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Jo Dinage

One race would live...
And one would die.

*Death of the
Immortals*

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Prologue: Segaan

The *Jirga* Kaiser watched with narrowed, yellow eyes as *Zha Obeel* cautiously approached him. Rule had been thrust upon the *Jirga* suddenly, with the unexpected accidental deaths of his first brother and his father. Having eliminated just about every disease known, an Azar was virtually an immortal and could technically live forever, barring accidents. A crushing injury to the torso, or depriving the brain of oxygen—as in a drowning—were some of the few unavoidable causes of death among the Azars, which was why the death of two royals in a transporting accident eight years ago had stunned the nation. The current *Jirga* had assumed rule in the midst of the present crisis, and unfortunately, the deference due a *Jirga* was seriously undermined because he was viewed as a young, brash second son with a ferocious temper.

Slowly the *Jirga* extended his hands from his robe to touch the pads of all four fingers with each other. Within the last few years his skin had taken on a translucent hue. Although a reversible process, it was a sure sign of stress among the Azars. And the *Jirga* was under a great deal of stress. As imperial ruler his responsibilities would have been enormous. With the turmoil of the past forty years, the *Jirga*, and indeed the entire nation, were now at risk. The stress had not only caused his translucent skin, it had also drastically worsened his notoriously short temper.

Nevertheless, the *Jirga* Kaiser was determined to find a solution—hence this new experiment. He now waited in silence, impatient with *Zha Obeel*'s slow approach.

Although he had requested this meeting, he was unsure how it would develop. Normally, this, his central receiving chamber would be bustling with advisors. This cycle, however, the hall had been cleared. Even the guards had been banished to the other side of the closed doors. The *Jirga* had allowed only four of his most senior advisors to be present. They were standing silently behind him and would remain silent unless he requested otherwise.

Zha Obeel continued his advance. His head was bowed as was customary. *Zha Obeel* was neither a minister nor an advisor within the imperial government. He worked as a Blocker for the Psychics. The Azar's system of government had two branches: the *Jirga* and the Psychics. And although the *Jirga* was the ultimate ruler of all Segaan, in the history of the Azars, none had ever dared to ignore the powers of the Psychics. Within the Psychic chambers *Zha Obeel's* position was undoubtedly revered. The imperial rule however, consistently refused to grant Blockers the almost mystical privileges reserved for the Psychics. Here in the *Jirga's* chambers *Zha Obeel* was regarded as an ordinary citizen.

Beside *Zha Obeel* walked, *Loya Favood*, the most powerful psychic of Segaan. At the required twenty paces, *Zha Obeel* stopped and prostrated himself on the floor. *Loya Favood* stood silently next to him. The psychic's eyes were closed in concentration. His robe and hood covered his form from head to toe leaving only the pale blue of his face and hands visible. As a tenth-degree psychic, and leader of the psychics, he only could remain upright in the presence of the *Jirga*.

<"Eighty full cycles ago *Loya Favood* made contact with the aliens. He has disabled their outside communication system and the controls of their flying machine. They were forced to land on Segaan and cannot leave."> *Zha Obeel* intoned as he raised his head.

His mental words reached all, including the *Jirga*, who grunted in assent.

Zha Obeel continued mentally. <"We have captured some of the aliens and *Loya Favood* been studying them carefully.">

<"My advisors say that you have brought twenty-one of the females and one male into the sector. What have you learned so far?"> The mental question was addressed to the psychic standing silently in front of him. But again, it was *Zha Obeel* who answered. A psychic could communicate only through his blocker and even then communication was mental. Without a

blocker, communication with others was often difficult, many times impossible. There were recorded incidents in history of psychics dying from mental jamming in attempts to communicate directly. The psychic needed the blocker as a shield to filter the mental static of others, especially a high-level psychic such as *Loya Favood*.

<“Contact is dangerous, but *Loya Favood* believes we are compatible.”>

<“Believes?”>

<“*Loya Favood* wishes more time, *Jirgaar*.”>

<“We have no more time,”> the *Jirga* roared. <“So inform *Loya Favood*. Have him send an image of these beings.”>

<“*Loya Favood* wishes to study the beings more before....”>

But the *Jirga* interrupted harshly. <“An image!”>

<“It is as you wish, *Jirgaar*.”>

The same fuzzy image began to form in the minds of all present. It slowly took shape, showing three aliens. They were naked and unconscious, lying on a smooth surfaced, table like structure, in a sterile-looking chamber. All were female.

<“These are the first females we captured and the ones we are studying. The others are in a conscious state and kept in separate chambers.”>

The *Jirga*'s face remained expressionless, as he stared at the females. Unlike the Azars, the skin color of these beings was pinkish yellow – a skin color unknown to the Azars. Stranger yet was the hair that seemed to cover their entire body. The Azars did not have body hair. But worse was the thick, shoulder-length, yellow-brown hair on two of the females and the flowing black hair on the other. Lower animal life-forms were the only living things on Segaan to have such a quantity of hair concentrated at any one area.

Despite his shock, the *Jirga*'s voice was neutral as he asked. <“What of the males?”>

<“We have only captured one male. The others were accidentally killed on the Upside. He is kept in a separate chamber.”>

<“Is he like the females?”> the *Jirga* demanded.

Although his face was still expressionless, a certain tension had crept into his voice. It was enough to make *Zha Obeel* blink rapidly in a sure indication of nervousness. And two of the advisors actually shifted in disquiet.

Despite the general unease, nothing prepared them for the next image. He was undoubtedly male, and he too was naked. But he seemed totally unconcerned about his nudity as he stood shouting at someone unseen. Despite the fact that he was caged, his savage expression and furious grip on the bars of his cage caused even *Zha Obeel* to gasp in shock.

The *Jirga* gave the mental equivalent of a growl. <“They look nothing like us.”> Now his voice reverberated in growing anger. <“The *Loya Favood* said these beings were as we are.”>

Certainly, the male was even stranger than the females. Although tall, he was still not nearly as tall as the average Azar, and his skin color was a dark brown with eyes that were either dark brown or black. Like the females, short yet clearly visible hair covered his entire body, noticeably thicker on his head and in his groin area. But the hair on his head looked different. It was tightly curled, sitting like a cap on his head. The *Jirga's* growing anger and revulsion were hardly surprising. Azar's eye colors were all varying shades of yellow making the black color of this being's eyes seem even more shocking. And none in Segaan had ever seen anyone without the blue skin of their own people. Add these differences to the body and head hair – phenomena unknown to the Azars – and the result was total abhorrence mixed with fear. All present had also noted the absolute fury on the face of the male.

