A Gentle Stroll

October 2026 — Issue Eleven



They Are Coming

by Tiffanie Gray

Collation File

They Are Coming by Tiffanie Gray … 1

Collation File … The Collator Supreme … 1

I Was Walking … Lisa Padol … 9

Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne #6 ... Gabriel Roark ... 6

Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne #7 ... Gabriel Roark ... 8

The Fox's Den ... Nicolai Shapero ... 31

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #11 … George Phillies … 4

Editorial Note

The transition to bimonthly does not seem to have worked that well. Perhaps it will improve with time.

Please email PDFs of your zines to the collator, George Phillies, phillies@4liberty.net The due date of the next issue will be July 6, 2026.

General rules: Publication is bimonthly. Contributors are expected to stay on topic and remain civil to each other. Discussions of contemporary politics and graphic pornography will be rejected. Recall that A Gentle Stroll will appear with our other zines on our web pages, so matters you would not want seen by the public should go elsewhere. You retain all rights to your material, except that the N3F may use your submissions in this magazine, which may be distributed to subscribers and/or N3F members, and may be placed on our web site or other electronic archives.

I Was Walking

Copyright Lisa Padol 2026
Lisa Padol, 39-20 52nd Street, Apt. GD, Woodside, NY 11377, 718-937-8919. I am currently seeking employment.
email: drcpunk@labcats.org or drcpunk@gmail.com

#RPGaDAY2026 has prompts here:
https://www.autocratik.com/

This is generally "scheduled" for August, but I, of course, am doing it in September.

This year, in addition to the prompts, there were alternative questions for each day, as well as Weekly Modifiers and modifiers for the day of the week:

Weekly Modifiers:

Week 1 - Drive 1
Week 2 - Intellect 2-8
Week 3 - Associates 9-15
Week 4 - Instinct 16-22
Week 5 - Emotion 23-29
Week 6 - Ability 30-31

Daily Modifiers:

Monday - Fair of Face 3, 10, 17, 24, 31
Tuesday - Full of Grace 4, 11, 18, 25
Wednesday - Full of Woe 5, 12, 19, 26
Thursday - Far to Go 6, 13, 20, 27
Friday - Loving & Giving 7, 14, 21, 28
Saturday - Works Hard: 1, 8, 15, 22, 29
Sunday - Blessed 2, 9, 16, 23, 30

#RPGaDAY2026: Prompt and Alternative Question:

1. Discipline. Share a character or fellow player who is a strong example of discipline.
Key Words: Drive, Works Hard

My character from an urban fantasy game dubbed Altclair (after the fictional college it centered around) comes to mind. Justin Thorne was a hot mess of a college freshman in so many ways, but also disciplined in many ways: as a theater major, as a creator of magical items, as a founder of an unofficial newsletter detailing on-campus weirdness, and in fulfilling several other self-imposed duties. He definitely worked hard and had a strong drive, though he didn't always go in the right direction.

One of many incidents I remember fondly was a quiet battle of wits with his ex (relatively amicable breakup), fellow theater major Riley, who had posted a cast list for *Rent* that was, shall we say, controversial. Justin, who was his AD (Assitant Director) was cast in a lead role as was someone who was dying of AIDS at the time (and with whom Riley had fallen in love with, which, Justin maintained, showed that Riley's taste had improved). As the game was run in and set in the late 1990s, the cast list was a piece of paper taped to a wall, so Justin grabbed it before anyone else could see it, and let Riley know they needed to discuss it. Riley had no intention of meeting on Justin's home turf, and knew Justin wouldn't meet on his, so suggested the theater.

Justin made it clear that he couldn't be both a lead role in the musical and Riley's AD, so Riley suggested that the student dying of AIDS be the assistant director, and Justin accepted this. Riley re-cast the other role.

> Justin: This leaves just one problem.
> Riley: What?
> Justin: We still audition at Altclair!

Riley grinned and proceeded to subject Justin to the most grueling audition Justin had ever had.

When Double Exposure started its Envoy program, I signed up for a couple of roleplaying games. The late and much, much lamented Darren Watts was the contact person, and I emailed to ask him about setting up a playtest, per instructions. He said that it wasn't necessary; he'd just take my word.

My instant verbal reaction, as Josh can confirm: The **hell* he will! We still audition at Altclair!

(Alas, our scheduled never meshed for that, and the publishers no long sponsor this for the games I was volunteering for.)

2. Stature. What does one character's stature in their community mean to them?
Key Words: Intellect, Blessed

When I ran Kerberos Club Fate, one player created Sophronia, a 9-inch-tall clockwork fairy as her character. The club's test for her, we agreed, involved sending a cat after her, only to discover that she quickly tamed the cat, named him Martin, and made him her steed. Another character, the shapeshifting Reginald, would often shrink to match her height, and the two did eventually marry. He was posing as his master, the Pensington heir, and eventually became the heir in truth (as the actual heir, Gregory Sage, preferred it that way, not wanting to return home from

Africa, and his mother was furious enough to let that stand). Reginald certainly worked hard at everything he did, although he did have a wicked sense of humor and could play well with most people.

Sophronia was more centered on emotion and a sense of what, by her lights, was right. One could consider her blessed, by the fae, by her creator, however one chooses to look at it, despite her anger towards her creator/father who sold himself to the fae for wings for her, wings she never asked for, because he felt that she needed them to be Perfect. She took as a principle We Do Not Give People to the Fae, and had an Aspect of Take Me As I Am (and Josh wrote a filk of Heather Dale's "As I Am" for her, which the player liked).

Reginald was more of an intellect-centered character, though also fairly emotional in his way, and he fell hard for Sophronia. I suspect the player would agree with my take that Reginald probably felt himself blessed and that this probably cut both ways.

3. Poise. How does one character present themselves?
Key Words: Fair of Face, Intellect

Josh and I got to play John Steed and Emma Peel respectively in a *Luther Arkwright* one-shot at Gen Con. It was a blast! Steed and Peel were in an undeclared car race with Arkwright to see who'd get to the event they were supposed to investigate first, and while Arkwright did technically win, there was a lovely moment illustrating poise.

I described Peel as touching up her lipstick as Steed drove, and the GM looked at the result on the dice.

> GM: Any other woman would have lipstick smeared all over her face. But you knew Steed was going to swerve like that, so you leaned into it, and your makeup is perfect.

4. Charm. An enjoyable moment of charm gone right or wrong?
Key Words: Full of Grace, Intellect

I'm not sure intellect applies here. There are two NPCs I've played that, to my surprise, proved popular with the players. One was Axel, an Unseelie sidhe troublemaker from Cthulhupunk +20. Another was Ambrose Solanidou from the Strange School play by email game I ran. I'd intended him to be a sort of secondary villain, but when he decided to challenge school rules by wearing the uniform intended for girls, i.e., by putting on a skirt (I was running this in 2008-2012 or so, iirc), almost all the players decided he was charming. Indeed, a litmus test for whether later players would at all enjoy the game was whether they liked Ambrose and another NPC, Billy Siegel, who had decided he was Green Lantern.

5. Burden. What burden is a character willing to carry until the end?
Key Words: Full of Woe, Intellect

Semiluna in Scadere, my main character from a Take the Universe: Power Is Fleeting; Love Is Eternal. TTU is a hack of Good Society, and this particular game riffed on science fantasy movies of the 1980s. The two opposing sides in a building space conflict were the Lunar Alliance and the Heavenly Octave. Before the game started, Semiluna had been captured by the Heavenly Octave and later released. Their rank and reputation both suffered, and they were definitely psychologically damaged (though no one had harmed them physically).

They essentially begged Princess Percipia Vie to use them however she could so they could redeem themselves, whether or not this was public. They successfully played a body double of the princess's mother and was secretly rewarded with a boon to be specified. Semiluna later asked that this be that if Percipia's fiance, Hekmenos, marrying her to forge a peace treaty, wished to leave, Percipia would let her.

Alas, Semiluna was goaded by the assassin they'd helped captured to the point of murdering said assassin, and told their uncle and former CO to disavow them, which the uncle did, with a mixture of, I think, disgust, pity, and pragmatism, and maybe a touch of respect (or not). They vowed to find the mysterious 9th moon for the princess. And, in the final session, they tried to get between the princess and their former lover, the automaton Titanox, when the two dueled. Hekmenos, who had once been in love with Semiluna, held them back, despite their protests that Titanox and Percipia were both more important than themself.

Semiluna had something of a martyr complex, as may be obvious. They also recognized the burden that Percipia carried, noting that, even though the treaty she tried to forge was only 17% likely to work, leaving an 83% chance of war (per Titanox's calculations), that was still 17% more of a chance for peace than had previously existed, and that no one credited Percipia for either her sincerity (she really was trying to make the peace happen) or the burden this placed on her (she really wanted to go to war).

I think Percipia, too, had something of a martyr complex. Hekmenos's mother was murdered right before the wedding, having been framed (I think by her own side) for the attempt to assassinate Percipia's mother (and I cannot recall whether or not there was a later, more successful attempt on the queen). I'm not sure if Percipia learned exactly what had happened, but she was too proud to offer any explanation, excuse, or

even open ignorance to Hekmenos, who still went through with the wedding, but she had now gone from "you want me to marry you??" to "okay" to actually being in love with Percipia to now hating her. Additionally, Percipia allowed Titanox to challenge her to a duel and killed the automaton, prompting the rest of the automatons to declare that they would no longer fight in wars.

Titanox had been pushing hard for peace, printing subversive pamphlets about how war was stupid, and the player had wanted the duel and wanted, iirc, Titanox killed in it. Between that and Hekmenos trying hard to create peace between the two sides by agreeing to marry a woman she'd just met, one with many flaws... I think all four of these main characters were trying to carry heavy burdens.

The fifth main character was something of an exception. Originally, the seer/priestess Rheita, the player retired the character, and when I pointed out that the rules explicitly said one could promote a Connection to Main Character, happily took the opportunity to do so with Semiluna's former captor. But while I don't think either character carried a burden, between Theudegisklos, Grossequinte (The Great Fifth) of the Heavenly Octave, and Geraldesse Milmeteau, cyclops Princess and a rival to Percipia, I'd say the player admirably took on the burden of playing opposition to at least three of the Main Characters.

6. Reach. Who would you like to be able to share RPGs with?
Key Words: Far to Go, Intellect

It's more likely to be folks I know play RPGs who, for whatever reason, aren't able to play them with me. Sometimes, it boils down to there only being so many hours in a week.

7. Mercy. A moment of mercy received or given?
Key Words: Loving & Giving, Intellect

There was a very odd larp I played in, where my cohort was based on the characters from the opera La Clemenza di Tito (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_clemenza_di_Tito). We delighted one of the GMs by keeping to the spirit, if not the letter, of the original, even though none of us knew anything about the original.

My character, Tivoli (based on Tito) had been told that Cecil, whom he trusted, had been the one to mastermind an assassination attempt, which Cecil thought had been successful. As Tivoli, I gathered the characters from Roma and revealed my true identity. Cecil, wracked with guilt, started to confess, but Vita interrupted him, saying that he did it for her, revealing that she was the daughter of a man whom Tivoli had murdered in the name of his justice. She had told Cecil that it was either assassination or war, and he picked assassination as the least evil of the two.

Tivoli, ignorant of Vita's true identity, had planned to court her, for political reasons, and, after explaining why he had executed her father, noted that a marriage still made political sense, perhaps even more so in light of Vita's parentage, and asked if that were something she would want.

Her response was not "How could I possibly marry the murderer of my parents?" but "How do I know you wouldn't kill me?"

They agreed to take oaths in a temple not to kill each other (or have each other killed, and so on). Vita's and Cecil's roles in the failed assassination attempt would never be revealed to anyone else.

> Vita: And you wouldn't imprison me?
> Tivoli: To do that would be to say this had happened. This. Never. Happened. On what grounds could I possibly imprison my wife?
> Cecil: But it did happen.

He did not feel it was right that he should not be punished. Tivoli was having none of that.

> Tivoli: If the assassination attempt had succeeded, you would have served Vita?
> Cecil: Yes.
> Tivoli: Then serve her now. Serve both of us. This. Never. Happened.

I enjoyed finding I could play someone with authority, someone merciful, but also a certain amount of cold intellect.

8. Resolve. A moment when a character kept or broke their resolve?
Key Words: Works Hard, Intellect

I've just been reading over my after-action larp report to the author/lead GM of Changelings of the Tangled Wood. My character, Romulus, was not a huge intellect type, but definitely worked hard. As I put it: I have a laundry list of things to do, and one of them has its own laundry list.

And then, I acquired another list. For reasons I never quite understood, Romulus wound up bound by a magical pledge he'd never made, requiring him to get and do various things within a certain time, lest he suffer a mechanical penalty and be known as one who broke a Pledge.

He managed to get and do all but one of the things on the list and had resolved to do the last one: Hurt a

fellow changeling, physically. He even had a volunteer who understood why Romulus needed to do this, as well as his liege's promise support whatever decision Romulus made, finding the whole thing as distasteful as Romulus did, but understanding the rock and hard place situation.

Then, one of Romulus's friends asked him to break the Pledge for reasons that were a bit murky to Romulus (and proved to be ill-founded, but neither knew that then). And Romulus's resolve faltered and broke. His friend kept hammering how necessary it was that Romulus break this Pledge. Romulus himself had never made the Pledge and had no idea how or to whom it had been made. His liege would back his decision. And Romulus really didn't want to beat up a fellow changeling, not even a volunteer. Also, he hated bullies and bullying. Neither he nor I regret breaking the Pledge.

9. Privilege. Give one reason why it is a privilege to play with your group.
Key Words: Associates, Blessed

They're awesome. They are cooperative and imaginative. They are willing to take risks and to build a safe game space, whether online or in person. They're patient and kind. (None of this means we don't have friction sometimes, obviously, but it's still a privilege.)

10. Secret. A secret you hope comes out about a character?
Key Words: Associates, Fair of Face

Ooh! Secrets should generally come out! Yes, there are exceptions, and timing matters, but it's usually more fun when they come out. For players who are not GMs, this is somewhat more likely to come up in a larp than a tabletop.

In Kerberos Club Fate, we all knew out of character that "Gregory Sage"'s secret was that he was actually the nobleman's valet, Reginald Hunter, who looked remarkably like him. (They were not necessarily half-brothers, but it was extremely likely that some Lord Pennsington at some point had, ah, bestowed himself on at least one of the household servants.) Reginald's player wrote a poem to read to everyone when the character came clean to his companions, and the question really was when, not if.

As for me, I did the thing I often do as GM and created a complex family tree which had most of the characters ultimately related to each other, and Victor Knight in particular was related to a major villain, a secret he didn't know at first. Similarly, the clockwork fairy Sophronia discovered that her creator had a partner who'd created a giant clockwork man, Talos. She instantly decided that they were cousins and responded to any suggestion from the other PCs that they oppose him (as he worked with revolutionaries and criminals) with "Cousin!"

11. Tact. A character made great by having or not having tact.
Key Words: Associates, Full of Grace

When I ran Kerberos Club Fate, one of the PCs was Victor Knight, whom I described as "Robert Downey, Jr.'s Sherlock Holmes, only without his tact." Indeed, one of his Aspects was "Truth before Tact".

At a convention run of *Clockwork: Domionion*, a Black roleplayer showed us how to play the nicest bigot. That is, it was abundantly clear that the character was a bigotted jerk, but he was played in a way that never undercut the **players*. The character was utterly condescending, which meant he was always at pains to give proper credit to everyone and to stand back and let them take the lead, something which, on the player level, is correct. We also wound up with a running joke about the absence of elephants.

12. Loss. Most things end. What is one RPG loss you still feel?
Key Words: Associates, Full of Woe

I am sad that Eden Games is no longer supporting *Witchcraft| Armageddon*. I am sad that we never got the *Buckaroo Banzai* RPG. I am sad that we didn't get an official Fate version of *Blue Rose*.

13. Strain. So far, what is the heaviest set of RPG things you have carried to play?
Key Words: Associates, Far to Go

I carried home a bunch of maps I'd had printed out for the second run of the *Trail of Cthulhu* campaign *Eternal Lies*, and I carried a lot of notes and books when I ran it the first time. Ditto for the second full run I did of *Masks of Nyarlathotep*, as I had rulebook, campaign book, and lots and lots of notes and handouts. I've carried dice and notebooks and pens to conventions where I'm just playing, and more than that when I'm running stuff. For playtesting Dangerous Refuge, we print out copies of our rules and cheat sheets as well, and I bring erasable index cards and markers, as well, of course, as notebooks. And I currently have a Very Large notebook I refer to as a breadloaf, bought for me for a secret santa gift exchange some years back. Having stuff on my tablet has been extremely useful.

14. Regard. What is a game held in high regard you have yet to play?
Key Words: Associates, Loving & Giving

2D20 Dune, 2D20 Star Trek Adventures, 2D20 John Carter, Aegean, Alas for the Awful Sea (PbtA), Hearts of Wulin (PbtA), Undying (PbtA), Wanderhome (Belonging Outside Belonging), Girl Frame (I think PbtA), Changeling: The Lost, The Between, CHEW (FitD), The Clay That Woke, The new Laundry game (C7D6), Colonial Gothic, Coyote and Crow, anything using the Cypher system, anything using DCC,, Dialect, DIE, Demon (The Fallen and The Descent), ECCO, Eureka, Fabula Ultima, Godkillers, Hard Wired Island, Haunted West, Hidden Isle, Honey Heist, Mythic Bastionland (Into the Odd), Kids on Bikes (on Brooms, in Capes, in Space, et cetera), Lancer, Lasers and Feelings, Liminal Horror, Magical Kitties Save the Day, anything for Mazes (including Senta and Sensibility), Memento Mori, anything for Monad Echo, Nibiru, Not the End, Promethean: The Created, Deathmatch Island, Part-Time Gods, Pathfinder, Penumbra City, Prince Valiant, The Quiet Year, Raven, Red Markets, Spire (though I've played Heart), Rivers of London (BRPS), The Dee Sanction, Shadow of the Demon Lord, Shield Maidens, Slugblaster, Tribe 8, Troubleshooters, Thousand Year Old Vampire, Witcher, and many others not on my spreadsheet of games I own.

