

THE SCION FACTOR

Chapter Six

THE SACRIFICE

It was the hardest thing I have ever done in all my life. After waiting so long for the prediction to be fulfilled it seemed incredible that we should have to turn our backs on it again. But what else could I do? It was either my son or the lives of everyone in the spatiad.

(The Kosmon Log, Bram Terahson, Keeper of the Log).

‘I wouldn’t take another step further if I were you.’ The voice was sinister and threatening. It came from a shadowy figure by the railer entrance.

Bram turned around slowly. A few steps away he saw a thin, wizened man, whose face seemed strangely twisted. There was a deep gleam of hatred in the man’s eyes. ‘Are you talking to me?’ Bram asked quietly.

‘Who else?’ the man replied.

Bram stood in silence. Without haste, he reached out his arm and wrapped it around Jokan’s shoulders, drawing him closer. He and his son Jokan were just about to return after three days’ travelling. He was weary and keenly looking forward to a relaxed night at home. There was just one more short railer trip and then they could take things easy. But now there was a potential problem. Who was this sinister person who seemed to be threatening them? What was he trying to do?

‘What do you want?’ Bram asked him firmly.

‘It’s been a long time, Bram Terahson,’ the man replied. ‘I’ve waited over thirty years for this moment. At last, it has come.’

‘What in Space are you talking about?’ Bram asked testily.

‘Don’t you remember?’ the man answered. As he spoke, he lifted his left hand to his face. There were golden rings on three of his fingers. A flicker of recognition slipped through Bram’s mind. He had seen that hand before. He remembered now. This was the man who had engineered the kidnapping of Spinner and his family and possessions so many years before. This was the man they’d called Ring-fingers!

Ring-fingers continued to stroke his face. ‘You see this scar and this crushed cheek bone?’ he asked. ‘I have you to thank for them. All my life since that day you threw me into the cellar, I’ve had to endure insults, questions and scorn because of the way I look. Children run away when they see me and cling to their mothers for protection. Women take one look at my face and turn away in disgust. Even my friends don’t like being seen with me.’

His voice turned to a snarl. 'And it's all because of you! You did it! You ruined my life!'

Bram remembered how handsome and debonair Ring-fingers had been in his younger days. Now he really was disfigured and ugly.

'I'm truly sorry,' Bram said. 'It was not intentional.'

'Sorry!' exploded Ring-fingers. 'Sorry! What good will that do? I need more than "sorry"! And I will have it, too. I will have my revenge.' He lowered his voice. He spoke in sinister tones. 'I will have my revenge and I will have it today!'

'If there is anything I can do to help you,' Bram began, trying to soothe the man. 'If it's a matter of money, or medical attention or—.'

Ring-fingers cut him off. 'Money! Medicine! Don't you think I've tried all that? Don't insult me. I can get money any time I need it. I don't need your miserable offers of help. I have come for only one thing—revenge!'

Jokan clung to Bram. He didn't like the look of this angry, bitter man...

Jokan was very different from Audene. He was so much like his father. Fair-skinned, placid, contented. As a baby, he had slept peacefully and fed well. He wasn't restless and demanding as Audene had been.

Initially, Shyene had been happy enough. But with Jokan's birth, she knew that Audene would have to take second place. It was too much for her to handle. Her old ways began to return. She dropped hints that Bram was still not averse to an occasional encounter with her and flirted shamelessly with him. She boasted of Audene's achievements and made fun of the quieter, fairer Jokan.

The old lady couldn't take it for very long. 'Bram,' she said one day, 'this time Shyene will have to leave. I'm not going to have her parading around here making innuendos about you and pushing her son in front of mine. You have to send her away.'

Bram knew that there was really no alternative. He had given Shyene all she needed for the immediate future and once again arranged for her to leave. As they parted, she reached up and kissed him gently on the lips. The light touch of moisture that she left there brought back old memories to Bram. He had never loved her as he had loved Grace. She was more like a daughter than anything. But he would miss her—and he would miss Audene, too.