<“Outside appearances will not matter if we are compatible,”> *Zha Obeel* rushed to explain. <“*Loya Favood* thinks they have the appearance of our early ancestors. It may be that they are in a primitive stage of their

development. *Loya Favood* is still investigating their biology. It is most difficult. He cannot see their insides clearly.”>

Unfortunately, the *Jirga*’s disgust had hardened. <“Already the *Loya Favood* has spent eighty cycles examining them. What more time does he need?”>

<“Perhaps twenty or more cycles. *Loya Favood* needs to confirm....”>

<“We do not have twenty cycles to waste. It was the plan of the *Loya Favood* that we use genetic material from the female aliens. Surely he has already tried this? We need to know the results of his experiments!”>

<“*Loya Favood* begs more time *Jirgaar*. It is critical....”>

<“Enough! The *Loya Favood* can continue his examination of the beings already captured. We need not bring any more Downside. How many more are there?”>

<“*Loya Favood* has touched 153 females and 215 males, *Jirgaar*.”>

<“Tell the *Loya Favood* to send a pulse to destroy them all.”>

<“A pulse is not possible *Jirgaar*. Touching the alien mind is proving extremely dangerous. This first-cycle the mental contact killed one psychic.”>

<“Very well. We will send a small party Upside. We can wait no longer.”>

After a brief pause *Zha Obeel*, still prostrate on the floor, lowered his head in obeisance. <“*Loya Favood* will submit to your wishes *Jirgaar*. However, let it be known that only one psychic will accompany the Upside party. *Segaan* cannot afford to lose another psychic.”>

The *Jirga* grunted. As the *Jirga Kaiser*, he was determined to find a way to save the *Azar* race. After over eight thousand years of civilization, the *Azars* would not all die – not while he was *Jirga Kaiser*. He would do whatever it took to save his people, which was why he had reluctantly agreed with his council when *Loya Favood* first made his proposal.

However, now that he had seen the strange beings, he did not think this plan would work. The aliens looked repugnant. He did not wish children

from these beings populating his world. To change course he would need to eliminate *Loya Favood*. That would be difficult if not impossible. There was no other psychic powerful enough to challenge the *Loya Favood*—assuming he could even find a psychic willing to oppose their own leadership. A better alternative would be to pretend to go along with policy of the *Loya Favood*. Perhaps he would spare the females for a while and let *Loya Favood* continue with his experiments. The male he would have killed immediately. That too would be difficult to arrange, but it was feasible. It was certainly not necessary to have any live alien males on the planet. Besides, even the *Loya Favood* admitted that they were a danger. He did not want even a remote chance that any would survive. And without males the aliens would not be able to reproduce.

With an abrupt mental command he dismissed *Loya* and his Blocker, <“Go! I will allow you more cycles to study the aliens you have captured. But the ones on the Upside will be destroyed. Also, we must have an alternative option. This I will think more on. Our survival is in the will of Tooaal.”>

300 years later

Chapter 1

“Perhaps we should have taken more boys?”

“No. Only fifteen boys were born from the experiment. Taking more than five would be too risky.”

“The Soosan would never know.”

"The current *Jirga* does not track the boys, but the previous one did. If this one lives..."

Zooric couldn't pinpoint exactly when he began making sense of the sounds he was hearing. There were two men in the room and they were discussing him. He struggled to open his eyes but the lids felt unbelievable heavy. Drugged again! He did not even have the energy to summon his past rage. He wanted to give up. Could he will himself to death? Even as the thought surfaced he realized – I am thinking! In his past drugged state he had been unable to put two thoughts together.

"He's coming awake."

That voice! Zooric became absolutely still but he knew he would never be able to fool them. He could already hear his frantic heart beat – in his head.

"Zooric!" One of the men tapped him lightly on the face.

He tried to turn his head but his muscles seemed disconnected from his brain; he was not sure how much movement he actually achieved and not even to save his life could he open his eyes. An involuntary groan escaped, startling him. Was he in pain?

"What do you think?" It was the same voice.

Suddenly, Zooric felt a burning pain in his upper chest. Again he groaned and helplessly shifted his head, but fortunately, he truly was unable to move his upper body. *What were they doing to him?*

"He is not really responding." This was the other man. Zooric feared them both but this man, Deeknor, was a monster.

"*Dees!* I thought you were going to kill him."

"With a knife? Deeknor laughed. "That would be too messy. Apply some pressure. I do not want his blood dripping on the floor."

"His brain is probably fried."

"He definitely cannot move," Deeknor sounded satisfied. "No one could remain still while being stabbed."

“So what do we do now?”

“We will keep him here for a few more cycles. He is waking up. The other boy never regained conscious although he lingered for four cycles. If this boy wakes, even if his brain is gone, we will use him until he reaches puberty.”

Zooric breathing was labored as the pain slowly faded. Only vaguely was he aware of a pressure on his chest. They did not want him bleeding to death. He did not care anymore. They would still use him. He slipped back into unconsciousness even as despair filled him.

It was dark when he woke again. He knew because he shocked himself by actually opening his eyes. He tried to lift his head but the effort was beyond him. As he relaxed on the bed, he was jubilant as he realized that he was aware—his brain was working again—he could think. He was naked, lying under a thin sheet covering; he could turn his head but he couldn't lift his arms and he was not sure his legs were actually attached to his body. If this was the effect of a drug it was something new. He searched his mind—trying to recall anything of his past—and a fierce joy filled him as his memory came in bit and pieces. It wasn't much but he could now remember his family. This definitely meant he was no longer under the influence of the mind numbing drugs. With a sigh of relief he closed his eyes and drifted off.

When he woke again there was light, and the sounds of a quarrel.

“*Onke* Deeknor sent you to change him.”

“I changed him last cycle. It is your turn.”

“It is not my turn. And you did not change him. You always get Raekon to do your dirty work. I brought him his food. *Onke* Deeknor said we were to take turns...”

Restric and Shron were two of the boys. Both were Zooric's age, not harmless, but not an immediate threat so he ignored them as he again took stock. Since he was feeling stronger, he cautiously tried moving his arms and

legs. Yes, he was definitely recovering. Now that he had some control over his muscles he would have to hide that fact from them. How long had he been unconscious? It had to be at least one cycle for certain, but perhaps two. Each cycle was 25 *eens* but a cycle was broken into first-light, which was five *eens*, followed by three *eens* of first-dark. The cycle continued with second-light which generally lasted eight *eens*, and then nine *eens* of second-dark. It was light now but he was not sure if were first or second light.

