

## **Excerpt from *DEAD HEROES*** (page 22 in the print version)

... Gamion sang a melodious, commanding tone. The amphitheater quieted until only the swell of Gamion's voice could be heard. He faded his opener with lively modulation, drew a deep breath, then spoke, "My friends." Sensors transmitted his soft, aged speech throughout the open-air theater. He smiled and turned his head as though he could really see everyone. Gamion had been blind for decades, although many people said he had been that way since birth. The irreversible condition seemed to have enhanced his advancement and he was a positive model for every generation. "Good people of County Two and their friends. I wish you well, and thank you for coming. I should have done this long ago."

Only the last two months had found Gamion in the park at half-sessions and month's end, telling tidbits of history and anecdotes from his varied experiences. He was one of New Esrii's oldest citizens and also high ranking, with an MAR of 79. He held two medical degrees, was a Master Scholar Elite in nine fields and a Sage in three.

"Little ones who sit at my feet bringing me sweet things to eat and smell, I thank you. And as for your requests, I wish I could fill them all, but I'll do my best to tell the stories most want to hear." He drew his staff in front of him to lean on. "Tonight's tale has been handed down from the long ago."

Sinoa hoped he would tell more adventures from before True Insight. Nathan's shoulder pressed against hers. *Tell of the time of dissension.* Sinoa frowned, certain that was Nathan's thought. How could she know his thoughts—as if he were a family member?

"Long ago in the space of our original sun," Gamion began, "Earth people settled on different worlds during the second migration, and were often at odds with one another. Whenever something went wrong in the space colonies the people would turn to the Esrii clusters for advice; our people have always been astute in medicine and environmental management. But when all Earth signals died, leaving the colonies on their own, the others blamed the Esrii clusters for the tragedy."

Sinoa thought this monologue much too serious for an evening in the park. Everyone learned the old history during their third year of primary school.

"Our scholars had predicted that Earth would fail, and many believed we had somehow influenced the problem. Persecution began and many of our resources were taken; we were forced to flee the colony system in order to preserve what we had and our beliefs." Gamion paused and straightened in his chair. He cocked his head.

Sinoa's arm grew hot where it touched Nathan's; dizziness washed her with odd images and flowing colors. Stunned, she stepped away. The strange feeling ebbed. This had happened on Krellanon, too. The few times they had touched struck her like an electrical impulse, and once Nathan's green eyes held to hers with such intensity she was smothered with waves of trembling. She rubbed her arm and listened to Gamion's gentle voice.

"The threat from beyond was all around—," Gamion said, then he sat for a moment before speaking in the ancient tongue of the old ones. "*Ste trait orf beyoun as...*"

*"...ill aroun o mode is atwa chen cauz,"* Sinoa heard Nathan whispering with Gamion.

Nathan was calm, staring, trance-like. Sinoa glanced around. No one else seemed to have heard Nathan saying the words he couldn't know. Maybe she imagined it. She looked back toward the stage. Gamion's bluish stare moved over the audience to Sinoa's location. He raised his hand as though feeling something in the air. "But perhaps this isn't of yesterday," he continued. "Maybe it's of tomorrow and the time when Lambda2 will come upon us and burn our planets, leaving dry, ugly scars. You all think of that as a bad thing, yet there is—" he seemed dazed, his voice astounded—"there is another crisis! It will surpass even the Lambda Apex."

A child whimpered. A man called out. "Sage, you're frightening the children."

"We're all children," he replied. "So little we know." The air became charged as in an electrical storm and Gamion stayed transfixed; the crowd remained breathless and tense.

"We've come to hear good things," another voice rang. Hushed speculation began in the audience. "Treat us with a poem or two!"

"Give us a Hushra Song of Find from the second century," a woman respectfully sang.

Silence.

Nathan sagged a bit, and on seeing his paleness, alarm overshadowed Sinoa's reluctance to touch him. "Nathan," she whispered as she steadied him. "Nathan!" He blinked. His shoulders slumped and he drew a deep breath.

