retired. A servant, Mizy Untav, helps me on with my coat and boots. It insists, as well, that I wear eye and face coverings to protect me from the increasing winds. Once I agree, it asks "Will you be wanting a guide, Yazi Ro?"

"No. I know the way."

"A hand light, perhaps? The footing in the dark can be treacherous." I nod. "A light would be sensible. Thank you." With the light attached to the back of my left glove, my hood up and my coat sealed, I step out into the night winds of Fyrine IV. As I lean against the wind and begin my trek toward the cave, I realize that the retainer who clothed me with such concern about my welfare is the child of Mizy Kinasu, the student of Davidge's the others mentioned who traveled across the quadrant to become a monk in a strange, demanding religion on a strange and frightening planet: Earth.

## CHAPTER 15

Davidge sits at the fire, staring into the flames, the manuscript in his lap. I turn off the glove light, remove my coat and face protector, throw them over an empty chair, and sit in another, wondering why Davidge wasn't at the repast as part of Estone Falna's homecoming. As the flames warm me, I again look at the interior of the cave. On one of the beds of branches, Haesni is sound asleep, a leather quilt pulled over him. I think of the Koda Nusinda and wonder where in the manuscript Davidge is. One part that gave me pause was the lesson of the repast. As the actors played their parts, the blind human Nicole, not knowing they were actors, was having presented to her the problem of Amadeen. The Mavedah's goal was the death or removal of all humans on Amadeen. The Front's goal was the death or removal of all Dracs on Amadeen. The Dracon Chamber's commitment to the Mavedah and the United States of Earth's commitment to the Front, and the mutually exclusive goals of the Front and the Mavedah, made the workings of talma impossible. Nicole ended the big war by severing the larger powers' commitments to the warring factions on Amadeen. The core of the problem, though, still remains, although the removal of the other species by something other than death must have fallen in priority. The Mavedah's goal now is the death of all humans. The Front's goal is the death of all Dracs. Where is there room for talma? Every time the Front and the Mavedah form a truce in an attempt to settle things through negotiations, an unruly faction from one side or the other always demolishes the truce by performing an atrocity on the other side. How can the Mavedah punish one of its own groups for killing humans, after all that the Front has done to them? Of course, how can the Front punish one of its own groups for killing Dracs, after all that the Mavedah has done to them? "Yazi



Ro," Davidge says, "have you read this?" He holds up the manuscript. I pull my mind back from the past and look at him. The human's gaze is on my face. "Yes. I read it on the voyage here."

"Were you supposed to read it?" Again the shrug. "I do not know." He looks at the manuscript and raises his eyebrows. "What if you reading this screws up the talma?" I settle back in the chair, stretch my legs out toward the fire, and clasp my hands over my middle. At that point I answer. "Then the talma is screwed up. On the other side, though, what if me not reading it would mangle the path? What if my reading it or not reading it makes no difference at all?" Davidge smiles and says in formal Dracon, "Aakva, why do you play with your creatures so?" He looks at me, sees my expression, and says, "From 'The Story of Uhe'. The Koda Ovida?" He looks at me as though I have three heads. In English he asks, "Yazi Ro, is it possible that you do not know your Talman?" My Amadeen English responded. "It is not only possible, Uncle Willy, you can bet your wrinkled old ass on it." An unusual squeaking comes from the back of the chamber and Davidge turns from me and looks toward the child's supposedly sleeping form. "If you are finished sleeping, Haesni, there is some sewing you can do."

"Oh, I'm sleeping Uncle," gasps Ty's child.

"I am sleeping. I think I'm just having a bad dream." This last followed by more poorly stifled squeaking. At last, unable to contain itself any longer, Haesni laughs out loud, throws its covers aside, and runs into one of the back chambers. Davidge smiles and closes the manuscript. My elbows on the chair's armrests, I cover my eyes as I feel an edge of shame. It is not my mission in life to humiliate this teacher in the eyes of his student, even if the teacher is a human. When the echoes of Haesni's laughter die, I say to the human, "I apologize, Davidge, for referring to you as Uncle Willy. Once we settle this matter," I gesture toward the manuscript in his lap, "I will be gone. It is not your fault I am here now and there is no point in seeing how much more difficult I can make things before I leave." The human nods, looks down at the manuscript, and says, "I wouldn't make any plans on leaving soon, Ro. The Ovjetah is smarter than anyone I know. If Jeriba Shigan thinks there's a good chance of achieving peace on Amadeen, I'll give it a look. So, we'll do what we need to do together until we both agree that the job is hopeless. Okay?"

"I agree."

"Good." The human stands, places his hands at the small of his back, and stretches. Finished, he looks at me and says, "Confidences are sacred, Yazi Ro. What you tell me in confidence I will never repeat without your permission. What I tell you in confidence you will never repeat without my permission. Agreed?"

"Yes." He takes a step and squats next to the fire. Adding a

stick to the flames, he looks toward the back of the chamber, then faces me. Speaking in almost a whisper, he says, "The name Uncle Willy really doesn't bother me." I feel my brow rise in astonishment. "Nearly every member of the Jeriba line that I have met has warned me that you hate the name." He holds out his hands, looks up at the smoke hole, and grimaces as he looks for words. "Kids need an easy way to score against adults." He looks down at me. "Know what I mean?" I shake my head. "No."

"Is your parent living?" The question pounces on my awareness like an emotional predator. I feel my breath growing short. "No. Yazi Avo died before my first year." In a very quiet voice, I tell him my shame. "I never learned my line." Davidge nods as questions in his face resolve. "I see." He stands, goes to his chair, and lowers himself into it. Staring into the fire, he gathers his thoughts. After a long moment, he frowns and looks at me. "What were we talking about?"

"Uncle Willy."

"Right." He nods, sits forward, and says, "To eight generations of the Jeriba line, from Zammis's nameparent to Haesni, as well Estone Nev's descendants and the children of the line's retainers, I have been playmate, friend, teacher, and warden. Kids, mostly wanting to do what they want to do, reverse the order. To them I am the warden, the one who stands in the way of their adventures, like trying to fly by jumping off the cliff." I point toward the ocean. "That cliff?"

"That's the one. Shiggy even had a set of wings it had designed and built. The only way I could discourage the experiment was to let Shiggy try it, although I got the kid to use a small hill for its first flight rather than the cliff." He smiles in remembrance then brings himself back to the moment. "Warden first. Later they regard me as teacher, friend, and playmate. Usually. Still there's this piece of each kid that remembers, and resents, the guy who spoiled all the fun, who was mostly right when they were mostly wrong." I nod as I understand. "Letting them call you Uncle Willy and believing that it makes you grind your teeth is an easy, and harmless, way of letting them wreak vengeance on the warden."

"Yes."

"Was it the same sort of thing with Estone Falna?" Davidge's eyebrows go up. "Heard that story, did you?" He grins and shakes his head. "Falna was different. It wasn't satisfied with mere vengeance. Falna wouldn't settle for anything less than total annihilation. Strong minded and smart as a whip. Its parent died on Earth. Did you hear about that?"

"No."

"Estone Oyneh was a part of the Dracon Chamber's diplomatic delegation. There was a racial incident, a crowd thing that got out of control, and Oyneh was dead. Falna saw it all. It was less than a year old." I feel the cold fingers of reality clutching my heart. "I too lost my parent before I reached my first year. I saw it die." Davidge looks at me and I see the compassion in his face. "It is a hard way to grow." He looks at the fire. "Estone Nev had Falna brought here and I took it into the cave. It took five months for its nightmares to stop. I'm awfully proud of Falna. I hated to miss it doing the rites, though." He nods, picks up the manuscript, and opens it. "There's stuff to eat next to the fire and back in the cave where Haesni went. I better get going on this." He finishes a page and turns to another. I feel a strange longing: a glaring emptiness against a painful jealousy of the Drac children who learned line and Talman before this man. It is a bottomless well of anguish that always begins with: things should have been different. Haesni, wiping its face with its hand from having eaten something, sneaks into its bed after waving a hand at me. Before I can respond, the child is under its leather quilt, its head covered. The favored child sleeping in the heart of its uncle's love. I rest my head against the back of my chair and study the human as he reads. I have seen humans before. In battle, as my prisoners, before my knife, torturing my friend to death, and at least one holding a little Drac baby. I see no human woman in Davidge's cave; not even another man. There is a lot to mistrust in a man who forsakes all that there is in being a man to live in a cave and bring up Drac children. As the sleep tugs at me, I ask myself, why are you here, Willis E. Davidge? Before I can ask my question aloud, Davidge lowers the manuscript and faces me. "Ro, tomorrow morning I want you to ask Ty to show you how the subspace link at the house works. It's about time you learned your line. Before you can learn it, you must assemble the information." Without waiting for an answer, he returns to reading. I see the warden, feel the irritation at being told what to do without being asked or even told why. I smile as I acknowledge the human's wisdom in providing a talma along which childish retribution may be exacted. I close my eyes, settle into the chair before the fire wrapped in my warm cloak, and say, "Sleep in peace, Uncle Willy."

## CHAPTER 16

The next morning, after a peculiar breakfast of root cakes and roast snake in the cave, Davidge returns to the manuscript, Haesni washes the shells and griddle, and I make my way to the estate, the day warm enough that I can walk the path without fear of my eyeballs shattering. From the ice sheathed trees and rocks, I can see melt water dripping. Later, in Ty's office, I sit facing the screen of the link. Jeriba Ty establishes contact with the Talman Kovah on Draco, runs the line probe, explains the controls, and says to call when I have completed entering what I can. Ty leaves and I enter the information for which the line probe asks. My own name is Yazi Ro. My parent's name was Yazi Avo. I know from what my parent told me of its parent that its

name was Yazi Tahl. Tahl's parent was named Itas, although I am uncertain of the spelling. If I ever knew the name of my nameparent's child, it has left my memory. I have no choice but to leave the five name sequence incomplete. The line location, what I know of it, is on Amadeen, Northern Shorda, City of Gitoh. The occupations of myself and my forebears, those that I know of: Yazi Ro, Mavedah soldier; Yazi Avo with its crippled foot, did whatever it could find to provide food and shelter for its infant child. Mostly it taught battlefield English to Mavedah soldiers; Yazi Tahl, another Mavedah soldier; Yazi Itas, I do not know, and there it ends. I call for Jeriba Ty and in moments it is there reviewing the information. After reading it, Ty looks down at me and places a hand on my shoulder. "It must have been very difficult growing up without the knowledge of your line." I am confused by my host's pity. "I do not know, Jeriba Ty. I have nothing with which to compare it." I point at the screen. "Is that enough information?"

"It

is all we have," Ty answers as it reaches forward and touches the screen which changes immediately to the main catalog. "How long will it take?" Ty opens its mouth to answer, but before a word escapes, the results of the line probe appear. I nod my thanks to Jeriba Ty and sit back to discover part of myself. The data links from Amadeen were cut off when the quarantine isolated Amadeen from the quadrant. There is, nevertheless, only one line on Amadeen whose names fit the sequence I entered. The full sequence is: Ro, Tomas, Itah, Tahl, Avo. There is a message to note the difference in the spelling of the center sequence name. The original line archives were registered in Gitoh. I find that I had a nameparent, and my nameparent had a nameparent. Yazi Ro, third child of Stiyima Bahn of Aakva Benabi on Draco, left its home to found its new line on Amadeen years before the war. The founder was an explorer and entrepreneur who became partners in a business venture with a human named Tomas Munoz. The Drac and the human began providing food and other supplies to the prospectors in the mountains above Gitoh. The business was prosperous, and the pair expanded their activities into various other retail enterprises. When Yazi Ro had its first child, the founder named its child for its partner, Tomas. In turn, Tomas Munoz named his new son Ro. The two children grew together until Tomas was no longer a child. Yazi Tomas maintained a close friendship with Ro Munoz, though, until the war started on Amadeen. No one seems to know why it started, or how. Something about land and an unjust decision made by some court. The only thing certain was that members of the other species were responsible. The Yazi-Munoz business venture struggled along for another year, but it eventually was consumed by the widening war. The partnership ended along with the friendship when Ro Munoz was slain by an angry mob of Drac miners and Tomas Munoz returned to Earth. Yazi Tomas attempted to keep a much smaller foodstuff supply business going by itself, but war respects no contracts and soon Tomas was pressed into service by the newly organized Shorda Continental Defense Force, which later changed its name to the Mavedah. Tomas's only child, Itah, went directly into the Mavedah, as did its child, Tahl. As my parent's nameparent was born, the quarantine was placed on Amadeen, and

there the information ends. The cycle of names is there, though, and the probe fills in the missing names. I am the eleventh of my line. If I should ever conceive, my child would carry this human's name: Tomas. "Ro, did your parent ever tell you about this Tomas Munoz, and about their business?" I glance at Ty, only part of my mind on its question. "I do not remember. I was so young when Avo was killed. I may have been told, but I do not remember."

"You have an information notice aid.

"May I see what it is?" I look and there is a spot on the screen blinking between white and blue. I get up from the link and go to the office's window wall as Jeriba Ty sits before the link and gives the probe some new instructions. The window looks out upon a distant chain of mountains, the tops black with cliffs too steep to hold ice or snow. My eyes see the mountains but my mind is on Amadeen and a time when a Drac and a human could become business partners and name their children after each other. How did we move from such a place to Douglasville where that man, that human, took its captured energy knife and cut poor Lota Min into living screaming pieces? The wounds on Amadeen are so many, so deep, so ghastly, how can there be an end to it? How can we live in a world where we cannot kill humans, where there is nothing left to do but feel the pain of our many losses while staring at the shattered remains of so many futures? "Yazi Ro, do you know a human named Michael Hill?" My thoughts touch the passenger lounge of the Venture and the man who told me about the danger of looking at the stars alone. "I met him on the ship." I turn to face Ty. "He is a representative for Earth IMPEX." Jeriba Ty is frowning as it looks at the screen. "It seems that Michael Hill is very interested in anyone carrying the line name of Yazi." Ty shakes a finger at the screen and says, "More specifically, he's interested in anyone who has an interest in a Yazi line name. Hill has entered an automatic call request that his message station be notified of the names of everyone who does a probe on any of the Yazi lines." I turn from the window and face Ty. "I don't understand."

"What

it amounts to is that this man wants to know if anyone, most likely you, did a probe on the Yazi line name."

"Is there some way to hide my inquiry?" Ty shakes its head. "No. All of this -- the line histories, the names of those who file requests -- is public information. Michael Hill has already been notified that you did a probe on your line. Might he be a danger?" I lower myself into a chair facing Ty. "Your parent said that it has done business with Michael Hill for years. Zammiss said that Hill is well respected."

"Perhaps it's just curiosity concerning a chance encounter on board a ship." I think back and recall that face in my mind. For a human it is a handsome, pleasant face. Honest, hiding nothing. Perhaps it is just curiosity. Those who travel far from home may need things with which to occupy their time. Still, the man might

be the descendant of someone in the Amadeen Front or the USE Force who thinks he has a debt to collect against Dracs of the Yazi line. He was on Draco at the same time I was. Perhaps Michael Hill has some interest in the Jetai Diea's charge that sent me on my mission to Friendship. "Does Hill know where I am staying? Is that information public, as well?"

"It's not public information, Ro, but having Jeriba Zammis pick you up at the port effectively announced to the entire population of First Colony where you are staying. With your permission, I will have my parent look into the matter of Michael Hill." Ty looks up at me and smiles as it hands me a copy of my line probe. "If Uncle had you learn your line, the next thing he'll want is you to memorize it. Then The Talman. Before he's finished he will have you in front of your line's archives reciting line and book."

In my rooms I look at the copy of my line. Eleven names is all.

If I had been born into the Jeriba line I would have had to memorize over two hundred histories, as well as The Talman. What a fantasy it is: Yazi Ro, filled with knowledge, reciting line and book in front of the Yazi Archives, my human Jetah standing with me as I receive the belated robes of adulthood. My line is missing a few histories, though, the Yazi archives are smashed and in Front controlled territory on Amadeen, while my Jetah, Uncle Willy, is safe in his cave beneath Friendship's protective clouds. Still it is a nice fantasy. I take the paper and read from it, my tongue wrestling around the ancient, unfamiliar sounds of formal Dracon. Before you here I stand, Ro of the line of Yazi, born of Avo, the teacher of English. .. I stop as I realize the hopelessness of it all. I do not know if Avo itself stood the rites, and if so, when. There is so much missing. A great weariness fills me and I lie on the bed, close my eyes, and, just before I search my usual nightmares, I see Estone Falna as it was at the repast, strong, witty, smart, full of fun. A longing begins in me that I extinguish as soon as I know what it is, because it can never be.

... I hear a dog. The night is cold, Amadeen's moon huge and bright in the sky. The dog is whimpering, begging for an end to its pain. Except for the dog, it is quiet, the fighting and bombing at an end for now. Inside the bombed out structure, Avo is sitting in a shadow looking across the street, its eyes wet with tears. "Avo?" I call from its side where I have been trying to sleep. "Avo, what is wrong? Are they coming again?"

"No my child. They are gone for now." I reach up and touch my parent's cheek. "Why do you cry?" Avo nods at the ruins across the street. "Do you remember the building that once stood there?"

"No."

"You were just born, I suppose, when it was last used. The Mavedah stored supplies there until the building was destroyed completely by a Front bombing. Before that, when I was a child, it was a hospital." Avo looks down at me. "My parent once told me that very long ago, before the war, your nameparent's nameparent had a business there where it sold food and many other things." My parent returns its gaze to the ruin. "Yazi Tahl told me that Dracs and humans both shopped there, and that your nameparent's nameparent even worked with a human in the business." Its head lowers until Avo's chin rests on its chest. "I don't know if I believe that," it says, "though I always thought of this building with a special warmth, until it was destroyed. Now it makes me sad." I do not know why Avo cries. It is, after all, just a pile of rubble. I wrap my arms around my parent and urge it to stop crying. Avo places an arm around me and continues to look at the ruin. It still looks as I close my eyes. The dog is silent and I sleep.

## CHAPTER 17

I awaken with the smell of smoke in my nostrils. At the moment I know that the smell is no dream I sit up and open my eyes. Davidge is sitting in a chair in front of the window wall, looking at the view. The smoky smell comes from his clothes. I stand and walk toward him. As I do I see the sight that holds the human's gaze. Great streams of black smoke come from the point, blown back toward the mountains by the winds. "Davidge?" He turns his head and faces me. His skin is smudged with soot, soot rings his nostrils, and his eyes are very red. "You're awake."

"Obviously." I point toward the smoke. "What happened?" The human looks back toward the point, his eyes on the past. "Someone came into the cave last night and set fire to the place. I was in the back getting something to eat." He seems to nibble at the insides of his lips as tension makes his jaw muscles pulse. "When I came back to the big room, I saw him. A fire was already started in the woodpile and he was tinkering at some sort of device. I picked up a piece of wood and came up on him from behind. He turned just before I struck and I caught his head and an arm. Whatever kind of bomb he set fully ignited then and filled the cave with smoke and intense heat. The man got away from me and all I could think of was making sure that Haesni was safe."

"Is Haesni safe?"

"Yes. A sore throat from the smoke, scared, but other than that, okay." Davidge stands and faces me. "Haesni was in the back chamber. We had to cover our eyes and feel our way through the main chamber, the flames and smoke were so fierce. Once we made it out of the mouth of the cave we came to the house." He looks around at the room and says more to himself than to me, "After all these years, they're finally going to get me to sleep in the house."

"Was there any sign of the intruder?" Davidge nodded. "Ty had the retainers arm themselves and search for the fire bug. They were at it for the rest of the night. At first light Alri Gan found the bastard at the bottom of the cliff below the cave entrance. Looks like he didn't quite make that first turn." Davidge narrows his eyes and studies me. "Ty, Zammis, and I climbed down to the base of the cliff to look. Jeriba Zammis knows the dead man. Before he splashed on the rocks, he called himself Michael Hill." I feel my eyes widening at the name. "The man I met on the ship? The IMPEX representative?"

"Yes. Ty told me about your experience; also about Hill's interest in your line probe. You have any idea why he might want to kill me or Haesni?" I remember the stars, that face, the compassion in his voice. That strange joke: If you want to hear God laugh, make a plan. I think back and remember the cliff, the height of it, the broken boulders at its foot. Michael Hill had a long opportunity of understanding before he reached those water washed boulders. I have seen my enemies come at me many ways, everything from shooting to begging. Compassion is an unexpected stratagem. "Davidge, on the ship from the Amadeen orbiter it was not a closely held secret that I was smuggled off of Amadeen. On Draco, almost the entire Jetai Diea knew I was Mavedah, as well as an unknown number of clerks, masters, and others." I look down as I think about the man in the wheelchair. Matope. Something mean and bitter crawls into my heart. "And still others." Davidge nods. "So he learns you're coming here."

"He might be someone with a hatred. Perhaps an ancestor or loved one might have died on Amadeen."

"That explains why he might want to kill you. Why me or Haesni?" I look to see if he is joking. "To such a person, Davidge, a Drac is a Drac," I nod toward the human. "And a Dragger suck is a Dragger suck." The human's eyes grow wide and he laughs. "Ro, Dragger suck is old fashioned, obsolete. According to Falna, the modern term is symp."

"Symp?"

"Short for sympathizer, I think. Maybe it's short for simpleton." He shakes his head and turns back to the window. "It just doesn't wash, Ro. Zammis has known Hill for years; worked with him, introduced him to others. Michael Hill has been working with Dracs for an awfully long time. Is it possible that you're the first Drac Amadeen veteran he's ever run across?" I think of Aureah Vak, pilot of the Tora Soam. As well there is Kobac, the Tsien Denvedah veteran who lives with Matope. There are millions of Dracs who fought on Amadeen, old but still alive. "No, Davidge, it is not likely that I am Michael Hill's first." I reach out my hand and place it on the human's shoulder as a theme from the Koda Nusinda teases the back of my head. "Davidge, the



Ovjetah considers you and me to be pieces to a very important puzzle. Perhaps the puzzle cannot be solved if either of us is removed." The human's face wrinkles in confusion. "What does IMPEX have to gain in keeping the war going? Do you have any idea of the investment --" As Davidge cuts himself off, his confusion fades. "The Koda Nusinda. The Eyes of Joanne Nicole."

"Yes. The Timans. Do you think the Timan species is still attempting to manipulate events?"

"If it's true, they're taking the possibility for peace on Amadeen a whole lot more seriously than we do." I rub my eyes and look at the smoke from the cave hanging in the air as the winds shift. "I thought the Timan tampering in USE-Dracon relations ended with the death of the war's secret architect, Hissied-do'timan."

"So did the author of the Koda Nusinda, but I don't know why it would. If I read that manuscript right, manipulating other species toward self destruction wasn't just Hissied-do'timan's hobby. It's a survival mechanism -- instinct with the Timans -- the entire species." The human scratches his beard. "What is it?" I ask. "Yazi Ro, maybe the key to stopping the war on Amadeen is in somebody's ammonia soaked hand on Planet Timan." His eyebrows rise. "You don't suppose that's where the Ovjetah's talma is supposed to go?" "As I understand this most recent book of The Talman, Davidge, if the Timans are involved, they are operating their own talma. I don't know which talma we would be serving by going to Timan. Perhaps the Timan path encloses the Ovjetah's." Davidge folds his arms and frowns at the thinning smoke. "I got to get on the link and talk to Shiggy about this. If we go to Timan and it's a wrong turn, it'll be a helluva big one."

"Why?"

"If I remember right, it's going to take us around half a year just to get there. Once there, I don't have a clue who to see, where to go, or anything. On top of everything else, the atmosphere on Timan is not exactly kind to oxygen breathers. Environmental suits, protected shelters, food, water -- we're talking about a major expedition." The frown grows deeper. "Which means major money." He suddenly turns his head and fixes me with his gaze. "Did the Ovjetah give you a blank check to go with that manuscript?"

"Blank check?"

"Unlimited funds." I shake my head. "No. My account has a few thousand credits. Enough to get me back to Draco."

"Talma!" the human snorts angrily as it faces the window. There is the gentle ting of a musical note followed by the greeting room door opening. Undev Orin stands in

the door and bows. "My apologies. Willis Davidge, the investigator still waits for you to bring Yazhi Ro." The human turns from the window and smacks himself gently against the side of his head. "Dammit, that's why I came up here. Orin, tell the investigator we'll be right down." Undev Orin bows and closes the door, leaving Davidge and I alone. The human laughs at himself and says, "I came up here to get you, but I got sidetracked by the view." He points toward the smoke, now almost at an end. "It's been a lot of years since anyone tried to kill me. The last one was the Ovjetah's nameparent." I feel cornered. No one yet seems particularly concerned that I was smuggled off of Amadeen, but an investigator might. If no one at all cares, there wouldn't be a quarantine. "I cannot see this investigator."

"Why? You haven't been here long enough to get in trouble."

"I was smuggled through the Amadeen quarantine --"

"Don't worry about it," interrupts Davidge. "That's not a crime on Friendship, and the investigator isn't a cop -- a police officer. This one's been hired simply to establish what happened last night and who was responsible."

"Hired?" Davidge nods as he takes my arm and leads me toward the door. "We don't have police officers acting for the government here." He shrugs and holds out his hands. "No government."

## CHAPTER 18

There is a path, steep and icy, from the ledge at the level of the cave to the base far below. We are met at the top of the path. There are two investigators, a Drac and a human, both of whom are employed by Aakva Lua, which means Blue Light. They have with them a Drac operative dressed in a deep blue Aakva Lua uniform beneath its black hooded coat. A second uniformed operative, also a Drac, is at the bottom of the cliff with the corpse. With the investigator are Zammis and Estone Falna. The Drac investigator's name is Mirili Sanda, which the other investigator, for some reason, insists on pronouncing 'santa.' Sanda is quite short and plump for a Drac, its eyes so dark they are almost black, making its gaze quite fierce. Its hooded coat is bright blue, as is the flyer in which it and the human investigator arrived. We follow them down the path. To Zammis, Falna, and Davidge the path down the cliff is just another trail. I, however, can feel unseen forces drawing me to the edges of sheer drops. Only my shame at my fear of heights forces me along. At the bottom we have to climb over and around the slippery boulders to get to Hill's body. Sanda struggles at the physical challenge where Davidge, Falna, and Zammis appear to have no difficulty. The human investigator is amazing. The human's name is Kita Yamagata. Although small for a woman, she jumps from boulder to boulder with the

same fearless bearing and disregard of heights with which she climbed down the treacherous path to the base of the cliff. The hood on her blue coat is back displaying her glossy black hair, which she keeps short. Her eyes, too, are very dark, giving her a strange kinship to Sanda. By the time we reach the location, Yamagata is already examining the corpse, her hands covered in special blue gloves. Between the warmer air and the action of the sea, there is almost no ice on the ocean's rocky shore. The spray from the breakers washes everything, which is why there is very little visible blood on the corpse, Sanda explains as Falna leans in to examine the body more closely. What blood there is seems to repulse Sanda. It does not bother Yamagata or Falna. I have seen so much of it, I am surprised that it bothers me. Michael Hill landed first on his legs, bounced and came to rest on his back, according to Yamagata. Falna remarks that it would be surprised if there were any bones not broken. Hill's clothes, boots, and hooded coat are white, with a few smudges of red. With the snow for a background last night, he would have been almost invisible. Against the green and black sea washed boulders at the base of the cliff, he stands out like a target. Jeriba Zammiss, its head uncovered in the wind, stares at the body as the investigators take their readings and fill their little containers. When Sanda and Yamagata determine that they have done all that they can do with the corpse in its present position, they have their operatives turn it over. The back of Michael Hill's white camouflage coat is scorched. Yamagata makes a comment about being half a step ahead of the volcano. A search of the corpse's pockets produces an expensive leather identification case with Hill's credentials and permits from Earth IMPEX, Draco, and other governmental authorities. It contains, as well, a company travel pass, pictures of beings of several species, and over sixteen hundred credits in currency. There is the key to his rented flyer, a key to his room at Colony House, an exclusive hotel in First Colony. There is a smashed pocket computer and Yamagata bags all of it to bring back to the Aakva Lua laboratory. There is nothing I see that connects Michael Hill to the Timans. Later, up at the mouth of the cave, I stand outside with the others as Kita Yamagata, wearing a protective suit and respirator, enters alone. Sanda explains that Yamagata has experience as an arson investigator, arson being mostly a human way of killing. Falna remarks that Yamagata is a rather competent medical investigator, as well. While we wait, Sanda goes over the terms of the agreement once more with Jeriba Zammiss. Aakva Lua is free to release information to any other investigative company or police authority that may wish to pursue the matter, even if such action is opposed to the legal interests of Jeriba Zammiss or other members, employees, or agents of the Jeriba line or Jeriba estate. Aakva Lua may also seek and accept employment from parties other than Jeriba Zammiss, using such information, and so on and so forth, la la la. Zammiss agrees to it all. Sanda asks Davidge and me questions regarding Hill's possible motives. I relate my experience with the IMPEX representative on the ship, and Davidge and I share with the investigator conjectures concerning old vengeance and recent insanity. Davidge does not share our thoughts about the talma and the possible Timan interference. I keep silent on this matter as well. While Sanda returns to the bottom of

the cliff and supervises its operatives in loading the body into an Aakva Lua flyer, I notice once more Zammis's troubled manner. It is looking at the entrance to the cave, the leather and stick door open. Jeriba Zammis notices me and says, "In doing business I have been to Draco, Earth, and many of the planets colonized by both powers. So many times I have seen populations living as though in the midst of a war zone. The inhabitants divide themselves into tribes, arm themselves, put bars on windows, and live in fear. The wealthy turn their estates into forts and their retainers into armies." It motions toward the cave with its hand. "Thieves, killers, terrorists insane on ideals, and I believed that Planet Friendship was exempt."

"How can any place be exempt?" I ask. Zammis looks upon me as though I am mad. "We have no tribes here, we are not awash in poverty, crime, or repression!" Davidge is looking out over the sea. He glances toward Zammis, and says, "Sharks don't kill because they're poor, criminal, insane, or repressed, Zammis. Sharks kill because they're sharks."

"Michael Hill?" demands Zammis. "Michael Hill was a shark? He was a fine, intelligent, imaginative man of business. I know his family. He has taken the repasts here at the estate. Michael Hill was no shark, Uncle." Davidge looks at me and nods as a tiny smile pulls back the left corner of his mouth. I watch as he picks up a rock and hands it to Jeriba Zammis. "Is this a shark?" asks the human. Zammis takes the rock and studies it for a moment. Keeping the rock, Ty's parent looks at Davidge, frowns, and asks, "Who?" I am confused, not knowing what a shark is nor the meaning of the rock. Zammis opens its mouth to ask again and Davidge cuts off its former student with a wave of his finger as Kita Yamagata lumbers into view, the helmet of her protective suit back, the respirator hanging from a strap around her neck. In her gloved hands are the remains of a metal case, its top and two sides melted away. She stops in front of us and holds out her treasure. "One thing we know for sure is that Brother Hill didn't know drool about setting fires. At least, not with one of these things."

"What is that?" I ask. Yamagata looks at Davidge. He shrugs and shakes his head. "What we have here, folks," says the woman, "is a mining tool called a thermal drill. It uses a special plastic explosive called Thermex. Under various brand names, it's used by most large mining operations in the quadrant." She wiggles a finger at a tangle of wires and molten metal next to a lump of black goo in the bottom of the case. "This case was filled with the stuff. It burns hot enough to turn granite to ashes with almost no smoke. Lots of steam, though, if there's water in the drilling medium." She pokes a wad of wires and melted circuit boards. "With this gadget you can program the size and shape of the burn. Miners use it for tunneling, removing obstructions, drilling holes -- wherever they want to get rid of some rock." Yamagata holds up a gloved hand and points at the black lump in the bottom of the case. "This stuff used to be an initiator."

