

MY TIME AMONG THE STARS

VOLUME ONE: NOVITIATE

by *Guiseppe Alustro*

The Collected Alustro's Journals
as transcribed for pre-Diasporan readers
by Bill Bridges

FADING SUNS

Credits

Writing: Bill Bridges

Additional writing: Christopher Howard (“The Letter”)

Art: John Bridges

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Holistic Design Inc.
5295 Hwy 78, D-337
Stone Mountain, GA 30087

Introduction for New Readers

Guissepe Alustro is a young member of the Eskatonic Order, a fringe sect of the Universal Church with interests in occult study. In joining this near-heretical order, Guissepe earned the disapproval of his powerful Uncle Palamon, Archbishop of Byzantium Secundus. But he gained an influential ally — Erian Li Halan chose him to be her personal confessor. He has spent the last five years traveling the Known Worlds with his liege and the rest of her entourage: Cardanzo, Erian's bodyguard; Julia Abrams, a caustic but able Charioteer star-pilot; Ongangarak, a Vorox warrior; and Sanjuk oj Kaval, an Ukari "reclamations" specialist (she joined the group in "An Open Mind").

Erian Li Halan eventually swore allegiance to Emperor Alexius Hawkwood and was admitted to his order of Questing Knights. Alustro, along with Erian's other companions, joined the Emperor's cause as an Imperial Cohort, sworn to aid Erian in her quests (see "My Quest," in *Volume Two: Provost*).

Alustro keeps a journal of his travels, both as a historical record and a forum for his musings on Known Worlds life. He has published some of these journals in small press editions, often including some of his sketches. While his journals are not widely known, they are popular among a small readership. Apparently, these journals are even read by the Vau (see "Approbations," in *Volume Two: Provost*).

After a time of rest and meditation on Byzantium Secundus (see *Volume Two: Provost* — "Approbations," "All For One," "Ghost Story," and "Witness"), Alustro has collected all of his previous journal entries (except for the most private or those dealing with Erian's secret missions) and published them in two new editions, entitled "My Time Among the Stars, Volumes One and Two" This PDF file is a facsimile of the first volume.

New journal entries will continue to appear in each new **Fading Suns** book.

Prologue

Thürlday 3, Shenri moon, 4996 (Leminkainen calendar); Tuesday, June 6th, 4996 (Holy Terra calendar)

Greetings Uncle Palamon,

Forgive the years of silence between this and my last letter to you. It is only now that I can again write you, for the years have opened my eyes and greatly changed my soul. I am not the youth you once knew, your dutiful nephew, son to your dear sister, my beloved mother. I realize that you harshly disapprove of the course my life has taken, and your reaction to this letter may cause you to burn it before it is fully read. I ask in my mother's name that you read further. If not for me, then for her, to whom you were indebted for tutelage and upbringing after the tragic death of both your parents. If you still bear her any love — and I know that you do — then read the words of her only son, your nephew who once looked to you as a dog does its master, with both love and fear in its eyes.

Two years have passed since I left Midian to follow Erian Li Halan, my liege, to the stars. Four years since I left the fold of the Orthodoxy to join the Eskatonic Order. You could not then understand my choice; you took it as an insult. But that was never intended. I hope this letter will lead you now to better know the fire that burns in my soul and demands the choices that I have made. Can an archbishop not understand the yearning of the soul for the Pancreator? The yearning for answers to the deepest questions of life, and the thread of meaning which is woven between its inception and departure? I have so many questions, and I have chosen the path which will allow me to answer them, among the stars.

Can you not understand why my life could not be the same as yours? The noble quietude of cathedral, although nourishing as a sanctuary from the world's pain, is to me only a retreat. The career you had outlined for me in the Orthodoxy would have led to my slow pining and suffocation. I mean no insult. You did as you thought best, with the kindest intentions. It must chaff to read a surly youth's attack on your beloved institutions. I know what the cathedral, the Orb and the rites mean to you. They mean much to me, too. I have grown, yes, but that boy to whom you taught the chants will always be a part of me.

I made vows to another order not because I was rebellious or discontented, but because it promised escape. Unlike the Orthodoxy, the Eskatonic Order requires that its priests quest, and questing was the first virtue extolled by the Prophet after his vision of the Holy Flame. Of course, you know that. But why act otherwise? I have met priests of the Orthodoxy who chaff under the strict rules laid down by the archbishops. Do you not know their need? Do you

deny it? I tell you, it is not the illusions of demons that cause them to rebel, but the call of creation. Call it heresy if you will. This is a charge my order suffers under all too often. The truth is that your fellow priests refuse to see, to ask, to really discover the wisdom nurtured by the Eskatonics.

But I spend too much time arguing theological knots. This is not what I intended when I picked up pen to write. I mean this as an explanation, not a reconciliation. If you choose to forgive me after reading this, you must do so without my repentance. I am what the Pancreator has made me, and can be no more or less.

I mean to tell you why I changed, what seed was planted in my breast which sprouted roots and branches. Do not feel guilty when I tell you it was your fault. You could not know how the Emperor's coronation would light in me a flame which only grows hotter with each year. When you invited mother and I to Byzantium Secundus to witness the crowning of the new Emperor, I am sure you only thought to introduce me to the grandeur of your great cathedral. Grand it was, I do not deny that. Indeed, had it been but a trip to see the holy sight where Vladimir was crowned, I might then and there have given up all other ambitions but the Orthodoxy. But the cathedral was not the nexus of that visit. The new Emperor was.

You cannot imagine what it is like to know only war in one's lifetime. You are old enough to remember a time before the Emperor Wars, when the houses were not constantly at each others' throats. Of course, they always have been, I suppose. But in the times of your youth, they at least were discreet and kept their quarrels among themselves. But once Darius Hawkwood made his bid for the throne, the hatreds of the houses, guilds and, yes, even the sects of the Universal Church were naked before all. Since my birth and until Alexius was crowned, I knew only war. A war which killed my mother not long after the coronation, as the last malcontents made their final, failed bid.

But you know this. My point is only that, after Alexius took the throne, peace was finally a possibility. It is now, as I write this, a reality. How long will it last? I do not dare guess. But I pray every morning and night that it does last, that it is eternal.

The other factor in my current development was also your doing. It was you who pulled the strings which placed me in the service of House Li Halan. I was still new to my vows, and stumbled over the chants often, and was imperfect in the eyes of the traditional and stern Li Halan royals. It was the mild ostracism I received there that drew Erian Li Halan's interest. She was coming of age and struggled against the preconceptions her family held her to. We be-

came compatriots against the stodgy elders around us. She chose me as her confessor, to the annoyance of her father, who wished her to be kept under closer scrutiny by one of his own choosing. The fact that I soon after forsook the Orthodoxy to join the Eskatonics became a minor scandal in the house. But Erian supported my choice, although I suppose it was merely a rebellion for her, a means to snub her father again.

She doubts too much. She has many questions of faith, and I am hard put to give her sufficient answers. How can I, when I still have so many questions myself? But I do not doubt. My faith is strong. Regardless of the conundrums and paradoxes of existence, I see One hand behind all actions, that of the Pancreator. It is my duty to ensure that Erian comes to see this also. I must endeavor at all times to bolster her faith.

When her father passed away and left her disenfranchised, having given all his lands to her brother, she had little choice but to leave Midian. I had to follow, not just because she asked it of me, but because I had yearned for the stars for so long. I had secretly contemplated leaving, of begging Erian to let me go. But the time to cut the final bonds which held me to the Orthodoxy and Midian had finally come of its own.

The jumproads became my new home. I have always been fascinated with the jumpgates and all the relics of the Anunnaki, that race also called the Ur. Who were they? Where are they now? Did they know the Pancreator as we do? What names did they use to address the Mystery? I was consumed with curiosity concerning the Great Ones and their ways. Now, I could pursue this obsession freely.

I presume you know more of them than even I have discovered. You are, after all, Archbishop of Byzantium Secundus. One does not rise so high without learning some secrets. I am certain the Church fathers know more than they reveal, especially concerning history and the mysterious, inhuman race which left us our star-faring legacy. Like most outside of the Patriarch's favor, there are many things I will never know. All the more reason to seek answers elsewhere.

I have enclosed some sketches from my travels. I include for you the one I made of the Gargoyle of Nowhere, the great monument of the wastes known to give omens and visions to certain pilgrims. I remember when I was very little that you talked about the Gargoyle. Is it surprising that I remember this? How could I forget it? As you spoke, there was excitement in your eyes and your gaze looked off into spaces immaterial. You had been to the wastes on a great pilgrimage with many nobles, sent to guide their penance in return for Church forgiveness. But it affected you more than it did them. You received no vision, but its presence alone was enough for you. It thrummed with Mystery. Imagine now what you felt then

and you will begin to understand my whole life. My quest.

In my travels, I have discovered that the Known Worlds are not what we are told they are. You know this already. I suspect your hand in much of the Church's creed. Why? I know the political reasons for the lies, but why do you participate in this scheme of ignorance? I ask knowing that I will never get an answer. You will say you are protecting their souls, but I know you cannot believe that. Not really believe it.

The places I have seen! The people are so different... yet so much the same. The Pancreator's creation is a wondrous tapestry. I could not begin to detail for you the incredible people of the worlds I have walked upon. How the peasants of Madoc, living on their great, sprawling boats, know generosity without measure, sharing all they have with those in need — and they are canny distinguishers of want and need. Their fishers, those most revered among them, know where the largest herds of fish are without any outward clue. They simply know, with an instinct of sorts, the way the old men of Midian know when the weather is growing bad well before the Engineers' terraforming towers tell them anything. How is this?

How is it that the downtrodden, brutally punished rebels of Cadavus still dream and yearn for more when everything the nobles tell them denies the value of hope? I have seen hope, uncle. It is no fleeting thing, but a tenacious, living thing in the heart, in the eyes of those who have it. Those who lack it are empty vessels waiting and desperate to be filled. All too often, they drink first of hate and violence.

The people of the Known Worlds group themselves together in cliques and gangs, guilds and sects, houses and whatever else they want to call themselves. For protection, for companionship, for some sense that they are not alone in the growing darkness. I know from experience that you cannot go alone, through life or the universe. That is death for the asking. All too many prey upon the lone traveler, he with no one to vouch for him or pay his ransom.

I am no fool; I have many friends on the road. We are brought up believing that we cannot trust those who are not sworn to the same allegiances as we, whether it be another house, guild or sect. But it is a myth, a lie like many others made to serve the political needs of the war. Besides my liege, I have friends among the Charioteers and the Vorox. They are boon companions, and we have shared wonders and dangers together. I would gladly give my life for any of them, and they would do the same for me. This is not what I was taught as a child. There were many lies in my youth.

A friend of Erian's, Sanjuk oj Kaval, has a saying she heard among the youth gangs on her homeworld of Ukar: "The older you get, the more lies you wear on your skin."

This, of course, refers to the Ukar custom of writing an Ukari's deeds in scars on her skin, and the fact that adults come to conclusions about how things really are and rarely deviate from those convictions thereafter. But youth is questioning. Why not maturity as well? It is clear that our immediate predecessors did not have the answers to all questions, and our distant ancestors, while mighty in thought and deed, failed in humility. We pay the price for their hubris.

Strange that many of the things our ancestors of the Second Republic achieved and were proud of are now considered vain or evil. Their technology was remarkable, but we spurn it as if it were the tools of demons. So we say, yet without it we could not travel the stars or maintain life on barren worlds such as Nowhere. Though we curse the fruits of our ancestor's labor, it does not prevent us from using that labor and its yield. All recognize the necessity for tech, but the Church teaches that tech taints those who use it, that their egos will grow too mighty, and self-importance will surpass their love for the Pancreator. This, it is said, was the sin of the Second Republic citizens.

They are said to have been a godless people, spurning belief in a deity and exalting themselves in the Pancreator's place. But I find this hard to believe. How can anyone not recognize the works of the Pancreator and his hand behind them? I find this to be the greatest lie we are told about our sinful ancestors, that they knew not the Pancreator. Was not the Church in existence then? Did not the Prophet preach before the Second Republic was formed? I have seen ignorance and willful denial of the truth, but rarely on such a scale as is claimed here. No, I refuse to believe that anyone who could mold the very substance of a planet to make it pleasing to the body, mind and spirit is one who is without knowledge or love of the Pancreator. The ego alone cannot work such feats, although some will attempt to argue otherwise.

On blessed worlds such as Holy Terra, the maintenance of elder tech is unnecessary. The Pancreator molded that world for humans, and little is needed to maintain it. But on other planets, such as the tragic Pandemonium, upkeep of tech is vital to life. I know that monks now build a cathedral there in denial of the cataclysms caused by terraforming engine failure, expecting the Pancreator to save them from any harm. We are gifted with intelligence and insight; to so foolishly ignore these gifts in the face of disaster is an insult to the Pancreator. Is not the wisdom of science but the perception of the Pancreator's laws? Certainly, we need to beware our own greed and pride when utilizing tech, but this does not mean we must forsake it entirely.

Outside the cloister, people live life as they must; they use what they can to survive. While the Church chants about the sins of tech in its hallowed halls, those living

outside the walls scrape as they must. It was eye-opening, I tell you, when I first realized just how many people ignore the laws of the Church. Not just mendicant monks, but peasants, yeoman and nobles — even bishops! They say one thing but mean another, especially when it concerns their comfort and power.

Since the end of the war, the jumproads have opened again. As people travel to neighboring planets long sundered by their ruler's rivalries, they meet strange people, once so much like them but now changed through years of isolation. Some greet old family or friends from other worlds. But others remember old hatreds and simmering feuds. New conflicts have broken out on these worlds, so long united by their lords against rival houses or guilds. But with no direction, they fall back to their old conflicts as if they were instinctual.

Such is the case with Malignatius. Long under the rule of the Li Halan, the morally lax Decados now own the world. People are returning to the ancient sects of their ancestors, denying the Orthodoxy which was imposed on them for so long. Wars have erupted over religious issues; pain and misery is the result. How can those who claim to worship one creator fight so much over the details of his grace?

Yet still I think the best of the Pancreator's creatures, whether human or alien. For while I have seen violence and greed, lust and all the other sins paraded unashamedly, I have also seen the virtues. I have seen peasants suffer the lash of their lords to rescue a fallen comrade. I have seen mercy and forgiveness from nobles when severity was surely the wiser course. Tenderness from a mercenary who had seen the darkest of shadows on Stigmata and survived.

I have grown in ways the cloister would never have allowed. I am convinced that holiness resides not only in the monastery, but among the people, the worlds and the stars. I am not naive, however. I know that evil abounds. I have seen not only the good, but the foul. Traveling affords a vision of an evil tapestry as wide and varried as that of good. As the Prophet said, demons lurk in the dark between the stars, waiting for a fallen person whose flesh to take.

I was witness to one such possessed soul, whose poor family pleaded with me to exorcise him of the taint. But I had to refuse, for I cannot perform such a feat. Only those who have mastered the theurgic rites of the Orthodoxy can dream of attempting it. The possessed one was finally lynched by the townsfolk, who tired of his tricks and black ways.

Have you ever lost one of your flock? Of course you must have, for you are far older than I. This man was not even one of mine, for I am itinerant and have a flock of one to preach to. But I knew then what it must be like to feel responsible for a soul and then to lose it.

How much more such loss must pain you, for your flock includes all the Known Worlds. Even were there no individual sin and misery, there are the dying suns to doom us all. How do you cope? Penitents must flood your cathedral daily, begging for salvation from the dimming light. What comfort do you give them? Surely you do not tell them the standard canon, that their sins are the cause of the darkening skies? If that were so, then would not the collective penance from all the years since the Fall of the Second Republic have made up for all sins committed or contemplated since the beginning of time?

What be the cause? It is truly the end of history, it seems. Judgment is near. Yet, I cannot accept that we are to be rewarded for sitting still and waiting for death. If that were so, why did the Prophet say: "A sun must burn to birth light. When your passion burns, you give off light." Perhaps the suns die because we lack passion. Passion for life, for the struggle necessary to unlock the Mystery. We are bored with everything, having accomplished all. History has returned to the point at which it began.

Or perhaps the answer still waits for us. Perhaps the dying suns are our spur to greatness, a necessary quest on which we will finally understand ourselves and our place in the universe.

This is a quest I gladly undertake. Erian Li Halan has also taken it, although she knows it not. Indeed, anyone who seeks outward for new horizons seeks to renew the light, wittingly or no.

Farewell, uncle. My liege calls and I must go. To what planet we next travel I do not know. Perhaps I will write again once we've arrived. This letter will probably not reach you until I have left for yet another world, so if you choose to answer this letter, you must send it care of Erian's mother on Midian. There is no guarantee I will receive it, but I will look for it with hope nonetheless.

Your nephew,
Guissepe Alustro

The Letter

August 15th, 4996 (Holy Terra calendar)

Brother Guissepe Alustro,

A month has passed since I received your letter. I read it, though I debated burning it as you suggested. Still, if nothing else, I believe you deserve the dignity of a reply.