Since the boys were still busy arguing, he carefully turned his head to look around the room. This was not the room he normally shared with the other boys. Was he even in the same house? In his regular room there were no windows and he and the other boys slept on pallets on the floor. This room had a large window and, in addition to the bed, a closet completely covered one wall. From this vantage point, he could not recognize any landmarks. In fact, he could see only the green Segaan sky. It was also impossible to tell how secure the window was. However, if he was in the same house, he could be in one of the rooms that he had never been allowed to enter. Before he was drugged Restric had told him about those rooms, and he knew that they had unsecured windows. He was afraid to hope, but now that he could think rationally he had to plan. This could be his only chance to escape.

He was brought back to the present by the slamming of the door. Restric had walked out. He was never changed but at least Shron fed him, and later that cycle the boy Restric came back with another liquid meal.

“You stink,” Restric sounded pleased.

Whose fault was that? Zooric thought surly. However, he deliberately gave no indication that he understood. He now knew it was second-light. And he was in the same house. He hadn't dared leave the bed, but he had been able to raise himself enough to take a peek out the window. He recognized some of the landmarks. Also, throughout the cycle he had been regularly exercising his muscles, carefully hiding his actions whenever anyone entered the room. His bed was wet with urine because no one had

come to assist him from it and he was not about to let them know that he could speak, or move. A wet bed he considered minor. He had learned that he could live with discomfort, beside, after an entire cycle he could no longer smell himself. He now waited in silence for what he knew would be minimal help at best, torture at worse. It was Restríc's specialty.

Shron had propped him up with pillows to feed him the thin liquid with a spoon. Fortunately, he was still in the same propped up position as Restríc brought a full bowl to his mouth.

"Here! Eat! Do not expect me to feed you."

Zooric kept his expression blank. He did not move. Predictably, since he was unable to swallow fast enough, most of the liquid poured down his chin and onto the sheet. It was steaming hot and Zooric was unable to stop a hiss of pain. As he gasped, even more of the hot liquid poured over him. Zooric's breathing was hard, his eyes wide and staring as he struggled to blank his mind – to control the pain. His biggest struggle was controlling the urge to move or push the bowl away.

Restríc began giggling. "Poor Zooric. It is a pity you cannot understand."

The bowel emptied. Zooric slowly unclenched hands that were fortunately hidden by the covers.

Restríc grinned at him. "If you are lucky Shron will clean you." Restríc continued grinning as he pulled away the covers, exposing Zooric's naked body to the cool air. "You need air to dry and perhaps get rid of the smell." He was turning to go when the door opened. Deeknor entered.

"How is he?"

"I tried feeding him but he does not swallow. Look at the mess he made." It was said with exactly the right amount of indignant concern.

Deeknor came over to the bed. "Why was he not changed?" he demanded.

"You were not here *Onke* Deeknor, when I begged Shron for help and he refused. I tried but could not turn him by myself. I was just now about to replace the sheet he soiled as I tried to feed him."

"Shron refused to help?" Deeknor eyes narrowed.

Restric tentatively reached out to touch Deeknor's arm "I even threatened him. I told him I would tell you of his refusal but he said he would accuse me of lying."

Deeknor patted Restric's hand reassuringly. "I will take care of Shron. Go find him. Tell him to go to my room immediately. I will be there shortly."

Zooric did not have time to feel pity for Shron. As Restric left the room Deeknor bent over the bed.

"This is probably for the best."

He forced himself to stare blankly as Deeknor removed a knife from his belt. Zooric eyes tracked the knife as Deeknor absently tapped the blade against his open palm. This is it, he thought. Yet his heart was not even racing. He was in fact feeling unnaturally calm.

The other man entered. "I have been checking on him throughout the cycle. He is fully awake but he still does not move."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive! I checked him with my knife."

He had done no such thing but Zooric was not about to argue the point. The boys had been his only visitors this past cycle.

Deeknor straighten. "It is senseless to keep him alive if cannot even feed himself."

"We will be left with only three boys." It was said nervously.

"That means you will have to be very careful. We cannot afford to lose another boy."

Somehow his words seemed to carry a threat, perhaps to the other man, yet Zooric gave an involuntary shiver. Fortunately, the men were no longer focused on him.

“I have heard that the sizzle can have a numbing effect on muscles. It has been only two cycles. Perhaps we should wait at least one more.”

“Perhaps, but I never intended him to live much longer. We could not keep him drugged forever. Besides, now that the boys from the experiment are approaching puberty the Soosan Protectors may begin making enquires. We could give them a dead boy but there is no way to explain how a boy could get sizzled.”

The other man was nodding. “You are right. How...”

“A blow to the head. That worked before.”

Zooric eyes flickered. He could not believe he was listening to a discussion of his own death. And such an emotionless discussion! Deeknor could have been discussing the weather.

“I have to travel outside of Caleel within a cycle.” The monster continued. “I will take him then.”

“We told the parents of the other boy that their son ran away. What will we say for this one?”

“He did not like the strict disciplined training that a Soosan must follow. He fell out of the window when trying to run away. They are poor. It is unlikely that they will question us if we pay them well. Also, like before, I will give them the body.”

They continued talking as they left the room. Zooric was now shaking so badly his teeth were chattering. It was not only from the cool air. His emotional numbness of a few minutes ago had evaporated. He was now terrified! If he wanted to live he had perhaps one cycle to plan his escape. As the door closed, he resumed the careful exercises he had started earlier. Hopefully someone would come soon, both to change him and to cover him up. It was risky exercising his limbs when he was so exposed, but he had to be ready and the exercise would warm him. He was freezing!

Chapter 2

Cautiously, silently, Zooric eased the window open. It was pitch dark outside, but this was good. It was less likely that anyone was about, giving him a better chance of escaping undetected. The window squeaked as he lifted it and he froze, his leg raised in preparation to climb out. Tense, he strained his ears, even closing his eyes for a second, to better concentrate—but nothing. There was no movement outside his room and hopefully the entire house was asleep. Quickly this time, he adjusted his bundle—it did not hold much, just a few items he had gathered from the room, things he felt he would need to survive—and scrambled out. Zooric was not sure how long it would take him to walk home. However long it took, he would make it; there was no turning back. He would die rather than return to this house.