As the railer swished silently down the track, Bram had stood still for a long time. Life held so many unusual mysteries. One day, perhaps he might understand. One lesson he had learned was that the Owner didn't need help to get things done. Faith and patience were more important.

He didn't suppose he would ever see Shyene and Audene again. One day, perhaps, their grandchildren might meet. Who could tell?

The years had continued to roll by. Jokan grew to young manhood. How different he was from Audene. Quiet, reflective, careful, discerning. Half the time you never knew where he was. Then you would find him in a corner somewhere, studying a computer program, or working on a robot development project or simply sitting and thinking.

Bram had seen some of Grace's gentleness in the lad—and he fancied he saw some of his own strength as well. Well, time would tell. One thing

was certain: he would grow up and raise a family, for the Owner had made it clear that there would be many descendants through Jokan.

Bram didn't work much these days. He had slowed down a lot and was content to take life easy. There was nothing much else for him to do now except dream—and to spend time with his son.

One day, he had decided to take the boy on a tour. Jokan was excited. It would be great to travel through the spatiads. He had heard many stories about them but this was his first chance to see them for himself. He wondered what they would be like! Probably pretty primitive in comparison with theirs, he thought. But perhaps he would be surprised.

It was actually a three-day journey by railer. So they had stayed each night in a different guest billet. Of course, they were able to look around a bit and observe different people's life styles. For Jokan it was full of interest, although he grew weary of sitting for long stretches in the railer.

The tour had continued for another day and, although Jokan was eager to keep going, it was enough for Bram and he was looking forward to relaxing in his own living quarters once again. He would be there now, but for this unexpected encounter with Ring-fingers...

The man was still speaking. 'And I will have revenge. Mark my words. I will have it!'

'Revenge?' echoed Bram. 'What kind of revenge?'

'Do you know what this is?' Ring-fingers responded, holding up a small rectangular box in his right hand.

'It looks like some kind of remote control,' Bram replied cautiously.

'Right first time,' Ring-fingers responded. 'That's exactly what it is. It's the triggering device for a sonic shaker.'

'A sonic shaker?' Bram replied, puzzled. Sonic shaker was a popular name for an audiotronic activator. This was a mechanism that set up a controlled field of high-pitched sound waves used to crumble solid wastes—including disused machinery. When carefully controlled, it was clean and efficient. Even machinery made of plasteel or vibrar could be broken down into miniscule fragments which were easily disposed of. It was the basic procedure used in all disintegrators.

'What kind of sonic shaker?'

'The usual kind—one you use to get rid of unwanted rubbish.'

'So what has this got to do with us?' Bram asked.

'I thought you might be interested in the way I've set it up—and in the garbage I intend to dispose of.'

Bram waited quietly without speaking. He tightened his grip on his son. Ring-fingers leered at them, a wild look in his eyes. He continued to rub his hand over his crooked cheek.

'It has taken me a very, very long time,' he said menacingly, 'but I have finally done it. Year after weary year, night after gloomy night, creeping around like a ghost of the past, freezing at every strange sound and hiding from every footfall, I have been installing receptors in level 12. And now they are all in place. Like little demons, they sit winking and blinking in the secret corners of the railer terminals and the quiet recesses of the air tunnels and even

in the communication networks of your own offices, just waiting for my command. All I have to do is switch on this control unit and the audiotronic activation will begin.'

Bram was amazed and appalled. Ring-fingers might be crazed with his passion for revenge, but was obviously highly literate and fearfully intelligent. He had devised a plan for destroying a whole series of spatiads—and with it hundreds of lives. In fact, it might even be far worse. What would be the effect on the rest of the Kosmon if one level were to collapse? Would it set up a chain reaction that could destroy the whole ship?

'You can't be serious,' Bram protested. 'Do you realise the implications of what you are saying? You could ruin the whole Kosmon and destroy everyone in it—including yourself.'

'Oh, yes, I know it,' said Ring-fingers. 'When your spatiad begins to crumble into a thousand fragments, and the rest of the level 12 with it, the Kosmon may implode. There might be nothing left but a few scattered metallic memories drifting like stardust through space. But what do I care? My life is almost over anyway. I have nothing left to live for. You made sure of that thirty years ago.'