I send this missive through the hands of the most worthy Lady Tira Li Halan, as you suggested. She is a gracious woman, and I heard from her a somewhat different accounting of your stay on Midian. Her family saw your conversion away from the Orthodox Church and to the Eskatonic Order as more than the “minor scandal” you described to me. Her son, the baron, told me that he suspected you in the theft of Saint Urda’s bones, a sacred relic of the Li Halan. I assured him, truthfully, that you were in no way responsible for the outrage. I told him that you were young and naive, yes, but that you were in no way a thief. You may wish to carefully scrutinize your choice of friends in the future, however. One of them was a well-known thief from the planet’s Ipswich region. (And yes, in answer to your unspoken question, I have been keeping watch over you. I owe this much, at least, to my sister.) I suggested that the baroness have him arrested; they recovered the relics and you are, at least partially, returned to the good woman’s graces.

I relate this story for two reasons. The first is to make you aware of your choice of companions. While your liege, Erian Li Halan, is no doubt a worthy, though overly-spirited, young lady, you must watch her retinue. The worst ruffians follow even the best noble trains. Your eyes are so fixed on the stars that you do not watch where you set your feet. Still, that is the way of your order, is it not? If nothing else, consider your lady’s safety in all this and exercise greater diligence in the future. I do not believe I need to further belabor your responsibilities as her spiritual counselor. The second reason for this parable is to illustrate what consequences your order’s lack of respectability may have on your future career, if any, in the Church.

Petty miscreants, such as the one you met on Midian, are the least of your concerns. Although you know my disapproval of your newfound sect, at least they, in the end, are mostly loyal clergy of the Universal Church. If you hearken to the Eskatonic Order’s more responsible injunctions then you are, perhaps, not consigned to the icy shades of perdition after all. You see? I am not as humorless as you had supposed. You must, however, beware the siren song of alien and heretical philosophies. Ideas have a seductive quality. A heresy of deed almost inevitably follows a heresy of thought. Some priests of your order are free-thinkers, anarchists or secret Republicans.

I say nothing here that I have not said more forcefully

before the bishopric council. The Eskatonic Order is overly concerned with ephemeral matters. They teach that ideas in and of themselves are not dangerous. “A heresy restricted to one’s private meditations is not a true heresy.” Some in your order even preach the odious doctrine of moral relativism. Still, it is not your sect, per se, that is my concern. I once knew a curate of your order who spent a year among the Ur-Obun on an “anthropological grant.” The Church paid for this expedition, yet when he returned the unfortunate sinner was parroting the Ur-Obun’s dubious, animistic philosophies. That a primitive race such as they would have anything to offer the Universal Church beyond their admittedly technically proficient art is a notion more foolish than heretical. (And, yes, I detect something of their style in the sketches you sent me.) Their work is currently en vogue among certain Byzantine nobles. But enough; I trust I have made my point. I believe I need not fear you becoming a tree-worshipping pagan.

Still, one of your acquaintances is Ur-Ukar, is she not? In your letter you quoted to me some of her no doubt endless homespun wisdom. If the Ur-Obun are dangerous only in thought, the Ur-Ukar are dangerous in thought and deed. Despite our ministrations among them, many remain malcontents, saboteurs and murderers. They live in the sewers and feed on filth. I have known a respectable Ur-Ukar or two in my time, but few have found the light of the Pancreator, despite the words they so readily mouth. If nothing else, I suggest you hide your relationship to me while you are among them. There are many of their number who would ransom or kill you just to strike a blow against the Holy Church and me.

There are many such pitfalls throughout the Empire for one such as you. Alien fallacies and human perversions are rampant. All this despite the benign efforts of the Church, of which (I will again remind you), you are still a member. As a youth I too met with many such temptations. Cleverly wrought sophistry and salacious lies conjured by honeyed tongues can divert even the most devout believers from the true faith. You were always an intelligent youth; you excelled in all but a few of the Church’s disciplines, and I admit that your accomplishments filled me with a sense of pride. It is because of this that your recent sea-change in attitude proves so vexing to me. Intelligence, however, is no defense against the many false paths of knowledge. Indeed, promises of false wisdom bait some of the surest traps. Others are baited with more fleshly, worldly desires. Your order’s overemphasis on the Prophet’s sermons on questing make you particularly vulnerable to such snares. You were ever an obstinate heretic in your quest for knowledge; I read little in your letter to allay my

fears in this regard.

It is not easy to watch the child one cared for as a son defy all that one has taught him. Unthankful child. So I saw you then; so I see you now. I will further note that your conversion has caused me some small political discomfort in my administration of the Holy See. Still, I will give you what you so guardedly asked for — my forgiveness. In answer to your conditions on my forgiveness, however, I must add one of my own. As I must extend you my forgiveness without your contrition, so too must you accept my forgiveness without my approval. I ask not for your repentance; for I see that you are not yet ready to do so. There are places on the roads between the stars where I fear this lack of penitence and humility will serve you ill. I say this, not as some sinister veiled threat, but as a simple observance of spiritual truth.

I look at you and I see myself at your age. I was young, brash and so sure that I was on the threshold of all the secrets of the universe. They called it hubris, and so it was. The old father at Saint Horace's shook that out of me soon enough. I went to the Cloud Caves against temple law. The old father caught and rightly punished me, for the caves were filled with carnivorous rats the size of Bannockburn hounds. He put a penance on me, greater than any I have ever laid at your door. Still, I learned a great lesson that day: The hand that chastises also protects.

And so I come, at last, to your question of what I say to my flock. Do I give them the "standard canon," that their sins are in some way responsible for the darkening skies? That we humans, as a race, are not in some way responsible is inconceivable to me. Can it be that you doubt this truth? During the Second Republic we spat our contempt to the heavens. "See?" we said. "We have conquered all the powers of nature. We have controlled the force of earthquakes and storms with our terraforming engines and weather control satellites. Behold! We are no longer merely beasts imbued with a divine spark; we are ourselves divine!" The Pancreator justly punished us for this blasphemy, just as the Prophet foretold. The Pancreator notices the fall of the smallest dust mote on the most dead and distant world. Think you that he does not see the wickedness in the human heart? A heretic may hide his sins from his community, his family and even himself, but not from the all-seeing eye of Creation.

You are knowledgeable in the arts of rhetoric and debate. The Prophet said "quest," and so you do. The Prophet said: "A sun must burn to birth light. When your passion burns, you give off light." You take this as an admonition against what you see as the burdensome responsibilities of order and tradition. You, like many who follow this new Emperor, misinterpret the Prophet's teachings on the Quest. The Prophet spoke not of an outward seeking passion, nor was he a proponent of a dubious quest for "self-enlighten-

ment." The Prophet spoke of a passion for building the one true Church, so that all throughout the Known Worlds may know the divine touch of the Pancreator. Humans are creatures of two instincts, one base and profane, the other divine. If the Church must discipline its flock to save their souls, so be it. If, as you said, many ignore the "petty" laws of the Church — what of it? Dereliction of duty by the weak should in no way dictate the actions of a man of conscience. At the end of all things, our souls must be in right order, before the final judgment of the Pancreator.

But again, enough. I will not rebut your letter point for point. You no doubt view it as your "Manifesto of Freedom" against the stifling old ways. I wrote many such documents in my own youth; they molder even now in the great cathedral vaults beneath my feet. No, the impetuosity of youth will in no way admit to the wisdom of age in its quest for "truth." I understand, perhaps even envy, the unbridled freedom that you believe your travels afford you. You must, in the final analysis, make your own mistakes (although many Inquisitors may be less lenient in their judgment). As long as you remain true to the ideals of the Universal Church, I will strive to protect you as best I can. I do this out of a love for my dearly departed sister, and because of a lingering belief that you may yet become a productive member of the Church. I have spoken with Bishop Vestrus. He assures me that his parish is still open to you, despite the unfortunate events surrounding your final parting with him.

If not, you are set on an altogether more dangerous path than any I ever attempted. You have traveled much, from Midian to Leminkainen. If you in any way still heed my word, then take heed of this: Midian is a relatively stable world, Leminkainen less so. Yet, still you have not walked the dark paths. There are planets, and you know of which ones I speak, that are far more treacherous than any you have yet encountered. As you and the Prophet said: "Darkness walks among the stars." I have had visions of hidden hands at work throughout the Known Worlds. I fear that a time of great tribulation is upon us. There are nightmare paths, some unknown to the Charioteers or the lower castes of your order. Questing does not mean the reckless courting of needless dangers. If you walk these cursed paths, you pass beyond the borders of all help and I will not be able to aid you.

You are, no doubt, tested by my old man's warnings. So I will end by allaying at least one of the fears addressed in your letter. I bear you no animosity for the choices you have made... thus far. I may still feel the brunt of your rejection of Orthodoxy, but if you repent it must be to yourself and to the Pancreator. If your path should bring you to the seat of the Empire, you will find my door open to you.

Your Uncle,
 Marcus Aurelius Palamon
 Archbishop, Byzantium Secundus

Sins of the Past

October 31st, 4996 (Holy Terra calendar)

Since it always calms my nerves to compose in my journal, I undertake to do so now, for rarely has my need for calm been so great or my nerves so aflame. For so long have I heard the priests who tutored me condemn crime and the criminal, painting with words a picture of terror for he who commits such an error. Never did I think while a youth in the rectory that such a litany would be turned against me.

I am now faced with the moral quandary Julia Abrams mockingly warned me of when first we joined company in the entourage of Lady Erian Li Halan. “Wipe the mother’s milk from your lip, priest,” she had said, “If you travel with us, you’re going to break all the rules.”

I smiled then, used to such airs of superiority from working class freemen, who seemed convinced that only they knew the ways of the worlds and that only their feet were not weary from walking them. “Let not thy vows to Mother Church be forsaken, and all resistance will yield to thee,” I quoted, so confident, even though the Avestites were then on our heels. But I knew that their hunt was only political. At least, it was then. I fear our actions have made it otherwise. I have broken my vows to Mother Church and touched the sleek and cold brilliance of technology, risking my soul in the act, and the souls of others in my care.

My sojourn into sin began when Earl Sebastian Hazat de Aragon made loan to Lady Erian of a starship in his family’s care. He did so in return for my liege’s later favor in an as yet undisclosed matter. The vexing charity of the nobility is best left unaccepted, but we were in dire need of transport to Kurga, for on that embattled world was rumored to be a long-buried secret vital to House Li Halan. Possession of this secret could very well restore land to Lady Erian.

We took possession of the craft with Julia Abrams as pilot. Even though we had traveled far already in her company and had become fast friends, sharing life and death struggles together, she proved her guild ties once we were in the craft. A loud argument ensued when she raised the matter of compensation for her piloting the craft. She dared to ask her boon companions — nay, the Lady who succored her — for money. The guilds bathe in such filth, preferring the clink of coin to life-giving water. The matter was finally resolved when all of us threatened in return to charge her for our once-freely given aid in future matters. She relented and consented to pilot the craft in return for a share of any profit our group’s endeavors might one day yield.

I shall perhaps later add an entry concerning our jour-

ney though the vast spaces between Aragon and her jumpgate, and the void which awaited us on the other side of that gate. But I am eager to address the matter of which I now write — of technology and its misuse in the eyes of the Church, and the rabid hate invoked in those whose mission it is to guard the faithful from such sin. My sin.

We landed on Kurga undetected, for the Hazat and the Kurgan rebels were fully engaged in bitter warfare at the gates of the capitol, a battle which, as with many others in that location before, would come to naught but death for many soldiers with victory for none. The capitol stood firm.

Far from it, in the deep forests to the north, we landed our craft near the spot to which our data had led us. From a long-slumbering think machine on Aylon I had retrieved a map of this very place, detailing from a millennia ago the city which once thrived here, but was now swallowed by root and loam, canopied by leaf and vine.

Such wilderness expeditions were not unknown to us, and our Vorox companion, Onganggorak, led us through the winding paths to the remains of a structure wherein rested our secret find. After digging a while to gain egress, we traveled by fusion torch light through corridors untouched for generations. After nearly a day of such travel, with many false turns and dead-end alleys, we finally came to the vast vault.

I gasped in astonishment at what lay before us. I had seen weapons of war before, but rarely so grand as these. They stood in perfect ranks, unblemished by the centuries, perfect metal cannons of destruction such as have never been seen by the faithful souls of our modernday Empire. Such Second Republic monsters could only have been crafted by godless men, who knew not compunction or remorse for the horrors their metal children wrought.

It was our mission to retrieve one of these beasts, of the same design and type clearly once used by the Li Halan long ago when they had secured their fiefs from the sinful Republicans. But as I looked upon them now, I shuddered, and remembered the legends of the early Li Halan, how they had made pacts with demons and slaughtered their enemies with such ferocity as to make the Pancreator weep. I knew doubt then. Could I aid even my sworn liege in this task? To return to the Known Worlds with such weaponry? Surely, to hand over this technology would return Erian to the graces of her family — but to what use would it then be put? These things could only deliver horror and soul-death. Oh, the Emperor Wars had been one long night of terror for too many, with similar rediscovered weaponry shifting the balance of power for each house who discovered them. What if these weapons convinced the Li Halan that they could defy the power of the new Emperor?

I pleaded with Erian to realize what we had done, and to leave these things untouched, to destroy the data which had brought us here. But she was flush with the power of these things, and heeded me not.

Even with the burns that now pain my arm, I thank the Pancreator for the delivery of his punishment then.

We were fools to think that the Avestites had not followed us here. Ong had said too much in public under the influence of drink, and word had spread of our goal. They burst into the room brandishing flameguns and screaming their litany of seizure.

Of course, we all resisted. We hid behind the monstrous carcasses of the cannons and fired our weapons while they fired theirs. But it was a short fight, for Erian was struck when her shield burned out. We pleaded surrender, knowing that because Erian was noble, they would have to return her for trial rather than let her die here. There was always the hope of escape then.

While I ministered to her wound under their watchful gaze, they demanded that Julia show them the workings of the cannons. She refused at first, but their brands convinced her flesh, and her resolve soon followed.

Let what bad words I said of the guildsmembers earlier be mitigated by my thankful admiration for their cleverness — as dangerous as it is. They are all trained in the art of talking, used to befuddle their customers so that they might sell faulty merchandise for good price before the dupe is aware of what he has bought. Such a gift served Julia here, as she maneuvered the Avestites to inspect the mouth of the cannon as she pressed the remote control unit she had pocketed during the firefight.

The ensuing chaos allowed us to escape down a side tunnel, which Ong collapsed behind us to stifle pursuit. I followed in a daze, ashamed at my extreme relief. Like a child who had avoided punishment, I was elated — but great Pancreator, others suffered in my stead.

I can never forget the sight of the Avestites blown apart by the fires belched forth from the metal beast, asleep for so many years, awakened now at an instant to destroy all in its path — including its own brethren, standing in ranks

before it. The fellow cannons' screams pained the ears. They did not go gentle to their doom, for the fires in their innards erupted outward, released from their long captivity by ruptured steel.

It was only the fire-retardant robes of the Avestite which stood before me that prevented my burning in the blight. He burned for me. My clothes were alit and my skin hot, but I was alive. Ong's fur was singed terribly, as was Erian's clothing, but our fear helped us ignore the pain as we bolted from that fiery chamber.

We suffered two days without food or water in the winding caverns before finding escape from that tomb. Our craft was still where we had left it, although the Avestites had tried to search it. Of them, there was no sign. Did any survive the conflagration? I pray for their sakes and ours that the answer is no.

I have received a harsh lesson, and one which I will endeavor to heed. But not so my companions. Erian has resolved to not give up her search for similar engines of her family's past. Julia is positively ecstatic about the power she wielded with but the movement of her thumb on a switch. Cardanzo, Erian's bodyguard, has sworn to be more cautious around such technology, but has developed no fear of it. Only Onganggorak has realized the full import of what we have seen. Bred among little technology, on a world where only one's own strength can prevail over others, he rightly fears what destruction can be wielded with such machines.

I have thought deeply on this but have no easy answers. It was such technology that aided Alexius in his ascent, and I am not one to deny the greater good he now delivers to us. Indeed, I write this from inside a cocoon of metal speeding through the void towards a machine greater than any yet conceived, the jumpgate of the Annunaki. The Prophet admired such space quests, yet abjured the cannons we have seen. He knew the terrible, seductive temptation to use them.

I am only a young priest, but I know that technology is a greater force than I, awakening desires within me and others to remake the worlds in images not of my choosing.

On Meeting a Noble

Nobles are most perplexing. My time in Lady Erian Li Halan's service has taught me that, but offered little insight otherwise. I have not the upbringing to fathom their thoughts, and thus their deeds remain largely unpredictable to me. I live by the guidelines of the Prophet, with compassion before all. They have other... priorities. I say this not to diminish them. How can one such as I, a novice in a small and ill-famed order, through word or deed ever tarnish those of noble blood? If, as some say, they were born to their high peak by the Pancreator's will, then the words of those below them can mean little, even those words blessed to reach them past the furious winds which blow at such heights.

No, I in no way infer a political statement behind my musings. I simply wonder at times. If but a few nobles could put aside their obsessive duties and place the well being of their charges first in their hearts, then perhaps the darkness which devours the suns would not seem so cold to those who suffer in its dimming light.

Perhaps I had best give example before my confusing thoughts yield heresy.