Caleel during the dark was eerie, with the dome shaped houses and buildings looking like miniature stepping-stones in a giant's pond. After leaving the house, Zooric deliberately kept to the shadows, his bare feet made no sounds on the rough pavement. As a pre-puberty boy, he had no special senses to help him. But even that fact would work in his favor because if he remained motionless around others there were no electro-signals for even a Soosan to detect.

Silently, yet as swiftly as possible, he walked away from the house. He knew running would attract too much attention so he resisted that urge, beside he felt too weak to run. However, with an almost paranoiac fear of discovery, he found himself looking back every few seconds. But there was no hue or cry—no alarm was raised. Again he made a silent vow. He would never go back. And he had no plans of stopping until he was well clear of Caleel.

His first act after leaving the town was to wash. It was only a small body of water but with an almost frantic obsession to be clean, he did not care. He went in, clothes and all. For him it was almost a ritual. In cleaning himself, washing, he was effectively washing away the past— putting it all behind him. He was dripping wet when he finally walked out of the water, but he made no effort to dry himself. In his mind, the act of natural drying completed his mental cleansing ritual.

He continued walking until first-light approached. The lightening skies found Zooric searching for a hiding place. Deeknor would come searching for him. This he did not doubt.

Like the town itself, this area was a fertile and lush region. Centuries ago much of the forest had been cleared, allowing roads to criss-cross the region. Through the ages however, poor upkeep of the roadways had allowed the proliferation of sates, a naturally occurring purple, ground cover that grew only ankle high. Sates seemed to naturally repel the dense woodlands and many farmers outside of Caleel proper, after clearing the land, used the plant to keep the forest at bay.

Zooric finally found the ideal spot in one of the scattered remnants of the area's wooded past. It was in the middle of an ylieen tree. With branches as wide as an adult's torso, and leaves just as broad, the ylieen tree would provide an effective cover and would hide him completely from any casual observer, even one standing directly below the tree. However, getting into the center of the tree was tricky. The ylieen tree, when in bloom as this one was, often produced numerous multicolored buds. They were beautiful, but caused painful ylieen burns on the skin. Within a few cycles of contact, the skin would become irritated and swollen, forming unsightly white blotches that could take up to ten cycles to clear. Since Zooric was hoping he would not meet anyone, an unsightly skin condition was the least of his worries. He climbed a good distance off the ground to find a comfortable branch then hitched his bungle to the branch above. As he settled down to rest during for

the light, he examined his arms and legs. His skin was smooth, brown, virtually hairless, and as yet showed no signs of ylieen burns. But he wore only a sleeveless tunic. It was the only clothing he could find in the room, and although the adult size of the tunic covered him completely, actually reaching to just above his knees, that still left all of his arms and most of his legs uncovered. He just hoped the ylieen burns he knew he would have to endure would be worth this effort.

He closed his eyes with a sigh. But, as his body relaxed, images began crowding his mind. *Saac ga!* Not now! He did not want to deal with the emotional trauma of his immediate past. Unfortunately, his brain had other ideas. Even with his eyes squeezed tightly shut he was unable to banish the scenes of horror. The worst was the fuzzy nature of his memory. He would recall the end of a scene but not the beginning, the middle but not the end. With a grimace he sat up. Pulling his knees to his chest, he wrapped his arms around them and stared sightlessly through the branches. He was exhausted, but unable to sleep.

Just how he had escaped with his mind intact would remain a mystery. Yet he was thankful. The incident had allowed his escape. As far as he was concerned, the past was the past and he wanted it to stay that way. But with his brain playing tricks on him and intent on reliving hazy scenes that he had no wish to recall, he knew there would be no sleep for him this light.

The rest of the light was spent planning the best route home and designing a protective cover for his feet. He used leafs from the ylieen tree and cautiously left his perch to retrieve flexible branches from other shrubs. There was no hurry and he wanted a sturdy foot cover. He knew the path from his father's farm to Caleel was well traveled and much of the territory was familiar because he had made the trip numerous times with his father. The problem was he would have to avoid the well-traveled paths. And travelling in the woods without foot protection would be painfully if not

impossible. However, now that his brain was finally free of the mind numbing drugs that they had been giving him, he knew he had a good chance of surviving. True he would have to avoid the open, but if he stayed to the edge of the forest he would not get lost. And much of the vegetation on Segaan was water rich. There were also numerous edible fruits. Besides, even without the water-filled plant life he would not die of thirst. There were enough rivers and streams between here and his home.

His biggest worry was really an attack from any of the various wild animals. The most deadly was the feera. They were particularly vicious scavengers, but as nocturnal animals they hunted only during the darkening. By traveling in the darkening Zooric was hoping to avoid contact with others, but a plus would be that his constant motion should reduce his risk of attack. He could sleep in trees during the light. The one wild animal capable of climbing trees was the wolar. But it was too big and lumbering to launch a silent attack. The wolar depended on its size to subdue and kill its prey. He was sure he would awake long before a wolar could plan an attack. Zooric was confident that he would survive—if only he could forget the past.

At second-dark he climbed down from the tree and continued his journey. Because he had carried no food, he stopped periodically to scrounge around for wild nuts and fruits along the way. Initially, he planned to go directly to his parent's farm, but by the third cycle he felt the first simmering of awareness. *Saac ga!* It was happening!

Zooric stopped. As he stood absolutely still a tingling of electricity ran throughout his body. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Why now? He wrapped his arms about his body as a powerful surge gripped him. It was the beginning of his electro senses! Now he would need a medic! During the first ten cycles of onset, his electro senses could fluctuate wildly. Only a medic could stabilize the electrical surges. He had heard that some boys went crazy without a medic. Zooric took deep breaths as another wave of awareness gripped him. It was followed almost immediately by that tingling of

electricity. Even as he hugged himself protectively, he was mentally rebelling. No! No! No! No way was he going back. Yet, to get a medic he would have to return to the town!

Zooric opened his eyes on another powerful surge. It was pitch-dark, but he could now 'see.' Despite the urgency of his need, he looked around in wonder. It was unbelievable! Already his special electro-senses were displayed. Now, by sending small electro-pulses out into his surroundings and monitoring the return signals, he had a picture of the area around him. He could 'see' across the open land to the next group of trees. He could 'see' the animal life that had been invisible to him in the dark. It was even possible to 'see' where the land dipped and disappeared into the horizon. A bitter expression pulled at his features. Was this the reason he had survived that last incident? Although the fog of numerous drugging had slowly faded, his memory was still hazy. Yet, he knew he should have been dead or badly sizzled; instead he had only been stunned. Perhaps puberty started in the brain long before the electro skills showed. It was the only explanation he could think of.

