

# JAKUB HUSSAR: 0Tu Vol. 1

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## Prologue

I hover above the extraction pit. Haze is descending.

Lately, I have not been feeling well. As time passes, I am devoured by loneliness.

I see my sons only rarely. They miss their father...

Poor boys, life will not be kind to them.

I inhale the vapors, the filters hissing with effort. The acrid air uncomfortably burns in my nostrils. In the distance I hear the unintelligible echoes of commands.

Somewhere below booms an explosion, sending a shiver up the railing. Dense clouds flicker on the horizon - another metal storm is blowing in from the mountains. The extraction machines will need to be taken off line again.

I avert my eyes. To this day, looking up at the dome triggers wide illness. It is time to return to my chambers and finally commence circling.

A scholar once said: *Always turn a shard in your palm twice before you grind it into dust.*

Perhaps that is why I delayed creating this log for so long. But the emotions have faded, and the only thing left behind is an old woman's unbending mind.

I am prepared to share my story with you. I will tell you about the long and arduous journey to Coraab. About the incredible courage of the Tals, but also about destruction, madness, and death.

Tal Kusa-Gammah

24 Tu

## Book 1: MAGGA (-61 Tu – -52 Tu)

### 1. The magrav

In my childhood, the magrav *Oona* seemed immense. To this day, I delight in remembering the luxurious life onboard its stern decks where I spent most of my fleeting early years.

I still recall the exact scent of my bivaq. Within its walls I masterminded endless mischief – before lights out, I would intentionally slip out of my sleep harness, or, with delight, smear the sensors with mud smuggled from the greenhouse to ensure that my conversations with my colorful *Ku* figurines would not reach uninitiated ears. I was a lively and energetic child whose highborn status did not avert regular and deserved punishments.

One day, my parents introduced me to my first tutor. Old Izzel was a mild and forgiving woman, who supplemented her lectures with enthralling real-world examples that aided my understanding. Whenever I struggled with a new concept, she reminded me of the benefit of time, as impatience rarely brought anything of value. I secretly called Izzel “Skelly Legs” due to her grotesquely emaciated extremities, but I never dared to call her by that name to her face.

In retrospect, I cherish every moment I spent with Mother Wa in our impeccably kept greenhouses. It was she who inspired my life-long interest in all living things, teaching me how best to care for the shrubs of jemge fruit or how to multiply our livestock. We called our regular sessions “schochts,” during which we shared wide ranging gossipy stories. Mother Wa was a fascinating woman.

Time passed, and I noticed certain differences between me and the other women who inhabited the elite decks of the Talion. True, at an early age my parents had my nose pierced, and I wore a sparkly jewel. But I found no interest in my peers’ vain and endless chatter about body beautification techniques. Already as a child, I preferred to listen to adult debates about governance and politics, even though I rarely understood them. When I confessed my favorite pastime to GrandMother Amh, she looked at me with concern and sternly reminded me that there was plenty of time for such things.

Life on the Talion’s decks consisted of an endless stream of functions and rituals. Today, it would be difficult to name all the ceremonies which we carried out with such ironclad regularity. Of the more notable events, I would mention the *Tu Nudura* festival. The ritual fast lasted the entire day of light. With the coming of haze, the Talion’s inhabitants gathered for a communal dripping of saturated water. *Tu Nudura* concluded only when all throats – ours and our staff’s – were refreshed by buroten.

## 2. Tu Nudura

The half-year festival offered a welcome opportunity to meet new Talion faces with whom I would otherwise not cross paths. I already knew some of those present. Gracefully swaying by the hall's entrance was Vorcal, the commander of our vigil unit, whose skintight armor and grimly confident visage I had always admired. Mother Wa was deep in conversation with quartermaster Kaskan, whose quick tongue in many respects outshone its competitors in the mouths of talkative tal women. The serious chief gravmaster Baap Map was new to me, a stocky tal with a pronounced black *khe* spiral stretching across his round face. Baap Map looked nervous, his deep-set sharp eyes darting around the feast hall, and he regularly bolstered his courage by surreptitious drops of buroten.

The melodious gong of the ship's interware announced the end of the *Oona*'s day of light, and the present tals –in accordance with tradition– took turns circling themselves to honor their Lords. Though the day of haze had just begun, Oibaan kept gravity in its usual parameters. I held our protector in deep respect, knowing full well that, without his careful oversight, the *Oona* would descend into ungovernable chaos. The interware turned down the lights, and the excited guests headed to their seats, assigned according to a strict hierarchy.

During *Tu Nudura*, Father tended to become especially intolerable, as generous doses of buroten accentuated his character infirmities. While children were allowed saturated water in strictly regulated amounts, adult Tals on similar occasions indulged with abandon. In their defense I must add that older members of House Kusa had since time immemorial strictly condemned wasteful overuse of buroten, and therefore often extended their fast by several days. Perhaps that was why the oldest Tal present was my Father, Tal Kusa-Nakat, who ostentatiously enjoyed his privilege.

Loud and crass, Nakat constantly drew attention to himself. Not surprisingly, his celebratory speech failed to inspire much joy in tal hearts. Limiting himself to a vague string of required phrases, he eventually finished his speech with the following utterance:

“Let us circle ourselves in recognition of the harmony in which we live with each other, which others would envy. We are boring through the infinity of exospace like maggots through soft soil, though we differ from maggots in many important ways. A maggot aims to find the closest juicy tuber – our fleet continues on its preordained path in hopes of finding our fated tuber in the distant future.”