I had returned with Erian and her entourage to Vera Cruz after our harrowing expedition to the barbarian world of Kurga, of which I will say no more here. We were forced to abandon our starship for fear that it would lead the Inquisitors to us. We set out on beastback to hide ourselves in the remote mountains for a time, hoping the Inquisitors would turn their hunt to another world, figuring we had moved on. With minimal supplies, we left the last settlement listed on our maps and went to the wilderness.

We soon found that the maps were wrong. Drawn up and made available by noble decree, they omitted what the nobility hid in shame.

Two days into our journey, with no sign of any village or even a manor house, we came upon a field of peasant workers. I know they saw us, but they nonetheless pretended they had not. We could hear a commotion up the road, concealed around a bend. By the furtive glances the peasants gave this area, I knew it was the source of their fear.

We rounded the corner and saw a cruel scene. A man was on the ground, writhing in the mud and grunting in pain, suffering the terrible lashes of a whip, which was thrashed wildly by a stripling in noble garb.

I acted without thinking and only later realized how foolish it was. My compassion got the better of me, but I endangered my Lady with it. Without even considering that the victim of such torture might be a criminal who deserved this treatment, I jumped off my horse and ran to him. I grasped the long tail of the whip as it was drawn back

before it could strike again, and yelled in anger at the startled boy who held it.

His eyes widened in shock but he quickly recovered, snarled at me, and sent me reeling with a backhand. I flopped into the mud alongside the whipping victim, and immediately felt the lash myself. Oh, I will never understand how the man beside me withstood 10 lashings let alone one without crying like a babe from the sheer pain of it. I could not withstand the one lash, and did cry out.

There did not come another. When I opened my teary eyes, the noble boy was lying in the mud before me, unhorsed himself. Beyond him stood Erian, sword drawn.

"Get up, boy," she said. "If you would dare to strike a member of my entourage — a priest, for Prophet's sake — then you would surely be bold enough to settle the matter properly. Draw your blade!"

The boy scowled at her with a most ugly expression. Indeed, he looked the most ill-bred of any noble I have yet seen. But he certainly had reflexes, for he was up with sword drawn in a second, with his steel aimed straight for Erian's throat.

She casually tapped the thrust aside and flicked her blade at his wrist, drawing a thin line of blood. His scowled deepened, if it can be imagined, and he began a hail of blows, all easily parried by my Lady.

I looked to Cardanzo, Erian's bodyguard, who had not even dismounted. He sat on his horse smirking. I knew Erian was in no danger. Few men can size up an opponent as quickly as Cardanzo, and if he saw no danger for our Lady, then there was none.

I picked myself up and bent down to attend to the poor wretch I had attempted to save from misery. The clang of swords continued behind me as I examined the man. The lashes had cut deep in some areas, now splattered with mud. He would need washing and a bed to properly heal.

I turned to watch the duel in time to see it end. Erian, finally tired of toying with the boy, disarmed him and sent his blade flying into the field. A few peasants ran from the spot at which it landed, afraid to be near it. The boy was panting and exhausted, but his anger seethed from him, hot enough to warm a small hut on a cold winter's night.

"Admit your defeat, boy," Erian said. "Or fetch your blade for more."

The boy growled and ran to his sword. He was soon back, hacking furiously at Erian, who was actually surprised and somewhat angry now herself.

Anger is the great undoer. He pushes us to precipices we would rather not fall from.

Erian struck out and sliced the boy's forearm, not enough to cripple, but enough to end his days as a duelist

for a long time. As he fell to the ground screaming and clutching his wounded arm, horse's hooves sounded loudly on the road ahead. In moments, a horse rounded the bend and stopped short, kicking mud up into the air.

A wild, blacktressed demoness leapt from the mount and marched toward the boy. Never have I seen such an impressive lady or such a seething anger. But I could not tell at whom it was directed — the boy or us?

She said nothing but I could tell by the way the boy's eyes beseeched her that she was his mother. She looked at the wound in contempt and then turned her attention to Erian.

"You have wounded my son, lady," she said. "Are you prepared to stand trial for restitution?"

"I'll do no such thing," Erian cried. "I had just right to challenge your boy. You'd know that for sure, but then, you're the one who raised him to strike priests!"

"I raised him no such way!" the lady yelled. "Defend your actions then!" She drew sword and waited for Erian.

I could not believe this. I had thought the matter swiftly ended, but here was yet another noble seeking yet another duel. And Erian, without a moment's hesitation, gave it to her.

Their swords flashed in the light of the coming sunset as they paced about each other, each seeking the other's measure. I looked to Cardanzo to see that he had left his mount and now watched the battle intently. By the way his eyes never wavered from the blades, I knew that Erian had perhaps met her match. All because I had foolishly acted, creating a chain of events which inevitably led to this, vendetta upon vendetta.

Fear gripped my heart, for I knew that my Lady's energy shield was inoperative, for our fusion batteries had long since run out. I could not allow this! I cried out: "Hold your sword! My lady is at a disadvantage — I can see that you have an energy shield while she does not!"

"Still your tongue, Alustro!" Erian yelled.

But her opponent stepped back and dropped her blade. "Good priest, I thank you. I would not have it be said that my accouterments won a battle rather than my hand. I remove my shield." She unhooked an elaborate brooch which she wore on her cloak, and placed it in her saddlebags. "Now, have at you!" she yelled and engaged Erian.

I prayed for my Lady, using no theurgy or rite which was unseemly to a duel, but with the simple means of faith instead. If she was in the right, surely the Pancreator would grant her victory. I winced as the first full strike hit steel, sending a clang echoing across the field. The peasants had all stopped their work and were staring gape-jawed at the fight.

Swords moved so swiftly I could not mark the battle. Parry became riposte, becoming feint and then slash, punctuated by moments of supernal stillness, then broken once

again by flashing blades. Both combatants were nicked and bloody, but with no major wounds on either side.

But as the sun moved closer to the horizon and the sky grew red, the mysterious lady's face grew softer, and her grim expression slowly became a smile, which rose to her eyes. Then, she drew back and raised her sword for truce.

"You fight well, lady," she said. "We are both tired and have not yet got the full measure of the other. What say we call a truce and end this duel?"

"I accept your terms," Erian, panting, replied. "You fight most well indeed. It would seem we are both the match for the other. I doubt that even another hour of dueling would decide the outcome."

The swordswoman laughed. "True. True, indeed. It is rare to meet such an accomplished and honorable noble in these parts. Would you return with me to my manor and be my guest? I am most curious about you now, and would be offended were you to refuse."

How odd! She had wanted to soundly thrash my lady moments before. Now, her rage was turned to... affection? The offer seemed to be most genuine, with no hint of guile behind it, and I am glad my Lady accepted it, for we had as yet no place to stay for the night.

But our host's boy was not happy about the offer. He scowled at his mother, climbed on his mount, and rode off down the road. I was surprised to see that she cared little about his actions, even rolling her eyes as if to suggest to us that the boy was overly dramatic in his actions. Most perplexing, indeed.

The manor was but a mile up the road. Not the richest lodging we had seen, but it was most comfortable. The lady had even graciously helped me to place the wounded peasant on my mount and offered her churgeon to aid him. Thus, I joined our entourage at supper a bit late, as I took it upon myself to ensure that the wounded man was put to bed well. As I entered the dining room, I was greeted with laughter and joy. Our hostess was listening to some of Erian's tales of our lighter adventures, and she seemed fully caught up in the humor of them. A most remarkable change from earlier.

"Ah, Alustro," Erian said as I sat down, "Is all well with your charge?"

"Yes, my Lady," I replied. "He will do fine. His wounds will heal aright." Our host's face darkened somewhat as I said this, not out of anger, but shame.

"Our gracious host, Baroness Shariza Hazat de Laguna, has explained the incident to us," Erian said.

"But I owe an explanation to the priest, also," the baroness said. "My son learned only the ways of cruelty from my husband. He knows not how to treat the serfs in a manner befitting the Pancreator's creations. Had you not already intervened, and had it not been a matter of family

honor to defend him before strangers, I would have lashed him with his own whip. Of all the misery my dishonored husband left me, he is the worst.”

“I... I am sorry, baroness,” I stammered.

“Why? It is not your doing. No, my husband chose to betray his liege during the wars, and in return his widow is given only the least of his manors on the least — and now last — of his lands, a prisoner far from society where she can no longer harm his reputation.”

It seemed to me that her exile perhaps had less to do with her husband than with her own outspoken manner. She seemed a great lady, but in the fashion of many nobles, greatness leads to great enemies. Indeed, as the night went on, we talked long about our exploits and listened intently to hers. She and Erian had built a bond of sorts on the field which only grew tighter as time passed. They had so much in common, both wronged by their royal connections.

We stayed at the Baroness Shariza Hazat de Laguna’s manor for a week. During that time, Erian cemented a friendship it seems will last a lifetime. Rarely were those

two apart, talking always about noble affairs and how to overturn their bad fortunes. By the end of our stay, we knew we had an ally for whenever we needed it. I don’t think Erian wanted to leave when we did, for the baroness was the first compatriot she had met since her exile. But the vision afforded by the Gargoyle of Nowhere drove us on.

The whole affair was most perplexing, even if it did have good outcome. How can the shattering sound of steel upon steel lead to such a true friendship? Most people make their friends in more civil ways, but it seems that nobles must first ascertain the power of another before they can be unguarded before them. Is this any basis for true human companionship?

Perhaps its the truest and most enduring basis. I hope not. It would be a crueler world than I imagine if all human interaction was reduced to hierarchies of power. But then again, there is surely evil out to thwart all good people. Perhaps only in the heat of such passion, tested where there is little chance for guile, can we truly come to know another.

Tall Tales

"Hell, I've got the scar to prove it!"

"I understand the trophy value of these wounds," I said, "but they are not healthy. At least, not in such number. Surely so much scar tissue must lead to health complications later on in life. If you anticipated such dangers, why did you not travel with a trained physick, or at least learn something of the arts of healing yourself, so that you could properly bind your own wounds?"

"I did pretty damn good by myself, son," Foote said, holding his head high. "But for this one — the jagged tear in my bicep opened up by that grackle fox — I didn't have any thread. I had to use the sinews of the grackle itself. Almost fainted from blood loss by the time I'd skinned him enough to get at the tough cords. If I didn't have my Martech Gold with me, never would've cut through it at all. That's stuff's tough! A knife'll go dull before slicing a grackle fox's guts up!"

I looked at my companions. Cardanzo nodded knowingly, as if Foote had stated some eternal verity. Even Ong nodded eagerly. Grackle foxes were native to his world; he surely had some experience in such matters. If he agreed, perhaps it was so. But I felt it more likely that the beast served the same purpose for Vorox hunters that it did now for Gabriel — a prey whose capture is greater in the telling than in the deed.

It was Julia who introduced us to Gabriel. She knew him from her apprentice days among the Charioteers. Actually, we had all heard of him. Who in the Known Worlds has not? The famed Captain Foote and his exploits for the guilds are well-told tales throughout the Known Worlds, providing proof of the virtues of heroism and duty. Of course, the occasional parish priest sermonizes against Foote, fearful that his exploits will provide example for fools to venture forth to the stars, and thus meet useless deaths on distant worlds. But his reputation was enshrined in most houses.

But now that I had met the legend, I thought him a blowhard. Most of his stories were sheer illusion, tall tales which — amazingly — everyone seemed to believe. Even my Lady, Erian Li Halan, was genuinely excited at meeting a man who, in most circumstances, would be her social inferior to an extreme degree. But she treated him with the deference due a count. For such he was, in her mind and the minds of others. A hero, regardless of actual worldly rank and station, is often considered a *de facto* lord.

And here this lord sat, on his well-worn bench in the Rampant Gurdvulf, the throne on which he gave audience to his visitors. The requirements for admission to such an audience? As much alcohol as the lord requested. And should the well run dry, the audience would end, the sup-

plicants sent on their way to make room for the next batch. Such is the life of retirement for Captain Gabriel Foote, former pilot and explorer.

We had already been overlong on Criticorum when Julia heard word of Foote and his night roost. Now, we had spent another three nights here, plying Foote with liquor in return for tales of his exploits. The longer we stayed in one place, the closer the Inquisition would come. But Foote assured us that no Inquisitor would dare step foot in this district of Nueva Janeiro. So far, he was correct. But could we risk an exception to his rule?

My Lady believed the risk worth the prize, for she had grown up hearing of Foote's legendary adventurers, told among the noble youth of Midian when their instructors were not listening. Such exciting stories, especially ones about a guildsman, were not considered proper for Li Halan lords and ladies, but they heard them nonetheless, spread by the children of householders, whose connection to the bustling world outside the palace was greater. For my Lady, Foote was a childhood hero, and she was proud to meet him. His slovenly ways and colorful language seemed only to reinforce his legend.

And so we listened to Foote. How many exploits can one man possible have? His seemed innumerable.

"Julia," Foote said, "Didn't you say you'd been to Nowhere?"

"Yeah," Julia replied. "We saw that Gargoyle thing in the desert. Erian and Alustro got some weird dreams after seeing it."

"Visions," I said. "We both had the same true vision."

"Okay, right," Julia said. "But we've been there. Why?"

"I've been there, too," Foote said. "Saw the Gargoyle also. I didn't get a vision, but my passenger did."

We all waited as he took a swig of ale. He certainly knew the art of suspense, purposefully pausing at just the right point in his narrative.

"Whatever it was he saw lit a fire under his butt," Foote continued. "We were off again the next day, hurrying to Shaprut. Over the journey, he wouldn't tell anyone about it or why we were going to Shaprut. When we landed a week later —"

"A week?!" Julia said. "From Nowhere to Shaprut? That's at least half a month's journey, what with the time it takes to get to the gates—"

"Well, we had a fast ship."

"Fast is one thing, but that's not even counting the shakedown you get from the Stigmata Garrison before they let you take the jump out of the Stigmata system. How'd you avoid that?"

Foote shrugged. "The regent could go where he wanted,

when he wanted.”

“Regent! You mean Alexius was your passenger! No way!”

Foote smiled. “Ask anybody in the guild, Julia. I served as the regent’s pilot for three years. Luckily, I went freelance before he crowned himself Emperor. Things would have gotten a bit hot even for my taste.”

I rolled my eyes, but Julia saw me.

“All right, Alustro,” she said. “I’m sick of your attitude. Gabriel’s been an excellent host to us, yet you seem bored. Or disgusted. I can’t tell which. What the hell’s the problem?”

I gave her a glare. How dare she say this in front of Foote! I did not wish to openly insult the man, but I could not lie about my feelings once asked directly. “I am most grateful for your time and entertainment, Captain Foote.”

“Gabriel, please,” Foote said, “I’m retired now, and my first name’s good enough for friends.” He flashed a smile which seemed to charm them all. Friends of the great Gabriel Foote. What a high honor.

“Gabriel. Thank you,” I said. “But... Well... It just seems so... elaborate.”

Foote raised a single eyebrow.

“I mean... You seem to have done an awful lot of things. So many things...”

Everyone was looking at me now, staring me down, telling me with intent alone not to say what I was about to say.

“They cannot all be true. These are tall tales.”

“Alustro!” Erian said. “How dare you!”

Foote chuckled. “Can’t fool a confessor, I guess. Of course some of it’s overblown, priest. Tales grow in the telling even if you don’t mean them to. Do you think your friends here don’t know that? Only a fool would take it all at face value. But I tell you this: the important things happened. I did fly for Alexius, for a time. Were we friends? No. I doubt he’d even remember me. Hell, boy! Ask me anything about any place you know and I’ll bet I’ve been there. Go ahead, ask.”

I frowned, but thought for a moment. “Pentateuch. Have you been there?”

“Ha! Of course.”

“Then surely you visited Heliopolis. In which quarter is the Basilica?”

“Son, anybody could answer that question even if they’d never been there. Let me ask you: Have you been in the Sirocco from atop Mount Tabor?”

“No. And you have?”

“Aye, I have. An old friend of mine led me there — we went through flight school together here on Criticorum when we were as wet behind the ears as you were. He’s a Marabout now. Saw the World Fire and it changed his life. Out of remembrance for our youth, he took me there when

I asked him to. I waited for three nights and nothing happened. I gave up and left.

“But on the way down, the storm came. Next I knew, I was in the desert, miles from where I’d been standing, my friend and pack beast no where to be seen. I had to walk without water or food for three more days before I came across the Ur-Obun pilgrims train. But I did it without complaint. I’d seen something in that storm. Something I’ve never talked about to anyone. But I’ll tell you. As naive as you are in the ways of people and the worlds, I think you’d understand this best of all — begging the Lady’s forgiveness, of course, but she’s not a priest and you are.”

He leaned forward, staring intently at me. All the bluster had left him, and he seemed instantly sober, as if his drunken cheer was all just in jest. Despite my earlier feelings, I had a slight chill. He seemed to be in the grip of some deep passion as he spoke about his holy experience. I could not help but respect it.

“I saw myself in the cockpit of my ship, flying through an atmospheric storm. My instruments were out and it was too dark to steer by sight. I was freaking out, flying wild. Then my navigator told me to fly by instinct, that faith in myself would get me through this. And he was right. I calmed down and just flew like there was nothing I couldn’t fly through. Next thing I knew, the storm cleared, and the sun broke through, so bright I had to squint. It felt like victory. And only then did I remember that I don’t have a navigator — I fly alone.