'So what satisfaction will you get if you're not here to enjoy your triumph?' Bram asked. 'What's the point?'

'I've had thirty years of satisfaction,' Ring-fingers answered gleefully. 'Thirty years of eagerly looking forward to this day. I'm well satisfied already.'

Bram looked around quickly, desperate for some way to escape or for someone to help. But they were too far from the entrance to the railer terminal and there was no one else in sight. And what if they did escape? What good would it do? It was better to stay and try to prevent Ring-fingers from implementing his heinous plan.

'It's no good looking for help,' Ring-fingers said, noting Bram's furtive glance. 'We're quite alone. And what could you do now, old man?' he jeered. 'You might have got the better of me once, but you couldn't do it now. I'm younger and fitter than you are. And anyway, before you could lift one hand, I would have the sonic shaker activated. So what would be the point?'

Bram knew he was trapped. If only someone could creep up behind this maniac without him knowing. Or, perhaps he could signal for help. He went on talking, trying to gain time. As he spoke, slowly he moved his left hand to his belt. He rested it on his sigtran. Maybe he could activate the call signal. Someone just might pick it up.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you,' Ring-fingers warned him. 'Take your hand away from your sigtran, Bram. Right away.' Bram did as he was told. 'There, that's better,' said the avenger smoothly.

Outwardly, Bram appeared very calm. Inwardly, his mind was racing. Perhaps, there was some way of distracting Ring-fingers' attention. . . Quick as a meteorite, he flung Jokan to one side. The lad was caught by surprise and so was Ring-fingers. His attention was diverted and Bram flung himself at him grasping desperately for the remote control. Wildly, he grabbed Ring-fingers' wrist, falling downwards as he did so and dragging the man down on top of him. They wrestled desperately, rolling from side to side.

Jokan scrambled to his feet and tried to help. He bent down, grabbed Ring-fingers' by the shoulders and attempted to haul him away. He tugged as hard as he could, but to no effect. Suddenly the two men rolled over again knocking Jokan's feet. He tumbled backwards and fell with a thud, knocking his head against the wall. He lay there insensible.

Old as he was, Bram was no weakling and he pinned his opponent's arm to the floor. He applied more and more pressure to him, anxiously trying to force him to release his grip on the activator. Ring-fingers refused to let it go. Sweat shone on his brow as he struggled frantically to get free. With a savage cry, he lifted his other hand and chopped it down on the back of Bram's neck. For a moment, Bram relaxed his grip. It was enough. Ring-fingers jerked his wrist free and rolled away. He sprang to his feet. Bram sat up dazed.

'You foolish old man!' Ring-fingers snarled, panting for breath. 'You can't stop me. I will have my revenge, no matter what you do.'

'Well, why don't you just do it,' Bram wheezed. 'Why wait any longer?'

'Ah, now at last we're getting to the point.'

Bram waited for him to go on.

'You see, Bram Terahson, I want to suggest a way out for you. If you agree to it, I will not use the sonic shaker after all.'

'What sort of diabolical plan are you coming up with now?' asked Bram.

'It's very simple when you think about it. You give me your son instead.'

'What do you mean,' asked Bram, his face suddenly ashen with apprehension.

'Easy, my friend,' Ring-fingers answered, his breath now coming more easily. He nodded towards the unconscious form of Jokan still lying motionless on the floor. 'I accept the life of that boy of yours instead of the lives of everyone else in level twelve. Put him to death and the rest will live.'

If Bram had been appalled before he was horrified now. For years he had waited for a son. Finally, Jokan had been born. And now—was he to lose him again? It was unthinkable. Yet if it was a case of one life or many, what could he do? This was an intolerable decision. How could any man agree to the deaths of hundreds of his family and friends? And how could any man agree to the death of his own son? Either way, it was impossible.

'You're crazy!' he said to Ring-fingers. 'You don't know what you're asking.'

'I know only too well,' he replied, coldly. 'I've seen what that boy means to you. I've been watching you for years. I know how much you care about him. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if you would give up the whole Kosmon before you'd part with him.'

