

MY TIME AMONG THE STARS

VOLUME TWO: PROVOST

by *Guiseppe Alustro*

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

FADING SUNS

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My Quest

To: Archbishop Marcus Aurelius Palamon, Cathedral of Saint Maya, Holy City, Galatea, Byzantium Secundus
Dearest Uncle,

It has been long since I last wrote you. I apologize for not doing so sooner, but the dangers involved were too great. I'm sure you will scoff at such a remark, but I tell you it is true. How dangerous, I hear you ask, to write to the Archbishop of Byzantium Secundus? No one would dare delay delivery of such a missive, and none would dare break its seal to read it.

As you know, trusts and confidences can be betrayed under intact seals. My liege, Erian Li Halan, has many enemies, not the least of which is her brother, a hateful man bent on destroying her. To that end, he has enflamed many of his allies against her, some of whom are involved in the highest levels of information gathering. I could not risk even a letter to you, lest it reveal our whereabouts before we had moved on.

Such cloak and dagger lives disgust you, I know. I wish I could live otherwise. I yearn for the life of simple contemplation I left behind on Midian when I eagerly joined Erian on her mission to the stars. My hunger for new sites and experiences could not be sated, and the cold walls of the monastery seemed a prison. Ironic that it now seems a warm den of rest and safety, after so many years on the roads between the stars.

But I am not writing for pity or justification. I simply explain my situation so that you understand the long years between correspondence. I wish so much to speak with you in person, to walk the corridors of your great cathedral and hear you orate the virtues of the Prophet's disciples again, in your commanding voice that was once a pillar of faith for me. It matters little that I betrayed your own faith by joining the Eskatonic Order rather than the Orthodoxy — the words of the Prophet are shared by both our sects.

I digress. I must put aside reflection and state the matter about which I write. My liege readies to travel again, this time on a new path, one full of possibility and danger. I am to go with her, for our fates are one. I am her confessor, and spiritual guide besides. No longer is this role just in her service, however — it is also in mine, for I have been gifted with dreams and visions leading me toward an uncertain but important future.

I wrote of the Gargoyle of Nowhere in my last letter, that monolithic relic left behind by the Anunnaki, they who wrought the jumpgates and tamed the heavens before our kind was raised from the muck by the hand of the Pancreator. The vision it gifted us then — the maddeningly vague clues which lead us from world to world in

search of ever more clues — only now begins to take shape.

To explain this shape, I must first explain where we have been and what we have seen. The Known Worlds are huge, sprawling across the nightscape of the dimming stars forty worlds strong. While this is a paltrey sum compared to the hundreds of worlds once known to the Second Republic, it is still a testament to humankind's unity that even so many worlds as these have stayed together, connected through the jumpweb now under the rule of Emperor Alexius.

I have been to many of these worlds — nearly all of them, in fact. How many people can claim that? Most never leave their hovels, let alone their provinces — and to leave one's very planet is a momentous step indeed. From there to travel to more than three worlds is a jaunt even most Charioteer star-pilots never achieve. But to travel like Erian and her entourage — unimaginable.

And yet we have done so. We have broken all bonds of place and come and go from hither to yon as birds migrate through the seasons or as leaves travel the aether or float along the stream. What's more — we are not alone. More and more people of brave will and good constitution awaken from a long night of captivity on their homeworlds to escape gravity and go outwards, to worlds once known only to their grandparents or more distant ancestors in the past. The Emperor Wars kept everyone penned in, trapped behind enemy lines in their own homes.

But that dark time is over at last. Alexius is ascendant and the jumproads are open once more. The cage is broken and the beasts have slipped through the bars.

Yes, I mean beasts. For every man and woman of good heart and purpose who now travel between the worlds of the Empire, two or three scoundrels of black heart and base desire also go forth. For this reason, only a fool travels alone, and those of good intent are best served by their own kind. I do not follow Erian because feudal duties alone decree it — I do so because in her service I am among others of good heart, some with strong arm and hand to defend us bodily from the harm others intend. I can attempt to sooth a soul with words of scripture, or even seal a wound with prayer, but I can do little to prevent injury in the face of evil.

Cardanzo, Erian's bodyguard, is a capable man and goodly tactician. Of even greater might is Onggangarak, our Vorox friend who has elected us members of his angerak — his blood pack. No better soldiers could one ask in the quest for right.

And no better pilot than Julia Abrams. Although her demeanor is caustic, her heart is strong and deeply tied to ours. She is the engine of our escape and a hearty com-

panion on the road — a true follower of the first disciple, Paulus the Traveler, he who guided the Prophet on his sojourns.

In your response to my last letter, you warned me against associating too closely with the Ur-Ukar aliens, whom you, like many, distrust for their seemingly primitive, clannish ways. I have learned to look beyond the expected, and seen the truth that lies in people's hearts. Sanjuk oj Kaval is a woman of supreme courage. Her travails on her harsh homeworld of Kordeth, in the subterranean caverns of her clan, have only strengthened her bravery. While she is as yet largely ignorant of scripture, I have made a pact with her — for every legend she tells me of Ukari culture, I read to her verse from the Omega Gospels. In such a way does understanding between two different peoples grow. It is just such an interchange that must take place on a galactic scale, to overcome the centuries of ignorance and hate fostered between fiefs and territories.

The Church teaches us of the good in our souls, and yet acts as if people are mean and evil unless taught otherwise. The rod of rulership must fall heavily on humanity and its alien brethren lest they rise up to do evil. Or so the widespread belief — justification — goes. I know otherwise. I know that even the most oppressed men will share their only foodstores with suffering strangers, even if such strangers be from strange locales and other worlds. Yes, distrust and suspicion is rampant, and some are more likely to be greeted by a lynch mob than an invitation to dinner, but this is by no means as universal as we are all taught.

Perhaps during the Emperor Wars and its aftermath, distrust was the lot of humankind. But with each new starship that comes from afar bringing goods undreamed of before; with each new person who comes bearing news of distant and long-forgotten family on other worlds; with each new knight that comes from the Emperor bringing law to the lawless regions, understanding and hope grows.

When men have hope, they begin to cherish their dreams once more. No matter how dark the suns may fade, the light of hope cannot be fully extinguished.

The fading suns. I have tried often to forget them, for their dimming light fails to show the way forward, only the way back. I no longer want to look back. I want only to go forward, to solve the dilemma of our impending ruin, to reignite the stars that have for so long only portended our doom. Heresy? To hope to change what the Pancreator has wrought? But you yourself preach that it is not the Pancreator that darkens the day, but the demons who haunt us and hover before the light, casting their mournful shadows over our stars.

Why not act against them? Why simply sit and wait for the end, assured that judgment will come swift to all. What if that judgement depends on our acting? If we fail in this, how will we be judged then?

Go back to the Prophet's words and read them afresh. I believe with the deepest sincerity that he was not speaking for the people then, but for now. He spoke of a "dark between the stars," and the demons that dwell therein. He spoke of the evil which would descend on us and the ways that we might fight it. Yet when he said these things, were not the stars shining bright? Did not humankind have its greatest moments yet before it, in the founding of the Second Republic that was to come?

Then why was he so ill at ease and dark of heart? Why in an Age of Miracles did he alone see danger? I tell you he did not see with the eyes of the present but with the future — to our present, to our time and its rising darkness. He set down words which we would need now to survive against the chill end of time.

All his deeds, all his acts and words that enriched us, did so in the hope that we would not simply look to them as artifacts of a better past, but as examples of a greater future. It is for us now to become as his disciples and follow their steps toward the stars, to Quest, Defend the Faith, Right Wrongs, Seek Justice, Heal the Injured, Aid the Needy, Seek Wisdom and Look Within.

If Paulus could do so, why not we? If Mantius and Lextius, Maya, Amalthea, Hombor, Horace and Ven Lohji — why not we?

I know your answer. Heresy. We are not saints, and we dare not elect ourselves so. I agree. I am no saint. But I can try to be. I can muster all my will and faith toward walking as one who can make a difference, one who can change fate for the better.

Worry not that the Inquisition will hunt us for such hubris; they already have. I have dodged more flamerguns and brown-robed fanatics over the past years than I thought could possibly exist. There are so very many who desire to punish others for reaping benefits they themselves fear to ask for.

We have surely sinned in that we travel in a starship. Is not this the sort of technology they spew sermons against? I am not ignorant of the dangers of such tech, for the Second Republic proved what science without faith can produce, and its mewling horrors are not easily forgotten. But I will not stand against all technology because some of it was misused.

I digress again. I meant to tell you of our travels, of the sights I have seen since last I wrote. I have sent you in separate letters copies of my journals of the past three years. While they tell of my deepest thoughts and our entourage's trials on many worlds, I want here to tell of the things I could not enter into those journals, because the hectic pace of our lives prevented it. I want to impress upon you what I found, how things are not as we are told, and why I seek to go even farther.

My thoughts first turn to Malignatius, that frozen hell

of a world, gulag for so many suffering under the whim of House Decados. No better served were the people, however, when House Li Halan ruled the world before the Emperor Wars. I know the Li Halan well, having lived in their service all my life, and I believe I can thus see their faults clearly. Never are the common folk under them allowed to rise, no matter how they prove themselves otherwise. But the virtue of the Li Halan is that neither do they mistreat their charges, unlike the Decados. While surely even the lowliest Decados peasant may rise to better status for committing any number of heinous deeds that please their lords, most are trampled under foot.

This world is renowned for its religious schisms and the many charismatics who have risen to guide people onto often bizarre spiritual paths. Such loud men and women have branded the world fanatic, and this is surely how the Orthodoxy sees it. But what if I were to tell you that, hidden in the ice caves under the surface, there are many monks of astonishing enlightenment? I met one, a Friar Ged, who treated me to such a dialogue of scriptural questioning that I had not had since my first exposure to Magister Tarsus, my Eskatonic examiner. I came to realize that no matter the political situation in a place or the tenure of its people as a whole, there are always unique individuals worthy of encountering.

And there are wonders, too, visions of beauty and natural awe. I can never forget my undersea swim on the world of Madoc, a planet whose surface is mainly ocean and achepeligo. Using breathing suits provided us by a wealthy guildswoman — technology of which I'm sure many in the Church disapprove — our entourage swam deep down to examine the ruins of that planet's previous culture, a civilization that had fallen even before humans left Holy Terra.

Off in the far distance, fearful to come near us, I saw shadowy figures flit in and out of the coral ruins, watching us with their large eyes. One wore sparkling armor of sea shells and another bore a luminous staff — these were no simple sea creatures. They were Oro'ym, the fabled amphibian sentients of that world. I wished so much to approach them and speak with them, hoping they knew our language, but they fled whenever I drew near.

Even more enigmatic than the Oro'ym, however, were the Vau. Ah, I wish I could see the look of shock and indignation on your face when I tell you that I have met a Vau. I even shook its hand, although it seemed bemused by the gesture. It was on Manitou, that border world where the Church itself treads only lightly for fear of raising the ire of the Vau rulers. Here many of the outlaw dregs of humanity have collected — not its pirates and murderers so much as its thought criminals, those who follow different gods or indulge in pastimes harmful only to themselves but which are punishable by death in the courts of the Known

Worlds.

I will not tell you why we were there, for you would greatly disapprove. I will simply say that, while wandering the agora and marveling at the wealth of black market goods, an emissary from the local Vau mandarin approached us. He appeared to be of their worker caste, a lowly position among his kind but still far and away more prestigious than our serf class. He seemed curious about us, but afraid to show it. Nonetheless, he came up to Erian and smiled, a gesture alien to his kind but one which he had obviously practised for our sake. She greeted him, unsure what to say or do, and I offered my hand. He took it. And then he left, as if he had already gone further than he was allowed.

I still don't understand the matter, but I am impressed nonetheless. Perhaps my leige is destined for greatness, and the Vau somehow know of this. It is said that they have machines that foretell that future, and ancient prophecies given to them by the Anunnaki. Who can say for sure? They remain removed from humankind, protected by their superior technology.

The Ur-Obun also seemed to favor my leige, and believe she is destined for something, although Julia opines that they were simply "sucking up" to a human noble. Our stay on Velisimil was short, but most relaxing. While Erian made alliance with many Umo'rin members, I spent a meditation retreat in a humble Voavenlohjun temple. I was the only human, but they welcomed me as if I were one of their own. They do not separate involvement in the Church into sects as we do; all who follow the Prophet's teachings are sacred to them. Of course, they see all religious system as sacred in a way, although they certainly do not honor them equally. They recognize prereflective faith and postreflective grace, fear not.

I will shock you again with an admission concerning the Ur-Ukar — I have sat in a cavedark ceremony on Istakhr. It was not a true cave like on Kordeth, but a deep basement. Nonetheless, it was pitchblack. I joined the others, Sanjuk and her family, in reading the deed carvings of their ancestors on the wall. I only know a little Ukarish, and missed much of what was written, but Sanjuk's recitation aided me.