“I looked at the seat next to me and there was this pilot, smiling at me. I knew he was a pilot, ‘cause he had on flight gear, except it was old, like they used to wear a long, long time ago. He said that only when everybody could trust themselves enough to weather any storm would the light of the sun shine bright enough to blind us. I knew then who it was. I can tell by the look on your face that you also know.”

“Yes,” I said in awe. “Saint Paulus. Those were the words the Prophet spoke to him after he had safely flown through the terrible storms of Manitou, before the Prophet made his final journey. But this is not in the Omega Gospels! It appears only in the apocryphal scripture of Darius, apprentice to Paulus after the Prophet’s death. Only the Eskatonic Order keeps this scripture and they do not reveal it to the unordained. How did you know this?”

“I certainly didn’t read it in your books. It was what the World Fire gave me. And it changed by life. You think I’d travel to all those worlds and get into all the trouble I told you about because I like it? What kind of idiot prefers getting shot at, stabbed, chased, locked in dungeons or possessed by demons just for the fun of it? I was questing, son, because the Prophet demanded it. Only out there, among the stars, was the answer to my fate.

“Only on worlds unseen by other men, in places

damned by priests and peasants, did the answer to my destiny lie. And I wasn't alone. It was my going to such places that led me to Alexius's service. My time with him saw some of the strangest things I've yet seen. Weird things which I'm under vow not to tell of — a vow which I'll keep. You don't break an oath to the Emperor. Hell, if he hadn't gone questing, he wouldn't be Emperor now and we'd probably have some Decados or Hazat pig ruling us all.

"And my travels weren't all heroic, either. There was a lot of misery, too. And heartbreak. Times of such despair that I'd liked to have killed myself — and I almost did, taking risks no sane man would. But I survived it all, lived to tell of it. And the telling's just as important as the doing. When someone hears about such quests, it's sort of like they're participating in them, even when they're just sitting on a barstool farting. What's the difference between questing in the body and questing in the mind? It's questing either way. 'As long as our hearts are ever expanding to distant orbits.'"

"Paulus 23:5," I said.

"I'm not just telling stories, I'm telling sermons. Parables of sorts about the places I've been and what they

mean to me. What they could mean to others. If it gets even one person up off his butt to find out what's what — what his purpose is — then it's not a lie."

I nodded, beginning to understand. Gabriel Foote was no priest and no lord. He sought to change the world the only way he knew how: through example.

"It is true that our own experiences would not be believed even were I tell them with no art whatsoever," I said.

"But the secret of storytelling," Foote said, "is to weave the truth with a little art — even with a lie. If the art's good enough, they'll want to believe it with all their hearts. The Prophet knew that. When you tell folks about your own adventures — and you will, come time — remember that." He sat back and winked at Julia. "Sorry I never told you any of this. I hope you understand."

Julia nodded. "Oh, I understand."

And I, too, finally understood Julia's fondness for the man. His deeds light the way for us. Without the possibility of great deeds, what use are our travails? Is our suffering and hardship simply for naught? Or can we forge from them something worthy of the telling?

Visions

For too long have I delayed writing of the two most significant events in my life. I feared to put them into words lest their power disappear like a dream upon the morning. But over the years and months since, they remain with me, as powerful as when I first experienced them. The vision from my youth and the dream of the Gargoyle of Nowhere have changed me, and I cannot yet say where they shall take me.

I am aware that these things are uncomfortable to many, who would rather not read such intimate portraits of another's inner life when they are often too confused to read their own. Faith — even quiet, enduring faith — unnerves many, for they either equate it with foolery or with the fires of the punishing Inquisition. Most would prefer to leave spiritual matters to experts. If this is so for you, reader, then read no further. For I will write of naked experience and the raw power of the Pancreator. If such beliefs make you nervous, turn the pages and return to matters more mundane.

When I was little, I was fed on the bread and milk of the Church. Raised in pious fashion on Midian, I knew no other ambition than that of the vestry. My dear, sweet mother wished only ordination for me, as did my well-placed uncle, none other than the Archbishop of Byzantium Secundus. But the Pancreator often has his own goals for our futures, and reveals them in his own time.

I was 14 years old when I took vows and received my novitiates' robes. My family connections ushered me in early to such duties, for my friends were still altar boys and cantors. I was neither bothered by this, nor was I overjoyed. My career in the Church was a given, not something I looked forward to with any excitement nor misgiving. This changed in the gardens of Lady Tara Li Halan.

Walking there alone one afternoon on a gray day, I came upon a dying wuweï bird. The mokuto neko which had mauled it slipped away as I came down the path, leaving the bird to weakly flutter in fear and pain. I bent down to watch its last moments, more from curiosity than compassion. Dying animals are no rare occurrence. But as I watched its weak struggles, I realized that my presence caused it only more pain. Foolishly, I reached down to stroke it, hoping to allay its fears. Birds, of course, do not like being petted. I do not know what I was thinking. Stupid boy.

Then, a remarkable thing occurred. The bird stilled, not yet dead, but calm, as if it accepted my weak gesture of peace. Its eyes looked into mine and I saw in them an inner light. Indeed, I now saw a light limned about its entire tiny body, a warm glow which spread outward. As I watched, my vision became clearer, as if fogs rolled aside

so that I could truly see, for the first time, another being in its full glory. The light radiated out and met another brilliance, a deeper, brighter light descending from above. When the lights met, the entire area was suffused with the glow, spreading all around, engulfing me within it.

I gasped. Light now escaped from me, as if a furnace burned in my breast and my flesh could not contain the glow. I looked again at the dying bird and saw its light burst from its heart and shoot into the sky. As it disappeared into the heavy clouds, the radiance around me dimmed and returned to gray. My own light retreated within once more.

I was exhausted. The world returned to its previous state. The fog rolled in again, concealing the secret luminosity of the world. The bird's body lay unmoving, a dead husk.

I believe that I was gifted with a vision of the Pancreator's Descent of Grace, and the Luminous Return to the Empyrean of one of its divine creatures. But the experience was different from what I was taught by my Orthodox tutors. For the bird had revealed a flame within itself — and its display had in turn revealed to me my own light, drawn outward by the Pancreator's presence.

This holy vision changed my entire outlook on my career, my very life. Yet I could not tell my teachers, for it departed too far from their doctrines. I knew even then, as a young boy, that my vision was truer than the theology carried in books over a millennia. I knew then and there that I would eventually leave my order to join the Eskatonics, whose own doctrines spoke of the very thing I had experienced.

I have since spoken with many priests, my age and older, and discovered that such a vision as was afforded me is rare. Most travel through life with no such experience, relying only on faith as proof of the Pancreator. I understood why the Church was important to them; it was their only experience of the divine, mediated through the accounts of those who had touched Creation. I knew how truly blessed I was, that I had received what so many others have not. I did not need books and debates; the truth of the Pancreator resided in my memory, in my soul.

But I also knew that to count my self above them for such a gift was wrong, and would lead only to hubris. To the contrary, I believed myself humbled. Why was such vision afforded me? Surely it meant that I must perform a duty for the Pancreator, to give my life in service to him. I began to envy those who were blind to visions, for they could choose their courses as they saw fit, with no divine prodding to sway them. I began to question all my actions in the light of my vision. I was paralyzed with indecision,

lest I choose wrongly.

Only time has allayed such fears in me. Only the rhythms of the mundane over the months and years have brought me to a sense of peace with my self. I must trust my heart, my own light. Why else was my burning heart shown to me if not for this meaning, that the truth lies within?

But I could not forget the heavens, to which the dying soul of the bird had fled. My yearning for the stars and for questing began there. It is still strong in me. It is this yearning and the memory of that early vision which prepared me for the quest given by the Gargoyle.

My Lady Erian Li Halan led me to Nowhere to seek the famed oracle. With the rest of her entourage, we bought access past Stigmata to Nowhere, realizing that we might not be allowed to return should the garrison fear Symbiot taint among us. But to Erian, it was worth the risk. Her lands were stolen from her and she was rootless.

An old matron of her pious house had told her of the Gargoyle, which had delivered to her grandfather a vision long ago, one which revealed to him the secret needed to rise to power within the family. Returning from that oracle, her grandfather had, within a number of years, deftly rid himself of all his rivals and uncannily predicted which of his allies would betray him. Emboldened by this tale, Erian swore to seek the oracle herself.

Once on Nowhere, we had to purchase transportation and a guide to take us to the wastes, where the Gargoyle had sat for more years than recorded history. Few ships can risk landing in the wastes, lest the winds of the upper atmosphere scour the vessel's hull and breach it. Yet the winds on the lower plain are eerily still and dead. The atmosphere of the wasted planet required that we wear breathing masks, although atmosphere suits were not needed. After a journey of a week, we finally saw the thing across the vast plain.

After setting up camp, we approached and examined it. Its architecture was impressive, its sculpting so lifelike that it seemed a creature frozen rather than carved. But it did not move, and thus could not be alive as we know it.

I then performed a rite so that I might view its occult properties. When I opened my eyes with the Second Sight, I saw that it was staring at me. Its eyes had moved, rolling in their massive sockets to peer down at me. I shuddered, for its gaze was inhuman. No emotion could be read from it, except perhaps that of fear.

I looked to Erian and saw that she was the only one of my companions who remained. The others were gone. Even the wastes were gone, replaced by lush grass over a purplish-green plain dotted with groves of oddly shaped trees. We stood in the Garden of Nowhere, the legendary state of the planet long ago, before it was turned to waste by mysterious forces.

Erian looked up at the Gargoyle and beseeched it. "Show me," she said, with a pride and bearing which I hoped would not insult the artifact. But it was, as ever, unmoved. Its eyes had rolled to gaze upon her, but its silence was supernal.

"Blessed be the works of the Pancreator," I said in prayer. "Let wisdom come to those who are open to it, whose cups are empty and whose minds are as guileless as those of small children. Show us thy will so that we may complete it."

I do not remember exactly what happened next, but I know that I dreamed. I saw more than I can recall, but what I saw was strange enough. I was back aboard the pilgrim ship we had arrived in, but it was empty of pilgrims and my companions. I found my way to the bridge and discovered that it, too, was empty. Looking out the port, I saw that the ship approached a jumpgate. Although no pilot had willed it so, the gate began to open, space and light warping within its hoop to open a strange portal to another star system. As the ship entered, I realized with a shock of fear (in that form of dream logic where one knows things which have not been told) that the Sathra Damper was disabled and that my soul was at risk.

Instead of the fabled euphoria, however, I saw a mist outside the ship. The pilot (yes, for there was now a pilot there, as if he had always been there) turned to me and asked me why it had taken me so long to get here. I replied that I had been on the bridge since before the jump, but he said that that was not what he meant.

The ship then exited another gate and we were back in normal space. A ship awaited us, but it did not belong to any noble house, guild or sect. It was Vau. The pilot was gone again and the ship flew randomly. The Vau ship shot forth a beam and caught my ship in a cocoon of light. I went to the hatch to greet the visitors (which I knew would be coming).

I was then in a sumptuous dining-room, eating with a Vau mandarin. Soldiers stood by the doors and half-naked servants brought us plates of oddly colored plants and meats, but they all tasted good. The mandarin turned to me and said, "Now that you have truly traveled space, you must become a priest."

I got up from the table and left the room, returning (instantly in the way of dreams) to the bridge of my ship (although it was now a different ship — the very one we would later acquire from one of Erian's Hazat allies). Julia Abrams flew the ship and asked me where I had found the strange clothes which I wore. I realized that I was wearing Vau priestly robes, and replied, "I earned them."

She told me to strap in, because we were going to have to fight the Symbiots to get out of there. "There" was a different place than I had been before. We were now back in the Stigmata system, apparently pursued by a Symbiot

spacefighter. It was faster than us, and shot forth a spider-web from its guns. The web wrapped about our ship and I could see tiny spiders crawling across our hull, strengthening the web with their own silk. Our ship slowed to a crawl as the web dragged us back.

The spiders were now in the ship, crawling underfoot. I shoed them away, but Julia was frantic. I told her to calm down, for we would all one day be food for the spiders. I said that we must climb the web to get home. I led her to the hatch and we crawled out onto the hull (without spacesuits!) and grasped the sticky webbing around it. Using it as a ladder, we climbed out into space, toward the sun. Julia complained about the cold, but I said that the sun was hot and we'd be warm when we would arrive there.

But as we got closer, it only got colder. The sun seemed less bright. I knew that we had to connect the web to the sun, but I did not know why. I then realized that my own inner light would keep us warm. A small sun seemed to be inside my breast, and it radiated heat into space. I then remembered a Vau word to shape the light, and began to weave it into an extension of the web, building a ladder from our ship to the sun.

I woke on the wastelands of Nowhere at the foot of the Gargoyle. I had been unconscious for nearly a day. Our

guide had instructed Cardanzo and Julia to shade my body, but told them that this coma was the way of visions.

Erian had dreamed also, but not the same dream as I. Her dream was populated by famous figures of her family's past, many from before the Conversion, when her relatives were demons among men. She has yet to tell all that she saw, but one of the elements of her dream was the discovery of a family relic on some unnamed world. Whether this world is one of those we know or a Lost World is unclear, as is the nature of the relic. Erian seems to remember less of her dream than I, but traces of it return to her in dreams.

As to the meaning of my dream, I cannot say for sure. I am still trying to unravel it. Perhaps I must bring the word of the Pancreator and the Holy Flame to the Vau and Symbiots? But this seems too simple an explanation for such a profound seeming vision — and profound for me it was, even if such emotion is lost in dry writing.

Whoever reads this account in my journals, temper any charge of heresy that you may have with the knowledge that even the Prophet revered the Gargoyles, and believed that they represented a purpose as yet to be revealed to Creation.

Melting Pot

August 8th, 4997, 9:00 am
(Holy Terra calendar)

I am in awe at the immensity of this spacestation.

Its engineers are powerful indeed to keep it operating so many years after the Fall and under extreme pressure from the Church to abandon it. Cumulus, a city in space.

We arrived here to meet with Erian's al-Malik patron. Our highly expensive berthing fees are being paid by this wealthy noble, whose name I had best not record here. We disembarked to discover a melting pot of people from planets all over the Known Worlds. The bustle was almost as maddening as that in the Istakhr Market. People hurried to and fro, desperate to conduct their business and be off before rivals could find them — or before their berthing fees grow too high.

Safe from monetary worry, we took our time reaching the domed city. We wandered the hydroponic gardens open to the vast night of space, lit only by rows of artificial sunlight. Here, in this chill void, humankind has erected a safe haven of light and life where even the flowers of Urth can find rich soil.

Our patron resides in a rather lavish apartment building fronted by the main avenue of the domed city. There, we enjoyed a rich repast and comfortable rest. Such a relaxed atmosphere has grown foreign to us after too many months spent on rough worlds. But here we can let down our guard and enjoy life.

I have just arisen from a good night's rest (although day and night are governed here by the League's clock, not by the rising or setting of the sun). Today, I will visit the agora, rumored to host items unavailable on many worlds. I hope to find an Obun meditation bowl, an item which has so far eluded me in many markets.

9:00 pm

What an adventure! I am lucky to be whole and with a full pouch of firebirds. Villainy walks freely on Cumulus.

After finishing my journal entry of the morning, I left for the agora. Since my comrades had not yet arisen, I decided to spend the day exploring on my own. A mistake.

The first portion of the day was as wonderful as I had hoped. I wandered many stalls, all makeshift structures cuddled together in a network of hallways vast and small. Some — the more expensive — hosted permanent structures or staterooms, where the air is more pleasant and elbow room more abundant.

But it was the smaller ones which interested me, for they carried the most exotic goods. Of course, some of these I avoided, such as those promising a taste of the dreaded

zhrii' ka'a lotus or even the addictive selchakah.

After a time of careful looking, I finally found a merchant who sold Ur-Obun goods. He had two of the bowls I was looking for! While I only purchased one, it seems that when one finally finds what one seeks, it comes in abundance. Much like the Pancreator's grace.

My purchase perhaps lulled my wariness. With a smile on my face — too broad and idiotic — I turned into a tighter passage, hoping for a shortcut back to the main thoroughfare. It was here the ruffians waylaid me.

A rather large man stepped from an alcove and blocked my way, glaring down at me evilly. From behind me, others gathered, chuckling low to themselves.

"What's in the bag, priest?" the large one grunted.

I hesitated, revealing my fear. "It... it is simply a meditation device used by the Ven Lohji sect of the Church, my son."

He obviously did not like the appellation I had used to address him, and showed his displeasure with a swing of his thick arm, knocking me forcefully into the wall. I clutched my Obun bowl, desperate not to break it. How foolish! I would have suffered broken bones before a broken bowl!

"Hand it over! Along with that pouch!"

My mind raced, trying to figure what stratagem I could use against them. I knew no theurgy which could help me so quickly as I needed, and my skill in arms is rather pitiful.

