

1



Dassa trudged through the Ayin Forest across a crusted snow, her weary steps fueled by the nearness of her goal.

Soon, she told herself. Soon this will all be over.

On much of the planet Gannah, winter was drab as an old faded photo, but here in Ayin, the foliage boasted the colors of a prism. The trees kept their leaves until the new spring growth pushed them aside, so now, the frosty forest pulsed with color.

Dassa quickened her pace despite her exhaustion and the steepness of the slope. Labored breath billowing like smoke from a puffing firedrake, she crested the ridge and cast her gaze into the valley below.

A rush of delight coursed through her weary body. There it was—home—the comforting outlines of the domed green roof barely discernable through the trees. Revived by the sight, she hastened down the hill across the sun-spangled snow.

She smiled as the round, two-storied house came into full view. Unlike her childhood home, it was no mansion. It couldn't compare to any of the seven provincial palaces from which her father, the toqeph, reigned as the ruler of all Gannah. But she could think of nowhere she'd rather live than in this yellow stone cottage at the edge of the forest with her husband, Rosh, and their two boys.

Nor could she imagine a more perfect late-winter's day. Gannah's volatile temper was mild that afternoon, with the sun smiling down from a brilliant blue sky and breezes caressing with a mother's gentleness. And today, this most beautiful of days, she, Atarah Hadassah Hagah Natsach, would finish her quest and be named a Nasi.

As she plunged toward the house and the last lap of her race, she felt no euphoria. But, the test had been grueling, and she still must prepare the metheq and take it to her father. Surely once he approved her offering and declared her Nasi, her elation would know no bounds.

She left the woods and traversed unbroken drifts. A shroud of abandonment lay over all. Of course it was quiet, she reminded herself. Her mother kept the children at Armown, and Rosh traveled Outside.

So why did the silence seem so unnatural?

At the house, she removed her snowshoes and used a booted foot to sweep the snow from the threshold. Once inside, she closed her eyes and heaved a sigh.

Then she shivered.

Before embarking on her trek, she'd set the temptrol to just above freezing, but the empty house felt frigid, with a chill of the spirit more than the body.

Dassa tugged off her boots, took thick slippers from the shoe-warmer by the door, then slid her feet into them. Next she shuffled through the dining area to the climate panel nestled in the gently curved, fabric-covered wall, and adjusted the control to a more comfortable temperature.

The heater rumbled awake then settled into its familiar hum as Dassa toured the vacant rooms. She hugged herself as the emptiness formed a shadow of foreboding in her heart. Nothing had been touched in her absence, but somehow, nothing was the same.

She had neither time nor strength to waste on the puzzle. Back in the kitchen, she shrugged off her travel-stained pack, laid it on the table, and pulled out a heavy tin. Though mossberries weren't much bigger than the blue spots on a damebug's back, they were weighty, and this tin was full of them.

She removed her hooded coat and draped it on the back of a chair, then opened the tin and admired the glistening purple berries. Their rich fragrance made her mouth water. Hungry as she was, though, she wouldn't steal a taste.

Every Gannahan knew the legend of the would-be Nasi who completed his quest with valor, but sampled a berry while preparing the metheq. When he then came before the toqeph, his purple-stained tongue told all. Because he'd yielded to temptation, he was disqualified from the Nasihood for the rest of his life.

The knights of Gannah wore neither badge nor uniform. The color from the mossberries eaten at their induction never left their tongues, and that was the mark of their rank. Some toqeph's mouths were black because they ate each time a new Nasi pledged.

Dassa assembled the ingredients for a pie shell. Though the metheq could be any sort of treat in which mossberries played a role, her father loved pies, and she'd picked enough berries for a nice one. Thinking of the pleasure it would give him, she scooped and measured, mixed and rolled.

An hour later, Dassa left the house with a bubbling-hot mossberry pie in a basket over her arm and ice skates slung over her shoulder. The ancient rules stated the Last Requirement must be performed entirely on foot, so she trudged past the hangar without stopping for the motorsled. If she continued on through the woods then cut across the frozen lake, she'd be at Armown in less than two hours. A baby step, compared to the distance she'd already come. She'd easily make it before nightfall.