"Ahhh!" came Gamion's voice.

Sinoa jerked to where the old scholar seemed to awaken from his trance. "Ah, yes. You want to hear nice things, only things of pleasure." Gamion's voice grew angry. "We have become a threat to ourselves. We strive for perfection and in the process kill off much of our strength. We are growing weak! And I haven't time to add to that weakness. I will tell no stories this evening."

He lurched to his feet and turned toward the exit. A Prep student rushed forward to aid him. The youngsters of the audience crooned for him to come back, while scholars seemed stupefied by the sudden end to the evening's festivities. Sinoa heard comments of dismay at the Sage's actions, and some grumbled that Gamion was near his expiration, and even the Seminary chambers couldn't rejuvenate him.

Nathan pushed Sinoa toward the outer edge of the theater and the transfer cubicle that would take Gamion to his vehicle. She hurried in that direction, grateful for Nathan's sudden alertness. Gamion was off the stage now, heading toward the T-cube. His aide called for CO crowd management while people pressed near the old scholar, asking questions.

"Sage! Most Honored Master Scholar Gamion!" Nathan's call was lost in the harangue. Sinoa moved toward the clot of people who surrounded Gamion. "Sage Gamion!" The pitch of Nathan's voice overcame other sounds.

The old man stopped, alert. Nathan rushed ahead of Sinoa in an effort to reach him, only to be blocked by a CO that rolled by with its continual order to be peaceable.

"Who called for me?" Gamion asked. "There was someone."

"Here, Sage. It is I. Nathan from County-Three."

The CO moved on and the old scholar made his way to them. "You! I know you," Gamion declared. His free hand reached from under his cape and his fingertips examined Nathan's face, felt his hair and shoulders. His bright smile faded. "But...No."

Sinoa felt an infusion of Nathan's excitement.

"Most Learned One," Nathan made a low bow. "I would be honored if you would allow me some of your time." His student's tone was filled with respect.

Gamion turned his head a bit. It was as if they were in private audience, so still had the bystanders become. Gamion's hand went again to Nathan's shoulder and rested there, the old fingers squeezing slightly. "I am tired. They don't want to listen."

"But *I* will listen. Tell me, Sage, of this time when our people are disparate." Nathan's voice was a near whisper and Sinoa felt a certain agony from him.

"I sense someone with you," Gamion said. "Who is it?"

"Sinoa, of your city," Sinoa replied. "From Zaya Glen and Paul Berklin."

"Ah, yes...Zaya. I recognize a similar pattern. And again, my boy. What is your name? Who are your parents?"

Nathan's face grew solemn as he fingered his ID.

"I am Nathan, Great Scholar. An AG ward of S.E. Ricostam Deece."

Sinoa thought she might melt from pure astonishment.

The old man nodded. "An AG," he said in an amazed tone. Making an abrupt turn, he said, "I must go," and hurried off. The crowd closed around him.

Nathan's thought came clearly to Sinoa: "*I didn't think he would be that way.*" She was trying to decide a reply—trying not to stare at Nathan to find some physical flaw that would mark him as an AG—when Gamion's voice came above the crowd.

"Nathan. How old are you?"

"I am two months past twenty-four, Sage." Nathan leaned forward, expectant of further conversation. The honored scholar seemed more alert, his sightless eyes directed at Nathan, then he walked away.

In the hot Sol twilight, Sinoa lifted her surrey from the parking deck. Nathan's distress had been acute and she had convinced him to follow her to a quiet place, not wanting him to be alone. Leaving the city's major traffic lanes, she recognized his vehicle behind hers by its alternating segment of missing rim lights, leaving him with only one more than the minimum requirement. He had told her that he wanted to see how many citations he would get for this non-violation. She wished she hadn't remembered his curious trait for pushing the rules. The strange occurrences in the park had her tense enough as it was.