15. Endurance. How would you organize an endurance session of your favorite game?
Key Words: Associates, Works Hard

Oh my goodness, that takes me back. When we do *Scum & Villainy*, we get to the GM's home around 2-3, snack and game for 2-4 hours, eat, then go home, usually driven by the GM.

Both Aviatrix and I would do nominal noon start session that actually started at 1-2, with snacks or food ordered somewhere in there, breaking around 6-8, possibly with dinner after. Any of these patterns would work for a session of 6-10 hours where that counts meals and other breaks. It could probably also work online, but zoom fatigue is real, so it'd probably be 2-4 hours followed by a break of 1-2 hours, repeating once or twice.

For a weekendlong session, if live, folks would need to crash, I think. I've done this at least once, but we are all getting on in age. Now, it could still work. Arrive Friday night or Saturday morning, do a slowish start, get a meal, take a break, repeat a few times, only with sleep involved and maybe a shower or two. The thing is, in most cases, someone(s) would need to sleep on the floor. We do have an air-matress/futon or two, fwiw. There are exceptions; a couple of folks have multiple spare beds.

Online, this would likely boil down to multiple 2-4 hour sessions over the weekend. The other alternative would be at a hotel or AirBnB, which, while doable, is expensive these days. Still, Josh and I have done "longcon" games at the Double Exposure conventions, and the occasional 2-3 parter at larger gaming conventions.

16. Composure. One thing that will cause a character to lose their composure?
Key Words: Instinct, Blessed

Ooh, we are now in *Unknown Armies* territory, with Rage, Fear, and Noble Stimuli! Here's a list of some of these for some of the PCs I've played in convention oneshots:

- Rage: Seeing someone else get credit for something you did. Fear: Having someone discover that you're really just a shallow, self-centered, petty man. Noble: To entertain the masses.
- Rage: Those who make $20,000,000 per picture—and aren't half the actor you could have been, if you'd just gotten the right break. Fear: Failure. You've already failed once. You're not about to fail again. Noble: Taking care of those who depend on you.
- Rage: Whenever you see someone ostracized for being different, you lose your cool. Fear: Losing [your spouse]. She accepts you for who you are. She's the foundation upon which your world is built. Noble: Every idea should be judged on its merits. You won't reject an idea until you've first considered it carefully.

17. Intensity. A satisfying example of a character's integrity
Key Words: Instinct, Fair of Face

I may be stretching the term, but I don't care. I played a one-shot of *Progenitor* (One Roll Engine system) at Gen Con, and the full write up is here: https://www.labcats.org/drcpunk/wiki/index.php/Progenitor:_The_Battle_of_San_Francisco. The relevant excerpt follows.

Context: A group of low level superheroes were defending their city, San Francisco, from the fallout of a battle of higher level superpowered people. Here's the climax of that session.

===
GM: There are 19 tons of tungsten cartwheeling through the sky. [Basically, a 19-ton tungsten telephone pole, visually] ... What can the six of you do to prevent nineteen tons of tungsten from hitting the city?

Folks asked a couple of questions about their powers, involving a) reaching the tungsten pole and b) dealing with it.

GM (in response to a question from the Spectacle's player [The Spectacle = A big glowing ball of energy]):

If you push yourself to the point of self destruction, it will kill you in the next ten minutes—but it _will_ get you there in nine.

Spectacle (taking a deep breath): Gotta do it.

GM: Big Damn Heroes!

I'm not entirely sure why sending 19 tons of tungsten in a straight vertical drop was the correct course of action, as my knowledge of physics is slim, but this is what happened.

Spectacle: Tell San Francisco I love them.

As final speeches go, that's a beauty.

<snip>

Spectacle took human form upon dying (male, I think), and The Moment [another PC] carried the body through the streets like Pieta as folks snapped pictures.

GM: That's what the statue will look like.
===

18. Directness. Directness: A fast introduction of a new PC or player?
Key Words: Instinct, Full of Grace

In *Good Society*, if one plays with Inner Conflict and completes that conflict, one can create a new Main Character—or promote a connection one plays to Main Character. This is pretty quick; either the character is in town already, or they come to town. Good Society character creation doesn't involve a lot of mechanics; it's more description.

When I ran the Strange School PBEM, a new player's PC was generally a transfer student or an entering freshman. If the PC joined mid-semester, well, think of every anime where a teacher says, "Class, we have a new student, So-and-So," and hey presto! New character.

In the *Scum & Villainy* game, at least one player has two characters because the original character overdid their vice while attempting to clear their stress, and the player picked the option of having that character absent for a session, quickly making a second character. I think Josh did this once, and I know Gareth's done it twice.

In *Cy Borg*, as in many *Mork Borg*-derived games, and, presumably, *Mork Borg* itself, characters are fragile. When I played *Cy Borg* at this year's DexLite, a number of PCs died, and the survivors leveled up because of this. The players whose PCs had died quickly made up replacements, and we didn't think too hard about how and why they joined the group on its deadly heist.

When Stephen Tihor ran a Strixhaven summer vacation sequence, it was clear that he was not going to run all of the options. My character, Ivo, was definitely going to go into the game world's equivalent of the quantumverse, but no one else was. So, Josh helped me create Giovanni the Geometric, my sentient, devoutly Denari-worshipping, gelatinous cube, previously created for *Swords of the Serpentine*. It was not an especially short to create Giovanni in 5e. However, it was easy to drop the cube into the Strixhaven archeological dig. Clearly, Giovanni had been in school all along, just not generally hanging out with the PCs, as they were in their own dorm.

19. Desire. A huge risk taken because of desire?
Key Words: Instinct, Full of Woe

I ran "Night Forms a Cover for Sinners", a scenario in Golden Goblin's *Tales of the Caribbean* about a search for the Fountain of Youth in Puerto Rico. It's set in the 1920s, but I easily updated it to the 1950s (and converted it to *Trail of Cthulhu*). It pretty much has "trap" written all over it, but I correctly gauged that the particular group I ran it for would walk into that trap anyway.

The characters were Martin, Jeremiah, and Joyce. Joyce was very competent, but depressed enough to follow the other two, who were lovers. All of them had been dealing with mythos business for a long time.

In the course of this, Martin had made a deal with Hastur. Jeremiah had been murdered, and his brain placed in a mi-go jar, and Hastur had offered to re-embody Jeremiah on condition that Martin finish a mythos job he and Joyce had taken on. After consideration and consultation with Joyce and his other companions, he agreed.

In mechanical terms, this meant that both Martin and Jeremiah were bound to their Unspeakable Promise, which means that when they eventually died (and Hastur wasn't going to do anything to hasten that, and had nothing to do with this scenario), they'd rise as Unspeakable Possessors, aka tentacled monstrosities. Jeremiah had come to terms with this, planning out either getting a friend like Joyce to make sure to kill them a second time, or to rig up explosives to do much the same thing.

Martin had not come to terms with it, and was the driving force leading the trio into what they all knew was a trap. Afterwards, Jeremiah pointed out that Martin was risking the life they had, nearly 20 years thus far, and with every reason to believe they'd have at least another 20 years, for this, and Martin agreed

that Jeremiah was correct, and made some kind of peace with their situation. As of 1969, both men are still alive. I suspect Martin has not stopped hoping to find a way out.

I wasn't surprised that the scenario worked, though I was relieved. Oscar Rios, who wrote the scenario, reminded me that in our world, many, many people have died in the hunt for the Fountain of Youth.

20. Promise. Have the characters kept or broken more promises?
Key Words: Instinct, Far to Go

In the Fae Courts supplement to the *Pride, Prejudice & Practical Magic* expansion for *Good Society*, players should keep track of all promises made, and when I play this, I suggest that we distinguish between little-p and big-p promises, and only focus on the latter for this.

The Fae in *Monsterhearts* is all about promises and punishing those who break them. This was a big plot point in the Monsterhearts game I played in at Dreamation 2015. See https://www.labcats.org/drcpunk/wiki/index.php/Monsterhearts. I played the Infernal to Kat Miller's Fae, and both understood exactly how important promises were. My character, Mika, had promised to take hers, Brynn, to the dance, and got permission from his Dark Power. Old Joe, the antiques dealer, and Mika's Dark Power agreed on condition Mika give Brynn a brooch in the shape of an oak leaf. Naturally, Mika agreed.

Brynn recognized it as an item of power, and knew what it did (though none of us, including the GM yet did), but fought back tears and like Mika pin it on her. Her adoptive father (who had no idea she was a fae) wasn't too sure about all of this and told Brynn he was keeping an eye on her.

> Brynn: Promise?
> Father: Yes!
> Brynn: I love you, Daddy.

Brynn made Mika promise never to date her rival/frenemy (the Vampire), and made the Mortal promise never to hurt Mika. As the night went on and the violence quotient increased, Brynn decided that her father had broken his promise to keep an eye on her, so she didn't care that the Chosen and the Wolf had made a mess (throwing Mika throw the window of the house, although she did care that they'd done that to Mika).

Mika learned via Gazing Into the Abyss that the brooch he'd given Brynn was eating all promises made to Brynn, including those made by her patron, and that if she didn't have any promises by midnight, she'd be sucked back through the veil to Faerie.

> Mika (to Brynn, as the clock strikes midnight): I have obligations that I have to keep. I know you know about that. (Clock finishes striking. As Brynn is drawn back through the veil, just after midnight) But I promise you this—I'll wait for you to come back.

The relationship between Brynn and Mika was horribly functional in a weird way, but Mika's take was that he owed Old Joe everything for bringing Mika back when he'd died during WWII (before the game started). And if this had been a campaign, I'm sure Brynn would have found a way back.

21. Charity. Share an RPG charity past or present that moved you.
Key Words: Instinct, Loving & Giving

The rpg community tends to be very generous, noting that this is a broad trend, et cetera, disclaimers, et cetera. There are a lot of charity bundles which raise a lot of money. On a personal level, Rob Heinsoo sent me the *King Arthur Companion* when I was doing my dissertation on modern Arthuriana. (This isn't to say other communities aren't generous; I've seen a lot of amazing acts of kindness and generosity in the Society of Creative Anachronism and in fandom in general, such as an annual concert that's raised thousands of dollars for a children's hospital (I think Children's National in DC, but am not sure).)

I remember a post-mythos-apocalypse *Call of Cthulhu* game at Gen Con where my PC gave away his medkit, expecting he was doing a suicide run. The family he gave it to was most grateful. The PCs survived (except the one whose player had to leave early), due in no small part to luck, but they'd unknowingly angered Nyarlathotep, so their days were probably numbered.

Ivo Alom, my Strixhaven character, regularly keeps sweets on hand in case Mac, the 9-year-old PC (who remembers her past lives, but this hasn't stopped her recklessness) has a dire need for a candy or cookie. Mac's player and I later decided that in a previous life, Ivo had killed her, as I'd said that, while Ivo didn't remember, he was the reincarnation of a dictator. Mac has now remembered this, though Ivo hasn't, and has said that he promised her she'd live again, and hey! Here she is, so he kept his promise! As Ivo is costuming for a masquerade as his previous self, he thinks this is just Mac playing into that. He is a little disconcerted that there's a whole college campus appreciation society for the tyrant he's costuming as, but still plans to go to one of their meetings, unaware that he's occasionally reverting to his previous self.

UPDATE: He's since been to this meeting and is even more disconcerted by both the society's members and Mac.

In *Butterfly Court*, my character was genuinely sympathetic to a woman who wanted to assassinate him out of jealousy, and I think this raised his status at court. In one *Fate of Cthulhu* campaign, we all knew a PC whose player couldn't make the final session would be killed off; nevertheless, the characters took the time to hold a funeral for them, throwing the snacks the character loved into their grave. In another one, my character was built to use Deception, but time and again, kept using Rapport, in one case telling a man that he was a great father and didn't want his own kid to become what my character had.

But all of this is about me. In the larp Owlsborough, my character, the fae Magpie King, was touched by how generous humans can be, if often boggled by how they did it. One human insisted on giving up their special magical gift even when the disguised Magpie King assured him that the Magpie King didn't require this. Another wanted her liege lady to have enough money for her lifetime, and in return, promised to confront another character about his unsavory deeds, and to kill him if he lied about them. This one really boggled the Magpie King, but, hey, humans, right? A third, when assured that she no longer needed to serve the Magpie King, asked if she still could. After all, look at these horrible nobles! (I think she herself was also a noble.) The Magpie King was boggled. And pleased. And touched. She understood!

22. Grit. An enjoyable moment of grit PCs did or did not tough out.
Key Words: Instinct, Works Hard

This would seem to describe *Phoenix Dawn Command* as a whole. This is a game where the PCs have died and come back anywhere from days to centuries later to discover they are Phoenixes, people with 7 lives. Each death, apart from the final one, makes a Phoenix stronger. And pre-game, every PC has clearly had enough grit to come back to life the first time.

This is a mission-centric game, and the PCs are a unit sent to fight against the multiple ongoing apocalypses. If that's not the game the players want, then, bluntly, pick a different game. In the campaign I played, technically, only two of us were tanks (my character, Kaban, and Lidi, aka Zoarcid), but everyone died multiple times, as intended, and in the end, yes, we saved the world.

23. Fortune. An enjoyable moment of good or bad fortune.
Key Words: Emotion, Key Words: Emotion, Blessed

I remember rolling 01 on d100 in *Cthulhu Invictus* when my charioteer punched an enemy. I remember a FASA *Star Trek* game where we were playing Klingons trying to rescue one of their agents (also a Klingon), and the NPC Klingon transporter chief was trying to transport her onto their ship. The GM rolled the dice in front of us—and got a 00, aka a critical failure. The agent died in a transporter malfunction.

24. Distance. Your preferred distance in any type of RPG conflict?
Key Words: Emotion, Key Words: Emotion, Fair of Face

I'm not sure I understand this. Are we talking melee vs ranged? Are we talking as close or far away from combat rules as possible?

I want combat to be fun to play out. I don't want to have to go through a lot of strategizing. But I'm also fine with no or low combat games.

25. Familiarity. One game you want to get more familiar with?
Key Words: Emotion, Full of Grace

Just one? Have you met me? Memento Mori, Various FitD games (a|State, CHEW, Candela Obscura), DramaSystem, Ecryme, Gaia Complex, Gods (as a player), Scion, Haunted West, Vaesen, and Blade Runner will do for a short list.

26. Regret. One game you regret not trying?
Key Words: Emotion, Full of Woe
The Widdershins rpg. (https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/libomni/widdershins-the-roleplaying-game/description) This is based on the Widdershins novels of Jordan Hawk, late 19th/early 20th century m/m romance with a take on the Lovecraftian mythos. The system tries to handle the interesting combination of horror and romance, leaning somewhat more towards romance, and I'd very much been looking forward to it.

The creator canceled the project, however, and while I regret this, I support and respect the decision. I've seen several projects linger on in limbo as their creator hopes they can finish it, plans to finish it, maybe goes radio silent, and backers get progressively disillusioned and less diplomatic about it. Canceling the project and returning the money before things hit that point was the right course of action. I do have the quickstart, and could probably do something with that, but am more likely to use a different system if I try to run (or get someone else to run) something in that world, possibly *Good Society*, which, I maintain, doesn't really need a special hack to handle matters Lovecraftian.

27. Hunger. What do you hunger for most from a session?

Key Words: Emotion, Far to Go

Oh, so many things. Connection. Emotion. Scenery chewing. The good kind of "bleed". Having the pieces fall into place. All of that as a player. As a GM, also being able to predict and manipulate players—and being surprised by them as well. Remembering all the cool stuff, and ideally, also not forgetting the bumps. Folks talking about the session for years, enjoying what we all wrought. Getting complimented on stuff I did, and knowing the compliments are well-earned. Not getting a swollen head because of it. Being able to give similarly sincere compliments to everyone else.

28. Devotion. Devotion: Game you have played the most!
Key Words: Emotion, Loving & Giving

I have no idea and no intention of counting back over 4+ decades. A lot of Call of Cthulhu, GUMSHOE, Fate, Over the Edge, Powered by the Apocalypse, Penned to Good Society, and Forged in the Dark, for sure, and no small amount of D&D of varying editions.

29. Labor. Thing you are most willing to work on for a game.
Key Words: Emotion, Works Hard

- Editing and proofreading, for money. I like making rpg material better.
- Playtesting. See above.
- Chewing scenery, loudly and quietly.
- Creating journals and letters and other handout things, as a GM and as a player.
- Relationship maps (definitely including family trees), mostly as a GM, but not **not** as a player.

30. Pride. A game event that you are still proud of.
Key Words: Ability, Blessed

- Setting up the climax of *Eternal Lies* so that the players could (and did) put the clues together.
- Doing callbacks to things other players established in playtests of *Saltfish & Almanacs* and a Joust With Spirit hack of *Fight With Spirit*, and, come to think of it, *Portal Fantasy Session Zero* at Metatopia in 2024.
- Setting up a Fellowship challenge for the Halfling's player: His people had boobie-trapped the approach to the village, which was quite sensible. The challenge was to keep the Halfling's companions (i.e., the other PCs) from getting caught in/by the traps.

  Halfling's Player: I love my people!

- At the online convention Pelicon, in a GUMSHOE *Da'Zoon* game, establishing in the epilogue that, due to time travel shenanigans during the session, the PCs had created the present-day villain.
- My exit in the larp 2 Dance, 2 Furious at Time Bubble in September. I won't go into details because spoilers.

31. Edge. Why does a character think they have an edge?
Key Words: Ability, Fair of Face

Because they do? Because they're mistaken or delusional? This question confuses me.