Now he could no longer go home. If he went home, by law his father would have to take him to a Soosan medic for first-link testing and for treatment. All Owoons boys must undergo first-link, a test of their electro skills. And as a child of a Soosan, most likely he would test sensitive—and become a Soosan. He had already been initiated into the life of a Soosan. He wanted no part of it. Slowly, reluctantly, Zooric changed course and began heading into the underdeveloped area to the South of Caleel. Yet, mixed with his reluctance was a curious relief. True, he wanted to see his family. Of course he missed his parents, his sister and his brother. But on leaving home he had already accepted that he would never see them again. Returning now would mean he would have had to tell why he could not stay in Caleel. It was also possible that the men would demand his return—perhaps even force his father to give him up.

Zooric stopped, lifted his head and stared at the twinkling sky. The silence of the universe looked down at him. He was alone yet... Zooric took a deep breath and, for the first time since his ordeal began, he cried. They were not silent tears, and they were endless. The emotional onslaught left him huddled on the ground, his arms wrapped tightly around his body. When the tears finally stopped he slowly rose, sniffing and wiping his face on his shoulder. Now he could admit a truth that had been nudging at the edge of his consciousness ever since he started this journey. He wanted to be alone. Here, there was no one to ask uncomfortable questions, and no one to force him to recall what he preferred to forget. He would not live in the wilds forever, but he would stay for as long as he could. Yes! He would at least learn to control his special senses. He even preferred the risk of going crazy. Perhaps with time he would learn how to hide the fact that he was a sensitive, was perhaps Soosan!

Over the next few cycles Zooric slowly learned to manage and control his new skills. With constant practice, he was able to stretch himself to the limits of his abilities. He had always been taught that the initial surges were uncontrollable. This was definitely so, but they did not drive him crazy. They were an annoyance, yes, but functioning was not beyond ones capabilities. It was like a background noise that was irritating, but with determination could be ignored. The great positive was that, with his new skills came food. It took him two full cycles of practice before he learned how to generate a pulse just strong enough to kill his prey without burning the animal to a blackened crisp. The fact that he needed to practice control was positive proof that he was a high sensitive and could be a Soosan. For an ordinary Owoon, normally the difficulty was in generating a pulse strong enough to kill. But he also debunked another myth when he found that generating a pulse, even to kill a prey, did not reduce the violently swinging surges. Yet there were other advantages. Now that he could scan the surrounding area for movement, he

no longer feared attacks by wild animals. He found that he could scan vast distance of level land, but his signals were blocked by mountain ranges or even large trees. There was one curious fact: he could detect the electro signals from even the smallest animal! Zooric never knew that there existed Soosans with that particular skill but since he had never live among real Soosans he was not concerned. After all, no Owoon really knew everything about the Soosans.

Zooric had been traveling for more than 100 cycles, in a southerly direction when his senses picked up some low-grade electrical impulses coming from a mountain range. The signals were so faint that had he not been actively scanning the area, he would have missed them. This far from Caleel the land was uninhabited, but it had been explored. Although he was now traveling during the light, in all the time he had only seen two fur trappers. Fur trappers tended to travel with a pack of hunting rocleers and were notoriously protective of their territory. Like wild animals, some trappers would fight to keep others out of a given area. With his electro detection skills Zooric was able to locate trappers long before they were even aware of him; he was therefore careful in giving them a wide berth.

It was possible this was another trapper. Zooric stopped to get a better feel of the signals. The vegetation here was much the same as around Caleel, although there was less of the purple sate ground cover, and more dense areas of forest. This type of terrain was not ideal for long-range signals. Yet, the signals seemed to be coming from a distance. Curious, he slowly and cautiously tried to locate the source. Yes, they were coming from the looming mountain range. The question was, where? It could not be trappers—they did not travel in packs—maybe another settlement? He had never heard of another large settlement of Owoons. As he got closer, the signals did not become stronger. Puzzled, because somehow the signals did not seem normal, he tried again to pinpoint the source. It was then that he realized why the signals felt so strange. They were mechanically induced and not from a

living being! Dense sates covered the pathway that led directly up to the mountain. There, on a narrow ledge about his height high, were six large stones – each about the size of his head. Zooric stared. The stones were emitting the signals! They were large and oval and even as he gazed at them, understanding dawned. He had found an ancient Azar sector!

Frowning, Zooric tried to remember from past lessons whether an Azar entrance opened out or in, up or down. Hopefully it opened in, or down, because the door would never be able to open out with over 300 years of sediments collected behind it. Next he tried figuring out how to open the entrance. From past history lessons, he knew that the stones were the key. By pulsing the stones in a specific combination the door would open. However, there were six stones. Ancient Azar poems that he had studied gave combination keys only for four stones, which meant that unless he got lucky it could literally take a lifetime to figure out this combination! Yet he intended to try. Taking a deep breath, he concentrated – focusing his electro-pulse on first one stone then another. Nothing happen. After a period of trial and error he realized that four of the stones had a slightly different signal. Perhaps those four stones were the key? Throughout the course of the cycle he repeated his efforts, concentrating on the four stones, trying out different combinations learned from past history lessons.

Five cycles later, after again pulsing the series of four stones, Zooric though he heard a sound. Frowning, he tried again. This time he both heard then felt something. The door was opening! Slowly, noisily it opened downwards. Zooric scrambled out of the way as it fell with a thud. A blast of debris cascaded around him. Coughing and gasping, Zooric fled further away. When the dust finally settled he moved forward, cautiously climbing over large and small rocks, as he made his way inside. What a find! His heart was humming with excitement. Soon he would have to report this to the Soosans – but not yet. This would be his one and only chance to explore.

Two years later Zooric was still exploring. It was not that he had changed his mind about reporting his find. Rather it was because of his fear – he was terrified he would be returned to the house in Caleel. Fortunately, he had not spent the time alone. About thirty cycles after his find, he found a young rocleer. The animal had a terrible injury to his back, likely the result of a fight, and was on the verge of dying. More than likely the animal had been abandoned by a trapper. It was so sick it gave only a token growl as Zooric bent to examine the injury, but did not otherwise protest when Zooric carefully picked it up. It was another twenty cycles before the rocleer, now named Soor, fully recovered. By then he was Zooric’s faithful friend and companion. Rocleers were the domesticated cousins of the wild feera and Zooric suspected that his rocleer was half feera; it had grown so tall – reaching almost to his waist. The feeras in the wild were taller, although, like his pet, they too had small bodies in comparison to their massive heads and long skinny legs. Like the wild feeras, Soor also had short but thick black fur covering his entire body.