The sun still shone undimmed by clouds, but the shadow in her heart grew darker the farther she trudged. Fear knotted in her chest, though she smelled no dangerous animals near nor sensed treacherous changes in weather.

She cast her mind toward Rosh, and their meahs connected faintly. Good. He was well. Her children, though... A mother shouldn't lose touch with her children, even under stresses like these. But when she reached for them in her meah, she felt nothing.

Perhaps she'd been away too long. She reached her meah upward, toward her Yasha. That connection remained as clear as ever. *Finish your mission*, was the message she sensed. *Finish your mission*.

So that's it. The children would be restored to her once her quest was completed. Odd, though, how she felt so desolate. Almost as if... No, she wouldn't think it.

On the bank of the lake, she sat on a rock to change into her skates. After that, the colorful tree line fell behind as she sped to her destination.

But the closer she drew to the palace, gleaming in the sun across the frozen expanse, the larger the emptiness yawned within her. What was going on? Was this part of the test? She drew the crisp Gannahan air deep into her lungs, but it failed to calm her.

Fourteen days ago, when she'd clung to the frozen cliffs, buffeted by gusts and sprayed by the icy breakers, filling her tin with the tiny mossberries, she'd envisioned this moment. Nearing the palace, carrying her prize. Lightheaded from fasting, weak from exertion, but energized by the impending victory. Then presenting her offering to the toqeph. He'd sample it. She pictured his azure eyes widening in delight as a smile stole across his face. "Not bad," he'd say, or some such grudging praise. Once he'd eaten, he would pronounce her a Nasi, and the rest of the metheq would be hers.

It would be the first food to cross her lips in a fortnight, but it was reputed to be worth the wait. They said a man could fight for seven days and nights on seven mossberries. An exaggeration, no doubt, but the tiny fruits did seem to impart unusual strength and refreshment to those who had earned the right to eat them. Her mouth watered at the scent wafting up from the basket she held in both arms.

As she neared her destination, she wondered at the absence of skate marks on the ice. Usually the surface was scarred with them, especially here, near the palace.

She glided to the pavilion on the shore. After stumping on her skates across the snow, she sat on a bench to change into her boots then started up the path to the plateau, where Armown reigned in noble splendor. Her legs felt wobbly, the basket heavy on her arm, as she plodded upward.

Intent on her purpose, Dassa maintained communion with the Yasha, putting all else out of her mind.

Then she reached the stairway cut into the stone face of the mountain, leading up to the palace. Before she'd climbed three steps, waves of sorrow radiating from the ancient pinkstone walls drove her to her knees, and she barely rescued the precious metheq from sliding down the slope behind her. A vision of death—many deaths—passed

across her meah, sucking the air from her lungs. Eyes closed, she forced herself to inhale, and the frigid air cut like a blade.

She rose slowly, casting with her meah into the palace. She could make no connection with her sons. Her heart nearly stopped—they were gone. *No!* Her mother? Gone. Her father? Dim. Very dim.

A great many souls had vanished from inside those walls, from the whole city of Ayar. She spread herself farther. This death ravaged as far as she could sense.

Dropping her skates, she clutched her basket and ran up the stairs.

2



In his office aboard the hospital starship *LSS Barton*, Pik studied a computer image. Was it an actual woman of strange and wonderful breeding, or a computer-generated compilation?

And was it pornography? Perhaps. But he was conducting an anatomical study. To settle an argument.

His eyes followed the gyrating image on the screen. She was a remarkable specimen. Clinically speaking, of course. The breasts were Glenmarrian, no doubt about that. His focus lingered there to confirm his first impression. Definitely Glenmarrian. And definitely delicious. His gaze moved south. Ah, the umbilicus sprang from a different gene pool. Unlike the one undulating before him, the Glenmarrian navel is –

"Dr. Pik."

Pik's heart jumped and he exited the site, feigning deep interest in the medical page that came up in its place – a treatise on toenail fungus in elderly Eutarians.

Though Broward's thinning brown hair and stubby frame made him a less-than-imposing figure, his position commanded respect. Probably the only man in the galaxy with both a medical degree and a ship captain's credentials, his resume was impressive indeed. Besides that, Pik liked the man. Considered him one of his few Earthish friends.

