

Prologue

I found myself immersed in a living painting. Opalescent blues and tans danced a slow waltz with sheets of lightning behind portly trees, knee-deep in dark, blue-green scrub. Rock and adobe buildings with rounded contours shared nearby cliffs or nestled under huge trees, scattered on the hillsides or clustered near streams and lakes. All sang with a peaceful quiet. Only a few tall figures moved along the paths, spiraling their hands at the occasional rider on wheeled craft. Across broad, rust-hued fields leapt huge rabbits, like shaggy giraffes with smiling dog faces.

"They're daramonts, Orram, aren't they?"

My varok nodded and smiled, raising his chiseled brow without looking up from the navigation panel.

The vision faded, but the painting was mine now, a part of me.

"Want me to call up some more memories while Conn's still soaking his gills?"

"I'd love it," I said, easing forward to take Conn's usual seat next to Orram.

"Where shall we go?" he asked. "My past is yours for the reading."

"How about interactions with ahlorok?"

"I'll see what I can remember. Too bad elll brains are so convoluted. Conn could give us some good memories, but they're not easy to access."

"He's told me about his first encounter with ahlorok when he arrived on Varok."

"Oh yes, the ahlorok who was applying to the Concentrate." Orram smiled. "Conn took the brunt of Nidok's rage when he was rejected."

"Conn didn't realize he should not offer a comforting word."

"A comforting insult might have fared better."

"Hold that thought," I said.

Orram raised his chin and pulled his mouth into a thoughtful grin. "I was only one Jovian year old when I encountered my first ahlorc. I had just started work on calculus at the Concentrate . . ." *sitting outside at a table, a bright peach colored sky . . .*

I felt the pen in Orram's young hand sketching a diagram—no, a graph. Suddenly a small whip encircled his wrist. I felt the grip of an ahlorc's prehensile wingtip and heard the strange gargling sound of his rough Varokian words.

"Show me this. Show me this writing, varok."

With his free hand, young Orram pushed five long fingers through his head of silver-streaked bronze hair. *What can I do? The ahlorc could slash me if I don't tell him something. What can he understand?*

"Tell me these lines," the ahlorc demanded. "What are they meaning?"

"I am learning calculus."

"You learn about warts?"

Young Orram laughed, and for a moment nearly went irrational with comingled fear and bemusement. Quickly regaining control, he said, "No, no. It's your brain that has warts. This is mathematics."

The strangled sound of the ahlorc's laugh flooded Orram's memory and filled my mind, overlain with the crackling of chitinous wing plates as the beast took off from the table.

The sounds faded, leaving pleasant traces that merged with the love I knew was in real time, coming from the deepest blue of Orram's eyes.

"Thank you," I said, as his gaze shifted again to the instrument panel.

"We'll do more later, Tan. Tell Conn to put on a wet-sweater and come back to work flying home. He won't want to miss the swing around Jupiter."