It was like the sharp searing burn of a heat probe into Bram's heart. His son was more to him than anything else in the galaxy. He couldn't part with him! He could never let him go! He thought about the promises the Owner had made that he and his wife would have a son whose descendants would grace the whole Kosmon,

'How can I agree to destroy him?' he argued with himself. 'It doesn't make sense. I won't do it. I can't do it.' And then he thought of all the other lives that depended on his decision. He couldn't forfeit them, either. He fought a fierce inward struggle, his heart and mind in turmoil, his feelings running

amok, his emotions exploding like colliding meteors. How could he possibly decide what to do? Whichever decision he reached, the outcome filled him with horror. He stood trembling and angry at the heartless, inhuman dilemma that confronted him.

‘Well, what is your decision?’ asked Ring-fingers, delighted at the way his request had so shaken Bram. ‘We don’t have a lot of time.’

‘You’ve waited thirty years. What are a few more minutes now?’

‘Yes, I have waited,’ said Ring-fingers slowly, ‘and I am tired of waiting any longer. I want your answer now.’

‘If I agree to your request, what do you want me to do?’ asked Bram fearful of the answer.

‘Simple and painless, my friend. You just take the boy, place him in a disintegrator, and close the lid. It will all be over in a moment.’

‘In a disintegrator!’ Bram exploded. ‘You want me to treat my own son like garbage?’

‘Isn’t that what I said I came to do?’

‘You’re—you’re—deranged!’

‘Oh I don’t think so. I’ve never been more rational in my life.’

‘But to ask me to—.’ Bram could not continue.

‘Oh, don’t take it so hard. Who knows? Perhaps your mysterious Owner will reconstitute him again!’ Ring-fingers laughed bitterly. ‘It would have been nice if he’d done something like that for me,’ he added quietly.

Bram was lost for words. His heart was pounding. What in the galaxy was he supposed to do?

‘And what if I agree to—to—sacrifice my son? How can I be sure you won’t still destroy the rest of us?’

‘Oh, I don’t suppose you really can,’ his nemesis answered with a cold smile. ‘That’s a risk you must take. But I have given you my word.’

‘That’s a great comfort,’ Bram answered sarcastically. ‘I’m sure I can depend on it.’

‘It’s as reliable as the Owner’s. I’ll give you that.’ And he laughed again, as if he had said something humorous.

After a while, Bram began to calm down. He felt less tense and less resistant. Suddenly, like an exploding star, a word that Ring-fingers had used burst into his thoughts. ‘Reconstitute.’ Ring-fingers had said ‘reconstitute.’ Of course, he had meant it as a cruel joke. But what if it were possible? What if Jokan could actually survive? Was there some way in which he would not be disintegrated after all? Or, if he was, would he be put back together again? No, the idea was impossible. It was preposterous. But, then again, what if it could happen?

Bram wrestled with his thoughts. Could he really be expected to undergo such a test? Was he actually prepared to go this far? Somehow, deep inside, he knew that if he was, his willingness would have extraordinary consequences for good; but if he wasn’t, the Kosmon would sink further into turpitude and decay. He couldn’t explain how, but he began to see that this traumatic task would involve not just him, not just Jokan, but the whole future of the Kosmon. Somehow, it was an act of destiny.

Ring-fingers might have kept his actions secret from everyone else but the Owner's surveillance system had probably picked them up. Had the Owner known about this all the time? Was he waiting to see how Bram would react? And would he then intervene? He realised that in his desperation he was just imagining things. But on the other hand, this was so typical of the Owner. To allow an action that seemed downhill all the way, yet was actually the only way up. Bram had learned over his long life that it always paid to do whatever the Owner said. And he realised that for all his nameless fears and deep terrors, he didn't intend to go against that now.

There had to be an explanation. He tried to think it through clearly and unemotionally. If the Owner's prediction about Joka's birth had been proven correct over so many years, then how could things possibly now go against it?

He sighed deeply. There really was no alternative. If the Owner promised him descendants like the stars for number and he had to sacrifice the only means by which this prediction could be fulfilled, so be it. Somehow he would work it out. But how would he do it? Bram honestly had no idea.