When it is triggered, it vaporizes, combines with an igniter, the combination achieving a high enough temperature to ignite the Thermex. If it doesn't go in exactly that sequence, the Thermex won't ignite. Instead it will melt or vaporize. It's a safety thing. This initiator was never triggered." Davidge moves a step closer and looks down into the box. "It looks like there was a fire to me." She looks up at him and grins. "Oh, there was a fire, all right. The igniter was set off out of sequence. That was what caused the fire. Because it couldn't combine with the trigger vapor, though, it couldn't ignite the Thermex." Yamagata turns and holds her hand toward the entrance to the cave. "If this thing had been set off in the proper sequence, Mr. Davidge, that cave would be one big hole in the ground. As it is, it's just a smoked out mess. The Thermex vapor condensed on the wood and smothered the fire started by the igniter." She turns back and looks at us one at a time. "Now, what I don't understand is this: a man like Mr. Hill, running around the quadrant for Earth IMPEX, probably knows more about mining methods and equipment than just about anybody." Her gaze rests on Jeriba Zammis. Zammis nods. "Of course. IMPEX has been using thermal drills since before the war. You can't sell the customer unless you can show him how the gadget works. Michael Hill was well qualified to represent IMPEX's interests, and he certainly knew how to use a thermal drill." Davidge points at the remains of the thermal drill and says to Kita Yamagata, "I thought you said Hill didn't know drool about setting off one of these." The woman grins. "I'll bet my next two paychecks that this drill isn't one of the IMPEX models. IMPEX and JACHE," she explains, "have licenses to produce the stuff from Nisak, who made it available to both outfits before the war. Each company produces its own range of models." Nisak. I look at Davidge, but he is looking at the investigator. "Timan Nisak?" he asks. "That's right. Timan Nisak invented Thermex and the thermal drill. In any event, it appears that Michael Hill wasn't thoroughly familiar with this particular model, and ichi-bu hachi ken." She sees our confused expressions and says, "One-tenth of an inch, forty-eight feet." While Zammis and I remain confused, Davidge smiles slightly and says, "Small errors can result in big mistakes." She smiles widely, obviously pleased that Davidge understood her enigmatic reference, and says to us all, "I'll bet that this is either a JACHE drill or one from Timan Nisak." Davidge keeps looking at the melted case in Yamagata's hands and says, "Yazi Ro, what do you want to wager that this drill is from Dracon JACHE?" I slowly shake my head. "Not even air." There is a whining sound coming from the edge of the cliff and soon we see the Aakva Lua flyer move out across the water, make a steep climbing turn to the right, and set course for First Colony, Michael Hill's body in its cargo bay. The others begin walking the path to the house. I begin following but pause when I see Mirili Sanda struggling its way up the path to the ledge. Keeping against the wall, I go down a few steps and lend the overweight investigator a hand getting up the last few steps. At the top, Sanda wheezes its thanks and sits on an outcropping to catch its breath. "That Zammis is twice as old as I am and it runs up and down this trail like it was three. The company has an employee's gym. I think I'll drop in and see what I can do to get in better physical

shape." As Sanda rests, its gaze wanders along the edge of the ledge then to the door, back to the ledge, and then to the rocks below. "Yazi Ro, if you were going to plant a bomb in this cave, could you forget this cliff outside the entrance, no matter how dark it was, no matter how big a panic was driving your feet?" I look down at the rocks and shake my head. "No, Mirili Sanda, I could not forget. I, though, pay particular attention to heights."

"Everyone does, Yazi Ro. Everyone does."

## CHAPTER 19

The slightly warmer temperatures of the early morning drop suddenly, foreshadowing a new storm. In the house, Davidge isolates himself with the subspace link and doesn't emerge for the second or night repasts. After the night repast, in the main gathering salon, Jeriba Zammis tells us that the investigators will return to ask more questions. They have some lab results and they have located the flyer Michael Hill rented. They will be here in a few moments. As Zammis, Ty, Estone Falna, and I sit and speculate about what the investigators have found, Davidge at last emerges from Ty's office, the expression on his face somewhere between confusion and fatigue. He drops into a chair, becoming part of our circle. "What is it, Uncle?" asks Falna. "The Ovjetah informs me," he announces, "that if the talma leads to Planet Timan then the talma leads to Planet Timan."

"That took you from before the second repast?" I ask. "Basically. The rest was taken up with a little talk about relatives, and a lot of talk about why Shigan can't talk about what I want to talk about. If Timan has nothing to do with this damned talma, why can't Shiggy just say so? It's as stubborn as a damned mule." Falna assumes a serious expression and says, "I can't imagine where the Ovjetah would acquire a trait such as that."

"Such a human quality," adds Ty. Zammis's child grins as Davidge glares at both of them and raises his eyebrows. "There is a difference, my children, between conviction and stubbornness. The former is based on knowledge or sincere belief. The latter is rooted in stupidity brought on by the need to be regarded as right."

"My parent," says Ty to Zammis, "it is a shame how stupid your parent is. I have always said so."

"True, true," responds Zammis, shaking its head sadly and turning to Davidge. "What can one do, Uncle? Ever since Shigan took on its master's robe and then earned the position of Ovjetah of the Talman Kovah, it has been impossible to convince my parent of its stupidity." Falna laughs out loud at this. Davidge drums his fingers on the armrests of the chair

for a moment, then says with half a smile, "You clowns ought to take your act on the road." Our laughter is interrupted by Mizy Untav. The doorkeeper enters, bows, and announces the investigators from Aakva Lua. Mirili Sanda and Kita Yamagata enter. Sanda is wearing the same tan short robe, trousers, and boots from this morning. Yamagata is dressed in an all white, high collared jumpsuit with soft white boots laced up to just below her knees. A red flower is in her hair and her eyes almost glitter. I turn my head and look at Davidge sitting uncomfortably in his old snakeskin leathers scratching his beard. His gaze is fixed on the center of the floor. It is impossible for me to fathom these human hormonal reactions. Kita Yamagata, who regards Davidge as an overage murder suspect, primps herself and preens in front of him like a vacci bird before a prospective mate. Willis E. Davidge, dedicated to teaching The Talman and line to an endless succession of Drac children, isolated from human companionship and celibate for the past three decades, now a murder suspect, is squirming in his chair because he wishes he looks more presentable before the woman who might charge him with murder. Of course, I am no master on the subject of love. My own encounters were hurried, almost chance events between horrors, leaving me without love or loving. There is a barren loneliness eating at me, and between that and Davidge's comical look, I would too become a clown. I envy him his discomfort as I take a furtive look at Estone Falna. Falna is watching Sanda with both eyes as the Drac investigator folds its arms across its chest. "Earth IMPEX and Michael Hill's family both want to continue with the investigation, although they are doing so through investigative companies other than Aakva Lua. JACHE is also interested in continuing the investigation, but unlike IMPEX, it is using Aakva Lua."

"Are you at liberty to reveal JACHE's interest?" asks Zammis. "And what of Timan Nisak?"

"Nisak has been informed, but has not responded. As to JACHE's interest, they have placed no restrictions on us, and it seems that Hill's actions have the potential to affect business, and JACHE is in business." Sanda looks at Davidge. "The laboratory and autopsy reports are in and everything appears to be consistent with events as related to us by Willis Davidge and Jeriba Haesni this morning. Our pathologist reports that Michael Hill's death was caused by massive trauma to his internal organs, as a result of his fall down the cliff." Sanda nods toward Yamagata. She nods back and looks at each of us, one at a time. "As I surmised, the thermal drill is not an IMPEX model. There are no chemical markers in the explosive, and both IMPEX and JACHE are required by their laws to have markers in all of their explosives. That means that the explosive is from Timan Nisak. The case itself has markings that our translation service has identified as Timan." Davidge frowns and says, "So, what's an IMPEX sales representative doing in my cave with a Timan explosive?" "Trying to kill both you and Haesni, I have no doubt," says Yamagata. "Understand that Thermex burns with such an intense heat that there would be no evidence left at all had Hill programmed and set off the

thing correctly. Either he was not familiar with the Nisak model, he was nervous, or something else impaired his performance."

"Michael Hill

was no killer," declares Jeriba Zammis. "Everything you have said confirms that. Some threat, some incredible pressure must have been brought to bear. What of the supplier of this explosive? What of Timan Nisak?"

"All talmas lead to Timan," Davidge remarks, his gaze still fixed to the floor. Falna sits forward, looks from Sanda to Yamagata, and says, "We were told that this meeting had to do with some further questioning." Yamagata nods and looks at me. "Perhaps I am in error, Yazi Ro, but when I was talking with you and Willis Davidge this morning I got the distinct impression that both of you were certain that the drill was Timan." I glance at Davidge and he shrugs followed by a nod. I look back at the woman. "Davidge and I are implementing a talma devised by a Talman master on Amadeen and assigned to us by the Jetai Diea through Ovjetah Jeriba Shigan. The intended result of the talma is peace on Amadeen." Her dark eyes aim at Davidge but her face is still turned toward me. "And Timan Nisak?"

"There is a new book of The Talman," I answer. "It will probably be published to all worlds in the near future. It describes how, under the direction of a quadrant diplomat, Hissied-do'timan, Timan Nisak was used to begin Amadeen's war." Her eyebrows go up. "The USE-Draco War?"

"Yes." Mirili Sanda's mouth hangs open in astonishment. Equally astonished are Jeriba Zammis and Ty. Estone Falna sits studying the female investigator. Davidge leans forward and raises his gaze to the woman's face. "Since their prehistory the Timans have survived and achieved superiority by manipulating stronger species into destroying themselves. The Koda Nusinda is called The Eyes of Joanne Nicole. It has been withheld from publication for all this time because ten or twenty years ago what is in the work would have probably initiated a war of Dracs and humans against Timan and the entire quadrant. At the very least, the bad feelings would have shattered quadrant interplanetary economic and defense agreements."

"What about its publication now?" asks Zammis. "Enough time has passed so that its interest for most persons now is mostly historical." Davidge looks at Yamagata. "The Timans, though, might find the widespread publication of the Nusinda very embarrassing, and perhaps threatening. It outlines very effectively how the Timans function in regard to other species as well as how far at least some Timans are willing to carry it." Kita Yamagata narrows her eyes as she says, "If the talma based on this book fails, perhaps the book will be rejected by the Jetai Diea." Her partner frowns. "Even if it is published," adds Sanda, "it will be discredited. How better to make it fail than by



removing those who are necessary to its success?" The investigator looks around at the persons in the chamber, and says, "This investigation, like your talma, seems to lead to Timan." After a long silence, Yamagata says, "If we had a government, now would be the time someone might suggest we get in touch with the proper authorities." She looks at Sanda. "This is going to be expensive." Sanda waves its hand back and forth. "JACHE has placed a substantial line of credit at our disposal. I'm sure they will increase it when I include this new information." It looks at Davidge. "May I have a copy of the Koda Nusinda?"

"Yes," answers Davidge. "The Ovjetah asked me if I thought I should supply copies to you. I answered that I thought I should. "Then perhaps it is talma,' it said."

"What about the talma?" I ask Davidge.  
"JACHE might fund Aakva Lua's investigation on Timan, but what about ours?" Davidge, unaware that he is doing so, scratches his beard. "I don't know. You have the funds from the Jetai Diea. I must have some money on the reprints of my translation." He looks at Zammis and both Zammis and Ty appear stunned. Zammis looks at the investigators. "May we have a moment alone?"

"Of course," says Sanda. He bows and both he and Yamagata leave the room. I begin to follow, but Davidge restrains me with a hand upon my shoulder. "Uncle," Zammis begins, "you may go anywhere you wish and mount virtually any size and type of expedition you have in mind short of an armed invasion of the quadrant."

"This might take hundreds of thousands," warns Davidge. Jeriba Zammis leans forward in its chair and assumes the expression of one attempting to explain something to a retarded child. "Uncle, it is this frustrating attitude of yours regarding money. Every time any of us attempt to talk to you about it, you make jokes or grow impatient and cut us short. I have tried to explain this to you before --" Davidge holds up a hand. "Can we have the short version."

"See?" says Zammis. It shakes its head and lets out a breath it seems to have been holding for all of its sixteen years. "The short version, Uncle, is that there are sufficient assets in your name to purchase a small planet." Now it is Davidge who looks stunned. "I know the translation went into its sixteenth printing, but --" Ty reaches out a hand and places it on Davidge's arm. "Jeriba Gothig, your friend Jerry's parent, when it moved the line to Friendship to settle here, put a quarter of every new Jeriba enterprise in your name, a practice that all of us have continued. The port in First Colony, hotels, stores, hospitals, apartment complexes, ski resorts, toll roads, farms, airlines, spacelines, shipping, flyers, investments in more things than I could possibly recall. The money and properties have been managed, and you spend very little."

"Here,"

interrupts Zammis holding up its pocket computer. "Uncle, your assets right now amount to just under two hundred million credits. Your only liabilities involve bills for almost ninety-five credits in overdue lift tickets and ski tuneups that you haven't paid." Zammis lowers its little computer and looks at the human. Davidge scratches his head, looks around the chamber, and shrugs. "Yazi Ro, I guess we're going to Timan." He looks at Jeriba Zammis, a guilty note in his voice. "I'll take care of those skiing bills." He purses his lips, thinks a moment, and we watch as his eyes glisten. "I remember Gothig saying something about taking care of me before it died. I wonder how far into the future Gothig could see." He glances at me, frowns, then faces Zammis. "Am I invested in Timan Nisak?" Zammis nods as he picks at his pocket computer. "Forty nine percent of the stock is open for those other than Timan citizens, and you hold half a percent of that. Almost forty million." Zammis raises his brows and looks over its computer at Davidge. "Between your holdings and those of the Jeriba estate's, we are the largest single alien investor in Nisak."

"Why such a high

percentage of all his holdings?" I ask. Zammis raises an eyebrow and swings its gaze in my direction. "Steady eleven percent annual dividend." Davidge stares at the floor for a moment, then turns to Zammis's child. "Ty, I need somebody who knows about money. Zammis can't be spared from its business interests, and it's getting a little long in the tooth anyway. Would you come with us to Timan?" Ty sits silently for a moment, then nods. "I will come, Uncle. Thank you for inviting me to be a part of your talma. "I would come, as well," says Falna as it moves to stand at my side. Davidge frowns and looks at Estone Falna. "Do you want to go?"

"I do, Uncle."

"Why?" The young

Drac's eyebrows rise and then lower. "Uncle, I have gone to considerable trouble and expense to acquire the skills to treat humans. My primary motive for this was and is your continued good health."

"I'm  
fine."

"Yes, and I insist on keeping you that way."

"Uncle," Ty

interjects, "Besides its medical knowledge, remember that Falna has been to Timan when it attended the Ri Mou Tavii." Zammis nods in agreement and says, "As a deputy of the Jetai Diea, Falna's presence can add a lot of clout to your investigation. It would cut the paper wizards down to size."

"Please include me," begs Falna. "Give me the chance to make up for what a terrible child I was in the cave." Davidge laughs, holds up his hands, and grins at Falna. "I'd be pleased to have you. Pack your bags. And you were not such a terrible child, Falna. I was, and am, very proud of you." Falna grins, places a hand on my shoulder, and squeezes it. "Thank you, Uncle. Davidge faces Yamagata and Sanda in turn. "I think we are after different ends of the same rope. Will you combine your investigation with our expedition?" Sanda raises its head and says, "I will have to clear this with Aakva Lua and with JACHE, but I can see no objection. I think it is an excellent thought." Davidge gets to his feet and faces Jeriba Ty. "I want to get cleaned up and get something to eat. Then we'll get together and start getting this trip to Timan on the road." He stops in front of the investigator, Kita Yamagata, still self conscious about his appearance. "Do you ski?" he asks. She smiles and nods. "I see you every now and then at Hidden Valley." He says, then she says, they laugh, and he says some more and I leave, a strange touch of jealousy filling me. I am confused by it. I am not one of those who couples with humans, male or female, and I have no secret desire to try. Even if I did have such an inclination, it wouldn't be with an ultra hairy sixty-three year old male with a sour disposition who lives in a cave on an ice planet. Neither would it be with a tiny woman who jumps around on rocks like she cared nothing about her life. The feeling, though, is jealousy. In my rooms I think on it and find my jealousy standing before me as clear as the desert sun. I am jealous of Davidge and Yamagata. They can desire, they can, perhaps, even love. Give love, accept it, risk it, trust it, perhaps even act on it. They possess emotional parts I am missing. They are complete beings and I am only part alive. The few I desired, the fewer I loved, all dead. Over the years I turned my desire and love into staying alive, killing, and hardening my heart against everyone. Never before have I seen this as I do now: cowardice. Yazi Ro will not be hurt. All I can do now is look at someone like Falna and ache. I place my hand on the shoulder Falna touched and fight to recall the feeling. My armor is only a shell and never before did it seem so thin, so empty. "My apologies, Yazi Ro, but your doors were open." I look and Estone Falna is standing just inside my greeting room door. My heart beats so hard I fear it might tear itself to pieces. "What is it, Falna?"

"Could you come to Haesni's rooms? I believe the child is frightened. I tried to help, but Uncle is with Haesni and he suggested you might help."

"I?" I feel my heart slowing, disappointment settling in. "I believe, Yazi Ro, that he said you are something of a fear expert. Haesni urged me to ask you." I nod my assent and follow Falna out of my rooms, trying to ascertain whether I have been insulted or complimented. Compliment or insult, it is suddenly very threatening to me. To do either Davidge must see past my emotional armor, which means the armor is useless. Soon those thoughts subside as I notice the grace with which Falna walks. There is a piece of my mind that would dare to imagine us making

love, while the rest of me laughs at the thought of this brilliant deputy of the Jetai Diea degrading itself to rut with a piece of Amadeen filth. At the north wing of the guest floor, Falna pauses before an open greeting room door and guides me in. At the sleeping room door, it pauses and waits. The sleeping room door is open, I enter and Haesni is in its bed, a man seated in a chair beside it. The human is in cloth clothing, tan trousers and a dark green jacket. He has no facial hair and his other hair is well trimmed. The only way I recognize Davidge is that his feet are still in those same old snakeskin boots. Saying nothing, Davidge stands, nods his thanks, and leaves. I walk over to the bed. Ty's child is frowning, its gaze focused on some point past its feet. I glance at the door, Falna smiles at me, bows its head, and leaves me alone with the child. I face Haesni. "Falna said you wanted to speak to me." The child's jaws almost grind, its arms ridged at its sides, the hands flexing beneath the covers. "Yazi Ro, have you ever been frightened?" Frightened? I lower myself into the chair vacated by the human and land like a bag of sand. I sit there stupidly as emotions safely locked away for years bubble forth leaving me torn between laughter and tears. "Yazi Ro?" I turn my head and Haesni is looking up at me, its eyes wide. "Ro?" I take a deep breath, blink my eyes, and sit forward, my elbows resting on my lap. "Child. Have I ever been frightened?" The tears win over the laughter. I feel them streaking down my cheeks. I wipe them away with my hands and nod. "Yes, Jeriba Haesni, I have been frightened." I look at the child. "Many times." Ty's child looks away, its face softer. "What do you do with the fear?" "I have nightmares. During waking hours I use the fear to make me watchful. In sleep I have nightmares."

"Do the nightmares ever end?"

"I don't know." Haesni's hand steals out from beneath the covers and holds mine. "Tell me something that scared you, Ro -- that scares you still." I think of a hundred battles, Butaan Ji and the man who wanted me to end his pain; Douglasville and the man with the flute; Stokes Crossing; Gitoh; Riehm Vo; so many. The horrors, the pain, the endless terror of it all. It would aid nothing, though, to give the child a heavier burden of nightmares. There are, though, other fears. I pick one of mine. "The cliff in front of the cave, Haesni. Its height. It frightens me. It took all I could find to climb down to the bottom. I hate standing on that ledge." Haesni looks at me, its eyes wide in disbelief. "That doesn't frighten me." I shrug and respond, "A little bit of smoke doesn't frighten me." The child looks at me for an instant, and laughs. I laugh with Haesni. I stay that night next to Ty's child, sharing warmth, bad dreams, and the night storm's wrath.

## CHAPTER 20

Early the next morning, the sky still dark, we take the first repast, Estone Nev, Haesni, Zammis, Ty, Falna and Davidge at the table. Afterward, Zammis and its driver streak me toward First Colony to an

environmental suit outfitter near the port. From there we proceed to the port and Zammis and I meet with a Vikaan, Rotek I Hye, the representative of the chartering service Zammis hired. The purpose of the visit is to inspect a ship for the voyage. Mirili Sanda arrives after us and joins us in the charter service's office. Rotek I Hye is the first Vikaan I have ever seen. Tall, thin, and fragile looking, her smooth face is set with huge greenish eyes. As with everyone else on Friendship, she dresses as though in the midst of an ice age. Nonetheless, her words of greeting are crowded with sentiments of the allegedly approaching spring. After she conducts her search on the link, there is only one ship and crew on register and in port that is ready to depart at a moment's notice equipped for an indeterminate stay on Timan. This seems to simplify the selection process for me. The coincidence of there being only one ship at the port, available, and fitted out for Timan bothers both Sanda and Zammis. As Zammis, Rotek, and I leave to inspect the ship, Sanda remains behind to check out the histories of ship, crew, and owner. The ship is the Aeolus, a fifteen year old refitted USEF attack transport serving as a small passenger and cargo vessel. It carries up to ten passengers and a crew of four: Pilot, co-pilot, engineer, and a cargo master who also serves as the ship's steward. Although old, the ship appears new and well cared for, its hull sleek and gloss black. The pilot, Eli Moss, is a human and I think approaching forty years, although it is hard to tell with humans. He is dark with a cap of short black hair above unblinking brown eyes set in a serious face. No taller than Davidge, he seems unusually muscular. He conducts the tour of his ship with the distaste of one allowing peculiarly endowed aliens to fondle its underthings. The tour through the ship is thorough and quick, from the cockpit and crew's quarters, to the cargo bay, suspension pod bay, and passenger cabins, arranged in single rooms according to human custom. The only two places we are not taken are the engine room and the captain's quarters because, as Eli Moss puts it, "None of you have any business in either." The suspension pods look like elongated silver teardrops gathered into two circles, the points aiming toward the centers where are located the life support monitoring banks. There is room in the compartment for six other such circles, but they have been removed and the space given over to exercise equipment and more cargo space. It is going to be a six month trip to Timan, and as the captain points out, in the space between takeoff and landing, life on the Aeolus is much like doing time in prison. Upon relating that bit of information, he smiles his only smile. "Captain Moss is making it sound worse than it really is," assures Rotek I Hye after we return to First Colony Charters. "You'll be in suspension for most of the trip, with probably one or two interruptions for health checks and maintenance. While you are in suspension you can go blank, as they say, leaving your trip with only a total of perhaps five or six days in real time, or you can use the time either to entertain or educate yourself." Zammis makes a joke about being on a trip to Earth once and stuck in the middle of a work called Moby Dick for twenty-eight days until it was rescued by a maintenance and exercise break. "'Damn your eyes!'" shouts Jeriba Zammis, "'what's that pump stopping for?'" Roared Radney, pretending not to have heard the sailors' talk. "Thunder

away at it!" "Aye, aye, sir," said Steelkilt, merry as a cricket." And so on. In a more serious vein, Zammis points out that, if I want to, I can have The Talman programmed for the voyage. "It would give you a solid foundation for memorizing the work, for when you stand the rites." The charterer apologizes and says that in another six days there will be a second ship available for charter, and in a month a third. Moving a charter from a larger port on another planet would effectively triple the price and would take at least forty days. Sanda joins us at the charter office and Rotek I Hye excuses herself and leaves as the investigator reports using its pocket computer to refresh its memory. "The ship is registered on Rhana and is one of three such ships owned by Moss Transportation, which is wholly owned by Eli Moss, captain of the Aeolus. Although he has never actually been charged with violating any laws, he has a bit of a reputation as a smuggler." I ask, "Was Moss in the military?" Sanda nods as it pages to a particular reference. "He was an attack pilot in the USEF seeing action only in the Buldahk Insurrection eleven years ago. Shortly afterward he was dismissed under dishonorable conditions for disobeying orders and striking several superior officers. After his dismissal, he flew as a mercenary for several quadrant powers, principally for the Dracon Chamber. Five years ago he took his savings and began his cargo line."

"Did he ever serve the Timans?" asks Zammis. "No. The only connection with Timan I can find is that he does regular runs there, bringing in the few human and Drac passengers who need to travel there on business, and to bring in specialized instruments and equipment available only outside Timan." "For Timan Nisak?" I ask. "Yes. Among others." I point at Sanda's computer. "What of the crew?"

"The co-pilot is a female named Yora Beneres. When Moss was cashiered from the USEF she resigned her own commission. She's been with Moss ever since. The engineer is a male named Ghazi Mrabet. He's been with Moss for the past three years, and appears to be something of a magician with machinery." Sanda raises a disapproving eyebrow. "Prior to his employment with Moss, Mrabet's principal notoriety was based on his well-publicized sexual liaisons with some rather well known Dracs, most notably the artist Xian Ti."

"He knows Xian Ti, the sculptor?" blurts out Jeriba Zammis, thoroughly starstruck and quite missing Sanda's point. "Yes. Quite." The investigator pages down and says, "The remaining member of the crew, cargo master and steward Ernst Brandt, served with the Tsien Denvedah, becoming a seventh officer before he resigned to join the same mercenary unit for which Moss was fighting." I am stunned. "A human in the Tsien Denvedah?" Sanda looks at me as though I had recently emerged from beneath a rock. "Of course. Humans have been in the Denve for the past two decades. Dracs are in the USEF, as well."

"When in the Denve,"

interrupts Zammis, "did this Ernst Brandt have a specialty?" Sanda taps a finger on its computer's tiny screen. "Military intelligence. His nickname is Reaper."

"Reaper?" I repeat. "It's an agricultural term the significance of which escapes me," answered the investigator."

"Among some humans," Zammis interrupted, "the Grim Reaper is a euphemism for Death." I acknowledge the explanation with raised eyebrows and a sinking feeling. Jeriba Zammis walks to a window and looks through it to the enclosed mall connected to the space port. A scattering of humans and Dracs walk slowly, pausing to look in the store windows while the moving walkways speed small crowds of pedestrians to their various destinations. "Tell me, Mirili Sanda," says Zammis. "If there were two ships available for this charter instead of just one, what are the odds of the second ship being similar to the Aeolus and its crew?"

"Charter work is something for which ships register when they can't get anything else. I've seen worse ships and more disreputable crews, Jeriba Zammis, but not much better."

"What of this involvement with Timan Nisak?"

"A ship equipped to land on Timan gets that way because it travels to Timan. Nisak is the largest single interplanetary business concern there. Chances are good that if a human or Drac ship is used in business on Timan, it will at some time or other deal with Nisak or a subsidiary of Nisak." Zammis turns from the window and looks at Sanda. "Then it is merely a coincidence?" Sanda holds out its hands. "That is possible." Facing the window once more, Zammis says, "Sanda, please post that information to the estate. Uncle might be back by now and Ty will show it to him. It's Uncle's decision, not mine."

"Back?" I inquire. Zammis glances at me and returns its gaze to the mall. "Yes. Uncle went skiing this morning." As I point out to myself that there is no point in asking why or with whom, Zammis asks Sanda. "Incidentally, what is the significance of the ship's name, Aeolus?"

"Moss named the ship after it was refitted, and the name wasn't English or Esper so I wondered and did some research." Sanda glanced at me and then told Zammis, "In ancient belief on Earth, among the tribe of Greeks, Aeolus was the god of the winds."

"The Greeks. Zeus, Athens, Aristotle and all that?"

"Yes." I face Jeriba Zammis. "Humans often name their machines and other possessions. I have seen humans address weapons, helmets, luck charms, landtraks, flyers, cook stoves, and satellites with names of endearment. Usually the names are only a way to make an inanimate object something more: a friend or companion. There are no rules or customs, as such." Zammis rubs its chin. "I have witnessed this same behavior on Earth. The chief executive officer of Baine Whitley refers to her computer as 'The Bitch.' I can't recall Uncle ever naming such things, however." Zammis looks at Sanda. "What are the names of Moss's other ships?"

"The Max Stearn, named after a fellow USEF pilot of Moss's whose ship and crew were completely destroyed in the Buldahk Insurrection shortly before Moss was dismissed from the USEF. The remaining ship is the Edmund Fitzgerald, named for a fresh water ore ship on Earth owned by the Columbia Line that sank with its entire crew during a storm in the Common Era year of 1975." I look at Jeriba Zammis. "Jetah, I cannot pretend to know anything about business, but naming one of his ships after a pilot who died in a wreck and naming another ship after another wreck seems needlessly morose."

"It does tend to open one's mind on the subject of travel insurance." Zammis nods and hold out his hands. "I'd prefer waiting the extra time and using one of the off planet charters, but it's up to Uncle."

## CHAPTER 21

When we return to the estate, Ty is directing a scarcely controlled chaos. Undev Orin, Mizy Untav, and the other retainers race from floor to floor and wing to wing, their arms piled with things. When I reach my rooms, all my things are packed. I return to the main hall and track Jeriba Ty to its office, where Zammis is on the link, issuing instructions and jumping from address to address. Ty is on the com finishing off some last minute instructions to someone. As it pauses to take a breath, I ask, "What is happening?" For a moment Ty looks at me as though it has no idea who I am or where I am located in the enigma of its current activities. When the eyebrows rise, signifying recognition, Ty says, "The Aeolus leaves tonight for Timan. There are approximately half a million things that need doing before boarding." Ty immediately begins punching a number into its com. "Why so soon?" Suddenly I am angry and touched by panic. "No one asked me when I wanted to go!"

"Quite correct," Ty responds as it finishes punching in the number. "Well, what if I refuse to go?" Ty studies me for a breath and says, "If you refuse to go, you do not go." Frowning, Ty leans forward and speaks quietly so that Zammis cannot overhear. "Yazi Ro, it is not my habit to give out unsolicited advice, but in your case I am making an exception. You really ought to get to know your Talman." With that, Jeriba Ty leans back and begins talking into the com.



For some reason I feel that I need to talk to the human. On the fly, Undev Orin tells me that Davidge is in the cave. The walk to the cave under the approaching night overcast confuses me. Friendship seemed like such a cold, forbidding place. Now that the prospect of Planet Timan looms before me, the melting ice, the blue strip between the blankets of gray above, the raging sea seem like indispensable luxuries. Before, when Davidge and I discussed the possibility of following Zenak Abi's talma to Planet Timan, I made up my mind to go. If peace is truly possible, that is where I have to be to make life with myself bearable. My outburst at Jeriba Ty had more to do with feeling caught in a current, powerless to influence the events before me. The fear, though, is real. As I reach the entrance to the cave, I hear a seductive, haunting voice singing in a language I do not know very well. I think it is Japanese, the human tongue spoken by most of the prisoners we took after the Battle of Butaan Ji. The singing man and his dead daughter. The song coming from the cave, though, is not sad. It reminds me of the song Pina would sing at times before we loved. I wonder if I might interrupt Kita Yamagata and Davidge in a human love making, but then hear Davidge bellow "Shit!" This well known human sentiment is followed by the sound of pottery being smashed. Yamagata is no longer singing her song. I enter the cave and see the woman, seated on one of the explosive covered firewood logs. She is wearing a deep purple suit that covers everything except her head. Around her neck is a golden chain and suspended from it is an amulet similar to a Drac Talman. As she sees me, she nods a little bow and smiles. The interior of the cave is black from the flames and condensed vapor, the odor of chemicals strong in the air. Balanced on the rocks of the fireplace, there is a battery powered lamp casting everything in a harsh blue light. Before either she or I can say anything, Davidge's voice comes from one of the back chambers. "Esha may be able to divest itself of material possessions, but we don't live in a tropical paradise!" He emerges from the entrance on my right holding a small pair of boots, blackened and gummy-looking. "Look at these. Haesni worked so hard on them."

"And

what is the lesson Haesni now has an opportunity to learn from this?" asks Yamagata, her face quite serious, but her eyes filled with laughter. Davidge aims a brief scowl at her, then softens his face and sits next to the investigator, holding the boots before him. "Fairness is an illusion. Neither effort nor intention holds title to the nature or form of either the present or the future." His lips crack in a tiny smile. "And if sincere effort has no title, what interest can the bellow or the lamentation hold?"

"The humans on Amadeen have a different way of saying it," I observe. Davidge faces me and asks, "What's that?" "Tough shit." Both of them laugh at that and Davidge gets to his feet, tossing the boots aside. "Well, after Yazi Ro's abbreviated version of the Koda Ovsinda, about the only thing left to do is to find another cave." He waves a hand at the walls. "It'll be decades before this

will be a safe place to bring up a youngster." I walk over to him and ask something that has bothered me since I first met Willis E. Davidge. "Why bring up a youth in a cave?" Davidge frowns at me as he puts on his hooded coat. "Of all the persons I have ever met, Yazi Ro, you are the one I thought would understand without explaining." With that, he turns, picks up his coat, and heads for the opening. In a flash I shout at his back, "I am not one of your students!" Kita Yamagata stands, places a hand on my arm, and says, "If that is so, you may want to ask yourself why you are here."

"The talma. The path to peace on Amadeen. That is why I am here." She nods, her eyes looking up at me. "What is the point of putting you together with Will if he learns nothing from you, if you learn nothing from him? We are all students, Yazi Ro; and we are all teachers." She pauses as though weighing something she might say. "What is it?" I ask. She weighs it once more, purses her lips, narrows her eyes, and says, "Learn your Talman, Ro. It's not only the peace on Amadeen that may be at stake." She pats my arm. "At stake as well is the peace of your own being." I want to shake her hand off my arm, but I do not, for I fear she is right. A burdensome thing to hear from a Drac; more burdensome still from a human. I look at the golden locket hanging from her neck. It is her Talman, carrying the strange sign of a dragon. At the battle of Butaan Ji, I saw a similar sign. It was a tattoo on the back of one of the dead defenders. I watched as a Mavedah soldier cut the skin from the dead man's back, saving the tattoo for a trophy. I watched and felt nothing. Kita Yamagata smiles at me and turns to put on her hooded coat. "Yamagata," I say. "Kita," she corrects. "With humans the line name comes last." She smiles widely. "Which is funny, because that is not always true. With my people the given name does come last. Of course, with my people my name is not Kita Yamagata; it is Yamagata Kita."

"Kita, then. Do you know The Talman?"

