





**The**

**Aluminum**

**Quest**

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The following is a work of fiction, any resemblance to any persons, places, things, religious organizations or governmental agencies, living or dead is purely coincidental. You can easily see that the pseudo-arabic is purposefully not arabic, it is a tumor of that language as the religious organization in this tale is a tumor on a real one. Please take them for what they are meant to signify, a malignancy infecting something holy.

This is dedicated to all the innocent Moslem women and children killed in acts of terrorism worldwide. I include among them victims of what governments might call acts of war or repression. May Allah treasure their souls and may evil men of all sides stop their blasphemous butchery.

# The Aluminum Quest

On the planet Kassidor, metal is so rare that every bit is precious and most is used almost exclusively as a medium of exchange. One of the few things even more rare than metal is energy. A metal like aluminum that can only be extracted with large inputs of energy is the most precious of all, and people are likely to do anything and expend any amount of effort to possess it, even in the face of unimaginable danger.

Foreword	A few Notes on the Translation	1
Prolog.	A Visitor's Warning	3
Book I.	Tdeshi's Ghosts	5
Book II.	Four Tons	72
Book III.	Ava's Mission	151
Book IV.	The Ghosts of Narrulla's Tear	218
Book V.	Avenging Angel	284
Book VI.	For Presidente Lula	351
Book VII.	For Heavenly Mother	442
Book VIII.	Untanglements	528
Epilog.	A Battle in Deep Space	621



North  
Durlagar  
Waste

Icewind  
Waste

Salvador

Basin

Northlands

Kugenzglaw

Eizigor

North Lake

Skizzak Desert

Egaiga

Dolostel

Zharvai

Entisonggass

Zortone

Atirith

Chessamishaw

Kodestone

Black  
Forest

Norailian Arm

Fmalif

Norail

Toran

Equator

South  
Durlagar  
Waste

Pentuush Waste

Westlands

Eastlands

Center Lake

New  
Midlands

Equator

Esterain

Kassidor Yakhan

Dromedian Arm

Mholyra

Azhergok

Chingor

Tunnel of Cys Ungor

Amersahm

Elbain Crater Arm

Tunnel Utrae

Tunnel Hamel

Tunnel of Lazheer East

Daggareth

Bellora

Old  
Lands

1000 Miles

Golibar Waste

Gengee Arm

Gorazai

Gengee City

The  
Gengee

Dels Balneh

Daggareth

Aroonador

Kleggain Tunnel

Kleggain

Arm

Kleggain Block

Lumpral Basin

Tunnel of Uvon Mahsk

Toumda Arm

Polar  
Troll  
Waste

Dos  
Basin

Kinsheeta

Waste

Kyeb  
Basin

# Foreword

## A Few Notes on the Translation

As well as the standard Kassidorian translations, the following terms are part of the vocabulary of the simulated humans who know the truth of their existence.

- Cheron** Silicon configured to simulate a nerve cell in a cherub. These simulations do not derive from a former mortal soul and are controlled by simulated humans who are copied from a former mortal soul. They have lower protection levels and different accounting schemes.
- Veron** Circuitry configured to simulate a neuron in a soul captured from a mortal.
- Personification** The image a soul presents to the other souls it interacts with. In some simulated societies there are limitations placed on what a personification looks like. On formal occasions only certain looks are allowed in many societies. Personification code runs in both Veron and Cheron space.



## Prolog - A Visitor's Warning

Near the pyramid's point, he was about to turn in. It was deep in the chill of Dawnsleep already and the business of a founder is never done. But in spite of all the ways he had augmented himself, he still needed sleep, and he still had eternity to get tomorrow's work done. It was too cold for him to go to his bed without a body stocking. Even though his wealth allowed him all the fuel he wanted, he would not be a drain on the world's resources. Any who had lived thru the Fall were extremely sensitive of that. As he dons the body stocking, one can see his white hair and beard are all that show of his thirty plus centuries. He was already in that stocking when a lovely maiden came in the room and whispered a message.

He was a little disappointed that her message meant she would leave and wouldn't be spending the sleep with him, but the person she announced was an important member of the staff and might be an interesting companion also. "Of course, send her right in," Keithying said. He was surprised that she was here, he hadn't thought she was in town.

He waits only seconds till a tall, dark-haired and elegant woman stands before him. She's dressed in a twill nightcoat and leggings, but her hair flows free. "Sorry about the hour sir," she said.

"Ava," he said, "It's good to see you any time. I heard you were North?" He wondered if she had borrowed a floater again.