The large one reached his arm back to strike again when he grunted in pain and toppled backwards, pulled by his own arm. As his girth sank to the floor, his face a mask of pain and rage, I saw Cardanzo behind him, clutching the giant's wrist with his hand, twisting it enough to cause pain and force the brute to follow Cardanzo's whim lest his arm be dislocated in its socket.

I envied him his martial skill then, embarrassed at my need for his aid. But this envy passed quickly, replaced by my more rational relief at his arrival.

He pointed his heavy slug gun at the giant's compatriots, who I now saw to be but striplings. Instead of heeding his words to remain unmoving, they fled, quickly disappearing into the crowd.

Cardanzo backed out of the alley, forcing the brute to follow him, although not without him expelling some nasty words. I followed quickly, thankful to be in an open arena again.

Cardanzo bent down to whisper in the brute's ear. I could not hear what was said, but the fellow nodded quickly. Cardanzo released him and the man picked himself up from

the ground and walked away at a fast pace.

I was astonished. “Why did you let him go? He’ll only rob from another!”

“Of course he will, Alustro,” Cardanzo replied, holstering his weapon, “He is a member of the local thieves’ guild. Arresting him will only bring retribution on us from his fellows. Releasing him will allow us a degree of freedom from their kind.”

“I don’t understand. How is such crime allowed to run so rampant?”

“Cumulus follows different rules than most worlds, Alustro. The League has its hands full just keeping it in one piece. It cannot police it in addition.”

“Then where are the priests? Cannot the Church lend some moral enforcement?”

“Ah, would you allow this? That bowl you so proudly bought is not exactly legal on Holy Terra.”

I flushed with embarrassment. “How long have you followed me?”

“Not long. When I realized where you had gone, I knew you would need some help. But do not take that as an insult. Even I am wary walking these halls alone. Now that you are here, we are both better off for it.”

I smiled at his transparent attempt to ease my ego. Cardanzo was a good friend, and loyal to all of his lady’s chosen entourage. As we walked back through the agora, I asked: “How did you know about those ruffian’s guild allegiances? Have you been here before?”

“Not to Cumulus, no,” he replied. “But I’ve seen it’s like. Before I took service with Erian’s family, I was a legionnaire in the Li Halan forces. I was stationed for a while on the Hagia, a spacestation in the Rampart system. Even on a Li Halan-controlled station, I saw the corruption that finds its way into any long-term gathering of people. Of course, the station’s previous owners had been the League.”

“I didn’t know you were in the military. I assumed you had been trained at birth to be a house guard.”

Cardanzo smiled. “I am not so well born to serve so close to the lords and ladies from such an early age. I had to earn my way up. My father was a captain in the fleet, and that’s how I attained my officer’s status. It was my deeds in the Emperor Wars which gained me my service after mustering out. I received an offer from Count Gijan Li Halan, Erian’s uncle. So, I entered the house forces and trained to guard nobles. It’s very different, you know. Guarding a person rather than a ship. So many more things can go wrong. Assassins could be anywhere. You’ve got to assume the worst of others.”

I saw no remorse on his face as he said this, although I cannot imagine living with such distrust. “How do you keep from getting bitter? You always seem of such good spirit, no matter what we go through.”

“I’ve been through worse. The only thing I can imagine that could really embitter me is if I ever failed to protect my lady. Other than that, what else is there? Injury? I’ve got scars everywhere. Loss of friends? I’ve lost more friends during the war than most people can claim throughout their lives. Loss of property? Not even an issue. No, there’s little left that I haven’t lost. Best to count what one has and be glad for it.”

“What about love? Is there no one who has ever won your heart?”

I said too much, for now a darkness entered his eyes.

“More than one. All unfaithful or dead. The dead ones hurt less.”

I decided to change the subject and pretended to become absorbed in a craft store we passed. He saw through my attempt but played along anyway. As we walked on, I asked him about some of the things he had seen, the places he had been. I had hardly ever talked so deeply with him before; we never really had the time together. His travels were far but he rarely left the ships on which he served. What he saw of these places he only knew by the visitors who came aboard.

“What of aliens? Surely you’ve seen many of them?”

He smiled and chuckled. “There was a Gannok engineer on the Hagia. The Li Halan hated him but couldn’t risk getting rid of him. He was the only League engineer left who knew the ship, so he got away with an awful lot. He did win the heart of the captain, however, when the Inquisition came aboard to search for illegal goods rumored to have been left by the previous owners.

“They spent weeks on board, searching everyone’s cabins. But before they got to the officer’s quarters, they were finally driven off. This Gannok — Kang Kang, I believe his name was — he began playing pranks on the Avestites. They started out small — rocks under the mattresses — but got worse and worse as time went on. Things like filling their ka-oil cannisters with perfume or replacing their wax candles with Brute fat.

“Then there were the cigars! The head Inquisitors had found a box of proscribed Vorox cigars. Do you know the kind? Grown from a tobacco-like plant on Vorox and heavily intoxicating. Well, this priest confiscated the cigars and no one knew what had become of them until the Gannok struck again. Two friends of mine were on routine patrol when they heard a small explosion from down a little-used corridor. Running to investigate, they came across the Inquisitor, his face blackened and burned, the butt of an exploding cigar still in his mouth!

“Well, he dropped the cigar quick and tried to claim that his flamethrower had misfired, but everyone soon knew the full story. The next day, the ship was declared clean and the Inquisition left. A party was held in Kang Kang’s

honor, although he swore he had no idea what everybody was so happy with him for.”

“So the Gannok prankster trait is not just a stereotype? They really do these things?”

“Well, you could never catch Kang Kang at it, but yes, I’m sure it was him.”

I looked ahead at the stall selling alien crafts, the one

with the sign showing mechanisms manufactured by Gannok. “I had considered buying one of their toys, to give to Ong. He likes wind-ups. But now I’m not so sure.”

We eventually arrived back at our host’s apartments in time for dinner. When offered a fine Delphian pipe after the meal, Cardanzo and I both declined.

The Rampart Plea

November 4th, 4997
(Holy Terra calendar)

I humbly thank the Pancreator for allowing me life and mind and a sound soul with which to continue my journals. Such a harrowing event did I experience that only the whiff of Empyrean's grace blew me from an ill course. I shake even now to think back upon it, even though I am safely ensconced in a noble estate in the Imperial City itself, on Byzantium Secundus where no enemy can approach unseen.

The events began simply, with a flitter journey over the Tepest Desert of the Ghastr continent. I was with Canon Jophree, a respected member of our Order, who had invited me to witness the Ur ruins discovered there. With Lady Erian's permission, I set forth with my fellow priest in his own flitter (Jophree was born to House Cameton, a powerful family on Byzantium Secundus, and has access to many things most priests do not — a boon for our Order). He had learned how to fly such crafts before he took vows, and he and I greatly enjoyed our trip together. It had been a long time since I had been able to talk so deeply with a fellow priest, and he shed some light on my own strange experiences since I joined with Erian.

The ruins were... eerie. It is the only word to describe them. We did not land, but only flew over them, circling around to see them from all sides. It seems that we both had a strange sense of foreboding, and agreed not to walk among them.

After getting our fill of the strange landmarks, we turned back. I still do not understand just what happened or why, but Jophree lost control of the flitter. We spun maniacally in the sky, up and down and in circles. He fought the controls but some greater force seemed in control. I remember him yelling something about an "electromagnetic grid disturbance" and something about terraforming anomalies. But I was too hurried, fetching safety bubbles from the back and strapping them on to both of us. I had just latched the belt around him when the engine blew up.

The force must have thrown us both out the windshield. This would explain the gashes on my face and hands. I was knocked unconscious immediately. I came to on the desert floor, the plastic liquid of the safety bubble splattered over me; it had ruptured prematurely, leaving me with more bruises than I deserved and a broken survival kit. There was no sign of Canon Jophree. I prayed that his bubble had activated correctly, and would cushion his fall before bursting.

I began searching for him, but my own transmitter was broken. I feared the worst, for both of us. Without a

transmitter, no one would find me in this wasteland. If I could not find Jophree and his transmitter, I was doomed.

My search took me in an ever-widening circle. By the time the sun set, I still had seen no sign of Jophree or our downed flitter. I knew my robes would do me little good against the chill desert night, and began to look for an outcrop or gully where I could light a fire safe from the winds. That is when I saw the lights.

At first, I thought it must be my friend, so I began calling. Two fusion torches came toward me. Had Jophree called a rescue party so soon? Two men approached, one wearing the uniform of a Charioteer spacepilot, although somewhat torn and dusty, made of old-style synthsilk, the kind usually inherited over generations from a wealthy family. The other was even better attired, for he wore a short cape and brooch with the crest of House Cameton.

"Greetings," I said as they came near. "I am glad you found me. Is Canon Jophree alright?"

They looked at each other quizzically and then the pilot replied. "You're a priest?"

"Yes. I am Novitiate Alustro of the Eskatonic Order."

They both smiled. The pilot reached his hand out to me. "I am so glad to see you, father. We've needed a priest for a long time now."

"I don't understand," I said, shaking his hand.

"Come on over to the ship. We have food." They both began moving back the way they had come, and I followed.

"Are you not the rescue party? Did Canon Jophree call you?"

"We don't have a squawker," the pilot said. "It broke when we crashed."

"Crashed? You ran into the electromagnetic interference also? How long have you been here?"

This time the noble spoke: "It seems like years. I am Baron Arbuck Cameton, by the way. I apologize for not introducing myself earlier. We have been in the desert too long."

"Well, surely then you have people looking for you? Your family?"

"Of course they're looking for me. But this is the Tepest Desert! It's huge. Whatever caused the crash is foiling all our equipment. It is surely doing the same to our searchers' equipment."

As he spoke, we came over the rise and I saw a starship, perhaps an Explorer class vessel. It was half buried in the ground, obviously from a crash landing. Although the nose was buried deep, the rear hatch still allowed access in and out of the craft. It was to this door that they walked.

"We've got a lot of supplies," the pilot said. "So don't worry. Eat all you want. You have to be hungry after a day

like you've had."

"Thank you," I replied, following him into the hatch. "I'm famished. By the way, what do I call you?"

I couldn't see his face as he walked ahead of me in the tight passage, but he mumbled his reply.

"I'm sorry. Was that Captain Kamen?"

"Kariman."

We came out of the engine area and into a common room. It was lit by an everlight clasped to a ceiling pipe. Captain Kariman began opening tins and scooping their contents onto a plate for me. I embarrassingly wolfed it down. I hadn't eaten since well before our flutter accident.

Baron Arbuck disappeared into the forward cabin. After a few minutes, power came on, flooding the cabin with light. In the rear, where we had passed through, I heard the slight whine of an engine or generator. Kariman looked around and flicked some switches on and off, cutting some of the lights.

"Alustro," the baron yelled from foreship. "I want to show you this."

I got up and walked carefully down the passage. The ship rested at a slant, so I walked a downward incline to reach the cockpit from where the baron called.

He was sitting in a navigator's couch, moving dials and switches on and off. "I need to ask a favor of you, father. Would you bless this ship?"

"I can certainly perform a blessing, but why?"

Kariman came in and closed the door behind him, sitting in the pilot's couch.

"Because we're going to try and get this thing off the ground again," the baron replied.

"Well, I suppose I could perform a small litany, if you think it would help."

Captain Kariman spoke: "It would, father. It would, indeed."

I prepared my robes and polished my jumpgate pendant, filthy from the day's sweat and sand, and read a short litany from the Epistles of Horace. "It is done. I hope it helps."

"Hmm," the baron said. "I was thinking of something... well, more powerful. Could you perform this one instead?" He handed me a small think machine with a gospel displayed upon it.

"But this is the Rampart Plea! From the Cardano Apocrypha. Where did you get it?"

The baron shrugged. "It's always been one of my favorites, father."

"Favorites! This was deemed heretical in 4672 by the Orthodoxy. Even my Order bans it."

"I'm sorry to hear that, father," the baron said, as he swiveled around in his seat to face me, a laser pistol aimed at my chest. "But I don't condone the censure of great works. We cannot begin our voyage without it. Now, I need

you to read it for me. And put some heart into it."

I was speechless. I could not even begin to understand what was going on. But faced with a deadly weapon and a threat, I complied with the baron's request. What harm could it bring? I had read the forbidden gospel before. It had been banned on doctrinal grounds only, and so was not considered harmful, just false. Once attributed to Saint Amano of Rampart, it was later deemed a forgery. I began to read:

"O Invisible Intelligences, hear my plea. Open the path to the stars and guide my feet upon it. In my travels, let me not shun the unknown regions. Show to me creations yet to be birthed. Let mine eyes scry thy true foundations, the secret thread which binds your creatures, so that I may proudly perform my duty to thee."

The baron lowered his pistol. "Thank you. Maybe now we can finally leave."

The engine sound grew louder as Kariman worked his controls. The ship shook and rattled, and a horrible grinding commenced. The baron looked up at the ceiling. "I think she's breaking apart."

"You're tearing your own ship up!" I yelled.

"Yes," Captain Kariman said. "Yes, we are." The grinding could now be heard in the rear of the ship also. I turned and fumbled the door open, expecting to feel the searing heat of a laser on my back. But as I slipped into the hall, I glanced back to see the baron staring listlessly at his read-outs.

"A captain must go down with his ship, father," Captain Kariman said, flicking on every switch he could reach. "Isn't that right? Isn't that proper?"

I turned and ran, convinced that they had been driven mad by their stay in the desert. The ship rocked back and forth, the engines pushing it deeper into the earth. I had to get out the rear hatch before we were buried.

As I ran through the common room, lockers flung open with the stress and stretch of the hull. A body fell from one and smacked onto the floor in front of me. I think I screamed. It was obviously a priest. His robes and vestments showed that. But he was desiccated like an ancient mummy, and a terrible knife wound could be seen across his throat.

I leapt over it and kept moving. As I sped through the final passage in the engine room, I heard moaning sounds around me. Fearing that the two madmen had tried to kill another of their crew as they did the priest, I stopped to see where the sounds came from.

Then the flux cache hatch flung open and raw fusion energy and radiation spewed forth. Shadows lengthened across the walls and ceiling, as if something large approached from a distance, blocking the light. I dared not stay to see the source of the shapes wriggling on the walls, and threw myself against the rear hatch, now locked and

bolted. I struggled with the bolt, finally throwing it off as the moaning sound grew louder.

“Ssstaayy...” a voice said from somewhere in the room.

I kicked the door and only the shifting of the ship — the hull struggling against the force of its own engines — allowed it to burst open. I jumped from the ship, which now dug a deep furrow into the ground, and struggled against the crumbling sand to reach the lip of the deepening pit. Something cold touched my ankle and I cried, making a last leap up. I grasped the edge of the hole and pulled myself out, running as fast as I could back to the rise over which we had come earlier, back to the place they had found me.

I never looked back. I myself was now mad, delirious with fear and exposure to the cold night. Two days later, the rescue team found me. Canon Jophree had landed fine and immediately called for help. Julia herself came to find me, showing more worry for my welfare than I had thought her capable of. I recovered over a number of days in a Church hospital, in the care of Amalthean healers.

I explained the incident with the two madmen and their ship, but Canon Jophree could find no such ship when he went back to investigate. And he knew no Cameton named Arbuck, certainly not a baron by such name, but said he would inquire nonetheless.

He believed the men were Ur artifact thieves who had disguised themselves as noble and guildsman to gain access to the ruins. Obviously, their ship went down, per-

haps carrying Ur artifacts of a psychic nature, which would explain my hallucinations.

But I do not believe they were hallucinations. I suffered radiation poisoning from somewhere and there is the wound on my ankle — a black, putrid bruise which required merciful techinals to heal.

November 27th

I am writing from my cabin in the Resurgent, our new starship. I have just spoken with Canon Jophree by radio. He has new information concerning my “adventure” which puzzles him just as much as it does me.

A distant cousin of his in House Cameton approached him soon after we departed and inquired as to why Jophree was interested in Baron Arbuck. It seems that a certain Baron Arbuck was this woman’s ancestor. He and his crew were lost when his ship crashed in the Tepest Desert — in the year 4562. The accident was blamed on his pilot, a Captain Kamen, a suspected Antinomist. Only years after the crash did evidence come forward about Kamen’s atrocities on Rampart. He is apparently a folk legend on that world, equated with evil.

After hearing this, Jophree initiated another search of the desert, near to where I had been found. He uncovered the remains of a starship, buried deep in the sand and scoured by years, perhaps centuries, of exposure. While little is left of the remains, enough is there to confirm its name: the Rampart Plea...

Blink

December 17, 4997
(Holy Terra calendar)

I had always heard about Leagueheim and its decadent ways. By what my Church instructors taught, I was lead to believe it was a veritable Gehenne of sin. I believed that once I could see it for myself, such an overblown reputation would, like so many other Church fallacies I had been taught, crumble.

I was strangely right, although in a way I never expected. Even here among the smooth ceramsteel spires and flashing lights I found a spirituality of sorts.

We arrived here in time to catch one of Erian's al-Malik allies before he left on some undisclosed mission. Before leaving, he provided us with information on an unknown lost world where the answers to our quest may await us. I will write nothing of it here, until we are closer to our goal.