"My father and mother reared me within Earth's Talman Kovah." She continues fastening her coat. Old myths, cryptic lessons, they seem to make no difference on Amadeen. The only one on Amadeen I know who memorized its Talman was Zenak Abi, traitor, fugitive, and gunslinger. Too, Abi is the only person I met on Amadeen who appeared happy. Strangely enough, Abi also lives in a cave, if the jetah still lives. "Kita, what is it that Davidge thinks I ought to understand about his cave?"

"The answer is less important than what you learn finding the answer." She holds her hands up, indicating the cave. "The answers are in here," she reaches out a hand and touches the side of my head with her fingertips, "and in here." After she leaves, I look around at the blackened walls, the fireplace, the remains of the chairs, the beds, the firewood glued together with melted explosive. There are crudely made pots and plates, baked to a light red color. I see eating utensils

carved from wood. The covers and branches that made Davidge's bed are nothing but ashes, but Haesni's was not touched by the flames. The covers, though, are spread with the residue of the burning igniter's smoke. I take off my coat, hang it from a blackened peg, and turn back to the bed. I pull back the top cover and see its underside, untouched by the residue. The cover is made from long colorful strips of soft, pliable snakeskin, each strip carefully stitched into the cover. There is a small tear in the cover exposing the insulating medium that fills the layers. I pull some out and see that it is composed of seeds, each seed carrying a soft crown of delicate white fibers. The seeds tell me there is indeed a season on Friendship when the ice is gone and things grow. Seed pods are gathered, opened, and the fluff covered seeds quilted into layers of snakeskin for a coming winter. So much cold and ice, the winds strong and frightening. What the heart must feel when the spring comes: as the ice melts, as the first growing thing shows life, as the first animal who hides from the cold is seen emerging from the dark. It must have taken endless hours collecting the seed pods, catching and skinning snakes, curing and softening the skins, stitching them together. I look more closely. The thread is hand made from some kind of plant fiber. I do not doubt that in Davidge's cave the needles that were used were made as well. In the center of winter's intolerable cold, what must it be like to sleep upon such a bed, warm beneath such a quilt? Everything worn, eaten, slept on and beneath, hunted with, and used is something that was fashioned with mind driven hands. No child could do all of this without knowing that it matters, that the work it does has value, that personal responsibility is a survival tool.

Forty-one Drac children had been brought to adulthood in caves with Davidge. In the cave's primitive surroundings these children learned self reliance, teamwork, trust, to look beyond appearances at an individual's character, how to work, how to adapt, how to improvise, how to endure. By becoming one with this icy horror of a planet, they turned it into a home. The Jeriba Estate with its extravagant luxuries is only a stopping place for Davidge's students all of whom are as just as comfortable in cave or castle. There is no work beneath them, no challenge too exalted or too frightening to try. Most of all, such children become grateful for the many gifts of existence that others take for granted. I glimpse and understand how Davidge's students become complete beings, able to become successful at whatever they choose to do, even if that choice is to become a meditative monk living in isolation and deprivation on Earth. And there is Yazi Ro, one who can find dark on a star's burning surface. If I do not have it and cannot take it, I do without and use this to make my dark still darker. When I made or repaired something with which to prolong my existence on Amadeen, I was not grateful or congratulatory for the means of survival. Instead I cursed the circumstances that made such survival necessary. I look at the boots Haesni made. The tops are made of the same snakeskin, double layered and filled with seed down. The soles are made from many layers of snakeskin adhering to each other, glued together with some substance harvested from the land or sea. The residue from the smoke begins to affect my fingers, the skin burning. The back of my throat burns, as well. I leave the boots on Haesni's bed and walk toward the

entrance to listen to the sea. The night brings no new storms, but the winds are still strong. At the door, my arms wrapped about me against the cold, Davidge's first words to me make me smile. I close the door, turn to look at the sea, and, staying well back from the edge, let the winds wash my face. For a moment I am caught in my thoughts, envisioning myself part of this harmony of being and universe wrought by an accident of war. As I am about to go back in the cave to retrieve my coat, far out over the sea see a point of light. Except for the overcast, I would think it a star. It grows brighter and brighter until I am driven back to my senses and run. Four, five steps and I jump for the path to the top of the cliff for cover as a shrieking roar races behind me followed by an erupting inferno that flings me against the rocks. Half conscious, my arm covering my face, I turn to see a column of flames explode from the cave's entrance. First red and orange, it rapidly becomes blue-white, the roar of it deafening. Ice, rocks, and frozen clods of dirt fall about me and I see another column of fire shoot from the top of the cliff toward the sky. Almost as soon as it comes to life, it dies. The stream of flame from the entrance weakens and sputters out, leaving an orange glow from the super heated rock. There is a sound behind me and I see Davidge and Kita in the rocks above sliding down the path. When he reaches me, Davidge goes down on one knee and studies my face by the remaining glow of the rock. His left cheek is scratched and a cut above his left eye is bleeding freely. Kita slides to a stop beside him. She appears unharmed but frightened. Satisfied with my state of health, Davidge slumps back and sits beside me. "I guess someone finally figured out how to set off that Thermex." I look out to the sea, amazed that I am still alive, and wondering how much longer a reasonable person could expect this condition to continue.

## CHAPTER 22

Instead of slowing us down, the rocket attack speeds things up.

Placing Kita in charge of the Timan investigation, Sanda removes itself from the expedition to head up the search for the missile launching aircraft on Friendship, while that night the rest of us make for the First Colony Port and the Aeolus, ahead of schedule. As we are secured in our suspension pods, the first of the Talman stories begins. I see the others, clad in their skin tight blue vapor suits entering their pods. I let my gaze linger a moment on Estone Falna, then tear it away to watch the crew check seals and read monitors. Captain Eli Moss looks upon everything with contempt and mistrust, which to my mind makes him someone hard to trust. As Davidge's agent, Ty purchases what trust there is by paying Moss half in advance. Why this arrangement satisfies the others I cannot say. Loyalty that is purchased is not loyalty. When I brought the subject up to Davidge, he told me not to worry about it and to make certain I had my pod programmed with The Talman. As the steward, the one nicknamed Reaper, punched in the program, he made comments about holy joes, salvation, and the illusion of illusion. Once in the slot, as our pilot put it, the jump behind us, the pods are locked and the cooling fields engaged. The fluid entering my body

through the needle in my leg is supposed to protect me from the cold, but I begin feeling the cold and, after one last look at Falna, I remember just in time to close my eyes. The program is already running and the distraction of the suspension process causes me to lose track. I think for the start and it begins the play from the beginning. "Sindie was the world. "And the world was said to be made by Aakva, the God of the Day Light. .. " Relaxed, focused, without resistance, I absorb the intellectual, philosophical, political, and spiritual saga of my species. Rhada and the Laws of Aakva. Daultha, Aakva's lesson of no laws, and the division of the Sindie. Uhe, its new law of war, and the unification of the Sindie. Shizumaat and the discovery of universe and talma. The three books of Mistaan who invented writing and recorded the life and words of Shizumaat and Vehya as well as its own. Ioa and the founding of the first Talman Kovah. Kulubansu, who destroyed the Talman Kovah, and Lurvanna, who hid The Talman in the memories of its students. Ayden who fought in the War of Ages and made war a science to achieve peace. Tochalla and the rebuilding of the Talman Kovah. Cohneret who did for love what Ayden did for war. Maltak Di who unified the problem solving sciences into talma, the science of making rules to step outside of rules. Faldaam, Zineru and its truths, and there is the Koda Siayvida and Ro, the Ovjetah who took talma and applied it to crime and law. And now I understand what Davidge meant when he handed Zammis a rock and asked it if the rock was a shark. "The tool of the one who acts becomes the one who acts. The one who murders is no more responsible for the murder than the one who ordered the killing or the one who provided the weapon or provided the compensation. If I throw a stone and it kills you, I am not exempt from responsibility because it was the stone that killed you, not I. "Before the law, the stone and I are one. Before the law the assassin and its master are one. .. " Avatu who left Sendie with the generation ships, Poma and the founding of Draco, Eam and the colonization of new worlds, Namvaac and the Thousand Year War, Ditaar, the end of the war and the Formation of the Dracon Chamber. It plays again and again, and each time I learn more. Each time, though, as I reach the story of Ditaar, I think of the missing book, the Koda Nusinda, The Eyes of Joanne Nicole.

A flash of warmth against my face, a wash of heat all over my body, sounds, words, garbled and dim. There is a yellow light and I reach to my eyes, the muscles of my arm, palm, and fingers tight and painful. There is a crusty substance along the edges of my eyelids that glues my eyelids shut. "Slow down, Yazi Ro," says the voice of Reaper, the steward. "Let me do it." I feel something warm and wet on my eyelids, a little extra dribbling down the right side of my head. They are blotted dry as the steward says, "Okay, you can open your eyes now." I can feel him move away as I reach my hand up once more and touch my eyelids. The gunk is gone. I pull my eyelids open and look to see a blur of shades and colors. They resolve into the brutal visage of Reaper. "Rise and shine, it's maintenance time. Unass the box so I can change the filters." I look over at Estone Falna, still motionless in its sealed pod. I have seen an abundance of death during my years, and Falna looks dead. I cough, clear my throat, "Why is Falna so still?" I

whisper. I look and mine is the only pod open. I look at the human named after death. "All of them?" Reaper grins and says, "It's either a mass murder, one hell of an equipment failure, or we do the pod maintenance in rotation and this time it's your turn." He makes a fist and gestures with his thumb. "C'mon, outta the box. Wash up, eat, get in some exercise, and take your suspension med's." Every muscle protests as I pull myself into a sitting position. Reaper is checking the health monitors and he points me toward the shower booth where I wash myself down in the tepid water. Once I am dry Reaper supplies me with a towel, a fresh vapor suit, and slippers. "It's going to be a couple of hours before you go back in the box. Get some exercise and a bite to eat and do whatever you want."

"Reaper, would you mind if I ask a question?" The big man shrugs. "You can always ask." Taking that as assent, I look into his eyes, seeing there not the mind of a brute, but intelligence. I avert my glance and ask, "When you were in the Tsien Denvedah, what was your occupation?" The man's eyebrows jump up, then he grins. "Ilcheve. You know, a kind of cop -- police officer." He shrugs again and screws his face up. "Not exactly. Look, the shadow jetahs in the squirrel palace would idee a black hat. Sometimes a sleeper, op, brass, a glad hander, or maybe an enemy ilcheve. Then they'd pull my trigger and shoot me after the mark. I'd have to sniff him out, and pull his plug, most times in hot zones. Sometimes the shadow masters wouldn't know the target and I'd have do a holiday and find out who the bad daddy is. After I fingered the perp, the regreta Jetah would give him the thumbs down and then I'd do him with prejudice to the max." I stare at Reaper for awhile and then say, "Your superiors would send you after someone they wanted killed and you would kill it."

"Yeah." The big man nods.

"That's what I said." He holds up a hand. "Gotta go back to work. Don't forget your exercise and med's." After the bland food and a run on the musculmill, I begin feeling Drac again. I watch Falna in its pod for a few minutes, letting my fantasies shadow my realities. Reaper tells me that everything is on automatic so I can go up to the cockpit and look at the stars if I want. Just don't touch anything.

I sit in one of the acceleration couches watching the slightly distorted images of the stars pass by. As I lose myself in their hypnotic dance, the themes, lessons, and images from The Talman momentarily touch my awareness, presenting themselves like gems of unknown properties to be contemplated, observed, tested, and placed aside until more is learned. My mind has been packed with words, phrases, chapters, ideas, and stories. I thought that once I had the words of The Talman in my mind, I would have its knowledge and wisdom there as well. All I have though are the words. Some of those words drift into my awareness: "Words are maps to existence. Once you travel a piece of reality it is possible to know the meaning of its words. If all you have before you are words, all you can consider are meaningless marks and sounds." I smile as I acknowledge my first application of The

Talman's words to my life. Knowing that I do not know is knowledge, says Faldaam in the Koda Siovida. To see stars and the systems of worlds that orbit them gives a strange perspective. How many hundreds or thousands of wars, crimes, atrocities, disasters, and horrors does the Aeolus pass by each moment? If Amadeen is among them I can say no more than I can to those others passing around me now. It is so unimportant, so insignificant. Come, rise to where I am. See the stars and the worlds pass and know that you are occupied with trifles. Yet we are to walk one of those worlds orbiting one of those stars and see if our trifle of a war on Amadeen can be influenced by another trifle on the Planet Timan. I remember all too clearly that in the mud and blood of Amadeen there are no trifles. It is so hard to know what is important. Is there anything important in itself without regard to some thoughtful pair of eyes and a mind? At times there seems so much to learn that the task of learning it seems impossible. I hear a click, a series of audio oscillations, and another click. I turn to my left and see Eli Moss in the pilot's couch, his face illuminated by the white, orange and blue instrument lights. Seemingly satisfied as to whatever he was checking, he quickly scans the instruments then settles back to watch the stars, his face grim and bitter. I do not intrude, for I know his expression. I have worn a similar one. I get up to leave the cockpit and Moss says, "Do you have any questions I can answer?" I pause and think for a moment. I only have one. "The ship you own, captain, the Edmund Fitzgerald. Why did you name your ship after an old wrecked ore freighter?" Moss is silent, balancing his aversion at sharing himself with his desire for conversation. "It's not named for the ship. It's named for an old Gordon Lightfoot song, which was named for the ship. Do you know it?"

"No." I see the reflection of the panel lights in his eyes as he recites: ""Does anyone know where the love of God goes when the waves turn the minutes to hours?" He leans back on his couch. "Have you learned anything from The Talman?" For no reason I can think of, I feel that I am under attack -- that my choice of suspension learning materials is under attack. "A few things," I answer. "It is not yet completed, and I have yet to absorb what I have completed." He holds a hand out toward the stars. "What is the point of it, Yazı Ro? What is the purpose of it all?"

"The universe?" Moss nods in response as he lowers his hand. I can remember nothing that was in The Talman, and have no answers of my own. In response I ask, "Does it have to have a purpose?" The captain examines me with his liquid brown eyes. He breaks eye contact, faces the stars, and leans his head against the couch's backrest. "I suppose not. It would make it easier, though."

"Easier?"

"Easier to tell if I am aiding that purpose or attempting to defeat it." There is a strange supply of questions and answers within me. "Which would you prefer, Captain Moss?" The dark man grunts out a laugh and swings his feet to the deck, his back toward me. "Answering that I would

prefer to defeat it would sound bitter, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," I answer.

"Although one person's bitterness is another's realistic appraisal." Moss ignores my tired joke. "There are worse things than sounding bitter," he says. I sit on the edge of the acceleration couch and watch as our pilot rubs the back of his neck, rolls his head around to stretch the muscles, and twists his torso to look out of the front port at the stars. Perhaps some think of Eli Moss as a man with a bad attitude. I see a tower of pain that makes the human my sibling. It is easier to recognize such from my own heights. "As I understand The Talman, captain, each of us is free to choose its own purposes, yet there is a larger purpose, as well." Moss swings around until he is facing me. "And what if this larger purpose crushes my individual purpose out of existence?" Without waiting for an answer he turns his head until he is facing away from me. "I had a friend, Yazi Ro, who was sent to his death to accomplish nothing."

"Max Stearn," I guess, "The Buldahk Insurrection."

"Quite a security check you people do." The captain is silent for a long time. When he at last speaks there is a choking sound in his voice. "Do you understand the love of a man for a man?"

"No."

His eyes narrow and his nostrils flare. "Who in the hell are you to judge, Drac?" An enormous sadness fills me. "I make no judgments, captain. You ask me if I understand the love of a man for a man and I do not. Neither do I understand the love of a man for a woman, the love of a woman for a woman, nor the love of a Drac for a Drac. Love of any kind is something outside my comprehension." The man stares at me for a moment, his eyebrows raised. As he gets to his feet he says, "Hell, Drac, you're riding a nightmare bigger than mine." He leaves the cockpit and I am left alone with the stars.

Later, as Reaper adjusts the controls to the suspension pod, I look to see if the captain is getting into his pod. No other pods are open. "When does the captain go into suspension?" Reaper shakes his head. "He doesn't. Not ever." The big man holds up a player button. "That Davidge was finished with this when Yora did the maint on his box. He said you might want to wrap your lobes around it."

"What is it?" Reaper looks at a wrinkled scrap of paper. "I can't make this out too good. Timan something. Surviving, I think. It's by a Drac. You want me to switch it?"

"Yes." While Reaper is inserting the new button in the player, I ask, "When you were in that mercenary unit with Capt. Moss, who were you fighting?" Reaper looks up, pursed his lips, then looks



back at the player. "Dracs in the two rebellions in the Lota System, Dracs, humans, and Vikaans when we went after the Nadok Rim Pirates, and humans in the Freeholder Invasion on Eam."

"Thank you. Although you are awfully free with your answers -- for an Ilcheve." Reaper shrugs and says with a big smile. "I got nothing to hide, and neither do you. When you people get ready to go to Amadeen, let me know." His smile turns into a big grin. "I don't do suspension, either, Ro. Gives me all the time I need to go through everybody's things. Happy dreams." I glance at Falna, close my eyes, and try to relax as the pod is again sealed and the new words and strange thought patterns begin playing in my mind. As they play, a detached part of my awareness wonders if Reaper was joking, or not.

## CHAPTER 23

There is a joke the Timans tell. A human, a Drac, and a Timan are locked in a chamber. The human's task is to stab the Drac. The Drac's task is to stab the human. The Timan's task is to befriend both the human and the Drac and supply the cutlery. Their jokes are teachings that prompt the young to witness and understand certain truths. The principal truth is: to survive the Timan must turn force against itself, the Timan never revealing its own role. As a civilized species the Timans are younger even than the humans and much younger than the Dracs. Even so, each one of their "jokes" has undergone many transformations. Before the human and the Drac stabbing each other, the joke read: "There was a Rilgian, a Khirat, and a Timan locked in a chamber. .. " That was eleven hundred standard years ago. The Rilgians no longer exist. The few remaining Khirats are little more than curiosities on a number of Timan administered planets. The reaction of Timans to one of their own jokes, no matter how many times and in how many variations they have heard it, is the same. Massive gray heads nod in approval at the wisdom while a diminutive sucking of wide purplish lips perform the Timan equivalent of smirking. Timans do not laugh nor do they have an equivalent reaction, Neither do they cry, display anger, or show pain or disappointment. It is not that they are incapable of such displays. Such are repressed, however, as being too revealing. The Timans are divided into two castes: the teachers, who are addressed by name followed by "'do Timan," which means "for Timan," and everyone else. The 'do Timan is awarded by a teacher to an especially excellent student making the student himself a teacher. The most respected academic institute on Timan is the Ri Mou Tavii, the school where Estone Falna earned its 'do Timan. Timans live in nests of genetically related groups of thirty to forty containing one to three females whose only function, and ability it appears, is to make little Timans. The organization of the home nest has been carried into all social institutions. Timan males are obsessed with puzzles, which is reflected in their games, their art, their music, and their behavior in business, government, and diplomacy. The Drac who wrote the book Timan Survival is named Vigas Thorm. Thorm is an academic on Draco who has never been to Timan.

Once more, the resurrection, this time administered by Yora Beneres. Something different this time. I am not the only one out of suspension. We are close to Timan and all of the pods are open. I see Falna sitting up in its suspension pod, working its neck muscles to loosen them. "Falna," I call. It looks at me and answers, "Yes?"

"On

Timan. What was the Ri Mou Tavii like?" Falna looks at me for a moment, squints its eyes, then shakes its head. "Depressing. Very depressing." It struggles out of the pod, stands weaving on the deck, and stumbles toward the shower.

As the door on the airlock opens, allowing Timan's poisonous atmosphere to enter, I look through my suit's view plate at the three Timans standing there in clouds of choking gas. The smaller of the three is named Atruin 'do Timan and he represents Timan Nisak to Willis Davidge and his entourage. In excellent English he introduces his two companions, Pritith and Riniseh. Despite the purported Timan abhorrence of violence, at least the kind that involves them personally, it is apparent that Pritith and Riniseh are personal bodyguards. They appear capable of backing up their instinctive social manipulations with fists and whatever weapons are concealed within their brown and gray robes. Davidge introduces his "entourage," Kita, Ty, Falna, and myself, the crew having already left the ship headed for Timan's limited Indulgence Zone for oxynitro breathers. After that comes the Timan's formal greeting: "I approach you in peace with no motive or weapon hidden. Welcome to Timan, to my hearth, and to my place of business." Davidge steps forward and in English replies, "I stand here in doubt, the heat of a Timan weapon still burning my skin, a weapon meant to kill me and my charge, Yazi Ro." Davidge nods toward me and I watch as the Timan's tiny white eyes grow wide. Atruin 'do Timan waves aside his greetings with a fleshy arm and bows his head. "I am very distressed by this, sir. What can I do to clear the doubt between us?" Davidge gestures at the bulkheads with a suited hand. "Words have no leashes." The Timan holds the palms of its irregularly fingered hands out to indicate his understanding. "We should go where they cannot wander." Davidge bows in approval to the suggestion and Atruin 'do Timan leads us down a ramp into a dimly illuminated passage that arrives at a huge, sleek blue vehicle that opens itself, allowing us to enter and seat ourselves in the plush black couches inside. Atruin takes his seat with us and leaves his two protectors to ride outside the compartment, a gesture of great trust on the Timan's part, according to Timan Survivor. Once the doors are closed and locked, Atruin says "Nisak, dark and quiet." At that the windows opaque, the sounds from outside the compartment blank, and the vehicle begins accelerating toward the company nest. "No one can hear us or observe. Now, Mr. Davidge, tell me the circumstances that gave birth to this distressing doubt."

"There are two things," begins

Davidge. "First, there is the latest book of The Talman accepted by the

Jetai Diea on Draco. It is the Koda Nusinda and titled The Eyes of Joanne Nicole. Are you familiar with it?" The way the Timan's skin blanches as his eyes go wide speaks worlds. The extreme emotional reserve claimed for Timans in Timan Survivor appears to have at least one exception. "Although I have not read it, I am familiar with its substance. I was not aware that the existence of the work is common knowledge. You said there are two things." Davidge glances at Kita and she leans forward, issues a tiny bow with her head, and holds an envelope toward the Timan. "Atruin 'do Timan, sir, these are the test results on a weapon used against Mr. Davidge and Yazi Ro on Friendship. It is an improperly detonated thermal drill and the source of the weapon was Timan Nisak." The Timan holds the envelope in both hands and stares at it as though it might grow fangs and bite him. After a moment he looks up and says, "There is something missing." Davidge looks at me and I turn away, frowning. This Timan might be our enemy -- probably is our enemy. But then The Talman speaks to me from the corridors of my memory. Aydan said that if there are no secrets, there is nothing to hide, nothing to remember. I face the Timan and say, "There is a talma whose end may find the war on Amadeen at an end. Through the work of a Jetah Talman on Amadeen and the insights of the Koda Nusinda, the likely paths became visible. Davidge and I are parts to this puzzle. The Koda Nusinda is a third part. If the Koda Nusinda is discredited and the Jetai Diea rescinds its decision to add it to The Talman, the Timan role in the USE Draco War will never become more than a rumor. If Davidge or I are killed it is not likely that we will be replaced. The talma will probably fail and the Nusinda may be discredited." The Timan's lower mandible rests on its bloated chest, his head jerking slightly in time with his breaths. "I see why you came to Timan. You perceive a motive in our desire to have the work disregarded." He looks up and adds: "And you would find out who is behind the attempt to sabotage this talma. Perhaps you would see, as well, if the species you believe gave birth to the war can somehow manipulate the warring factions on Amadeen into a peace." No one contradicts the Timan and Atruin seems to close himself off from his surroundings. After an uncomfortable moment of this silence, Atruin emerges, his eyes almost glowing. "Please understand, every species has the choice, in response to a threat, to act or to react. Both humans and Dracs attack or run when they react. Timans, as you know from the new book of The Talman, react by manipulating the threat against itself. Most Timans do not respond this way, of course, any more than most humans or Dracs immediately attack and kill when they perceive a threat. Reason and choice have subordinated primitive instinct." Atruin 'do Timan's head sinks into his shoulders until he exhibits no neck. "Some of us do yield to instinct, however, at least to the extent of using the skills instinct has provided. Hissied 'do Timan was one such."

"Might there be others?" asks Kita. "Are there murderers on Earth?" asks Atruin, not expecting an answer. He holds up the envelope. "I will turn this over to the Karnarak, our situation resolution force, with an urgent request from Nisak for information." He orders the windows cleared and I watch the hazy grays of Timan's

landscape as we streak toward Timan Nisak.

## CHAPTER 24

Timan Nisak provides a business village for alien representatives, contractors, and visitors. Our part of the village is the Keu Vac Ount, which means Oxygen Garden. The air is rich, humid, and scented with something that resembles rather old cheese. We are given individual suites, and shortly after I remove my environmental suit and clean myself, Davidge enters my greeting room and fills a chair, his expression one of intense concentration. After dressing, I enter and sit opposite him. "You have come to say what?" He lifts his gaze slowly and faces me. "I have a favor to ask."

"Ask." He looks around at the room, sniffs the air, and shakes his head. "God, this place stinks. It smells like old feta cheese." He rubs his eyes then clasps his hands over his belly. "There are two things we need to accomplish here. First, we've got to track down whoever it is who is trying to kill us. Atruin has pledged his complete cooperation. I believe he'll produce our killer, or die of embarrassment trying. He seems sincere."

"I wonder if he is working you," I add, "or someone higher up is working him."

"Or both," completes the human. Davidge scratches his ear and looks at an animated light display on one wall attempting to resemble a log fire in a fireplace. "Anyhow, Ty, Kita, Falna, and I will be working with Atruin on that."

"And the remaining thing," I prompt. "Ro, we know the Timans can manipulate other species into destroying themselves. Can they manipulate other species into healing, or at least mutual survival?" Davidge leans forward and rests his forearms on his knees. "One of us needs to know what the Timans know. I want you to enter the Ri Mou Tavii." I lean back in my chair. "Falna graduated from the Ri Mou Tavii years ago, with honor."

"Ro, sooner or later this talma is going to lead us to Amadeen. I expect you and me to be there. I don't want to have to tell Estone Nev that its line is finished because I got Falna killed."

"I am not eager to get killed myself," I point out. Davidge waves the comment away with a gesture. "There are some other things, too, Ro. You got into this because you want peace on Amadeen. That's what I want right in the front of your head when you're in the Ri Mou Tavii. Falna never fought on Amadeen and has different priorities. I think you already suspect how good I am at guessing what goes on in Falna's head. You I understand. How about it?" I shrug. "Why don't I

go to school, attend a few classes, and speak with the masters? Does it cost much?" Davidge grins. "Tuition isn't our problem. The trick is getting you in. Not many Timans make it into one of these schools. An alien, hardly ever." It was my turn to smile. "Timan Nisak has moved planets. Perhaps they can move this little hill."

"Yeah, maybe." He looks at me, a puzzled expression on his face. "When I asked Falna what kind of qualifications you'd need to be accepted, all it said was: "Be interesting." A strange qualification that. Be interesting. Of course, what would interest a Timan? I am not certain that I care. What I know about Timans I do not like.

## CHAPTER 25

Lahvay ni 'do Timan, Dakiz of the Ri Mou Tavii, squats before its crystal table and fills its white-eyed sight with my environmentally suited countenance. He speaks in Timan, the flattened translation coming through the link in my helmet. "I perceive a threat, Yazi Ro. Can you see it?"

"Perhaps," I answer as I look through my visor. Through the misty air I can see that the chamber is papered with penned writings in Timan. Letters from grateful students? A book the Dakiz is writing? Warning letters from creditors? I see the Dakiz open and close his lips in a gesture of approval at my evasive answer. "You have had training in Ri Mou?" he asks, a slight tone of incredulity making it through the link. "No," I answer truthfully. "I was born on a battlefield and reared within the bosom of a war, Dakiz. It develops certain skills." "You have killed?"

"Yes." Lahvay leans back from his table and looks at me, his white eyes hooded beneath dark gray lids. "Have you killed many?"

"How many would be many to a Timan, Dakiz?" Again the Dakiz approves. I am a success. "Yazi Ro, we've never before had a killer as a student."

"As far as you know," I respond. Lahvay leans to his left, adjusts his plain blue robe, and rests an arm on the table. "There have been no Timan wars for hundreds of years."

"I find that very strange, Dakiz."

"How so?"

"I am but seven, yet the war in which I was born and fought and that gave me the scars I carry was a Timan war." The Dakiz taps the fingers of his right hand against his chin. Perhaps Davidge

should have warned me not to be too interesting. "Yazi Ro, if no Timan fought in the war, no Timan died or suffered wounds, if no particle of Timan territory was lost or acquired, how then can this be a Timan war?" I feel the anger coming on and I force it down. My mind goes blank as I try to remember the story of the sharks and the rock, and instead I say, "Lahvay ni 'do Timan, who is responsible for an egg: the egg itself or the creature who laid it?" The Dakiz narrows its white eyes and holds back its head. "Know that when Nisak applied its considerable influence to gain you admittance to the Ri Mou Tavii, my appreciation of the situation was as an impertinence, at best. At worst, a threat. Do you appreciate the threat?" I take The Talman and add it to the wisdom of the battlefield. "If I know what I know, and I know what you know, you have no secrets."

"Then, make my decision for me, Yazi Ro." I hold out my hands. "I am admitted." The Timan's face is slightly touched by a breath of disappointment. "That is not the product of the points discussed."

"Not all has been discussed," I answer. "What has been discussed misleads."

"How so?" I point at the Dakiz. "Until I have walked your steps, breathed your breaths, and seen your seeing, I can never know what you know. I am admitted." The Dakiz stands, smooths its robe over its ample middle, and holds wide its arms. "Welcome to the Ri Mou Tavii, Yazi Ro. If you find here what you seek, that will be a treasure you will earn. Regardless of your success or failure, I trust I will be thoroughly entertained."

We are arranged in learning nests, circles of students linked by a form of mind fusion to the nest master, a more advanced student who passes down the lessons he has learned to us. Try as they might to appear indifferent, the other students in my nest seem uncomfortable with a suited alien in their midst. As the fusion begins, the universe is made very small. In it, two creatures, multi-legged, black, and scaled, their powerful pinching claws slowly opening and closing, corner a third creature, smooth, soft, small, and slow. The two clawed creatures are equal in strength and similar in form. They do not, therefore, regard each other as threats. The small creature looks to the creature on the right, points at it, and screams. The clawed creature on the left faces the other to see the cause of the small creature's reaction. It sees only its companion and fellow hunter. The clawed creature on the right, however, notices the other clawed creature facing it instead of the small soft one. The creature on the right raises its claws, hisses, and moves its legs up and down in a menacing dance. The creature on the left answers by arching its back, brandishing its own claws, hissing, and moving its legs in a menacing dance. As the two clawed creatures attack and pull each other to pieces, the smooth, soft, small, and slow creature escapes.

In the village, we are seated in another circle. Kita, Davidge, Ty, Falna, I, and another. Our number has been increased by the addition of Captain Moss, who looks terrible. Beneres and Mrabet are still in the Zone. According to Moss, Reaper Brandt is in his quarters on the floor trying to get his heart started. As I half-listen, my head toying with the Ri Mou Tavii lessons, Kita holds out her hands in a gesture of frustration. "I don't think Timan Nisak is giving us its complete cooperation."

"Why?" asks Davidge. "The most recent theory from the Karnarak investigator is that the thermal drill used in the cave is a forgery. All of Nisak's drills of that type are accounted for, he says."

"How do they explain the lack of markers in the chemical residue?" asks Jeriba Ty. "As I understand it, Both JACHE and IMPEX explosives have chemical markers in their explosives." Kita slowly shakes her head. "They have an answer for everything. Their scientists say that in the manufacture the chemical marker might have been purposefully left out. They also point out that the marker can be removed, given a lab with sufficient sophistication. As far as the Timans are concerned, it was an act performed by parties unknown with a fraudulent thermal drill designed to implicate Timan Nisak." As I watch Davidge's face redden in anger at the report, a memory of mine achieves a different perspective. My brief moments in the Ri Mou Tavii learning nests have already rearranged my view of everything. I am not yet certain whether I like or dislike my new view. I remember the thirty or so Front prisoners that I was guarding shortly after the battle of Stokes Crossing in the Southern Shorda. Three human children, very young, were in the compound with the other prisoners. A woman was entertaining the children by making things appear and disappear. Her hands were very quick. She took a pebble from the ground, put it in her pocket, then pulled the pebble out of one of the children's ears. As the children laughed, she threw the pebble away then pulled it out of her own mouth. I had never seen anything like it before. I moved closer to the wire to get a better view. She held the pebble between two fingers, placed it in the palm of her other hand, closed her fingers around it, then opened it. The pebble had vanished. She opened both hands and there was no pebble. She clapped her hands together, then slowly parted them to reveal three pebbles in the palm of the bottom hand. I heard a shout from a Mavedah soldier on the other side of the compound. A sickening feeling in my middle, I looked up to see three humans running toward a group of rocks. They had escaped while I was distracted by the woman. I raised my knife and cut through the three of them, killing two and wounding the third. I lowered the knife and looked at the woman, wanting to cut her in half because she was as much a part of the escape attempt as the three who ran the wire. Everything pointed at the right hand while it was the left hand doing all the business. I look at Davidge and the others seated around the table and think again about where the fingers are pointing. Kita is explaining to Davidge some obscure procedure in police record keeping. When she is

finished, Davidge asks her to get together with Ernst Brandt to pick his brain. Once she agrees, he faces me. "Are you a part of this?" I look up at him. "What do you want?"