"You know what they say about what you hear," she said with a mischievous smile, "but I have been taking some time off."

"Glad you're around, would you care to stay?"

"No I can't, I'm already committed."

"Somewhere in the neighborhood?" Keithying questioned. Decades ago, when she was first brought down from the Angels, she had stayed in Althart's quarters quite a bit.

"No, no, not at all. I just have a favor to ask,"

"If I may?" he said.

"That warning you got from Herndon," she paused. Perfect memory was only one of the myriad mental enhancements he carried, he saw a copy of the note in his mind as she spoke. "Please

take it seriously, but don't, and I mean this, don't rely on him because he loves that ship too much."

If anyone should know, she should. She and Herndon had been lovers for decades when the people in flesh first arrived from YingolNeerie. "But if what he says is true," Keithying asked, "what other hope do we have?"

"We have my sister," she said, "and our own wits and people."

He started to approach her, but she backed off. "You know more don't you?" he asked.

"I have to go," she said, obviously nervous. Her nightcoat swirled and she was gone, as if she had been but a flashback or was still a ghost. Even so, he was inclined to heed the warning, his operative with Herndon agreed.

Speaking of operatives, he should find out why he wasn't informed of Ava's return to the city. He tried to know the whereabouts of all the visitors from the war world at all times. Recalling that note and having it re-enforced in this way would keep him from sleep, but there was nothing he could do at this time of the week. With the dawn he would have to request a report from whoever was supposed to be tracking Ava. He'd have to find out what she knew and how.

# Book I.

## Tdeshi's Ghosts

### 1. The Bead in the Sandal

Jorma beheld a world of blue and orange-kissed white, the sweeping blue expanse of the lake and the gleaming white of the snow sticking to every branch, glowing orange in the dawn. It was week Kyebenwae and after six weeks, winter was finally starting to abate. Only a few inches of gentle snow had fallen this past Dawnsleep, leaving all the shaftwoods coated with white, looking like fingers of frost on the stained glass of the lake.

"How pretty," Venna said, pressing herself warmly to his back, "and how beautifully silent."

Just as she said that a large clump of snow fell from the noodle tree with a loud rumble on the leaves of the roof. In spite of the snow, Kortrax brought warmth and that tree was already pushing forth its leaves for the light. "So much for silent," he said.

She laughed, "Lets go in and get some breakfast. It's still too cold to be out here like this." She was still nude, something she truly loved.

"Sure," he said, "That workout we just had is enough to give a guy major hunger."

She giggled again and rubbed her chest against his back once more before going inside. He had already donned a full length worker, but there was wet snow on the deck and his feet were starting to protest aggressively. He followed her trim body and billow of orange curls thru the door only a few steps behind. She slipped into the same thick-knit wrap she had on the day they met. That was back when he and Ava went down to the Yakhan to follow Tdeshi's trail, the trail that lead him to Venna.

Venna was all the adventure Tdeshi had ever been and then some. At least as enthusiastic, at least as sexy, with an even better figure and all the social skills but a more genuine manner. She had become instantly popular around town, especially here on north island. Finding Venna on the way to the Yakhan was at least as

good as finding Tdeshi in Ava would have been. He now knew that could never happen, that body would forever remain under Ava's control.

Venna had taken the lead in cooking in their partnership, leaving him with most of the garden chores. This garden was big enough that he had only been over to his own place enough to see that it wasn't vandalized and that the neighbors still knew he claimed it. He should start a cash crop that needed little care over there next week. It might net him a couple irons and make the place look occupied. There had been lean times in Sinbara before and everyone remembered when property had been abandoned as people left for the deeps. Two thousand miles to the east the former seabed was now a fertile prairie and was reclaiming many of those who had come up here during the 40's as that sea dried out.

Times were not that bad in Sinbara today if one had land. Between he and Venna they owned over four acres. Venna bought this home from Ava, the scientist from the Yakhan who had taken over Tdeshi's body after she OD'd on Shonggot.

"Can you get me a few onion shoots?" she asked, "I think I saw some up last week. They'll be frozen but fresher than these."

He went out to the garden, there were a few up above the snow that remained. They had already melted and slumped, but they were a nice bright green and didn't feel slimy yet so he brought them inside. "The plant won't be needing this anyway," he said.

"That's fine," she said, she had already matted some thesh for patter-mats.

He rolled up the night mats from the windows and cleared some paperwork off the table. Venna had been going over the paperwork Ava had left with this house. There was a property map and some soil studies. Ava wasn't a farmer by nature but she had pursued it with scientific zeal for the season she lived here.