A barbaric practice? How so? It brought them together and united them in blood and a shared past. That Sanjuk allowed me to join in was a great honor and a sign that she considers me as trustworthy as family — a powerful trust for an Ukari.

What I found most enlightening about the reading, however, was the history of the Ukari gods. While Sanjuk sneers when I mention the common human belief about the truth of their gods, I still believe it so. How can any deny, after hearing the legends of the Ur-Obun and Ur-Ukar, that their deities were any other than the ancient

Anunnaki? That this powerful race grandfathered these younger races in their early days hints that perhaps they did the same for us, on old Urth.

The xenoarchaeologists of the Second Republic thought so. Is this not why they named the Anunnaki after the old gods of Urth? What if these gods of our prereflective ancestors were from the stars? And what if they took our ancestors with them on their journeys? What would have become of such humans? Do they still exist among the stars?

These questions are impossible to answer as yet. I hope to do so one day, however.

But let me not leave out opinions on the Merchant League and noble class. You'd surely be most disgruntled at my omission — if you've bothered to read this far. I know you have been to Leagueheim, for your disapproval of its "Republican sympathies" was most apparent to me even at a young age. But even you were somewhat awed at its spires and cities, one of the few worlds that still resembles the Second Republic at its height. I have walked those spires, and ambled the sky lanes from building to building, traveling leagues without ever touching ground.

As I walked, flitters would hover near me with guildsmembers offering me rides, confused that I would willingly choose to walk when I could ride for free. But I knew their kind offers were not truly free, for I would surely be subject to a sales pitch of one kind or another should I choose to ride in their gravity-defying chariots. It is indeed true that everything is for sale on Leagueheim, including allegiances.

How refreshing then, to meet those for whom allegiance is a matter of honor, not firebirds. I mean the Hazat — those nobles of a most martial bent whose hot-headed fury has shaken up the Empire on many occasions. Erian has allies in the house, and we have visited them often. On one occasion, on Aragon, we were witness to that most famous of noble pastimes: the duel.

Erian was to be Baron Allejandro Campeiro Justin de Justus's second in a fight. This means that, while she would not fight herself, she would hand him his weapon and watch for treachery from the baron's opponent. We all gathered to watch, and I was ready to mend any wounds taken by either side.

It was a short but vicious fight, with terms of surrender alone. Whomever gave in first would be the loser. Such a duel between Hazat nobles is usually to the death, but the baron's opponent was an al-Malik dandy, Sir Jacob Saladin al-Malik, whom we all doubted would choose death before honor. He was an expert swordsman, though, and had first blood on the baron in mere seconds. But our friend ran him through moments later, thanks only to a malfunction in Sir Jacob's energy shield.

Nobles rely on these shields to protect them from the

worst harm, although they don't stop relatively harmless blows from landing. It is these small wounds which add up over the course of a duel, however. In this case, the shield failed, and a mortal wound was delivered — or would have been mortal if not for the miracles of faith. My Eskatonic training allowed me to call upon the Pancreator's mercy to heal his wound, thus saving his life.

Instead of triumph, the baron was mortified, for he had no intention of winning a duel in such a way. Sir Jacob, who had been his enemy at the start of the day, became his friend by the end, for so gracious and generous was Baron Allejandro to his wronged opponent that he spared no expense in making things right. He invited the lord to recuperate at his mansion, in as much opulence as he could withstand. For his part, Sir Jacob was more than relieved at being brought back from death's door, and he pledged to tithe heavily to my order when next the chance arose.

I tell this tale not to impress you that I move in the company of nobles, but to mention the odd sense of honor they display. Sometimes, that is; not everywhere universally. There are nobles who are far from honorable, those who shame their very class by becoming tyrants. I speak of Duke Granzil Hassan Keddah, a lord on Grail who mistreats his people terribly. Even the Etyri of his fiefs have fled, flown on to other territories in high eeries rather than suffer his decrees, even though it is illegal for them to have done so. He has called a hunt on these avian sentients, but one which has been thankfully ignored by fellow nobles of his house, who have denied these hunters entry onto their fiefs.

And so I come, through long digression, back to the heart of the matter: the shape of my destiny in Erian's company. My lady has taken a great step forward and allied herself to the greatest power in the Known Worlds: she has taken pledge as a Questing Knight, in fealty to the Emperor himself. She now places his needs over those of her own house, although we both pray they never come into conflict. By this act of fealty, she is empowered to Quest.

To such happy news I add this: I, too, have taken an oath, one which places me in even greater fealty to her and her lord. I have become an Imperial Cohort, the new office opened by Alexius for those who wish to aid the Questing Knights but for whom such rank is closed themselves. Since I am not of noble blood or landed rank, this chance to aid my lady with the full support of her lord is a welcome opportunity. Cardanzo, Julia and Onggangarak have also pledged themselves as Cohorts, and so we all form a knightly company now in Alexius's service. We, too, can now Quest with the full support of a great lord — our destiny nears completion. The riddles posed years ago by the Ur can begin to be answered.

I hope that this act of mine pleases you more than my previous decisions. My refusal of orthodoxy hurt you, but

perhaps my new fealty to the shining star of your diocese on Byzantium Secundus will assure that my deeds will from now forwards be in the name of universal justice and law.

I know that you did not fully approve of the emperor at first, but his regular appearance in your cathedral for services has warmed you to him. I know this because I saw it myself. You and he, his Imperial Eminance, chatting together like old friends after the service, surrounded by bodyguards on all sides.

Yes, I saw this, for I was in your cathedral yesterday, witnessing your service from the high balcony. I so wanted to come down and greet you, to pray in the first pews before you. But I did not dare. Too many eyes are upon you, and your reaction to my presence would have alerted Erian's enemies, even if word took time to reach them.

My lady prepares a mission of great import and I go

with her, as always. I know not where or what our pledge leads us toward, for it is not yet revealed to us. We leave, however, tonight. I had hoped to visit you in your personal quarters, far from prying eyes, but it is too late. I delayed too long, and duty pulls me away to another world, perhaps even to barbarian space, for many Questing Knights have been dispatched there of late.

I will see you again, uncle. I will kiss your hand in recognition of your high station and because you are my mother's brother. Fear not for me or my liege. If I should die on the reaches far from home, the Pancreator's light will still find me and guide me back, as it will all of good heart and right hand.

Farewell.

Your nephew,

Provost Guissepe Alustro

Loyal Service

The old general stared out across the fields as if yearning to join the farmers working there. He shut his eyes for a long moment, and then shook off his ennui, turning to greet me with a smile. His movements were graceful and measured, practiced many times before in countless courts, but given an unusual edge by his years of military training and martial practice.

“Ah, Erian’s young confessor,” he said, gently cupping my hand in both of his, a gesture of familiarity normally reserved only for family. “Come, sit. I was preparing to take tea. I think today it shall be shava tea, in light of your visit from afar. Like you, it comes from Midian.”

I bowed and took the cushioned chair he offered me. He reserved the hardwood stool for himself, spurning soft, physical luxuries even now, years after his last campaign. His age ensured that there would be no more battles for him.

“Thank you, my lord,” I said. “I am pleased you consented to see me.”

He nodded slightly. “Your liege is very dear to me. What concerns her, concerns me. Until yesterday, I had not seen her since her ninth natal day, yet ever has she remained dear to me, a luminous reflection of her mother, my dearest sister.”

I waited for him to invite me to relate the matter upon which I had come, but knew that, as is Li Halan custom, such weighty matters would wait until he was ready to hear them. The servant arrived with a tray and teacups, and poured us each a steaming cup of the suffused exotic leaf. General Hanmei Usaki Li Halan sipped slowly, his attention again amidst the fields. The sun’s noon heat rippled through the humid air and the thrumming sounds of insects filled our ears. After nearly five minutes of such quiet contemplation, he turned to me and spoke:

“What concerns you, holy man, and how does it involve my favored niece?”

“Her rivals, my lord,” I said. “As you surely know, her brother was most insulted by her refusal to stay in her father’s home once it had passed into his rule. He fears she plots some method of overthrowing his inheritance. A most ridiculous and uncivilized assertion, but it stands nonetheless. He has sent agents against her many times, and has spread lies and deceit to his loyal allies, poisoning their minds against her.”

“Yes,” the old general said. “The masks of decorum occasionally fall from noble faces even in the Courts of Divine Mandate. The Li Halan, like so many others, preach a doctrine even they rarely hold.”

I didn’t know what to say to such a frank admittance. I was embarrassed, and unsure if he was testing me for a

sign of disloyalty or if he had simply forgotten to whom he spoke. I have served his family for years, but I was not one of them, and thus not used to being privy to family criticism. I remained silent.

He smiled as he watched me, and then continued. “I know of her brother’s campaign against her. He tried to initiate me into it. I refused. A simple thing, since I am so far removed from the courts.” This last was said not wistfully, but with a startling righteousness, as if he had earned the right to exile. He looked at me and waited for me to speak again.

“Last night,” I said, “my lady confided in you and told you of our plans, about how we are preparing to leave Byzantium Secundus for Leminkainen and then Hargard, and from there travel deeper into barbarian space in service to the Emperor. She said this trusting fully in your confidence, knowing that you would never reveal to others our mission.”

“And yet?” he said, staring at me pointedly.

“Her brother has somehow heard of our plans. A leak among the Questing Knights, perhaps. His allies are here now, although I know not who or where they be. I do know that they will try to stop my lady from leaving, although how far they will go to achieve this end, I know not. But I fear it will be far...”

I saw the general’s anger for the first time. It was not a loud thing, but a simmering heat radiating from behind his eyes. I thanked the Pancreator that he did not direct his gaze at me, but inward in contemplation of some deed, act or person that ignited such a rage.

“And you seek protection from me for Erian? You need not speak it. It is her’s, and always has been. I would muster all my armies for her, or receive myself the sword aimed at her breast.” He stood and moved closer to the balcony, staring fiercely out at the fields and into the deeper distance, at the Ventriddi garrison town. “I have sat too long in this manse, rubbing wounds and replaying lost strategies. I had not heard that Inami’s allies were here. The old man naps while the cats slip into the garden to steal the golden carp. How did you know this?”

“Cardanzo saw a familiar face at the inn late last night, a former bodyguard of Erian’s father whom he had served with before. He knew this man to be disreputable and long-suspected to be in Inami’s employ even before his father’s death.”

“A loyal man, Cardanzo. He truly understands the role the Pancreator has given him; his loyalty to Erian is his loyalty to the Pancreator. And I, too, am loyal to both. This man of Inami’s will not make a move while Erian is my guest; he will instead cloak his actions, perhaps hiring lo-

cals to act for him. He will do this only when she is in town, away from my manse.”

“But she is in town now! She insisted on overseeing the provisioning with Julia.” My heart was clutched by a black hand. Fear and panic overcame me, and I stood, wanting to run to the town. “I should not have gone to Saint Maya’s! Oh, selfish errant priest! I should have come to you first!”

“Fear causes the jackrabbit to rush before the wheels of the chariot,” the general said, gripping my shoulders and seating me again. “We must act with surety in the time the Pancreator allows.” He clapped thrice quickly, and a guard appeared from a hidden alcove I had been completely unaware of.

“You heard?” he asked the guard, and when the man nodded, the general spoke again in a tongue I did not know. It was surely a secret Li Halan battle tongue, a unique language used to hide communications from listening enemies on the field of war. The guard then turned and disappeared into the manse. “A general does not grow to great age without inspiring loyalty. Go now, there is a flutter waiting on the lawn to take you to Erian. But wear a mask as you go: your part is the innocent shazzle, unaware of the forces moving through the woods around him. Do nothing to alert Erian’s enemies, and be assured that all is well; none will move against her without first encountering my displeasure.”

I bowed, and hurried down the hall to the front lawn, where the driver who had brought me here prepared to fly be back to the garrison town. Halfway to the car, I halted and forced myself to walk calmly. I must appear undisturbed, as if nothing had taken place but a pleasant conversation. I climbed into the car and sat in the back, my hands twisting and almost tearing at my robe in frustration and anxiety.

Soon the flutter landed in the square before the town gates, and I rushed out, hurriedly seeking sign of Erian or our friends, forgetting Usaki’s advice. The place was full of soldiers, most of them imperial legionnaires recently arrived for a quiet retirement from Stigmata. While they were still a standing army, they had little to stand for here in Old Istanbul. Nonetheless, the imperial capital world must keep soldiers ever at the ready. Among them thronged mercenaries and soldiers from other armies — even a Church contingent — sharing uncomfortably the largest garrison town outside of the Imperial City.

It was market day in Ventridi — the reason Erian had come— and merchants yelled over the low rumble of diverse conversations. I threaded my way through crowds, nearly scattering a pair of dice on the ground as I accidentally trod through an impromptu game of odds. Two burly and scarred veterans on their knees in the mud looked angrily up at me, but I kept moving and was soon out of

their sight.

I cried with relief when I saw Ong in the crowd, his head reaching above even the tallest soldier. I waved and yelled to gain his attention, and his keen eyes quickly darted in my direction. He smiled as he recognized me, and moved forward through the crowd as I struggled to pass a band of Hazat veterans.