"You've just been sitting there staring into space. Do you have any suggestions; a thought or two?" I glance at Falna. Its eyes urge me on. I look at the floor and nod. "Will, all of the fingers are pointing at humans and Timans. Earth IMPEX because of Michael Hill's involvement, and Timan Nisak because of the weapon he used, in addition to the things revealed in the Koda Nusinda." I stand, look around at the faces, and say, "There are no fingers pointed at Dracs. Look for a Drac." Kita frowns at me and says, "But Ro, we have absolutely no evidence of any Drac involvement at all."

"Exactly." Back

in my quarters I think about my answer: exactly. It means trust no one, nothing. The knife can come from any direction. There is a part of me that seems to find meaning in doing nothing more than being a witness and understanding that which passes before me. Living beings moving through their relationships of war and love are exercises of interest primarily to see how the relationships resolve. This is the manner of the Timan nest master. This is also the manner of the Drac Jetah Talman. Detached, emotionally removed. A very safe place. All of the advantages of being dead with none of the rot. The existence of this place, my ability to occupy it, as well as its attraction, make me despair. I look up and see Falna standing in the doorway. Two steps, three steps, and it is at my side. Falna's hand brushes my cheek. "You are filled with such pain, Ro. Have you no one? No one at all?" I look up at its face, its image blurred by the tears in my eyes. "I have the dead." Falna encircles me with its arms and slowly pulls me toward its breast. I lose myself and my pain in Falna's touch as the scent of it fills my awareness.

A history lesson on The Last War: The few remaining Timan Ka were huddled in their mountain stronghold as the Rappani Ka, filling the Steppe of Irnuz before them, prepared to finish the extermination begun generations before. Bahtuo, nestmaster of the Timan Ka, looked down upon its people at their defense positions. There was hardly a one who was not wounded or scarred. In the center of the compound, protected by stone walls, were the females, their fat tails teeming with unborn who would never see life. "We can withstand one or perhaps two more assaults," said Ashab the war leader to Bahtuo. "We will kill perhaps another hundred or hundred and fifty of their warriors, then the Rappani will overrun us. They will kill the females and we will be no more." Bahtuo looked at the war club in his hand and let it fall to the ground. "We surrender, then, Bahtuo?" The nest master looked beyond his defenders and let his gaze fall upon the fires of the Rappani Ka. "We surrender, Ashab, but with a condition." Later that night, Lord Nuba, eldest surviving son of King Jax, ruler of all the Rappani Ka, was entertaining his generals in the long hut. As they feasted the generals boasted about whose warriors would first storm the Timan birthing ring,



crushing the females, cutting off their tails, splashing the Timan Ka larvae underfoot. In the midst of this revelry, a guard entered and whispered to Nuba that an emissary from the Timan Ka begs for an audience. Lord Nuba ordered the Timan brought before him and his generals. The Timan emissary was Ashab the war leader and he groveled before Nuba and said, "Great lord, I have come at the behest of my master, Bahtuo, to beg you to take our surrender." A great cheer erupted in the long hut. When it quieted, Lord Nuba said, "This is most excellent news and I shall pass on your request to my father, the king." Ashab rose to his feet and held out his hands. "We surrender only to you, Lord Nuba. It has been your warriors we have fought and we know you to be fierce in battle, but merciful and just in peace. Your father is without mercy, killing even his own brother to take the throne of the Rappani Ka. We have seen your father's work and we will not surrender to the king." Now, it is true that the king was cruel, but no more so than his son, Lord Nuba. It is true that the king killed his own brother, however Lord Nuba had killed both of his own brothers. It is true that the king was a leader without mercy, but it was no accident that, behind his back, Nuba's own generals and warriors referred to him as Nuba the Terrible. Yet Bahtuo's words brought many of King Jax's crimes back to the minds of Nuba's generals. To Lord Nuba's mind, Bahtuo's offer brought something different. Nuba the Just, not King Jax, would take the surrender of the Timan Ka. It would be Nuba the Merciful, not King Jax, who saved the hundreds of warrior lives that would have been lost storming the stronghold. It would be Nuba the Magnificent, not King Jax, who cleverly eliminated the Timan Ka, for the lord intended to kill every last Timan upon entering the stronghold. "Go in safety, Bahtuo," Nuba said to the emissary, "Tell your master that I will take the surrender of the Timan Ka and that those who surrender will be under Lord Nuba's personal protection." Now, there were a number of Nuba's generals who were, at one time, generals of Nuba's elder brother, Yiva. When Nuba murdered their Lord Yiva, they did nothing, for, by the time they learned of the affair, all was done and sanctioned by the king. Yet the words of their oaths to their former lord were still sharp. These generals got word to King Jax about his son's actions. Jax was incensed and sent a courier to Lord Nuba with orders to stay in place. If there is to be a surrender, Jax, King of the Rappani Ka, will take it. As the courier ran off, Jax called in his generals to prepare the warriors beneath his command to enforce his wishes. Still, when Lord Nuba learned that his father's army was facing his own position, he ordered his own generals to respond appropriately. No one knows who loosed the first shaft. Perhaps one of Jax's archers, perhaps one of Nuba's. Perhaps it was a lone Timan warrior hidden in a cleft between the two armies -- As the two clawed creatures attack and pull each other to pieces, the smooth, soft, small, and slow creature escapes.

That night Falna is waiting for me and we make love. I do not conceive, but I make love. For a moment I withdraw, fearing that Falna only pities me. Then I no longer care. I let go, losing myself in the currents of passion and gentle affection.

## CHAPTER 26

In the morning Davidge comes to my quarters. I expect him to make some comment regarding Falna's presence and demonstrations of affection for me, but the human says nothing. Falna gets tea for all of us as, from my couch, I tell Davidge the story of the two clawed creatures and the creature who was small and soft. I tell him the story about King Jax, Lord Nuba, and the nest master. I tell him the story of The United States of Earth, the Dracon Chamber, and a politician who perceived a threat to its people, Hissied 'do Timan. I tell him the Duoa Jreal, or Insanity Stories, of Mijii of Sindie who burned its own people, of the Zealots of Masada on Earth who slew themselves, of the Balkan, Irish, and Middle East tribal self-immolations. After telling the Timan stories to Davidge, he studies the inside of emptiness for a long time. "So," he says at last, "how do we get the scorpions to stop fighting?" I do not know what scorpions are, but I assume Davidge is referring to the clawed creatures in the Timan parable. "I do not think we can," I answer. "Can we get the two scorpions to go after the puffball again?" He glances at me, his forehead growing a frown. "Ro, I have never seen you look so strange." I hide my face by looking at the image of the log fire. "I think I am coming to appreciate how easily war can be started, and, once begun, how hard it can be to stop." I look back at the human. "We can't get the scorpions to go after the puffball, as you put it. The puffball, Hissied 'do Timan, is dead." Falna places my tea in front of me, glances at Davidge, and says, "The original reasons for the fighting have little to do with what is going on now, Uncle. Hissied 'do Timan provided direction and a spark. The holocaust no longer needs the match for its existence." Davidge frowns and looks from Falna to me. "Explain." In my mind I pick at the reasons I had for fighting. "I think that with the very first act of violence all of the motives changed and the reasons for continuing the war multiplied. If I ever knew the original reason for the fighting on Amadeen, it is nothing compared to all of the new reasons which are added to daily. The original causes were less than memories before I was born."

"Hissied managed to get the USE and the Dracon Chamber to colonize Amadeen at the same time," says Falna. "Then he arranged a land dispute and some -what do they call it on Earth -- hemp justice. The other side retaliated, then the whole thing was fed by 'they killed my parent' and 'they destroyed my village.'" I nod and continue with "And they tortured and killed my friends, my lovers. .." I shake my head as old feelings splash into my heart. "I wasn't fighting because of any mining rights or land disputes. I fought because -- so many deaths, so many horrors." I look at Davidge and say, "I fought because it was the only way to fight back." As I say it I know it is insane. The insanity, though, makes the reason no less real, no less powerful. I feel Falna's comforting hand on my shoulder. As I place my own hand atop Falna's, Davidge looks away and again explores emptiness with his gaze. "What is it, Uncle?" asks Falna. Davidge lifts his hands slightly and lets them

drop to the armrests of his chair. "I don't know. All along I've been looking for this magic linchpin that holds everything together. Yank it and we find out who's trying to kill us and discredit the Koda Nusinda, the solution to the fighting on Amadeen pops up, and we can all go home. Everyone has a motive, though. The Timans want the Koda Nusinda thrown out to keep their secret about the war."

"And about how they survive," I add. "What about Earth IMPEX?" asks Falna. Davidge shakes his head. "IMPEX has no motive whatsoever, but there is a political party headquartered on Earth called Black October." He glances at Falna. "Did you ever hear of it?" Without removing its hand from my shoulder, Falna says, "Certainly. It's the fourth largest party in the USE aligned planets." Falna looks down at me. "Black October's principle objective is to throw out the USE-Dracon Treaty and reenter the fighting on Amadeen supporting the Amadeen Front."

"Kita got a subspace message from Sanda a little while ago," interrupted Davidge. "It looks like Michael Hill was a member of Black October. It's possible the drill he was using is a forgery. Sanda's been in touch with the Karnarak and it looks as though the circuit board from the unit in the cave doesn't match any of the Nisak designs."

"What about the Dracs?" I ask. I look at Davidge and he is looking at Falna. Removing its hand from my shoulder, Falna sits next to me on the couch and says, "Yes, there is opposition to the Koda Nusinda in the Jetai Diea. It's small in numbers but vehement in its refusal to have a human written book in The Talman. Some of their arguments are quite compelling. I was on Earth during most of the debate, however."

"Did you vote?"

"Of course. It was by absentee ballot because I couldn't leave my studies. I voted to accept The Eyes of Joanne Nicole as the Koda Nusinda." Davidge stands and thrusts his hands into his jacket pockets. "So everybody has a motive and none of the motives ties directly into the reasons why the fighting continues on Amadeen. The fighting fuels itself regardless of what goes on in the rest of the universe; regardless of what we find out about who is trying to kill us." He raises an eyebrow at me. "Yazi Ro, I'm beginning to suspect that Shiggy and that Jetah on Amadeen, Zenak Abi, bit off more than we can chew."

The Davik's image hovers over the nest as ghost images of planets and armies drift through our awareness. "A threat that can be divided against itself is rendered a threat no longer. A galaxy wide coalition of tribes can be divided by the differences between its members: species, beliefs, origins, objectives, allegiances, interests, anything unimportant that can be made to appear important to them." Step by

carefully plotted step we see a unified force cracked then shattered by racism, religious bigotry, political intolerance, and class bias, all the forms of tribal loyalty. How easy it seems, yet there are forces that either cannot be divided (very rare), or are more efficiently dealt with by drawing them into conflict with a third party. A powerful species of adventurers, explorers, warriors, and profit-seekers, colonizers of two hundred worlds are within a few days of racehome and are being considered for membership in the quadrant federation. Their numbers, their power, wealth, energy, and designs could eclipse racehome and drown out racehome's voice in the quadrant assembly within a generation. The threat is, in this case, so huge and so powerful that dividing it risks producing multiple threats. Far from racehome and the threat there is another species of powerful, wealthy adventurers and profit-seekers. Can their separate designs and interests be led into a conflict of such a nature that the wealth, power, and numbers of both species are reduced to insignificance? To the Davik I send a thought: "The Timans deplore the actions of Hissied 'do Timan in creating the USE-Draco War, yet his crime is used as a lesson in the Ri Mou Tavii?" The Davik responds, "In your own Talman, Yazı Ro, it is written: "Are we to ignore a truth revealed through crime because it is somehow tainted, somehow less than truth? Nonsense. Truth is truth. The crime would be to ignore truth."

Joanne Nicole had the sight to detect the hand behind the war. She caught Hissied 'do Timan by surprise and foiled his plans to secure Timan influence in the quadrant by destroying both Dracs and humans. Had he allowed himself to see the blind woman's role in the negotiations, he could have prepared better. He did attempt to manipulate another into killing her, but the one who took on the mission to kill Joanne Nicole didn't expect her to fight back. After all, she was blind and helpless. The attempt at murder failed.

In the village I see Davidge and Kita walking around the reflection pool in the common chamber. Among the strange trees and shrubs are several unfamiliar beings. Three are Dracs, one is human, and four are Vikaans. I am curious about their reasons for being here, but I have no desire to meet anyone new. There is a refreshment lounge off the common and I enter it to get some brewed tea and to look for Falna. Eli Moss and Reaper are sitting in comfortable chairs holding large glasses containing a beverage that resembles carbonated human urine. When he notices me, the captain turns off the newsscreen in the cubicle and points toward a chair facing his. I sit in the chair, a human waiter takes my order, and I am left looking at Eli Moss and Reaper. I am not much of one for making conversation, but that responsibility is lifted from me. "What in the hell are you people doing here?" asks Moss. Before I can attempt an answer, he waves a hand and continues. "Murder investigations, wheeling and dealing with Timan Nisak, whatever it is that Estone Falna is doing besides patting your fanny, and you? Going to school?"

"You are drunk." Moss nods. "That explains what I'm doing

here. Now, what're you people doing?" Reaper, not quite as medicated as his captain, leans toward me. "I tried to tell him about Amadeen --"  
The waiter brings my tea and places it on the small table to my right. I forget to thank him as I look at Eli Moss's smirking face. "What we are doing here is trying to stop a war."

"A war?"

"That's right." I sip at my tea, noticing from my increasing anger that I have not quite achieved the ideal of Timan reserve. Moss frowns as he looks at Brandt. "That's what you said, Reaper." His eyebrows go up and he wags a finger at me. "What war? There hasn't been a war here for hundreds of years." "Amadeen. We're here to stop the war on Amadeen." Moss laughs out loud. "Amadeen?" He lurches to his feet, looks at the timepiece strapped to his wrist, then turns around and points toward a potted imitation tree. "Amadeen's that way." Davidge and Kita come up to the cubicle, and before they can say anything, Moss points again at the fake tree and says. "Amadeen is thataway." With that Capt. Moss finishes off his beverage, puts down the glass on a table, and brushes past Davidge on his way to the quarters wing. Kita looks down at me and says, "The good captain appears well medicated."

"He needs something to do," says Brandt finishing off his own beverage. He puts down his glass, wipes his mouth on a napkin, and looks around at all of us. "What the captain was saying is that if this expedition of yours ever gets moving toward Amadeen, he would be pleased to assist you in whatever capacity he can." Davidge points with his thumb toward the entrance. "What's he know about why we're here?"

"Everything," I answer. Kita sits in the chair vacated by Eli Moss and Davidge takes the chair to my left. "What do you mean, everything?"

"It, all of it, the works, the whole enchilada." I look at Reaper. "It's true. In between manuscripts, notes, link records, receipts, and so on, I've pretty much put together that you're working a talma to bring an end to the war on Amadeen. The captain and I think it to be a worthy goal."

"No kidding," says Davidge. The big man nods. "How you are to go about it is something I couldn't figure out. I'm guessing that's because you folks haven't figured it out either." "Well, hell. Welcome to the club." Davidge rests his elbows on his chair's armrests and clasps his hands across his belly as he looks at me. "Are you tired of Timan?"

"You said it yourself, Will. The war feeds off itself. The rest of the universe could vanish and the fighting on Amadeen wouldn't pause for an instant. Whatever answer we

are looking for, it is not on Timan. It is on Amadeen." The waiter heads in our direction but Davidge waves him off, glances at Kita and me, then faces Brandt. "Okay, we've reached a dead end with the investigation. Timan Nisak has put incredible pressure on every government, public, and private institution on the planet. If there is anything, it should have surfaced by now. Just in case something was overlooked, Ty has been running Timan Nisak's records, seeing if there's a money trail of some kind from Timan Nisak leading to IMPEX, Hill, or someone else, but it's an impossible task. The money that falls through the cracks every month in an outfit like Nisak could finance the invasion of a minor solar system." He nods at Kita and she faces me. "Sanda got in touch again. Aakva Lua managed to track down a hovercraft capable of firing the marker missile that almost took you out. The owner is a Drac as is the pilot. Sanda found both of them dead. Suicide, Sanda thinks. No identification, no record of the hovercraft, no financial records, no record of either Drac." I hold up my hands. "Michael Hill, after he made his attempt, he fell to his death." I lower my hands and face Davidge. "We assume he just made a wrong turn in the dark. What if he, too, committed suicide? What if all three were under the influence of some sort of mind control? Between that neural amplifier that they use in mind fusion, and the Timan variety the Ri Mou Tavii uses in instruction, all kinds of things could be planted in an individual's mind. What if whoever is behind this used Hill and those two Dracs like self-destructing robots?" Davidge snaps his fingers as he fixes his gaze on a point in space. "Maybe that's it," he says quietly. He moves his eyes slowly until he is looking at me. "Ro, what was it that changed you?"

"Changed me?"

"From what you told me, one minute you're cutting up Front soldiers with an energy knife and the next you're letting some human female run off with a Drac baby. What changed you?" I think back to that moment when I first saw the Drac baby in the woman's arms, both of them hiding beneath a bed in the smoke and filth of that shattered bunker. "It's not human," I said to her. She answered by saying, "No. It's mine."

"For a moment I saw the pain, the loss, the desperate fear of another." I look up at Davidge. "For a moment I could not think of humans and Dracs. I caught a view through her eyes. We were the same: frightened beings in the center of a firestorm. After that I could no longer carry a weapon for the Mavedah."

"Maybe that's it," repeats Davidge once more. "Maybe we're supposed to mind fuse everybody on Amadeen, give everyone a peek into the other guy's skull, turn everybody's enemy into just another frightened being. Maybe that's what we're here to learn how to do. Where's Falna?"

"I don't know." Davidge gets to his feet. "Falna can tell me if what we want to do is possible." Kita reaches out a hand and touches Davidge's arm. "What about the investigation?"

"Let's see if it can be done, first. If that's the way to go, though, you'll have to continue here on your own -- unless you want to come with us."

"To Amadeen?" she asks. As Davidge nods, the waiter comes up to us carrying a tiny black comm link in his hand. "Mr. Davidge, there is a call for you."

"Thanks." Placing the link to his ear, he says into the speaker plate, "This is Davidge." His mouth splits into a wide grin. "Hey, Falna, we were just talking about you. Where ---" He frowns, then his face becomes like stone. "We'll be right there." He closes the cover on the link. Turning to us he says, "That was Falna. Jeriba Ty is dead. Nisak security found Ty in an airlock, no suit, the place filled with Timan air."

"Suicide?" I ask, my voice more cynical sounding than I intend. Davidge tosses the link on his chair, nods once, then turns to head for the quarters wing.

## CHAPTER 27

Jeriba Ty sits slumped against the bulkhead near the airlock's interior control panel looking as though it were asleep. There are no signs of struggle. A playback from the panel shows that the open command was given from the oxygen side of the lock, the door opened, the close door command was given from inside the lock, and the door closed. The open command was then given from inside the lock to the Timan side door. An automatic caution warning requiring special gear to enter the Timan section went on, the cancel warning command was given, and the oxynitrogen atmosphere pumped out and replaced by Planet Timan's mix of ammonia, carbon dioxide, and several other disagreeable substances. By the time the Timan side of the lock opened, Jeriba Ty was certainly dead. All this is supplied by the Timan Nisak investigator who appears to us through the comm link. Kita, Brandt, and Falna stay at the scene to go over some things while Davidge and I go to the subspace link to make some calls.

In the subspace link's little chamber, I look into all of the dark corners, my mind flooded with truths and suspicions of truths. At one point I am so overwhelmed I lean against the wall. When I look at the screen, I see that Davidge has made a subspace link to Friendship and Aakva Lua. "Why are you calling Sanda first?"

"Cowardice," he says flatly. "The easy call first." There is not much to pass on, except the

news of Ty's death and my suspicions regarding mind fusion. Afterward Davidge calls Jeriba Zammis. I watch as Zammis's forceful, dynamic manner evaporates upon learning of its child's death. Zammis looks stunned for a moment, then comes under complete control. After the call is concluded I mention how strong Zammis seemed. "Zammis can't afford to feel its feelings just yet. Zammis still has to tell Haesni." He glances at me. "You know how that is."

"I know how that is." The last call Davidge makes is to the Talman Kovah on Draco. Jeriba Shigan is awakened from its sleep to receive the call by servants who are none too pleased at the task. Once on the screen, Davidge bluntly tells the Ovjetah, "We are on Timan. Jeriba Ty is dead. Falna and two others are investigating, but right now it looks as though it was suicide." I watch Shigan's face as the news is disbelieved, fought, and eventually accepted. While the Ovjetah wages its battle, Davidge explains the circumstances. Listening to the bitter tone in his voice it seems as though, in some manner, Davidge blames the Ovjetah. At last Davidge explains our thoughts concerning mind fusion on Amadeen and he asks, "Have we paid enough of a price on Timan? Can you look in your computer and at least tell me if our wild goose chase here is over?" I never saw Jeriba Shigan look so old, so tired. "Knowledge of the path might close the path, Uncle."

"Dammit --"

"Uncle, you are the one who first taught me about talma!" shouts the Ovjetah. After the interruption, Jeriba Shigan calms a bit and says, "Right now we can see several possible paths. If I tell you what they are, you will pick the one you like the best and pursue it, disregarding the rest. Or, to protect yourself from creating what you used to call a self-fulfilling prophesy, you might refuse all of the paths." The Ovjetah rubs its eyes and looks at Davidge. "You must be free of such self-imposed restraints and limitations. You must be free to move from path to path for I am convinced that the talma that will succeed has yet to be discovered." Davidge takes a deep breath, lets it escape his lungs, and says more gently, "I know. Forgive me, Shiggy. The years haven't made me any smarter." He reaches to cut off the link and I place my hand on his shoulder. "I want to talk to the Ovjetah." Davidge frowns at me. "Alone or do you want an audience?"

"Alone." The human raises his eyebrows, shrugs, and leaves the small room. I take his place in the seat and look at the image of Jeriba Shigan on the screen. "I grieve your loss, Ovjetah." Shigan nods its thanks and asks, "How are you faring on the Jetai Diea's wild goose chase?" I think for a moment, my mind still swamped with its new truths. "Ovjetah, I am in places I do not like learning things I do not want to know."

"What is your opinion regarding



mind fusion as a tool to bring about an end to the fighting on Amadeen?" I lean back in the seat and take a deep breath. There are many subjects to discuss to avoid the things I need to say. I can spare some time for one answer. "I do not know how we can submit the population of an entire planet to mind fusion." I hold out my hands, then drop them in my lap. "Ovjetah, mind fusion allowed me to see things about myself I wouldn't ordinarily see. The thing that changed me, though, had nothing to do with mind fusion. Besides, few on Amadeen want to give up their pain. Most feed off of it. It defines them. It makes them belong to each other. For every one on Amadeen we can coax into mind fusion, there are ten thousand we cannot." I look at Jeriba Shigan and say, "There are some things I need to know, and to ask I need to know that my questions and your answers remain confidential." The Ovjetah raises an eyebrow as it considers my request. "I and my assistants will respect your confidence." Shigan leans toward the screen and adjusts something. As it leans back in its seat, a channel encode message appears across the screen. "Now everyone else will respect your confidence, as well." I ask for the information I need and watch as the Ovjetah frowns back. When I am finished, Jeriba Shigan's voice is very cold. "As soon as I have the information you want I will communicate with you."

"My thanks,  
Ovjetah. If you would, please tell Matope we are making progress toward peace on Amadeen."

"Matope?"

"The human in the wheelchair with the sign."

"I will tell him. As you walk your path, Yazi Ro, take care," and then the screen returns to the cloud and sun symbol for Timan Nisak. Once I stop shaking, I place a call to Friendship. When the link is completed, Undev Orin comes on screen to answer. After its greetings and good wishes, I give Orin my request. As it hurries away from the link I hear myself asking Uhe's ancient question: "Aakva, why do you play with your creatures so?"

That night I bury myself in Falna's arms. It whispers in my ear, "Why are you so frightened, Ro?" I say nothing out loud. What does one who feels like a leaf blown about by the universe's wind say to one who feels like a rock. Falna grew within the love, safety, and wisdom of Davidge's cave. I grew within the hate, danger, and stupidity of the battlefield. All I say is, "Love me. No questions. Please, for tonight, love me."

## CHAPTER 28

Graduation from the Ri Mou Tavii. All of the nests, from low to high, gather through mind fusion to witness and participate in the competition. The Davik posits a threat and hears the candidates for

graduation as each one applies the lessons to eliminate or divert the threat. The Davik chooses the first application he finds satisfactory and that student then must posit a threat of its own. The title of 'do Timan goes to ones who posit threats that have no satisfactory answer. The top honor of ni 'do Timan goes to the ones who posit threats no one besides them can resolve satisfactorily. The problems are stated, the solutions are offered, and it pleases me not at all that I guess the correct solutions before the Davik. The threat I have to posit is the one to which I have no answer. The latest successful student, Pria, posits a single individual as the threat. The setting is a closed environment containing only two beings: the threat and the one who is threatened. The environment is such that no third being or force can be either brought in or can intrude. I signal my willingness to participate and the Davik selects me. "Know the threat," I begin. "With this knowledge divide the mind of the threat. Cast its interests against its loyalties, its loyalties against its loves, its morality against its reality."

"Example," calls the Davik. I look at my fellow students and point at the one who posited the problem: "Pria. You shall be the threat." Pria throws wide its fleshy arms, takes a step toward me, and says, "I am going to crush you to death!" He growls rather effectively. In response I say, "If you take another step toward me, Pria, I will break every bone in your body."

"Ehh?" Pria looks to the Davik and the Davik looks at me. "Violence?" asks the Davik. "No. The threat of violence."

"This is not a solution." I point a finger at Pria's lower extremities. "Notice the threat's feet, Davik. They do not move. I have placed Pria's loyalty to his problem against his interest not to have broken bones. I have placed Pria's morality, that no Timan should ever respond with violence, against its reality: I am not a Timan and if he takes another step I will break every bone in his body. Pria believes me. The threat is thereby neutralized and I have not resorted to violence." The Davik asks the students for competing responses, and the scant two who apply fail in their applications. One favors begging and the other tries buying off the threat. The Davik calls neither for examples. No longer looking entertained, the Davik nods toward me. "State your problem, Yazi Ro." In our communal mind I face all of the classes. "The threat is an ongoing war in a closed system between two species neither of which has the ability to forget or forgive an injury. Each side's goal is the elimination of the other side. The end of the threat requires peace."

"Who are the ones who are threatened?" asks a student. "All of those on the planet."

"What is the original cause of the conflict?" asks another student. "Irrelevant," I

answer. "The original cause is outweighed by the continuing cause."  
"What is the continuing cause of the war?" asks the same student. "The war," I answer. The student named Ojuahn asks, "Are both species warlike to the degree that everyone on both sides are warriors?"

"No. In fact,  
at any one time I would guess that only a fifth to a quarter of each species on the planet belongs to one of the combatant groups. Perhaps a majority of those of each species would like to have peace."

"A peace  
less drastic than the elimination of the opposing species?" presses Ojuahn. "Any kind of peace," I answer. "A truce, then. Resolve what can be resolved, and have peace."

"Every time there is a truce," I begin,  
"uncontrollable factions and individuals from each side attack and perform atrocities that ignite again the larger war. Truces that once lasted weeks and months are now reduced to hours or a day. Neither side can police its uncontrollable factions for neither political leadership can survive the prosecution of its own kind for the crime of killing those of the other side." There are more questions, some explanations, no answers that manage to survive testing. I did not think there would be. Since I posit the lone problem without sufficient answer, I graduate at the top of my class. The Davik says, "Take your place with honor, Yazi Ro 'do Timan." Perhaps if the Timans had been able to consider such problems for centuries their answers would have been more useful. However, on Timan solutions involve starting wars, arranging it so others start wars, or shunning a war and dumping it in someone else's lap. Not since the time of Bahtuo, King Jax, and Lord Nuba had the Timans actually carried arms and fought in a war, and never had the end of a war itself been considered the removal of a threat.

I stay in bed the next day. That evening I shun all company, walk the gardens until my legs ache, then go back to my quarters. Falna is waiting for me there, a special repast illuminated by candles is prepared. "All my best wishes and sincerest congratulations, Yazi Ro 'do Timan," says Falna. It holds a hand out toward the table. "For your celebration."

"What kind of mind does it take to celebrate a failure?" Falna holds its head back as though I had slapped it. "A failure? You received a very high honor from the Davik, Ro. If you want, you can continue at the Ri Mou Tavii with a high nest."

"Falna, I  
have one problem that I need to solve. The fact that neither I nor anyone else can solve it was what earned me my so-called honor." I allow myself a bitter laugh. "Besides, it was not original work."  
"Come, Ro," Falna begs, its hand held out toward the table. I notice that it is wearing a special, filmy black gown. "No. I realize you have

gone to some special trouble for tonight, Falna, but no. Tonight I want to be by myself."

"Please --"

"Leave me!" I shout. I turn my back, go into the bed chamber, and close the door. There I sit in the dark and remind myself why the children of the battlefield do without love and hope. To have love one must have hope, and to have hope one must be a fool. Quietly I hear Falna close the door as it leaves my quarters. How many ways are there to be a fool? I am not certain, but I think I must have explored all of them by now. Of course, every time I think that, I am usually on the brink of discovering new worlds of foolishness. A regular alarm corresponding with a flashing blue light comes from the com link next to the bed. I stand it as long as possible, then cross the room and pick up the link. "What?"

"Many sorrows for disturbing you," says the Timan operator, "but there is an urgent communication for you coming in on the Keu Vac Ount subspace link from Draco." I stand there, the last brick in the burial vault in my hand. "I will be there in a moment."

## CHAPTER 29

Aakav Muta, assistant to the Ovjetah, comes on screen. "Jeriba Shigan apologizes for not conveying this information to you itself, but at present the Ovjetah is on board its ship heading for Friendship to be with Estone Nev."

"I understand," I answer, a sinking feeling in my middle. If I am wrong I will have troubled a great many persons for nothing. But if I am wrong, Jeriba Shigan would not be going to Friendship to support its nameparent's sibling. "In answer to your queries, on the seven votes concerning the acceptance of the Koda Nusinda by the Jetai Diea, Estone Falna voted against the acceptance motion the first six times and voted for acceptance on the final ballot. The initial motion was voted on by absentee ballot from Earth, where Falna was in residence at the University of Nations Hospital. The subsequent six motions, including the final vote, were voted on by absentee ballot from Timan, where Estone Falna was attending the Ja Nuos Tavii. That is Timan's most advanced and prestigious school of medicine. Falna's course of study there was exclusively on Timan mind fusion techniques, research, and applications." Muta leans toward the screen, makes an adjustment, and says, "The Ovjetah conducted the investigation you suggested. These are the recordings of the interviews. As the hard copies are being transmitted, I can give you a summary, if you wish."

"Go ahead, Muta. Give me the summary." As the Ovjetah's trusted assistant looks at its notes, Muta appears as though

someone off screen is surgically removing its heart. "In the interview with Jetah Tumach Jortiz, leader against the acceptance of the Koda Nusinda, Jortiz revealed that Estone Falna was one of the opposition's chief strategists in the fight to vote down the human written book. It was through Falna's efforts that the process dragged out to seven votes." Muta looks up from its notes. "Falna's favorable vote on the final motion that passed should not be mistaken for support. Under the rules of the Jetai Diea, only those who vote in favor of a motion are eligible to make a new motion to rescind it. Because Estone Falna voted in favor of acceptance, it is now eligible to move to throw out the Koda Nusinda."

"I see." Muta returns its gaze to its notes. "Tumach Jortiz eventually admitted that Falna had alluded to taking some action outside the Jetai Diea to erode support for the Nusinda, but Jortiz claims to believe Falna was referring to things such as further investigation and publicity --" I hear an involuntary laugh come from the shadows, and I say to the Ovjetah's assistant, "I think I have enough, Muta. Thank you."

"May you find the peace you seek, Yazi Ro."

"I am far away from that, Muta," I say to the Timan Nisak symbol. I look to the corner of the chamber. "It seems you have made some rather startling advances in mind fusion techniques, Falna. Turning good humans and Dracs into murder-suicides, getting a very happy, self-confident Jeriba Ty to end its own life. Are you planning on publishing a paper on your research?" "I think not," says Falna as it emerges from the shadows, a smile on its lips, a glittering knife of some sort in its hand. "That fool Jortiz. Did you see how it attempted to distance itself from me? Publicity, indeed." There is a long silence, then Falna speaks, its voice dead calm. "When did you begin to suspect, Yazi Ro?"