In his absence, he allowed us the use of his suites. We have used this needed rest to make some additions to our new starship, the Resurgent. Julia demanded a neutrino sensor array, but the prices we discovered were outrageous. We voted against it. That's when she revealed that she knew a place where we could find one cheaper, but she would have to go there in person to arrange the sale. We all thought it promising and agreed.

"I want Onggangarak to come with me," she said. "In case of trouble. And Alustro, too."

"Me?" I said. "I know nothing of commerce. What can I do?"

"Even the most desperate thugs think twice about hitting a priest. You're my insurance against... hasty opinions."

"Wait just a minute," Erian said. "This trip is dangerous? Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

Julia rolled her eyes. "Everywhere on Leagueheim is dangerous, Erian! This is just... more so."

"Then I forbid it. I will not have Alustro put into unnecessary danger."

"Hold on, now! He'll be fine. Like I said, he's just there to sooth bruised egos and such."

"Erian," Cardanzo said, "They will be fine in Julia's care. We could really use that array."

"Then I'm coming too," Erian said.

"Oh no you're not!" Julia yelled. "They'll know you for the royal brat you are the second you step off the lift! You're staying here."

"How dare you! I can go wherever I want. Whenever and with whomever!"

"Not here you don't. They'll jack the price up at least three times more than it's worth when they smell your privilege."

"Please," Cardanzo said, "there is no reason for raised voices. Julia is right, Erian. You and I must stay here and let them do their work."

"Why do you stay?" Julia said, looking surprised. "I could use you there."

"A bodyguard does not leave his charge," Cardanzo replied. "Besides, Ong is more than capable of providing all the muscle or threat you may need."

Julia looked annoyed but nodded. "All right, then. Let's go, you two." She picked up her belt, loaded with her blaster and all manner of tools, and headed for the door. Ong and I got up to follow.

She lead us through a dizzying maze of sidewalks, escalators, tubes and cargo lifts until we reached what I believe was the ground level of Leagueheim. At least, it seemed like the ground. It was dark even though slight patches of daylight shone through openings in the soot layer above and innumerable fusion signs from hundreds of stores flashed at us from all directions. None of this phased Julia, although at times I think Ong was ready to attack something. I feared lest an unattentive pedestrian bump into him.

Eventually, Julia stopped in front of a bar called the Last Flight Out and peered inside through the grimy window. "This is it. Name's changed but the place is still the same. As long as the same owner's here, we're fine."

I began coughing immediately upon entering the place. I don't know what sort of burning weed was in the air, but it wasn't tobacco or even one of the milder narcotics.

"Yimbun," Julia said. "Cover your mouth and you'll get used to it. Smells awful but tastes great."

I nodded, pulling by robes over my nose. Ong seemed undisturbed by the smell, even though his senses were keener. I assume that the legendary Vorox resistance to toxins held true here.

Julia lead us through the crowded room to the bar and rapped on it, trying for the bartender's attention. "The owner in?"

The sweaty fellow glared at her. "Who wants to know?"

"Julia Abrams. He knows me."

The man nodded and picked up a small palm squawker. He whispered something into it, which I could not hear over the crowd's conversations. He looked at Julia and nodded, smiling. "Wait here. He'll be right out."

As we lounged against the bar, I noticed a few men looking at us from across the room. They seemed to know Julia, but were not too happy about it. As I was about to ask Julia who they were, a yell came from the rear of the bar.

"You! How dare you come into my establishment!"

Julia turned to the man and went white. "Yours?!"

Where the Gehenne is Lark?"

"Lark's dead," the man said, now backed up by a number of thugs gathering around him. "Left the place to me."

"He would. He never did have a good eye for character. Leaving his pride and joy to Sobol Hetch. So what now?"

"We settle up, that's what. Decide here and now who's best."

Ong began to growl deep in his throat. Sobol's thugs began to look nervous, their hands reaching for their holsters.

"Here and now," Julia said. "Let's go."

"Wait!" I cried. "There's no need for violence! Whatever your dispute is, surely there's a calmer resolution!"

Julia and Sobol both looked at me like I was mad.

"Violence?" Julia said.

"What's the harm in a game of Blink?" Sobol said.

"Blink?" I stammered. "What is Blink?"

Sobol pulled out a deck of holographic cards and slid them towards us across the bar. "That's Blink. Best damn game of chance in the Known Worlds is what."

I could see Julia's eyes roll up. "Say's you. But since it's so damn important to you, let's play. No way you'll beat me, though."

"I've learned a lot of tricks since we played last, Abrams. I think this one's mine."

Sobol went over to a table and shoved some empty glasses off it, scattering them across the floor. None of them broke. "Have a seat. All of you."

Julia walked over and sat down, but motioned for us to stay behind her. "They'll stand."

Sobol, seating himself, shrugged. "Fine. Let's play. Can your boy shuffle cards?"

"Sure," Julia said, picking up the deck, which one of Sobol's men had fetched from the bar. She handed it to me.

I have never handled a deck of cards in my life. I looked at the ones I now held in my hand and caught by breath in awe. They were stunningly beautiful. Lush, three-dimensional images leapt from the card surfaces as I peered through the deck. Impossible patterns of color and texture mixed together as two cards were connected and broke apart again as they separated. I shook myself from the reverie and placed the deck on the table, trying to remember what shuffling looked like from having seen it done.

"They're mesmerizing, aren't they, priest?" Sobol said. "Banned on most of the Known Worlds by the Church. Your even touching them would get a reprimand from your superior and a call for confession. But here on Leagueheim, who is going to police such things? No priest with any wits would step foot in this district. Except you, and you're only here because Abrams here was looking for an element of surprise."

Julia frowned. "My confessor goes where I go, Sobol."

"Yours? Or does he belong to some haughty royal

you're screwing?"

Julia stared at Sobol with utter hatred and the tension returned.

"Uhm... I think I've got them randomized," I said. "Is this good enough?"

Sobol did not take his eyes off Julia. "Fine. Go ahead and deal us seven cards each — without revealing them."

When they had the cards, I stepped back behind Julia to see what was in her hand. It made no sense to me, but I was awestruck again at the intense images. They almost portrayed something, and it was maddeningly tempting to stare at them until the image they were hiding revealed itself.

Julia hid the cards, looking at me. "Don't stare too long. That's the trick. You'll try for hours — years, even — to put the cards in the right combination to reveal 'it.'"

"It?"

"The secret they hold. The image just on the edge of consciousness. If you ever saw it, it would solve everything. Or so everyone thinks. It's all just a load of crap. A bunch of random holograms generated by a field. As long as the cards are in a certain range, they're affected by the field."

"But what generates the field? Where's the power?"

"Who knows? That's what makes them so valuable. Can't make them anymore."

"Enough talk," Sobol said. "Put down a card."

Julia looked through her hand again and placed down a bluish card with a slowly revolving vortex. Sobol quickly laid a green card with rising lines on top of it. The two images combined to create a weird effect, somewhat like a jumpgate, with lines of force radiating from a spirals. Sobol smiled. Julia frowned.

This went on for some time. About an hour into the game, Julia sent me to the restaurant next door for some food. One of Sobol's men came with me to help carry the bags.

Three hours after it began, however, it was over. Julia placed a red card with intermittent flashes on top of Sobol's yellow, pulsing mist. The effect was to destroy all the images, leaving a momentary void in the space where they had been. The effect lasted for perhaps less than a second, but I could now understand why Sobol was so obsessed with the game.

Staring at that blank moment, it seemed that something leapt in to fill it, some deep feeling of... contentment. Julia sighed and had a look on her face unlike any I had seen her wear before. For once, the tense jaw slackened and her eyes softened and she had a fleeting glance of peace.

Sobol looked like he wanted to cry, for he obviously had not received the full effect. Was it possible that it affected the winner differently than the loser? If so, what

form of technology was this?

After a moment's silence where nobody made a sound, Sobol gathered the cards together, held them close to his body and stood up. "What's it going to be, Abrams? Name your price."

"A neutrino sensor array for an exploration class vessel."

"That's it? You just won Blink and all you want is a lousy sensor array?"

"I don't want your cards, Sobol. I just came for some hardware."

"Okay. Yeah. All right. It's yours. Where do you want it delivered?"

"Charioteer Bay 33."

"It'll be there. It'll take a day or two at least, though. You understand that?"

"If it's not there in three," Julia said, standing up. "I'll come looking for it."

Ong seemed to sense his cue and growled a short, gruff bark.

Sobol nodded. "It'll be there."

Julia turned toward the door and began walking. We followed, although I kept glancing over my shoulder back at Sobol to see what his reaction was. I suspect this was a violation of exit etiquette for it implied that I expected a blaster at our backs. But he was slumped in the chair again and looked like a loved one had died. I couldn't even begin to fathom such an addiction.

We said little on the way back, for Julia was obviously in no mood to talk. On the lift upwards, however, I know I saw a tear in her eye. She wiped it away quickly to hide it from us.

How can it be that a mere toy of the Second Republic can elicit a religious response in one who has denied it from even the Church? Such a thing is alien to me. To find faith, no matter how elusive, in a thing rather than a being is... all to human, perhaps?

An Open Mind

January 21st, 4998
(Holy Terra calendar)

Noon

I look at Sanjuk oj Kaval and wonder at the ferocity and tragedy from which her life is built. They are marked on her very skin, these stories of loss and ruin, surrounding the few tales of triumph and transcendence. Her *baa'mon*, her body carvings, tell all about her. I wish I could fully read them.

I know only a little written Ukari, enough to tell a clan marking here and there, and sometimes a coming-of-age mark, but little beyond that. They fascinate me, though, and I wonder if it would be impertinent to ask her to teach me the marks.

But my pondering is interrupted by the entrance of the bailiff, come to take Sanjuk back to her cell where she will await trial. I must put aside my journal for the moment...

Evening

Erian has been successful in convincing the court to hear her argument; her station does bring its privileges, even here on Leagueheim. Julia, as a Charioteer, has already been called upon as a character witness. Although Sanjuk is a low-ranking Scraver, she is still a member of the guild, and thus allowed representation.

I fear, however, that her guild is prepared to throw her to the void on this case. It is too high-profile, one even they shun. I had best describe the charges for the record.

Sanjuk oj Kaval has been accused of murdering Paano HanJoirii, a high-ranking Ur-Obun diplomat in the service of the emperor. Indeed, HanJoirii was a confidant of Bran Botan voKarm, the emperor's Left-Hand Council. Serious charges.

Sanjuk is an old friend of Erian from her days on Midian. While she is native to Ukar — she calls the world Kordeth — she spent her early years in the Scravers guild on Midian, scrounging ancient ruins under the patronage of Erian's uncle, a man obsessed with Second Republic art. She is, of course, an Ur-Ukar.

She claims innocence in this affair, and tells Erian that she was set up by rivals in her guild to take the fall — what better suspect for the murder of an Obun than his hateful cousin, an Ukar? She has too little pull to even find out who was behind this high-level murder, and has thus swallowed her pride and asked Erian to intervene on her behalf. It was mere coincidence that we were on Leagueheim at this time.

I am unaware of the full details of the investigation, but from what Erian has disclosed, there is scant evidence

for Sanjuk's involvement. For one, it is unlikely that she would have ever been allowed access to the ambassadorial grounds, although she was seen outside them soon after the murder. However, she was on duty at a Scraver-run pawnshop on the nearby corner at the time.

This shop is located just outside the grounds and is merely a front, a place to arrange various clandestine activities for any adventuresome ambassador who seeks diversions from his duties. It is not the sort of work Sanjuk is normally involved in — Ukari are generally considered untrustworthy for such secret affairs — but since the claim on her recent reclamation operation had not yet come through, she signed up for any duty available. She claims that someone in her guild purposefully positioned her there to become the main suspect in a planned assassination.

Her guild, of course, does not appreciate being accused so.

Julia has done her best to find out who would have set Sanjuk up, but has gained few leads. She suspects that little word will be heard, for anyone involved in murdering an imperial ambassador would surely cover his tracks well.

Erian has arranged for good advocacy: Derrick LeFamon, a Reeve known to her uncle, has agreed to represent Sanjuk, although he believes her chances are slim. While there is little but circumstantial evidence against Sanjuk, the prejudice against the Ukari will work against her — especially that from the prosecution witness, Lorim HanPavak, the murdered Obun's brother. It is LeFamon's hope that enough doubt can be raised that the case will be dropped.

The trial is tomorrow. I will pray for our friend tonight.

January 22nd, 1998
(Holy Terra calendar)

Morning

We all gathered at the courthouse, a former Second Republic court that still serves its original function. Its huge, vaulting ceilings are higher than those of many cathedrals I know. It does seem that worship of the law eclipsed that of the Pancreator in those times.

Lorim HanPavak sits across the hall from us, watching Sanjuk. I cannot read his expression; he is well trained in stoicism. Sanjuk stares back at him, her face also a mask of calm. I wonder what she is thinking?

I wish I could say this was to be a lengthy trial, but it just is not so. The odds are against Sanjuk.

LeFamon makes his opening arguments most eloquently. He is a fine Reeve, well-versed in rhetoric. But the prosecutor is even more so, a greatly experienced consul, one in imperial employ.

LeFamon tells the court somewhat of Sanjuk's life and the hardships she has had, the struggles she has made, emphasizing the sheer folly of imagining that she would throw it all away in a fit of anger against an ambassador she never met. As he tells us about her, he points to her carvings as proof of his story, showing that her life is written for all to see.

He calls upon Erian to describe her friendship with Sanjuk, and she tells of an incident in her youth where Sanjuk and she discovered a valuable sculpture from the Second Republic, marveling over it together, revealing that each was more versed in art than the other had thought. LeFamon then asks how anyone capable of such cultural appreciation could be a murderer.

Julia is called upon next, and explains her work with Sanjuk on Midian. She occasionally flew finds from Sanjuk's digs back to the Li Halan palace, and had multiple opportunities to discuss League matters with Sanjuk. She makes the point that Sanjuk would never betray the guild which provided her an escape from the clan wars on Ukar.

Our advocate then details the lack of evidence against the accused, and how her proximity to the scene of the crime is the only reason she is here in the court today. He has done a very good job of raising doubt.

And then his rival stands to speak and brings forth a list of reprimands Sanjuk has received throughout her career from her Scraver chiefs. This list is long and full of petty crimes, such as assault and theft, none enough to warrant expulsion, but all enough to paint her as a criminal.

It is clear that both Erian and Julia were unaware of these reprimands and look... disappointed. Sanjuk does not look at them as they are read; she only looks at the Obun across the hall from her, who stares back, unmoved.

And then the prosecutor calls upon Lorim HanPavak to explain why the Ukar hate the Obun and why Sanjuk would have done murder upon one.

The Obun rises and then closes his eyes for a moment. I notice Sanjuk sit back and close her's also, as if she was very tired. The Obun then speaks:

"It is true that the Ukari hate our people. But it is also true that some of our people despise the Ukari. Nonetheless, I came here to see justice done. To see that my brother's killer was tried and punished. That killer is not in this room."

A gasp of shock traveled across the chambers, and even the judge stared at the Obun in surprise. The prosecutor's jaw even dropped.

"The accused, Sanjuk oj Kaval, has graciously allowed me to read her mind, hiding none of its contents. While I must say that I find much of her past repugnant, I find her character... strong. If I had to suffer as she had, I wonder if I could carry myself as well. There is much my people

have yet to learn from our long-sundered cousins."

"This is ridiculous!" the prosecutor yelled. "You cannot simply walk into the court and make such claims!"

"I have been asked to come and bear witness against the accused. I know for a fact that she is not the murderer. There are some who can hide memories from others, and even those who can weave false ones, but she is not one of these adepts. Indeed, she is nearly mind-blind.

"She is innocent and I must ask that the case against her be dismissed. I then ask that the real murderer be found. My brother's close friend, Bran Botan voKarm, desires true justice in this matter, and will not be content until it has been received. Let the innocent go free, and find the true culprit."

He then sat down, his face as expressionless as always. But those around him were far from expressionless. The prosecutor seemed not to know what to do. But the judge decided the matter for him.

"There is scant evidence against the accused. Unless you can bring forth convincing evidence, I see no reason to waste the court's time further."

"I have no more to say," the prosecutor said as he sat down, exasperated.

"Then let Sanjuk oj Kaval go free," the judge said. "And let it be known that all charges brought against her for the murder of Paano HanJoirii are dismissed." He stood and began the long walk down from his high perch.

Once he left the room, we all stood, looking dumbfoundedly at each other. We all knew that, if this was not a League-run court, such witchery as psychic mind-reading would never be allowed. Indeed, had it been a Church court, I fear that Lorim HanPavak would have been censured and removed as a witness, his comment stricken from the record.

Sanjuk seemed not the least surprised. She smiled, looking at the Obun, who nodded to her and rose to leave.

LeFamon was perhaps the most surprised of us all, confiding that he had fully expected to lose the case. This was now a feather in his cap, one he planned on spreading news of quickly. As he gathered his notes and portable think machine, he thanked us all for an exciting case and turned to leave, heading for the closest town crier.

"It's all so creepy," Julia said. "I don't know if I'd want someone like that peering into my soul."

"If you were facing the gallows, you would," Sanjuk said. "I still wonder at you humans, so virginal when it comes to mind-sight. Few Ukari grow to adulthood without suffering the mind-gaze of another — or even the mind-commands of others. That you believe your souls are your own is your great ignorance."