“Little father,” he said when we reached one another, “I thought you went to see our lady’s uncle.”

“Erian is in trouble!” I said, as low as I could, fearful now that someone might overhear. Ong’s keen ears had no trouble understanding what I said, and he stood to full height, his eyes searching for our lady. He apparently saw her and practically leapt in her direction, startling a group of beggars and scattering them in all directions. I followed in his wide wake.

Erian was standing outside a merchant’s stall, Cardanzo by her side, while Julia haggled with an old crone over the price of what appeared to be old canned goods. They all looked at Ong as he came, and Cardanzo’s hand instantly shot to his pistol, his eyes scanning the crowd for the source of Ong’s anxiety. As I ran up, I saw his eyes tighten into hard slits and his pistol slide from its holster to point at a target to my left.

I had failed to notice the crowd clearing to the left for reasons other than our Vorox friend. A group of grimy mercenaries gathered there with clubs, maces and bats, all staring at Erian and our entourage. The leader stepped forward, boldly ignoring the blaster aimed at his eyes.

“Eh, you there! Li Halan!” he yelled.

Erian shot him a contemptuous glare and ignored him; he was well below her class and she was well within her rights to pretend he didn’t exist.

“Don’t turn from me!” he said. “You’re the one that cheated us out of our pay. Twenty-five men dead, all because of you. The rest of us, abandoned on that field, bleeding and crying for evac. But you couldn’t be bothered. What’re a bunch of liege-less mercs to you? But we did our duty, and now we’re going to take our pay out of your hide!”

Erian looked aghast. “I’ve never hired mercenaries in my life!”

I scanned the rest of the crowd. They were moving away, refusing to get involved in what they deemed a matter of pay between a mercenary group and a disloyal noble. No one here — all soldiers and veterans, surely wronged themselves at one time or another by a noble’s whim — would defend Erian, a stranger to them. I moved to Erian’s side. “They work for your brother, my lady. This is a trick.”

She looked at me with shock and then back at the mercenaries. “You dare hide your affiliation to my brother under lies?! Step forward and fight me then!” She drew her sword and stepped clear of us.

Cardanzo moved in front of her. “They have no intention of honorable dueling, my lady. Step away. I will defend you.”

The mercenaries fanned out; they intended to take us all. Even with Ong’s strength and speed, and Cardanzo’s skill, they posed a risk to Erian. I cried out to the throng: “Can’t you all see this is about a noble vendetta, not about wronged soldiers?” No one responded.

I moved in front of Cardanzo, to stare in the mercenary leader’s face. “If you intend harm to her, you must then harm me first.”

He smiled. “All right, priest,” and then swung his club. Too startled to resist, I felt the hard wood crack into my skull, and I sunk to the mud. The world seemed distant and like a magic lantern picture show. I could watch but not act. My limbs didn’t respond to my thoughts.

A blaster bolt tore into my aggressor, charring his fatigues and knocking him back. But his men surged forward, weapons swinging. They did not reach Erian. Soldiers from the crowd appeared between them, slashing expertly left and right with katana blades. The mercenaries turned to defend themselves but could not stand before the equal but better-trained numbers that assaulted them.

As I recovered my senses and tried to rise, I saw the uniforms our allies wore, emblazoned with red hawks swooping over a field of bones. I knew who they were, and I whispered a prayer to the Pancreator for General Usaki’s aid. The Red Hawk company, third regiment of General Usaki’s Scarlet Legion, were renowned veterans of the Emperor Wars, now retired like their lord. While most had returned to the Garden Worlds of the Li Halan, some had retired here, on the general’s lands, to be close to their beloved lord.

The short battle lasted mere seconds, with the false mercenaries routed, many disappearing into the alleys of the garrison town but most dead in the mud of the make-shift market.

Ong helped me up, and Julia tended the wound on my head. “A little blood, but it’s not that bad. You’ll have quite a knob for a while, though.” Cardanzo gave me a “what-the-hell-did-you-think-you-were-doing” look, but I just

shrugged, unsure myself of what came over me.

Erian examined my wound and smiled. “My brave defender appears to have survived. But from now on, he had best perform the role of medic and not wounded soldier.” I nodded but smiled.

One of the Red Hawks addressed Erian. “My lady Li Halan, I have been asked by my Most Notable Commander of Crimson Conflicts to escort you to his manse, where you may rest safely away from such rabble as tried to accost you today.”

“I thank my uncle for his timely aid, and you for your valiant service. I accept his offer and will return with you to his estate.”

The Red Hawks stood in a formation, waiting for sign that Erian was ready to depart. As soon as she saw we were together, she walked toward the gates, surrounded regally by this force of disciplined soldiers. As I walked among them, guarded on all sides by their regimented march, I saw that all were older than any of us. Indeed, there did not appear to be one of them under forty years of age. I marveled at the loyalty engendered by the general to keep such troops standing in his name even years after their days of glory in the Emperor Wars had passed.

My head hurts and I tire of writing. My letter to my uncle has already been given into the hands of Usaki’s servant, with strict orders not to be delivered until after we depart tonight. Once aboard the Resurgent, I think I shall sleep for a week.

I will be safer than before. One of the Red Hawks, Lieutenant Chinzi Gosado, begged Erian’s uncle to be allowed to accompany us into barbarian space. With Erian’s permission, he agreed. He knows the soldier well, and vouches for her. There is no place for this woman of war on Byzantium Secundus, but among the Vuldrok and Kurgans, her tactical lore may do us much good, and she begs to be of assistance once more to her noble lord.

I witness her untiring devotion to a cause, even one that threatens her life constantly, and wonder at the nature of faith. I follow the call of the Pancreator’s service, and I know now that people such as she do the same, even though their path is carved with blood and mine with words.

Margins of the Wild

The margins of the wild seem much closer here.

I couldn't help but feel pity for the stray mongrel from the woods that stared at me, its ribs shockingly apparent on its starved torso. It eyed me with a mixture of wariness and desperation, wondering if I was the sort to kick it or feed it.

I opened my satchel and withdrew a strip of dried meat, part of the travel rations we had purchased in Elfhome before making our way into this Pancreator-forsaken country of Jyandhom. Hargard has proven every step of the way that it is not one of the Known Worlds. I threw the strip at the mongrel's feet; it leapt backwards before realizing what it was I had offered. It lunged greedily at the meat and gobbled it in an instant, and then looked to me for more.

I sighed and turned away, looking into the thatch hovel where Erian and the rest of our group held converse with the local matron. We sought a meeting with the infamous star-thane, Haldon Boldeyes, in the hopes of acquiring his patronage as an escort and guide deeper into Vuldrok space. While the idea of allying with one of the raiders who routinely pillaged Hawkwood space was initially abhorrent to me, it's necessity is now obvious after weeks of failure to obtain jumpkeys to other Vuldrok worlds.

Our lack of knowledge about these planets and their people proves a constant hindrance as we betray our ignorance to the locals with every word we speak. What little information was provided us by fellow Questing Knights and Cohorts has taken us this far and provided us with a number of potential guides, along with some murky idea of what other worlds lie further beyond Hargard's gates. But it has proven terribly incomplete, full of hearsay and bigoted opinion relayed as fact.

I felt something tugging at my satchel and looked down to see the mongrel had advanced upon me from behind and now held my bag in its teeth, attempting to wrest it from me. I yanked it away, crying "No!", but it clung tighter and growled evily. I pulled again and freed its jaws, but the beast, boldened by its taste of meat, leapt at me, barking.

I jumped back, afraid it would bite me and bring a host of infections, but it whimpered and ran, quickly disappearing into the nearby woods. I recovered myself, wondering at its sudden cowardice, and turned to enter the hovel — only to run straight into Onggangarak, my Vorox friend. He had silently come from the hovel upon hearing my cry to stand behind me. No wonder the mongrel had run off.

He chuckled and smiled, shaking his head. "A lesson about wild beasts: if you feed them, they will see you as food."

"Well, I... it didn't seem completely feral. I mean, it did approach me. Surely it's been around the people of this village long enough to become somewhat domestic."

Ong smiled. "I know something of 'becoming domestic,' and it is but a thin veneer over a surface of instinct. Some would say it is not worth the effort, but I disagree, appreciating greatly the wonders of civilization. I can thus see the lack of contrast between the two more clearly, perhaps, than you, little father. You have lived long among those schooled in morals."

"Is not certain morality inborn? While dire circumstance may try even the best of us, does not even a cub understand and seek love?"

"Perhaps. It is hard to remember what I thought before I was taught to think in the known manner. It is an argument without ready propositions."

I laughed. "Ong, you could argue theology before the Metropolitan of Kish! Most men are not so familiar with our own language as you."

We were interrupted by Julia, exiting the hovel followed by the rest of our party. "Enough philosophy, you two. We've got to head into the valley; there's a fortress where we can supposedly find this fabled Vuldrok we're looking for."

I turned to Erian, who looked perturbed. "My lady, did you get all the information you needed?"

"No," she sighed, tired after these weeks of frustrating attempts to pretend the Vuldrok informers she interviewed were not peasants but equal peers. She had quickly discovered that her typical noble airs aroused only hatred here. "These people know how to hide secrets from the Hawkwyrdedda, as they call us. But the woman swears that Haldon's steading is in the valley below — if he's not away raiding Hawkwood fiefs."

She marched past us toward the woods, to the thin trail that wound downwards. Cardanzo quickly moved past her to take the lead, and Ong dropped to all sixes and bounded into the trees to the right side of the path, scouting our flank and remaining hidden in case the need for surprise arose. The rest of us, I, Julia, Sanjuk and Lt. Gosado, followed behind our liege.

Lt. Gosado is still new to our company, but her military discipline has served her well in our strange surroundings these past weeks. Her presence among us has calmed Erian, for she is a soldier sworn to Erian's uncle, General Hanmei Usaki Li Halan; it is almost as if the old warrior were here himself, so well does Lt. Gosado know his proverbs and tactical wisdom.

It was a cool day, but not as cold as it was rumored to get in this region. I pulled my robes tighter, but had no

need for anything thicker. As we marched through the woods, I found time to reflect on the immediate environment and took some pleasure in its peaceful beauty. Green conifers dominated, but the occasional open meadow displayed brightly-colored flowers, with the slight buzz of insects about. Birdsong rang through the trees from various distances, undisturbed by the sounds of any human-made thing — there was no whine of flitter or skimmer, no jangling even of horse-tack or horse-drawn wheelcarts. While this is not unusual even in the Known Worlds, it was new to me to experience this nearly uninterrupted for weeks. Even the poorest fief in the empire has some form of craft or tech to eventually disturb the silence.

We soon came into the valley, and the trees opened up to reveal a broad meadow with a trickling stream cutting through its center, its source revealed as a thin cascade from a rising mountain chain on the far side. In the middle of the field was a stone fort, supposedly built — according to our recent village informant — years ago by the earliest Vuldrok settlers. It was an old ward station marking the boundary of a now extinct thanedom. The only sign of modernism to it were the ceramsteel planks bolted to serve as shutters on its windows, stolen, I surmised, from some spaceship hulk.

Children ran and played in the stream and mud ponds around the fort, excitedly pointing at us when we broke through the trees. Their commotion summoned bored-looking soldiers from within, who immediately gained some energy upon seeing us. They called more of their kind, and waited patiently but glowering by their home as we approached.

Five of them moved forward as we neared the door, each handling his or her (there were women soldiers among them) sheathed or slung weapons, an assortment of swords, axes and even a blaster-axe, much notched and scorched but probably in fine working condition.

Erian greeted them and explained our goal, promising Imperial riches and rewards to Haldon Boldeyes if he consented to see us and guide us to other worlds. They seemed unimpressed, but sent a man inside to inquire of their chief. He eventually returned, this time smiling, and gestured for us to enter the fort.

It was surprisingly cosmopolitan inside, its walls hung with fine hangings and fine art paintings — loot from Known Worlds holdings. A short passage opened to stairs on either side (upwards to the left, down to the right) and forward, into a main chamber, where a hearty laugh greeted us.

A man in a worn but well-kept Charioteer jumpsuit opened his arms and smiled at us. His chest was studded with patches and badges, both Merchant League and Vuldrok, and an array of weaponry (blaster pistol, dirk and skinning knife) and tools hung from his belt — including

a key ring with at least 12 jumpkeys.

“Aha,” he cried. “Julia Abrams! Little Jules!”

Julia stared aghast at the man, and finally stammered out a reply. “Gordon Samothrace? It can’t be you!”

“It is! It is! In the flesh and healthier than ever!”

“But the travelwaste disease! You were dying of radiation poisoning last time I saw you at the Academy on Leagueheim. Pancreator’s mercy, that was nearly 10 years ago!”