"It is not that simple," I answer. "A part of me that I usually do not acknowledge noticed from the beginning a difference -- a strange coolness -- between you and Davidge. Still you must have some affection for him. Michael Hill's bungled attempt with the thermal drill shows that. Perhaps it is only affection for Estone Nev and the Jeribas who would be distressed at Davidge's death. You were trying to scare him off the talma, am I right?"

"Keep going, but deenergize the equipment first. We wouldn't want some tech wandering in here to see why it's on and not in use." I lean forward, cut off the link, and slump back in my chair. "Your affection did not extend to me, though. The attempt on my life was quite genuine."

"Yes. I am very impressed with your reaction time. I didn't think anyone could run faster than one of those marker missiles

could turn." I nod. "That explains it. It confused me why the killer would go to such trouble to keep Davidge alive yet recklessly fire a missile at the cave in hopes of hitting someone. We all had markers. When I was in the cave by myself, Davidge and Kita well away, your mind fused killers in the hovercraft fired the missile."

"I still can't see how you outran it." I smile and face the last of the Estone line. "I did not outrun it. It was still warm in the cave. I took off my coat --"

-- and left it in the cave," completed Falna, nodding as one of its own mysteries resolves. "The marker was in the coat."

"What happens now, Falna? Another suicide?" With its free hand, Estone Falna reaches to its Talman. Falna works the catch, but instead of its line's book of The Talman, a silver cube set with four tiny blue lights drops out. "This is a remarkable piece of engineering," says Falna. "Mind fusion was invented by the Timans. Did you know that?"

"No."

"You still haven't told me when you knew it was me. Was it before last night? Before we loved?"

"It was when I heard that Jeriba Ty was dead."

"Before we made love?" Falna frowns as it cocks its head to one side. "I don't understand this. On Earth they would say that you are from the sticks. Straight off the farm. A rube. You're not that devious. You love me." I look into Falna's beautiful brownish-yellow eyes and say, "I am, after all, Yazi Ro 'do Timan, graduate of the Ri Mou Tavii."

"I'll take that, Falna," says Davidge from the doorway. Stunned, Falna allows Davidge to take the strange knife and the mind fusion instrument from its hands. Kita and a human security officer are behind Davidge and they move in. The Nisak security man takes Falna's arms and shackles them. Kita has a pistol in her hand and it is trained on Falna. Davidge faces Falna and shakes his head. "I don't know what to say to you. The loss. My god, Falna, the loss. To Estone Nev, to your line, to the entire Jeriba line, to yourself, medicine, the Jetai Diea."

"Uncle, it is impossible for you to understand what drives those who would make sacrifices to keep The Talman pure, free from human corruption." His face sad, I see Davidge's shoulders slump as the human leans against the link console to steady himself. "I think I do understand, Falna. Remember, thirty

years ago Jeriba Shigan's nameparent and I were on Fyrine IV to kill each other. I understand very well. What I don't understand," he holds up his hands showing the knife and the miniature mind fusion instrument, "is this! You and this. That's what I don't understand." He lowers his hands and steps closer to Falna. "Out of all the children I've loved and taught, I gave you more than any of the others, yet you resisted at every turn. Why?" Falna turns its back on Davidge and spreads its three-fingered hands. "Count the fingers, Uncle. Remember my parent and count the fingers." With that Falna leaves the chamber followed by the Nisak security guard. Kita places a hand on Davidge's arm. "I better keep an eye on Falna." Davidge nods and, as Kita hurries after the Nisak security officer and his prisoner, he turns, leans his back against the wall, and slides down until he is squatting. He stares for a long time at the floor until at last he says, "For the first time in my life, I feel old."

"Feeling like a failure?" I ask him. He snorts out a laugh and looks over his right shoulder into the shadows. "You wouldn't?"

"No, Will, I would not. I have met some of your successes." Davidge stares into the shadows for a long time. When he at last faces me, his eyes are glistening. "Thank you, Ro." He closes his eyes and leans his head back against the wall. "Will you answer me a question?" "If I can. And," I add, "if you will answer a question for me." Davidge nods and asks, "Is Falna right? Do you love it?"

"Falna is correct about that." I feel the breath catch in my throat, that ache in my middle. To put my focus elsewhere, I say to Davidge, "Now it is your turn."

"Okay."

"On Friendship, when we were preparing for the voyage to this planet, you took a day off to go skiing. Why?"

"Kita makes great company." He looks at me, a touch of guilt in his eyes. "Okay, no flip comments." He looks down at his hands and thinks for a moment. "There's a trail out at Hidden Valley that I've never been able to do without falling down. I keep trying, though, because its a way of measuring myself." He shrugs and begins rubbing his eyes. "There was a moment after reading the Koda Nusinda when I got this feeling." He lowers his hand from his eyes and straightens his legs until he is standing. "It's like somehow I knew that I was never going to see Friendship again. I can't put my finger on why. It was a feeling. I had to give that trail one last try. Does that seem crazy?"

"Did you beat it?" He grins and shakes his head. "No. I went down it a good bit

of the way on my butt, a little bit of the way on my face. But the failure is in not trying, right?"

"Shizumaat seems to think so," I answer. He stands next to me and places a friendly hand on my shoulder. "Are you about ready to go?"

"Go?" I frown at the human. "Go where?" "Amadeen," he answers as he points with his thumb toward the door. "We're done here, and as Capt. Moss pointed out, the war is thataway." We walk together to the quarters. In my bed chamber, alone, I cry for yet another love lost. Davidge, I fear, cries for much more.

## CHAPTER 30

Amadeen. Yazi Ro is going back to Amadeen. There are a hundred good solid reasons and at least a thousand plausible excuses for not going back. Here I am, nonetheless, riding my rocket back to hell. Two days were taken up by the Karnarak. There will be a trial and our depositions were needed. The Karnarak District Master says that he is convinced Falna will be found guilty of Ty's murder, which draws the heaviest penalty: endless sleep. It is much like a permanent state of alert suspension with the trial charges, records, evidence, and testimony interspersed with Timan lectures on morality, responsibility, consequences, and remorse, all repeated again and again. I think about this as little as possible. Another day was spent preparing and packing the ship. On the day we leave a call comes to me and I have a visitor. The call is from Estone Nev over the subspace link. Nev says that it is grateful I caught the child of its namechild before Falna killed anyone else. Nev also makes it clear that I am welcome at the estate at any time. The visitor is Lahvay ni 'do Timan, Davik of the Ri Mou Tavii. He comes to my quarters in the Keu Vac Ount wearing an environmental suit, an unprecedented honor to me, as the Nisak representative Atruin 'do Timan is quick to point out. In the bubble top of the suit, Lahvay's face appears distressed. When we are alone, I offer the Davik one of the comfortable chairs in my greeting room. "My great thanks, Yazi Ro 'do Timan, but forgive me." His suited hands pat his rather wide girth. "In one of these suits I find it much less painful to stand. It has been years since I wore one. I had to borrow this ensemble from one of my students, whom from now on I will refer to as Slim." I hold out my hands. "I would have been happy to meet you on the other side of the lock, Davik. In fact, if you prefer we can go there now."

"Again my great thanks, Ro, but what I have to say is brief. I am here to ask you a favor."

"I will grant it, if I can, Davik." Lahvay ni 'do Timan raises a hand and holds up a cautionary finger. "Do not be in such haste. It is a considerable favor." He glances at the chair I offered him, decides against it, and aims his white-eyed gaze at me. "With Amadeen,



as I understand it, you are going into a solution test without the benefit of a solution to test." I feel my eyebrows climb as I nod. "You have put it quite well, Davik." His suited hands flip up and down in a gesture of either helplessness or frustration. "Are you and your companions going to dance among the energy bursts and disrupter beams hoping that something will simply turn up?" I think about the Davik's question for a moment, then nod. "In essence," I answer. "Perhaps it might sound less insane if I say that we do not have all the information we need. The information is on Amadeen, and that is why we must go there."

"And then," says the Davik, "you hope something will turn up."  
"Yes." The Davik snorts in disapproval, half sits on the chair, then changes his mind. Upright once again, he looks into my eyes and says, "I approach you in peace with no motive or weapon hidden."

"I meet you  
in the same manner, Davik."

"I have thought long and hard about the problem you brought before the nests, Yazi Ro 'do Timan. I do not have a solution, but I very much want to see such a solution. Our small corner of the universe is changing and it is time that the Ri Mou Tavii added ending armed conflicts to its discipline. I ask you to record your efforts upon Amadeen and the results. Whether you and your comrades are successful or not, please send the results to the Ri Mou Tavii so that we may begin building this new field of study. Should you survive this experiment on Amadeen, I and the Ri Mou Tavii would be honored if you would come to Timan and become a nest master at the school long enough to share your knowledge with us."

"The honor would be mine,  
Davik. If I survive and can get off of Amadeen, I will come to the Ri Mou Tavii." At that, Lahvay ni 'do Timan opens his hands, faces the palms toward me, and says, "I wish you and your comrades insight, wisdom, good luck, and a safe and profitable journey." He then bows and waddles from my greeting room.

## CHAPTER 31

In the Koda Ayvida of The Talman, it is written that the seeker Mistan undertook a six-year meditation to join with that part of itself and the universe that had the answer it sought. The seeker's problem was how to keep alive the words of its master Vehya through which the wisdom of Shizumaat had been carried from the earliest times. Mistaan found a place on a cliff high above the forest floor, stated its problem, then opened itself to the universe. Six years later the meditation ended and Mistan picked up a stick and a lump of flattened clay and invented writing. The first documents written were The Myth of Aakva, The Story of Uhe, and the Story of Shizumaat, the first three Kodas of The Talman. The voyage to Amadeen will take four months, which is all the meditation

I am to be allowed. I join Capt. Moss and Reaper Brandt in refusing suspension. The captain does not undergo suspension because he trusts no one and no thing. Reaper says he enjoys the opportunity to study, reflect, and otherwise add to his knowledge. He also has a trust problem and a denial problem. In my case, I need the time to think. Between The Talman and the lessons of the Ri Mou Tavii, I have much to absorb about my place in the universe, my purpose, and my degree of commitment. There is also the problem of Amadeen. With Davidge and Kita in suspension next to Yora Beneres and Ghazi Mrabet, I often go into the suspension bay, look at the four of them, and wonder where they have traveled to reach this place. Mrabet, for all his erudition and calm manner, is in a race with his own memories, losing himself by using sex as a drug, when he can get it, and music when he cannot. The songs and instrumentals he favors are the skull-shattering tempos of Vikaan. My font of information, the eternal seeker, Reaper Brandt, says that Mrabet was an engineer for the Nadok Rim Pirates before he teamed up with Moss and the rest before the Dracon Chamber employed mercenary unit drove the Freeholder Invaders off of Planet Eam. Reaper has not a clue as to the nature of Ghazi's nightmare nor of its origins. He is a mechanical genius, a bloodthirsty and fearless fighter. Yora Beneres, according to Reaper, is a hero waiting for a cause worthy of her ideals. After years of looking for some sort of meaning, she had given up her quest and was filling in the time left before death, until we came along seeking an end to war on Amadeen. She is a good pilot and an even better small arms expert. Reaper reports seeing her take out with three rapidly fired shots three guards who were surrounding her with weapons drawn. "Very frugal," Reaper added. "She hates to waste ammunition." Before joining the USEF to fight in the Buldahk Insurrection, she was a video actress with a fairly impressive list of credits. When I study Kita Yamagata's face, I am puzzled about her reasons for being on this ship. With the arrest of Estone Falna, her job with us is over. She has no stake, mental or otherwise, in what happens on Amadeen. Reaper says he and Kita have had long talks about police work, intelligence, and police procedures, and he is seriously impressed with her mind. Reaper is not certain why Kita is riding on this bullet to Amadeen, but the reason is in the next pod: Willis E. Davidge. I look through the clear plastic canopy at his face, tiny crystals of ice on his eyebrows and upper lip. Kita Yamagata loves this man and I wonder if he even has a clue. I think I love him, as well, but as a strange sort of surrogate parent. Not a parent. An uncle, in fact. His war was over three decades ago with the signing of the USE-Dracon Chamber Treaty. I know that he would not trade those thirty years on that hellishly cold planet for any other being's time or place in the universe. He said once that my comrades and I had helped buy him that thirty years and it was time for him to put something down on account. Remembering the old human joke, I said "On account of what?" Without acknowledging the joke, Davidge said cryptically, "I shave these days. That still requires a mirror." Capt. Moss is up in the cockpit, thrashing himself with his losses, Reaper is in his quarters reading, and it is time for me to begin my meditation. In my quarters, I take the kneeling position most Dracs take when meditating, but the unfamiliar position is too distracting. Before the

Aeolus left Timan space, Kita had shown me a pose she uses called the lotus position, and I simply stared in horror at that tangle of legs, feet, and ankles. After the manner of Mistan on its ledge above the forest, I lie down on my bunk, my hands at my sides, close my eyes and breathe, opening myself to all of myself, the universe.

--Falna enters my awareness first, its sleek thighs, that miracle of a face, its gentle embrace, its passionate touch as it spread the lips of my womb and entered me. A great well of loss. Other lovers, other touches, other losses. A lonely child, its dead parent's hand cold and limp. When it was warm, that hand had little time to stroke the child. There were enemies to avoid, shelter to acquire, clothes to mend, food to steal, the endless demands of the Mavedah. The child still craves that touch, though, seeking always to fill the void that touch's absence left.

--The Davik's face, eyes white, purplish lips pulsing in and out.

"Welcome to the Ri Mou Tavii, Yazi Ro. If you find here what you seek, that will be a treasure you will earn."

--The Amadeen Front prisoner held outside Ft. Lewis, his hands upraised, "Love! We have to love one another!" Two guards were laughing at him. The third was listening. "There can be no peace until we kill hate. Let us be of one family." All three guards died as the prisoner suddenly leaped at the one who was listening, wrested the energy knife from its hands, and killed them before another guard could bring the human down with a single pistol shot. Love one another. A few days later, guarding a new batch of Front prisoners, one of them rises to one knee and is hit at the same time by two guards with disrupters. I stand there watching as a female sitting on the ground next to the dead man cries and asks, "Why? My god, why?"

"Love one another," I tell her.

--two creatures, multi-legged, black, and scaled, their powerful pinching claws slowly opening and closing, corner a third creature, smooth, soft, small, and slow-

--Graduation day. "The threat is an ongoing war in a closed system between two species neither of which has the ability to forget or forgive an injury. Each side's goal is the elimination of the other side. The end of the threat requires peace."

--Graduation day. My time at the Nokbuk Kovah is near its end. Soon I and my fellow fighters will join the ranks of the Mavedah. There is a test, though, its nature a closely guarded secret. One says it is a torture we must suffer without complaint. Another says it is a demonstration of arms. Another says it is a shameful hideous task we must perform to show how much we want to be Mavedah. All of them are correct. In my hand is a knife. When the door to the pit in front of me

opens, I see a live human male tied with his arms behind him to a pole set into the hard packed ground of the tiny combat arena. In the seats above the pit are Jetah Dekaban Lo and the Selector, Choi Leh. There are no instructions. I am supposed to know what to do, and I am supposed to do it. The human looks at me, its voice low and pleading. "No. Please. No. Please." I raise my knife and walk toward the man, my mind racing. In our communications training we were shown a holographic receiver. Perhaps this is not a real human. -- In combat training we were shown some of the mechanical men some of whom were used by the USEF early in the war. They say there are still a few in the ranks of the Front. Perhaps this is not a real human. -- Its eyes are gray, the perspiration beaded on its forehead, its throat dry from fear. "Please, God, no. Please, God, no." It is just a test. Lo and the Selector just want to see if I am hard enough to kill. No one would really use prisoners this way. I think I see a crack in the flesh of the man's neck, just above the collar of his sweat-stained shirt. It is a mechanical and I have hesitated too long already. As I reach up with my blade and draw it across the throat of the man, I see that the crack is only a loose thread. Then I am sprayed with human blood as Dekaban Lo and Choi Leh grunt their approval. As I walk toward the door, wiping the blood from my face, I hear them dragging another human into the pit. "No!" the human cries. "Please, no!" I am led to a different place. I see my blood-spattered comrades sitting and standing by a tracked vehicle. They avoid looking into my eyes and I avoid looking into theirs. By late afternoon the last of us is graduated and led to the tracked transport. We all climb in, the doors are closed behind us, and the transport's motor whines as the walls and floor lurch on our way to the Okori Sikov in the Southern Shorda. "We are the twelve," says a bitter voice in the dark. "The front twelve," we whisper in response. "Mavedah."

"A truce, then," offers the Timan student. "Resolve what can be resolved, and have peace."

"Every time there is a truce," I begin,  
"uncontrollable factions and individuals from each side attack and perform atrocities that ignite again the larger war. Truces that once lasted weeks and months are now reduced to hours or a day. Neither side can police its uncontrollable factions for neither political leadership can survive the prosecution of its own kind for the crime of killing those of the other side."

-- Pria presents its problem to the nest. -- The Davik calls for a test of my solution. -- Pria throws wide its fleshy arms, takes a step toward me, and says, "I am going to crush you to death!" I say, "If you take another step toward me, Pria, I will break every bone in your body." The beginning of a new Timan parable.

As if from an incredible distance I hear someone calling my name:

"Ro! Ro! Ro!" That human children's song works its way into my mind and I hear my voice croak, "Row, row, row, your boat, gently down the

stream--" Before I can get to my first merrily, I gag, then cough, then double up with a coughing fit. The fit passes, I lie there like a wet rag. No strength, my middle hurts, a horrible odor assaults my nostrils. With effort I open my eyes and see Kita's face looking down at me. "How long has Yazi Ro been lying here?" she asks. "A little shy of twenty-one standard days," answers Reaper. "Why didn't you bring me up sooner? A little longer and it would've died from dehydration. My god, couldn't you smell it in here?"

"Dracs don't need that much water.

Besides, Ro said that Mistan did a meditation for six years," he explains lamely. "Reaper, that was a parable. Even so, it was on a cliff, in the open, its disciples bringing it food every day!" I see Reaper's face next to Kita's. His nose wrinkles. "Um. I suppose the occasional rainstorm hosed off the ledge, too." He grins at me and says, "Hey, Ro! You alive?" I nod and croak out, "I am."

"Next time you

want to do a marathon meditation, maybe you should get together first with someone who knows what he's doing."

"You may be right." Kita holds

up my head and places the end of a squeeze bottle between my lips.

"This is just some juice." The sugary liquid splashes into my dry mouth and it is the most delicious thing I have ever tasted. Three squirts and I nod my thanks. Kita removes the bottle and lowers me back down. "Reaper, get Ro into the shower and get it cleaned up. I'll find a clean robe."

"One thing, first." Reaper bends over until his face fills my vision. "Did you get the answer you were looking for?" I shake my head. "Not the one I was looking for. Instead I saw one that will work." Reaper turns to Kita. "The aroma is high but the sight is keen."

## CHAPTER 32

In the galley, a small bit of solid food in me, I sit wrapped in a blanket looking at the others seated around the table. Kita sits at my right, Reaper to my left. Mrabet, Davidge, Moss, and Beneres sit across the table from us. "There will be another attempt at a truce between the Mavedah and the Amadeen Front," I begin. "There always is." I look at Davidge. He cocks his head to one side. "Then one of the splinter factions, either human or Drac, will do something to torpedo the peace process."

"And then the whole thing blows up," says Yora Beneres. I shake my head. "No. One of the splinter factions will do something to try to disrupt the peace process. We find out who it is and either stop them or punish them if they violate the truce conditions." Capt. Moss frowns in confusion, looks around the table, and asks, "We? Who's we?" "For a beginning, the seven of us." Six pairs of raised eyebrows face

me. Undaunted, I continue. "I think we can build our numbers by first presenting our talma to Zenak Abi, and then to its people, as well as to any one else who has defected from the fighting. Once the word gets out that a neutral force will police the truce, I think more will join. We will need fighters and investigators in our ranks," I look at Reaper. "and those secret members who collect information in the Drac territories and in the human territories and those who lie in wait to take Aydan's Blade to the violators. Every time there is a violation, those who order the violation and those who take part, die. We leave our mark to let others know that to violate the peace is to die, and it is us, not their opposition, doing the killing." Ghazi Mrabet taps a finger on the table. "Then you see Dracs killing Dracs."

"And humans killing humans," adds Kita. "Yes."

"A war to end war?" asks Davidge. "Is this just taking a two-sided conflict and making it three-sided?" Reaper leans his elbows on the table and clasps his hands together. "I see what Ro's getting at. We're not talking war, Will. Yazi Ro here is talking cops." He looks at me. "Police?" I think for a moment and nod. "Police. Very special police, out to prevent only one crime." Eli Moss shrugs and holds up a hand. "This isn't going to change the goals of any of these nutball factions." A moment of light-headedness brushes me and floats away. I take a sip of juice, swallow, and look at the captain. "We will not attempt to change goals, educate, mediate, or have the peoples of Amadeen love one another. Until at least one generation can grow up in peace, all of those are out of reach. Our only goal will be peace. Making violating the peace pointless is how we will do it." I look at Davidge. "Our goal is different from the Front and the Mavedah and from all of their factions. Our goal is peace. Any two groups that come together to make peace, we are there in both the light and the shadows to keep the peace from being violated."

"Why would anyone take us seriously?" Reaper shakes his head and wags a hand back and forth. "At first, they won't." He lowers his hand and raises an eyebrow. "After the first hit, though, we will have credibility." Davidge leans back in his seat and ponders while Reaper and Kita talk about how to set up a network of clandestine local information and investigation centers from which can come accurate information to identify, target, and hit particular violators. In Davidge's face I see objections present themselves and get resolved one by one, his face saddening with each resolution. It is argued, pulled apart, and argued again from different positions. Davidge, Capt. Moss, Yora Beneres, and Ghazi Mrabet hang back and frown as they listen. Reaper and Kita almost appointing themselves my sales agents. Kita talks about the information system used by the Asian Regional Police on Earth where she was an interrogator and later circuit troubleshooter for the East Asian Administrative District. An organizational outline is drawn, amended, changed again, the outline redrawn time and time again. Where to do

this, how to do that, who to do this, what to do it to. Nearing the end of the discussion, Davidge is the only one still hanging back. With the others, I can see that what we are going to do has been resolved. How to do it is detail. I am exhausted by the time Davidge is finished with his pondering. "Two things," he says. "First, I think we can get two year's head start on building the information files if we can get access to the quarantine force's data banks. They've been out there going around in circles for thirty years and I'll bet for all that time the sociologists and government paper wizards have been observing Amadeen, taking notes, and writing papers and reports no one is ever going to read. I'll use the subspace link and see if the Ovjetah can get the information and send it on to us." He smiles and shakes his head. "And your second thing?"

"I guess there is no second thing. I was going to have Shigan run this through the Talman Kovah's projection computers, but it would only say the same thing that it's been saying for months: "Knowledge of the path might close the path, Uncle." He looks at me, the sadness in his eyes heartbreaking. "If we do this with even a slight degree of success, we will be in a war: killing theirs and burying those of our own who don't make it." He clasps his hands and looks off into the distance. "In the only war I ever saw, I jockeyed a long-range fighter. When I killed someone it was a blip on a screen. When a friend died, he just disappeared in a burst along with his ship. All very neat and clean. There wasn't time to think, only to react. If you took time to think, you died." He brings his gaze back to my eyes. "The kind of war you're talking about, Ro, is a lot dirtier. I don't want it." He pauses for moment and says again, "I don't want it, but no one has an alternative. You did good work, Ro." It is one thing to suggest a theory. There is a special terror in having those you know take it seriously and act upon it. I nod my thanks, and give in to my weariness. "Get some rest, some food, and some exercise. We're only at the beginning of this." He looks around at the others. "I don't see going back into suspension. If we can get that data from the quarantine force, we're all going to be up to our ears making plans, training, sorting information, and studying." He looks around the room one last time. "Anyone else?" The Reaper makes a fist and knocks on the table top. "Computers. We need lots of small hand portables for on the surface. We can get started with the ship's computers, but once we're planetside, we're going to have to check and cross-reference all of our information, with each station adding and updating info for each area. I can't believe they have anything left on Amadeen that's working and we can get out hands on."

"How many?" Reaper glances at Kita and she frowns as she does a little calculating in her head. "Two or three hundred with extra power packs to begin. We'll need comm portables so they can transmit and receive updates."

"Something else," interrupts Mrabet.

"Components and tools for repairs and for manufacture. If we can

develop the capability to make our own we'll be able to keep up supplies and adapt the newer ones more closely to our needs without having to depend on off planet supply." Davidge nods. "I'll see what the Ovjetah can do for us. Anything else?"

"Yes," answers Yora. "It seems like the Front is going to be mortally bent if we hit a human and the Mavedah is going to be equally hacked if we whack a Drac." She nods at Moss. "The captain and I used to belong to an outfit that everybody on a particular planet hated. It got pretty hairy and we weren't even on the planet's surface." There is a long silence then she smiles broadly and says, "Just an observation."

In four days I am healthy and feel fit. At our regular meeting, Davidge asks, "How do we get down on Amadeen's surface?" Capt. Moss dismisses the matter as no problem at all. "We've already recorded the orbiting stations' positions and movements relative to the planet's surface. We have the fighter patrol schedules, and we're getting records of the movements of the quarantine force's own band of smugglers. "What it amounts to," says Moss, "is we go in where no one is looking and quickly get down to an altitude below what they consider trying to leave Amadeen. The only thing we have to worry about then is getting pranged by a Front or a Mavedah ground to air missile." There is some discussion regarding the accuracy of the quarantine force's information on the location of such missile units when Ghazi Mrabet taps a finger on the table. "What about getting off Amadeen?"

"Off?" I ask.

He nods. "Yes. Say we make it down, get everything organized, whack the bad guys, the truce we hope for holds, and all of us aren't dead. In other words, what if there is peace? Does anybody get off or is Amadeen quarantined until its sun goes red giant?" I look at Davidge and the human is nibbling at the skin on the insides of his lips. "If the truce holds, if there is peace for a year between the warring sides, the quarantine will be reviewed and becomes eligible to be relaxed to the extent of allowing trade, communications, and passenger traffic. Once a formal peace is signed, the quarantine force loses its charter. That's when we can all leave, go to the Talman Kovah, and present our talma to the Jetai Diea. Then we can watch them reaffirm their vote and publish the Koda Nusinda. Maybe." Yora leans back in her chair. "Maybe?" The left side of Davidge's mouth pulls back in a wry smile as he looks at me. "Ro, what was it that Michael Hill said to you on the ship from Draco?"

"If you want to hear God laugh, make a plan," I answer. Davidge nods, stands, and walks toward the cockpit.

## CHAPTER 33

Three months from Amadeen. The Ovjetah reports the computers, parts, tools, and equipment we requested are waiting for us at the A'ja



Cou Station in orbit around Vikaan, thirty days from Amadeen. In the intervening two months, we can work on the USE-DC Quarantine Force data. All of the information we want from the quarantine force is already at the Talman Kovah, as it is at the USE Archives on Earth, complete with weekly updates. It may only be released to parties engaged in serious research on the subject of Amadeen, which puts us at the top of the list. We get it all: historical overviews, government, political history, economics, currency, and finance, production, trade, demography, transportation, agriculture, forestry, fishing, industry and mining, culture and education, environment, natural resources, geography, geology, and so on. There is even a vast part of the data bank devoted to sports and recreation. My mind numbs at the wealth of information for which we have little or no use. The military and terrorism sections, however, have names of individuals and organizations, dates and places, methods of operation, individual relations and even some locations and addresses. On the Drac side, there is the Mavedah and three main splinter groups: the Tean Sindie or Children of Racehome; the Sitarmeda or Sixteenth, named for the Koda Sitarmeda in The Talman, which covers the Thousand Year War; and Thuyo Koradar or Eye of the Killer. Within and around these ungovernable organizations are numbers of much smaller uncontrollable factions and individuals with records of acting on their own without regard to any authority or organization whatsoever. On the human side, there is the Amadeen front and four main splinter groups: Black October, for whom the political party on Earth is named; Green Fire, named that for reasons of its own, possibly an early founder; the Fives, named for the number of fingers on a human hand; and the Rose, named for slain Front Chairman Gordon Rose. They, too, have their minor factions and rugged individualists. Of the most recent seven truce attempts over the past two years, four were undermined by Black October and the remaining three by Tean Sindie. Non-combatant groups aligned with neither side, I am surprised to see, form the majority of the population on Amadeen. Zenak Abi's friends are just one of hundreds of such groups numbering from fifty to one island enclave numbering over a million men, women, and Dracs. Our planned structure is thrown out and done again based on the existing organizations, factions, and individuals it will be necessary to monitor and outguess. As the information is processed, Kita and Reaper make charts showing the location and extent of influence of each organization, the location of individuals, supply dumps, weapons caches, food, clothing, and weapon production facilities, hospitals, power plants, disposition of military units, and so on. At one point, Davidge hands me a sheet of paper. "A little something I squeezed out of the name bank." I look at it and I now have all of the names and all of the histories of my line, including the address where the Yazi line archives are supposed to be. Perhaps when we get to Amadeen, if we live long enough, and if we can maintain a truce, and if we can get to Gitoh, and if there is any of Gitoh left when we get there, perhaps Davidge will stand with me when I recite line and book and take on the robes of adulthood. It is still my fantasy.

One of the charts shows where fighting is actually taking place.

On the holographic reader in the cockpit it is a huge blue and white globe perforated and scratched with a few glowing red dots and lines. While I am studying it, noticing that in the Southern Shorda nothing much has changed during the past year, Yora Beneres leans back in her couch, stretches, and says in a loud voice, "I think we have a path down to the surface." She leans forward and suddenly my holographic display is replaced with another: a smaller scale representation of Amadeen with the six orbiting stations of the quarantine force surrounding it. Yora gets up from her couch and stands next to me. "Look at this, Ro. Thirty years of sitting on their butts and not doing anything has made them very sloppy." She reaches over and punches something into the keyboard. The surface of the planet turns bright orange at the equator, the color growing dimmer as it reaches the poles. At the poles themselves the surface is blue. She punches in another code and the orbiters begin leaving bright pink tracks as they circle the planet. With less than one orbit, the eccentric orbits of two of the orbiters becomes obvious. When they are below the equator, the patch of blue at the north pole increases on one side. "See that?"

"Yes," I answer, looking up at her. "What about the fighter patrols?" She taps in another code and tiny bright dots in motion begin leaving bright green tracks. A group takes a position thirty degrees above the equator and its sibling group takes a similar position thirty degrees below the equator. The entire surface of the planet is orange, including the poles. "Now watch this." At that point in time when the two eccentrically orbiting quarantine stations and the northern fighter patrol are on opposite sides of the pole, a beautiful blue slot opens in the quarantine force's coverage of the planet. "How long will it be open?"

"Long enough." She stands straight and glances toward the hatch. "I better let Eli know."

"Before you go, could you bring up the display I was observing?" Her eyebrows go up. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you had something in the works." She taps in a code and my own display replaces the one showing the orbiters. With a long finger she points at one of the glowing red lines on the surface of Amadeen. "The battle charts! So that's what it looks like on the reader." She studies the display and nods her head. "Well, that's encouraging. Most of the planet is at peace. All that's left is to tidy up a bit." I am certain she is joking.

A day from the A'ja Cou Station, after much sifting, sorting, and eliminating, we arrive at a list of names and locations of likely truce violators and likely candidates for our infant organization. Now all we have to do is verify the information, find them, watch them, add the new names, catch the guilty, prove them guilty, and call upon them with prejudice to the max. Kita, Yora, and I are in the galley discussing the

name of the organization. In my mind it has always been Aydan's Blade. They have, though, other ideas. Yora leans on the table and says, "Aydan's Blade is a great name, Ro, if you're a Drac. It's a story out of The Talman, the name of a Drac Jetah."

"The Front won't think of us as neutral and independent with a name like that," adds Kita. After some more argument I let go of the name in favor of the organization's absolute neutrality in appearance as well as in fact. Reaper joins us and the four of us offer many names, reaching agreement on none of them as Capt. Moss enters the galley. "Where's Davidge?"

"His quarters," I answer. "What is it?"

"Two messages from Atruin 'do Timan. First, he's seen a general report issued by the USE-DC Quarantine Force that the Front and the Mavedah are both putting out feelers for another truce. The other message is that Estone Falna was found guilty. It got the long sleep." Moss heads toward the passenger quarters. With joints made of water, I stumble to my quarters to be alone in the dark.