Nevertheless, he felt superior to the captain, in height, looks, intelligence, and especially fashion sense. Pik didn't lift his gaze. "Yes, Captain?"

Broward got right to the point. "You have a new project."

"Already? We haven't completed our assignment here yet."

"No, but a distress signal takes precedence."

Pik looked up. "Distress signal?"

"From Gannah. They're dying in a plague and require immediate assistance."

Pik blinked, not sure he heard right. "They're dying *where*?"

"Gannah."

Something clumped in Pik's gut like a not-quite-done Cephargian blood pudding. "What sort of plague?"

"The message calls it the Karkar plague."

The pudding rolled over. "I had no idea it still existed."

"Nor did I." Broward paused. "Gannah's never asked for help before. Ever. For anything."

Pik said nothing. He couldn't fathom the proud Gannahans being brought so low.

The shorter man looked at Pik with accusation in his brown eyes. "What do you know about this disease?"

Pik returned his glare with a Karkar impassivity no Terrestrial could match. "That was centuries ago. I'm not that old."

"But you are head of my Infectious Disease Unit, and it originated on your planet. How do we stop it?"

"I have no idea." Neither did he have any idea why they'd want to.

"But you can research it."

Pik's ears swiveled in a Karkar shrug. He felt confident the captain, being a Terrestrial, would be unable to interpret the subtle gesture of casual disrespect, even if he noticed it.

But Broward frowned, perhaps picking up on Pik's attitude through his hesitation. "Well? You Karkar might not have the musculature to make faces, but I know there's something going on behind that expressionless mask of yours."

The Karkar sighed. "Research the plague?" He paused again. "I suppose I could..."

"And you will. Quickly. We should be there in two standard-weeks. A great many more Gannahans will likely have died by then. Your plague just about wiped them out last time, did it not?"

"It's a shame it didn't."

Broward's brows rose. "You're a doctor. How can you say that?"

Remaining seated, Pik pulled himself up to his full, proud height, putting him eye to eye with the standing captain. "I don't see that Gannah has made any contribution to the galaxy, save to provide a template for pure evil."

If Broward was impressed with Pik's superior size, he didn't let on. "It's good you're a cool, dispassionate professional, then, because as an agency of the League of Planets, it's our job to save them." He let that sink in a moment then went on. "What do you know of Gannahan physiology?"

"Very little. Only that it's markedly different from yours or mine."

"How so? Are their livers in their armpits and their hearts in their backsides?"

Pik ignored the captain's Earthish humor. "The systems are comparably arranged, but their chemistry is different and their functions are enhanced. Muscle mass is greater, senses are sharper, organs more efficient and less subject to wear. Their immune systems are impervious to all known diseases..."

"Except this plague."

Pik turned to his computer and began a search, but answered according to his own knowledge. "That's caused by a musculophage engineered by Karkar biochemists to attack Gannahan muscle tissue. I believe it's the only illness they're susceptible to, and it's harmless to all other life forms."

Broward crossed his arms. "So those biochemists must have been familiar with how the Gannahans are put together. And they must have kept records."

"I'm sure they did." Pik scanned the various entries. Not much came up at first glance.

"And with their data, you can stop the plague."

Pik cocked his head to the left in acquiescence. "I shall try."

"And you'll succeed. Once you and your people figure it out, get a team working around the clock to manufacture as many doses of the cure as possible. If you need more help, I'll take personnel from other duty. This is our top priority."

"I'll do my best, Captain."

"Your best is all I ask. But you've already shown me how good your best can be. If you fail me this time, I'll be demanding some answers."

If Pik could have scowled, his look would have been enough to get him demoted to records clerk. "I understand, sir."

"Very good." Broward nodded and started to go, then turned back. "But Dr. Pik..."

"Yes?"

"Those people who sent the distress signal are generations removed from the ones who ravaged Karkar. They've been living peaceably for hundreds of years, ever since your forefathers sent theirs running for home with their tails between their legs. You should have no axe to grind with them after all this time."