He was very glad of one thing, however—that Grace did not know what he was being asked to do. But what would she say when he returned home? Especially if things did not work out for the best? He pushed the thought from his mind.

Joka began to stir. He moaned quietly and sat up.

'You'd better make up your mind,' Ring-fingers said, indicating the lad with a turn of his head. 'It's now or never.'

Bram knew that he had to do something. Ring-fingers was growing agitated. His index finger was tapping impatiently on the remote control. He could activate the sonic shaker system at any moment. Bram took a deep breath. He swallowed hard. 'All right,' he said. 'I'll do it.'

He walked over to where Joka sat and lifted him to his feet. 'Come on, son,' he said, as cheerfully as he could. 'We're going over to the disintegrator.'

They walked slowly together, with Ring-fingers following them quietly.

'What's happening?' Joka asked. 'This man—is he going to do what he said? And why is he following us?'

'It's all under control,' Bram said. 'Don't worry. Everything's going to be all right.'

'But what are we going to disintegrate?' Joka asked.

'The Owner will provide what we need,' Bram replied.

'But Dad, that doesn't make sense! Why would the Owner provide rubbish?'

'We'll find out, son.'

He raised the plasteel lid of the disintegrator. He looked up and down the traffic-way, scanning its smooth walls and clear, polished floor. He had hoped that maybe something or someone would turn up at the last minute. But there was no one to be seen. The corridor was completely bare.

'Well, son, it's not really rubbish I have to dispose of. In fact, quite the opposite. I must put in the most valuable possession I have.'

'Well, where is it?' asked the lad, looking at Bram inquiringly.

Bram shuffled his feet, cleared his throat and then looked straight at Joka.

The boy looked back at him, still not understanding. Bram held out his arms towards Joka, his palms spread upwards, in a half-helpless, half-indicative gesture.

Suddenly, Joka realised what his father was trying to tell him. 'You mean me?' asked Joka incredulously. 'You want me to get in there?'

'Yes, son, I do. I do because it's the only choice I have.'

'But, Dad! That's unreal! You can't be serious! You can't murder your own son!'

Bram shuddered at the word 'murder.'

'No, it's not like that,' he replied, struggling for the right words. 'It won't be murder. In fact, it's actually going to save lives.'

Joka laughed out loud. 'Come on, Dad, pull the other leg!' he said. 'Now show me what you want to put into this thing and I'll help you.'

'I'm not joking, son. Although it's breaking my heart to say it, I do have to put you in there.'

Tears formed in the old man's eyes and one began to slide down his left cheek, a bright, tiny, translucent bubble on a brown surface. Joka watched as it slowly trickled down to his chin. His father was serious! He meant what he said!

'But, Dad, if you put me in a disintegrator, that will be the end of me! You know what those things do. That's why they're called disintegrators!'

'Yes, son, I know.' Bram choked on his words and struggled to get them out. 'And so does the Owner. Maybe he will intervene somehow. Do you remember the story of Arkon? Remember how the disintegrating process was neutralised by Indy's protective shield? Maybe the Owner will neutralise this disintegrator. Maybe he's got some other idea.'

'That'd be fine if we had an Indy here to do it. But how's the Owner going to stop a disintegrator? He's not even here! He could be a million miles away for all I know! And what about Mum? What will she think?'

'I do know one thing,' Bram went on, as if Joka had not spoken at all. 'The Owner promised your mother and me that through you we would have a family, and somehow or other, that promise will come true. In the meantime, I have to do this for the sake of the whole Kosmon.'

'What's the Kosmon got to do with it?' demanded Joka. 'This is between you and me.'

Ring-fingers stepped towards them, holding his activator in full view and waving it ominously. 'Dad, what's he doing here!' Joka went on angrily. 'Why don't you tell him to get lost?'

'If only I could,' murmured Bram. 'Son, if I don't go through with this, hundreds of people will lose their lives. It's you or them. I have to do it.'

'What are you talking about, Dad?' Joka demanded. 'What has this to do with anyone else?'