Going through some of my characters:

- **Kaban:** He's a Phoenix in the world of *Phoenix Dawn Command* (which is NOT *Phoenix Command*, but a completely different game), which means he doesn't need to eat, drink, or sleep; can't be poisoned (probably); won't die of natural causes; and has 7 lives (I think he's on 5 or 6 as of the end of the campaign), and that's before the special abilities he has.
- **Valsi:** My character from *Scum & Villainy*, who'd say it's because they follow the Way. Valsi can do the equivalent of "Jedi mind tricks", so this may even be correct.
- **Millicent Lowell:** She's the daughter of Nyarlathotep and has some ability to break time and space.
- **Ivo Alom:** My Strixhaven dhampire student. He can touch the minds of people and animals, and quite possibly some intelligent plants and the like. He can eat dreams and is willing to help fellow students by devouring their nightmares. Unbeknown to himself, he's also the reincarnation of a tyrannical ruler. He also has a certain amount of social power, as he's a generally good person who's helped protect fellow students and the school in general.
- **Arata Hoshi:** A character from a Penned to Good Society game set in a modern day school, Hoshi learned the power of spreadsheets and networking. At first, almost frightened by this, they now want more.
- G**iovanni the Geometric:** Created for *Swords of the Serpentine* as proof of concept, then translated to *D&D* 5e/2024 for Strixhaven. Giovanni is a sentient gelatinous cube, which means there are some obvious edges and reasons for them. However, Giovanni would say that the reason for these edges is faith in Denari, the goddess of Holy Commerce.
- **Rag-and-Bones:** From *Yazeba's Bed and Breakfast*. He'd say he has an edge because he is very clever. He's wrong. He's obvious and has no edge.

Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne #6

Where Roleplaying Games are the ~~Centaur~~ Center of Attention

For *A Gentle Stroll* #10

Gabriel Roark
Rancho Cordova, California
gabrielroark@gmail.com

July 20, 2026

From the Herald's Scroll

Goodness, I have been away from these pages for five months, my last contribution being in AGS #7. Why? General fatigue, I think. My wife & I stepped up our figure skating; since Postscripts #5, I have moved through the Alpha, Beta, Gamma, & Delta courses, gaining basic competency in 20 figure skating elements over 26 weeks. On August 1, I start Freestyle 1, which will be challenging in that all elements entail jumping, spinning, or skating a pattern backward on one edge (ice skates have two edges). On the flipside, the number of elements that we have to learn in a 13-week quarter has dropped from nine or ten to five! That will be terrific. Not all our training occurs at the rink. We are researching the most beneficial off-ice training routines for us & watch skating tutorials to sharpen our skills. We also purchased a small patch of synthetic ice on which to practice a limited range of techniques.

Since January, our D&D 5e referee concluded our *Keys from the Golden Vault* campaign. He is now running a Star Wars (2e) campaign set a few years before the events of the *Andor* series. This is fun & nostalgic for me; Star Wars 2e is the version that I played as a teenager, discovering this RPG just a bit late for Greg Costikyan's original version.

My other gaming group continues its assault on the *Temple of Elemental Evil* using the Advanced D&D (1e) rules. The player characters (PCs) are finally keeping up sufficient pressure on the Earth Temple (first subterranean dungeon level) to constrain recruitment of reinforcements. It took a long time for the players to grok that extended forays away from the temple, such as for overland exploration, gave its denizens opportunity to replenish their ranks, which the temple leaders did with alacrity.

In addition to the campaigns & figure skating, I am working with the Emperors Choice Games & Miniatures Company, the publishers of *The Arduin Grimoire*,

on an anniversary product for game. I cannot divulge more than that at this time. Oh yes, and Governor Newsom ordered the state government workforce back to the office at least four days per week. Happily for my department, our floor hasn't sufficient space for all Sacramento-area employees to come into the office four days a week, so we do two days. I take public transportation to the office, so office days add two hours & twenty minutes to my workdays. Boo.

All right, with all of that as a backdrop & summary catch-up, let's get into the zines.

COMMENTS ON *A GENTLE STROLL* #8–9

Ronin Engineer for AGS #8–9 (Jim Eckman): I emailed you requesting a copy of Wanderer. I'm looking forward to reading it. Similarly, I am hoping that the introduction to your worldbuilding appears in AGS #10. The outline is fun in its variety by topic. You treat some topics as variables along a simple scale (see Size & Wealth of organizations), whereas others read more like a menu. I am glad that you enjoy the Dispatches. The fifth follows comments.

The Fox's Den: A Zine by N.C. Shapero for AGS #8–9: Well, this is embarrassing: with my reading of AGS being scattershot since January, I got it in my head that your contributions in AGS #8–9 were entirely works of fiction. Yet, both of your zines state that the ~~tails~~ grew out of the Cyberfur campaign. The quality of these campaign write-ups is superlative. Neil Sharpe ("Cry Havoc") sounds like an anagram for N.C. Shapero. I'm afraid that is all I have on these two contributions; I read them too long ago to have much recall under duress of an expiring due date…

"**A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #9 (George Phillies):** I am glad the N3F Website is mostly reconstructed. May the health issues of active members resolve for the better soon. Congratulations on the progress of your Telzey Amberdon novel!

American geographic fiction…I didn't know that was a genre!

Concerning The Ancient D&D Campaign, what is a least dwarf (see PDF p. 8 of AGS #9)?

DISPATCHES FROM THE FIELD: FINNEGAN TARREGA'S UNAUTHORIZED INVESTIGATIONS INTO MATTERS ANCIENT AND ARCANE

Copyright is to Gabriel Roark for this material.

Dispatch 5: *A Serpentine Injuncture*

Dear Readers,

*You have in your hands the fifth dispatch from a serial exposé concerning the investigatory activities of my former employer, the Special Acquisitions Section of the Smithsonian Institution. I took employment with the Smithsonian Institution under the condition (unspoken though it might have been) that the Institution would support uncensored publication of discoveries made under its aegis, and that such objects as might bequeath educational remuneration upon the discerning public would be displayed at the National Museum. Regrettably, the Smithsonian reneged on these obligations, consigning my findings to secrecy. Dispatches 1–4 (*Something's Rotten in Sikyatki*,* Agarrar a un Ladrón*,* Götterdammerung*, and* Fleurs de Mystère*) related the uncanny natural phenomena that we in Dr. Fewkes' archaeological expedition witnessed at the Tusayan or Hopi ruin of Sikyatki, their probable cause in the theft of sacred artifacts—katcinas—from Tusayan, and my confrontation of the thief Balázs Andres and his men at The Bucket of Blood saloon and La Señora Hotel. Shortly after The Bucket of Blood brouhaha, I recovered a diary written by a man killed by Andres' order. The journal entries dated to a time before the arrival of Fewkes' expedition yet referred to government men's role in angering the Hopi god, Gatoya, as well as the removal of gods from the region. At La Señora, I met with one of Gatoya's servants, with which episode I resume the narrative.*

Yours very truly,

Finnegan Tarrega

The rattlesnake filled the silence in Andres' room with the quiet hiss of scales on cotton and canvas. I held my breath, wondering how this would end. Its head was behind my back now—would it strike? Probably not, but the cause of the man's death was now clear to me.

A loud knock at the door interrupted the tranquil scene of incipient strangulation. "Police! Open up in there!"

"Privacy, please, officer," I replied. "I am tied up at the moment."

The snake squeezed tighter when I spoke, and then moved its head to face the door, which one officer pushed open. A Caucasian and an Indio copper faced me, revolvers drawn and levelled. The white man's steel-gray eyes narrowed. He was going to shoot, and I could do nothing. The snake had my Hydra carbine pinned between its coils and my back. My six-gun also was obstructed by the serpent.

The tendons of the deputy's gun arm tensed, and his partner slapped the man's arm just as the resounding crack announced that a shot had been fired. The bullet shattered a floor tile and red dust flitted into the air.

The white man looked at the Indio in disbelief, but the other only chastised the shooter. "Idioto! You cannot shoot with the snake there—it is Gatoya's child!"

"Gato-what?" The white officer kept his pistol down, while the Indio holstered his own.

"Gatoya, *gabacho*. He is the great snake god of the Hopitu."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean to me?" asked the shooter.

"More importantly, my good lawmen, what am I to do in the clutches of Gatoya's child?" I queried.

"Don't move or speak. The serpent is here to judge you. See, he is a rattlesnake but does not bite you. See how his tongue sniffs you? Gatoya sent the snake. If your heart is good, the snake will let you go; if it is evil, you will be punished like that man there." The Indio pointed at the body.

The other copper scowled. "So you're suggesting we jest stand here and wait for a rattlesnake to suffocate this lawbreaker? Well, all right, if'n the snake don't kill him, maybe he deserves jailin' over hangin' after all."

With that, the white deputy put away his piece and leaned against the balcony railing. The other peace officer stood in his place, watching with interest.

Meanwhile, the rattler resumed crawling up my torso, not gripping tight. In time, it sniffed my left ear, a sensation not unlike being tickled with a feather, then reared up (technically outward) and faced me. Its slit-pupil eyes were filmed over for combat protection. A red tongue flicked in and out, regular, like drops from a water clock. I stared at the beast. A strange end, but if this is how I cross the River at last, so be it. The eyes slowly unclouded and emanated an uncanny intellect or insight. The snake loosened its hold and slid to the floor. It coiled itself in front of me, facing the deputies, head raised and fangs bared. The Indio smiled.

"Ah, Gatoya says that this man has a good heart, James," the Indio told his partner. "He didn't kill that man there, and we can't arrest him."

James drew his revolver, a worthy match to his iron-hard countenance. "Quit spoutin' that horseshit Injun religion and do yer gawdamn job, Tom!" My legs tensed in preparation for flight, though I was unsure of the way. Time seemed to slow down. The cylinder of James' pistol crept counterclockwise, a second away from hurling lead at the supernatural reptile. At the same moment, the

rattler released the kinetic energy stored in its coiled position. I leapt forward, arms outstretched to grab the snake, just as James squeezed off a shot. Tom yelled, lead pulverized terracotta, and Gatoya's spawn was on James' arm, clear of the bullet and my grasp. James grunted while Tom's face went grave-gray. The Indian lawman stood motionless, hopeless anticipation of disaster apparently having seized his will to move.

My body had assumed a downward trajectory by the time James fired again, his second shot caused by reflexive action when the rattlesnake buried its yellow fangs deep in the crook of the deputy's elbow. The shot went wild, ripped through the brim of my hat and grazed my temple and ear. It felt like somebody tried to stab my head with a white-hot fireplace poker. The room dazzled and the cacophony occasioned by our collective rambunctiousness faded into a wash of sound akin to a waltz played on a too-slow phonograph.

"One-and-two-and-three and… 'Hello, floor!'" I thought. My chest hit first, followed by my elbow, chin, and knees. One-and-two-and-three and…All the breath rushed out of me in one inarticulate gush that scattered gun smoke and dust. James screamed, panicked now, far-off sounding. The next beat was punctuated by James' weapon crashing to the floor. Two beats more and James pitched over the balcony rail. A thick crack announced the meeting of James' body and the burgundy chaise longe in the hotel lobby.

I don't know how long I lay there, half in Andres' hotel room, and half in the hall. I blinked, twitched one finger, then another. "I'd like to get up now," I wheezed. I felt pressure under my armpits and sudden light-headedness. My stomach seemed to lag behind on the floor, and I choked down bile. I was on my feet but they felt leaden. The room recrystallized around me. Tom was supporting me.

"You have to get out of here," Tom said and tugged my hat to the left. "You're bleeding good on this side. This should hide it a little." The deputy started walking me toward the stairs. "James is probably dead—I'll go see just as soon as we get you downstairs."

"Why are you helping me, Tom?"

"Because Gatoya showed us that you're innocent. James just wouldn't see it."

"Hell's bells, friend, I'm not innocent."

"You didn't kill that man in the room," Tom replied. "So, we can't get you for that."

"That much is true. I was looking for his boss, a European foreigner," I said.

We reached the lobby. Hotel patrons and staff gathered around James' still frame. Nobody paid me or Tom any mind. Tom steered me into a hallway that extended eastward, past the coat room and outside.

"I can't help with man you're looking for—we get people from all parts come through Holbrook. Maybe try the train station, if you think your man is making a run for it." Tom opened the exterior door. The wind seized the construction, slapped it into the hotel's clapboard side and pinned it there. The monsoon had lost none of its primal belligerence during my travail in La Señora. "Hard to see how anyone could make a getaway in this weather," the Indian muttered.

I turned and shook Tom's hand. "You have my gratitude, friend, and condolences for James' injuries."

Tom shrugged. "I better look in on him. Go, before the posse finds you."

While Tom headed back to the lobby, I noticed that the coat room attendant had left the door ajar. Time for a quick wardrobe change. An overcoat, hat, and ascot would serve my purposes well. I wrapped a burgundy, silk ascot around my head, concealing the wound, and topped it off with a fine, beaver bowler. Damn thing was tight and aggravated my injury. One of the overcoats in my size range looked waterproofed. I donned it and stuffed my coat and hat behind a crate in the alley before heading to Holbrook Station.

Nota bene: Finnegan Tarrega's *Dispatches from the Field* are faithfully presented by Gabriel Roark, who works as an archaeologist and cultural resources manager in California. Finnegan's exploits are fictional, albeit cast in real-world archaeological and social contexts. Representations of historic persons are attempted with the utmost respect; fictional contrivances might not fare so well. This dispatch was kindly and ably edited by E.S. Wynn (www.eswynn.com), although any shortcomings in the story are wholly my doing. Correspondence with the author may be directed to cwmag.submissions@gmail.com or gabrielroark@gmail.com.

For Further Reading

Tyler, Hamilton A. 1964. *Pueblo Gods and Myths*. University of Oklahoma, Norman.

Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne #7

Where Roleplaying Games are the ~~Centaur~~ Center of Attention

For *A Gentle Stroll* #11

Gabriel Roark
Rancho Cordova, California
gabrielroark@gmail.com

September 26, 2026

Comments on *A Gentle Stroll* #10

The Fox's Den: A Zine by N.C. Shapero for A Gentle Stroll 10: The following line on page 12 is terrific, "I'm awfully afraid that a later 'me' might be the individual tasked with serving as the *deus ex machina*; I hate to make work for myself." I also enjoyed the temporal debate between the Major & the Professor & Doctor Fox. The turnaround on Justine at the end of this chapter was humorous & excellent. Well done!

Ronin Engineer for A Gentle Stroll #10 (Jim Eckman): My thanks to you for the copy of *Wanderer*.

Wow, that is an extensive goodies list. It taught me some unfamiliar terms, such as wind fairing. On PDF page 32 of AGS, you wrote that characters will generally eat two meals per day in the field instead of three. This accords with my experience conducting archaeological fieldwork, whether surveying or excavating. The lunchtime meal, I find, is usually substituted for protein-rich snacks & water consumption. By carrying snacks rather than an extra meal, we reduce weight & bulk in our packs. Furthermore, we avoid making ourselves sick to our stomachs by having less in our bellies during our exertions, which in California are conducted in moderate heat much of the year. Maybe our minds are more on the task at hand, too, rather than our appetites. How did you arrive at the two meals instead of three business?

Regarding the digestive implant on PDF page 34, why does having a digestive implant remove taste buds? Couldn't one have a digestive implant & still retain taste buds?

There is an awkward phrasing in your description of the pressure suit. The second sentence could be construed as the pressure suit being for use inside a ship that possesses no temperature or radiation protection, but I think the sentence means that the suit itself does not offer these protections.

On PDF page 38, emergency locator transmitter is consistently abbreviated, "LET." I would think it should be "ELT", unless LET is selected as a spoken & written acronym pronounced like the work, "let."

On PDF page 43, should "Penetrating Radar" read, "Ground Penetrating Radar"?

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #10 (George Phillies): I admire your descriptions of magic use & combat in this installment of "No Tears for a Princess." The way that contact with the illusions dispelled them was an especially nice touch—I will have to use something like that at my game table! What a nasty sword Elaine picked up!

DISPATCHES FROM THE FIELD: FINNEGAN TARREGA'S UNAUTHORIZED INVESTIGATIONS INTO MATTERS ANCIENT AND ARCANE

Copyright is to Gabriel Roark for this material

Dear Readers,

For those of you who have followed my previous dispatches, you will have observed that few luxuries are afforded government agents in our country's wild Southwestern territories. In the summer of 1895, the Special Acquisitions Section (SAS) of the Smithsonian Institution had attached me as a special observer to a Bureau of American Ethnology expedition to Arizona Territory. Led by Dr. Jesse Walter Fewkes, the BAE Archeological Expedition to Tusayan (Arizona Territory) was purposed to explore ancient Hopi ruins and recover scientifically and culturally significant objects. The SAS instructed your correspondent to assist Dr. Fewkes, but also reconnoiter the region and its peoples—be they white, red, or brown—for antiquities or other phenomena that defied natural laws as we understand them.

Investigation and serendipity (if it may be so labelled) put me on the trail of one Balázs Andres, an artifact thief with whom I had tussled in Bechuanaland a few years past. Andres had stolen several katcina dolls during a multiyear sojourn on the Hopi mesas. I surmised from eldritch happenings and a Hopi doctor that Andres' perfidy succeeded in bringing the wrath of a Hopi deity upon the region of Tusayan. Your servant's last few dispatches chronicled the thief's attempts to evade justice. The present and concluding episode divulges Andres' fate, and that of Tusayan.

Yours very truly,

Finnegan Tarrega

Dispatch 6: Gatoya's Reckoning

I proceeded south toward Holbrook Station, keeping a hand on the clapboard wall of Hotel La Señora to my right, while on the left a wall of rainwater plummeted from the hotel's roof to the already soupy morass that once was a road. With each step, the supersaturated earth sloughed away from my boots, threatening to dump me into the mud. The alley emptied onto Way Street, directly across from the depot.

The station's Edisodium fixtures cast pallid, shifting globes across its red sandstone façade. A single brick chimney protruded from the corrugated steel roof. The storm resounded from the rooftop like a million pebbles poured into a tin funnel. Not a soul stirred outside Holbrook Station; the edifice stared back with three ill-lit windows. A green wooden door would give entry from this side of the station. The grounds were unfenced.