*Nathan is an AG—born from Astral Genesis.*

She adjusted her flight. Events from earlier in the day returned, from when one of her students had maliciously taunted, "Aggies have no parents!" She also recalled words from the unexpected interview with the varsity scholar: "Have you a partiality for the AGs?"

She landed her vehicle in a small valley, miles from the city on the border of County

Seven. She and Nathan departed their crafts as the setting sun etched the Mahliun mountain range in bright yellow. Lambda2 was three hours from rising and the moon cast bright light onto their surroundings. When Sinoa looked at the moon, she was certain she could see sunlight glinting from the gold honey-combed roof of the Advancement Complex. The AdComp encompassed more than three thousand acres of moonscape.

No wind, so they took off their visored hats and strolled through the parched area. Nathan said nothing. They sat on the bank of a dry stream bed. The floury soil roiled orange around their feet and the land beneath was cracked to mosaics. Sinoa stalled her own questions by talking about the classical percussion ensemble that had begun playing as soon as Gamion left the park.

“You didn’t know I was an AG,” he stated.

“No, but what does that matter?”

“I think that’s one reason Scholar Elite Glen, doesn’t want me at the Hushra Seminary.”

“Zaya certainly wouldn’t have feelings against AGs,” she said. “She’s often worked in the harnessing towers.”

“I must admit, you haven’t reacted as I feared.”

“Reacted? I don’t understand, Nathan. Aren’t you a bit paranoid?”

He frowned and spread his hands before her, palms up. “This is the flaw you were looking for. I’m surprised you never noticed while we worked on Krellanon.”

On each hand, the last three fingers were webbed up to the top knuckle, looking almost like some nearly-healed med repair.

“I also have a large mole in a place it would be unseemly to show you,” he said with a smirk.

Sinoa looked away from his fingers. If a Sigen child had developed with this mark, his parents would have authorized correction; but AGs have no parents.

Nathan lurched to his feet and began pacing. “The war. It all has to do with the war, I’m sure of it.”

Sinoa knew he didn’t mean the blemishes. “What?” She frowned. “Sage Gamion was possibly going to tell about a—a war, or are you referring to the second century before the government was stable?”

“No, not pirate tales.” He stopped before her. “Your elders probably call it the conflict or deception. We went to the inner sector and fought the...the Yivenese.”

The mysterious word conjured vague thoughts about creatures of the inner sector. Unenlightened, they were called.

“I’ve been trying to learn more, but my sponsor, Ricostam, won’t acknowledge my questions. I know he could have been involved. Anyone over ninety surely remembers it. But all information is stored in the Hall of Memories. I can’t access that because I’m not a student any more.” He was pacing again.

“Why would you want to know about that anyway?”

“Why not? Doesn’t the concept intrigue you?”

Sinoa’s curiosity *had* been nudged, but she told Nathan, “We’ll learn about it when

we get to the proper level of academics.”

“Oh, sure,” he said. “And who determines what’s proper? Why aren’t we taught this now, along with mining development and advancement of flight theory? Most of what we learn is mathematics, automation and circuitry. Very little history, no theoretic introspection. Very few pleasuring arts, like drawing and sculpture or music, are allowed people our age.”

Sinoa’s pulse raced, stunned by his outburst. She stood up, thinking she should leave.

“And how many people could pick up those old books and read them?” he continued. “What we speak is far different from even five centuries ago, not to mention the lost languages of our ancestors. What we read is truncated—sparse—just enough to make our bench work easy.”

“But don’t you know some old language?”

“That’s why I want to go to a Seminary,” he said, “to study philology and to get my M.D. in chamber research and advanced meta—”

“But don’t you know a few words?” She remembered Nathan murmuring old words in the park. “Maybe some your elder, Scholar Ricostam, has used.”

“He doesn’t know old languages, either. But everyone knows a few old words, like *Hushra ud Hedor*—Unity and Advancement.” He looked at her with a slight smile. “Or *alas dua acama*.”

Sinoa repeated the unfamiliar words, puzzled. Nathan laughed. “It’s an old phrase, often used in the non-junction cities.”