## CHAPTER 34

The A'ja Cou Station. The Planet Vikaan fills the blackness above us with its greenish-blue surface broken by bands and whorls of delicate white clouds as the station, looking like thick spokes of a wheel with no rim, comes into view. Each spoke looks like a stack of thin white wafers, the bottom of each stack joined together at the hub. There are eight stacks, three of which are only partly completed. They seem to have a strange radiance. As we move closer the sheen I thought I saw resolves into thousands of illuminated window ports revealing that each one of those wafers is at least fourteen stories thick. While Ghazi Mrabet is busy with Reaper, Kita, and Davidge, I sit in the engineer's couch in the cockpit watching while the Aeolus prepares to dock. Eli and Yora flip switches and mutter unintelligible chatter at each other and into their headsets which prompts additional gibberish from the station port traffic controller into the headset I am wearing. Their instrument panel screens fill with numbers, diagrams, and attitude views of the ship as countless colored lights flash between blue and green. Despite this chaos of information, the Aeolus moves smoothly toward the most outside wafer on one of the eight spokes. The white edge of the wafer is broken with innumerable slots, each slot being a docking bay capable of handling one or more freighters or large passenger ships. As the ship follows a trail of five other ships around the spoke, bays illuminate. Each bay preparing to accept a ship has docking codes displayed. One by one the ships turn from the pattern into their respective bays in a silent, dreamy dance. At last the Aeolus turns and moves smoothly toward one of the bays. In moments the ship is swallowed by the cavernous interior and is brought to a halt so smoothly I fail to notice when we actually stop. Eli and Yora shut down their panels and

get up from their couches. Yora stops next to me. "Well, what did you think?" I am so stunned by the scale and beauty of it all I cannot think of anything to say. Eli pushes past her and looks out of the cockpit's ports at the interior of the landing bay. "It was kind of monotonous, wasn't it?" He looks back at me. "I suppose dockings and landings are lot more entertaining when the reception committee is shooting at you."

After disembarking, Yora and the captain go to the port director's office while Davidge, Kita, Reaper, and I move through crowds of Vikaans, humans, Dracs, and some others to take a tram to Ekst 98, the cargo holding level, one wafer toward the hub from the docking level, Ekst 99. As the brightly illuminated car drops down and slows at the almost deserted level 98 boarding platform, Davidge and I see a familiar personage waiting for us. It is Estone Nev. The old Drac is clad in dark maroon trousers and boots and a black robe. I look at Davidge and his skin is pale. As the doors open, Reaper heads straight for the cargo transfer office while Kita and I stand and watch Davidge approach Estone Nev. Neither of them say a word. Nev looks sadly at the human while the human cannot look into the old Drac's eyes at all. Nev reaches out a hand, places it on Davidge's cheek, and pulls the human toward itself. Nev embraces him and Davidge's shoulders begin heaving. "It was not your responsibility, Will. You did not fail the child. Falna made its own choices." Kita takes my hand and holds it. I look down at her and her eyes are filled with tears. I look away from them all before I too burn my eyes with tears. There is too much killing and dying in our futures to begin crying now, especially to cry for such as Falna. I feel another hand touching my shoulder. I turn to look and it is Estone Nev. The words tumble from my lips, "Forgive me, Nev." It pulls me close and embraces me, its words gentle on my ear. "There is nothing to forgive, child."

"But Falna! If I --"

"I do not judge you, Yazi Ro. If I do not, who are you to judge yourself?"

Much later, alone in my quarters in the station, I am again sitting in the dark entertaining my demons. Why does the permanent suspension of a murderer -- a murderer who once aimed death at me -- act upon me harder than the death of any of those who loved me? I think on it and the only reason that makes sense is, with the exception of my parent, all of the others I expected to die. I never believed any of the others truly loved me because we all held something back. All of us expected ourselves and the others to die. Falna, though, had the most wonderful past and future I had ever seen -- could even imagine. Blessed by the universe, it had to live for it was destined for a life of peace, love, prosperity, and fulfillment. That is why I believed Falna loved me. That is why I loved Falna. That is why some perverse part of me still loves Falna. What can permanent conscious suspension be like? Unlike the pods on board ship, where time, even conscious time, is compressed, months seeming like hours, suspension in Timan's Karnarak cells is in

real time, every instant filled with endless repetition: the trial, the trial notes and materials, lectures and object lessons on morality, the trial, over and over until the only hiding place is madness. Falna is strong minded, though. Perhaps it will not quickly give into insanity. It might take years, decades. It might only take a few months, though. A mind as brilliant as Falna's needs stimulation. The monotony coupled with the prospect of forever being imprisoned in a cell the exact size of its own body -- Falna might be screaming in silence this very moment. Falna is so young. If it lives as long as its parent's nameparent, Estone Nev, it will be suffering for another five decades. I look at the darkness around me and suddenly it no longer provides a hiding place. Instead a thousand invisible threats lurk in the shadows. I rise from the meditation dais, go to the door, and step into the main salon of the suites Estone Nev arranged for us. The aged Drac has done much for us. After hearing the talma from Jeriba Shigan, Nev added something to the cargo for us it accompanied to the A'ja Cou Station. In addition to the computers and the supplies, tools, and equipment for repairing and manufacturing computers, are eight power platforms packaged together in a stack. Separated and assembled, each platform can carry up to sixty soldiers in full battle gear. More important than that, however, it can carry an equal weight of tools and equipment. Nev had said, "Remember the words of our old deceased enemy, Hissied 'do Timan: "The enemy who believes it has an investment in a particular site will fortify that location, and in so doing fashion its own trap." Our entire operation, including Ghazi Mrabet's small computer factory, is air mobile. Davidge and Nev are seated in plush couches facing each other. Kita is in a third couch looking at one of the hand portable comm linked computers the crew of the Aeolus was having loaded into the ship's cargo bays. Kita sees me and smiles. "You must see the computers, Ro. They are exactly what we need."

"Good." I sit next to her, and as Davidge and Nev discuss the Amadeen talma, I look at the instrument and am surprised how small and light it is. While Kita points out the features, Davidge asks the old Drac, "Why are you here, Nev? Anyone could have supervised delivery of the cargo."

"Well, there were the power platforms, and some special equipment."

"Orin or any cargo agent could have handled that."

Nev's eyes search Davidge's for a moment, then they look elsewhere.

"This thing you plan to attempt on Amadeen, it is very dangerous."

"Granted."

"Will, would you begrudge me a last meeting and embrace with you?" Davidge sighs and looks down guiltily. "Of course not. I am very glad to see you." His gaze slowly rises until he is once more looking into Nev's eyes. "That isn't all, though. You. .. you're going from here to Timan, aren't you?" Nev wrestles with a thought, then discards it. "Yes, I am."

"Why?" Estone Nev shows its palms and says, "It is not sufficient that my namechild's child is being held there?" Davidge leans forward, his expression one of fear and concern. "Don't do this, Nev. An army couldn't break Falna out of the Karnarak security center."

"I have no such plans," answers Nev. "To attempt to do that I would have to disagree with the Timan verdict, and I do not. Falna is a murderer and among its murders is dear Ty, the child of Jeriba Zammis." The old Drac seems stunned for a moment by its own words. "Why go to Timan, then?"

"I know about conscious suspension, the way they are keeping Falna." Nev nods toward Kita. "Her partner at Aakva Lua, Mirili Sanda, told me that according to the Timan law, there is an alternative to permanent suspension. I had the estate's attorney investigate the matter, and it is true. There is an alternative." Estone Nev looks up and its eyes are haunted by its chosen mission. "Falna may be put to death. As its sole living ascendant, according to the law, only I have the right to take Falna's life." It raises its hands and looks down at them. "With these," it whispers. "I am allowed no medications or weapons or surrogates. I must use these." Nev looks up and its gaze meets mine. "I am traveling to Timan to strangle the life from my namechild's child." There is another embrace between Nev and Davidge, Kita standing next to them, her arms around them both. I hurry from the salon horrified by the torture Estone Nev has chosen for itself and enraged at Falna for placing Estone Nev in the position of having to make such a choice.

"Where is happy paste when you need it," Min had said as it lay dying in that shell hole near Douglasville. The words come to me as I walk the endless colored corridors and ways of the transient quarters' level, looking for someplace to put my head, some event in which to bury my feelings. There are some shopping pavilions selling things I neither want nor need. I find myself in an entertainment kiosk lined with books, buttons, disks, decks, vids and viewers. I soon realize that I do not have the calmness necessary to read a book, listen to a disk, or watch a vid. As I try to make up my mind where to go to explode, a vid viewer behind me ends its sample program and fades to a news program. Leading the news from Vikaan, the eleven day truce between the Amadeen Front and the Mavedah ended six hours ago, reports the USE-DC Quarantine Force, when a Black October assassination team attacked the relatively untouched Drac community of Namdas in the Silver Mountains of the Southern Shorda, slaying all the inhabitants, including the children. A face fills my view and it belongs to Reaper. "Great! I found you." "Yes."

"I did a name search and out popped a couple of old friends of mine from the Tsien Denvedah. If we can get them to come along, they'd be important additions to the team. I posted a message and they're

hanging out at the end of one of the incomplete spokes. Want to come along and do the selling?"

"I do not feel much like selling anything right now, Reaper." The former assassin studies me for a moment, then smiles. "I know what you need, Ro." He cocks his head toward the tram landing. "C'mon. These guys hang out with a rough crowd and I need someone to watch my back." My good sense calls to me to go back to my quarters and go to bed, but it is such a small voice. I join Reaper on his quest to renew old friendships and perhaps to pick a fight.

## CHAPTER 35

Up and down are twisted at the station. The wafers at the end of the spokes seem to be up because that is the way the artificial gravity points our heads. The hub seems like down, because our feet are pointed in that direction. Beyond down, however, are seven more ups. After consulting a directory at the hub, Reaper and I take the uncompleted Niym spoke out to the farthest completed Wafer, Niym 44. On the tram car our fellow passengers seem divided equally between Vikaan Police Security and miscreants bound for excitement, chaos, and destruction. I number myself, of course, among the latter. Beginning with the Niym 44 platform, the eight main corridors are jammed with establishments selling drugs, sex, games, and exotic items of every kind in every combination. Flashing colored lights share the strange smelling corridors with darker stretches illuminated with dim illusion lights that haze and randomly delay photons making a dreamy multi-dimensional oasis before the next set of blinding lights and ear shattering sounds. Half way out the radius along Corridor Six, we turn left off the radius and walk along a mid circle corridor through deep purple illusion lights until Reaper turns into an establishment called Jada Diea, which is a word play on Jetai Diea, which means Chamber of masters. Jada Diea means Chamber Pot. Inside it is dark, the music jumpy, the air thick with the smoke of several different kinds of burning herbs. I see seven or eight Dracs, the rest are humans and Vikaans. Reaper stretches up on his toes to see over the heads of the crowd, then he turns, pokes my arm, and moves his way through the press of bodies. As I follow, I see in the center of the dance floor, suspended above it, three naked beings together in the white light, a man, a woman, and a Drac, moving in unison as they undulate in an unbelievably erotic dance. Someone puts a drink of some kind into my hand, and with my awareness melted down by the three dancers, I drink it not knowing, or caring, what it is. Reaper's hand jerking my shoulder brings me back to the unreality of the Chamber Pot. I finish off the drink and follow him to the back of the establishment, the tips of my fingers and toes apparently going numb. From bits of overheard conversation, bits of uniforms, weapons, and the artwork adorning the walls and ceiling -- and floor -- I realize that a substantial majority of the guests in the club are former or current mercenaries in the employ of the Dracon Chamber, Vikaan, and perhaps one or two other quadrant powers. At the edge of the crowd, the tables begin, and they rise in tiers, Vikaan waiters and waitresses moving

between them, casting drinks and drugs into the crowded tables, harvesting credit slips, promises to pay, and an occasional wad of money. At the second tier from the top, there is a table with four persons sitting at it: three humans and a Drac. Two of the humans are female. The woman with blond hair is sleeping with her head on the table. The other, with very black hair, is singing a strange song to herself. The man is leaning back in his chair, his mouth open, either dead or passed out. The Drac is half-crushed on happy paste, its eyes having difficulty moving in unison. As Reaper stops at their table the somewhat less comatose woman looks startled, ends her song, sways as she reaches beneath her right arm with her left hand, looks down in confusion, and laughs. "I'm wearing a dress!" Looking up, she says, "Reaper, you creepin' son of a bitch, what're you doin' here?" An evil glint in his eye, he grins. "I'm here to say hi, and maybe put you and your Drac onto a good thing." At that she reaches beneath the table, but before she can straighten up, Reaper has a pistol, the muzzle of which is a hair's breadth from the end of her nose. She becomes motionless and smiles broadly. "I s'pose it wouldn't hurt to listen." Very slowly she sits upright, places her hands on the table, and looks at the Drac. "Cudak, honey, look who's come to visit." The drugged out Drac jerks its head about in a random search of the club's interior, its gaze eventually settling on Reaper's face. As it does, Cudak's lower jaw falls open, sobriety returns in a flash, and it reaches inside its jacket. The pistol is now aimed between Cudak's eyes. "Whatever you pull out of there, Cudak, better be a suppository," says Reaper, "because whatever you have in your hand is going to be shoved right up your ass." The Drac raises an eyebrow in disdain and answers, "Reaper, you never did understand that, unlike yourself, Dracs don't have assholes."

"That doesn't alter my plan, Cudak. Just let me know where you want one." Cudak hesitates for a moment, then removes its hand from inside the jacket holding nothing but fingers. I look around the club and several unpleasant looking persons are looking in our direction and muttering among themselves. I poke Reaper's arm. "We seem to be drawing attention."

"Half of 'em are probably owed money by these two. Let me know if anyone looks like they want to play," he answers without looking away from either Cudak or the woman. "Ro, I'd like to introduce you to the former Mrs. Earnst Brandt, Sally Red Feather, and her cuddle-bumps, Gav Cudak. Sally, Cudak, this is my comrade, Yazi Ro."

"Spook?" asks Sally. "Not easily," I answer, causing the others to laugh. Reaper lowers his weapon and half-turns to me, his gaze still fixed on his former mate and correspondent. "Sally wants to know if you're in intelligence work. You are."

"Yes," I answer. A waiter comes, places a round of drinks in front of all who are still conscious, and looks to



Reaper, who reaches into his pocket and drops a few credits on the Vikaan's tray. As I pick up my drink, I nod toward Gav Cudak and its human. "Are you two working at all, or simply doing career research for employment in the exciting world of drug rehabilitation?" As Reaper burst out laughing, Sally's large dark eyes study me as though measuring me for a shroud. The cruder elements behind me increase their muttering level, one of them calling out, "You got trouble, Sal?"

"Either that or a job," she answers. "I'll let you know." Reaper surveys the immediate area, pulls out two chairs, and nods his head toward the chair on the right. "Have a seat." As both of us sit down, Reaper puts his weapon away inside his jacket and leans back in his chair. "I've joined up with Ro and his buddies. They have a gig that might suit the pair of you right down to the ground."

"Where, when, how?" asks Cudak. "How much?" adds Sally. "Amadeen is where," answers Reaper, drawing a low whistle from his ex-wife. "When is pretty much right now. We'll be leaving in a day or two. How is a little more complicated." He looks at me and says, "The short version, spunky." How to stop a war in twenty-five words or less. "We form a neutral force that polices truces and finds and eliminates violators. Object: peace." Sally keeps me fixed with her eyes as she seems to nod approvingly. "How much?" she asks again. Reaper frowns, glances at me, and looks into the distance as he drums his fingertips on the table. "I guess we really haven't gone into that much." Both Cudak's and Sally's mouths drop open in astonishment. "You don't know?" demands Cudak. The Drac faces its lover and says, "Reaper doesn't know. The human cash register is signed up to do spooks in the hottest pit in the quadrant, and he doesn't know." Sally looks at me and says, "Sign us up, Yazi Ro. I just got to see what it is that got the Reaper working for something besides money." I finish my drink and nod toward their two companions. "What about them?" Sally looks at the man and jabs his arm. Getting no response, she jabs him more forcefully toppling him from his chair into the woman sleeping with her head on the table, causing both of them to fall to the floor. Sally shrugs and looks back at me. "They don't want to come."

Their quarters are in a room in the rear of the club next to the kitchen. It is nothing more than a cot in the corner of a storage area. Next to the cot, sitting on a case of toilet cleaner, is an elderly Drac. When we enter, the Drac gets to its feet and points to two backracks completely packed and standing together like two soldiers on parade. In Drac it says, "I have them packed, Sally. You will not find a spot of dirt or a strap out of place. No one stole anything. I stood guard." Sally pats its face with her hand. "You did well, Toack. I'm proud of you." The old Drac blinks its eyes at Reaper for a moment then turns to the cot. "I made this up. No wrinkles. See, no wrinkles at all." Sally takes off her dress, folds it into a flimsy white box, and begins putting on tan trousers, soft brown boots, and a brown jacket. "Toack, the cot is yours again, and I'm leaving you the dress. You

ought to be able to sell it for a good price. Cudak and I are leaving on a mission." Toack frowns and says, "A mission; can you tell me about it?"

"I know very little; only that it is on Amadeen and the object is peace." Cudak puts on its backrack as Toack slowly shakes its head. "Lost. Ask the masters. They know. Amadeen is lost." The old Drac looks up at Reaper and seems to study him closely. "You are one of my human children, aren't you?" I look at Reaper and I see tears in the big man's eyes. "Yes, Jetah. Earnst Brandt, Seventh Officer, Ilcheve." "Earnst," says Toack, the name apparently unfamiliar to it. "I apologize, but I should know you. I know all my children." Toack sits on the cot and keeps repeating, "All my children. All my children." Reaper stands with his feet apart, his left hand hooked into his belt, and his right hand open and placed over the center of his chest; the salute of the Tsien Denvedah. After a moment the old Drac notices, struggles to its feet, and returns the salute. As the four of us work our way through the crowd to the entrance, Reaper is deadly silent, his attention on his own shadows. Cudak and Sally are ahead of us and keep going as a hairy five fingered hand reaches out of the crowd, plants itself in my chest, and stops me. The hand is soon followed by a human face with a jaw that looks capable of gnawing the stones out of the Talman Kovah. "Excuse me, squid," he says, "but the last time you streaked through here, you picked up a drink that was meant for me and didn't pay for it." I remember a drink, but the details are fuzzy. Since I want no trouble, I reach for my moneyfold as I say, "I apologize if I have taken something that is not --" Reaper interrupts by pushing me aside, a curiously calm expression on his face. "Do you have a problem, comrade?" he asks almost politely. The fellow with the prominent jaw eyes Reaper and says, "This is between me and the Drac, kizlode. Piss off." Sally reaches out a hand between me and the jaw and pokes Reaper. "You don't have to do this, you know."

"Nag, nag, nag," says Reaper.  
"It's always nag, nag, nag."

"Do you think --" Cudak attempts to interject, but the jaw reaches out a hand and shoves it in the face, sending Sally's lover into a rather large Drac, knocking it to the floor. Before I can see the resolution of that little drama, Reaper hauls back and punches the jaw's nose, and suddenly personages, Drac, human, and Vikaan, that I have never before seen, met, or harmed, are throwing punches in my direction. I swing back, land a number of significant blows, when a shadow appears above me. As it smashes into my face I realize it is a table. As my consciousness evaporates, I see Reaper, smiling through a prolific nosebleed, smashing someone's head against a deck support as Sally and Cudak remove their backracks to join in.

Days and stitches later, Amadeen is a tiny white disk visible among the stars. Still we work as though preparing for a test upon which the fate of the world depends, which it does. The swelling from my fractured cheekbone down, Cudak and Sally continue their studies as we hurtle toward the destiny fashioned by our talma. Sally Red Feather is an assassin and investigator, having once been partners with Reaper. Cudak is an interrogator. It will be Cudak's task to screen applicants, and see if they are capable of being trained, and becoming either spy, assassin investigator, additional interrogator, or sleeper. The sleepers will be members who will go back to their own villages, homes, or units and function normally until the call comes either to obtain information, make an identification, or hit an identified target near them, either neighbor, associate, friend, comrade, or family member. While we train on the computers and rework our plans, Gav Cudak remains reading and apparently memorizing everything he can about everything and everybody. All of the worthless information the USE-DC Quarantine Force academics collected about Amadeen, Cudak devours. Long after the rest of us quit to get some rest, Cudak is before its computer studying. Davidge and I work on plans, backup plans, contingency plans, necessary supplies, weapons, training, logistics, and so on until I am hardly able to keep my eyes open. Leaning back in my seat, I see Davidge once again staring off into the distance. "Is there something else?" I ask. The human glances at me and smiles. "Momentary enlightenment, Ro. It suddenly occurs to me that, of our current numbers, the one who is the least qualified to be running this crew is me."

"It is your talma," I protest. "It's our talma, Ro." He shrugs and shakes his head. "Which still leaves me mystified. I've never led anyone, organized anything, or did any of the kind of work this talma seems to call for. You have experience in combat on Amadeen, Moss and Beneres have more recent combat flight experience, as well as smuggling skills. Ghazi knows computers, Reaper and Sally have actual experience as investigators, and Cudak as an interrogator. On top of that, all of you have youth while my skills concern living isolated in a cave trying to keep little Dracs from cutting off their own fingers before they reach adulthood. I can't understand why any part of this talma depends on me." I throw up a weary hand and say with a smile. "If you knew the path, Uncle Willy, it would no longer be the path." Davidge laughs, stretches, and cocks his head toward the passenger quarters. Through a yawn, he says, "Maybe my real job is to find the person who can run this outfit. Anyway, we're beat. In another twenty hours we should either be on Amadeen or a trillion ionized particles floating around in space. Let's knock it off for awhile." I head for my quarters marveling at the things that separate persons and the things that bring them together in love, friendship, business, and war. As I reach my quarters, I look opposite my door and see that Cudak's door is open. Cudak is sitting at its small desk, one of the tiny hand portable computers before him. "Cudak, why don't you get some rest?" It glances at me, grins, and stretches its arms. "You may be right, Ro." It lifts and shakes an insulated flask. "I have some hot tea left. Would you care to share a cup?"

"That would be good." I enter the room and sit in the chair next to the desk. Cudak stretches again, pours the tea into two cups, and offers me one. I sip at it, my mouth filling with the taste of warm rains and Khama flowers. "This is delicious tea, Cudak. Thank you."

"It's nothing. Here. Have a candy." It holds out a small box containing a few wrapped gum fruits. I look at them and cannot imagine from where they must have come. "You only have a few."

"Go ahead," Cudak urges. "I eat too many of these things as it is." I eat one of the Drac candies and am transported to worlds of taste to which it would be easy to become addicted. "Thank you, Cudak. It is delicious."

"The least I can do for a fellow Gitohri."

"You are from Gitoh?" Cudak shrugs. "Actually from Hune, just west."

"I know Hune. My friend moved to Hune four years ago when the fighting on the east of Gitoh became too much for its parent." Cudak frowned as it thought. "Your friend; was that Dielo Ino?"

"Why, yes. Do you know Ino?" A sadness fills its face. "I did before my parent was killed and I found myself with Ravin Nis waiting for the Selector. I haven't been back since Choi Leh chose me and I left to become another student soldier for the Okori Sikov." Cudak had fought for the Mavedah, as I had, and had managed to have itself smuggled off planet through a thoroughly corrupt Mavedah gunnery officer it knew. We talked for a long time about children we had both known, Mavedah commanders we had both served under, and three of the battles we had both been in, especially Douglasville. Cudak talked about the wounds it had taken at Douglasville, its beloved commander who had been slain. I vaguely remember hearing of Bas Sarah's death after my Min had been butchered. I had been in such pain, Bas Sarah's death had hardly registered on my awareness. I could see, though, that the pain of it was still with Gav Cudak. When it was finished, and we had shared a few tears, I talked about Min and the human with the flute. After that a flood of pain burst through and I talked about it all, Avo, the Front Twelve, Pina -all of them. When I am done, I see in Cudak that most valuable of individuals: a friend. As I rise to go to bed, I place an affectionate hand on its shoulder, and wish my new friend peaceful dreams. Cudak puts the top back on its candy box and looks up at me. "There is something you should know about me, Ro."

"We have all done things that

do not make us proud, Cudak. That is Amadeen." It smiles and says, "This I think you might regard with particular distaste. You see, I'm from Draco. I've never been to Amadeen." I stand there like a fool, my mouth open, my hand still on Cudak's shoulder. "I don't believe you. All of the things you said, the things you know --"

"The quarantine force surveys." I can feel my eyes growing wide as I try and talk my new friend out of its absurd belief. "What about the things I know; things the QF could not possibly know. Gitoh, Hune, Dielo Ino? The way Viknim's grain patties tasted?"

"Some you told me; others I guessed. Most, however, comes from the surveys. They are the most boring writers in the universe, but the data is there." I pull my hand from its shoulder and it is all I can do to keep from using it upside Cudak's head. "Why? Why all these lies? Why this game?" Cudak picks up the box of candy and puts it away in its drawer. I see possibly ten more boxes in the drawer. "You asked me why I don't get some rest. Using what I have learned from my studying, I set up a context within which you felt comfortable enough to tell me your entire life story complete with feelings, names, dates, and places. There is still much to learn, and that is why I do not rest." It returns to its computer and I move to the door and look back. "Gav Cudak, how have you managed to live as long as you have?"

"I'm not as honest with everyone, Ro. Also, I run fast."

## CHAPTER 37

Amadeen. Risking my freedom, and more likely my life, to return to the only place in the universe I hate. "You'll come back, Yazi Ro. There is nothing more certain." I think of Zenak Abi's curse as we finish stowing away everything and strap in to our acceleration couches to wait for the flight program to begin guiding us through the quarantine force's array of obstacles. How did that look inside my head show Abi that I would return? How could it see what I could not see in myself? Through the open hatch to the cockpit, I see a corner of Amadeen fill the front viewport and the impossibility of what we are attempting fills me with panic. "Okay," says the captain's voice through our headsets, "here we go." The artificial gravity disengages and in the background I hear Yora counting "four, three, two, one, slam it!" An enormous unseen hand crushes my chest as the ship yaws sharply to the right and the acceleration of the engines begins shaking the deck and bulkheads. The deafening roar distorts the voices of Eli and Yora as my fingers dig into the couch's armrests. Another yaw to the left, then I feel my internal organs pushing against my throat as the Aeolus rolls over into a power dive that seems to last forever. I fight my eyes open, glance into the cockpit, and gasp as I see flames through the front viewport! "Atmospheric friction," yells Davidge. "It's okay. We're past the

quarantine. You're home." Home. I have not had a home since the Battle of Gitoh. On Friendship I had allowed my fantasies to see myself in Davidge's cave as a child, learning book and line, and all of the skills Haesni was learning: to hunt the snake, cure skins, sewing, preparing food, making beds, clothes, and boots. Home. Falna had a fire then a missile sent into the cave where it had been reared and the fantasy was over. It will still be three months before Estone Nev reaches Falna's side at the Karnarak. Will the old Drac have the strength to strangle the life out of its namechild's child, the end of its line? Does Falna deserve such love? "We'll cross the terminator in a minute," says the captain's voice through the headset. I release my straps, climb off the couch, and go to the cockpit in time to see us skimming across the surface of the Shordan Sea approaching the coast, the distant Silver Mountains bathed in reds and oranges from the setting sun. According to the data from the QF surveys, Zenak Abi and its band should still be somewhere in the Silver Mountains. As we make landfall I notice smoke and thin green threads of energy knives firing toward the southeast. A short distance in from the shore is a lake next to the fighting. I recognize it: Sharing. They are fighting in Riehm Vo one more time liberating the previously liberated town liberated previously from the other side's liberators. "Better strap in, Ro," says Yora. "We'll put down soon." I nod and go back to my couch, my heart filled with the seeming hopelessness of our task. I notice Davidge, Sally, Cudak, and Reaper also thinking to themselves in this moment before commitment. After strapping myself in and putting on my head set, I lean back, close my eyes, and try to focus on the breaths entering and leaving my body. "Crossing the terminator," says Eli. I look over at Davidge. "Will, was the Ovjetah's nameparent a military leader of great promise as the Ovjetah leads at the Kovah and the Jetai Diea and Zammis leads in business?" The human is silent for a moment. "No. Jerry was a fighter jock, same as me. Neither of us had a list of kills to brag about. Jerry was my third."

"How many did Shigan have?" Davidge smiles. "Jerry never did say how many kills it had. I always suspected I was number one. Disappointed?"

"I am not disappointed. Simply confused. You insist that you are just a man and that your enemy and friend was just a Drac, yet the two of you inspired the colonization of an entire planet." He rubs his chin, glances at Kita, and shrugs as he again faces me. "Ro, Jerry was a very ordinary being with only one extraordinary power: it loved. It loved life, Draco, its line, The Talman, and the child it never got to see." His voice grows rough. "Jeriba Shigan taught me to love by loving me. Its monument is Planet Friendship and the continuation of the Jeriba line." He turns his head and faces me. "If this talma isn't a disaster, if we do bring about peace on Amadeen, it will be because of that love working through me." My headset crackles with Eli's voice. "We're over the mountains, quite a ways in from Mt. Atahd. The sensor shows a population in one of the narrow valleys down there. They don't seem to be military units. Going in. Yora, hit the

shields, just in case." I feel us going down and down, each moment expecting the landing shock, each moment going down further until I feel that we must be beneath the crust of the planet. At last comes the gentle nudge of Amadeen against the landing skids. As the engines whine down, I release my straps and go to the cockpit. I stand between Eli's and Yora's couches and look into the darkness through the viewport. There are several small hand-held lights visible and one of the persons holding those lights turns it on its own face. I turn to the pilot. "Drop the shields and shut it down, Eli. That's Zenak Abi." The captain flips a few switches and looks up at me as he releases his straps. "Perhaps now we find out why one must be careful about what one asks for." I am the first down the ramp, the familiar smell of the cold mountain air sharp in my nostrils. Zenak Abi meets me at the bottom of the ramp, still wearing its human trousers. There is a new scar upon its chin, but that same expression of poorly concealed amusement. "Welcome home, Yazi Ro. Have you finished your shopping?" I hand Abi a copy of the Koda Nusinda. As it takes the manuscript in its hands, I say, "My shopping is done, Jetah. I will be interested to see if any of my presents fit." Zenak Abi purses its lips and looks at my comrades, its gaze stopping on Davidge. "I don't suppose these gifts can be returned." Davidge slowly shakes his head. "All sales are final, Zenak Abi." The Jetah's amused expression dissolves into something more desperate as it glances at its friends standing in the dark, and looks down at the manuscript. Its hands are trembling. "Well. I suppose we should go home and try them on."

## CHAPTER 38

In its new cave, an abandoned copper mine deep in the mountains a half hour hike from where we landed, Zenak Abi and the leaders of its nomadic community assemble. In a large chamber, a number of Abi's people stand and lean against the walls while the rest sit on crates, rocks, and the floor and listen as I recount the story of Abi's talma, where it led me, and the plans for its implementation on Amadeen. As I talk, I see Abi's people -- both humans and Dracs -- eyeing me and my comrades. By their expressions, some of them look interested. Others seem skeptical, a few look disapproving, and the rest look terrified. "We will be an independent force of humans and Dracs who have but one function: to render the attempted sabotage of a truce an act of absolute futility. A terrorist of Black October, Tsien Sindie, or some other faction who opposes a truce will be noticed as it plans and prepares its outrage. As it moves to commit its atrocity, it will be targeted. Before it strikes, if possible, we will stop the terrorist by killing it and leaving behind signs and notices identifying us as the executioners and why we did what we did. If the act is committed before we can stop it, we will find the ones responsible and kill them, leaving behind the appropriate notices."

"This is how we end killing?" demands a bearded human leaning against the wall to my right. "No," I answer. "This is how we end war." I look at the faces and I feel myself smiling as I

turn, face my comrades, and look back at Abi's people. "What you all must think of us I can only imagine. Some of you were born into this community, but most of you deserted from the fighting. When I left Amadeen, I too felt myself liberated from the killing and the dying. There is a magnificent universe out there, a universe of peoples, riches, knowledge, and endless wonders, the most precious of these being peace. I have had only a taste and the last thing I wanted to do is return here to everything I hate." I look at the Jetah sitting in its chair next to Davidge. "Zenak Abi put in a seed it hopes will grow into peace. Until we can establish this plant so that it can survive on its own, we are going to have to feed it blood, both yellow and red. I want this peace more than anything else in the universe. That is why I am here. You must decide for yourselves why you are here." In some faces I see that I have not said enough. In others I see that I have said too much. We do not need everyone; only a few. I was so certain, though, that those who were born on Amadeen and whose parent was war would see what I see. Too many, though, are tired. They put down gun and knife, ran to the mountains, and are too weary to pick them up again. Zenak Abi places its hands upon the armrests of its crude chair and pushes itself up until it is standing. Without looking at its people or addressing them, Abi speaks directly to me. "I am so very proud of you, Yazi Ro. I begged the universe to grant me an answer to Amadeen's pain, and it sent me you. Please understand our disappointment that the answer is not magic." There is one dark human with black hair and a huge black mustache flecked with gray. He is carrying two young children in his arms: a Drac and a little girl. He steps away from the wall where he is standing, hands the children to Davidge and turns to me. "I am Ali Enayat. Where do I sign up?" Slightly dazed, I turn slowly and point toward Gav Cudak. "It has some questions, first." Cudak steps out, shakes hands with Ali Enayat, and says, "Let's go somewhere we can talk, Ali. Would you like a chocolate?" As Ali nods, Cudak continues without missing a beat. "I picked up some chocolates at the A'ja Cou Station and they just plain don't agree with me. I can slip you a couple for the kids, too. Now, where are you from, Ali? You look like a West Dorado man."

"I am from Sakinah in the Western Dorado."