After crossing Way Street, borrowed felt bowler now a misshapen ruin plastered to my ears, I skulked to the median window. The ticketing area was empty. Moving to the door, I found it unlocked but did not enter. Instead, I circled the east end of the building passenger platform. My view was dominated by a massive five-car passenger steam locomotive. She was a beauty, one of the Atchison Topeka & Santa Fe's vaunted Illuminated Chariot passenger trains. She was painted in the colors of the canyon lands: muted cinnabar grading upward into warm ochre and radiant saffron. The passenger cars were lacquered to mimic the ultra-clean lines of the engine car. Each car boasted crystalline vista roof panels that curved to occupy a third of the cars' sidewalls. Then the train lurched forward and proceeded westward. I hopped onto the fourth car near the coupling with the caboose and let myself inside. No departures were scheduled for the night. I had no doubt that Andres was at the helm.

I was halfway to the third car and wresting the soggy, useless hat from my head when the far door opened. The doorway framed a lean man's silhouette, all suggestion of ranch hat, long coat, and shotgun. I cursed and dove under a whist table a moment before the man's long-arm roared, blowing out glass and splintering mahogany at the back of the car. The blast caught my borrowed hat in mid-air and made felt slaw of the garment. I pulled my revolver and fired a probing shot, hoping to lure the gunman into firing his second round. The gambit worked: he fired again, nearly upending the table. Cards rustled aloft and ivory whist markers tinkled and ricocheted off the wall. My assailant's feet shuffled out of view. The door clicked shut.

I rolled out into the center aisle and fired low, toward the bottom of the door's window. The slug went through and shattered the window in the rear of the next car forward as well. Andres' man flinched away from the window then turned and ran crouched toward the front of the train. I stood, tossed the pistol onto a table to the right, drew the Hydra repeater from its shoulder scabbard,

and unloaded all nine barrels into the man's back with four double taps. He had about three seconds of normal movement after the darts penetrated his coat—enough time to slap at the door handle before collapsing. I grabbed my .44 from the table and headed for the door.

Andres' goon had attempted to bar the way to the third car—the dining car—with his shotgun. The hapless amateur would have been better off just making a run for it. As it was, he gave me just enough time to bring him down. I reloaded the Hydra and pushed the sleeping thug aside with one foot. His head lolled back. Drool ran down his chin. Yeah, he would be taking a good long nap.

The train picked up speed. I moved onto the dining car coupling and unhitched it from the fourth car. The car faded into the maelstrom gloom. With any luck, the rear cars would stop safely. Plenty of opportunity for bloodshed lay ahead tonight.

I stole through the dining and forward passenger cars. Now immediately behind the engine, I took cover behind a padded bench toward the rear of the carriage and looked on with my spyglass. The engine compartment was crowded and busy. Two brawny men, already blackened with soot, shoveled coal into the fire. Left of them stood a man clad in khaki dress clothes, working the throttle. Balázs Andres. He wore a leather frame pack, which doubtless contained the stolen katcina dolls, plus another surprise or two, if I knew Andres.

I had to move fast: once Andres obtained the desired velocity, at least one of his shovel-bums would be back on watch. I stowed the spyglass and humped straight for the far door, Hydra pointed straight ahead. I pulled the door inward. A fourth heavy, previously invisible to me on account of the intervening portal, stood up as I stepped onto the coupling. We stared agape at one another, him dangling the coupling link by its chain. My perch jostled underfoot as the engine car pulled away, changing our speed. I pitched forward and caught myself by jamming my left foot onto the engine car's hitch. At the same moment, the guard swung the steel link toward my head. But the passenger car on which my right foot had been planted was falling back, stretching my legs like a wishbone and dropping my head below the thug's swing. While the heavy recovered from his exertion, I shoved off the back car's coupling with my right foot. Something tore within my inner thigh and I crumpled to the engine's rear platform, halfway on my back and left side.

"Time to say goodnight, friend!" The rain-swept gloom erupted in green and white flashes. My head rocked right then left. I turned and saw between pulsing stars the sole of a studded boot pulling back for another kick. Even in the hellish deluge, the unmistakable warm creep down my cheek told me that the kick had found my earlier gunshot wound. Weakened, I slid toward the edge of the slick platform. I lashed out with my left arm and grabbed the attacker's boot round the ankle. Off balance, he fell flat on his ass and, while it

rendered him unable to abuse me further for the moment, the fall put me further off the platform. I struggled to keep my legs aloft and lost a boot heel to a couple of jarring scrapes with the ballast and railroad ties barreling underneath the iron chariot.

The Illuminated Chariot sped its turbulent way along the track, displacing pooled water in magnificent waves to both sides of the locomotive. My foe and I scrabbled back of the engine compartment, him trying to shake me loose and maintain a purchase, me clutching his leg and clawing my way up. We hammered and thrashed, mostly striking glancing blows till I thrust a knee hard in his gonads and chopped his windpipe with the blade of my hand. I stared down at his wide and panicked eyes then pistol-whipped him in the left temple.

I was in terrible shape for another melee, let alone with three uninjured men: bludgeoned and bloody skull, bruises God knows where, a pulled muscle, and possibly a fractured heel to boot. At least I was dry from shoulder to waist. Water and blood beaded and trickled down my arm. I needed a plan to get the drop on Andres, or I would be feeding the vultures after the storm passed. I crammed the unconscious guard's ranch hat over my head, which felt none too good, then swapped coats. I scooped up the coupling link and dug in my satchel with my right hand. I had packed an Edisodium flare, Almighty be praised. I removed it and concealed most of its length in my coat sleeve. I entered the engine compartment.

Heat, blessed heat, bathed me the moment I stepped inside the cabin. I kept my head low. The shovel-bums gave uninterested looks, stooped at their labor and soaked through with perspiration. I shut the door loud behind me and stayed close to the back. Andres looked over his shoulder and asked in accented English, "Did you disconnect the passenger carriages, Emil?"

In response, I held the coupling link up by the chain and waggled it back and forth without looking up.

"Good," replied Andres. He turned back to the controls. I flicked the unlit flare underhand into the combustion chamber. The tenders stood up in surprise. Andres spun around on one heel and said, "Wait, where is Henri?!"

Before I could answer, the flare exploded inside the fuel chamber. Flames licked into the compartment and ignited the coal-tenders' clothing. I stepped to one side and drew iron on Andres. His lackeys rushed out the door to extinguish themselves, leaving behind the acrid stench of burnt cotton, flesh, and hair.

Andres' mouth was nothing more than a taut line. His eyes were the exact hue of an iceberg, devoid of all warmth.

"Mr. Tarrega—you are *such* an irritant! Why must you hound me?"

“Andres, you need to hand over the katcinas, now. You cannot begin to appreciate your peril.”

Andres shrugged, “Says the man who’s pointing a pistol at me. I think I understand my peril precisely, for I know you—and your scruples—Mr. Tarrega.”

“Do you really? I just roasted two of your men. Look, I’ve been poking around out here—mostly with the Hopi—for weeks now. The dolls that you stole…you took them during a critical ceremonial time. Your actions awakened the god Gatoya. If the Flute Society doesn’t get those katcinas back in a hurry, God knows what will happen. ”

The engine cabin boasted twin windscreens taller than a man. Our course was downhill from Holbrook, and the desert extended before the chariot’s headlamps. We hurtled toward the Leroux Wash crossing, which fed the already swollen waters of the Little Colorado River. Upstream from its confluence with the latter stream, Leroux Wash roiled in the gray night. I doubted that our train would cross the bridge before the floodwaters blew it out.

“Stop the train, Andres—we won’t make the bridge.”

Andres shook his head, “You will have to shoot me, Mr. Tarrega.

Exasperated, I marched past Andres and pulled back the throttle. He seized the opportunity to run for the door. I bolted after him. The Magyar ploughed into one of my burn victims and knocked him off the platform. The storm strangled his cry. Andres grabbed the straps of his frame pack. As I grabbed onto the pack, wooden wings and rudders unfolded from the container. A second later, we were flying up, pelted by raindrops. An electromagnetic thruster concealed in the bottom of Andres’ propulsion pack (for such it turned out to be) created a powerful thrust. Hanging from the pack, my right foot strayed into the path of the thrust. The force of it hyperextended my foot and ripped the leather boot right off. I hooked one arm around a wing and wrapped my legs around Andres’ torso to keep free of the electromagnetic pulse.

We careened northwest, it seemed, tracing an erratic path of changing pitch and horizontal trajectory. The propulsion pack seemed unable to support our combined weight for long, for we lost more altitude than we gained. In fact, we were traveling in the direction of Leroux Wash. During our approach, the writhing watercourse surged above its banks, but rather than spreading out over the floodplain, the floodwaters took on a cylindrical, vertically undulating aspect. The waters thrashed, rising sometimes to a few stories high. The spectacle was sinuous, even serpentine in semblance. Dread filled my psyche like formaldehyde in a taxidermist’s client. Still clutching one wing, I drew a bowie knife and sawed at the straps binding Andres to his pack. He strained to

pitch upward, to no avail. We hurtled nearer the supernatural wash, going into an aerial tumble after I cut the first strap.

“Au revoir, Balázs!”

I cut the second strap. Andres fell away over the wash, mouth open in a dolorous howl. The propulsion pack, free of the extra weight, resumed straight-line flight again and carried me over the surface of Leroux Wash like a skipping stone. At some point, I hit water. It felt more like being slapped by a grand piano.

***

Scrunch, scrunch, scrunch. Scrunch. Scrunch-scrunch. Something was scratching at my head. As if I needed that—I was more tenderized meat than human being. I tried to move my hand and found it difficult, weighed down. I lifted my head, breaking up the mud that had caked around me, and blinked silt from my eyes. Bella nuzzled my forehead and whinnied.

“Heh. Hey, beautiful. Give a fellow a lift?”

It must have taken half an hour to clamber onto Bella. I didn’t need a looking glass to know that I was wrecked. I had one boot, clothing that had dried brittle, no hat, innumerable injuries and cracked ribs. Andres’ pack had much to do with the fractured ribs; I was sprawled over it when I regained consciousness. The top of the propulsion pack contained a storage space. In it, I found a little food, water, and the missing katcina dolls.

The storm had abated and the sun resumed punishing the region of Tusayan. From horseback, I surveyed our surroundings. Leroux Wash had rendered the floodplain for miles around devoid of features. Tumbleweeds, sagebrush, cottonwoods, bowlders, and bridge, all were wiped clean and replaced with a homogenous sheet of silt and clay. So far as Bella and I were concerned that moment, the flood had eaten the world. I patted Bella’s neck and guided her toward the mesas.

We found Sikyatki and the Keams Canyon bivouac vacant. Bella and I passed through each of the major Hopi villages, starting with Walpi. Old Kopeli the doctor informed me that Dr. Fewkes abandoned Sikyatki following several mysterious deaths among the Anglo and Hopi excavation crews. The deceased all had asphyxiated in their sleep. Kopeli was moved when I presented him with Walpi’s katcinas. He in turn instructed me on where to return those gods that did not reside in Walpi. After returning the katcinas to their rightful guardians, Bella and I left the Hopi to their ceremonials. After an uneventful dirigible ride to Washington, I resumed the inevitable paperwork and library research that followed the more productive—or dangerous—forays into the field. On the whole, my involvement in the BAE’s archaeological expedition raised more questions than it answered. While old man Kopeli assured me that recovery of

the katcinas was sufficient to mollify Gatoya, the long-term consequences of Andres' final thievery would not be known until the next full cycle of Flute and Snake ceremonies.

Nota bene: Finnegan Tarrega's *Dispatches from the Field* are faithfully presented by Gabriel Roark, who works as an archaeologist and cultural resources manager in California. Finnegan's exploits are fictional, albeit cast in real-world archaeological and social contexts. Representations of historic persons are attempted with the utmost respect; fictional contrivances might not fare so well. Correspondence with the author may be directed to gabrielroark@gmail.com.

For Further Reading

Tyler, Hamilton A. 1964. *Pueblo Gods and Myths*. University of Oklahoma, Norman.

NEXTISH

In the next installment of Postscripts, I will write on one or more of the following:

- An overview of the RPG *Troika!*
- A review of *Lost Carcosa*, by Geoffrey McKinney
- Musings on assembling my upcoming campaign using *The Arduin Grimoire*

I am curious whether any readers or contributors prefer one of these three? I have my own reasons for suggesting each topic. Concerning *Troika*, well, it is a cool game & I think it is suited to a review of reasonable length for a zine & my time constraints. Additionally, I took the name for this zine from the game's setting. *Lost Carcosa* is a neat artifact & evocative in tone. It also will figure in my Arduin campaign. As for *The Arduin Grimoire*, David Hargrave's game is my favorite RPG. Personally, I lean toward the last option as a matter of utility. It will be some months before I have the Arduin campaign up and running (the gaming group for which it is intended is still working its way through Advanced D&D's *Temple of Elemental Evil* module) & I am sure that current & future contributors will have suggestions to improve the construction of the campaign.

Until nextish, my very best to you.

Nothing really seemed to require a comment in AGS 10 save: RAEBNC.

A Traveller[tm] Salvage Story

Prologue

Richard looked over the two spacers carefully. "What you propose is … somewhat dangerous. Just why should I want to join you in this – as you yourselves admit – somewhat hairbrained adventure?"

"What is so hairbrained about wanting to get rich?" the Vargr asked, in surprisingly unaccented Anglic.

"The basic target – getting rich – is not the hairbrained part. But you've just told me that there is a treasure that you've found and that it is ***off the tramlines***. That's the hairbrained part," Richard said.

"I see nothing hairbrained. My ship – the ***Lead Balloon –*** is a Vargr scout craft, and is capable of forming a jump point for a two-zone jump. My presence here, on Novaya Rossiya is clear evidence that my ship is not restricted to ***just*** the tramlines. Lair is "off the beaten track" as you Humans would say," the Vargr replied.

"I am well aware of the location of Lair, and in the difficulties involved in getting from Vargr extents to anywhere in Imperial space. But here in zone 1216 we have four jump points, and all of them lead to well explored systems. One even leads to the Capital, in zone 1418. We've been part of the Second Empire since the early days. Are you trying to tell me that there's something that no one has stumbled across in the Core systems in over six hundred years?" Richard asked.

"Show him the map, Fuzzy," the Human spacer suggested.

"Not unless and until he agrees to join us, Max," the Vargr said.

"Fuzzy?" Richard asked.

"A nickname – my name is rather hard for Humans to pronounce," the Vargr said. "And I really do not like the way your Human muzzles mangle the proper nasalization of several of the vowels in my name."

"Look, Academician Lewis, it's something we 'stumbled' across that's within jump-2 range of Novaya Rossiya," the Human spacer said. The Vargr glared at him. "We need him, Fuzzy, and he's not going to join us unless we give him ***something***."

"We'll offer you an equal share – one third of any profit on the expedition," Fuzzy said.

"And just how much do you project – if you're off the tramlines, your fuel expenditures will be much greater…" Richard said.

"I know, Academician. But we have scoops and processors on the ***Lead Balloon*** – she's designed as a scout ship, to explore and to go where none of the People have gone before," Fuzzy said.

"And we have a map that you can see – it shows roughly where the artifact is," Max said.

"If you agree to join us, for an equal share of any profits," Fuzzy said.

"So, what would I provide that is worth the loss of a sixth of each of your profits? If you've found something, and you know where it is, just why would you want me to join your exploration group?"

"You're a Xenoarcheologist and at the same time, your lecturer contract expires in two eight-days. You'll be required to vacate your university housing – though as I understand it, you'll be given an extra four eight-days to find alternative housing here in Landing. And if you can come up with first and last season's rent, along with a season's rent as security deposit…" Fuzzy said, stopping and staring down the length of his lowered muzzle at Richard Lewis.

"And I'm a poor lecturer, with enough cash to cover perhaps a single season's rent here in Landing. So, I take your offer and join you or I get to head back home to Walter's Ridge in the Outback. I'll admit – you have done your research," Richard said.

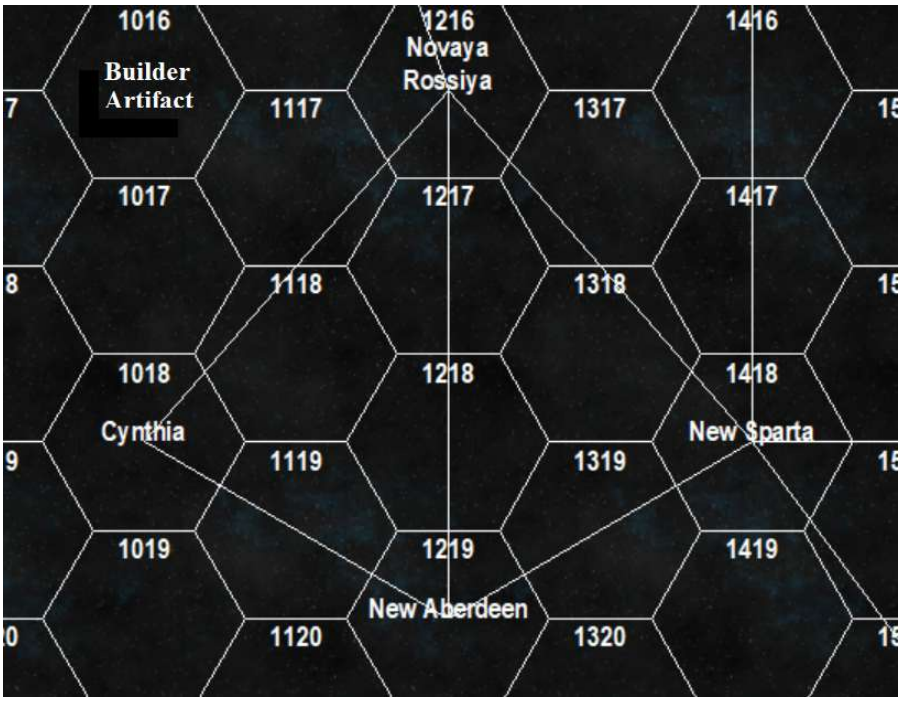
"We're offering you a job, Academician Lewis," Fuzzy said. "And fair pay. Worst case? You can count on room and board while we're on expedition, and who knows? You might get a paper out of it – and that might help you get another Lecturer contract."

"You know more about me than I do about you. But I'll agree to join you – as long as this little 'trip' is properly licensed and authorized by the Empire," Richard said.