In truth, with Soor for companionship, and the comfort of the sector to live in, Zooric did not miss civilization. The sector had huge reading rooms that were still intact and he spent many cycles using his electro-skills to read the embedded electrical disc that was the Azars primary recording method. As he explored deeper into the sector he was, however, assailed by guilt. The Azars had even more advanced technologies than his people; he really needed to report this find. It was his guilt that finally prodded him to travel north to Caleel. While living in the sector he had tamed two pageens. The smooth easy ride of the pageens could have easily reduced his journey to Caleel by half, but Zooric lingered. With Soor as a guard during the darkening he no longer had to literally sleep with one eye open in fear of attack by any of the numerous wild animals, especially the feera.

Instinctively, he continued to avoid others. Using his electro detection abilities he found that he was able to sense others long before they were even

aware of him. But as he approached the town his senses were swamped with more and more electro-sensory information. He was literally picking up the electro signals of hundreds of citizens. At first the static was overwhelming. Zooric dismounted. He allowed his pageens to walk slowly. Breathing deeply he caressed the animals, while striving for control. Finally, he stopped. He was on a wooded rise just above the center of town. He knew he could not go on—not because of the electro-sensory overload. True blocking was one skill that he was weak at—he had never before had to practice. But he had easily learned how to block much of the incoming electro-sensory signals and as he drew on them, his skills improved. No. His problem was his deep-seated fear of capture. As he got closer to the town, long forgotten nightmares began plaguing him again. Zooric stood and gazed in silence. He could see the lights of the town at this distance. Soor, sensing his unease pressed closer.

“I know Soor,” he murmured. “There is nothing to fear. It is unlikely that they will even remember me.”

Yet he could not move! He mind was already screaming in blind panic. Also, with his block fully in place, he had lost one of his senses. It was like going deaf. He felt exposed, plus like a phobia, no amount of rational reasoning could convince him that the people of the town would not immediately pounce on him—or take him back to the house. Zooric turned away. He would have to find some other way to tell the Soosans about his find. Decision made, he began a rapid retreat. He was a full cycle away from the town before his heartbeat settled back to normal. But Zooric did not pause in his flight. He pushed his mounts, determined to reach home in record time. With two mounts he was able to rest one while riding the other. It took less than fifty cycles to get back to his home in the Azar sector.

It was almost another four years later that Zooric next ventured out for Caleel. He had explored the entire sector and as he read his way through the vast selection of discs in the sector’s massive reading rooms, he was

amazed and astounded. Was he the only one with this knowledge? As more discoveries unfolded, he realized that he truly could not keep this find to himself. The people of Caleel needed to know. The Soosans had to be informed. The problem was getting the information to them.

On this attempt to reach Caleel, Zooric carried furs that he had collected. And this time luck was with him on his journey back. He met and aided an injured trapper. This was his first contact with another person since his escape and Zooric was surprised and pleased to discover that he could easily block the trapper's single electro signal while still maintaining his ability to detect other signals nearby. That was reassuring and helped to ease his fears as they approached the town. However, as he got nearer, he was again forced to put up a total block. Zooric fought his feelings of helplessness. Fortunately, the trapper was exceedingly grateful. Assuming that Zooric was new to the fur trade, he not only gave Zooric valuable information on selling furs; he also offered Zooric a place to stay when he learned that Zooric family did not live in Caleel.

Five cycles later, with cash on hand and a completely new outfit, Zooric again left Caleel—this time for his parent's farm. His stay in Caleel had relieved some of his fears of capture but instinctively he continued to travel in the woods, avoiding all contact with others. Now, for this last part of his journey, he would have to use the path.

“Come Soor,” he said to the rocleer at his side. “It is time to go back.”

The rocleer wagged his stubby tail, and pressed its massive head against Zooric's leg. Zooric rubbed the animal's head then reluctantly straightened. Leading his pageens, he made his way down the lightly wooded slope and onto the main path leading to the farm. Soon a cart, pulled by two caceens pulled up.

“Do you need a ride, *Zha?*” the driver asked while keep a close eye on the rocleer.

Zooric nodded his thanks. He was finding speech, or just communicating with others, difficult. For the last six years, just about all his conversations had been between him and his rocleer.

“Uh... I can't take the rocleer,” the Owoon said.

“No problem. Soor can follow.” He swiftly tied his pageens to the back of the cart.

“Are you from this area?”

Zooric cleared his throat a couple of times before speaking. “I am Zooric. I left here about eight years ago.” It was a risk giving his name but he could think of no way to avoid it, especially since he intended to visit with his family.

“Zooric!” the driver stared. “*Saac ga!* Zooric! I cannot believe this. I am Bmees.”

At the driver's expectant looks, Zooric stared. Bmees was his younger brother. The last time he saw him he was a ragged youth of eight years. This was amazing!

Bmees was grinning widely. “You are Zooric aren't you?” He did not wait for an answer. “Yes. I recognize you now. You are so different it was difficult at first but I did immediately think you looked familiar. That was why I stopped.” Without pausing he continued. “But where have you been? The man who took you, *Zha Deeknor*, he and a friend came looking for you after you ran away. When you did not return here we all suspected you had died trying to return home.”

Even now, six years later, just the mention of Deeknor's name was enough to cause Zooric to flinch. “I have lived as a fur trapper,” he said, after what he knew was a noticeable pause. “I knew that I would get in trouble for running away. I was afraid to come home.” He was very thankful that all those years ago he had changed course and headed south.

Bmees nodded understandingly. “*Eeng. Zha Deeknor* was very angry when he came looking for you. When he realized you were not here he

wanted his money back and at first threatened to have father arrested for breach of contract. But father retaliated by accusing *Zha Deeknor* of ill treating you and causing you to run away." Bmees grinned. "Of course *Zha Deeknor* backed down. He knew he was at fault for causing you to run away. But it is indeed fortunate that you were not here or he would have been sure to take you back. But why did you leave? What did he do?"

Bmees was naturally curious but Zooric was not up to satisfying his curiosity. This was just what he had been afraid of. Questions! "I did not like living with Deeknor," he said flatly. That must have been the biggest understatement of his life! Yet he knew that if he began any explanation it was only lead to more questions. He had no wish to answer questions.