“NJC’s, huh? I can imagine what that phrase might mean.” She preferred this conversation to the arguments he had just tossed out. They started walking. “Do you get to NJCs often?”

“Just Bavish. What about you?”

She leaned against a tree trunk. The limbs above were dry and bare. “I went to Southside for the first time during the last recess. It was quite overwhelming.”

“Did you have fun?” he asked.

“Well, let’s say I was satisfied, but I’ll stick with the dalliers of my own city.” His face and eyes were very dark in the dim light under the trees, but she could feel his gaze. A slight wind rasped the branches; a small animal chittered in the distance. Nathan drew his fingers along her arm and her thoughts scattered.

“*Alas dua acama*,” he said.

“You haven’t told me what that means,” she said, feeling too close to him.

“It means, let’s go to bed.”

Sinoa blinked, trying to control her nervousness. “Must you always break the rules?” She stepped away from him. “Until Partnership, intercourse with anyone other than a Term is—”

“Who said anything about intercourse?” He laughed.

“But—”

“You just interpreted it that way. I merely spoke three words. You were the one who put meaning to them.”

She shook her head. "I'm foolish to be out here with you. You talk about things beyond you, question the system, suggest illegal activities." She stalked out of the woods. "I must be unsettled."

Nathan jogged to catch her. "Our culture is stifled by rules and taboos."

"Rules create order. And order allows the tranquility we need to achieve and to understand True Insight."

"In theory, that's true. Our system is honorable and worthy, but it's flawed, Sinoa. I want to scream at the scholars, 'Look, can't you see!' I want to make it right, but it takes more than one person. And anyone who shows a little individuality is cast aside."

As with you entering the Seminary, she thought. This is all about his frustration over that.

"No. I'm not just thinking of myself," he said.

"Oh, Nathan!" She clenched her fists. "You read my thoughts!"

"I can't seem to help myself."

"My thoughts are my own," she stated and hurried on. "You have no right—" She wondered if she had read his thoughts earlier—very unintentional, but...

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that," he said, staying beside her. "Soon something is going to happen to get us back on track," he continued as they reached her surrey. "And it scares me, Sinoa. It truly does."

She looked at him, surprised by his tone. "You have prescient skill?"

"A bit."

By his weary look and the troubled vibrations she felt from him, she knew it was more than a bit. Her sibling Dannel, whose prescience was very good, exhibited the same tension at times. Nathan drew a long breath, throwing off the negatives she had just felt. She opened her surrey hatch.

Above them, the white rim lights of a surrey drew their attention, and they watched the low-flying vehicle speed toward the outliers.

"Aerobatics," Sinoa stated, thinking of the way she and Nathan both liked to use free spaces to push their vehicles through various maneuvers.

But this surrey didn't change speed or pull up. Light flared as it crashed into a hillside a few miles away.

"Great Timahrt!" Nathan exclaimed.

Sinoa gasped, her hand at her throat. "What should we do?"

"Look. There's a traffic CO," Nathan said, indicating a speeding vehicle with official cobalt-blue rim lights.

Sinoa's breathing came easier. "Timahrt help them. I wonder who it was?"

"Someone tired. Overworked by the rugged schedule most people have," Nathan responded. "I heard that the use of public solace rooms and chairs has trebled in the last two months."

They stood in the hot night and watched the official vehicle go to the area of the crash. The CO would report the accident, put out the conflagration, call a med if needed. The yellow burning subsided and vanished.

Nathan turned to her. "You be careful...Very, very careful."

"And you," she said, pleased by his caring.

They each got into their surreys and after she closed her hatch, her com light came on. Pressing the tab, she smiled at the sound of Nathan's voice. "I'll call you," he said.

She waved, doubting that he could see her through all the dust the motors kicked up. When they were airborne, he flew beside her for a while, not communicating, but she liked his being there. He turned his vehicle away, moving higher and to the north. She watched him leave, wondering when she'd next speak with him and hoping it would be soon.