Fuzzy laughed. "Show him the paperwork, Max," he said.

Max pulled a data crystal out of a pocket and handed it to Richard Lewis. "Read," he said.

Richard popped the data crystal into the reader on his desk, set it for personal file access only, and read the contained information. A few minutes later, he grinned at his fellow Human, and smiled a lip-covered smile at the Vargr, Fuzzy. "I think this is the beginning of a wonderful friendship," he said.



First Steps

"Ok, Max, how long to the derelict?"

"If I read these instruments correctly…"

"I thought you *understood* Arrghoun, Max?"

"I understand ***conversational*** Arrghoun. But these instruments are labeled in technical Arrghoun," Max reached down and picked up a thick binder. "So, I need to consult my technical Arrghoun-Anglic dictionary."

"I keep wondering why in the pluperfect subjunctive you can't do it once, and tape over the instrument markings…"

"Oh, that would go over ***really*** well with our 'little' Vargr associate, 'Fuzzy'."

"He has a ***Vargr*** name, Max. And ***he*** speaks Anglic well enough. And this bucket of bolts ***is*** his ship, in some sense."

"Yeah, but he hates having his name mispronounced. When he and I teamed up, he insisted that I call him 'Fuzzy'. Could have been worse."

Richard shook his head; some things just had to be accepted. "Ok, I know you two have been knocking around for the last, what, five years now? And I'm the newbie."

"And you're appreciated, Richard. But getting back to business, we're still a good six standard hours from rendezvous with the derelict."

"So, I can catch a meal and a short nap?"

"No problem. Just stay away from the kibble."

Richard shook my head again. "I know, I know, he actually likes that stuff. Why, I will ***never*** understand."

"Just think of it as a fortuitous circumstance. It costs less than a quarter what it would cost to feed Fuzzy an all-meat diet."

Richard headed for my hammock. *Food later, some sleep first*.

#

"And there she is, Richard," Max said, bringing up the visual display.

"I thought it was going to be something smaller…" Richard said. *That thing isn't a ship; it's a bloody moon.*

A heavy furred hand settled on my shoulder. "Dick, it's a ***find*** is it not?" Fuzzy said.

"A thousand klick diameter find. If we can't find ***something*** to salvage in this monster, I will eat my shorts."

"With or without salt?" Fuzzy asked.

"Hey, is that a docking bay?" Richard interrupted, directing his partners' attention back to the display.

"Looks like it. It looks to be open, and it's big enough to hold a battleship," Max said.

"So, you should have no problem moving our little scout in and settling it in," Fuzzy said, grinning, his tongue hanging out.

Entry into what?

As Max maneuvered the old Vargr scoutship into what was an obvious hanger bay, there was a moment when the bow crossed into the bay and was suddenly pulled down. Richard started to warn him, but Max corrected almost out of habit. "What was that?"

"Grav plates here still active," Max replied.

*Operational grav plates on a derelict? Now **that** was something new*, Richard thought.

"Someone built well, I would say," Fuzzy commented.

Max finished maneuvering the ***Lead Balloon*** into the hanger and settled it on the decking, then shut off the internal grav plating. "Ooof! The people that built this monster must be from a high-Gee world," he said.

"I can tell," Richard said. "What's the reading?"

"Just a bit under 1.5 standard gees," Fuzzy said. "Hold…1.48 gees on the button."

"I didn't think that even the old War Worlds were that high-gee," Max said. "So, we've found another race?"

"Not necessarily, Max. Zhukov had a surface acceleration of 1.52 standard gees, and Saint Ekaterina wasn't far behind, with 1.39 gees. Hell, Sauron was close to 1.46 gees before it was glassed back at the end of the First Empire," Richard said.

"Ok, so we might have found an Old Yarthe battle station," Max said.

"Don't hypothesize in advance of conclusive evidence, Max," Richard said.

Fuzzy made a "huffing" sound – Vargr laughter. "Perhaps we should venture outside and find out a bit more before you draw ***your*** conclusions, Dick. That is, after all, why we added a sapientologist with your unique hobbies."

Richard looked down and shook his head. "Xenoarcheology and history are part of the package. 'Those who will not learn from history are doomed to repeat it,' as a wise man once said back on Yarthe. I'll break out the suits and we can start our pillaging."

"Just remember the proper order," Fuzzy said.

"Got it, Fuzzy," Max said. "Kill the men, rape the women, loot then burn the village, ***and get it right this time!***"

Richard sighed, and headed for the suit lockers, followed by the Vargr and the human pilot.

What Have We Here?

The Vargr, Fuzzy, was the first one out of the airlock; he scanned the immediate area of the airlock and checked with his hand scanner for any active electronics. "It looks clear, gentlemen – but be careful!" he said, swinging out of the airlock and clambering down the ladder to the derelict's hanger deck.

Next, Max slid down the ladder and jumped off at the end, going down to a crouch to absorb the shock of landing. He unlimbered his rifle and repeated the Vargr's sweep of the hanger. "Ok, Richard, you're next."

The sapientologist was a bit more careful in his exit than their pilot, taking his time. "High gee does not suit me all that well – I do not need a sprained ankle, let alone a bone break."

"Suit yourself, Richard," Max said, continuing his scan.

"Ok, Fuzzy," Richard said, once he was down on the deck, "what's your scan indicate?"

"Nonsense, Richard," Fuzzy said, looking down at his scanner and shaking his head. "It makes no sense – but my suit's 'feel' backs up my readings."

"Don't keep us in suspense, then," Max said. "What are the readings?"

"According to my readings, there's air in this hanger – pressure is roughly 1100 mm Hg. Hold on…1102 mm Hg, or roughly 1.45 atmospheres. Constituents – Nitrogen, Oxygen, assorted other non-toxic gases. P O_2 inspired is practically Yarthe normal – breathable, with a filter mask. There's a bit too much ozone for comfort." The Vargr pointed at the open hanger bay, and the black star speckled space beyond. "I see no barrier."

"But your instrument says, 'breathable air'. Trust physics, until proven otherwise, Fuzzy," Richard said.

"As I said earlier – these readings are nonsense. But my suit is loose – even clinging in spots, as if collapsed by higher external pressure."

Max unslung a safety tether, launched himself up the ladder, and connected it to a recessed safety bolt on the scout ship hull. And jumped back to the decking.

"Ouch!" Richard said. I will ***never*** get used to your stunts, Max,"

"Working out in a 2-gee gym comes in handy. Now, get out of the way. Fuzzy? Hand me your scanner," Max said. Taking the scanner, he unrolled the tether until he was at the edge of the hanger bay entry. "Still reading pressure." He then stretched his arm out and stopped as he reached the plane of the entryway. He grunted, and managed to push on. "Ok, there's ***something*** here – I have to really push ***hard*** to get my hand past it. Seems about twenty or thirty centimeters thick,"

"I am not entirely pleased with this – it could be some form of illusion," Fuzzy said.

"The scanner is showing hard vac on the far side of this … whatever it is. Fuzzy, pull me back, I'm not sure I can drag my arm back myself. Richard? Help him if he needs it," Max said.

A minute later, Max was back with his companions, and the tether detached from the scoutship and recoiled at his side. "Now ***that*** was interesting. Suggestions?"

"I'll go back into the ship, and bring out a bowl filled with water. If it boils, then we have proof that we're being hocused somehow," Richard said.

"Good idea. Trust but verify," Fuzzy said.

A minute later, Richard returned, with a bowl of water, sloshing about but visibly not boiling.

"One more test," Fuzzy said, and opened his suit helmet. "Fah! The air stinks of ozone. Bringing up my filter mask."

"At least we can save on suit resources," Max said, and duplicated the Vargr's actions. The two experienced salvage experts paused for a long ten count, and looked pointedly at Richard. "We're waiting, Richard."

Richard sighed, triggered the filter mask in his helmet, then cracked the seal after shutting down the suit air flow. "Fine. The newbie is just a bit more cautious than you two experienced gentlemen," he said.

Fuzzy reached out and patted Richard's back. "We still love you, Dick."

"Now, next step, since this bay seems to be empty save for us, I suggest we find a lock, or a hatch, to get into the rest of this ship," Max said.

It's going to be a long day, Richard thought. But best to make haste slowly.

Through the Looking Glass

"Found it!" Max called out, and his partners gathered round. "You can barely see the join, here, but it looks like we've got a panel here – and what looks like what might be a hatch or a vault door."

"And all we have to do is figure out how to open the door – though that panel is suggestive. Three 'lights' – one yellow, one green, and one blue," Furry said. The three lights were arranged vertically.

"They look like they could be buttons. And they're still lit," Richard said. "Anyone mind if I do a bit of experimenting?"

Max shrugged, and the Vargr, Fuzzy, laughed his huffing Vargr laugh. "Lay on McDuff, and 'cursed be he that first cries, hold, enough!" Max said.

Richard took a deep breath, and pressed on the top light, the yellow one. The door dilated, and Richard stuck his head into the exposed chamber. "Room enough for the three of us, if you don't mind rubbing shoulders," he said.

The two salvage experts crowded in. There was another panel, much like the first, and Richard pressed on the green button. Nothing happened. "Ok, let's try this one," Richard said, and pressed the blue button; the door they'd entered through closed, leaving them "boxed in".

"This is another fine mess you've gotten me in," Fuzzy said.

"Relax. Likely an airlock. I'll try the yellow button again…" and another door opened, allowing them access into a complex of corridors, buildings and high ceilings. And lit by sources resembling nothing so much as carbon-arc floodlights in the high ceilings.

"Seal your suits!" Fuzzy called out, closing his faceplate and triggering the polarizing feature to reduce the glare. "UV count way up – spectral analysis in a bit."

"Ouch!" Richard called out. "Comm check – do you copy!"

"Five by five, Richard" Max called out, quickly echoed by Fuzzy a moment later.

"What's the spectrum, Fuzzy?" Richard asked.

"High in the UV end of the spectrum. Primary emission line is in the Helium vapor blue line. Whoever built this station did ***not*** come from a G-type main sequence star. I'll have a rough match in a minute. Wait," Fuzzy replied.

Make haste slowly, Richard thought, taking several deep calming breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth. *Almost half again a standard gee in their equivalent of grav plating, daylight from a star brighter than Sol. Yup. Definitely "other"*.

"Spectrum consistent with a mid-to-late F star – say F5v to F7v or F8v. If we wear eye protection and if you Humans smear on some sunscreen, we should be able to survive."

"And you?" Richard asked.

"I've got nice thick fur protecting my sensitive skin," Fuzzy said. "And ***that*** is just one more reason that I keep the ***Lead Balloon's*** thermostat set as low as I do."

"Right – to keep your thick winter pelt. There are times that I envy you," Richard said.

"The next time we have to stop at that jungle world – what was its name, again? – Richard, you'll get to take Fuzzy's place. And you'll do it in your shorts. Thirty-five degrees and seventy-five to eighty percent humidity. Being able to sweat has some advantages," Max said.

"We each have our advantages – and disadvantages. Your strengths balance my weaknesses and vice versa," Fuzzy said. "You'll learn, Richard."

"And speaking of strengths, where do we go now, Mister Sapientologist-and-Xenoarcheologist?" Max asked.

"First, look around," Richard said, surveilling the local structures. Many showed signs of battle damage: scorch marks as if from flamethrowers, pock marks as if from bullet hits, and other things. "Over there," he said, pointing at what looked like an improvised pillbox – or a pillow fort. It was set in the middle of an intersection between three different corridors, only a few dozen meters away from the hanger access doors. The three reached it in only a few seconds, being careful to scan down each of the corridors as they did.

"Can't see a way in," Fuzzy said.

Richard looked into one of the slots. "Just look here," he said, pointing a flashlight into the "pill-box". Bones – from several skeletons. "Do those look like your people, Fuzzy?" he asked.

Fuzzy looked in and examined the bones and scattered skulls and fragments as best he could. "If they are, they're adolescents – they're shorter than adults. Can't be sure unless I get a closer look. But the configuration is similar, at least. Could be some breed I'm not too familiar with," he said.

The investigation of the pillbox was halted prematurely by a shout from Max. "Over here, folks! ***Motherlode!***" he shouted, and waved them in the direction of one of the buildings. Through a doorway blocked only by a series of bead strings hanging from the arch of the doorway, assorted artworks were visible.

"At least it's darker in here," Max said, as he stepped in to the first open room. Richard followed him, ducking to avoid hitting his head on the top of the door frame.

"Our bogies had to be shorter than me," Richard said.

"At 195 centimeters tall, Richard, a good fraction of ***humanity*** is shorter than you. But I take your point. Height estimate?" Max said.

"If they're like us, I'd guess somewhere between 140 and 170 centimeters – high end assumed they don't mind brushing the tops of their heads against the arch of the door frame," Richard said.

Fuzzy edged into the room past Richard and stopped. "Darker, several statues, what looks to be several oils – we should be able to guess how old they are, shouldn't we, Richard?"

"If I get them back to the ship, yes," Richard said.

"We should be able to sell this one, at the very least, for a small fortune," Max said, as he reached out to pick up what looked to be an alien pieta. And fell, as if struck by lightning. Fuzzy jumped over and caught the statuette as it fell from Max's grasp, and before it could hit the "floor". Richard moved as fast as he could, and managed to catch Max before that individual had a hard collision with the floor/decking, and eased him down.

"Max, you idiot!" Richard cursed. The pilot had removed one glove and touched the statuette before collapsing. He glanced over at Fuzzy, who was still fully suited up. "Don't touch the statuette directly – it might be booby trapped," he said, nodding at Max's exposed hand. "Mister 'Touchy-feelie' may have gotten himself in some serious trouble, here."

Max chose this moment to open his eyes, and utter a single, heartfelt, "damn!" He shook his head, as if to clear it of fog. "Have you ever seen one of those 'touch-sculptures' that have been on display in the Capital?"

"Is it like those? What does this one do? How do you feel?" Richard asked.

"Like I've been hit by a shock-stick. This statuette packs one heck of a punch. It isn't just a sad image – it tells a story."

"All art does that, Max. What's special – dare I ask?"

"Whatever these beings were, they weren't Vargr. Not unless Vargr were telepaths back when this station was built," Max said.

Fuzzy shook his head. "Not in recorded history have we had more than a few teeps."

"It generates a little movie – all in your head. It's like a brain-tape. I can tell you what I 'saw', but unless you want to try it yourself, you'll have to trust me that I'm not just spoofing you."

What Max "Saw"

You are a quite entertaining bit of man-flesh, hengocha, the soldier 'cast. *Not to mention being one with a quite pleasantly plush brush and pelt. How do you manage to keep it so … full?* she asked.

The hengocha bowed his head to his customer of the moment. "This one pays for the reduced temperatures in his quarters. That way, this one keeps his fur at winter's length all year round. It is a simple matter…"

The soldier laughed, and leaned back on the couch. "A simple method – and I thought that it would involve some incredibly expensive salves and creams, herbal and vitamin infusions," the soldier said.

The hengocha giggled and wiggled his brush; the bells woven into his fur chimed. The chimes faded, as the alarm bells began to sound over hidden wall speakers.

"I must go," the soldier said, as she gathered up her things. "There are … problems."

#

It seemed as though only a few moments passed, but clearly it had been several hours at the least, perhaps several days. There was a smell of burned flesh in the air, mingled with the scents of burning wood and decay. A fine gray dust hung in the air, and the sound of ticking, as if from some gigantic clockwork timer. The soldier staggered from one room to the next; a severed hand in one, a tail in another, a head without a hat in a third. It was all some mad kaleidoscope image of body parts and blood. She looked down on her hands; they were drenched in blood, not all of it from others' bodies. There was a buzzing in her ears, a ringing that would not stop.

She staggered past a half-burned corpse, noting that someone – or something – had been gnawing at its innards. She took the last few steps to the hengocha's cabin; the door had been battered down, not burned as many others had been. She gripped the frame and dragged herself in, looking, hoping. The privacy beads were down, torn from their mountings in the ceiling and thrown about carelessly; green, gold and black beads littered the floor. A moan from the hengocha's sleeping room drew her onwards. "T'I'Chao, I came back…" she began, then she saw what there was left of the other.

She kneeled down, and picked up the male; he'd always seemed so heavy, his muscles so well toned; now he was limp, dead weight in her arms. The eyes that had seemed so alive just … was it only a few hours earlier, or was it days? … now, empty, unseeing. The spun platinum of his fur now dark and matted with blood and … other things. She stood, the hengocha in her arms, and turned at that insistent clockwork sound. A moment to see the metallic quadrupeds entering the *hengocha's* quarters behind her. *Trackers,* she thought, in the moment before they opened their muzzles and leapt…

Once More into the Breech

Fuzzy looked over the load of treasures now carefully packed into the cargo bay of the ***Lead Balloon*****.** "Richard, what do you think this load of statues and paintings will bring us, when we get it back to civilization?"

Richard shook his head. "I can't put a precise price on these artifacts. The Imperial Institute of Xenoarcheology is going to want a few for study – and as their 'cut' for not seizing the entire find. That statuette," he said, pointing at the one artifact not yet packed away, "could go for anything from a few thousand to a few million credits on the market – depending upon which company handles the auction, and which nobles take a shine to this find."

"Max seemed to find it quite … 'interesting'," Fuzzy said.

"Yes, and Max is still recovering from the contact. He'll need to speak with the brainbow boys when we get back."

"I'm curious to see what Max saw," Fuzzy said.

"Ah…I don't think that's a good idea. Max can still handle navigation, but … he found it a bit … disturbing. The People who made that statuette are a heck of a lot different from humans."

"But from what he described, and what we can see from the statuette, they weren't all that dissimilar from my people. Oh, they're thinner, a bit shorter, and close to what you humans call the 'uncanny valley', but they're still … strangely attractive."

"Like elves," Richard said.

"Yes, strange beings that resemble 'people', but are not ***quite*** people. I cannot help but wonder what ***I*** might 'see' in this statuette's story."

"Well, I'll catch you if you fall. But I'd appreciate it if you'd sit down and just reach out and touch that thing rather than try to hold it up."