There was a whole stack of folders, it looked like some of Ava's old notes, flow charts and stuff like that. Some of it was in Yingolian, Ava had studied that. He left the farming science that Venna was looking at on top and put the remainder back in the box, then put the lock box back up on one of the strap-up rafter shelves that made up the kitchen ceiling. He got out their plates. Jorma

never had to bring his over, Ava had left one here and Venna had bought one when she first got off the little packet that brought them up the point from Bhangyon.

Venna was thrilled by the beauty of north island and the rope footbridge that connected it to the other end of the waterfront. When Jorma informed her that the home she bought was on the country side of that island she jumped in the air and shrieked. When they passed Dolidites Glasswares and she saw the plate with that photograph in it, she had to have it, even though it was an iron and forty five. So she used that ever since and he used the plate Ava left with the house.

Ava bought the gas stove in this house but he installed it. With all the gnarlberry twig that fell of its own accord, he might go back to that if he had to do any expensive work on the methane digester. It had a thick maintenance manual that he would read when he needed to. But right now, it worked fine and enabled Venna to spin around with a couple patter-mats already toasted. "You got anything you haven't unpacked yet?" she asked.

"My summer shorts and sandals. They're on top of my cabinet upstairs. I might even be able to get those out this Afternooday." They had bought this house from Ava when they were still in the Yakhan. They had reached Sinbara just as winter set in.

"It's about time," she said. "I thought this was the near north, not the far north."

"It is, it got above freezing every week. It got above sixty degrees for at least a few hours every Afternooday but Kivundeer."

"Yeah, yeah, but it's more different from the winter in Zharvai than the winter in Zharvai is from the winter in the Yakhan."

Jorma knew that the point of the pyramid is just under two hundred miles from the equator, they had been in its shadow only a year and a half ago. "But Zharvai overlooks the deep and we are two hundred seventy miles over water but have only three miles of air above us. The lake is what draws winter down to us." When people spoke of 'miles of air', they meant air that could sustain human life. Jorma was not a scientist but he was self taught from centuries of reading and knew that there was thin air for at least

another hundred miles above the ground, but it would not sustain life.

"Those are some long miles that distance is made from," she said.

"These are really good by the way," he said, wishing she wasn't right because he was well aware that Sinbara was more seasonal than Egaiga, almost a thousand miles farther north but on the other side of the lake. He was embarrassed for his town's climate, this year more than most, and ready to change the subject.

"It's the thesh," she said with her mouth full, "And that griddle she left us. It's crystal you know, not just glass."

"I knew that from before. I did stay here with Ava the better part of a year." Almost as long as he stayed with Tdeshi.

Venna giggled, making her tangle of red curls shake and her thin dusting of freckles stretch. Ava was nowhere near interested in enough sex for Jorma, while he wasn't interested in quite enough for Venna. That was OK, they both liked to socialize and if she had to socialize twice as much as he did, oh well. "So you already know everything about this house?"

"I know it handles a mild winter better than a bad one," he said. "But you know you just might have got lucky when you were in Zharvai. Yeah it's a little warmer, but when we have a bad winter, they have one that's worse than when we have a good winter."

"What is a good winter like here?"

"This Dawnsleep was as bad as it gets all winter. The winter before we met was warm. You wind up getting annoyed when it doesn't get better but stays like this for week after week. A couple hours of high sixties, low seventies, maybe as many as seven. I also think there was a climate phase boundary the dusk we met." It had been a freakishly cold Dusksleep, at least as cold as the following Dawnsleep.

"Can it do that all year?" she asked.

"No, the good news is, we get a true summer, not like the Yakhan where it can snow any week of the year. I've never seen it snow from Iyosaign all the way thru Chezhervizhod. Well, once in my memory it snowed in Zawmathii."

"So we could be done?" she asked. "I'm looking forward to that."

"We could go deep, another mile down it doesn't snow at these latitudes."

"It's pretty here, I really should stop complaining."

"You wanted to come." She had just ended a relationship and wanted to get away. He worried that she would soon regret it, sell this cabin facing North Lake and sail back to the Yakhan. He worried that she was already getting bored with life here.

"I didn't think we were going to Kugenzglaw."

That was the big city fourteen hundred miles north, two thirds of the way to the far northern end of the lake, a New Nordic stronghold of almost eight million where it could snow every week and snow lay thru the week during winter in the hills just outside the city. People in that rugged land relish snow and slide downhill on long trails of it with sticks. The climate there was so much different than here that it was used only as a joke and he uttered the requisite polite chuckle.