"Sakinah? I

know it well. .. " and off they go into a side passage in which, before he knows it, Ali Enayat will spill everything he knows about everything, including that most valuable piece of information: can he be trusted. All of his answers will be entered and compared with all of the information we have on the same topics and cross-indexed according to source, location, organization, and so on. Perhaps Ali will make a good interrogator. Perhaps he might be a former member of the Front who might be able to return to the Dorado and work his way into Black October or one of the other factions. With the two children to love and care for, perhaps all Ali can do is supply information about his former neighbors, associates, and comrades, describe organization, order of battle, who holds what office, how every single soldier, officer,



advisor, and copyist does its job, looks, thinks, acts, lives, its relations, and thoughts, aspirations, ambitions, fears -- everything. After a few screenings the information we obtained from the QF surveys will show how reliable it is. After a few hundred, we will know enough to send agents out and begin targeting. Another stands, a Drac wearing black clothes and a dreary look. It walks over to me and says, "I am Mila Nin. I once ran with the Thuyo Koradar out of Navune in the Northern Shorda."

"Yes?"

"I would contribute what I can. I, too, would see an end to war." I look around and Kita is coming forward. In moments she will be offering fruit candies and a friendly ear to the former gun for the Eye of the Killer. Before she can drag off the Drac, however, Mila Nin stops, faces me, and asks, "What will you call this police force? What is its name?" I look at Davidge and he shrugs and faces Zenak Abi. "We couldn't decide, so we agreed to let it be whatever we are called." There are suggestions, and I am secretly thrilled that the name I love, Aydan's Blade, comes immediately to the minds of so many of the Dracs, but that is also why it is inappropriate. The name must not say Drac or human. It must be something in between. Several of the humans make suggestions based on the beginnings being in a copper mine, copper being one of many English names for a police officer. Those names too are inappropriate, although we do choose the number twenty-nine, the atomic number of copper, to be our sign. Before the night is done, eleven of those in the mine volunteer to help, as do more than three hundred of those in the surrounding mountains. Within six days Kita and Cudak have selected and trained eight more interrogators, Reaper is training a school of forty-seven agents, and more of those in the mountains come to supply information and a few more to volunteer. Ghazi Mrabet's computer factory is in operation, already turning out a modified hand-held that includes a button camera which can send digital pictures back to the net. All I do is to train the agents in weapons, but most of my students know as much about that subject as I do. They are all from Amadeen. To a great degree, we are all having difficulty in finding out what I should do. I have neither the memory nor the audacity required to be an interrogator. Kita and Cudak joke that I would simply eat all the candy and tell the one I am screening everything. I have a suspicion as to what I should be doing. I have killed and there was a time when it was easy. But the easy killing takes place in a rage, and that is not how our agents do their work. As Reaper remarks, "They are surgeons removing a lump." It is something I think I can learn, but I avoid saying it in the hopes that no one else will mention it. In another eight days we send out our first agents: two to Black October in the Western Dorado, one to Green Fire in the Drac occupied tip of the Southern Dorado, three to Tsien Sindie in three different locations in the Shorda, and fourteen others to work themselves back into their old communities as simple villagers. Ali Enayat and Mila Nin are both agents in this first group. In another eight days we send out an additional thirty-one agents. Once they are

established, all of the splinters and several of the most infamous individuals with reputations for reckless behavior have at least some coverage. In another month we expect to have regional nets recruiting and training, ever expanding our information base and our ability to respond to threats. Soon we develop our own language. Investigators are called "eyes," sleepers are "zees," and interrogators are "sweets." Code names become nicknames and nicknames become code names. Reaper stays Reaper, Davidge is Uncle Willy, Capt. Moss is the Fly, Sally Redfeather is Tommy, as in Tommy Hawk, a joke that evades me, and so on. I name Kita Itchyboo from the thing she said in front of the cave back on Friendship: ichi-bu hachi ken, the phrase that means small errors can result in big mistakes. They refer to me as The Answer, but not to my face. They know I hate the name. The organization is known among ourselves simply as Navi Di, in Dracon. In English: The Peace.

## CHAPTER 39

Morning on the edge of the camouflaged site on the top of Mt.

Rieka. I look away from the peaks at the reflection of an orbiting QF station, wondering if The Peace is now in the survey files, complete with names. We have done nothing for a hundred days except build the network, plant agents, and add to our data files. Nothing about us has been on the broadcasting stations, either Mavedah or Front. While the fighting continues around us, we learn, add information, and wait for the next attempt at a truce. "Peaceful here, isn't it?" I turn and see Davidge coming from the power platform concealed beneath some trees. I nod and return my gaze to the mountains, their foothills obscured by the early morning mist. A large avian glides effortlessly above the mist on its way up the valley toward a tiny lake. "Reaper says there are places like this on Earth. He called them the Rockies. Have you ever been there?"

"Back when dinosaurs roamed the earth." He sees my puzzled look and smiles. "A very long time ago. My initial flight training was at a base in the Colorado admindis -- administration district. That's right in the Rockies. The Silver Mountains are as big. Here we're closer to sea level, though. That's why we have more vegetation. I got to see the Himalayan Mountains once on earth when I flew over them. They make the Rockies look like a row of bumps. Then there are the mountains on Mars that make the Himalayas look like grains of sand. None of them, though, are as beautiful as these." He is silent for a moment and stands next to me. "Ro, it just came over the Mijii broadcast. The Mavedah has announced a new round of truce talks with the Amadeen Front. Mavedah invitations have gone out to the Tsien Sindie, the Eye Killers, and the Sixteen to take part in the talks. No comment yet from the Front, but the Mavedah wouldn't have announced it without some kind of understanding with the Front already in the works. We haven't heard from any of the splinter groups either, but all of the investigators and sleepers have been put on notice." I feel it coming and there is no longer a way to avoid it and be able to bear my own presence. "Will,

there is nothing for me to do here. I train the few who are not familiar with all the available weapons, but that is something that anyone can do. I cannot sit here on this mountain in safety while others take all the risks. I am going to become an agent, work my way back to Gitoh, and perhaps join Tsien Sindie. It has a cell there. From there I can be much more useful." I look at the human and Davidge's gaze is fixed on the snow covered peaks of the tallest mountains. "I respect your feelings, Ro, but I've got a much crappier job for you. I'm going to need help with it and I want you there."

"What is the job?"

"We've put together the means to investigate, identify, target, and execute truce violators and potential truce violators. To fulfill our part of the peace talma, the Navi Di must be able to act swiftly, decisively, and with certainty. We must be able to prove the ones we hit were involved in violating a truce or attempting to do so. We must act fast and we cannot afford to make a mistake. On the one hand, we can't drag our feet so that the execution comes so late that no one remembers why it's done. On the other hand, we can't have our hitters knocking off suspects as the mood strikes them. The hits have to be authorized, and that means there must be someone or some group to authorize them. I have that job right now. Zenak Abi is joining me. I want you there to share it with us and to break tie votes." To order the deaths of others would be enough to fuel my nightmares for the rest of my life. To know, though, that one bad judgment would probably destroy the Navi Di and render the peace talma useless, that is responsibility sufficient to render risking my life as a happy assassin mere child's play. Ichi-bu hachi ken. "Hey, Will!" It is Kita's voice calling from the ship's entry ramp. "The Front just made the truce talks announcement. They've invited Black October, Green Fire, The Fives, and The Rose to the table, as well. No responses from any of the splinters yet, but two of the zees we have in the Tsien Sindie report that the pure ones are beginning to foam at the orifices." Davidge looks at me, his eyes steady but more sunken than I remember. "It's starting, Ro." I do not want it. I can think of nothing I want less than deciding who lives and who dies, risking everything on the judgment of Yazi Ro. I close my eyes and nod. The human claps a hand on my shoulder, squeezes it, and follows Kita into the ship. I look back at the mountains and the huge avian is skimming the tops of the mists, gliding back the way it had come.

## CHAPTER 40

In the Aeolus, far over the Shordan Sea we are between the Shorda and Dorado continents. Kita, Reaper, three monitors, and I are in the information center, processing data and messages from the agents and monitoring the broadcasting stations, assessing the reaction to the upcoming talks. There is activity in all the splinters -- angry voices, nutballs making speeches, endless meetings, two spontaneous demonstrations -- but nothing actionable. A few minutes later, Eli Moss reports over the headsets that we are being scanned. "I'm not sure, but

I think it's the quarantine force orbiters."

"Trying to figure out who we are," adds Reaper. "We'll let them know, soon enough."

"I'm putting up the shields anyway --" Janice Butler, one of the monitors, turns from her console and holds up her hand. "Station October coming through." She flips a switch and the screens around the overhead illuminate with a jagged signal that settles to an image of Raymond Sica, head of Black October. Raymond likes to call himself The Vindicator. All we can see is Raymond in front of a blank wall hung with a black flag with a blood red X in the center, for the numeral ten. We do not see others, but we can hear crowd noises. "-- can they have in mind to invite the Front to a truce? What can the Dracs put on the table? Are they going to give us back our lands?"

"No!" shouts the crowd. "Our murdered loved ones?"  
"No!"

"Is it to restore the Dorado, and the Shorda to us?"

"No!" As Raymond rants, half the screens change to another view of Black October's boss. The images are much clearer than the original, but jumpy. It is one of Ghazi's modified computer cameras. The new images sweep to the left until we see a row of humans dressed in black. The images expand to fill the screen and linger a moment on each of the faces. "Who's feeding us this?" calls Reaper to the monitor. "Alley Cat." Ali Enayat. I try to imagine the courage of the man with the big black mustache and the two children, taking the opportunity of the demonstration to get up in front of the entire rabid membership to give us up to date pictures of Black October's leaders. "He's not holding that in his hand, is he?" I turn around and see Davidge behind me looking up at the screens. Reaper shakes his head. "Ghazi made it so those button cameras will transmit to the computer. Alley Cat probably has it in his hat."

"What about signal emissions?" Reaper leans back in his chair and scratches the back of his neck. "We're using frequencies that are way out of the park for the thirty year old stuff anyone on Amadeen has." As Zenak Abi comes into the information center, I glance at Davidge, and say to Reaper. "That presupposes in the past three decades no other smugglers have brought in modern communication or signal detection equipment." I look back at the screen showing Alley Cat's feed. There is Paul Ruche, Sica's second in command, a tall blond man without facial hair, his eyes a stormy blue. Next to him, her long black hair waving as she shouts and moves her arms, is Akilah Hareef, head of the ideological department. Akilah is very beautiful for a human, with a small nose, absolutely black eyes, and lips painted to look like a wound. Her weapons include an automatic pistol, a brace of

throwing knives, a fighting knife, and whatever she has concealed beneath her clothing. The image moves to Vatusia, Brooks, Pemba, and the rest. After the leaders, Alley Cat sweeps the crowd of about five hundred. Every one of them brandishes a weapon of some kind. "That's the old Catholic church in Obsidian, South Central Dorado," says one of the monitors. "That means October has a repeater station. The broadcast signal we're getting is coming from Mt. Jazirah, East Central Dorado."

"Look at that weapon," says Abi, pointing at one of the screens. Reaper freezes one of the crowd images. "Which weapon, Jetah?" "The man wearing the talit about his shoulders."

"Talit?" Zenak points

up at the screen. "The white and blue prayer shawl." The image fills the screen, centered on the shoulder weapon. It looks like a beam disrupter, but I do not recognize it. "That's a Valmet M660D," says Reaper. Abi shakes its head as it says, "I'm not familiar with it." "Latest thing from Earth." Reaper nods toward the screen. "Fully charged and at close range, that thing can cut right through the hull of this ship by turning the metal and ceramics into powder. They've only been out for a couple of years." Zenak looks away and faces me. "The smugglers have been getting through to Black October, then." More pieces of the puzzle are added to the data banks. "Priority!" shouts Janice. The images continue as the sound is cut, the center screen shows the view through the front window of a moving vehicle, the lower part showing the top of a steering wheel and the hands of the narrator. Each hand has three fingers. In the distance, beyond some dunes, we can see the ocean "Go ahead," says Janice into her headset. "This is Runner with the Sitarmeda just north of Mandit, East Shorda. I just finished a meeting with my cell and we have been advised to prepare to assist the central command by providing volunteers for a special raid. No details yet, but I made my best guess and volunteered -- I am driving." For some reason the fact that it is driving seems to strike Runner as funny, and it laughs. Kita mouths the word "stress" at me. When it calms, Runner continues. I and nine others are on our way south to report to the cell commander at Port Refuge." Runner signs off and the sound returns for Black October out of Obsidian. "Raymond hasn't threatened anything yet," Janice fills in, "except to boycott the talks."

"Alley

Cat," says Reaper, "we've got enough pictures. It's time to fade into the landscape. They've been getting smuggled supplies from off planet, so they might have some sophisticated detectors. Got that?" The images from Alley Cat nod up and down, then go blank while we continue to receive from the Mt. Jazirah station. Raymond's tirade against the Amadeen Front's betrayal of the struggle against the yellow menace continues. The volume drops and Reaper faces Davidge. "You know, if Runner is onto something, if Sitarmeda is planning a unit-sized outrage someplace, we're not ready for that. Right now we're geared up to handle one or two, maybe five, hits at a time, but that's really

stretching it. We can't take on a platoon or company attack until our regional rapid strike forces are operational." Davidge bites at his lower lip. "If it looks like it's coming from Sitarmeda, we'll send what we have at region in Cohilak. Until then, Runner will have to do the best it can. Do we know the proposed site for the talks yet?"

"We

just got it in," answers Reaper. "Silver City. It's a town of about eighteen thousand just north of Douglasville on the Dorado. Up until the truce there was fighting in the area, so both the Front and the Mavedah have lines there. The talks themselves are supposed to begin any time now." A computer map comes up on one of the screens and we can see Silver City. Blue lines indicating the Front and green lines indicating the Mavedah snake through the town. South of Silver City is Douglasville, completely under Front control. Sitarmeda has nothing near there, nor does Thuyo Koradar. There is, however, a large cell of Tean Sindie in a community a few minutes northwest of Silver City. Cells of Black October and The Rose are in Silver City itself, while The Rose has a cell in Douglasville. The Fives have nothing in the area. I look at Reaper. "Do we have anything in Silver City yet?"

"Two sleepers."

"Nothing more?"

"That's it. I'll put 'em on standby."

"Priority!" calls

one of the other monitors, a human named Roger Temple. One of the Black October screens changes to a scene of a small white masonry house next to a bombed out apartment complex. The metal roof looks to be in good shape, but the windows are covered with boards. "This is the Red Crawler," came the voice of a human named Anita Northstar. "What you're looking at is what's left of the southwest corner of Galena and Eighth in Douglasville. I might have a live one: Jacob Drews." The file on Drews comes up, the graphic showing a balding human male, forty-one years old, hard rock miner, the sole family member surviving the Battle of Douglasville four years ago. After losing his family he joined Black October as a bomb maker, although October dropped him only a few months later because of fears concerning his lack of stability. Since then he has been a recluse who is known to have gone behind Mavedah lines at least three times on his own to plant bombs. All three bombings were successful totaling over two hundred Drac lives. As I see Jacob Drews's file, I remember Min in that pit, the human with the flute, and Yazi Ro as it took its knife the next night with the Okori Sikov and slashed our way through the city. Did I turn Jacob Drews into the hate driven monster he is today? Did the man with the flute turn me into the same kind of monster? Are we all hate monsters; the bloodthirsty offspring of Hissied 'do Timan? "I've been following him all day." A recording runs on one of the screens showing the man walking into a bombed out industrial complex. "He went down to the old IMPEX mines east of the city, spent about three hours, then came back to his house carrying a

shoulder bag full of something heavy. He just got back to his own place a couple hours ago, then ate lunch at a sort of soup line the Front runs a block from here. He heard the Amadeen Front's announcement, left his soup on the table, and rushed back to here. Call me Crazy Horse, but I figure the man is getting ready to blow up something."

"Stay on it,"

says Reaper. The Red Crawler's signal goes blank and I see that I am standing. Taking a chair, I sit in it and think. What if it is the Sitarmeda mounting an air assault against the Silver City talks? What if Jacob Drews takes his pain to the talks and blows himself and everyone else to pieces? What if both of them do it at the same time? What if they are joined by other nutballs, both Drac and human? What can we do about it? I look at Davidge. He is leaning against the bulkhead studying the screen of his hand portable. I get up from my chair, stand next to him, and look down. The screen shows a single frame from Alley Cat's feed from the Black October rally. It shows the man in the prayer shawl holding the new beam disrupter above his head. "What do you see?" I ask. Davidge points with his finger. "See this guy? Look at those strings hanging from his middle."

"Arba kanfot,"

says Zenak Abi. "The four fringes." Davidge touches the portable's pointer and the point of view moves to another figure standing next to the first. He is a large, muscular man with a black beard. He is wearing an ornate knitted skullcap and is also brandishing one of the new weapons. Davidge points at the image. "I recognize this guy from the files: he's a Moslem. These two are old enough to have fought each other on Earth. That church is full of former enemies -- Jews and Moslems, Irish and English, Catholic and Protestant, black, white, red, yellow and here they all are together, united against the Dracs." Abi nods and smiles. "Were you thinking that if they got what they want, if all of the Dracs on Amadeen vanished, in a few days they would be once more at each other's throats?"

"Perhaps." Davidge looks up at the

Jetah. "What I was wondering is if we could get the Dracs and the humans together by uniting them against something else." Abi nods and looks up at the screens. "That's what we are going to do: unite them against futility." It points up toward the screens. "Something else coming in." For the next two hours we hear the reports come in from eyes and zees, on the line and from regional nets. The patterns emerges after awhile. It appears that the truce caught all of the splinter groups by surprise. Among the other reports, Alley Cat lets us know that the rally isn't going anywhere, but a Black October central committee meeting is scheduled for three hours from now. Runner reports that it looks as though the Sitarmeda strike is something that had been planned before the announcement of the truce and once they got to Port Refuge they were told to turn around and go back to their home cell to await further developments. In Douglasville, the Red Crawler is still watching the house of bomber Jacob Drews. From all reports, the cease

fire is holding. I know from the cease fires I have seen that on the lines no one is thinking of peace, a treaty, or even a lasting truce. Their highest hope is for a few days without fighting. They know it will start again, some horror will bring the smoldering fire flashing back to life, but for the moment all sides are cherishing the quiet. Reports from The Rose, The Fives, Thuyo Koradar, and Tean Sindie show all of the groups have called special meetings to decide what to do. Nightwing, who we know as agent Rudy Klass, reports that Green Fire, working out of the Front held territories in the Northern Shorda, seem to be preparing something. They have a number of operational missiles and may be preparing to send a little something into the main Mavedah headquarters in the Southern Shorda. Davidge frowns and glances first at Abi and then at me. "While the talks are on, there is no place to fire one of those missiles that won't be a violation. Can Nightwing take out the missiles?"

"It would be better if he was four guns instead of one," answers Reaper. "He's got a beam disrupter, so he can bring them down. The first trick is going to be getting close enough through Green Fire's security. The next trick is going to be taking the missiles down between the fire command and when they take off." He glances at Kita. "We have one more zee in the area. Let's call him up. If the site fires one or more missiles, have them take out the missiles, the site, and the personnel." She looks up at Abi, Davidge, and me. Abi nods at Davidge and so do I, although it seems that we have given Nightwing and his hypothetical partner an impossible, probably suicidal, task. Davidge nods at Reaper and Reaper passes on the orders, finishing with "Keep on it." Keep on it. Keep on it. After awhile I find it curious that I confuse the human with the Drac and the Drac with the human. Our agents seem to be of a family and the forces and factions upon which they report seem to be of another family. Perhaps the Navi Di is just another tribe. "Priority!" shouts Janice. "It's the Red Crawler!" A screen shows the dark interior of a small room, the point of view jumping and swinging about wildly. "He's gone. Drews. He's gone." Her hand reaches out and pulls some paper boxes away from a wall. Behind the boxes is a hole. The point of view goes into the hole, meets a solid concrete wall, and looks down. A ladder leads down into a sewer. "Damn. I'll chase him from this end, Peace. You better wake up a couple of zeas in Silver City to head him off. His graphic's on file. Crawler out." Reaper immediately issues instructions to the Central Dorado regional net and the two Silver City zeas report in less than a minute. The first to report in is a woman, code named Lilly. The other zee is a man, code named Peaches. They already have the graphic of Jacob Drews and know where the talks are taking place. They sign off and get moving. "Keep on it," says Reaper. Keep on it. I am too tired to stand and too nervous to sit. If the sides had put off their truce for another six months we would have more coverage in greater depth, and our fully trained strike forces in place and ready to go. But as a man once said to me, if you want to hear God laugh, make a plan. The matter of Jacob Drews preys on my mind. We do not know that he is carrying a bomb. We do not even know for certain that he is still making bombs. I



call up the complete record of Red Crawler's last transmission on my hand portable. Crawler did not linger, but there are some frames I can freeze. Drews's workshop has tools, wires, and bits of this and that. Some boxes and other containers. "Reaper, I have the inside of Drews's house on channel twenty-one. Show me something that proves Jacob Drews has a bomb." Davidge frowns at me then looks at his own screen. I look at mine and watch as Reaper runs a pointer around the contents of the workshop showing how this or that could be used in making a bomb, or repairing a radio; this or that container might have held explosives, or food, or just about anything. "We know he could have made a bomb," adds Kita. "We know he has made bombs in the past." Reaper nods, "And he's got plenty of reason not to want a truce. If he isn't up to something, why'd he go to the mines? Why's he traveling through the sewers?" Motive, opportunity, past history, suspicious behavior. When the time comes to judge whether I am to live or die, I hope that my potential executioner will have more evidence than that upon which to decide my demise. "Priority Red," calls Janice. "Peaches has Drews in sight." The screens change to show a relatively steady image of a large plaza seen from the top of a building. There are only a few persons standing on the multicolored blocks of concrete, all of them human. There is a front security line around the entrance to a large building on the far side of the plaza. "The Battle lines go right through that building," says Peaches. "The Mavedah controls the approaches to the opposite side of the building. Lilly was watching that side just in case, but here he is. I have a clear shot." The image grows until we see a shot of Jacob Drews walking across the square, his hands empty except for a walking stick. His steps are steady and slow, the expression on his face sad. Half the screens fill with another view seen from the level of the square. "It's Lilly," says Kita. "I have a clear shot," says the second agent. "I wonder if that includes getting away," mutters Davidge. The new view of Drews reveals nothing. "If he's got a bomb on him," says Lilly, "it's wrapped around his body."

"Damn!" mutters Janice. "Priority Red, Nightwing!" Three screens fill with flame and smoke. There is a roaring sound. "Green Fire shot the damned missiles," comes Nightwing's voice through a mess of static. "Two of 'em. We exploded one on the ground and that one took out the rest, including the site and its personnel. The other missile is on its way. We couldn't stop it. Sorry."

"We have to warn the talks!" I shout into my headset. "Don't worry about it, Ro." says Eli Moss through my headset. "I got it on radar and it's not headed for Silver City. That bird is coming straight at us!"

"Peace," calls Lilly. "If this guy is a bomb, we're going to have to do him soon. If he gets much closer he's going to take out the guard and a good hunk of that building." An alarm goes off and I instinctively grab one of the bulkhead braces as the Aeolus veers sharply to the right, then drops suddenly as a deafening crash drives

the ship down even further. As I struggle up from the deck, I see Reaper pulling himself back into his chair. Kita says, "Peaches and Lilly need a decision right now. Is it a hit or a miss?" I look to my right and see Zenak Abi and Davidge crumpled up together on the deck. Davidge is bleeding from his forehead and both of them are unconscious. I look back at the screen and Jacob Drews continues to plod toward the entrance of the building in which the talks are taking place, his walking stick clicking on the concrete. It is my worst nightmare come true. Yora Beneres rushes toward Abi and Davidge, but they are both still out. I am alone. "Hit him," I order. A split second later a shot is fired, Drews's comes to a halt, and the guards in the security lines ready their weapons as they look for the cause of the noise. Jacob Drews weaves for a moment, then drops to his knees. As he begins to pitch forward onto his face, the walking stick falls from his hand followed immediately by an explosion that momentarily leaves the sound system dead. When it recovers I hear the message we prepared, in the name of The Peace, explaining who we are, what we have done, and why we are doing it. In moments all of Amadeen will know that the game now has new rules. I squat down next to Davidge, and Kita is treating him, the tears streaking her cheeks. I turn to look at Abi but Kita shakes her head. I feel for a pulse, but there is none. Zenak Abi is dead. Abi dead. The anger in me says that Abi cannot start me on this path and then leave me. I almost say that it is unfair. I stand, look up at the screen, and see that there is nothing left of Jacob Drews save a small crater in the plaza. The guards near the building are picking themselves up, stunned expressions on their faces. The image goes to black as Peaches and Lilly leave their positions to fade into the background, the number twenty-nine left prominently at the location from where the fatal shot was fired. Reaper stands next to me, his hand on my shoulder. "That was a gutsy call, Ro. Was it a lucky call, too?" I feel the tears welling up inside me. There are some for Zenak Abi, perhaps a few for me. Mostly, though, the tears are for a mountain of pain named Jacob Drews who enters the next life as a breath of vapor. "Well, was it?" I face Reaper. "What do you mean?"

"How did you decide? How did you know for certain Drews had a bomb?"

"Certainty had nothing to do with it. I guessed. Because of the walking stick. He didn't have it in the recording showing him going to the old IMPEX mines. After his trip through the sewer, though, he had a walking stick. I guessed it was rigged with a dead man's switch." Reaper nods and goes back to his post as Yora comes out and lets us know that the ship is all right. More reports from agents covering The Fives, The Rose, Thuyo Koradar, and Green Fire. All plans on hold until everyone can assess the new player. As our agent Kamikaze puts it, "There's a cop in the neighborhood and the gangs don't know what to make of it." That evening, as we head back to our mountain, the truce still holding, I sit by Abi's body in the cargo bay and think about Aydan's blade and that no one earned one more than the old traitor. Abi had said that it would probably get me

killed. I wonder if Zenak Abi ever thought about the chances of its own death, and if so what that death would be.

## CHAPTER 41

Davidge regains full consciousness late that evening in Zenak Abi's cave. Once he is propped up in his bed of branches, he demands to know what happened. Kita and I tell him about The Peace's debut and the deaths of Zenak Abi, Jacob Drews, and eleven members of a Green Fire missile battery. Nightwing and the other agent at the missile site were cut up a bit from flying debris, but nothing serious. The truce still holds. Davidge looks at me. "With Abi dead and me out, did you authorize the hit on Drews?"

"Yes." Kita sits on the edge of Davidge's cot. "Neither the Front nor the Mavedah have issued statements and all of the splinters are waiting to find out what the main groups will say so they can oppose it, I imagine."

"We have heard from Green Fire," I add. "According to them the Peace is a Mavedah diversion allowing the Dracs to talk peace and keep killing."

"Anybody buying it?" Kita nods.

"Some are." Davidge closes his eyes and leans his head back on the folded coat Kita has stuffed behind him for a pillow. "What about it, Ro?"

"Everyone we killed today was human, Will." He looks off into the shadows, takes a deep breath, and lets it escape slowly. "All the ones doing the killing were human, too."

"Were they?" I ask, already knowing the answer. I sit on the edge of one of Abi's home made chairs, lean forward, and clasp my hands together. "We need someone to replace Abi. You, too, if you are not on your feet soon. I cannot do it alone." He looks at me for a long time. When he speaks he almost seems to be another person. "I want you to know that I am very proud of you, Yazi Ro. When you first showed up on Friendship, I thought you were going to be a real pain in the ass. Now that I've gotten to know you, if I could have my greatest wish it would be to have had a chance to watch you grow to adulthood. I don't know if growing up with me would have been an improvement. You did an excellent job all by yourself. It would have been happier for you, though, I think." He does not wait for a response, as if I was capable of one. Instead he looks at Kita. He places his hand on top of hers and squeezes it. "For reasons I'm not sure I understand, here you are." She smiles and looks into his eyes. "I never could turn down a ski date."

"How would you like a really crappy job?"

Her smile fades as she cocks her head to one side. "Are you sure?"

"I'm  
sure."

"If I disagree with you on a hit, I'll follow my conscience."  
Davidge pats her hand and nods, stopping the nod short as his face registers pain. "I expect nothing less." He looks at me. "What do you think about Kita taking Abi's place?"

"She is an excellent choice. Her training, her judgment --" The image of Jacob Drews hangs in front of my every waking moment. I feel unshed tears choking me. "Drews was a human and I can hardly bear knowing the pain that drove him." Davidge faces me. "I would be very concerned if his death didn't trouble you."  
"What if the next one is a Drac? What if I see myself taking my pain out on some Amadeen Front monsters? What will I do?" Kita turns and looks at me. "You will do the right thing, Yazi Ro. So much depends on it."

"If it destroys me?" I look at Davidge. "What then?" His voice is quiet, but firm. "If you do not reach for the strength you need, then you will be destroyed. Remember Aydan's warmasters in the Koda Itheda. When a warmaster took up Aydan's blade, it didn't join itself to a lonely cause. With the blade came its sibling warmasters and the soldiers of its army; a family united by the goal of peace. Together they became more than the sum of their parts. In other words, Ro, you don't have to fight the monster all by yourself."

Outside, the envelope of night hiding me from everything but my thoughts, I look down from the mountain into the shadows where ground fog fills the valley with ghosts. I hear Eli, Yora, Ghazi, and a few of Abi's people working on the Aeolus, attempting to repair the screen and hull damage sustained by the ship when the Green Fire missile detonated. Elsewhere, a newly graduated group of agents bids good-bye to their friends and families as they use the cover of dark to hide their departures to their respective posts. The power platforms that will deliver them are being checked by their pilots. Reaper, Janice, and the others are in the ship standing watch on the information center, taking reports, plotting movements, updating the data banks. I hear some of our people as they huddle in the chill of the dark, putting off sleep by retelling the story of Drews and the Green Fire attack. Before they get to my part in the saga, I move away, seeking a quieter place in the darkness. I hear crying; a person alone, letting its feelings out. For a moment I hesitate not knowing whether I will be more comfort or annoyance. I move closer and see that it is Kita. "May I help?" I ask. Before I can take a breath she throws her arms around my waist, buries her face in my chest, and cries. As I put my arms around her and hold her I see the wisdom of Aydan's admonishment to its warmasters against warring with grief by oneself. "You are but one," said the ancient warrior Jetah who raised an army to end The War of Ages. "Pain, grief, sorrow, hate, and revenge are armies without number."

"Ro," she cries.

"I love him so and I am so frightened." As my own tears begin, I place my head alongside hers and whisper in her ear. "Remember the student in the Sitarmeda? The one who was frightened and who was going to lay open its own throat rather than face its fear? Namvaac found the student and asked what was troubling it?" I feel her head nod as she sniffs back her tears and quotes from the Koda Sitarmeda, "'Jetah, the darkness covers all the universe. It is such an all-powerful evil, I feel so small and helpless within it. Next to this darkness, the black of death seems so bright.'" I answer her back, "'Where you are now, child, Tochalla has been before you. It too was in darkness. It, too, had a knife. But Tochalla also had a friend.'" She laughs and looks up at me. "I remember the passage a little differently, Ro. It was 'Tochalla also had talma,' wasn't it?"

"I like how I remember it, better. Besides, wasn't having a friend part of Tochalla's talma?"

"Thank you, Ro." She pulls herself up, kisses my cheek, and says again, "Thank you." As I watch her walk to the ship, I think of the Drac with the two children on Mt. Atahd who said I have the eyes of a killer. "I am all of that," I whisper to its memory as I turn and look down at the ghosts in the fog. "I am all of that, but I am more. I am more."

## CHAPTER 42

In the morning, the Aeolus in position over the Shorda Sea between the Shorda and Dorado continents, Davidge with us at the table. We listen to the broadcasts from the Mavedah and the Front stations. Both stations give a reasonably accurate account of what happened and why, which means they have yet to decide what to do about us. All of the stations use the graphics supplied by the Navi Di. After the shocking image of Jacob Drews exploding, there are shots of the crater in the plaza, the number twenty-nine found chalked next to the hole, as well as on the rooftop where Peaches had squeezed off the fatal shot. The stations also show the graphics we supplied of the Green Fire missile incident, the number twenty-nine prominently displayed on the side of a burned out van. Commentators from the Front and Mavedah stations speculate upon The Peace, from where we came, what our numbers are, and what our hidden agenda might be. Remarkably, both stations end their commentaries on a note hopeful that The Peace, or Navi Di, is here to do what it says, police the truce. Both commentators recall Aydan and the War of Ages and the ancient warrior's test: "Return when your goal is peace alone and you hold a willing knife at your own throat to achieve it. That is the price of a warmaster's blade." The Amadeen Front commentator remarks that such a degree of dedication is more than can be expected these days. In the information center, Davidge, his head bandaged, stares at the twenty-nine chalked next to the crater that closes out the newscast. "Ro, how many days are there in a year on

Amadeen?" I burst out laughing. After all of the studying all of us have done, it seems like a number everyone should know. "Three hundred and fifty-eight." He nods and faces me. "Three hundred and fifty-seven days to go." He points with his thumb toward the screen. "The reviews sound pretty good." He looks at me. "What's eating you?"