'You have ten seconds, Terahson,' said Ring-fingers coldly. 'Otherwise, everyone goes.'

Jokan thought of running for his life. He looked wildly around for the railer terminal. He tried to step to one side, but his father had gripped him by the shoulder and it was too late.

Gently, but firmly, the old man eased his son against the disintegrator and then leaned him over into it. There was little Jokan could do. He was young and fit, but his father, old as he was, still had muscles like plasteel and Jokan found resistance impossible.

'Dad! Can't we talk about this? I'm not ready! I need time to think!'

'There's nothing more to say, son,' said his father. 'And if I stop now, I might never have the courage to act again.'

He took one of Jokan's legs and lifted it towards the lip of the disintegrator. Almost against his will, the lad found himself cooperating. He placed one foot into the destructive device, like someone climbing into a bath, and then followed it with the other. His father forced him down until he was seated.

Now, strangely enough, Jokan made no further effort to resist. He sat quietly, his shoulders slumped, his brain in a whirl. He couldn't believe what was happening to him. It just didn't make sense! Hope and despair played droid-leap in his mind. If his father was right, he would even yet escape somehow. If the old man was wrong, he wouldn't know much about it anyway.

Bram kept one hand on the lad's shoulder and with the other began to close the hatch. Suddenly, an idea hit him like a punch in the chest. His heart skipped and his eyes widened. Why hadn't he considered this before? He turned slowly to Ring-fingers. Equally slowly, he began to raise the cover.

'Do it!' barked Ring-fingers. 'Finish what you came to do!'

'No,' said Bram. 'No. I won't.'

Ring-fingers held up the sonic shaker. 'You have five seconds to close that disintegrator,' he threatened.

'I don't think so,' said Bram. 'I think I've got as long as I like. I think you're only bluffing.'

'I'll show you who's bluffing,' cried Ring-fingers, his face red with anger. 'I'm warning you, I will do it!'

'No you won't,' said Bram, calmly. 'You won't do it, because to destroy everyone else you will have to destroy yourself. And you don't have the courage. Your audiotronic activator is no more than an empty threat. I doubt if it ever worked in the first place. But even if it does work, you're not brave enough to use it.'

Slowly and deliberately, Bram lifted the door of the disintegrator. When it was raised high, he dropped his hand to Jokan's shoulder and eased him up and out of the deadly unit.

Jokan wasted no time. He sprang out like an exploding rocket and stood back, well out of reach, panting for breath. He balanced on the balls of his feet, his eyes bright and alert, ready to flee at split second notice.

Bram looked up at him, a huge grin on his face. 'It's all right now,' Bram said quietly. 'You can relax! It's over!'

Jokan looked at Bram with suspicion. Was this just a trick to snare him again? No. His father was not like that. Never in his whole life could he

remember Bram doing anything deceptive or dishonest. Jokan relaxed slightly, but he still didn't move.

Bram spoke gently. 'It's all right now, son. It really is. There's nothing to be afraid of anymore.' He turned to Ring-fingers. 'Well, now, what are you waiting for? Why don't you activate that gadget as you said you would?' His heart was pounding. 'I hope I'm right,' he thought. 'If I'm not...' He refused to think of the possibilities.

'Do what I told you!' screamed the would-be destroyer. 'Do what I told you! Or I'll—'

'You'll what?' asked Bram, encouraged by Ring-fingers' hesitation. 'I don't think you can do anything.'

'Of course I can,' said Ring-fingers. 'All I have to do is press this button and the whole of level twelve will disintegrate.'

'Well, do it, then,' continued Bram, now more confident than ever that the man was actually powerless. 'Go on, do it!'

'I will if you don't deal with that boy.'

'No you won't,' taunted Bram. 'You can't now and you never could, could you? This whole thing has been a huge bluff. You just used it to wreak revenge on me in the cruellest way you could think of!'