"Did they not treat you well?" Bmees was puzzled and possibly confused by Zooric's use of Deeknor's name without a title. Politeness and respect were very important to the Owoon people. They routinely used titles to show respect, indicate relationships or delineate status. In fact, titles were omitted only among close friends or family. Therefore, for Zooric to omit the title of a non-relative was an extreme insult. "Were they not able to give you the life of a Soosan?"

Zooric tensed. He could not do this. Even after all this time he still was not able to deal with his past. "I... I did not like it there," he repeated.

Unsatisfied, Bmees stared. "But why? After *Zha Deeknor* approached father, father went to the Soosans. He had promised *Zha Deeknor* he would not, but he did not want trouble with the Soosans in the future. He only wanted to let them know that you were missing or possible dead. But the Soosans were very interested in father's story. They paid us handsomely for information on *Zha Deeknor*. We heard later that *Zha Deeknor* had three other boys living at his house. And soon after, they took all the boys away from *Zha Deeknor*. The boys were taken to the Soosan sector but *Zha Deeknor* and his friends disappeared. No one knows what became of him after the boys were taken away." Bmees shrugged. "You know the Soosans. They tell us nothing

of Soosan's business. We suspect the boys must have eventually become Soosans because we have not heard from them again. There was a rumor that the Soosans were upset that *Zha* Deeknor had collected the boys and had punished him. No one knows for sure. Did he not give you the life of a Soosan as he promised?"

Zooric hunched his shoulders. "He did. I just did not like it."

"The Soosans also collected all the other boys of Soosan fathers."

"What did they do with them?" Zooric cautiously asked his first question.

"They lived with Soosan Protectors until first-link." Bmees paused then added thoughtfully. "We all thought that all children of Soosan fathers would automatically become Soosans but there were a few boys that the Soosans did not take at first-link. These were boys who never lived with *Zha* Deeknor. Can you imagine how very disappointed they were not to become Soosan?" He paused again, this time in mortification. "I am sorry Zooric. I did not mean..." For the first time since their meeting, Bmees was at a loss for words.

With relief, Zooric realized that Bmees thought that he too had proven non-Soosan at first-link. He hastened to reinforce Bmees belief. "I have had time to accept," he said. "And I really do not mind that I am not Soosan."

Bmees stared in astonishment. "You do not wish to be Soosan?"

"*Zte*," Zooric said firmly. "I like my life as it is. I have lived as a fur trapper outside of Caleel for some time, and I like it." He did not add that after just over two years of living in Deeknor's house he had no wish to repeat the experience as a Soosan. "How are mother and father?"

Fortunately for him, Bmees went along with the change of subject and was happy to bring him up to date with news of their parents. By the time they arrived at the front entrance of the farm he had learned that his sister had bonded. She lived on the farm with her mate and three children.

No one rushed out to meet them as Bmees pulled the cart up beside the dome-shaped animal house. But that was not usual. At this hour the family was likely preparing for the end cycle meal. The place looked prosperous and almost unrecognizable. Because his parents had been poor, Zooric was surprised at the condition of the farm. Remembering Bmees' mention of a reward from the Soosan, he imagined that his father had used the money to expand.

"Hurry," Bmees urged him.

Bmees had already watered and fed his caceens but Zooric was taking his time, fussing over his pageens. Caceens, although great at pulling heavy loads, were not as intelligent as the pageen and required less care. However, finally acknowledging that he was delaying the inevitable, he gave the animals' one last pet before following Bmees to the family's living quarters. It was located just a short distance from the animal house. Zooric breathed slowly as he tried to control his fear. He could only block one strong signal while maintaining a partial block and already he was sensing strong electro signals—indicating the presence of others. Again Zooric found the sensory overload enormous. He knew he would be able to function only by blocking all their electro signals—using full block. Now, as much as he longed to see his parents, he wondered if he could just leave his information with Bmees then leave. But already they were at the door! Very reluctantly, he followed Bmees into the house.

"Look who I found!" Bmees announced as he walked in the main room.

The words made him the focus of all eyes. There were four adult Owoons in the room. Zooric recognized his parents easily. And the children he placed as children of his sister, which made the other female Owoon his sister, and the male, her mate.

Bmees began chuckling at their blank stares. "This is Zooric!" he stated triumphantly.

“Zooric!” his mother cried. “Zooric! I cannot believe this.” She began crying as she hurried toward him with outstretched arms. “Zooric!”

Zooric was enfolded in her arms. “Mother!” Despite his effort to block, he was swamped with her emotions. Zooric tried to pull away as he realized the contact was inhibiting his blocking skills—but his mother refused to release him. She was squeezing him and crying at the same time. As his father also approached, Zooric tensed, expecting another flood of emotions but to his surprise he was able to block his father. Yet he could not relax, not with his mother's intense emotions on the verge of overwhelming him. It literally felt as if she was projecting her emotions into his head. Yet, there was no time to analyze this strange effect. He could not remember the last time he had thought of his parents. Mentally he had chosen to survive, and for the longest time surviving for him meant forgetting the past. Unfortunately, forgetting the past—although the less traumatic alternative—had included forgetting his family. Now, unable to block his mother's feelings, the memories and emotions were almost unbearable. Sniffing and blinking he tried hard to hold back from the emotional onslaught, but tears were trickling down his cheeks as he returned their hugs.

“We thought you were dead.” His father voiced the thoughts of them all.

“I am fine,” Zooric said as he gently pulled out of his mother's hold. As loving and caring as her emotions were, they were too much, and there was a limit to how much he could take. Even when he finally stepped away Zooric found that he was still struggling to block her. “I have spent my time away as a fur trapper.”

“But why did you not return sooner?” The question came from his sister.

“I was afraid. I knew... I knew Deeknor would come looking for me. I was not sure how... when he would stop looking.”

“We cannot understand why you ran away,” his mother was still upset. “Did he ill-treat you?”

Their questions were endless, yet Zooric's answers got briefer and briefer.

“I did not wish to stay.” It was all he would say. And his answer was just as unsatisfying to his family as it had been to Bmees. Like Bmees they all tried to pry more information from him. Like Bmees they soon found that the happy, cheerful boy who had left home could in no way be compared with this guarded and wary adult.

Unlike the average person who would be spurred into speech just to break an uncomfortable silence, Zooric clearly felt no such compulsion. And as the questions continued his preferred method of dealing with those he did not wish to answer became silence. Without embarrassment, fuss or noticeable discomfort, he just refused to answer questions not to his liking.

After the third such uncomfortable gap in the conversation his family gave up. Fortunately for them all, Bmees was Zooric's opposite, in that he seemed driven by compulsion to fill any significant pause in the conversation. He took Zooric to his room to change and clean up for the end-cycle meal, then later began eagerly feeding Zooric news of the farm, their neighbors even the most trivial of current events.