“A lifetime. Time enough to be born anew. I have put weakness behind me and live with gusto, Little Jules, my best pilot in the whole squadron!” He turned to Erian, as if she were but one among many of us, not the obvious noble she was. “Nobody took to tax collection maneuvers like Jules! The Reeves were ready to graduate her then and there as long as she signed on with the fleet. But not Jules! She had her own gig going already! What was it? A contract with the Li Halan worlds for a Rampart-Kish mercantile route was it?”

“Something like that,” Julia said, not wanting to talk about her past sour contracts. “What the hell are you doing here? How did you get here? How long have you been here?”

“Oh, going on seven years I suppose. I wanted to go out fighting, Jules, not die in some sickbed racking up Apothecary bills. I hired on with a Hawkwood noble seeking revenge against some Vuldrok raiders. It was a suicide mission for all us, but I had nothing to lose.”

Erian coughed. Samothrace seemed to remember where he was. “Ah, what a host! C’mon, sit down.” He gestured to the benches surrounding a large throne, what looked to be a captain’s chair torn from some starship deck. He sat on a fur-covered ottoman beside the throne, while we spread out on the benches.

“To continue my tale,” he said, winking at Julia. “I came here to Hargard intending to die in a glorious space battle against barbarian hordes. Well, we got boarded instead. I was knocked out cold and woke up captured instead of dead. Sold as slaves, we were separated and sent on deeper into Vuldrok space.”

Erian again coughed. Samothrace smiled. “To make a long story short, I worked my way into the trust of our ship captain — helping steer the ship after its own pilot got himself shot got me many kudos. I was eventually freed and offered the position of pilot on Haldon Boldeye’s ship. Those were hectic times. So harried that I almost forgot about my disease. It seemed to disappear. I learned that I loved this new, reckless life, with no idiotic bureaucratic authority from on high to tell me what to do. I haven’t had a disease symptom in three years. The life of a raider has cured me.”

Julia shook her head, staring in wonder at him. “Amazing.”

I prodded Julia. “You seem to have an awful lot of old acquaintances scattered across the stars. Are you going to properly introduce your friend to our liege?”

“Oh! Uh, yeah. Sorry about that. Commander Gordon Samothrace, this is Lady Erian Li Halan, currently serving in the Emperor’s service.”

Erian nodded at the pilot and began to speak, but he cut her off. “Another Questing Knight? Been a lot of you guys around here lately, poking around, asking questions, all trying to get to the Vuldrok heartworlds.”

“My mission of diplomatic embassy is a noble one, commander,” Erian replied, hiding her annoyance well. “Is it so wrong to greet one’s neighbors with visits?”

“Considering that these neighbors — including me — have been pillaging your Emperor’s holdings for some time now, yeah, it makes some of us suspicious.”

“And what of Haldon Boldeyes? Do you speak for him? Or does he hide behind pilots, fearful to meet us himself?”

Our new friend frowned, not a look of anger, but disappointment, as if a dinner guest used the wrong fork. Before he could continue, one of the soldiers who had brought us in spoke, stepping further into the room.

“Fear? Haldon fears no one and no thing! He has spat in the eye of Satrar himself, and screamed in rage at his power when others broke down like milksop boys seeing their first bare woman’s breast! No, he does not hide, but neither is he stupid enough to announce his presence before strangers who have earned no rights by him.”

Erian stood and bowed to the man. “I meant no insult, star-thane. But impatience can prove to be a virtue, as it has here.”

The soldier stared warily for a moment and laughed. “What an odd way to speak! I like it. Too many of your kind demand things or beg them. Few speak honestly of them.” He walked past us and spun around as he dropped onto the throne. So this was Haldon.

“You are persistent,” he said. “My people have watched you and sent word of your seeking me these past weeks. I

told them to delay you, to test your resolve and demeanor. So far, you have proved yourselves able enough. Perhaps you would not be so annoying on a long star journey as I at first thought, eh? Gordon, how say you to their request?”

Samothrace smiled at us, looking longest at Julia. “I say honor it, thane. There is much to be learned on both sides.”

Haldon nodded. “It is done then. You want me to guide you into the Vuldrok Star-Nation. I want you to tell me of your emperor and pay me 25,000 firebirds.”

“What?!” Julia cried. “That’s robbery!”

Both Haldon and Gordon roared with laughter. “You think I got my jumpkeys for free?” Haldon said. “They cost me in blood and broken tech, and they’ll now cost you.”

“A high fee,” Erian said. “One we shall pay. On one condition: our portion of any raids you involve us in goes towards this fee.”

Haldon was shocked. “Ah, I’m seen through. How did you know I intended to raid with you aboard?”

“You can’t afford to travel far without stopping for booty. If we’re with you, you’d surely expect us to pull our fair share of the duty.”

Haldon nodded and narrowed his eyes at Erian. “Aye, I would. And if you turn against me, to protect one of your own kind, the deal’s off and I leave you in the void.”

“Conditions accepted,” Erian said, smiling slightly.

I was astonished. I could not believe my lady intended to engage in piracy to achieve her goals. I looked to Cardanzo and saw that he was not surprised at all. Surveying all my friends, it appeared that only Ong was equally surprised, but he smiled at the prospect of action while I paled at it.

“We leave for Khotan at the end of the week then,” Haldon exclaimed. “And then on to Frost.”

It appeared that the margins of the wild were not only close, they had engulfed us.

Obligations

I am on a starship traveling a strange journey into unknown spaces. My liege, Lady Erian Li Halan, presses us further into greater and greater danger in pursuit of her quest. Our fate has now led us into barbarian space, escorted by a Vuldrok pirate lord through jumpgates unknown to the empire — lost worlds which we hope to find again.

I have much time to write here in my cramped cabin. My journals are caches of my reflections on our travails, on our hopes and fears. I often send copies of them by trusted courier to my childhood friend, now chartophylax at the Vermillion Repository on Midian, who sees that they are published and distributed among allies. For this reason, I have not yet transcribed our leading goal here among the barbarians.

But danger is ever preying upon us, and I fear that we may not all survive this adventure. For this reason, I feel it best to record our goal. If we cannot accomplish it, then it is a lost cause. If we do, then I shall burn this entry and leave no evidence of our quest.

It was on Byzantium Secundus, where so many plots and causes are hatched, that fate chose to chain my lady to new obligations. She had only recently taken her vows as a Questing Knight, and already we prepared to tread new and dangerous paths for reasons given us in visions by the great Anunnaki Gargoyle of Nowhere. So as not to insult our host during our stay, we partook of his grand parties at his villa outside the Imperial City.

Boring and tedious affairs for the most part, my lady did find them amusing at times, for she knows the thrusts and ripostes necessary to thrive in such atmospheres. I, however, have no mind for even petty intrigue, and found myself on far too many occasions drawn into social conspiracies without my knowledge or consent, only discovering the truth of these matters after I had excused myself for the evening and discussed my meetings with Erian.

Such was the status quo on this night. Rather than be suckered into yet another attempt by some bold noble compatriot to pass messages to a lover or co-conspirator — why are priests considered such good envoys for such things? Are we that naïve? — I slipped from the hall to wander down a side passage near the servants' quarters, finding myself deep in contemplation of the proper response an Eskatonic provost should give to such frivolous social entreaties as met me on nights such as these.

A servant quickly exiting from an open door nearly knocked me over. He was in a rush and I was lost in thought; we barely avoided a painful smack. Before he could get his wits about him, I heard a yell of pain in the room. Reacting on instinct rather than wisdom, I stepped into the room to see who had cried so.

On a straw bed lay a soldier, his tunic and the straw beneath him stained in blood. A horrendous gut wound was apparent, one to which another servant was doing his best to administer. But he was no churgeon, and I wondered why no physick had been summoned. Harshly, I stepped over and snatched the blade and gauze from his hands, kneeling down to examine the wound. "Fetch hot water," I said.

The servant immediately leaped up and joined the other, and both left the room in a rush. I hardly noticed. My attention was completely drawn to the wound. It was greivous. The man was dying, and it was amazing he had not already passed on. I calmed myself and spoke the litany taught me years ago by Mother Kalpa, calling upon the divine fire in my breast to seal the torn flesh. The skin grew taut and the edges of the wound — from a sword, I presumed — reknitted somewhat. But it was not enough.

The man was looking at me now. He had awakened from his temporary delirium and stared into my eyes with an intensity I had never before encountered. Who was this soldier to have such a general's glare about him?

"Leave it, brother," he said, sighing. It seemed he was in a place beyond pain. "I am dying, and there is nothing your rituals can do about it."

"Who are you?" I asked. "I am a confessor. I can hear and absolve you."

"Of what? I bear no sins, but for pride perhaps. Regret, maybe..."

"Can I help?" I said as I soaked the blood from his wound. It did no good. My rite had not closed the wound entirely.

He then looked at me with that stare, one which commanded complete respect. "I need a Questing Knight, brother. Not a brat on tour away from father's fief, but a real knight."

"Then I shall fetch one," I said, standing. I could not hide my smile at the amazed but skeptical look on his face. I stepped out of the room and saw the servants returning, each ferrying a pail of steaming water. I took one from the lad I had nearly collided with earlier, and said: "Go to the main hall, quickly. Fetch Lady Erian Li Halan."

He stood there for a moment, doubtful, looking into the room. The soldiers' voice came: "Go, boy, do as he says. But quietly!" The lad was immediately off, moving as quickly as he could yet taking pains to appear like a normal servant on no mission of import.

I stepped back into the room and dipped the gauze in the water, rubbing it over the wound to cleanse it. The man dropped in and out of consciousness. I momentarily thought he had died, but a fierce will within him kept him here.

Erian Li Halan came into the room, a look of concern on her face. When she saw my charge, her jaw dropped. “Warlord Sentaku...” she whispered in awe.

His eyes fluttered open and he looked at her. “Who?”

She dropped to a kneel and bowed before him. “Lady Erian Li Halan, daughter of the Seven Petaled Rose lineage. You served with my father in the Shansei Conflagration. You saved his life. I remember sitting on your knee as you told the tale before the Matrons.”

The man smiled. “Can the Pancreator be so kind as to bring you before me now? Quickly, young rose with thorns, are you indeed sworn to the Emperor as this priest says?”

“I am.”

“Then I ask this one thing of you: Travel beyond all the maps we know to a barbarian world called Sky Tear. There, in a bunker, is hidden a relic important to the empire. Fetch it and give it to its rightful owner.”

Erian looked dismayed. This was an insane request. I shook my head, signaling that I believed the man to be delirious.

“What you ask is... difficult,” she said.

The man parted his collar, and revealed there an amulet carved into the shape of a fiery lotus.

Erian shuddered and nodded. “The Burning Lotus. There is no greater military honor from my house.”

“It was given me by your father.”

“Then I shall do what you ask, if it is in my power. But I have a quest of my own, you must know.”

“He who gave me this ring...” the man said, struggling to remove a large ring of copperish-purple metal, “...takes precedence.” Once he’d freed it from his hand, he held it out for her. “It is Second Republic manufacture. It knows the makeup of my body, and I now set it for you. Take it.” She did. “Hold it here, where I can reach.” He

touched it and a slight sound emanated, but nothing more. “There. None can now bear this but you, and it is a sign that you are my chosen. It carries the lore with it that you will need. In return for the quest I have set you, the owner of this ring shall render to you a service of your asking.”

Erian looked puzzled, waiting for him to reveal the patron.

“Look on the inner ring,” he said, his strength beginning to fail him.

Erian gasped. “The Phoenix Seal of Vladimir. Only one man can rightfully use it...”

“It is he,” the soldier said. “Now I am through.”

And there he died.

And here I now sit, in a starship somewhere making its way to the mysterious world he named. It is known to our guides, but they only laugh when we ask about it, and say that we will know it when we ingest it. And then we will “know everything.” I have no idea what they mean, but I suppose we will find out.

We did not speak of the incident to anyone, for the servants declared that the soldier demanded secrecy. Our host was an ally of his, and he had appeared at the gates wounded, seeking aid from someone he knew would keep his secret, but he gave the servants no explanation. By the time our host arrived, Warlord Sentaku had died.

Our host was greatly troubled and would not speak of it, but he did notice the ring on Erian’s hand — his raised eyebrows were hard for even him to hide. He seemed to have some unspoken idea of the debt wearing it entailed, for he was ever more respectful of her from then on. It seemed to me he treated us all as if we were leaving for a war from which we would not return.

It seems that the heavy hand of obligation makes martyrs of us all.

Strange Communion

Madness. Utter madness.

The inhabitants of Sky Tear are afflicted with a brain rot from which none seem to escape — even we feel its effects. Only Haldon Boldeye's assurances that time and distance away from the orb heals all its ills gives me the calm patience to write this now.

Curse this lawless space! Never before have I lost a journal book, but my most recent accounts of our time in barbarian space was reduced to ash by the hot plasma of a raider's blaster. It seems our guide has enemies here, as well as the friends for whom we hired him. I shall have to recreate our journey through Hargard, Khotan, Frost, Wolf's Lament, Fingisvold and Epiphany at some later time, when the stress of escape is no longer upon us. We only stayed any length at Wolf's Lament, anyway, passing through the space of those other worlds but not touching upon them. We were in too great a hurry to come here, to this stark world with its patches of eternal night.