"I was just thinking that, if I was in Tsien Sindie or Black October and looking at those newscasts, I would be wondering if this new police force is in league with the Mavedah and the Front." I glance at Kita. She shrugs and says, "Well, we are. We all have the same goal right now: a truce that holds. Things will clarify, though, once one of these splinter terrorist attempts gets through and the other side wants to retaliate." "Do you think someone will get through?" I ask. "We can't be everywhere all of the time. Sooner or later one of the splinter groups will look upon us as a challenge. Can we get a bomb past the Navi Di? Can we slip a suicide team into the West Dorado without alerting The Peace? We must expect it." I look at Davidge and he is slumped in his chair, his elbow on the chair's arm rest, his head leaning against his hand. He is about to say something when Janice calls out. "This is no priority, but I have to pass it along. It came in from the Central Shorda regional net at Ruota. "There's a Mavedah bomber we've been tracking named Jolduh Rihn --"

"Eye of the Killer," corrects Davidge. "It delivered the bomb that ended the truce four years ago."

"That's the one. Popcorn, our agent watching Rihn, observed the bomber cooking up something in its workshop. Popcorn called it in late last night and was told to --" "Keep on it!" says everyone in the information center in unison. Reaper frowns and looks around at the faces. He mutters something in German and goes back to his hand portable. "So what happened?" Davidge asks Janice. "When Rihn went to bed last night, Popcorn took some chalk and wrote twenty-nines all over the outside of the bomber's house. This morning when Rihn stepped out and saw the marks, he ran away from his house and hasn't been back since!" I am thinking that if only they could all be that easy, when Roger calls out, "Priority Red! Nightwing says that Green Fire has a move in progress: four greenies, three men and a woman, armed with shoulder missiles and small arms, heading toward the Southern Shorda. Nightwing's best guess is Gitoh." Reaper arranges for more agents to help Nightwing along the way and Davidge glances at me. "Humans again," he says. Davidge turns to Reaper. "Tell Nightwing we have to be able to prove what the greenies are up to."

"He knows," Reaper answers without looking up from his hand portable. "We also need to know where the orders originated."

"He knows," repeats Reaper. He raises an eyebrow and glares at Davidge. "I trained this bird, Willy."

Relax."

"Signal from the quarantine force," calls out Janice. "It's a General Mary Alice Lord with the USEF. She's the new co-commander of the QF." Davidge frowns and cocks his head to one side. "I thought there isn't supposed to be any communication from the orbiters to the ground." "That's the rule," answers Reaper. "But the QF isn't supposed to be doing any smuggling down here, either." Davidge adjusts his headset and nods at Janice, who puts up the image of the general on one of the screens. Mary Alice Lord, her steel gray hair cut short and brushed straight back, looks out of the screen. Her eyes are greenish gray and narrowed by the most stern expression I have ever seen on a human, including those who were trying to kill me. "Davidge here. What can I do for you, general?" Her view from the camera includes both Kita and myself, and the three of us together appear to violate one of her primary assumptions. "Mr. Davidge," she begins, pausing as if she expected to be corrected. "We have been listening to the planetside broadcasts here. What you can do for me is to explain who you are and what in the hell you are doing down there."

"What we are doing here, general, was, I believe, adequately covered in those broadcasts. We are, in short, truce police. If the future smiles on us, perhaps one day we will be treaty police. As for who I am, I was in the USEF a few years ago. I should be in your earthside computer --"

"Davidge, Willis E., USEF 997309974, Second Lieutenant, flight officer, attached to Squadron B, 98th Fighter Command, Pursuit Carrier USEFS Warspite. It says you were shot down over Fyrine IV and rescued some years later. All that took place while I was still at the Academy thirty years ago. All we have on you since is that you did a translation of The Talman and now live on Fyrine IV, since named Friendship."

"That pretty well covers it, general. All that's missing is that someone wanted, very badly, for the war on Amadeen to end. That person went on a search for a talma that would achieve peace, and it appears that I am a part of that talma. What we are doing is following that talma. Is there anything else?" General Lord's face is immobile as her eyes stare at Davidge. Glancing off screen for a moment, her gaze returns full force. "The ship you are in right now, the Aeolus, is registered on Rhana, and although it is an old ship, it is no thirty years old. As such, its existence in Amadeen airspace is a violation of the quarantine. You must either surrender your vessel to the quarantine force, along with all persons not authorized to be on Amadeen, or I will be forced to blow you out of the sky." Davidge reaches out his left arm and places his hand on my shoulder. "General, this is my dear friend, Yazi Ro." I nod at the image on the screen. The general remains motionless. "Yazi Ro was born on Amadeen. It was smuggled off of Amadeen in a quarantine force ship. Yesterday Black October held a televised rally. We had our own person

there who took pictures of some of the weapons the Octoberists are carrying." Davidge nods toward Janice and she begins calling up Alley Cat's shots of the rally. "You will see that some of them are carrying the Valmet M660D beam disrupter. The 660D is less than two years old, and the weapons held by those Octoberists were smuggled onto Amadeen by one or more quarantine force ships."

"I deny any knowledge of such practices, but given that what you say is true, Mr. Davidge, what is your point?"

"There are two points. First, until you people up there clean up your own act, we're going to find any accusations of smuggling directed at us downright funny. The second point, general, has to do with threats." Davidge's smile fades and he matches the general's cold look stare for stare. "This ship, as you know, is an old USEF attack transport. Right now its defense shields are operational and the ship is fully armed with its original complement of disrupters, defense missiles, ground support missiles, long range missiles, and automatic cannons. If you attack us, we will respond, with interest." He nods at Janice. As the general's image vanishes from the screen, she says, "It looks like Popcorn's bomber is changing its mind." The screens come to life and several minor officers of the Thuyo Koradar are dragging, almost carrying, the struggling bomber back to its home workshop. As the bomber screams for help and a few of us chuckle, I lean over and speak to Davidge. "Was it wise to threaten the QF, especially since the Aeolus has no weapons at all?"

"We have the weapons," he answers. "A present from Estone Nev. That's why we spent that extra day at the A'ja Cou Station."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Davidge shrugs and holds out his hands. "Sorry. You were out with Reaper's press gang fleshing out the crew, then you were unconscious, then other things came up." Before I can say anything else, Nightwing is back. The Green Fire suicide team is still on its way, Gitoh is confirmed as the goal, and the source of the orders has been identified. Everything is supported by recorded conversations of all the accomplices. In the hills overlooking Gitoh, the suicide team will set up its missiles, target the hospital, two schools, and the kovah for lineless children, totaling over eight thousand children and adults. Green Fire's leaders hope to kill enough children and wounded to provoke the Mavedah into a retaliatory strike, thus killing the talks. Green Fire's leadership is a council of seven members. This council voted unanimously to make the strike against Gitoh. The orders passed from them to their minister of revolution, who ordered a field commander, who in turn asked for volunteers. Taking out everyone responsible will mean killing thirteen more humans. "Do they have enough agents?" Davidge asks Reaper. "They have one on the missile team, two on the council, and one each on the war minister and the field commander. It'll be close, especially with the security on that



council, but they should make it. They should make it." As I watch Reaper, I suddenly realize that he is not giving his considered opinion; he is praying. I turn to Davidge. "I want to send this information to the Mavedah. If Green Fire should get through, we must stop the retaliation before it begins." Davidge thinks a moment, glances at Kita, then faces Janice. "See if you can raise the Mavedah." While Janice turns to the communication board, inside of me there is a voice saying it is all too one-sided. Yesterday we foil two human plots to disrupt the truce. Yesterday we kill twelve humans. Today we target and kill another thirteen humans. While the one voice cries that this is too lopsided, another voice is cheering. I feel guilty about both voices and listen to neither. "Got 'em," says Janice. "Taaka Liok, it says it's fourth warmaster, responsible for the Southern Shorda." I watch as the legend of Taaka Liok fills the screen facing me. I have followed the orders of this warmaster for so long that I feel like a child before a disapproving parent it has struggled to please. "I am here," says Liok. "Are you the one who wants to speak?" I lean forward, rest my arms on the table, and at last get my mouth working. "Jetah, I am Yazi Ro of the Navi Di." The old warmaster raises its eyebrows. "Ah, the truce police. What would you have of me?"

"We have learned that the Green Fire has planned a missile attack for tonight from the hills surrounding the city of Gitoh. They plan to target the hospital, two schools, and the kovah for lineless children. The object of the attack is to provoke retaliation."

"If they succeed in their plans," says the warmaster, "they will get their retaliation."

"We intend to stop them, Jetah. In case we fail, though, I wanted to warn you to allow the Gitoh Sikov time to prepare." Taaka Liok studies me for a moment. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes, Jetah. If we cannot stop Green Fire in time, we would have it that you do not retaliate. We will find out who is guilty, we will execute them, and the truce will hold." The warmaster leans away from its camera and clasps its hands together. "Why would you do such a thing, Yazi Ro?"

"That is our duty, Jetah."

"Duty?" Taaka Liok leans forward and points. "Who made this your duty?" Who? I think of the Front, all of the dead, the millions who live each day in fear, my old comrades, the weariness that haunted me between my terrors. Zenak Abi, Davidge, Jeriba Shigan, Falna in its perverse way. I look at Taaka Liok and do not avert my glance. "It is talma. A talma to peace." A sneer touches its lips. "Long before either of us were born, Yazi Ro, the Jetai Diea on Draco decided that Amadeen is forever rulebound into

its war. No talma is possible save the elimination of one side or the other."

"Things continually change, Taaka Liok, including the Jetai Diea's understanding of talma."

"Where are you from, Yazi Ro?"

"My parent died in Gitoh, my only home, save the kovah for lineless children there." It frowns as it studies my image on its own screen. "At the kovah, were you selected?"

"Yes, Jetah. I am a deserter from the Okori Sikov." Taaka Liok glances down, then it reaches out a hand to a point beside the screen. "I promise nothing. Let's see how successful you are against the Green Fire's attack. In any event, I will tell you my decision." The screen goes blank. All of us continue looking at the dead screen until Kita says, "I don't think the warmaster bought it." "Would you?" asks Davidge. "You spend your whole life in hell trying to stay a step ahead of the demons, then all of a sudden Angel Goody-Goody comes along and says, "Sit this one out, mate. I'll take care of it."" He looks at me and I hold out my hands. "Will, what if we let Green Fire know we are onto their plans? Perhaps they will wait for another time or simply call it off." Davidge taps a fingertip on the table. "We let the Front know, too. They might have some clout with Green Fire. Hell, let everybody know." Kita and Davidge exchange glances, then Kita faces Janice. "Raise Nightwing and his regional net. Tell him about Popcorn's bomber and see if some well placed twenty-nines around the council chamber and on the road to Gitoh can't put the brakes on Green Fire, then raise the Amadeen Front --"

"Priority Red!" calls out Roger.

On the screens we see an explosion followed by the trail of a descending missile followed by another explosion. The sound is garbled for a moment, then a shadow blocks the view. The screen goes blank and the sound goes dead. Sound comes back along with a black screen, and Sally Redfeather's voice saying, "This is Tommy. Alley Cat is dead. Obsidian is under a missile attack right now." We see a glimpse of Ali Enayat's face, eyes staring in death at a burning building. The picture jumps down to a view of Sally's boot crushing Alley Cat's hand portable. She moves into a shadow cast by some flames and we see another missile coming down into the town, far enough away so that all we see is the reflection of the explosion off the night air. "I don't know who's sending the mail, but the missiles sound like ZZK's, which means it's Tean Sindie. They're coming in from the east and being launched from over the horizon. Reaper adjusts his headset, covers the mouthpiece, and says, "Eli, lay in a course for east of Obsidian, and don't dawdle! Start scanning for that missile battery." The ship lurches as it turns and roars toward the Dorado. Taking his hand from the mouthpiece, Reaper's voice becomes very quiet. "Tommy, did you get hit?"

"Reap, you old bastard. No, I'm not hit, but in about a minute I'm going to be in an excellent position to get smeared. As soon as the shrapnel stops flying, old Raymond Sica is going to pull his face out of the mud and order a payback strike against the Mavedah. As soon as he does, I'm going to twenty-nine him, right?"

"Anybody covering your back, Tommy?"  
"Same guy as always." Reaper covers his mouthpiece and looks at the three of us. "If Sica orders the strike, does she whack him?" Without consultation, all three of us nod. Reaper says into his mouthpiece, "If he orders the payback, give him the twenty-nine."

"Landfall," says Eli over the headset. "We'll be over Obsidian in a couple of minutes. I have two missile tracks and reverse trajectories in the computer. Everything is armed, aimed, and ticking." Davidge glances at Kita. She nods. Facing me, he says, "What about it?" They will be my first Drac executions. Perhaps this will even out things. "Take out the launchers." Davidge relays the order to Eli, and immediately we feel two missiles launch from the Aeolus. Reaper says into his mouthpiece. "The cavalry is on its way, Tommy."

"Not them!" she protests. "The last time the cavalry came through my neighborhood, my great grandmother's great grandmother wound up in a tarpaper teepee in New Jersey selling polyester blankets from Taiwan. Hey Reap?"

"Still here."

"If it comes to that, let the Drac down easy. Tommy Hawk out." Davidge leans on the edge of the table and faces Reaper. "When you asked Sally who was watching her back, who did she mean?"

"Same guy as always. That's her Great Spirit, a giant of a mighty warrior who rides a horse made of stars and carries a lance of fire." There is silence for a moment, the only sound the dull roar of the ship's engines. Reaper turns to Janice and she nods. "It's the Tsien Sindie. Flower and the Blade are on it. No warning at all, very high security. I told them to target the two who handed out the orders, the missile site is about to take care of itself." As we authorize the hits on the battery commander and the Tean Sindie area Jetah, an image appears on the screen. We see six tracked vehicles mounted with launchers. Each launcher has tubes for sixteen missiles, but none of them has the full sixteen. As the launchers fire, soldiers of the Tsien Sindie cheer the missiles on their way to Obsidian and Black October. I look at Davidge. He is doing the same as I am: counting the dead before they fall. We do not see the missiles from the Aeolus come in. One moment there are a hundred or more cheering Drac

soldiers of the Tsien Sindie, the next the screens go white, the white fades, and there is nothing. No tracked vehicles, no missiles, no soldiers, no cheers. Smoke, a few small fires, a terrible silence. When we had killed nothing but humans, I felt terribly guilty, evil. Now that we have thrown a hundred Drac corpses onto the scales, I feel no better. I know why they were cheering. They were beaten, loved ones taken from them, life, friends, and lovers taken from them, and at last, in the form of a gleaming blue winged tube full of explosives, they strike back against all of those who have tortured and oppressed them. I know why they cheered. They cheered from their pain. They cheered because all of them cheered. They cheered because they did not know that the ones they killed were human copies of themselves. There are insignificant differences of color, the genetic orders concerning the number of fingers and toes, accent, language, belief. Nothing. But there is the tribe. That is something. Amadeen is cut up into tribes as primitive as anything on ancient Sindie, as obsessed as any on Timan, as vicious as anything on Earth. The tribe has only one commandment: the tribe comes first. Before right, before justice, before honor, before sanity, before survival, before love. Hissied 'do Timan did not create the war on Amadeen that became a war of three hundred worlds. The old Timan simply pulled the trigger on a gun that was loaded on the plains of the Madah, the mountains of the Irrvedan, the Irnuz Steppe, the streets of Belfast and Sarajevo, and the deserts of the Middle East before either Timans, humans, or Dracs even knew there were stars to touch. "Does Black October have this yet?" asks Kita. Reaper nods. "So does the Front, the Mavedah, and all the little sons of bitches." He glances at Davidge. "Raymond Sica ordered the retaliation. Before it could be carried out, Sally Redfeather took him on the dance. Sica's guards took her down." Janice reaches out a hand to place it on Reaper's shoulder, but he shakes his head and continues. "Paul Ruche is running October now. He wants to meet with us face to face."

"A setup?" asks

Kita. Reaper rubs his eyes and shrugs. When his hand comes down, his face looks very old. "I don't know. The feeling I get is that he wants to know if we're for real."

"For real?" I ask. "What does that mean: for real?"

"Sincere," answers Davidge. "Perhaps the new leader of Black October wants to know if we're sincere." He lowers his gaze to the center of the table. "Perhaps not." He looks at Janice. "What about the Green Fire attack on Gitoh?"

"They reconsidered." He nods, puts his hands on the table, and pushes himself up. Once he is standing he says, "Well, that's something. That's something." He frowns for a moment and looks up at the screen. Several of the fires have gone out. "Who's hand portable is that?"

"Fireball. It just got there from training."

"Fireball," Davidge repeats. "Tell Fireball we've had enough pictures. Tell it to put down its twenty-nine and get out of there." He removes his headset and places it on the table as he looks back at Reaper.

"Arrange a meeting with Ruche. Maybe we can show him we're for real. See what we can do about getting Sally's body returned to us." As he walks from the information center to his quarters, he walks very slowly. Kita places her hand on mine. "If we're needed I'll have my headset with me." She rises and follows him out of the center. Reaper, Janice, and Roger work with the screens, spreading the word, making arrangements, passing on graphics to the broadcasting stations. A meeting place and time is arranged with Black October and I feel the Aeolus swinging about. I think of Sally Redfeather in her dress at that terrible bar. And I think of that old Drac, Toack, who guarded her things, the one who never left reality behind and brought the war with it into the future, the one who kept repeating its mantra: "All my children. All my children." It is quiet on the Dorado for the rest of the night. I sleep and dream that I am a child in Willis Davidge's cave. There I learn to love, to be loved, to become love. I am a part of this wonder that is the universe only to find that it is a trap set for me by Falna. I reach for Uncle Willy's hand and find death. I awaken screaming and cry myself back to sleep.

## CHAPTER 43

Soon after sunrise, in the hills north of Obsidian, Davidge, Kita, and I go to meet Paul Ruche. From the right front corner, Reaper pilots the power platform because he refuses to let us go without him. He has enough weapons concealed about his person to make it possible to sink him to the bottom of a lake of quicksilver. The Aeolus is in its usual position over the Shorda Sea, our backup authorization team -- Yora, Janice, and Cudak -- in place. Reaper and I both carry hand portables and our cameras are sending, the ship relaying the feeds to the Front, the Mavedah, and to all of the splinter groups. Hanging onto the cargo braces, we stand silently watching Ruche and his two bodyguards standing in the clearing. At their feet is a stretcher with a shroud wrapped body upon it. The ship's sensors show that Ruche has at least a company of Octoberists hidden in the woods. A trap for us? Perhaps it is only Ruche's precaution in case the trap is ours. As we land I look away from the Octoberists and watch Davidge. His expression is somber. Last night I heard he and Kita arguing about who would go. He insisted that she remain behind. She insisted that he remain behind. The meeting though is with all of us, the ones who "run things" as Paul Ruche had put it. They at last accept that they both go and I hear them making love as though for the last time. I no longer question this love between this young woman and this old man. I am learning to see beyond surfaces; a skill Will and Kita knew back on Friendship. As I listened to them, I ached for Falna's touch. At that moment I could have forgiven it anything, just to have its arms around me. The platform lands and I force myself into the present moment. Reaper shuts down the controls, releases his straps, and steps down onto the grassy surface of

the clearing. The three of us follow, instinctively placing distance between each of us so that we cannot all be taken out with one shot. We stop five paces from the three Octoberists. Now that we are closer, I see that one of his bodyguards is the head of Black October's thought police, Akilah Hareef. The third one I do not recognize. Ruche fixes Davidge with a stare and says, "The agreement was that we are to be unarmed. The three of us are unarmed, and the three of you are unarmed." The Octoberist I do not recognize holds up a hand scanner. "That one," Ruche says nodding toward Reaper, "is armed." Kita smiles and says, "He balances out those hundred and forty-two armed soldiers you have watching us from the edge of the woods." As I listen, I remember the knife in my boot. I guess Ruche doesn't consider my blade a weapon next to the pistols and disrupters Reaper has tucked here and there. Ruche's expression does not change. He nods at the still form on the stretcher. "As we agreed, here is your assassin." Without looking away from Ruche, Davidge says, "Reaper." Reaper moves until he is next to the stretcher, kneels down next to it, and pulls the wrapping from the face of the corpse. It is Sally Redfeather, eyes closed, her face waxy yellow, her mouth hanging open. Reaper covers her face, stands, and looks at Paul Ruche. "She was no assassin, squid. She saved all of your lives."

"She killed Raymond," says Akilah Hareef. "Raymond Sica was an asshole who gave an order that, had it been followed, would have done for Black October what firing those missiles did for the Tsien Sindie." "They were killing us; killing our people!"

"And now they are dead."

Reaper squats down, picks Sally's body up in his arms, and takes her back to the platform. "What is this meeting about?" asks Davidge. The head of Black October frowns as he seems to have difficulty arriving at a decision. The decision postponed, he continues to watch Reaper bending over Sally's body as he says, "I needed to see you face to face. I don't trust these broadcast images."

"You're being televised right now," says Kita. Akilah holds up Sally's hand portable, her own image on the tiny screen. "We know."

"There are no screens between you and me right now," Ruche says to Davidge. "I want to see you -- your face, your eyes -- when you tell me what you are doing here, on Amadeen, in this fight that has nothing to do with you." I nod as I realize that Black October gets prohibited communications from the quarantine force orbiters. How many other groups do the same, I wonder. "We are here," Davidge begins, "to make it possible for all of you to end a war. We police the truce and punish violators. That Tsien Sindie missile battery and its commanders were violators, and they are dead. Raymond Sica was a violator and now he's dead. The truce still holds." Paul Ruche's eyes narrow and he dismisses everything with a wave of his hand. "I don't want to see your performance for everyone else, Navi Di. Turn off the

cameras. Make it just the six of us, no cameras, no recordings, no lies, no posturing, and then you tell me what your angle is." Davidge nods toward me. "Shut it down, Ro." I turn off my hand portable. "Reaper!" he calls back to the platform. "Shut down your camera." The big man nods in return. Davidge turns back to Black October's leader. "The only camera on right now is the one Akilah Hareef is carrying." Ruche glances at her and she shuts down Sally's hand portable. As its tiny screen goes blank, I feel very much alone and far out on a thin limb. "Tell me now," Ruche orders. "Why are you here? What do you get out of this?"

"We are here to police the truce," Davidge repeats. "What we get out of it is the same thing everyone gets out of it: peace." I can see all of Paul Ruche's thinking displayed on his face: Do you think I am a fool? I have seen a hundred thousand instances where Dracs have lied, betrayed, set up good men and women, and tortured and killed them. You are standing there with a Drac as your equal, your so-called police force even has a Drac name, and you had Raymond Sica murdered because he was only trying to defend us against the Tsien Sindie's bloody attack. "So, little Niagat, you're after Aydan's blade, are you?" In surprise I blurt out, "You know The Talman?"

"To defeat an enemy, one must know its thoughts," he answers. "I know the story of Aydan and its search for peace." He drops his gaze for a moment, and thinks. Once he finds his mind, he looks first at Kita, then me, then Davidge. "Aydan put together an army to end the war between the races on Sindie; an army whose only purpose was peace." He holds out an arm toward the woods. "I'll tell you what those men and women want. They want every last Drac in the universe dead. I'll tell you what those Dracs in the Mavedah, Tsien Sindie, Sitarmeda, and Thuyo Koradar want. They want every last human in the universe dead. And you want a truce. Tell me, Aydan, what can be gained from truce talks?" Davidge smiles and shakes his head. "Perhaps what the Dracs say is true: to get a human's attention takes a mirror, a loud voice, and a sharp stick." He takes a deep breath and nods. "I guess it's not as obvious as I thought. The point of the truce, Paul Ruche, is the truce itself."

"What does that mean?"

"If the Front and the Mavedah, and all of the human and Drac splinter groups do make it to the table, they will talk, and swear, and bellow, and curse, and threaten, and will reach no agreement, but the truce will hold. Then, in time, children will grow and your replacements will come to the table. Perhaps they too will talk, swear, bellow, curse, and threaten and reach no agreement, but the noise level will be lower and the truce will hold. All this time humans and Dracs will be venturing farther and farther from their weapons. They will be rebuilding their lives, their towns and cities, their schools, farms, and businesses. The young, not burdened with memories, will see where money might be made by selling to

the other side. Money might be saved by employing them, putting them through the same schools that ours attend, and the truce will hold. Eventually, the ones who show up at the talks will be men, women, and Dracs who really don't understand why so many old ones are so insanely attached to the past. The talks will be populated by those who no longer want to waste time on talks that don't do anything or go anywhere, and they will sign the peace."

"For me, then," says Ruche, "it is a pointless gesture. I get nothing I want. Black October gets nothing it has fought and sacrificed for all these years."

"You asked me what would be gained from truce talks. I answered."

"And this is all you want: the truce to hold so that in some point in the future there will be a peace?" Paul Ruche turns away, looks at Akilah Hareef, and she nods in return. "Willis Davidge," she says, "the only Drac I ever heard about who wanted only peace was Aydan, who incidentally killed millions of its enemies before it adopted its noble goal."

"Say what you will," remarks Ruche's bodyguard with the scanner, "we and the Dracs have at least accomplished that." After dosing him with a withering glance, Akilah Hareef looks back at Davidge. "In the story of Aydan, Niagat is told how to pass the test for a warmaster's blade." And Davidge quotes, "Return when your goal is peace alone and you hold a willing knife at your own throat to achieve it. That is the price of a warmaster's blade." As I hear Akilah Hareef make her offer, the talma is clear to me from beginning to end. I am stunned by it. "We will put down our weapons and come to the talks if we see the Navi Di earn its Aydan's blade." Davidge does not ask what the woman means, or argue that the goal of Aydan's test was peace, not the dubious agreement of a fraction of one side. Instead he bends down, pulls the knife from my boot, and stands holding the knife above his head. I reach to stop him, but Kita throws her arms around me, immobilizing my arms with a strength I did not know she possessed. When I break free, Davidge's hand is at his side, the blood is flowing down the front of his jacket, and he is sinking to his knees, his eyes open, his gaze fixed on Akilah Hareef. I rush to his side, and am there only in time to lower him gently to the ground. I look at Akilah Hareef, and her mouth is open in a parody of astonishment. Paul Ruche is studying Davidge, waiting still for a trick. The Octoberist with the scanner takes a hesitant step forward. As he squats down next to Davidge, he looks at me and I see the tears in his eyes. Reaper rushes up, pushes Ruche out of the way, and drops to his knees next to me. "What in the hell happened?" He glares from Ruche to Hareef. "Who --" I point at Davidge's hand, my knife still clutched in his fingers. I pry the knife from his hand and hold it. I want to rip the blade across Hareef's guts, cut off Ruche's suspicious face, gouge out the crying eyes around me. I do none of it. Instead I thrust



the blade into the ground, leave it, and pick Davidge up in my arms. As I stand I face Kita, her eyes awash in tears. "You knew!" I accused. Her lips form the word "yes," but there is no sound. The Ovjetah, Zenak Abi, Kita Yamagata, Davidge. Who did not know this talma? There is so much anger I need to throw at someone, but the only one who deserves it is dead in my arms. I swing Davidge's body around and look at Paul Ruche, the head of Black October. All I do is look and keep looking until he turns and begins walking toward the tree line, followed a moment later by Akilah Hareef. The remaining Octoberist looks from my face to Davidge's body. He shakes his head, turns slowly and follows the others to the tree line. "Let's go, Ro." Reaper is standing there, his arms out, offering to help carry Davidge. I turn away from him and holding Davidge close to me, I walk to the platform. I lower him and place his body next to Sally Redfeather. When all of us are aboard, the platform lifts off, I face into the wind, and try to believe that I am in a dream in which I know I am in a dream, which means I can change it at will. But I can will no changes, I am not in a dream, and the pain will never end.

#### CHAPTER 44

The truce still holds. As I stand in the shadows looking down at the night mists, the truce still holds. Thuyo Koradar and The Fives make some noise and some plans. The noise is just noise and the plans -well, if you want to hear God laugh, make a plan. Bombers, suicide attackers, nutball war chiefs, and everyone else begin seeing twenty-nines wherever they go. There are more twenty-nines than The Peace has either time or personnel to inscribe. The Mavedah's own people, the Front's own people, are marking the sign of The Peace everywhere. There were no cameras on when Davidge earned Aydan's blade, but the story spreads. Through Black October, through the Front, The Fives, The Rose, and Greenfire. For the Dracs, The Mavedah hears it first, then the Tsien Sindie, Sitarmeda, and Thuyo Koradar. All I can think is that the quarantine force survey team was on us and has been spreading the word. The truce holds and Black October comes to the table to talk. Tsien Sindie comes the next day. By the end of the dry season, the last of the splinter groups, The Rose, sits at the table. They talk, and swear, and bellow, and curse, and threaten, and they reach no agreements, but the truce holds. In twenty days another faction forms among discontented humans, but a galaxy of twenty-nines appears before they can perform their first atrocity. Eight days later, a lone Drac suicide bomber lets its pain drive it North of Douglasville where The Peace stops it dead. The executioner found it unnecessary to leave a twenty-nine. Those who live on the street marked it with the numbers. More come forward to join The Peace, the Mavedah donates two additional ships to the Navi Di, and the Front retaliates by setting up Navi Di offices and observers in all their units. Four months after Davidge earned its blade, Green Fire officially disbands. Cudak, Kita, and I are the authorization team, and I hardly look at her. Of all of those I blame for Will Davidge's death, second only to myself, I blame Kita. It makes no sense, but in my entire life, where had sense ever been a part?

I do not accept his death, although the entire planet of Amadeen seems to have accepted it. There are things I wanted to do. There are things I wanted Davidge to be there to see. That foolish child inside me, the one who cries "unfair!" is still there. From the shadows I watch the mists and find so much of my purpose for peace gone; so much of my purpose for life gone. As I watch the night avians race through the ground fog below, I feel a hand on my arm. Without looking I know it is Kita. "What is it?"

"There is someplace we have to go." I look at her and notice for the first time how puffy her face seems. "Where?"

"Gitoh.

The Mavedah has opened it up." I look back at the fog. "What is in Gitoh?"

"Something Will wanted you to see. It was his last wish." The thin scab across the wound of my grief is scraped away with a few words. Numbly I follow her across the clearing and into the Aeolus. In less than an hour the ship puts down in Gitoh. At first the inhabitants look upon us with suspicion, until they see the twenty-nines. There are waves, a cheer. There is a Drac who meets us and it leads the way between the bombed out buildings of the city. The streets are cleared of rubble and the bomb craters filled in. There is a small business repairing appliances in a burned out building. Another business sells seeds and food plants. A third business sells old clothes. At the end of one street is a pile of rubble that once must have been a huge building. When we reach it, there are twenty or so local Dracs there, all wearing their shabby best. Part of the bottom of the building has been painfully excavated and there is a concrete stairway going down. There is no electricity and the stairs are illuminated with candles. I look at Kita. "The archives? My line's archives?" She nods. "These are the archives of about sixty lines here in Gitoh. It has been over twelve years since they've been used." We enter one of the sub basements. The candles fill the huge room with a warm yellow light. The room is filled with Dracs and a few humans. Some I recognize, most I do not. There is an open armored shelf containing ornate books of various thicknesses. A blue robed Jetah takes a very thin book from this shelf and places it on a podium, I stop dead and face Kita. "I cannot do this! I am not prepared." I lower my gaze to the floor mosaic. "He is not here. I wanted him to be here for me the way he was there for so many others." Kita looks up at me and smiles. "He is here, Ro." I shake my head. "No, the only ghosts I believe in are evil."

"Ro, he is here,"

she insists. I look at her and she is holding her palms pressed flat against her middle. I am so stupid. She is carrying Will's child. I take her in my arms and hold her. Her arms steal about my waist and we stand there until all pain turns to love. At last she looks up at me. "I have a letter from Will. It's for you."

"What -- what does it say?"

"I haven't read it." I release her and she reaches into a pocket and hands me an envelope. I break the ordinary seal, take out the sheet, and open it.

Dear Ro, On this day you begin the rites to become an adult. Know that I am very proud of you and that I believe you will continue to grow and improve upon the especially valuable being you already are. I once told you that I wish I could have been there to watch you grow. From when I first met you on Friendship through all of our time together, until here on Amadeen, I have watched you grow and celebrated your accomplishments. I have gotten my wish. My love is with you always, Uncle Willy.

As I look at that Uncle Willy signature, I can almost see him with that mischievous smile on his face. I look at Kita, hand her the letter, and face the Gitoh Archivist. It reveals itself to me, as The Talman said the steps of the universe's plan of my life would. In time there will be a relaxation of the quarantine and I will travel to Sindie on Draco to tell Matope, the veteran in the wheelchair, that we have remembered and the war is done. From there I will go to Timan to honor my promise to Lahvay ni 'do Timan, Dakiz of the Ri Mou Tavii, to teach his students the problem and the peace of Amadeen. Afterward, I will go to Friendship, find a cave, and help Kita and the Jeriba line teach her child how to gather the wood, smoke the snake, and withstand the winter. From there I will see where talma leads.

Before you here I stand, Ro of the line of Yazi, Born of Avo, the teacher of English. ...