"I would prefer not to discuss such possibly heretical matters on such a happy day," I said.

Sanjuk looked at me and smiled. "You I could like.

The rest of your order... no.”

As I make this entry, the others are readying to go to a celebratory feast at a local restaurant. Erian has offered to pay (as she has the court costs), although she has not revealed to Sanjuk just how little money she has at present.

I suspect she will learn soon enough. From what Julia told me, Sanjuk may be joining our entourage when next we depart.

“She doesn’t know it yet,” Julia said. “Whoever set her up won’t be happy. It’s probably a Scraver crime family, one that won’t want her hanging around. If she doesn’t leave on her own soon, she may wind up dead in a sewer drain.”

“But she’s a Scraver!” I said in disbelief. “How could they do that to one of their own?”

“Wise up. It’s not the guild as a whole that’ll do it. It’s whoever murdered that Obun. They may not even be Scravvers. Could be Slayers. But they’ve got some sort of connection to the guild, one which ain’t healthy for Sanjuk to be around. I figure she’ll be okay if she gets off world. A few months away and everybody’ll forget about her.”

“Have you told Sanjuk or Erian this?”

“Not yet. Like you said earlier: Why spoil the celebration? I’m just telling you so you can help figure out where to fit another bunk on the Resurgent.”

It seems that I will soon be able to broach the topic of Ukari writing with Sanjuk. There will be little else for her to do on the long journey to the jumpgate.

Fragments

Night on Hira is bright when the bombs go off. The sky is lit with the fiery, short-lived glow of munitions. The Hazat and Kurgan Caliphate forces never seem to tire of war.

But the lights and the sounds eventually fade as the night grows older and the soldiers tire, and peace settles over the broken land. The rubble of countless villages lies as a no-man's land between the forces' current embattlements, with only long-range missiles, aerial flybys and the occasional theurgic rite forming any contact between the enemies.

We are safe here for now. In the ruins of Matanto city, in the blasted basement labyrinth of the former ruler's palace, we have taken shelter to search the past for our future. This building, constructed during the Second Republic of strong maxicrete and plasteel, has lasted through a millennia of erosion only to be torn open and exposed to the sky by a series of direct artillery barrages.

It wasn't even looted. Once the ruling family escaped the burning town, the Hazat and Kurgan forces moved on, fighting over new lands not yet sworn to either side. Why they mutually assaulted this city, I don't really understand. My lady Erian says it had something to do with the ruler's neutrality, an increasingly rare and dangerous thing to both Hazat and Kurgan — it is a tactical mistake to let anybody live who could later ally with an enemy. Tactical mistake, perhaps, but a moral gesture, something lacking in the behavior of both sides. I am ashamed at the way one of our own, a royal family of the Known Worlds, attempts to bring the civilized rule of the empire to this barbarian world. I am even more ashamed of the Patriarch's complaisant role in this. Were he here to witness the atrocities, he would surely move to reign them in with all the powers at his command. Or so I like to believe.

I don't even know who is winning the war. From our vantage, it is impossible to tell who is gaining ground. It seems that no one is. Well, little matter. As long as the fighting does not make its way back here, our mission can proceed without interruption.

Consul Darok Rohmer is our neighbor in the palace. We did not expect to find anyone when we arrived, but he was already here, the only one in the city who did not flee when the war reached the town. His fellows in the Reeves guild surely believed him dead. A great loss, for Consul Rohmer was one of the foremost authorities on the Anunnaki, the precursor race who left behind the jumpgates. His studies brought him here, to this old Second Republic museum, once a treasure trove of Ur artifacts, then a noble palace, and now ruins.

It is our reason for coming here, too. Clues on our quest

to resolve the great vision given Erian by the Gargoyle of Nowhere — a foreboding Ur artifact in itself — led us here, to this war-torn planet just outside of the Known Worlds. Something was here for us, some ancient piece in a present-day puzzle that, once assembled, would spell the fate and duty of my noble lady. Thus, I, my liege Erian Li Halan, her bodyguard Cardanzo, pilot Julia Abrams, friend Onganggorak (a Vorox) and associate Sanjuk oj Kaval (an Ur-Ukar), arrived in the Resurgent to resolve our quest.

We hid our ship under camouflage tarp in the nearby hills and set up camp in the ruins of the palace. It did not take long for Ong to sniff out Rohmer, who hid in the lowest level, evading all patrols that passed through. At first, Rohmer feared we were scavengers or Hazat conscription forces, and he led Ong a chase through the seemingly endless corridors below. But once caught by our over-eager friend and presented to Erian, he realized that we were independents, unaligned (or, at least not working) with any side in the war.

Since then, he has been gracious enough to show us about the museum in return for our aid in lifting and removing rubble, and for cooked meals. His rations were running rather low by the time we arrived; it was a blessing for him that we were well-stocked.

Cardanzo spent most of his time patrolling the region, making sure nobody came near to our camp. On two occasions he chased away local refugees — starving bandits, by his report — who came too near. He had wisely prepared for such a role before we had embarked on this journey, and now wore Hazat military garb. Anyone who saw him feared he was a ranger for a greater force nearby.

As the others tended mainly to logistical or defense matters, Erian and I combed the ruins for the sculpture seen in her dream: an Ur mandala. This item was carved from the same alloy as the jumpgates (the copperish-purple metal no one has ever identified) and was studded with glowing jewels. More importantly, Erian believed that the mandala pattern itself was a key of sorts, some sort of clue into... what? She did not know, but we all knew it was important, part of the greater tapestry of visions she had experienced since her coming-of-age on Midian.

So we spent the days searching the museum. Rohmer had not seen the piece, but helped us search whenever he could. He had research of his own here was trying to finish, a search for the lost Anunnaki culture as revealed in their language and art. This was a monumentally hard task, for what clues they left behind are mere fragments; the whole only came together after study over far-flung worlds, and even then provided only a hazy image, a warped imperfection in stained glass.

“No, we don’t know what they looked like,” he told me, “but we do know something of their behavior as revealed in the myths of the Obun and Ukari, the Oro’ym and the ancient legends of Urth itself. Yes, Urth, cradle of humanity. I believe, as did the xenologists of the Second Republic, that the Anunnaki visited Urth in its infancy and guided the early footsteps of humankind. The fact that a jumpgate exists there, and the known ruins on Mars, is proof enough. But there are sites on Holy Terra itself, although they are not acknowledged as such. Ancient places where only vague traces remain, a stray rock here, a carving there.”

“Have you seen any of these?” I asked. “Where are they?”

“All over the planet. If there’s one good the Church has done, it’s to keep Holy Terra pristine, a living museum. Certainly, many complain when their request to emigrate to the Cradle is denied, but thank the Pancreator for it! The world was once trampled with too many feet — as Byzantium Secundus and Leagueheim are now — and they kick away the footprints of those who went before.”

I noticed that he was not specific in naming a site, but chose not to question him further. As he began to open up more, he would perhaps tell me one or two of these places.

“See this?” he said, pointing to a cylinder sealed behind a see-through case, lit by an everlight, glowing since its Second Republic maker set it to burning a thousand years ago. “What do you think that is?”

I looked carefully at it, walking around its case to see it from all angles. It was smooth, with carvings all over, abstract designs with a hint of anthropomorphism in certain swirls. Carved from the unearthly alloy common to Ur artifacts, it had no opening: a perfectly sealed rod. Yet, somehow, in some strange way, I knew it was hollow, that some unspeakable space was enclosed within it, an otherworldly place sharing our space, our dimension.

“A king’s scepter, perhaps?” I said, noticing his look of disappointment. “Or a phallus? Perhaps a fertility sculpture?”

“You apply modern concepts to the distant past,” he said shaking his head. “But don’t feel stupid: your answers are the same as Crafter Oncales at the Academy Interatta. You see, there is an exact duplicate of this cylinder at that school. Indeed, I bet you could find at least one in every system of the Known Worlds. Do you know why?”

I shook my head.

“Because it comes from a jumpgate. This one was removed from the jumpgate of this very system. I don’t know where the academy’s is from. This one’s removal, I believe, is what caused this planet to disappear from Human Space for many years.”

“This? This is the reason Hira’s jumpgate shut down, keeping all ships out of the system for centuries?”

“I believe so. But I don’t think the scientists who took it knew. It is one of the last additions to the collection.”

“Then why did the gate open again? If this item is here, why does the gate now respond to codes it ignored for years?”

“I’m not sure about that. If I was, I would be the most celebrated man in the Known Worlds, wouldn’t I? The Emperor surely has need of such lore to open all the closed gates to all the Lost Worlds of Human Space. Perhaps it’s like a fuse; when removed, no circuits can complete themselves. The jumpgates have already shown signs of self-repair. It is no great leap to imagine that, over the years, the jumpgate rerouted itself so that energy could flow again.”

“A machine that repairs itself? How can such a thing be? That would imply life.”

“The genius of its manufacture eludes us, as does the genius of all Anunnaki science. All of it built on unknown scientific principles. The line between animate life and mere matter — mind and matter — grows indistinct the more one studies the Ur races. Nothing lasts. Nothing but Ur tech,” he said wistfully.

I stared in awe at the cylinder. He looked at me and smiled, shaking his head again.

“Don’t go worshipping it, now. I could be wrong, you know. It may be a simple antenna, or a strut meant to help maintain structural integrity. We can’t really know for sure. It’s all just theory.”

“Unknown principles...” I said, looking away from it. “Well, I must continue the search. Thank you for your time again.”

“Think nothing of it. Any more questions, feel free to ask. By the way, what’s for dinner tonight? Are you going to fix another of those Ukari dishes? I rather enjoy the way the worms squirm as you bite them.”

I thought he was being sarcastic at first, but he seemed to genuinely like Ukari cuisine. I had fixed some the previous night, based on a recipe Sanjuk had provided, attempting to use as much local resources as possible rather than our sealed stores. Ukari cuisine is a subterranean dining experience: mushrooms and earthworms.

“Perhaps,” I said, turning to go. “I shall have to poll the others about their responses to last night’s meal...”

Erian was not where I had left her, so I went up the stairs to the level above, coming out into the night air, now still and quiet after the nightly artillery died. Erian was there, whispering to Julia and Sanjuk. I came close and coughed to announce myself.

“Alustro,” Erian said. “I don’t want to alarm you, but Cardanzo believes soldiers are approaching the town. We may have to evacuate.”

“Now? But we haven’t found the object of our quest yet!” I complained.

“Keep your voice down,” Julia said. “That thing ain’t worth our lives.” She looked to Erian as she said this, hoping for confirmation.

“Alustro and I will keep searching. Sanjuk, will you help? There’s a large room with no lights and your up-bringing in the dark may help us.”

Sanjuk sighed. “I have lived in the light for twenty years. Only five were spent in the dark, and even then, my clan was not traditional. I knew what a fusion torch was at two. But yes, I will help you. I’m still surely better at moving in darkness than you blind humans.”

Erian frowned but said nothing. She was used to Sanjuk’s manner by now, and knew better than to press royal rules of intercourse here. She turned to the stairs, and Sanjuk and I followed. Julia remained above, watching for Cardanzo and Ong’s return from their patrol.

The room was indeed dark. Our fusion torches seemed to penetrate only slightly into the gloom, and a thin mist could be felt and barely seen in the air. Consul Rohmer, who had joined us on our way down, coughed.

“Eternair...” he muttered.

“Excuse me, consul?” Erian said. “What did you say?”

“It’s Eternair. Eternal Air. A preservative atmosphere devised by Second Republic archivists to use when sealing things in cases. It’s meant to keep those items unchanged over time. It’s near miraculous. A canister must have broken somewhere in the room. With little ventilation, the stuff stays in the air here.”

“Is it dangerous to breath?” I asked.

“I hope not,” he replied.

We continued on into the room, navigating the cases and shelves. This did appear to be an archivist’s room, for many items were displayed on tables with tags clearly showing that they were not yet ready for public display. Most of the items were reproductions of actual Ur items, made from extensive drawings and holograms. A few items were genuine, however. Consul Rohmer’s obvious interest in these told me which were real and which fake.

“You know,” Sanjuk said from somewhere up ahead, unseen in the darkness. “I really think we should set up some of the camp lights down here. We’re not going to find anything in this light.”

Erian sighed. “You are right. We will set them up during the day tomorrow, once we’ve heard from Cardanzo about the approaching troops.”

“If the troops don’t get here first,” Sanjuk said.

We left the room and returned to our camp in the servant’s quarters on the first level of the palace. This section was in the rear of the building, its back entrance now blocked by rubble. Anybody entering would have to come through the main hall, where we could see them well before they saw us. Cardanzo had led a search through the upper levels, now open to the elements, and had identified

a number of sniper points he could assume if necessary. One of these, the remaining high tower, part of the original architecture, we used as a watchpost. Looking up at it from the street below, I could barely make out the old museum sign, now partially covered with the local ruler’s torn and dirty flag: “Museum of the Ancients, Estab—” I wondered what date it read.

Cardanzo and Ong had returned from their patrol. The approaching troops were rangers, teams from both sides of the conflict. They each entered the market section of town, a few miles from us, and left soon after encountering each other (with no shots fired, apparently).

“I think now that each knows the other was here, they will move troops in force, each believing the other is trying to claim this ground,” Cardanzo said. “With luck, it’ll take them two days to get back here. We need to be gone by then.”

“We will spend another day searching,” Erian said. “Then leave.”

“No later,” Cardanzo said, looking into his liege’s eyes. “We still need time to escape atmosphere before any fighters take to the skies.”

“That’s all we need!” Julia said. “A dogfight between Hazat and Kurgans. Oh, yeah, I can fly through that no problem!”

“Point taken,” Erian said. “We leave tomorrow evening then. No later.”

I was relieved to know we’d be out of danger soon, but nervous that we would leave without our prize. As I prepared dinner (chorro steaks, courtesy of Ong, who came back from his patrol with a catch, saving us from another Ukari dinner), I cast my mind into the museum and walked through every room I knew, trying to divine where the curators would have kept the mandala. The smell of burnt steak woke me from my musings, and I consented to have the spoiled meat for my plate while I paid greater attention to the others’ preparations.

As I served the steaks and finally sat down to eat myself, a loud chiming sound broke the silence. Everyone looked at me.

“Uhm... sorry,” I said, placing my plate on the scuffed table and running to my bags nearby. I pulled the small, hand-held think machine from its pouch and touched the power stud, shutting off the chimes.

“Why does that thing always go off?” Julia said, glaring at me. “I hate it. Can’t you tell time like the rest of us?”

“It’s not for telling time,” I explained. “And that alarm was to remind me that it is only a number of hours till Renewal Day, the anniversary of Zebulon’s healing by Saint Amalthea.”

“That’s nice and all, but what’s it got to do with us here? There’s far better uses to put a rare think machine, you know. Can’t you just pray at dawn like most priests?”

“Dawn on Hira is not dawn on Grail. My think machine is set to automatically begin a recitation of the Thankful Exaltation, the Latin chorus as delivered by Zebulon to Amalthea, on exactly the proper moment: when dawn breaks over Mount Siddik.”

Julia rolled her eyes. “And what the heck does it matter if you miss the exact moment? I’m sure Saint Amalthea will forgive you; she’s certainly forgiven much worse.”

“That’s not the point. I am an Eskatonic; the energetic correspondences are very important. By opening a channel in our hearts and minds at the proper moment, we cast our light back to Grail, and it is in turn reflected back to us. In this way, we partake of the divine moment as if we were on Grail itself. The theurgic significance is incredible.”

“Whatever,” Julia said, finishing her steak and then rising to stretch. “Just don’t let that racket wake me before my watch!” She left for her sleeping bag in the garret directly above us.

I checked the program again to be sure its clock was correct and set the liturgy to play upon the appointed hour. After cleaning and storing the cookware, I crawled into my own sleeping bag by the kitchen.

That evening, I did not dream. This is not unusual except that I had dreamed every night since we arrived on Hira, dreams of ruins and combat.

We spent the following afternoon searching the darkened room. We moved all our portable lights there and found the illumination enough for a cursory search. Consul Rohmer idly examined the Ur artifacts and replicas.

“I had hoped to make my fortune here,” he said. “To build my life. I doubt anything can come of this now. I don’t dare alert anyone, or the Hazat will storm in seeking war-tech. Best to leave it be for now until I can get others to come. So little of this can be moved.”

“Can’t we just remove the artifacts from the cases?” I asked.

“Have you ever tried cracking one of those things? Near impossible, not without shipyard grade tools. And the cases themselves are likewise immovable, meant to deter thieves in an era where such criminals had high tech means to steal. No, most of this will remain here as it has for centuries.”

“But that means... If the mandala is in a case, we’ll never get it out!”

He looked at me sympathetically. “Well, we can always take holograms of it. I have a camera with me.”

Sanjuk came over. “A holocamera? That must of set you back a few firebirds.”

“Not really,” Rohmer said, continuing his idle search. “I took it in return for a bad debt, in my younger days in Collections. The debtor paid up eventually anyway, but I kept the camera.”

“There is nothing here!” Erian said from a few shelves

away, frustrated. “Surely we would have found it by now if they kept it in this room.”