"Yes, wouldn't help to 'break' it, just to satisfy my curiosity."

"So, you're demonstrating 'monkey curiosity'?"

Fuzzy made the huffing Vargr laughter, as he settled down next to the crate of packaged paintings that the statuette was resting atop. "How old did you say this art is?"

"At least six hundred standard years, plus or minus a hundred years. No chance I can convince you not to do this?"

"Sorry, Richard. I think I'd ***really*** like to see…"

Richard settled down behind the Vargr, ready to grab hold. Fuzzy reached out one hand and stroked the statuette with the back of one hand; he barked, once, and collapsed. Richard caught him before he could hit the decking. A long ten count later, Fuzzy opened his eyes and shook himself, a shake that started at the head and worked its way down his body and ended with a snap of his tail that slapped his brush across Richard's chest.

"Whew! A ***nasty*** one," Fuzzy said, sitting up and moving away but turning back towards Richard. "I saw what Max described, but there was another … story … another 'tale' if you will, behind or beneath what he saw. An unsettling story…"

What Fuzzy "Saw"

There was no escaping the graying, darkening, debilitating miasma of despair intertwined with fear. Hopelessness pervaded the atmosphere, the ground, the skin and bodies and minds of all who were not insane or un-sane, all those condemned to exist as inhabitants of the camp. The dragging, endless, senseless cycle of time and the certainty of the final ending – alone and abandoned and hated, hated, hated to the final darkness and solitude of brain-death.

There were fitful sparks of other feelings – a scattered twisting of anger, spikes of fear, or waves of sorrow. Hunger and cold and the privation of having all of one's cultured, gentler, lighter feelings ripped away were constants of this existence, from the first consciousness of the sunset in the evening to the final ebbing into the sleep of the day. Each time the latter happened, there was the knowledge that this could be the final sleep. For any or for no reason – death could come as easily from within, or amongst, the inmates as it could come from those guarding the camp.

Red-and-white outside, grey-and-silver inside, nine and one, one and nine. The same shape, virtually the same range of heights and builds, the same mix of features and pelt patterns and body lines – echoes of each other, captors and captives, Altha'ani and Shidran-kas, victors and vanquished in the religious war that wrapped the two cultures around and about each other in a death-grip.

Here, there was no hope, however fantastic, of escape, rescue or vengeance. This was the place of beginnings. This world, rebuilt millennia ago out of the ashes of that final rebellion, was the core and strength of the militaristic hegemony based hereon. There is no place to hide.

Here there would only be hunger, privation, misery, sorrow, and death. Even should the very last of the camp's current inhabitants die off, more would be shipped in – the population was always

in flux, always strongly negative, yet forever replenished by the captures of the Homeships. The Lost Ships. Whose inhabitants joined the endless stream of the dying, of the Lost Ones.

Cold. Wind. Misery. Keeping the brush up and fluffed, close-wrapped to torso to minimize radiative loss, burned too much energy, tiring one further. Letting the brush droop or drag, saved that fraction of muscular exertion, but exposed the torso. Those who could not lift their brush, were on the negative path; in forty days, their spirit would move on. Those who could not walk, were further down the path; they had twenty days. Those who could not sit up, had eight. Those who could not lift their heads, had four. Those who could not turn their heads, had two. Those who could not close their eyes, would be dead by the next dawning. All around the camp, every morning, the bodies of the latter would be dragged out, to be put into the dead-cart. Every day one saw a familiar face already present in the cart, cold, still, uncaring, and gone.

Follow the cart. Barrack after barrack, row after row, unchanging, undifferentiated, unappealing and unwholesome. One the one side, the simplest of shelters, a planar rectangle, a rectangular polyhedron; on the other – the triple lines that barred the inhabitants within.

The first line was suspended on knee-high posts, arbitrarily separating the walking zone from the "kill zone". Cross the first line without express order to do so from a guard, and guards would shoot – and the nanoweapons hidden in the air and soil would attack. If a guard ordered an inmate to cross the line, the inmate's only certainty was that the nanoweapons there would – at least temporarily – refrain from disassembling the inmate.

The second line was a grid of wires, two body-lengths beyond the first wire, that reached two-and-a-half body-heights above the surface, and a half-body-height below the surface. Distort any of the wires enough to change the inductance, and the alarms would sound and turret mounted blasters would fire. If there was nothing at the aim point to absorb the shot, it would continue until it struck – the ground, a building wall, or an inmate standing in the line of fire. For some it would be the right line – their agony would end in a hellish blaze of heat and light. For some it would not matter; their minds had already have vanished, leaving only the physical shell behind. A very, very few would only be wounded – and left to live further or die as their fate and limited, challenged, endurance might allow.

The third line was a dozen body-lengths further out. It was another grid, the one on which incorporated the automated towers, the gates and servos, and the single sign at the one entrance, giving the name of the camp and the credo that sent the inhabitants within: "Service to the State Grants Freedom". A slogan that could only be read backwards from within, a slogan aimed at the guards and those from whom they were drawn, from whom the impetus to place the inhabitants in the camps supposedly came. The citizenry, the Altha'ani people – the mirrored dupes and doubles of those that they held within the camps.

The third line and the towers also held the mindscreen generators that shielded those inside from the awareness of those outside the camp. They were serviced religiously by *V'es Cha* engineers and technicians, to ensure that no wrongful thought, no conscience-pricking awareness or questioning, might ever reach outside the confines of the facility.

The dead cart took the bodies to the processing facility. The clothing – rags, mostly, only marginally more covering in the depths of winter than in the height of summer – would be stripped off each corpse, if the other inmates had not already provided that service. Most of the corpses went out naked, with thinned or even missing fur – some inmates wore multiple pelts not their own, for

the extra insulation and protection against the world. Inadequate food, along with the stress of the camp and its privations, thinned each inmate's pelt to the point where it could take the full pelt from three of the prisoners to match the normal density and coverage of a single healthy Free Person. It did not matter whether the fur was silver, red, black, white, or any other color (chiefly grey, faded from missing nutrients); anything that could help trap the air in layers kept one that much better insulated. From the winter, from the breeze, from the weather, and even from one's own reality. There were some inhabitants who bore the scents of dozens of their fellows, in a constantly-changing potpourri of predation.

The wanderer looked down at his own pelt; it was still a normal thickness, though only the thickness of a summer pelt, rather than the fullness of a winter pelt that would better fit with the current season and temperature. He licked his lips, and shuddered. The food that meant the difference between life and death could be bought – but at a price; the touch of hostile hands-on private places, his tongue along the underside of guards' brushes, and … other places. He shook his head, as if to shake the memories from his mind as he tried to shake parasites from his thinning fur. He was not proud – pride was the first casualty of the camps, the first loss. He was nothing; and even if the Priestesses were right, and there were other lives to be lived, he begged Istiru for a sign that there might be something better than *this*, a 'life lesson' that he might carry forward that might be better than "survive at any price".

Leave the dead cart with its emptied surface, its load being turned into nutrients, ash, chemicals, and forgetfulness. Names were forbidden, family and clan marks were death – to name one's clan was to bring a visit of the butchers – ranks and Guild-titles and all former denotations of uniqueness, value, or preference, were forbidden. Each inhabitant was simply 'Penitent', followed by one's number. There was no further treatment for the spirit, for the entire purpose of this camp, of all its like facilities, was to torment and terrify; it was to break the spirit of a people and of all those who passed through the camps and survived. By the design, expectation, demand, and assertive claim, the product of the camp was to be a newborn Altha'ani, a new vessel to be filled with hatred and superiority and the denial of all continuing acknowledgement of past kinship or it was to be a corpse.

Circle the camp. See the sunken-in eyes, count the parallel ribs, the protruding vertebrae, the bone-thin, stick figures with their papery, failing pelts. In two entire rounds, count only two guards outside either the gate space or the interior of the towers – two guards in full adaptive camouflage, pulling some hapless 'penitent' out of the compound for 'questioning'. Watch their casual brutality, feel the echoes of fear and hatred and sick despair that surrounded them even as the shipborne inmates draw away, lest they, too, be attacked by their 'protectors'.

On each circuit one wades through a morass of regrets, despair, boredom, apathy, indifference, and hopelessness. There is no purpose to this existence – or, rather, the only purpose that the captors wish for their captives, is the death of self – a step in the rebirth of one of the Shidran-kas as an Altha'ani, or a step towards death of the body to match the mind. One more victory of groundling over shipborne, in a war that has gone on for generations almost without number. The Shidran-kas' crimes? Existence, self-defense, defiance of 'legitimate' authority.

Hot flash of hatred – do not turn the head. Do not tense up. Do not shift one's glance, alter one's step, even change the lay of one's whiskers. Make no motion, gesture, or other signal that can draw a guard's attention to you. To draw such attention is to risk death. For existing and taking up resources; for being a 'race-traitor', for being 'ktao-re-ir shirona'. The memories of others – so

many others – for whom death became release flash to mind; discipline fails on a terribly low-protein diet, and the Eight-Fold Walls of Self crumble, and a cascade of memories rip through the wanderer's mind.

The notice ebbs, the hatred flows and moves away. All around can track the guard's attention simply by the hesitations, halts, slowing of the circulation of movement of the other inhabitants further around the external circuit—

A blaze of light, the roar of thunder; the 'penitents' within earshot or sight drop to the ground and lie still; too often, one blaster-bolt is followed by a second, or a third and a score of bodies flash into a bloody mist, not even sufficient remains for a communal grave – a 'lesson learned': do not draw attention, and do not be noticed.

But not here, not now, not this time. One body only lies on the ground unmoving. The guard shouts angrily and four 'penitents' form a circle carry, while a fifth and sixth go to fetch a death-cart. The guard shepherds them along, watching them, following them. This time the Huntress stalked another – this is surely the favored preserve of the Chooser-of-the-Dead.

Muscles shake from exhaustion and stress hormones, and the wandering 'penitent' rises to his feet; he continues shuffling around the camp. It is wandering that is pointless, if not aimless; fruitless, if not purposeful. Here and there are brighter flickers, most within the barracks but some shuffling along amongst and between them. Those are the mad, the insane – the ones dead in mind and spirit, yet who are strong enough in body to last weeks or possibly years. They are the ones constrained by their fellows to their own individual beds, suffering the horrors of enlarged and no longer constrainable negative emotions. Some for their own protection, some for the protection of the other inmates – for it is not unknown for an inmate to snap and attempt to attack a guard, uncaring of how many or what lines, of sanity or safety, must be overwhelmed in a single and guaranteed final rush. Some, because there is a fellow or a (forbidden!) kin-fellow who either believes or simply cannot accept all lack of hope. If all that can be hoped for is a few more conversations, another known entity to share this withering experience with a few more days or weeks or seasons or years.

Eight-squared eight-days, more than three seasons, the wanderer has seen come and go in this camp. The remnants of two-eights Homeships have come and gone, while he remains; his metabolism is that much more frugal and efficient, his ability to mute the draining extremes of emotions marginally better developed – he has remained, while others have fallen by the wayside. *There, but for the mercy of the Huntress and Istiru's aid, go I*, he thinks, as he watches the death-cart pass him by again. *But the slope is negative – the final intercept delayed, but it will come. There must be another way out than the Forge*.

He remembers, on this dragging round of pacing, the names of others, their ships, their clans. He dared not speak them, nor 'cast them to others for fear that the ever-present guards and the (sometime) present mind-hunters might catch a forbidden word or thought.

Each year they empty out one barracks in four. The empty barracks are made target for the nano-weapons – they crumble into dust, along with the inevitable missed corpse in some hidey-hole. And in a ***san***, the barracks are reborn from the ashes, rebuilt by the same sort of nanodevices that dissolved them earlier. Nothing is permanent, nothing lasts. There is no record, save in the mind; and in the minds of too many, the records vanish with the mind that made them.

He keeps shuffling around the camp, but notices a change; one of the guards – a new one? – wears a different uniform, devoid of insignia, devoid of any markings save those of clan and pack. A

black sword, blacker blood. The usual swagger of the guards is missing from this one; she strides with the walk of a conqueror, self-assured to the point of arrogance and beyond, to the calm assumption of absolute superiority, lacking any requirement to prove her power, her superiority.

Aftermath

"And that, Richard, is what I 'saw'," Fuzzy said, and swallowed back stomach acid. "These 'Free People' have more than one 'super-pack'. And there are some deep hatreds between the factions."

"So, like pack politics among your people?"

Fuzzy shuddered. "Worse, much worse. The nearest equivalent would be something that I read about on Yarthe, pre-space flight."

"Oh? The Second Century purges? The chaos after the Nukewar?"

"Earlier – your 'Second World War'. The Death Camps."

"Ok, that's getting pretty grim. But that raises a question: why did you get this second story and Max didn't?"

"I think that I'm closer to the People that made this," Fuzzy said, pointing at the statuette. "And Max is too 'nice' a person – he thinks that everyone, given the opportunity, will be his 'best buddy'."

"Whereas you…"

"Do not believe in trusting first."

"Trust, but verify?"

"We understand each other, Richard. Max saved me from a lynch mob – and risked his life doing so. I ***know*** that I can trust him. And you jumped in and took my side in that bar fight."

"Hey, there were three of them and one of you – I didn't think it was fair…"

"And that's another reason I like you, Richard. You have that odd Human desire to 'play fair'. They made such satisfying 'thuds' after you brought down those stools on their heads."

"Well, they were ganging up on you…"

"And it wasn't 'fair'. I think that we want to pay off the Institute with that statuette. It will get us more than just credits, I think."

"Having a chip from one of the Families? You understand us better than you sometimes let on, 'Fuzzy'," Richard said.

Interlude

Personal Log, Richard Lewis, Tenmonth 15, 2105 AE

It's been a dull and relatively unprofitable four days since our little art "heist", and both Max and Fuzzy have recovered from their little "mind-tape" experiences. After our success in what appears to have been an artists' commune section of this station, we hit a dry spell. Yes, the artwork that we've acquired or, as Max called it, "five-finger requisitioned", will likely pay the cost of this expedition at least five times over. I have refrained from touching any of the more "unusual"

statues, and we've all been wearing suits and packing the artwork in insulated cases. But I had hoped for more. And we did find a few "minor" items.

We found, after going down interminable sets of stairs, and burning through some rather obstinate barriers, what I can only describe as an industrial production zone. The people who built this station seemed to have abandoned their usual tendency towards roughly human scale rooms and corridors. The rooms were are built on a scale for giants – the typical ceiling height was nearly twenty meters, the corridors are typically ten meters wide, and there were chambers that were nearly a hundred meters high and three hundred meters wide and long.

And the giant chambers weren't empty, but the equipment – likely including some advanced form of multifab units – was systematically destroyed. The damage wasn't massive, but it was widespread. Each manufacturing unit – each component – seems to have been damaged by either explosives or some form of directed energy weapon. And the damaged or destroyed components are from the same part of each device – presumably something critical to the operation of the units in question. Someone made it difficult – bordering on impossible – to salvage even one operational unit through scavenging parts from other units. While the technology looks as though it might have been superior to current Imperial technology, the sabotage carried out has rendered any salvage of industrial technology virtually impossible – at least from this one industrial district.

It is almost as though someone had gone through the area and made sure that nothing could be made to work, nothing could be salvaged. The destruction seems far too selective and far too complete to have been the result of simple battle damage. Someone went to a great deal of effort to strike at specific locations on all of the equipment here; it was likely carried out with malice.

There are … parts … of what look like spacecraft in one of the larger open spaces – a chamber that resembles nothing so much as a shipyard in its layout. One of the larger chambers, and also one of the more carefully and selectively vandalized ones.

The district still has functioning life support and artificial gravity; once again, it is demonstrated that whatever else the builders might have been, they were outstanding engineers.

Personal Log, Richard Lewis, Tenmonth 18, 2105 AE

Today, we hit the motherlode – not of riches, I will admit, at least not directly. But we found our Rosetta Stone to help understand the Builder's language.

We had one false start – we stumbled into what might be described as a "toy" store. Dildoes, erotic sculptures and the like; whatever powders and oils there might have been, all were long decayed. What books were present seemed to have been more pillow books than any other Imperial analog. They were illustrated, and we gathered up all the books we could find – every bit of information is important, after all, and found a store of data crystals – or what we supposed to be data crystals. The analysis we will leave for later – the Institute may have someone (or more likely several someones) able to "crack" whatever data encoding system these crystals use – but that will have to wait on our return to familiar territory. The pictures attached to each crystal hinted at their contents, and we may someday be able to read them. But not today, or tomorrow.

But it was a "real" toy store where we found our Rosetta stone. Children's books. Four dozen different children's books. The Builder's equivalent of "See Spot Run, Run Spot Run". A touch, and the books open; touch a symbol, and the 'book' generates a sound, and an image appears. I've already identified several nouns, and we have strong evidence as to the meaning of half a dozen verbs.

I've already cataloged some 9600 ideographs in the books – there is a roughly 20% overlap across the books, so we'll have a good chance of determining the meaning of some 7680 different ideographs. From what I've been able to tell, from looking at other books that we've found (in what I can only describe as an old-style library with print-on-flimsies) there are at least sixty thousand ideographs in the Builder's language. But we have the most important part of the language – and the thought processes of the Builders – those concepts and words that the Builders wanted to transmit to their young. We have the ideographs that these people think are the fundamental building blocks for their next generation. The cues for structure, ethics, values, norms…it's truly amazing. I know what the symbol for "hunt" – "aka" – is. It is amazing the feeling of power that it gives me.

Another Day, Another Section

"Great. Zero pressure in the next section," Max called out, checking his scanner. "Helmets and seals. If we're going in." He looked around.

"I want to look at a standard residential zone," Richard said. "What's the big deal?"

"Fair enough," Max said. "By the numbers, people." He watched as Fuzzy and Richard checked each other, then Fuzzy checked him, then he checked both Fuzzy's and Richard's suits and seals. To his mild surprise, Richard had gotten everything right.

"Shall we?" Richard said, pointing at the airlock. Max blinked and fought the surprise; that had come over the common frequency. Then he shrugged. It wasn't as if they'd been trying to keep their radio usage a secret, after all.