Eight jumps from Byzantium Secundus through unknown, hostile territory. Many here do not like Questing Knights, even though the majority have never met one — rumor alone precedes us, most of it lies. However, there are enough people here who welcome us, curious about our customs. Indeed, some even look upon us with a sort of reverence, relics from their legendary past come to walk among them.

Our mission is certainly a vexing one. The data ring that Erian wears only divulges necessary information on a "task required" basis — we must trust it to reveal important facts before we make fatal errors in our search for the secret relic its memory guards. Once upon Sky Tear, in the frigid dome of Cydax Station, it finally awoke to give guidance, informing us that we would have to leave the Vuldrok settlement and travel to another continent. It only spoke in latitudes and longitudes, but Julia was able to translate these onto the continent of Gervais.

Our guide's local friends here chuckle and shake their heads. A "fool's errand," they say, for Gervais is a vast jungle, unexplored except by savages — and this was a barbarian speaking. What sort of degenerate must one be to earn the title "savage" from such a thug? Here Haldon failed us, claiming that he was hired to simply take us here, not to go thrashing through a jungle waiting for the Muazi to chew on his brain.

Cardanzo demanded to know what the hell he was talking about, and so the Vuldrok of Cydax Station gathered to tell us the campside horror stories about Sky Tear. Terrible accounts of men driven mad simply by breathing the air on the world, or worse, of the bizarre sentient fungal aliens that whisper into a man's sleeping conscious-

ness, driving him to insane acts. Ong was getting nervous, as was Sanjuk, and even I began to fear, but Cardanzo smiled as each story got wilder and wilder. I began to understand that they were intentionally trying to scare us.

Nearby, watching but not taking part, was a man in animal-skin robes, painted sloppily with odd markings, similar to those we had seen on Wolf's Lament — the alleged Anunnaki script called runes. I am skeptical about their mythical powers, but recognize that the Vuldrok revere the runecasters and speak carefully near them. I assumed this quiet watcher was a runecaster, or perhaps apprenticed to one.

"Excuse me, good sir," I asked him. He simply stared back, meeting my eyes in acknowledgement but refusing any further sign. "And what can you tell us of this world? Is there any way to survive such perils as your comrades tell?"

The Vuldrok storytellers grew silent and sullen, but the robed man smirked. He came forward and sat in a chair immediately vacated for him by the lead storyteller. He stared at each of us, but Erian in particular, and Ong also.

"It is as they say, but not always so. They tell the worst, for they thrive on danger and feel that no trip is worth taking without a sense of adventure. But you are different. I can tell. You have purpose, and no time for drama. What do you seek?"

"I tell you truthfully that I do not know," said Erian. "But I have sworn an oath to retrieve it."

"Ha! Searching for the unknown with threat of dishonor. A brave quest if ever there was one. How will you know this thing when you see it?"

"A voice will tell me," Erian replied. "A voice from the past."

The man stared at her for a while, then nodded. "I can believe this... spirits are strong upon you. A rune dances on your forehead, but one I have never before seen. It is faint, otherwise I would have these warriors bind you while I studied it."

Ong growled at this, and earned a look of approval from the runecaster. "Yes, mighty beast, I would risk even your ire to gain such lore. But it is clear that it is not meant to be. Not yet... the rune evades me purposefully, and even I am no fool to raise the anger of such a thing."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but everything I had so far surmised concerning Vuldrok religion seemed true here. That they were animists, believing that even stones and trees have intelligence of sorts, or at least indwelling spirits. It seemed this one believed that ideas or thoughts had a similar life.

He said little after that, only commanding the nearby

warriors to aid us on our quest, telling any who accompanied us that a chance for destiny was at hand. This carried much weight, for we soon had five volunteers to help us navigate the wilds, one of whom owned a flitter, taken, he proudly informed us, from the “milkfed Kurgans on Ananoxia.”

There is little worth reporting about the following day’s provisioning activity, or even the flitter trip across continents, except that our pilot avoided the “night regions,” flying us five hours around one. These places, where clouds of crystal loom in the skies, often see no light for years, except for the stabs of lightning shot down from the heavens like spears thrown by an angry god. Ah, too much time among pagans afflicts even my imagination with their imagery.

As we approached the reported site, the ring once again awoke and chimed forth information, this time a detailed description of an old Second Republic archaeology bunker abandoned in the jungles below, besides the ruins of an old alien civilization. When Erian asked about these aliens, it droned forth a truly ancient report about them, in a long-dead voice from the Second Republic. It told us little, though, except that they resembled insects and were apparently not Anunnaki. They were a mystery shown only in ruins even to the first human explorers to this world.

We landed in a clearing six kilometers from the site — the closest we could get through the dense foliage — and trekked forth, leaving behind the flitter pilot and one other to guard our only escape from this place.

As we traveled, Cardanzo became quite surly, even snapping at Erian — something she had never experienced before, as evidenced by her shock and hurt. I begged him to tell me what was wrong, but he refused to even speak to me. Sanjuk also was not herself, shivering and staring at the jungle, obviously afraid. While I had seen her fearful before, never like this — she was a mouse expecting a cat to stalk her at any moment.

One of the Vuldrok warriors, seeing my reaction to my friends’ behaviors, came and whispered to me, “The madness begins, my friend. No one escapes it for long.” I shuddered, and hurried on, hoping we would be done before nightfall and away from this world before another week had passed.

The bunker itself was completely unimpressive. It was a block of maxicrete unceremoniously dumped on its existing spot by its unimaginative makers long ago. Since then, the jungle had swallowed its exterior, lending some degree of vibrancy to its long abandonment. The doors were sealed with a sophisticated lock, but the ring spoke again, demanding to be placed before the lock’s “eye,” where it could silently transmit codes. A rumbling within was heard and the door slid open a crack before a loud explosion came from somewhere deep within.

The ring chimed out: “Error. Internal power plant failure. The door must be forced.”

At least it had opened far enough for us to squeeze a tree branch in, and use it for leverage. I say “we,” but it was Ong and the Vuldrok who did the labor. No locking mechanism worked against us now, only the weight of the doors. The branch broke after the doors had been moved enough for Sanjuk to squeeze in, but we thought it best to try again before she risked going alone. A second branch did better, and this time the doors were fully opened.

No lights could be seen within, so we lit lanterns and activated fusion torches. Corridors within led to old offices empty of anything — whoever had worked here took their think machines and files with them upon leaving. The ring guided us to a set of stairs and bid us travel to the bottom-most level three stories down. At various places along the walls, cracks had allowed wet earth to seep in; I assumed we were near to some underground river or stream. Molds and oddly-colored mushrooms sprang up on some of these spots, emitting an ugly stench.

We finally arrived in what I assumed to be an old archive chamber. Crates were scattered about the room, sealed sometime during the Second Republic and unexposed to air since. It was apparently one of these which we searched for. The ring asked Erian to hold the shipping manifests before it, and it somehow saw their contents, comparing them to its own records.

I looked about the room with Ong, who sniffed and wrinkled his nose at the stench, greater now in this room than the stairwell. The Vuldrok looked nervous, so I went to the one who had confided in me before and whispered a query at him: “Why so edgy?”

“The fungus,” he said, trying not to look at it as he said so. “It isn’t normal. It is Muazi. Hsst! Do nothing to acknowledge it. Get your thing so we can begone from here.”

I went to warn Cardanzo, but the angry look in his face stopped me short. I felt a burst of betrayal and a sense of shame that he would act like this, but then I noticed the sweat on his brow, sure sign of the great effort of will working within to hold back an even greater tide of rage. We had to leave now, relic be damned!

I grasped Erian’s ring hand: “We should go, my lady. This very minute.”

“We have not come all this way not to search every crate, Alustro,” she said, her look acknowledging my fear and worry but telling me it was unimportant next to the goal of the quest.

“Damn your quest!” I yelled. “Are we but pawns for the Eye?! We’ll meet our deaths here!”

Julia moved to pull me away from Erian before Cardanzo could fully draw his sword, but we were all startled to hear the ring speak: “100% confirmation. Open this crate.”

Erian snapped the hinges on the crate before her, and the slow hiss of air seeped out. After a minute, it was safe to open it, so she carefully reached for the lid. She was gently pushed aside by a silent Cardanzo, who reached instead to open it first, still performing his duties even when gripped by a madness none of us could explain.

I cannot convey enough our extreme initial disappointment in what we found. A stone carving rested on a pillowed shelf, displaying the odd carvings of the aliens who had once built cities here. A grasshopper shaped entity could be seen, but the other markings made no sense. We had traveled all this way for a piece of stone.

I cried out in rage. Reader, realize that I was not myself at this point. I moved forward and grabbed it from Cardanzo's startled hands, smashing it to the floor in frustration. The stone shattered, scattering across the perfectly smooth maxicrete. Cardanzo's fist impacted by jaw and the next I knew I was lying among the broken carvings. A glowing crystal was near my hand, something I had not seen before. Small chunks of stone revealed that it had been inside the carving, at its core.

Before anything else could transpire, I heard a Vuldrok yell: "Get out of my head!"

And then I remember little but heaving floors, quaking stairs, spiraling molds on the walls, and the melting yet continually reforming face of Ong as he carried me. And this one, curious thing above all: a feeling of confusion not my own, changed to relief and then regret, all mingled with intense memories of my vision of the Gar-goyle of Nowhere.

When my sense finally cleared from what I now know to be the fungal-induced hallucination, we were all once more aboard the flitter on our way back to Cydax Station. Erian held the glowing crystal in her hand, soaked in blood — not hers, but that of the Vuldrok who tried to take it

from her, a renegade even his comrades did not mourn. Only she and Ong had remained unaffected, Ong because of his Vorox constitution, and she due to an antidote injected by the ring — which had apparently been prepared for all that had happened.

Our relic appears to be a soul shard, one of the famed makings of the Anunnaki. Each has unique properties of its own, and I would dearly love to investigate this one's, but Erian's ring reminds us that it is the property of he whom we serve in this quest, and that is enough to quell my curiosity.

We are once more in space, almost to Sky Tear's jumpgate. Captain Gordon Samothrace tells us to expect trouble on the other side: Kurgans riled by our previous jaunt through the system when we ignored their calls to communicate with them.

I don't know when I'll get another chance to write again, or to replace the lost journals, but I hope to have many things to say by then. Poor Cardanzo flinches every time he sees the great bruise on my jaw, but I smile to tell him it causes no pain (a lie, but one he needs to hear). More than that, however, he needs to hear my council, and I hope he will soon accept my offer of it. His confidence is wounded, for he is one who prides himself on iron control. We both suffered from contact with Sky Tear, and perhaps an alien mind.

I realize now that my mind had been touched by the Muazi intelligence present in the room, one which had feared us until it encountered the memory of my vision, which seemed to accord us some respect. When I told this to the others, after hearing their tales and piecing my own conclusions together from them, I earned a name from the Vuldrok: Alustro Muazi Friend. I'm not sure I like it, but it does reflect somewhat my strange communion.

Approbations

Never did I conceive such wonders as I have seen of late. Amidst the violent cruelties of barbarian space I witnessed strange beings and saw that, even far removed from the core worlds, humanity survives and thrives in manners all its own. Though my ribs still hurt when I draw breath and my leg shall ever walk with a limp from the wounds I sustained there, these maimings have been more than paid for by our patron's gratitude. Our mission — whose aim and ends must still remain secret — held importance for this nameless lord.

And yet wonders still present themselves, one greater than any that occurred on that long star sojourn into barbarian space from which my companions and I only just returned. On Byzantium Secundus we finally came to rest, three days ago, delivering the prize we had sought, found, and fought hard to retain on the perilous journey back to the Known Worlds. My wounds are still too fresh, even weeks after their delivery, to write overmuch of their getting — or the woundings I delivered in return. My soul still bleeds with sorrow from the deeds I committed in that far place, the dark void of space where bandits prowl heedless of all threat.

As I write, my Lady and her bodyguard meet with our quest liege, and surely great shall be the honor gained in his eyes, although she must wear it cloaked and silent. Julia, Sanjuk and Ong traveled to the Port Authority, hoping to immerse themselves in its cosmopolitan goings-on, so long denied them in those places from which we lately came. Lt. Gosado sought old friends at the Li Halan garrison, where she can reveal her newly won scars and tell the tales of our glory among Vuldrok pirates.

But I sought only solace and healing, and so wandered to the Holy City to rest in its chapels and meditate in the incense scents of sandalwood and jasmine. Walking unsteadily from circle to circle, borne on the cane I still find unfamiliar and damnable, I stopped at whatever shrine or cathedral took my fancy, and there prayed again and again, hoping in such wise to purge my guilt.