He went on to talk about the things he thought he should get done in the garden this Afternoonday. She wanted to take a walk down to the beach so he talked her into doing it this Morningday in spite of the lingering snow.

By the time they were done with breakfast and clean-up, Kortrax was up and orange with the swirls on his face just coming into max this part of the decade, making him hope next winter would be milder. The snow was dripping from everything, sparkling and filling the air with the sound of drops. Their path thru the gnarl-berries was shaded in early Morningday however, and slippery. He couldn't imagine trying to get down here riding a stick or even two like some of those crazy Vikings up in Kugenzglaw. They had to hold the brush and each other in the slush as they climbed down the steep bluff to the lakeshore. Here there was a lagoon they had to skirt, its ice far too thin this week to take them, even if they had been here for mid Dawnsleep.

A knob of the bluff extended to the lakeshore and they were able to reach the beach from that. From here a long spit of beach cordoned off the lagoon from the open lake on one side, a narrow

channel separated them from a glorified sandbar of an island on the other. The whole lagoon had a sandy bottom with a few clumps of bluestar growing up thru it. It was home to some rainbow flying fish who were still trapped under the thin film of ice that remained. Their young were darting around their mouths in supplication but the parents could not yet get to the lake to feed.

Venna broke the ice, scattering them, but moments later the adults began to emerge from the water, flying quickly over the sandbar and out over the lake in search of plankton blooms. He could see the hangleaves unfolding, they had thrown off the snow long ago and their fronds were unrolling as they returned from the desiccation of the dark. In a matter of an hour the line of forest on the inland side of the lagoon had been turned from a gigantic thicket of hooked sticks to majestic trees with long deep-green fronds swaying in the breeze.

The snow was almost gone from the beach already. The snow must have fallen early in Dawnsleep because the tide was higher then. On this end of North Lake the tide is high just after high noon and mid-dark, just after dawn and dusk it is low. It was not yet building toward high, just barely beyond the dawn low at this time of the week. There was a three foot band of sand free of snow above the reach of the waves. They walked that corridor.

"You can use those sandals here this Afternoonday." she said.

"I need to get the garden started, it's Kyebenwae already."

"You're such a realist."

"If anything splits us, I think it will be that, my boring addiction to reality." They were still new to each other, and spoke of their future together often. Her personality was enough like Tdeshi's that he expected her to be as flighty.

"Oh you're not too addicted. I know what you mean and that's why we're here now." She reached out and touched the water of the next wave to come toward them, letting it pass around her boots as she did. "Does this get warm in the summer?" she asked. Winter boots had been one of her first purchases here.

"By late summer, Chezhervizhod or so, you can stand it, but the water in the lagoon will get warm by tomorrow. You can still swim in the lagoons as late as Imnotn."

"Not now. At least the lake isn't frozen."

"The open lake hasn't had a fleck of ice on it south of Eizigor since it was topped off." Eizigor was three hundred something miles south of Kugenzglaw down the west shore of North Lake.

They walked the length of the beach. Venna was new to the area so this was her first look at the shore of North Island, on Morningday of the first hope of spring. It's a mile and a half to the end of the spit and they ambled slowly. From the end of the spit it is less than a mile across to the West Harbor neighborhood of Sinbara, a gentle slope covered with town homes the first few blocks from the docks and small holdings just big enough to eat from after that. They could see the upper branches of his house from here, it was one of those small holdings.

"I'm thinking of selling it," he said, after showing her which one it was.

"Why? What would you do with the money?"

"I'd like to put up a little camp down by the lagoon for the summer. Nothing like Ava talked about, just a fireplace, a bed with screens and a little privy. I think it would be nice to hang out down there on Afternoondays. We could clear enough space for a party."

"I thought you wanted a boat?"

"Ah, I don't think my place is worth enough money to get much of a boat. Maybe a trampoline racer or something like that."

"That would be fun."

"Only if we had that camp. I'd be afraid to leave it all by itself down there."

"What's a freshwater privy cost around here?"

"A couple coppers," he said. "I'd want plank for the floors but I could go with a plastic roof. I'd rather plank that too so we wouldn't have to take it down in the winter."

"If you want to close it in, we could probably sell the house up there."

"I don't think I'd want to go thru a winter down on the lake with nothing but plank over me. I'm just talking about a two sleep summer camp. We might do a few Noonsleeps in the winter." I wasn't thinking of springing for wall mats."

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