They clumped together in the lock and sealed the door behind them. There was a delay between when they pressed the activating button and when the door opened, a delay during which they could feel the changes in their suits as the air was replaced by a vacuum. Then the far door opened onto darkness. Handlights went on, and their combined efforts created a visible mixture of a short-range immediate circle and some longer-range moving spot points. Max took a first step forward – and soared "up" away from the decking.

"Crap – Zero Gee!" he warned. Behind him, Richard was also launched by his initial, gravity-expecting step, only starting to spin in an unbalanced fashion.

Fuzzy grabbed a hold of the hatch casing and tossed a rope to Max and, after pulling him back to the lock, proceeded to "lasso" and recover their xenoarcheologist. "Now ***that*** was interesting," he said. "I thought you said the Builders were good engineers, Richard. Care to revise your original analysis?"

"Even good engineers can't build eternal machines. This place has been abandoned for centuries – possibly back in the time of the First Empire. Systems degrade. I've been amazed at the systems' performance – they built to ***last,*** whoever…"

"Relax, Richard. Just poking you in the ribs," Fuzzy said, his tongue visible within his sealed helmet; the half-bark, half-huff sound of Vargr laughter filled the comm channel.

"Ok, you've had your…"

"**TRACKER! THREE O'CLOCK HIGH!"** Max bellowed, punctuating his statement with the vacuum silenced chatter of his 15 mm autorifle. Fuzzy spun and brought up his heavier 20 mm

autorifle, and added his own fire to Max's and Richard ducked back into the airlock, out of the line of fire.

The 15 mm armor-piercing and the 20 mm armor-piercing-high-explosive rounds tore into the drifting quadrupedal killing machine, quickly rendering it into an idly drifting cloud of rubble.

"Ammo!" Max called out, and Fuzzy tossed him another high-capacity magazine, replacing the magazine for his own weapon in a practiced motion a moment later.

"Be glad that we had vacuum, folks, or our ears would be ringing right now," Fuzzy said.

"My shoulder's a bit sore, even through the padding," Max said.

"Pain is good – it means you're still alive, Max," Richard said from the airlock. As they looked over the ruins of the "tracker", Richard called out, "that's the thing you both 'saw' from the statuette, I take it?"

"You take correctly, Richard," Fuzzy said.

"That ideogram on what was the 'chest' – Richard, can you read it?" Max asked.

"I think it means something like, 'death-hunt' or 'death-hunter' – the 'aka' particle is clearly that one," Richard said, pointing at the armor fragment. "I'd guess that our weapons are just a bit more effective than the Builders'."

"You think!?!" Max called out, and shook his head.

They focused their handlights on the body of the "tracker" – what was left was drifting slowly in free fall. Max and Fuzzy kicked off walls and dove back to the entry airlock. "I think it's dead," Richard said, looking at the rubble cloud that had been the "tracker".

"I think we want to leave this 'discovery' behind for the next time we're here," Fuzzy said.

"I second the motion," Max said.

Richard sighed loud enough for the voice-activated mike to broadcast it to the other two. "Agreed."

Moving On

"Ok, time to take a breather, here," Fuzzy said.

"Why? We've only been walking for …" Richard checked his time display, "ninety minutes."

"In nearly one-and-a-half gees, Richard," Max said. "I've been hearing you huff-and-puff for the last twenty minutes. I admire your dedication, but … you haven't been training for this sort of situation the way Fuzzy and I have. ***So, sit down and take a sip of water!*"**

"Yes, Mother," Richard replied; but he sat down and took several long sips from his drink-tube. "At least we have 'air' here, and we can save on suit resources."

"And with the air, we have the drag from the Builders' grav plates," Fuzzy said.

"Or whatever they use – to be sure they use grav plating like we do, someone would have to tear up this flooring," Richard said. "Care to give it a try, Max?"

Max laughed, and patted the flooring. "I don't know what this stuff is, it's resilient, like turf, but a diamond won't scratch it, so … "

"We wait and bring a materials specialist next time," the three explorers chorused, then all three laughed.

Personal Log, Richard Lewis, Tenmonth 21, 2105 AE

What I think was a residential area was laid out in a semi-regular fashion, with a variety of sized "buildings" forming living areas that divided space into public ways, and private spaces both interior and between buildings. Most of the buildings have a multiple of 230 square meters interior space; room heights varied between three and six meters.

There were no windows, but there were what appear to have been doorways. From what I could tell, each doorway had the ability to serve as an emergency "air door" – the thickness of the entryways was not sufficient for a true airlock, unless the mechanism includes something like the "field" or whatever it was that held in the air in the docking bay we used getting on this derelict.

The great majority of the doorways have chains of small beads in different colors that form colored patterns. My best guess is that these bead curtains serve the function of doors by blocking sight and attenuating sound, as well as demarking separate spatial areas. The colors and patterns vary considerably from dwelling to dwelling. After examining over a dozen of these "bead curtains", I feel morally certain that these color patterns have or had some meaning for the Builders, but what that meaning was, I cannot yet tell. The patterns doe not seem to deal with location – they may govern access, or as signals of the status of the individuals who resided in the different rooms or structures. They might denote rank, occupation, sex, or social standing – possibly even species, if the Builders allowed different species on their stations – as they likely would have, at least if my age estimate is correct and this station dates back to at least the time of the First Empire.

One thought I have is this: the lack of doors may have meant that the Builders had a different sense of privacy and territory than Humans or Vargr. The beads may have been the equivalent of a holographic fence – a noticeable trip line, or privacy warning. Privacy beads, in effect. They may also be clan markings, the buildings forming into larger groups. Of course, these groupings could also be professional groupings. And in this, I am really "high skying" without sufficient evidence to determine the correctness (or lack of same) of my conjectures. There are too many mysteries already – not the least of which is just who, or what, these Builders were. They are similar in configuration to Vargr, but they're clearly ***not*** Vargr – not even an offshoot thereof.

End Log Entry

"Hey, Richard, can you take a break from babbling into your recorder and get inside a few more buildings? Evidence first?"

Richard sighed. *Another long day, clearly*, he thought.

For the next two hours, the trio went from building to building, and from room to room within each building. They found a surprising paucity of personal belongings. "We have to wonder whether the relative absence is culturally induced – or a product of the fight for survival, or the result of our chancing on a just-recently-built or refurbished section," Richard commented.

After seeing, for the fortieth time, a low platform containing, by all appearances, a fine white sand in, Richard stopped the others. "I'm going to try something, here. Just a hunch, mind you," he said, and scooped up a sample of the "sand" from the center of one platform. The platform refilled with sand from the edge. He dropped the sand back into the center, and a small whirlpool formed and the newly added sand disappeared.

"Ok, what the heck is ***that*** for?" Max asked.

Fuzzy started laughing. "You've never had a pet, have you, Max?"

"You knew I grew up in a space habitat, Fuzzy. We couldn't afford pets."

"Shall you tell him, or shall I?" Richard asked.

The Vargr bowed, and held out both arms towards the xenoarcheologist, "by all means, proceed."

"It's a sandbox," Richard said.

"I can see that – but what's it for?" Max asked.

Richard chuckled and Fuzzy laughed. "It's an AWEF – an Animal Waste Evacuation Facility – a crapper! Deposit anything on the sand, and it 'disappears' down whatever drain there is," Richard said.

"Great. Two hours to figure out that the Builder's kept pets?" Max asked.

Richard shook his head. Fuzzy nearly went into convulsions he was laughing so hard. "No, Max, those are the Builders' sanitary facilities – their crappers."

"Richard, you have got to be effin' kidding!" Max said.

"Nope. Professional opinion, Max. Subject to revision in light of further evidence, but…"

"I can believe it," Fuzzy said. "They're enough like Vargr in configuration – I'll wager that they don't have a problem with public excretion and urination – and with the scents being carried away quickly by this sand…a self-cleaning litterbox in every home."

Max looked around, shook his head, and called out, "next 'great discovery'?"

"We shall see, Max, we shall see," Richard said.

More Discoveries

Max held up what looked like a flattened out and undersized bean bag chair. "Ok, master of eetee artifacts, just what in the fleep do you think this is?"

Richard couldn't help but join Fuzzy in laughter. "I think it's just what it looks like, Max. Toss it here!"

Max tossed the disk, and Fuzzy snagged it out of the air with one hand. "Feels fully – like that fabric material, what do you call it?"

Richard removed a suit glove and stroked the disk. "It's a bit like raw silk. I wonder…" he looked over at the pile of similar disks. "Anyone mind if we experiment with this?"

The two salvage experts shrugged. "What do you have in mind?" Fuzzy asked.

Richard pinched (or tried to pinch) the disk. "It's about the right size for one of the Builders to sit on…"

"If they went down on their haunches, yes. It would likely be fairly comfortable," Fuzzy said. At Max's raised eyebrow, he snorted. "Well, it might not be for a Human, Max, but the Builder's look a lot like ***my*** people, and ***I*** would be able to settle down onto one of these pads quite easily."

"What do you have in mind, Richard?" Max asked.

"I'd like to see how good they are in the way of armor protection," Richard said.

"A ***seat*?**" Max asked. "Have you gone space-happy?"

"Humor me, Max. I'll set it up, and I want you to fire one – repeat ***one*** – 15 mm round. You're carrying AP, aren't you?"

"Yes, and these pads are less than four centimeters thick. Of fabric. The ammo in Kate," he held up his autorifle, "will penetrate two centimeters of kaflek armor at 100 meters. Where do you plan on trying this experiment?"

"The corridor outside this building – set up against a bulkhead fifty meters away – that should be far enough to be safe from ricochets, if you fire from prone just out the 'door'," Richard said.

Max shook his head. "Ok, at least you're thinking of safety. Looking for another useful material?"

"Ever and always, Max. Based on the penetration, we can see how useful this 'stuff' might be to, oh, say – an arms or armor manufacturer back in Imperial space?"

Fuzzy patted Richard on the back. "I really like the way you think, Richard. Always keeping an eye out for value."

"Hey, I don't like the idea of being poor any more than you would. More money means a better chance that I can afford anagathics when the time comes," Richard said.

It only took a few minutes to set up the "target", for Richard and Fuzzy to retreat into cover, and for Max to set himself up for the shot. "Clear?" Max called out. Richard and Fuzzy called out, "clear" together. A moment later, the sound of Max's rifle was echoing down the corridor.

The three walked the fifty meters to the target; a flattened round was on the flooring just in front of the cushion. "Ok, folks. Now that is ***definitely*** weird," Max said, as he picked up the flattened round with his gloved hand. He looked down at the pad. "Not even a scratch. Damn! That stuff must be…"

"Valuable," Fuzzy said and, laughing, patted Richard on the back. "That's another good find, Richard. We'll make a good grave-robber out of you, yet."

"Pleased to be of service," Richard said, bowing to the Vargr.

After Max and Fuzzy stopped laughing, Max turned back to Richard. "When we get back to the ship, you're going to take the crystal for that old film and you are going to play it … again!"

"I try to find ways to lighten the mood, Max. And knowing the classics has more than one use," Richard said, and took the "beanbag chair/mat" and stuffed it into his pack.

The trip continued exploring buildings, looking for artifacts, clues, or anything else left behind by the inhabitants that might further educate them. After almost an hour's further search, when the call of "I found something" came from Max, as he walked "point", one room ahead of Richard and Fuzzy.

Richard and Fuzzy joined Max, staring at a single, mummified body. Playing before it – the skeletal remains made that direction a ready deduction based on observation – was a holographic image. One image, though it contained moving interior images. The mummy, apparently one of the Builders, was seated on some sort of embroidered object.

"So, she died while smoking a hookah?" Max asked.

"Smoking kills," Fuzzy quoted solemnly. Then he shook his head. "Well, it does!" he protested with a grin, as Richard and Max reacted to that misplaced truism.

"There's a real oddity here, folks," Richard said. "The fact that this body is mummified is ***not*** normal behavior for a dead body. In fact, dissolving into primordial goop with bones sticking out is far more the usual case. So, why didn't that happen here?"

"I've been watching, and while there are patterns to the movement," Fuzzy said. "I've not yet seen a repetition. If it's a recording, it's not on a short loop."

"Fuzzy, why don't you run the chemical analyses on the material in the 'hookah'," Richard said. "Max, you can take over for Fuzzy, watching the vid. I'll do my own scan on the mummy, here, and see if I can find anything that might explain it."

"Sounds fair to me," Max said.

The holo-vid recording was on what amounted to a roughly twenty-minute loop. It was of one of the Builders, dancing. As the holo-vid progressed, the dancer discarded more and more clothing, revealing eventually that the dancer was decidedly male. And aroused. "Erotic, dancing, if not out-and-out pornographic," Max said. "The difference would be both cultural and in the eyes of the beholders."

The body, as a preliminary examination indicated, was a Builder female; and the mummification was at least partially explained by the analysis of the chemical remnants in the "hookah" – complex organophosphates, and likely highly toxic. "And the gases may have helped to preserve – by killing all the microorganisms in the body as it killed the person, here," Richard finally said.

"There are traces of what appear to be inactive nanomachines in the mix as well, Richard," Fuzzy said.

"And that may be the final puzzle piece, at least here," Max added. "Take some samples, maybe some scientist back home can figure out the programming for the nanos."

"So, we're looking at levels that are definitely not harmless trace elements," Richard said. "This looks to have been a deliberate, intentional poisoning."

"I'll be damned," Max said, "if I can figure out how the image is being displayed – my scan doesn't show anything in this room that I can detect in the way of a projection system."

"We haven't been looking all that closely at what the walls of any of these dwellings are like," Richard said. "Could that be…"

"Save that they're of the same slightly compressible material that the floors are made of, and we don't know anything about them," Max said.

"Except that a diamond won't scratch them, any more than it will scratch the floors," Fuzzy added.

"It's the obvious place to put something you don't want to take up space with," Richard said. "But I don't see any way that we can find out how the walls might project this image," he pointed at the holo-vid, "without a good deal more equipment."

"Not to mention, specialized knowledge personnel," Max said.

"Do you think we could get someone at your Institute to fund a research team for this?"

"Depends," Richard said. "And it's not ***my*** Institute; it's an Imperial Institute – I just have a professional membership in the Society that backs the Institute. There is a difference."

"Right," Max said, and rubbed his fingers together.

"Or we might find some Noble who has spare credits that he might be willing to invest," Fuzzy said.

"Now, ***that*** idea has definite prospects," Max said.

"Shall we continue our 'grave robbing'?" Richard asked.

Fuzzy and Max both laughed. "Yes, enough jaw jacking, let's get to the loot!" Max said, and took point once more.

Unintended Consequences

"Ok, mister xenoarcheologist, take a look at this thing!" Max called out, pointing at the active screen hanging above a massive keyboard.

"The screen is still 'live'," Richard said, staring at the displayed ideograms.

"I can see that, Richard," Max said. "You got those children books – any chance of interpreting this?" he said, pointing at the display screen.

Richard took a deep breath, consulted the notes on his wristpad, and let out a long, low sigh. "Sorry, Max. Nothing on-screen matches anything from the children's books. And these," he said, pointing at the "keyboard", "look more like 'components' of ideograms. This circular pad at top? Might be a cursor control, or might allow drawing ideograms directly."

"Try painting something?" Fuzzy asked.

"Ok," Richard said, and, removing the glove from his right hand, used his index finger to attempt to draw one of the identified ideograms.

"What are you trying…" Max began.

"The name of this 'station' – it's one of the few ideograms that I'm fairly certain of the meaning. Relax, Max, it's what you're paying me for," Richard said. As he lifted his had and began reseating the suit glove, the speakers of the computer unit came to life, and the voice – either computer generated or recorded – boomed out.

Fuzzy jumped back. "What in Hell does that mean?"

"Sounds a bit like a warning to me," Richard said.

"Great. Of what? About what?" Max snapped.

"Who knows? Connect time running out? Don't do that, or I'll crash?" Richard replied. "For now, might I suggest that we 'be somewhere else'?"

"Good idea," Fuzzy said, as the speakers continued to bark gibberish in a singsong alien voice.

Decisions, Decisions

"All right. I understand why we're working the way we're working – from the 'most common' to the 'personal' to the 'more secure' areas," Max said. He looked between Fuzzy and Richard as he did. "I thought that what we were out here for was to 'loot' this artifact. We're here for artwork

and whatever new technologies we might find that we can sell when we get back to Imperial space."

"I'm here," Richard replied, "to maximize the information transfer that we can manage. There's so much about the cultural background of the Builders of this 'artifact'…"

"Maximizing gain in the shortest possible time," Max said. "We don't have time to waste in looking into every nook and cranny on this station. It's close to a thousand kilometers in diameter. We don't have time to look into the 'secret lives' of the Builders, or how they spent their time. We can barely scratch the surface as it is."

Richard sighed. "We need to proceed carefully. Look, you hired me so that you could take advantage of my xenoarcheological and sophontological knowledge. Trust ***your*** judgement in this. Have I proved to be a worthwhile addition so far?"

"So far, yes. But why can't we speed things up just a bit?" Max asked.

"We're going as fast as I think is minimally risky. Unless you'd like to run into one of those robotic killing machines – one that ***hasn't*** so decayed with time that it's inactive?" Richard said.

Max sighed and shook his head. "No, I wouldn't want that. But we've been here…"

"For several days, after a fair time spent getting here – and there's time we'll have to spend getting back," Richard said.

"But why are we wasting time in this residential area?" Max asked.

"We're not 'wasting time'; we're following my plan. Which calls for a thorough – not cursory – examination of each of the different areas in turn," Richard said. "It doesn't matter what order we go in, as long as we stick with ***some*** plan to visit them all. That's basic methodology."

"But it's taking days and days and days!" Max protested.

"Leaving us in a state where we have days and days to spend, Max," Fuzzy said. "It was your idea to get a xenoarcheologist. Hoist by your own petard?"

"Xenoarchaeology is a science, Max. Part of any science is a regular and repeatable methodology," Richard said. "Part of xenoarchaeology is using a regular sweep to be able to gather data that lets you deduce the statistical norms. If all you pick up or pay attention to are the 'gold-and-jewel-treasures', you'll be totally convinced that the trade in precious minerals and metals was the most important trade – which might mean you miss the details that let you discover a technological miracle that is – or was – the ***real*** trade item!"