In a black hole of despair, Ring-fingers realised that Bram now knew the truth. 'I had you! I had you!' he hissed. 'You were about to kill your only son! I knew you would do it. You're such a goody-goody you could never stand by and see a whole generation of people destroyed. I knew I could depend on your disgusting sense of morality to sacrifice your own precious son. And you almost did it. You almost did it. I had you. I had you in my hands...'

He looked at Bram with immeasurable hate. He smashed the remote control on the floor and ran wildly from the scene, both hands on his head, crying insanely as he went.

Bram and Jokan threw themselves into each other's arms and stood embracing for a long time. Finally, Bram spoke. 'What am I going to tell your mother?' he asked. They both burst out laughing.

They began to walk back to the railer when they noticed lying in the corridor in front of them an ancient, perfectly preserved automaton. It was a classical masterpiece of robotisation. It was probably worth a fortune.

'Look!' Bram cried. 'We do have something to disintegrate after all!'

'How did that get there?' Jokan asked in amazement. He hadn't seen it there before.

'Let's grab it, son!' Bram almost shouted, using unusually unsophisticated language for him. 'We'll get rid of some junk after all.'

Jokan could hardly move quick enough. Now he knew there was no further danger. They collected the robot, lugged it heavily between them and dumped it in the disintegrator. They didn't even check to see what happened.

Bram placed his large hands on his son's shoulders and looked at him proudly. 'You're worth ten sons to me,' he said, his voice shaky with emotion. 'I'm proud of you!'

'And I'm proud of you, too, Dad,' said Jokan. 'It took courage to do what you did—it took real courage.'

Jokan burst into tears as he released the pent-up emotion of the last few minutes and flung himself into his father's arms. The two of them embraced again strongly and lovingly. Then they left as quickly as they could.

When Grace found out what happened, she was appalled. But she soon recovered from that and her consternation changed to joy and relief. She hugged Jokan to her as fiercely as her old arms would allow, her tears of joy leaving his cheeks as wet and glistening as hers.

Jokan would never forget that experience. But he never liked to talk about it. It was something very private between him, his parents and the Owner.

Late that night, Bram found another message:

'From: the Owner

To: Bram Terahson

Memo: Because you were willing to give up your only son for the sake of others, I guarantee that your family will prosper for all future generations. One day, the Kosmon will be like a new craft through the Scion of Jokan.'

Bram made a mental note of it and tucked it away in his memory. It was consoling to be given such a pledge.

Bram lived for many more years. After Grace died, he even married again and had more children. But there would never be another like either Audene or Jokan. They were both as special as anyone could ever be.

Bram was never really commander of the Kosmon. There would never again be one such person. But he did take it on himself to keep the ship's logs up to date and to store the records for future reference.

There was one thing he tucked away in his mind. In his last communication, the Owner had made a mysterious reference to 'the Scion of Jokan.'

Was this the same as the Scion of Kala? And if it was, did it mean that one of Jokan's descendants would destroy Drakon forever?

And what about that strange incident with Jokan and the disintegrator? There had to be a reason for that. Why hadn't the Owner intervened sooner? Surely it wasn't just to test Bram's loyalty?

And where had that robot come from?

Was there a hidden message there somewhere?

Was it a kind of a trial run for some greater act of replacement in the future?

He thought again of the promise he had been given so long ago –

*Though your name is now unknown
Men will speak it with renown
The Scion from your family
Will set the crew of Kosmon free.*

Often in the quiet hours of the early morning, Bram would lie awake pondering the matter. In Arkon's day, the people had suffered for their own rebelliousness. But the Owner had promised that would never happen again.

Next time, and there almost certainly would be a next time, perhaps the Owner himself would provide an object of destruction, just as he had done for Jokan, so the people of the Kosmon could live.

It was an interesting and exciting thought.

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Acknowledgement

Dr Barry Chant is a regular speaker at church services, seminars, conferences and conventions. Hundreds of thousands of his books have been sold around the world. He has degrees in arts, theology and ministry, a diploma in education and a PhD in history. He was the founding president of Tabor College, Australia and an ordained pastor in CRC Churches International. He is married (to Vanessa) and they have three adult children and twelve grandchildren. For further information and other writings by Dr Chant visit www.barrychant.com.