Finally I came to the Pelunia Gardens, in Corona Secundus, over which looms St. Maya's Cathedral, on its perch on the upper and final circle of the city. I sat by a willow tree on a stone bench placed by Patriarch Halvor during his service as Regent of the Known Worlds. A simple carving, now forgotten by most priests, it brought me solace with the memory that here, in times of trouble, Chia Wen, the Patriarch's sister, would come and watch the gentle spring that runs past, delivering the fallen blossoms from the far end of the garden to a pond around the bend, hidden by trees. Here I sat for a number of hours, working over and over in my mind how I might have performed my

actions differently, and thus saved men their lives. A useless exercise.

So deep in thought I was that I failed to notice the complete stillness that fell over the gardens, for no passersby had come for some time, as if barred from the place. When I noticed the strangeness of its complete silence, I stood and looked about, wondering the cause.

Then I saw the Mandarin. On the broad lawn from the front entrance the Vau came toward me, his (her?) robes flowing about him as the wind gently swept through the trees, causing them to shiver and stir. We were alone but for his guards — Vau Soldiers bearing short staves — which I could now see at the gateway, keeping all others from entry.

He came near and stopped, nodding slightly, a faint smile on his face. I was too stunned to act at first, but then remembered my manners, and so bowed to him. His smile grew larger, and he watched me as one would a friend long sundered.

For many a long moment we stood thus, simply watching each other. I noted the intricate carvings of his head-dress, which extended over his shoulders and part of his chest, decorated with strange, indecipherable glyphs. Colored a dark brown, it looked more like a piece of wondrously shaped driftwood than the result of a technology beyond human ken.

Finally, he spoke: "I had hoped to deliver my invitation solely to you and your company, but your wounds do not permit your going at this time. A pity, for your insight would have served your kind well. May the glyphs turn and allow for such a moment to again occur. Then perhaps you shall meet with us in gardens of our own sculpting."

He bowed fully to me and turned to leave.

I barely knew what to do, awed at the attention this being had given me. How could this be? What supernatural means did the Vau employ whereby they would know me, from among so many others of my race?

"Please wait," I said, perhaps too hurried. "How is that you know me?"

He turned his head, his smile still there. "I have read your journals. It is wise that you chose to publish them."

He walked back whence he came as I stood dumbfounded and feeling somewhat the idiot. My journals are anything but supernatural and available to many who can read. I am nonetheless amazed that they have come to the attention of such as the Vau.

I watched the Mandarin leave the gardens, his escort behind him, and stood once more alone in the stillness. I tried to follow, but collapsed to the ground as my cane gave way beneath me. The exhaustion of my day-long walk

had been too much for my weakened state, and the shock of my encounter perhaps too much for my turmoil-wracked mind. I passed into unconsciousness as a fever warmed my brow.

I awoke not on grass but in a bed, a large cushioned one fit for a lord or rich merchant, judging by its size and the gilt on its four-poster hangings. Looking about the room, I saw a fire crackling in a small chimney, before which was an empty reading chair, positioned to catch light from a closed, ornate window. From beyond a door, now slightly ajar, I could hear the coming and going of people, servants by the sound of them.

I slid from the bed and noticed my cane leaning near. Clutching it, I stood and tried to quietly move to the chair, but could not do so without emitting a pained grunt — my broken rib complained overloud. A boy stuck his head through the door, saw I was up, and rushed to help me sit.

“Where am I?” I asked him.

“Worry not, provost,” he replied. “You are within the quarters of Bishop Yost. Rest now, and I shall fetch him who ordered you brought here.” He slipped from the room before I could say ought else, and so I sat, staring at the fire and trying to remember if I knew the name he had given. I did not.

It was not the mysterious Bishop Yost who came quietly through the door, but my uncle, the Archbishop Palamon, the highest spiritual authority on this world.

I bowed my head to him but was too startled to give the proper address.

He placed his hand upon my head and tilted it upward, so that he could see my face. I wondered at the look upon his, for it was so like that given me by the Mandarin — the expression of one who has long missed looking upon a friend. Tears welled in my eyes, for I so deeply missed looking likewise upon my uncle, who was once as a father to me. He bent down and embraced me with genuine ardor, but also, I suspect, to relieve me of the shame of my tears. I quickly wiped my eyes and gently pulled from his hug.

He called out to a servant: “Bring me a chair.” In moment, the boy came again, this time carrying a light chair, certainly not one fit for an archbishop. But my uncle took it without complaint and set it across from me, tilted slightly toward the fire. He waved the boy away, who quickly left the room, closing the door behind him.

We sat in silence for a few moments, listening to the pop and crackle of the flames, each wondering where to begin. I, of course, waited for him to speak first.

“When I received your last letter,” he said, “telling me of your journey beyond the Known Worlds, I feared you would soon be dead. I believed it to be foolhardy in the extreme, and knew not what madness could have driven your liege to lead you there.

“And today, my priests followed a contingent of Vau emissaries to the Garden of Respite and found you, lying fevered on its lawns, within sight of my very bedroom window. I could scarcely believe the news, and came myself to see. There you were, unconscious and pained by a wound-fever no priest should ever know. I had you brought here, to the home of Bishop Yost, a retired yet revered local. Your coming is unknown by any but those loyal to me, and so you need not worry about your secrecy. Oh, yes, I heeded well your comments in your letter about rivals and enemies. What noble does not reap such from their sowings?”

“Thank you,” was all I could say.

He turned from the fire and looked upon me again.

“Fear not my ire, nephew. It was extinguished by the cold that gripped my heart when I imagined you dead on some world far from the Church, but is now replaced by the warmth of seeing you again, weakened but still whole. I forgive you your transgressions against an old man’s fear, for I ever resisted your following a questing path, the most regretful of the Prophet’s admonitions to one whose duty it is to raise boys into adulthood, only to see them travel far from their hearths.

“Your letter laid upon me finally the burden of acceptance. I accept your duty, and your quest. And by my intelligence, I know that it has now led to perilously high acclaim.”

My eyes widened, but then closed. Of course, I realized, if any on this world know of our recent patron, it would be my uncle, whose eyes and ears hear and see much that the Faithful do here. “Then you know. I beg you not to speak of it.”

“I?” he said in surprise. “To whom would I tell? Is there any whose alliance I need court? Not I. Although he who was your liege in this holds goals different from those I foresee for the Church, he is yet true to the Faith and acts in accord with it. I can gainsay him nothing in this, nor you for your role in his mission.”

“I know you, uncle,” I said. “And your word I trust. But I also know that you would not have me leave this room without revealing something to you of my encounter with the Vau, and so I shall tell it—”

“No, tell me none of it,” he said. “Although I have ever demanded to know all of your doings, even one as old as I can still learn, and I perceive that what this being told you was for you alone. Let it stay that way for now, until you meditate further on the wisdom of revealing it.”

“You amaze me,” I said. “I almost fear you are not real, but a fantasy of my fever, which I thought was abated.”

He laughed at that, and stood up from his chair.

“You are surely wide awake, nephew, but must not remain so for long. Rest you need, and here you shall have it, safe from all intrusion. Your friends will come, for I have already dispatched messages. However, I ask this: Do not

mention my role in your rescue to them, at least not yet. They would fear the hand of politics come down upon them, and I would not burden them so.”

“I am tired,” I said, but rose from the chair. “Yet I cannot allow myself to sleep. I have too many questions concerning my visitor earlier.”

“Ah,” he said. “Few answers will be forthcoming, but I can tell you this: The being traveled to the second circle and there waylaid an unsuspecting noble and her entourage. He gave to her an invitation, an emissary mission to Vrill-Ya, and then departed to a starship outside the Holy City. The noblewoman, whose name I shall not reveal — for she deserves privacy as much as you and your Lady — is already the talk of the high court. No clue can be found as to why she was chosen for this honor; it is seemingly a random choice.

“One more thing will I tell you, a thing most people do not know as yet and may never come to know: This noblewoman and her entourage were not the first so chosen for ambassadorial duty to the Vau. Others throughout the Known Worlds have been so gifted of late, and their choosing is seemingly just as arbitrary, unless they all withhold intelligence of deeper doings. And so a strange sampling of humans go to meet the Vau, and none dare prevent it for fear of losing insight into those aliens’ inscrutable ways, regardless of the consequences of allowing them to pick and choose from our kind.”

He went to the door and turned to me once more before he opened it. “You are lucky, although I know you do not think so. If the Vau had chosen you, greater danger would have threatened you than you have yet imagined. Your very soul would have been tried by whatever plots the Vau hatch with this scheme. You have but late been delivered safely from evil; pray seek it no more.”

And with that he left, closing the door behind him. I went to the bed and lay down, thinking on the transformation of my uncle’s attitude toward me, but came to few conclusions before I fell once more into deep slumber.

I dreamed. There I stood in a hall unknown to me, for its make was strange and inhuman, the markings on the

walls and floor forming patterns that made little sense. The Mandarin from the garden appeared in a doorway that did not exist before, although whether this was but the logic of dream or some vision of actual Vau architecture, I know not. He smiled at me, and made an odd noise, his mouth forming a trumpet shape. He extended his hand and offered me an item that looked to be a portable think machine.

I gazed at it and saw, swimming in streams on its screen — flat, but yet seemingly with infinite depth — many glyphs, changing into different glyphs as I watched. Then they gathered together in a spiral and formed one large, complex shape that I could not look upon. As it formed, my mind reeled, and I surely knew what it was like for a dreamer to hit the ground after a long fall — something oneirists claim shocks us awake before impact. And yet still I dreamed, and was now in a cage formed from the glyph, so tightly that I could no longer see it whole, and was thus spared further pain. I was desperate and grabbed the bars of my cell, shaking them with all my strength, but they did not yield. I saw past them to other cages wherein stood my companions, talking through the bars to one another as if unaware of the enmeshing glyphs.

I cried out but they heard me not. In despair, I uttered a prayer to the Emyrean asking for deliverance, and a light appeared, so strong as to shine through the bars, revealing them to be insubstantial and unreal, a mere illusion. They melted away and I stepped forward into the light, where I saw a shadowy silhouette of a robed man awaiting my approach.

I then awoke to the sun-filled bedroom as a chiurgeon bent low over me, testing my brow for signs of fever. There were none. Awake now, I requested paper and pen, and so recorded this account. I know not whether my dream was fever-induced or visionary, but I must admit that it matters not to me at this time. I have returned to the hearth of my uncle’s regard, from which I traveled far, and have been welcomed home. Even though my feet shall wander again, my heart shall ever have a place here.

All For One

“And as the stars shine in their multitudes and yet are aspects of the One Flame, so are you now a multitude who are one — angerak mates! Friends until death claims you. Loyal to one another beyond all other ties. Only three oaths are more binding: those to the Pancreator, to the Emperor and to your liege lords. So it is ordained in the Empyrean as well as the Gray Realms of our bodied existence.

“Where before you had but six limbs to devote, now you have 26. Never turn one against the other, but instead clasp them together. Combined, you are mighty. Use your strength of brotherhood to lift great weights from your own souls and those of others who are weak and alone. You shall never be lonely again, for your souls are one even though your spirits be many.

“Clasp hands and walk together into the Light!”

And so we did. Onganggarak led us as we stood in a circle, backs to one another, holding hands as we moved as a group from the shadows of the cathedral into the shaft of light descending from the apex. I blinked as its intensity hit my eyes, and also to hide my tears of pride.

Ong howled in joy and tugged Erian and I toward him, gripping us in a gentle but encompassing hug. Julia, clinging to my left hand, stumbled as I was drawn in, tugging her forward. Sanjuk, clasped to her, also stepped up, as did Cardanzo, holding to her left hand as his left held Erian's right. Erian completed the circle with her left hand clasped to Ong.

The burly Vorox released us and leapt amidst us, hugging the others now as they released their holds on one another. I clapped and the others followed my lead.

Howls and bellows erupted all around us as Count Galagadang's Vorox angerak cheered the union. The count himself laughed heartily from the dais, standing beside Philosophus Wing San-chi, who smiled as he closed the book from which he had read the Angerakaal, the ceremony of adult bonding for civilized Vorox, as devised by Archbishop Man-shao centuries ago.

It was a profound honor that Onganggarak had asked us to be his angerak, his bond mates in the most sacred oath a Vorox can make. We had traveled before with a similar privilege, as his angruwa, or closest friends. But now he formalized that bond and made it greater and permanent. An adult Vorox's angwal, or adult bond, is his most important, the one which will last the rest of his life. His asking us to be part of this bond is a sign of his complete trust and loyalty to us — incredibly rare among humans. How could we refuse?

I looked at Erian and knew that this meant a great deal to her. She had traveled far with Ong and had come to trust him greatly; many times had he saved each of our

lives. What's more, she had no vassals but us. For Ong to request this of her was the best of compliments and confirmation of her leadership abilities.

Not all Li Halan — or Known Worlders for that matter — see it as such. To them, this union would surely be considered a joke, a barbaric custom that should have been ended long ago. They understand little of the strength and power the angerak holds for a Vorox. Although it is but a formal ceremony for us, for Ong it is the tying of his soul to ours. I must strive to respect that with all my being. I owe him no less.