Pik swallowed a snort of derision. "I'm familiar with your overworked Earth adages, but our Karkar proverb says it better: 'Deep wounds heal, but the scar reminds, and the memory makes the wound bleed fresh.'"

"Your sayings are morbid. I like ours better."

"It sounds smoother in our own language."

"Your language sets my teeth on edge. Spare me."

Before Pik could decide whether to take offense, the captain had left the office.

He stared at the door as it swished closed. Ordinarily, Pik enjoyed his job. The assignments were challenging but satisfying, and when he pillowed his head at dimlights, he felt as content as a luglit with a bellyful of well-aged zikzak. But requiring him to come to the aid of the filthy Gannahans pressed his loyalty to the edge.

He should have listened to his mother. She'd told him to keep all twelve toes on Karkar where they belonged and not get mixed up in the Earthers' affairs. Just because our governments have joined in league, she said, doesn't mean we should forget who we are.

She was a fine one to talk. She, who married a Terrestrial. Fortunately, that mistake hadn't tainted her progeny. Pik's appearance was as striking as anyone's on his planet, and his mind was sharper than most. That was why he wanted to travel. There was too much to see, too much to learn to stay in one place his whole life. He'd come home when he was ready to settle down.

But he didn't expect that would be soon. In fact, he'd released his betrothed from her promise two years ago.

Deen would have made him a worthy wife; his mother had chosen her well. But it wasn't right to keep her bound to a man who might not claim her until her fertility was past.

It had been comforting, though, to picture her waiting. It pained him more than he cared to admit when she married Llllaarr less than a year after he released her.

Now here he was, forever single, far from home, and required to rescue the people who would have annihilated his own had they not been stopped in their tracks by what some called a miracle.

As a scientist, Pik didn't believe in miracles. But he had to admit the way those ancient chemists stumbled upon the one thing that could bring down their ultrahuman opponents seemed supernatural. And their success at surreptitiously introducing it into the enemy starcrafts' ventilation systems certainly beat all odds. Every last fiend not only left the planet within days, but their bloody surge across the galaxy was halted once and for all. The Karkars' stroke of luck—or genius, Pik preferred to think—saved every civilization in the path of the ravening Gannahan onslaught. As far as Pik was concerned, his people were the saviors of the universe.

At the computer, Pik delved deeper into the records. Surely somebody, at some time, had digitalized the chemists' notes and entered them into the database. Not that anyone could have predicted a resurgence of the plague, but such a notable achievement should be properly memorialized.

While he searched, his mind rehearsed what he knew of modern Gannah. The sum of it would fit on a sticky note. The villains had burst from anonymity to become an unstoppable scourge—nearly unstoppable, anyway—then vanished from sight as quickly as they'd appeared. Thereafter they were relegated to the realm of legend, in which they always played the bad guy.

Except for that swarthy musician. Since first rocketing onto the music scene about two years ago, Ross Knapsack, as he called himself, had been improving his people's public image at the speed of sound. Adolescent girls swooned over his well-muscled physique and startling violet eyes, the boys admired his manliness, and adults appreciated his

talent. Having seen videos of his performances, even Pik was grudgingly impressed with Knapsack's smooth, agile voice and natural showmanship.

Pik tried to ignore the popular Knapsack tune that came unbidden to mind as he scoured the records.

After an hour of poring over the data, jotting notes, and sketching diagrams, Pik sat back and rubbed his eyes. The ancient Karkar had discovered that the invaders' inordinate strength lay, at least in part, in the extra CD155 receptors in their muscle cells. Pik's ancestors then were able to engineer an organism that attacked those receptors. Because of the Gannahans' unique neuromuscular junction, the virus readily slipped into their central nervous system through the retrograde axonal transport. That led to paralysis, respiratory arrest and death.

It was a masterful piece of molecular engineering—a thing of beauty, really. Now, what about undoing its damage? It would take a few days in the lab, but he was pretty sure he could —

He stopped short, realizing he was humming that Knapsack song again. Catchy tune, though. And the lyrics were clever, for a love song.

He thought of Deen, and his ears sagged. A Karkar didn't marry for love, but feelings usually formed between spouses over time.

Pik wondered with a touch of bitterness what his wanderlust had cost him.