Zooric could see where others would find Bmees chatter exhausting. He didn't—at least not initially. It was strangely comforting to realize that holding up his end of the conversation only required him to nod, shake his head or otherwise give some indication that he was listening. However, by the time Zooric and Bmees returned to the main room to eat even grunting 'yes' or 'no' was a strain. He was convinced that he had heard Bmees entire life story, and then some. Now he was actually beginning to worry about surviving the meal. But he lucked out. It seemed food placed a temporary halt to Bmees chatter. During the meal his brother's speech was strictly limited to

requests for more food. Thankfully, Zooric settled down to eat as he listened to the flow of conversation around him without joining in.

Traditionally, the entire family gathered after the meal. It was an informal gathering where they would often play games or just socialize. As they sat, Zooric began removing a total of five objects from his pocket. Then initiating the conversation for the first time, he revealed his staggering find.

"I have discovered an ancient Azar sector. It was a small one, perhaps home to about 5,000 Azars. It was called Nergeet and it will take about fifty cycles to reach it if traveling by pageen. It is south of Caleel.

"What!" His father jerked up right.

"*Saac ga!*"

The astonishment was universal. They gathered around in amazement, eyeing the unusual artifacts. Included was a very old map yet it was made of a parchment very similar to what the Owoons now used for writing.

Zooric pointed to the map. "I believe that years ago Owoons had to have lived in the sector. There are other finds but I brought this map as proof because the Azars did not store information on parchment."

"No one has ever discovered an Azar sector," Bmees commented as he fingered the finds.

"This is unbelievable!" his father commented. Carefully he opened the map. "This maps various Azar sectors. Look!" he pointed out the closest sector to the North. "Here is another one that is close to us—named Yotse. And it looks much larger than Nergeet. We must tell the Soosan."

"Will they reward us, do you think?" his sister's mate asked.

"It is very possible. This is really an astonishing find. But with the Soosan as it is, a reward is uncertain."

"Uncertain?" Zooric queried.

His father nodded. "There has been much grumbling about many of the recent verdicts of the Soosan. Many do not like the direction the new *Jirga*

has taken and the policies that have been adopted.” Here his father shrugged—a reflection of the general acceptance of the Soosan’s rule. “But nothing can be done.”

They all nodded in agreement. In fact, no Owoon would even dream of overthrowing the Soosan, forcing a change, or even questioning the edicts of the Soosan. Soosans were the rulers and that was an accepted fact.

“Soosan policy has changed for the worse,” Bmees said. “They are not as fair as they were in the past. Many do not like the current *Jirga*. If only he was close to the end of his years.”

“Unfortunately this is not so,” his father said as he picked up a curious instrument. “The old *Jirga* died suddenly and the current *Jirga* is very young, only about twenty-two years. We have never had so young a *Jirga*. Perhaps that is the reason for the erratic leadership.”

Zooric was not interested in the age or leadership abilities of the Soosan. He was not interested in the Soosan, period!

At his lack of response his father continued, after only a slight pause. “Regardless of who the *Jirga* is, we must take this information to the Soosan. Zooric, would you be able to find your way back to the sector?”

Zooric nodded. “I have prepared a map with instruction on how to find the entrance.” This he brought out and placed it on the table.

“We can take this to the Soosan the next cycle.” Bmees said excitedly.

Their father agreed. “*Eeng*. This should definitely be taken to them immediately.”

Bmees nodded. “It would indeed be serious if we did not inform them of this at once.”

At that comment, Zooric wisely refrained from telling them that he had discovered the sector a good six years ago.

They planned into the darkening. Bmees and his sister’s mate would go to the Soosan sector with the information. Zooric would stay at the farm for a few cycles before leaving.

“But why leave?” his mother asked.

“I wish to remain a fur trapper,” he said. “I will not disappear forever. I will return often.”

Again his family did not understand, and again Zooric refused to explain. He could not tell them of his discomfort around others. To prevent the swamp of emotion he had to block out all incoming electro sensory information and with his blocking skills so poor that effort took most of his concentration. It also left him sensory deprived and he was definitely not accustomed to the sensation. Perhaps his skills would improve with used, but he had another major problem – what if the Soosan suspected him to be a sensitive? Even informing the Soosan of his find was a risk. However, since some of the boys of Soosan fathers had tested normal, he was hoping that they would assume him to be a normal Owoon who had just accidentally stumbled on the correct combination to open the Azar sector.

Nevertheless, he would have to take care, even with his family. How could he admit that he had never had first-link? More than likely he was the first Owoon male to miss first-link and he was sure there was a penalty – he just did not know what it was. There could also be a punishment for hiding his sensitive nature. Again, he did not know. For certain, if the Soosan discovered him, they would take him to the Soosan sector.

Early the next cycle the Owoons left for Caleel. But like many plans, this one did not work out as expected. Less than four cycles later a large contingent of Soosan Protectors arrived at the farm. The Soosan was holding both Bmees and the mate of Zooric’s sister. The men would be released only if Zooric returned to the Soosan sector. No explanations were given. The Protectors were all Owoons except for the officer. He was *Gaare Retran*, a Soosan and the head of the Soosan Protectors.

Zooric did not attempt to escape. They did not say why they wanted him, but Zooric recognized that such a high-level delegation meant business. Besides, he could not in all good conscious leave his brother in the custody of

the Soosan. So he went with the guards to the Soosan sector, a place he had vowed never to enter. It was another horrendous cycle later before he was free again. In the confusion they had willingly allowed him to go. He had even secured the release of his brother and the mate of his sister. Still, Zooric hated his time there. Not only were his memories still too painful, there were Soosans now who provided a constant reminder of his past. The only good that came from his time in the sector was that it proved that Deeknor had actually distorted the lifestyle of Soosans for his own sick and corrupt propose.

However, with his release he was not about to chance the Soosan changing course and perhaps again demanding his return. He would have to leave. True he would miss his parents, his brother and his sister. He had enjoyed playing with the children of his sisters and had even begun learning to live with the flood of his mother's emotions. He was surprised how reluctant he was to leave them but some of his past fears of capture were returning and he knew he could not stay. This time he decided to head north. During his time in the sector to the south of Caleel he had read extensively. And from the writings of an Azar psychic named *Loya Favood*, he had discovered the secret the Soosans were hiding from the Owoons people. He would find this alien race of people, the Tifoosas...

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