As I write this account in the evening, full of food and wine after the feast Ong provided us, I think back on when we met this unique friend.

Was it really five years ago? We had come to Ungavorox seeking Captain Maria Sao-Lui Li Halan, an officer who had once loyally served Erian's father. She had heard of Erian's disenfranchisement and her brother's enmity, and sent word that she was safeguarding an heirloom that had belonged to Erian's mother. She had instructions to carry it until the day Erian would need it. That day, she told Erian in her message, had come.

Erian, Cardanzo, Julia and I came to Ungavorox in the Hardball, an explorer lent us by Charioteer Director Hendrix on Midian. Actually, he had contracted its use to Julia for certain specified mercantile operations. Ungavorox was not one of the specified destinations. However, we assumed our trip would be short enough that our scheduled trip to Criticorum would not be long delayed. Additionally, Julia's planned purchase of rare Ungavoroxian spices might even prove profitable.

We did not intend to get shot from the sky. As we approached the planet, a pirate vessel assailed us, damaging our maneuver jets. Julia managed to evade them and brought us in for a landing. Unfortunately, it was in the wild jungles, far from our destination of New Kowloon.

Everyone is raised with horror stories about the dangers that Ungavorox's jungles contain. Indeed, even breathing on the world can prove hazardous, as spores and insects lodge themselves in your breathing passages uninvited. Or so we'd heard. That last was exaggerated, but the dangers of predatory plants and animals were quite real.

As we disembarked to examine the damage to our small ship, we each wore breathers and full suits, too paranoid to touch anything. That's when we discovered that the ship was slowly sinking into some primordial mud from which I could not even dislodge the stick I had used to prod it.

Julia and Erian began arguing. Erian was convinced we'd lost our ship and would have to walk through who knew how many kilometers of jungle to reach even an

outpost of civilization.

That's when the sharprats attacked.

Or they would have had it not been for Onganggarak. The Vorox's timely arrival to investigate the downed ship saved us from the beasts' assault. He had crept through the spiky grass and surprised their leader before we even realized we weren't alone. The other beasts squealed in surprise and ran back to their den, while Ong casually wiped his bloody glankesh sword on the blades of grass and introduced himself most eloquently to my lady: "What brings a fine lady like you to a swamp like this?"

The well-chosen words and humor were so incongruous I think we all stared in shock and surprise for a moment while Ong's smile (showing no teeth) grew the wider. He knew he had scored one on us.

After introductions, he offered to help us prevent our ship from succumbing to the dagmush — this mud wasn't mud at all, but a lifeform intent on slowly digesting our hull. He disappeared for a time into the jungle and came back with massive loops of thick vine that resembled hopelessly tangled spider webs wound into a single line. He tied the vines to our ship's cone and then, with Cardanzo's help, tied the other ends to a nearby tree. This, he assured us, would keep the ship from sinking further while we repaired the engines.

As we waited for Julia to fix the damage (only she knew how to tinker with the arcane materials), we spoke at length with our unusual guest. By strange happenstance, he knew of Captain Maria Sao-Lui and could lead us to her in New Kowloon. He was himself a householder for Baron Emilio Cesarus Li Halan, a local lord serving as a liaison between certain Vorox lords and the court of Prince Flavius on Kish. Onganggarak, or Ong as we came to know him, had recently been serving as a go-between for his lord and a group of nomadic ferals who had moved into the wilds adjacent to the lord's fief.

What we did not learn until later was that he was not yet an adult, and had thus not chosen his angwal, or adult angerak. While he pretended that this did not bother him, it was clear that he was lonely. Otherwise, it is doubtful he would have been so friendly to strangers such as us.

It did not take Julia long to patch systems well enough to launch us to New Kowloon, where more extensive repairs could take place. Ong agreed to accompany us, for his lord was visiting the city and he could make a report on his recent time among the ferals in person. First, however, he introduced us to Captain Maria Sao-Lui, who commanded the garrison of Li Halan troops protecting the city.

She spent the next few days reminiscing with Erian about her family, and her mother especially. The details of their talks do not concern my account here. I spent the time with Ong, for he proved an excellent guide of the city. I accompanied him as he reported to his liege, and in doing

so raised the curiosity of Baron Cesarus.

He had heard of my lady and her troubles, and after a long tea ceremony, confided in me that the pirates who attacked our vessel were not mere raiders. They were agents of a certain Baron Cornado Li Halan, an ally to Erian's brother. Baron Cesarus knew for a fact that Cornado sought to capture and deliver Erian back to her brother, where he could keep her in sight.

At the mention of Cornado, Onganggarak growled low and menacing — the first such sign of his bestial instincts I had yet encountered. It unnerved me greatly, and he was immediately apologetic and ashamed. Baron Cesarus asked Ong to leave us, and then explained to me that Cornado was Ong's original lord.

"He captured Ong as a cub in the deep wilds," the baron explained. "He treated him brutally in a crude attempt to civilize the young feral. I was ashamed to witness it, for I feel that the manner in which the Li Halan treat the Vorox reflects on our soul mirrors. If our own compassion is tarnished, then so will be the Pancreator's compassion towards us.

"I made my disdain clear to Baron Cornado and he challenged me to a duel. It was an uneven match, for he was a renowned fencer and I was but a diplomat with only the barest of formal sword training. Nonetheless, the Pancreator intervened and won me the day when Cornado's foot slipped on a patch of zruX slime and he fell right onto my blade, awarding me first blood.

"Our terms, however, were not simply for honor. I demanded beforehand that, should I win, he would transfer Onganggarak to me. Cornado angrily allowed the transfer of loyalties before the gathered group of nobles and priests, and stormed away. I am sure the man still bears a grudge, but one directed more against Ong than me."

He sighed and sipped his tea before speaking again. "I have become quite fond of Onganggarak. He is a model example of what his race can achieve in their climb from savagery. I shall now reveal my reason for relaying this tale to you: I would ask your lady if she will allow Ong to accompany her off-world, to remove him from Baron Cornado's ire. He can offer in return his loyalty and protection, should Cornado pursue her further. Ong would be a great aid in anticipating Cornado's tactics, for he knows him well.

"Onganggarak's angwal, his adulthood ceremony, is still a year away. In return for transferring his fealty to your lady, I request that she become angruwa to him, a companion and sister, teaching him of the human worlds while he protects her from her brother's assassins."

I thought the idea most interesting, for I had come to like Ong greatly. I told the baron that I would propose his idea to my lady. She, of course, readily agreed. She had also come to enjoy Ong's company, and felt that any ally

she could gain against her brother was a good one.

Captain Maria Sao-Lui admitted that she knew Baron Cesarus to be an honorable man, but knew little of Cornado. "One would at first suspect Cesarus's reasons for surrendering a valuable vassal, but he surely cannot intend Ong to be a spy; the angruwa bond would provide too great a conflict of interest. Vorox take such oaths most seriously. Perhaps it is truly the case that he cares for Ong and wishes to remove him from Cornado's vengeance."

Only now do I realize other reasons Baron Cesarus had. I knew too little of Vorox then, but I now understand the tragedy of Ong's early life. Over the years I have been able to learn from him, as he has been ready to tell it, his true story.

He was not taken from the jungle as a raw cub but as a youth who had already undergone his kabaljal and angerakaal. His angerak mates, who had grown up with him from infancy, were killed in a battle between Li Halan and Decados forces for control of a patch of land. This was during the later years of the Emperor Wars, when the fighting was at its fiercest and most meaningless, with forces opposing one another less for tactical reasons than as retaliation for past losses.

Only Ong survived the conflagration that swept the jungle, but he was caught and caged by Baron Cornado, who decided to make Ong a model example for his own ideas on how his house should conduct the Vorox civilizing process.

He was only with Cornado for a few months, but they were enough to scar him deeply. Only Baron Cesarus's kind and disciplined rule calmed him, and this only after he escaped and attempted to rejoin his feral tribe. They would not have him, however, suspecting that he was a civilized spy, and they threw him out. Dejected, with no tribe or angerak, he returned to the only place he even remotely associated with home. The baron forgave his leaving and raised him well, teaching him letters and good speech. Over time, Ong learned to control his wild manners even better than others of his kind.

And so he came to join our company. I think back on the happenstance that delivered him to us at our time of need in the jungle and marvel at where it has brought us today. The odds that such a boon friend could be met in such a manner are staggering, enough to throw doubt on the existence of coincidence in favor of a more ordered matrix to our meeting.

I am told that a Vorox who loses his angerak is a terrible creature, alone forever. And yet, Ong has overcome any instinctual depression and built his life anew along human principles. Perhaps he is less than a true Vorox because of it, but he is fully a part of our group. Indeed, after this evening, we are also a part of him.

He is no longer alone.

Ghost Stories

"You, priest, surely you've heard worse tales," said the man with a scar descending down the length of his left cheek, its chalk-white, puckered trail reaching to his neck. His eyes bored into me, seeking both a challenge and an answer to his hopes.

I cleared my throat. "Oh, yes. Far worse."

Cardanzo, sitting to my left, smiled and sipped his beer, and Sanjuk, to my right, raised an eyebrow. The scarred man, one Lt. Harbald Drax of the Muster, leaned across the table, attentive.

"Do tell, friar," he said, his eyes still on me as he motioned behind him to his comrades, summoning them over. I took a sip of beer myself as I waited for the mercenaries to pull up chairs, each of them eyeing me suspiciously.

Once they had settled, I put my mug down and stared intently at the wood grain of the table, as if seeing some augury there.

"It was dark that night on Midian during the crop-gathering season. Peng-Lai, the Woman in the Moon, did not come out that night to play her lyre. Only torches lit the edge of the lake where the men gathered to administer justice...."

The room grew quiet as ears turned to listen attentively. Smoke from a dozen different weeds from half as many worlds floated over our heads, misting the wan light from the lanterns hung by each table. The room was full of silhouettes, with few features discernable from over an arm's length away.

"Their captive struggled against his bonds, but they were drawn tight about him and made of strong-threaded hemp. If he could only reach his wireblade, he would be free. But his weapon, along with the rest of his devil's gear, had been taken from him, distributed among the vigilantes who carried him, kicking all the way, to the lake's edge.

"The old headman, leader of the village gang, turned from the dark waters and regarded the captive. He nodded to the men and they began wrapping more cord around the bound man, these ones tied with stones and rocks of varied sizes.

"The captive, frantically trying to dislodge the stones, cried out to his accusers: 'This is illegal! I demand you cease immediately and free me! How dare you even lay hands upon me! When my family discovers your crime, you shall all be killed, and your children sold into slavery!'

"The old man looked on, no emotion on his face. 'I reckon it's no worse than what you'd do to us if we didn't take justice into our own hands. You're an evil man, Baron Michaelo. The Pancreator will judge what's wrong and right here.'

"You have no proof for your accusations!' the criminal cried.

"Don't need it. This ain't no Reeves' court. You killed them children with this here Republican sword,' he said as he held out the criminal's wireblade hilt, 'and carved horrible symbols and signs into their flesh before dumping them into the lake. I don't know who you tried to sell their souls to, but I tell you they are the Pancreator's children — they're in a better place now, not that hell you intended for them.'

"The criminal quit his struggling and an ugly grin stretched across his face. 'Do you know what I wrote into their skin, old fool? Compacts and deals, sealed with blood. Agreements which cannot be broken by your petty justice. Do what you will to me. I shall wreak my vengeance upon all of you one by one. Your own avarice shall be your undoing!'

"Throw him in!' the old man yelled, and the vigilantes lifted the criminal — writhing in their grasp — and flung him into the lake. The stones quickly dragged him into the dark depths. A few air bubbled broke the surface but their coming eventually slowed and finally stopped.

"The men dragged their tired bodies to the nearby vil-lage and each returned home, lighting a small candle to burn through the rest of the night.

"Over the coming weeks, the village returned to normal. What children still lived were allowed to play outdoors once more. With each day, they were allowed to roam farther and farther from their parents' sight, until they once more played like all children do, roaming far and wide over the nearby hills and dales.

"But it was not the children the villagers had need to fear for. All those men who had participated in the murder of Baron Michaelo came to calamity, one by one. First, there was the butcher. He had kept the baron's fine hunting dagger for his own, and used it to skin what deer others brought to him for preparation. One day, while skinning an ontagot with the knife, he slit his own throat with one well-determined swipe. Others soon found him, his blood mixed on the floor with the split innards of his butchered animals. They assumed it was suicide, anguish over his lost child.

"Next, however, died the tanner. He had kept for himself bottles of the powerful beverage the baron carried with him, a vintage from some far world none knew where. He used such bever to console his guilty soul on the many nights that had passed since he had helped to throw the baron into his watery grave. One night, he drank three whole bottles. His body was found by his wife, and the local apothecary discovered that one of the bottles held not

wine but sweetened poison from the glands of a vicious Ungavoroxian beast.

“More vigilantes soon died, each helped along by some item pilfered from the dead baron: his synthsilk rope used to hang the wrangler, his travel rations to choke the baker, his velvet cape to smother the weaver. Soon, the only one left alive from that night was the headman who had personally condemned the baron.