Father's blathering made little sense, but lower tals nonetheless nodded in muted appreciation. At that point gravmaster Baap Map gathered his courage and said out loud over the uncertain clinking of goblets:

"Let us venerate the *Tu Nudura* holiday, as the next Tu glances over the ridge. May the chief gravmaster speak?"

Nakat ostentatiously dripped some buroten and proclaimed:

"The chief gravmaster may always speak, everywhere. I welcome each day when I can behold your furrowed brow and hear your melodious tune about coordinates and machines."

Polite laughter acknowledged Nakat's convoluted speech, but Baap Map's face remained stern:

"My words are only for the ears of House Kusa, my Lord of Extraction. I will not keep you longer than absolutely necessary."

The other members of House Kusa exchanged surprised looks and one by one moved to the salon next door, humbly followed by the chief gravmaster. In the door, Father turned:

"Perhaps it is time to bring little Gama as well."

I was surprised, considering that Father Nakat rarely showed me any kindness. But I ascribed this gesture to the plentiful buroten that was flowing into Father's mouth at a steady trickle.

We settled into deep, comfortably upholstered sofas of a small but sumptuously appointed conference room. It was the very first time that I visited these surprisingly cramped quarters of the Boroa-Tal. Its walls and ceiling were intricately patterned, and I recognized numerous flowers from our greenhouses – the beautiful blooms of jemge shrubs, the climbing bodra, and the poisonous tylok. The color scheme was dominated by tyrian purple and amber, the traditional colors of our House.

Even as everyone settled comfortably, chief gravmaster Baap Map began:

"A few moments ago, we received troubling news from the next furrow, from our guild brothers on the magrav *Rybbt*."

The room filled with unsettled murmurs. The festive mood was gone. Nakat nervously dabbed at his wet chin.

"Gmons," whispered Mother Wa. "What has happened? Do not make us wait, Baap Map. Cut to the heart of the matter."

Baap Map carefully weighed his words, his eyes darting between Mother Wa and the other women in the room. That made my cousin Pula perk up. She pulled on auntie's Noyar's shoulder:

"Gmons? Don't we buy clothes from them, mother?"

Noyar began chiding Pula for her bad manners, but Mother Wa was undeterred:

"Please, Map, continue. Give voice to the words our ears need to hear."

Baap Map took a deep breath and said:

"The Gmon ship was struck by an unknown illness. Hundreds of tals are dying, thousands will no doubt soon follow. I fear that the *Rybbt* is irrevocably lost. I have received this information from two of my guild brothers who serve onboard. The younger brother is already infected, and his prognosis is not good."

At the end, Baap Map's voice faltered, and he struggled to hold back tears. This whole thing evidently brought him suffering. I had not heard of the Gmons before, and I silently berated myself for this obvious gap in my knowledge of our culture.

The news lay heavily on all present. The Tals were silent. Eventually, it was Nakat who spoke:

"Thank you for your words, Baap Map. You have my gratitude for not spreading this news among the lower castes, as general unease would not be beneficial. I command you to silence, for which I will of course reward you commensurately with your station.

Baap Map blinked in surprise:

"Are you suggesting that we will ignore this horror? We must assist the Gmons. The *Rybbt* carries..."

"We heard all we needed to hear, chief gravmaster," Nakat interrupted. "I am well aware of what is expected of us. The allies of House Kusa will not stand for any delays. For many years, the Gmons have sleepily teetered behind, lagging at the tail end of our fleet, and that puts them beyond our reach. I am also concerned about the new and unstudied disease you spoke of. If it kills tals on the *Rybbt*, it will not spare us on the *Oona*. We must therefore avoid any direct contact with the Gmons. Please send the brothers our sincerest greetings in your next log, with our ardent wishes for their speedy recovery. We can discuss this further during the *Rokha'Tu* holiday. Till then, all we can do is wait."

Having spoken, Nakat rose from his seat and left. Baap Map remained motionless, as if riveted in place. Mother Wa approached him and carefully took him by the hand. She said:

“Baap Map, all the years of your life you have faithfully served the Tals, as did your father before you, who likewise discharged his duties with unparalleled care and precision. I am afraid that we are truly unable to help the unfortunate Gmons in this regrettable situation. Nonetheless, I will try to persuade my husband to quickly send at least basic assistance. After all, for generations we have benefitted from fruits of the noble Gmons’ labor, and their hardships impact us here on the *Oona* as well.”

Baap Map acknowledged her kind words with a small nod. With that, the rest of the Tals rose and headed back to the feast hall. The chief gravmaster was left alone. He did not present a cheerful sight: for a long spell, he sat on the edge of his chair, staring at but not seeing his ornate surroundings. When he saw me, he quickly rose and wiped at his cheeks. To show respect, he hastily circled himself and disappeared into the complex of corridors.

I tossed and turned in my bed for the rest of the haze, thinking about the unfortunate Gmons and their unenviable fate. I was most disturbed by the fact that, before that day, I had not known of their existence. If Baap Map had not mentioned their struggle, how would their souls ever find peace without the support of our sincere grief at their passing in the expanse of exospace? How many creatures were there whose bitter end was never recorded?

I was so immersed in these unhappy thoughts that I got little rest in my disrupted sleep. In my dreams, the darkness gave way to pale, emaciated Gmon faces, heart-wrenchingly begging for a bit of space in our Talion. When I refused, the faces melted and wailed, bursting like overripe plums. The echoes of their agonized keening followed me for days.