“Perhaps we should try elsewhere,” I suggested. “There’s still the back wing...”

“It’s strictly Diaspora era,” Rohmer said. “I checked when I first arrived.”

“What if the mandala was discovered then?” Erian said. “Wouldn’t it be kept there?”

“Well, I suppose it’s possible,” Rohmer said. “I wasn’t looking for it in my search, since I hadn’t met you yet. It’s at least worth another look.”

“Sanjuk, would you come with me?” Erian said, heading for the door. “Alustro, please keep searching here, just in case.”

“But I’d like to see some Diaspora artifacts!”

“Just dioramas mainly,” Rohmer said. “Images the Second Republic believed were true of life during humanity’s first spread to the stars. Rather boring, actually.”

Erian was already gone, so I resigned myself to a continued search. I had worked my way down the far left aisle and was ready to traverse the back wall when a rumble shook the building.

“They can’t be shelling this early,” Rohmer said, confused, looking at the ceiling as if he could see through it to the skies above.

“I think we should leave, consul,” I said, moving toward the door. “If they are shelling, it may mean troops are advancing already.”

He sighed. “Alright, but let’s go back through the east wing. I want one last look at—”

The air exploded and the ceiling collapsed, burying me under a pile of tiles. I coughed, singed from the fire that had momentarily engulfed me. The Eternair must have ignited, I thought. But the mist still swirled around me, so it had not all gone up.

I pushed the tiles off and crawled to my feet. Half of the room was gone, blocked by a wall of rock, dirt and furniture from the levels above. “Consul?” I yelled.

“Here...” a weak voice answered. I worked my way over to him across the sliding tiles and rock. Consul Rohmer was half buried under a maxicrete strut, his head bleeding, his hand clutching his chest.

“It’s finally over...” he moaned.

“I can heal you!” I cried, trying to lift the maxicrete that pinned him. “But we have to move this strut!”

“No...” he said, his eyes glazing. “It doesn’t matter. Your faith can’t heal plastic.”

“What? I don’t understand,” I said, trying to raise the strut but failing completely. It was too heavy. If Ong were here—

“Don’t... don’t bother.” He coughed blood. “My heart... it’s cybernetic. My third one. The others failed. I knew this

would, too. That's why I came. To make something of myself, to complete my work."

"But... maybe we... Julia... can fix it," I stammered.

"Leave me here," he said, weaker, barely audible. "Among... the Ur. Close... the door... on your way... out. Air will... preserve me." His eyes closed and a final breath escaped his body.

I now understood his respect for the artifacts around him. They were the only things to last in a world of entropy. Everything died — people, culture, even the stars. But the Anunnaki had crafted with their unknown principles things immune to the laws of decay.

I felt for a pulse but could find none, then placed my hand on his false heart, tears welling in my eyes. I said the Prayer to the Departed, asking the Pancreator to draw Consul Rohmer's illuminate soul to its reward, to protect it as it traversed the dim and dying spaces. And then I switched off all the camp lights in the room and closed the door, leaving him in the peaceful, preserved dark.

I looked about, trying to get my bearings in the aftermath of death. My survival was important now, and I feared for my liege and companions. Had they been buried, too? The hall was a mess; my way was blocked on all sides. Only a thin ray of light from atop a pile of stone (a later addition to the palace, not a part of the original structure) promised a way of escape. I climbed and began to pull dirt and rock aside. I soon had a small hole through which I could squeeze. It was tight but I was soon on the ground floor again.

I stood, scraping dust off and surveying the area. The walls no longer existed, and gaping holes into the museum could be seen the length of the palace. I had no idea where I was standing. Was it the main hall or the dining room?

The sun was setting on the horizon and it was growing dark very quickly. As I stepped forward to search for my liege, praying she was still alive and well, a footstep sounded behind me. I turned and stared into the eyes of a Kurgan ranger, his rifle pointed straight at me.

He should have shot me on sight. But something was wrong. I could see fear in his eyes. Not fear of me, but fear of death. His arm bled profusely, although it still seemed usable. His face was one of near shock, a man too long on the front lines.

But courage returned, and he slowly raised his rifle to aim.

Then the Prophet sang.

He paused, confused. From nearby, under a thin shale of tile, came the chorus of the Thankful Exaltation. My think machine. It was now dawn on Grail: the divine moment had arrived.

He looked at me and then at the sky, as if shocked to realize the time and the day. He slowly lowered his rifle,

looking into my eyes to see what I would do, and brought his hands together in prayer.

I joined him. We both closed our eyes and answered the chorus.

"And the light that burns, burns away poison.

"And the hands that heal tend the flame..."

He knew the Latin words. Our cultures, separated by time and the gulfs between the stars, still each remembered the deeds of the Prophet and knew them to be holy. Tears ran down my face as I answered the chorus line by line, unfearful, for I heard his voice singing, too.

When the program ended, and silence fell, we each slowly opened our eyes and looked at the other. Before anything further could pass between us, he stood and clambered over the stones. He was out of sight before I could think to yell to him, to offer to heal his wound.

I stood there for a time, thinking upon the wonders revealed amid the horror. Eventually, Onganggorak shook my shoulder, startling me. He had crept through the ruins silently, a great Vorox hunter.

"Alustro, are you well? I smell no injury," he said tenderly.

"I am fine, Ong. Where are the others? Is Erian okay?"

"She is wounded, but will live. Cardanzo guards her at the Resurgent and Julia prepares to leave. I came to find you, little confessor."

I smiled. "That was foolhardy. Kurgans are here. You could have been caught."

"Hmmp. We cannot leave without you. Ong's life is little next to yours," he said, tugging me to leave with him.

I made to disagree but finally assented and went over to the pile of shale that hid my bags and my think machine, the device which had saved my life today. "I'm ready."

"Where is the consul? I cannot find his scent. He should leave with us," Ong said.

"He... died," I said. "He rests with his artifacts."

Ong nodded and made a grunting noise, a statement of some sort in his own tongue, but before I could ask what he meant, he turned to go, motioning me with one of his four arms to follow.

As we began our trek to the ship, the sky thundered and glowed. Bombs flew once more. The flickering light of the deadly fireworks lit the area, and I saw the remains of the high tower, now scattered across the ground. The ruler's flag was gone and the museum sign stood bare. I could now read it:

Museum of the Ancients. Established 3973. "And the Anunnaki fashioned their individual shrines, the 300 younger gods of heaven and the Anunnaki of the Apsu all assembled."

I stood in shock, staring at the sign. "Ong!" I cried, and he came running, sniffing the air and casting his eyes

all about. “There!” I pointed to the sign.

Underneath the ancient quote from some long-forgotten Urth text was a beautiful mandala.

Our mandala.

I rushed over to the sign to examine it. It was the very same seen in Erian’s dream — copperish-purple alloy, four images quartered around a central star. “This is it, Ong. Our artifact.”

I tugged at it, and it snapped right off its base. We both stared at each other, chills traveling up our spines. Of all the Ur artifacts in the museum, why was this one so easily removed? I looked at the base it had rested on and realized that it had taken a direct artillery hit. The ceramsteel was melted and pitted, blackened every place but where the mandala had rested. The metal and magnetic glue had given out, but the artifact was unblemished.

I decided that enough was enough. Placing the mandala in my bag, we headed off to the ship. Ong blazed the trail, taking small paths through the ruins. I heard voices from afar, and radio chatter, but Ong’s path avoided all patrols.

We finally arrived at the ship. As I entered the hatch and Ong closed it behind me, I heard Erian call to me from her cabin. I ran quickly and saw her lying on the bed, her leg wrapped in red bandages.

“My lady!” I yelled, and immediately set to examining her wound. Cardanzo put his hand on my shoulder.

“She is fine, Alustro. I staunched the blood flow.”

Erian looked tired but she was awake. I reached into my bag and produced the artifact, holding it up to show her.

“The mandala!” she cried, trying to rise to her feet. Cardanzo and I both rushed to keep her down, slowly lowering her back into bed. She gazed at it wondrously. “Where did you find it?”

“The sign. The museum sign covered by the flag, the

one on the tower. All this time, right above us.”

She looked at me and a I felt a rush of pride. “Well done, my priest. Well done.”

I nodded and rose. “Get your rest, lady. We can examine it later.” I left the artifact with her as I headed to my cabin to change out of my filthy clothes. I would tell her about Consul Rohmer later, when there was time to reflect on a life now past. I felt the rumble of the engines and knew the ship was taking off.

As I entered my cabin, I heard Sanjuk and Julia talking in the cockpit.

“I can’t believe he found it,” Sanjuk said. “Of all the dumb luck.”

“I knew he would,” Julia said. “It’s not luck. The boy’s got a track record.”

I smiled, knowing that her comment was not meant for me to hear.

The next few hours were rough, as Julia encountered two squadrons of Hazat troops demanding we land to be examined by their military generals. Of course she denied all requests in Erian’s name, knowing our ship would be conscripted if it fell into their hands, and flew us out of the way of most conflict. Our ship’s shield easily deflected the few shots we took.

As I write this, we have not yet reached the jumpgate. Julia intends to hide behind the last planet until the jumpgate is clear, or until the few ships there engage enemies coming or going. Then we’ll slip over as quickly as possible, activate the gate, and be gone from this place.

I am confident that we will encounter little problem. We have come too far, and the fates have been too kind. Why would they mean us disaster now? The pattern is clearer now, fragments assembled by some principle whose meaning is as yet unknown.

Tangled Web

I pray that I never again experience a Night of Fire. The Inquisition's flamerguns burn not only wood and straw, they boil the blood and singe the soul.

The town of Ravican, in the barony of al-Bazan on Criticorum, was last night's target for Inquisitorial fervor. The rumors had spread throughout the marketplace earlier that day: a Symbiot had been seen by Yeoman Dar in his apple orchard, creeping about in the trees. There is no telling just what his initial description of the thing had been, for by the time word spread in town, various descriptions were given, with the creature growing larger and more malevolent as the shadows from the sun grew longer.

We ignored the rumors at first, for we are all well used to such superstitious panics among commoners. This was meant to be our rest time, a month far from the bustle and politics of the big cities. We deserved this time away from responsibility. As our liege, Erian Li Halan, pondered our next step in the quest, we relaxed and roamed the idyllic hills and meandering streams of this pastoral region.

Our peace ended just after nightfall when the Inquisition ship landed in the fields near the shire reeve's home. Cloaked and hooded priests — mainly Avestites, but some Orthodox priests among them — stamped from the ship and into the town, immediately demanding that no one leave. They summoned the local lord, a retired knight, and demanded that everyone in the town subject themselves to Inquisitorial questioning. Unable to deny them lest he be suspected himself, the old knight acquiesced and gave them free reign to find the Symbiot they had heard was hiding in Ravican.

The priestly team split up and marched down the streets, lining up the citizenry, eyeing them for any signs of inhuman behavior.

Erian, her bodyguard Cardanzo, and I were in a small pub on the far side of town. A farmer ran in to cry the news about the Inquisition, and the other drinkers and diners immediately abandoned their meals to flee from the town to their hovels in the surrounding hills. This was no sign of guilt — no one willingly subjects himself to Inquisitorial scrutiny. Even I, a priest myself, know that the accusing monks are wrong more often than right.

We decided to slip away ourselves. Our starship was in a field not too far from here. Julia, Sanjuk and Onggangarak were there now. By the time we passed two streets, the smell of smoke was already in the air. Somewhere a hapless fool said the wrong thing or tried to run when he should have halted, and flamerguns had roared as a result. The sky was lit with the flames, started in one building perhaps but now obviously spread to more of them. The whole town would probably be cinders by the morn-

ing. I almost hoped the rumors of Symbiots were true, to at least justify the cost.

As we neared the pig sty near the small path that would lead us to our ship, we heard voices approaching: "I saw movement here, brothers!"

We leapt into the dark doorway of the hovel and tried to still our breathing as a group of the robed fanatics rushed past and down another street. Our quiet allowed me to hear the sobbings in the room behind us.

I peered into the gloom and saw a man slumped to the floor, his head in his hands, his body wracked with sobs. I moved to him and bent down, my hand over his head. "Don't fear; I am a priest, but not like those outside."

The poor fellow looked up at me, his eyes pleading. "They killed my children, father. They burned them. My poor, poor children." Tears streamed down his face. I didn't know what to say. How do you console a man who has just lost his beloved children to the flames of priests?

I moved my hand to his shoulder but recoiled in sudden fear and disgust, unable to control my instinctual reaction. From out of his shirtless torso grew four thin, segmented spider legs. He didn't seem to notice at first until he heard the intake of my breath. He looked at me and then at himself in surprise. He then leaped to his feet with amazing speed and scuttled up the wall to the rafters above, his new legs clinging to the ceiling.

"By the Pancreator!" I heard Erian yell. Cardanzo drew his blaster and aimed it at the rafters, trying to discern the creature in the darkness.

The thing spoke: "Please, father, I beg you. I mean no harm. I was a priest once, like you."

Cardanzo, seeing the creature, pointed his gun and prepared to fire. I leapt forward, knocking down his hand, yelling: "No! Wait!"

Both Erian and Cardanzo looked at me like I was mad. I explained: "Let me hear him. I... I don't know why, but please. Let me hear him."

They didn't move, and the thing bent down further into the dim light coming from the doorway. "I was an Illuminatus grade monk on Stigmata. I fought Symbiots, and believed them to be evil and demonic. But then I was changed, converted by a stray spore they had spread months before. They came for me and taught me who they really were. They aren't like we think. They are a good people, living closer with nature than you can know."

As he spoke, he slowly came down from his perch, crawling down the wall and looking at me earnestly. "I remembered more of my human memories than most converts. I still know the litanies and exegeses drilled into me at the Naos. I still rever the Pancreator and Zebulon, but I

see that their message is broader than even Pallamedes knew. The Holy Flame is not restricted to humans. All beings share its spark. Each world has this fire, which empowers all living things.”

He stood up straight on two human legs when he reached the floor, moving closer, his arms gesturing as he made his case. “Because I still knew human ways, I was sent back to the Known Worlds to learn about the new Emperor and his plans against the Symbiots. I changed my form to look like anyone I wanted to, and spent time in the main capitals of many worlds, pretending to be many people I was not. But I tired of it, and longed for the peace and tranquility of my old home, the town where I had grown up.

“I returned to Ravican and started a family. My wife, who knew of my secret, loved me the more for it. She died last year of the Vantokos Sickness. But our children lived. They are human, like you. I cannot and would not convert them even if they asked. I love my Symbiot brothers, but prefer my human family. Do you understand?”

I stared at him, not knowing how to respond. He spoke so passionately, his tale came from the heart. His grief over his lost children seemed so genuine.

“I... I’m so sorry,” I stammered.

“We do not need to be enemies. We share the same dangers. The light of the suns fade for us all. There is a saying among the Phazûl: Weaving webs around the sun.”

“What?” I said, surprised.

“It means to support the Lifeweb, to renew the light.”

He paused for a moment, as if trying to figure out how to say something difficult, something hard to translate from one tongue to another, when a sword thrust out from his chest. He stared down at it in shock, and Erian, standing behind him, withdrew her rapier and quickly slashed it across the air. His head rolled forward and thumped to the floor. His body’s spider legs twitched momentarily before the body collapsed.

I stared in shock.

Cardanzo stepped forward and emptied his blaster into the body, turning the carcass into an ashy husk. Summoned by the blaster fire, Inquisition troops bolted down the street

and through the door. As soon as they saw the scene and the sizzling body on the floor, remnants of its spider legs still apparent, they nodded quietly.

Erian wiped her blade on a nearby sack, and the Inquisition leader stepped over to her. “Well done, my lady. May I know your name?”

“Erian Li Halan,” she replied coldly, as if speaking to her social inferior. “And this is my entourage. Cardanzo, my bodyguard, and Alustro, my confessor.”

Her attitude worked well, for the Inquisitor, cowed somewhat by a noble and her brave deed, bowed slightly. “I thank you for catching the Symbiot menace and sending it to Gehenne. We will clean up the remains.”

Erian, without any delay, walked out the doorway. Cardanzo followed, but I was still too stunned to realize that this was our cue to exit. I stood looking down at the body, my thoughts in turmoil.

One of the priests placed his hand on my shoulder. “It’s evil is done with. It cannot harm you now.”

I must have looked at him like he was mad; he completely misunderstood the cause of my confusion. But the startled look on his face brought me back to my senses. I bowed my head. “Yes. Yes, you are right. I was... unprepared.”

He nodded with sympathy and I walked through the door. Erian and Cardanzo had not waited for me, but walked slowly so that I could catch them. As soon as I came to them, they increased their pace, and Cardanzo whispered, “Hurry before they think to search us for taint.”

As we moved through the woods past the sty and toward our ship, my consternation was clear. Erian looked at me with worry. “It’s all right, my priest. You see the best in men, and not their lies.”

“But... the web. The web in the sun. It was in my vision. What does this mean?”

“I cannot say. Are not lies seen as a tangled web? Perhaps your vision warned you against his deception.”

I nodded, but I knew that was not the answer. There was a deeper meaning here, and I feel our prejudice and fear silenced the answer before I could ask the question.

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