“He fled the village, believing it to be cursed and haunted, and took to the hospitality of his family in the city. Surely here, far from that damned lake, he could escape his fellows’ grisly fate.

“Among his gear was an item of great worth, one he meant to sell once he reached the city, for it would make him rich for the rest of his days. After his cousins showed him his room, he curled up on the bed, exhausted after the long ride. He clutched his treasure in his hands, fearing that his own family would pilfer his bags seeking loot. Nothing would prevent his selling the thing on the morrow.

“He awoke as the sun crept through his window, casting its accusing light upon his eyes. He stretched and yawned and immediately doubled up in pain. He stared at his body and the blood welling up over the bedsheets — his nightclothes torn to shreds, deep, precise cuts all over his skin. His body was laced with symbols and images arcane and unholy, not unlike those the baron had carved upon his young victims.

“The headman stared aghast at the unreadable text of his flesh and groaned as his sight fell upon his hand, which he now realized still clutched the treasure he had so passionately guarded before falling into sleep. He moaned in horror and released the hilt of the wireblade. It slipped from the bed and rolled across the floor, coming to rest in the corner of the room.

“He leapt from the room and ran into the streets, screaming for a priest, for a healer, for anyone who could save his soul flame. A trail of blood followed him, for his wounds could not seal — so perfect had been their cutting, there was no edge where flesh could adhere to flesh. He died by the time he reached the next block, his blood having run completely from him.

“The Church authorities were summoned to investigate. Upon seeing the flesh glyphs, they scoured the headman’s gear, searching for any signs of the man’s killer. They found the wireblade on the floor, and recognized the crest carved into itsommel.

“Three days later, a young Eskatonic investigator called upon the Michaelo mansion and was greeted by a servant. Led into a vast library, he waited only a few minutes before the baron arrived, fresh from his lunch, its strong smell pervading his clothes. The noble apologized for his appearance, claiming to have suffered a long illness that

caused his flesh to become pasty white and his skin to heal wounds but slowly.

“The Eskatonic, nauseous from the smell, produced the wireblade and asked if it were his. The baron claimed it, and said he had lost it when his boat capsized in a lake to the south, well over two seasons ago. He had thought it long gone beyond his reach.

“The priest, too sick to interview the man much longer, forgot the urgency of his mission in his desire to once more breathe fresh air. He bid the baron farewell, found his own way out, and mounted his horse in the courtyard.

“‘If there’s one thing I cannot abide,’ he said to his horse, ‘it’s the smell of dead fish.’ He then rode back to the city and went about his daily prayers, thinking no more upon the matter.”

I sat back and took a long sip of my beer, watching the faces of those who leaned near.

Scarface crinkled his brow in thought. “What happened then?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I heard this tale when I was a young novitiate on Midian. Priests in my order swore that the baron still existed in his mansion and sometimes rode out at night on missions of retribution against any serf who dared to stand against the nobility.”

One of the mercenaries spoke up. “I don’t buy it. It’s too much like a morality tale. Keeps the peasants in line.” Others grunted assent.

A smallish mercenary, older than the others and sitting in a booth against the far wall, spoke: “I’ve seen him. This Baron Michaelo. I worked for him once. It’s true — his flesh stank of the rotten sea.”

The mercenaries grew silent. “Yeah? Doesn’t have to mean he was a warlock. Maybe he had a remote control for the wireblade, so he could operate it at a distance to chop that guy up.”

The old merc leaned forward: “What about the rest of his stuff? You think his knife and cloak were remote-control, too? There’s things out there no guild scientist can name, boys, and it’ll get us all in the end.”

Scarface smiled and guffawed. “Ah, it’s just a ghost story, colonel. It don’t mean nothing. Just a story to scare good folk is all. Might work on peasants, but not toughs like us. Right, guys?”

“Gehenne, no!” one merc yelled, and another added: “You gotta try harder than that to get us, priest!”

The mercs got up and went back to their tables, scattering again into small groups. Scarface looked at me. “Good try, friar. But next time add a haunted starship or something. You know, something that could actually happen!” He stood and stumbled to the bar, bellowing for a refill.

Cardanzo looked at me. “Was the story true?”

“I really don’t know. But I do know one thing: I still can’t stand the smell of dead fish.”

Witness

Erian Li Halan and I walked through the Resplendent Dew Gardens, both of us amazed at its marvels. Sculpted hedges mimicked animals from across the Known Worlds — mastoplants from Artemis, gorduvants from Grail and even a pod of leaping slu'meevee from Madoc. In some areas of the vast estate, the leafy creatures growing from the ground had existed only in legend, such as the mastadon, a folk monster of old Urth.

"Fascinating," Erian said, stopping to stare off the path at a collection of pack animals made almost real by the well-sculpted hedges. It helped that we walked in the late evening, when silhouettes shadowed mundane details, helping to evoke the myth of form. "They are exact duplicates of the maned wolf hedges on my father's estate."

I looked at them but they were unfamiliar to me. "I have visited that place many times and I do not recognize them."

"They hunted only in the family's private garden, off limits to those not of the immediate blood. I wonder how they came to inhabit this place, so far away from their home."

"I understand that often Li Halan ambassadors who are placed here to serve the Imperial Court bring with them tokens from their own lands, to ease the pain of separation. Perhaps one such ambassador once knew of your family's gardens and sought to imitate them here."

"Perhaps," Erian said, moving on. The path curved to the left and revealed an open lawn sparkling with many miniature ponds and tiny streams, each crossed by tiny bridges. "And yet, I still wonder. Those wolves bring back ill memories. A strange event in the garden, when I was... oh, I must have been no more than nine years old."

I listened quietly. I knew my lady well enough to realize that she needed to reminisce aloud without interruption.

"My father held a party. I'm not sure why. There were always parties for one reason or another, either ours or someone else's, where we children were taken off to distant estates and left alone with our nannies while the adults socialized in grand ballrooms or serene pavilions.

"This one was different, for it seemed more celebratory. I think it was my grandmother's birthday, perhaps? Or some other important anniversary of her's worth celebrating. My Uncle Vicardo was there."

I frowned, but knew Erian did not see my expression, for I still walked behind her. I knew the name. And the rumors about his demise. This memory was becoming familiar to me, also.

"We don't talk about him much, today. He was said to have been involved in... revolutionary thoughts and deeds.

For a long time, I didn't understand what they were. I heard the rumors and gossip, of course. Most people believe he was involved in some sort of pro-Republican conspiracy, an attempt to place someone on the Imperial throne who would then declare a Third Republic. Of course, this was in the middle of the early Emperor Wars, so such plotting was perhaps even more dangerous than usual."

We stepped over a stream and entered a grove, ringed with Urthish yew trees. In the center was a small plinth with ancient markings, long worn by harsh weather. I suspected it had come here from its original home — wherever that was — already in its present state. These gardens saw much rain, but were protected by ancient Second Republic nanotech filters, wondrous devices that ionized the dangerous particles of Byzantium Secundus's acidic rain.

Erian placed a hand on the monument, contemplating for a moment its origin and possible meaning, and then sat down on its ledge.

"There were famous men and women from all over Midian there that night," she said, continuing her story. "Even some from other worlds. I recognized a few: Duke Shou Zan, the famous general, and Countess Sa, considered practically a saint even then. Others, too, most of whom I do not remember.

"As usual, I was ushered in to stand nearby as the guests came, part of the illustrious host's shining family. I was not to speak or even murmur, but to stand straight and smile always. Once this was over, I was taken back to my rooms and not allowed to see the goings-on. However, this was our estate, not that of a stranger, so I knew well how to sneak away from my vigilant nanny and spy on the socialites from the top of banisters. I even knew a few hidey holes once designed for our family's secret guard.

"But I quickly became bored with watching people bow and smile and speak venomous lies to one another in honeyed words. Even then, I could recognize the cruelty of the court. My brother, old enough to stand by my father's elbow but still too young to be allowed to speak to guests, saw me on the stairs and scowled. Fearful he would report me, I slipped away into the garden and played in the groves and streams while the sounds of conversation could be heard over the walls from all directions.

"I heard voices approach from nearby, and wondered who would be walking in the private gardens, one of the few places forbidden to guests this night. I crept through the underbrush to get a peek and saw my Uncle Vicardo walking and talking in whispers with a courtesan. They giggled now and then.

"Too young to enjoy such voyeurism, I began to crawl

away when I heard a sharp intake of breath behind me, the sound of someone startled and in fear — too afraid to even scream. I crept back and saw a robed figure standing before the couple. He wore a large hood and a mask underneath it, and had apparently stepped from out of the hedges across from me. The maned wolf hedges.

“He spoke: ‘Baron Vicardo Chou Ssu Li Halan, you are guilty of conspiring against the prince!’

“Poor uncle stammered, deathly afraid, ‘No!’ he cried, ‘You don’t understand!’

“The hooded, masked figure drew a rapier and said, ‘I understand too well!’

“He then stepped forward in a flash and thrust his sword at my uncle. But instead of poor uncle, his blade pierced the courtesan. She had leapt to save uncle and took the blow meant for him. Uncle Vicardo stood staring at her with horror, and she choked out a final message before dying on the end of the blade: ‘Remember the dream that was our ancestors!’

“The masked assailant seemed confused, as if he had not expected this. He acted very much unlike an ominous and sinister force, and withdrew his blade almost lovingly, as if he feared to stain the dead girl’s dress. I was deathly silent. I don’t think I even breathed.

“My uncle bent down to cradle her in his arms. ‘It does not matter now,’ he said. ‘My dream is dead. Do with me what you will.’

“The masked man seemed to think a while and then acted swiftly: He stabbed my grieving uncle through the heart. He died without a sound.

“I must have then gasped or cried out, because the masked figure wheeled and stared at me, crouched on my hands and knees under the hedges. He (or she? I am still unsure) did not seem to know what to do. That’s when my nanny arrived. She gasped and took in the situation immediately. She waved her hands at the masked one, as if warding him from me. Even in my terror, I almost giggled at the odd gesticulations she made, so unusual for my prim and proper nanny.

“But the masked figure bowed to her and then slipped back into the maned wolf hedges from where he had come. Nanny grabbed my hand and hauled me up, dragging me painfully back to my rooms by a route I’d never seen before or since. Once there, she harangued me viciously, making me swear never to tell a soul what I had seen on threat of death for the both of us. I began to cry.

“She went to her locked cabinet and withdrew a large chocolate bar, the kind I was only ever allowed to eat on birthdays. She hushed me and fed me sweets the rest of the night until I fell asleep. I knew by that gesture alone that what had happened was truly important and that my silence was equally important. Nanny never broke the no-sweets rule. Until that night. She never broke it again. Even

today, I associate sweets with conspiracy.”

I had been standing quietly and respectfully throughout all of this, but now felt the need to speak.

“I have heard of your uncle. Many people have. He was said to have been killed by a jealous lover. Others, however, whispered that he had been killed by the Hidden Martyrs. I see now that the latter version is the truth.”

Erian looked at me but I could not read her expression in the darkness. “I only discovered that years later, after learning about the Hidden Martyrs and their ways. I often think about my poor uncle and the crime he had been accused of. Perhaps he was a pro-Republican, but if so, it was for love. When his love died, so did his ideals. He quickly followed them into death.”

I nodded and sat down next to her. “And why do you tell me this now?”

Erian sighed. “I don’t really know. Absolution, maybe? I have carried this with me for so long.”

“Carried what?” I said. “You could have done nothing.”

“No. Untrue. I could have cried out and brought guards or guests running. I could have saved my uncle, maybe even his lover.”

“And what then? You would have been watched by the Hidden Martyrs for the rest of your life, if not killed by them.”

“How are you so sure they don’t watch me now?”

“I’m not, but rumors says they work mainly within the Garden Worlds, rarely without. It has been a long time since we were home.”

“Yes, but my brother will surely have tried to contact them and turn them against me.”

“I suspect that, if that were true, you would have seen them already. They may be fanatics, but they surely aren’t so foolish as to follow your brother’s twisted crusade against you.”

I saw her smile; I could tell by the glint of her teeth in the moonlight. “I hope you are correct.” She stood and smoothed her cape. “So, my confessor: I have told you my crime. What is my penance?”

I leaned back and look up at the sky. The stars were dim, clouded by the screen of nanites above our heads. “You are to pray to the Pancreator for solace each night of the coming week at the hour in which you witnessed your uncle’s murder. Thenceforth, do not remain silent when witnessing crimes, but speak out and rectify them. The little girl you once were could do nothing; let her forced inaction be a lesson for you to act upon your own will at all times.”

“I shall do so,” she said, head bowed. When she lifted it, I could see her smile again.

“Come, Alustro. We have walked too long alone in the garden. Let us join the others and be joyous!” She stepped

out of the grove and headed back to the manse, where the rest of our crew were resting, waiting for us to return.

I followed behind her, glad to witness the bold steps she took as she sallied forth into her future, away from her past.

END

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