"Uh…all right, blast it all!" Max snapped. "It just seems to be so slow! Hour after hour after hour looking at wall after wall after wall – xenoarchaeology must be the most boring profession in the galaxy!"

"Not here it isn't," Richard said, grinning at Max.

Fuzzy leaned a little closer to Richard. "I've got to admit that I've been a bit worried about the pace myself," he said softly. "Frankly, I'm still surprised that we don't have an even dozen more 'xenoarcheological' expeditions nipping at our heels."

Richard raised an eyebrow and twisted his head. "I thought you'd taken care not to let anyone know ***exactly*** where the ***Lead Balloon*** was bound."

"We did," Fuzzy and Max replied in chorus.

"But we can't be certain that someone didn't track our initial vector. From there, it would be a difficult though not impossible task to estimate a stellar target," Fuzzy said. "Trust me – it's possible. Damn difficult, but … not impossible."

"Fair enough," Richard said. "So, what sort of a time limit do you think would be appropriate – to refuel and get back to Novaya Rossiya."

"The key time is from 'now' to refueled and at a safe jump distance. No one in their right mind would try to intercept us in Novaya's system," Fuzzy said. "An hour to orbit, call it roughly 3 AU to the gas giant – roughly 120 hours – then another 180 hours to boost out of this system's singularity. Prep for jump, and it's a total of roughly 13 days."

"Ok, how many more hours can we afford to spend, here?" Richard asked.

Max and Fuzzy looked at each other. "Fuzzy, you're the brains of this outfit," Max said. "How much time before someone who tried to follow us would be 'in-system'?"

"Two jumps for a good 'fix' on the stars, then one chance in three that they find ***this*** place, Max," Fuzzy said. At least another five days before I'd start thinking about scooting. Now, if the sensors pick up a jump-exit in system …"

"We scoot with what we've got," Max said.

"This is a priceless opportunity to start finding out aspects of the Builders that could take us lifetimes to uncover otherwise. We can investigate embarrassing, hidden, taboo, or even unthinkable parts of their culture," Richard said. "And yes, I know how big this place is. The Builders likely had more surface area in this station than there is in all of Novaya Rossiya."

"And from what we've seen so far, they weren't packed together particularly tightly. Unless we've just been hitting the 'high society' levels. More than 3400 cubic meters for a family group of four," Fuzzy said.

"And with the interconnects, likely more than just a small group living together – more like multi-generational. Remember the 'children's books' we found," Richard said.

"So, they liked their own territories," Fuzzy said. "Another commonality with my people."

"So, let's spend some time trying to dive a little bit deeper. And if we don't find anything worthwhile…" Max said.

"We can wrap it up and 'scoot' for home. This trip likely will be fairly profitable with what we've 'requisitioned' so far," Richard said.

"True enough," Max said. "So…"

"We dig deeper. Head closer to the 'core' of the station," Richard said.

Further Down the Rabbit Hole

"Well, Academician Lewis, what's this area supposed to be according to that general 'meanings map' that you've been working on?" Max asked.

"The translation is, I think, 'commerce-operational'. Or maybe it's just 'business works'," Richard said. He looked around. "What I'd like to do is actually do two of these areas in quick

succession. In the first, I want to concentrate on architectural functionality – the science of space and placement. In the second, I want to go 'inside' some of these, trying to put details into context."

"You're the expert," Fuzzy said.

"I just wished that we could have used something other than the stairs to get between levels. Just how deep ***have*** we gone?" Max asked.

"Laser range finder measurement, or leg strain measure?" Richard replied.

Max sighed, and Fuzzy laughed. "Fair enough," Max said. "You're showing some improvement in your leg strength. So, laser results?"

"It's called 'pushing through the strain', Max. And my laser agrees with the inertial rig – we're close to two klicks down."

Personal Log, Richard Lewis, Tenmonth 30, 2105 AE

We've been able to identify two patterns in the buildings in these sections. In the first, the building while averaging larger than the mean of what we believe to be the residential structures, appear to be arranged in hierarchies. Perhaps even a hierarchy of hierarchies. Perhaps not worth the added hours spent slogging through the higher gravity, but neither Fuzzy nor Max have been complaining – and the 'tenderfoot' here doesn't feel too good about bitching and moaning, when my two companions are carrying heavier loads than I.

The doors – or rather, the openings – are all much the same – the strings of beads have the same arrangement of colors, in the same orders. They obviously have some meaning, but for the moment, I must assume that the "value added" in deciphering the meaning is insufficient to justify further effort. There is only a 5% variance in the patterns – and then, only in what one might call in "minor themes". Another mystery, among thousands of others. We're barely scratching the surface of a non-human society, one that may well have been much more advanced than the First Empire – hence more advanced than our current society as well.

The variations might signify specialization by physical area – a "street of the clothworkers", another "a street of woodworkers". But we just don't have enough data to draw any conclusions.

I hate mysteries.

A Locked Door

"Ok, this is a bit different," Max said, as he looked at the door.

"Looks more like a vault door, don't you think?" Fuzzy said, looking over at Richard.

"That ideogram," Richard said, pointing at a complex raised pattern by the side of the door, "means 'forbidden' as far as I can tell. At least, that's what those 'children's books' told me."

Max laughed. "Use for everything, I guess. Ok, Academician, do we go through it, or do we move on?"

"Depends," Richard said. "Could be dangerous, but it could also lead to something valuable – say, the power plant for this region of the ship? How much would a fusion generator in good condition go for on the open market right now?"

"I like the way you think," Fuzzy said. "Depends on the output. But wouldn't it have run out of deuterium by now? You said that this derelict is at least 300 years old."

"Could be supplied by autonomous mining bots," Max said. "They've got 'em in the Capital system."

"Along with a lot of other high-tech items. So, do you want to burn through the door?" Richard asked.

"Would it be safe?" Fuzzy asked.

Now it was Richard's turn to laugh. "You want safe? Then hide in a cave somewhere under a thick blanket. A wise person told me that not all that long ago…"

Max laughed. "He's got you there, Fuzzy. Hoist by your own petard."

"Ok, Max, rig the thermite. If that doesn't work…" Fuzzy said.

"If it doesn't, we can try our cutting lasers, can't we?" Richard asked.

"If the thermite doesn't work, the lasers will be drained long before cutting through," Fuzzy said.

"Ok, just let me get clear," Richard said, and began backing away.

It only took a few minutes to set the thermite packs and the trigger cable and retire down the corridor. And a few moments to trigger the packs; the charges burned brightly, and the molten aluminum dripped down onto the flooring material, which smoked furiously.

"Bingo," Max called out, as he cautiously moved forward to view the damage. "Wait twenty for the stuff to cool, and we should be able to open the ruddy door."

They passed the time telling dirty jokes – it was really remarkable how common certain themes were among mammalian species with common social structures. Though "Fuzzy" was clearly the master of the funniest and simultaneously crudest of the jokes.

They levered the door open – and found what looked like a medical bay on the other side of the barrier. The "vault" door was only 20 centimeters thick, but it had nearly defeated thermite charges designed to burn through twice that thickness of tungsten-ceramic mix armor.

"Any idea what this stuff is?" Max asked, turning to their xenoarcheologist, who was staring at his hand scanner.

"I think so – but it's crazy. Cut a piece off with your laser cutter – I'll want to do a careful analysis when we get back to the ship," Richard said.

"Your wish is my command," Max said, and carved off a fist sized chunk. "Damn stuff has incredible thermal properties – my cutter is down by 90% to get just this small piece." He handed the chunk to Richard, who dumped it into his sample pouch.

Richard stepped through the opening, and stopped short, pointing at a long cylinder. "Bingo!" he called out, and then dashed over to the cylinder and began looking it over carefully.

Max and Fuzzy followed, a bit more carefully, scanning the room. "Richard, what about that thing has attracted your attention?"

"It's First Empire equipment!" he said, pointing at the fist-sized imperial sigil at one end of the cylinder. "That's the Griffon with the Earth globe in its claws – strictly First Empire, and only used by the Imperial Family!"

"Damn! That ***is*** a find!" Max said. "What is it, though? And what would it be doing on this derelict? Did the First Empire know the Builders?"

"Damned if I know – there's no record that I've ever seen of a species like the Builders. But ... this is a cryogenic suspension pod – and it's occupied."

"There's someone ***in*** it? Damn, poor soul must be so long dead it's getting on to ridiculous," Max said.

"It's still operating," Richard said, "and according to these readings, the person in it is still in suspension. Remember, this is First Empire tech – they knew how to build things that we're just beginning to rediscover."

"You mean that the poor bastard might still be alive?" Fuzzy asked.

"Not just any poor bastard – that Imperial sigil means the chamber contains a noble!" Richard said.

"Damn! That ***is*** a big find. Get us a patron?" Max asked.

"First, we lug this thing back to the ***Lead Balloon*****.** If there's a noble of some grade in this, we need to cut our exploration…"

"Looting, please, let's call it what it is," Fuzzy corrected.

"Ok, 'looting'," Richard said, "is going to stop – we've got a higher priority activity. And the return is potentially ***much*** higher."

"Might depend upon who it is," Max said.

"Which House, you mean?" Fuzzy asked.

"Whichever House the popsicle belongs to, if that House still exists, we'll have some 'real' patrons. And that will help ***all*** of us," Richard said. "It could mean more credits than you can imagine, Max!"

"I can imagine an awful lot, Richard. An awful lot of credits."

"Let's get it back to the ship, first, Max, before you start designing your new mansions," Fuzzy said.

"Fair enough," Max replied.

#

It took the better part of three days to haul the cryochamber back up the stairs and to the ship, settle it into place, and rest.

They settled the cryochamber in the ***Lead Balloon's*** small medical bay, removing the low passage cryotank to provide room (and putting the low passage tank into the cargo bay).

Richard triggered the defrosting process – and the First Empire device worked as well as if it had just been rolled off the multifab line.

Max managed a single, heartfelt, "damn!". Fuzzy laughed, and Richard Lewis went down onto one knee as the "defrosted" individual rose to a sitting position, half-in-half-out of the cryogenic chamber. "How long?" he asked in unaccented Anglic.

"When were you … frozen? What year?" Richard asked.

"Human? I was put into suspension in 2260 – May 15th," the other replied.

"When?" Max asked, looking at Richard.

"Likely common era – how long since the detonation of the first atomic bomb in warfare?" Richard asked.

"That was in 1945," the other said.

Richard took a deep breath. "Noble sir, you are in the year 2105 of the Atomic Era – that would be … the year 3050 in your calendar. Might this humble individual ask what House you belong to? And what is your name?"

"I am of the House Reynard," the noble said. "My name is Nicholas Joseph Reynard; I am a prince of the Empire of the EarthClans – my mother is Ekaterina Nicolaevna Reynard…"

"The Mad Queen?!?" Max yelled.

Nicholas Reynard turned his muzzle towards Max. "Who is this individual, might I ask?"

"Noble sir," Richard said, "he is part of the team that found you and brought you back to this ship. And you must excuse his lack of proper manners," he finished, glaring at Max. Max took the hint, and went down on one knee.

"I seem to have been 'asleep' for a bit longer than my mother intended, then. I take it that history did not look kindly upon her behaviors? Does the Empire still rule?"

Richard sighed. "History did not treat her kindly, no, your grace. If you are one of her sons…"

"A younger son, I'm afraid. Not the heir, but 'the spare'," the genetically engineered uplifted fox said.

"Still, some fair claim to the Imperial throne – though not the Empire that you knew, your Grace, and it will have to be verified…" Richard managed.

"If your stated date is correct, I can just imagine. Is Earth still the center of the Empire?"

"No, your Grace, I am afraid not. The Capital, Kensho, is on New Sparta, in Oshenjii Prefecture. We shall, of course, take you to your new home – all that we would ask …"

"Is that I treat you fairly and properly for your service and effort," the prince said. "I understand. How soon can we be on our way?"

"Immediately, your Grace," Max said. "You can have my cabin – I'll double up with Fuzzy…"

"Fuzzy?" the prince asked.

The Vargr bowed. "A nickname, honorable sir, my name in my native language is hard for Humans to pronounce properly…and I prefer the nickname that I have chosen to a mispronounced garbling of my ***real*** name."

"An … interesting … solution. What do you call your people, gentlebeing?"

"We call ourselves 'The People' in our languages. Humans call us Vargr," Fuzzy said.

Follow the Yellow Brick Road

"This should be a shallow enough grav-slope to form a jump point," Fuzzy said, his tongue hanging out and his hands dancing over the control console.

"You should strap in, your Grace," Richard said.

The vulpine-uplift noble sighed and buckled himself into the spare acceleration couch. "We gave up using the jump drive early in the expansion. Technological regression…"

"We lost the Alcubierre warp technology during the Collapse. We're lucky we managed to salvage a few of the older jump engines. We rediscovered the Warp-Point drive and the two systems have allowed us to rebuild the Empire," Richard said.

"Gods! Two of the worst systems we developed, and that's all that's left?" the prince snorted. "I should thank all the odd gods of the Galaxy that you gentlemen managed to find me. How ***did*** you find me? From your warp-lines maps, we're off all the main routes."

"You were 'picked up' by some now-vanished sophonts, and we were 'prospecting' for any worthwhile finds," Max said.

The prince laughed. "You were trying to find treasures that you could loot. We had people like you in my day, too. And I'm quite grateful that your 'treasure-finding' stumbled across me. I don't know anything about your time's politics, but in this 'Second Empire of the EarthClans', I should be able to find something useful in the way of employment."

"As the only surviving son of an acknowledged Empress of the First Empire, I'm certain that your House will find some suitable position. If nothing else, for a time you could easily take a posting to the Imperial Historical Academy at Kensho," Richard said.

Again, the Prince laughed. "A suitable posting indeed – telling bored students about my life in the 'First Empire' as a lecturer."

"I rather doubt that the Academic Senate of the IHA would only grant you a lectureship – an Associate Professorship, at the very least."

"I'm hardly an expert," the prince said.

"But you ***lived*** in the Capital – on Yarthe before…" Richard began, then paused.

"Earth was glassed before I was born, Academician, the Throne was on Luna. We were trying to terraform Earth – and making some progress before my … entombment," the prince said.

"Our history is a bit confused on the timing, your Grace. You'll be able to help correct some of our … 'misunderstandings' of the facts," Richard said.

"The terraforming – did it succeed?"

"It may have, but … during the Collapse … bad things happened again. Yarthe is a wasteland, still," Richard said.

"So, where ***is*** the throne and the House set now?"

"On New Sparta. House Reynard and House Fox relocated there during the Interregnum, after the Sack of Yarthe," Richard said.

"This 'New Sparta' – is it a terrestrial type world?"

"Sorry to interrupt you two gentlebeings," Fuzzy said, "but put in your bite blocks please. We're at a flat-space, and I'm powering up the jump engines. Time to jump now … one minute."

Novaya Amerika System, 22 AU from primary

"Woosh! That was a rough one," Richard said.

The prince shook his head and spit out the bite block. "Your piloting, 'Fuzzy' is excellent. I've felt far worse on jumps," the prince said.

"This was a rough one – NA is a rough system to jump into – lots of variances. I will have a fix on transit to the warp-point shortly," Fuzzy said. A minute later, he called out, "we're lucky – we're roughly 1 AU from the New Aberdeen warp-point, nearly 45 AU from the direct New Sparta warp-point. Three days to New Aberdeen, twenty to the direct warp-point to New Sparta."

"What's the configuration of warp-points in New Aberdeen?" Max asked.

"It should be a close pair – if the database is correct, they should be…3 AU between exit point and the warp-point to New Sparta – five days transit in New Aberdeen," Fuzzy said, after tapping out a query and running a few quick calculations on his board. Eight days or twenty – which point do we make for, people?"

"I trust that the question is rhetorical?" the prince asked.

In answer, both Richard and Max laughed.

"Next stop – New Aberdeen system it is," Fuzzy said.

8 Days Later, 18 AU from New Sparta

"Is the Prince ok?" Fuzzy asked.

"Jump shock. He's clearly more prone to it than we are," Richard said, removing the bite block from the noble's mouth, and ensuring that the uplift's breathing passage was clear.

"Hey, Fuzzy, incoming on the comms!" Max called out.

"Unidentified craft, this is Imperial Defense Command. You are in a restricted military corridor. Do not maneuver – a customs boat will be sent to you for inspection. Do not resist, do not attempt to evade, over" the voice was calm, and as emotionless as if generated by computer.

"This is the ***Lead Balloon*****,** registration number Victor Sierra Four-Niner-Three-Zero at New Aberdeen to New Sparta entry warp-point. Request information: time to rendezvous? Over."

"IDC to Lead Balloon: ETA custom boat 97 minutes … mark! Please identify crew, over."

"***Lead Balloon*** to IDC, Academician Richard Lewis, out of Novaya Rossiya. Survival expert Maxwell Stewart Farmer, out of New Upton Space Habitat, Grdzandrogarr Ivakhanrkadzh out of Lair, and…" Fuzzy paused, and looked over at the newly awakened Prince.

"Tell them," the prince said.

"And a passenger, Nicholas Joseph Reynard, second son of the Mad Queen, Empress Ekatrina Nicolaevna Reyanrd, prince of the First Empire of the EarthClans, Defender of the Coreward Reach, Baron of Tycho Under, over."

"And I am Marie of Rumania," IDC responded. "Please provide the ***correct*** identification of your fourth party member – your passenger, over."

"This is Grdzandrogarr Ivakhanrkadzh, and that is the full name that our passenger has given us. Our Academician found him in a situation where, at the least, his origin in the First Empire is

supported by evidence. He was found in a First Empire cryogenic unit that was still operational – and had been in continuous operation for centuries. A genetic analysis will confirm is generational period, over,"

"Say again? A First Empire cryo unit? Do you have the unit with you? Over."

"We have the unit, and are prepared to turn it over to the Academy on New Sparta, or to Customs, if we are given proper receipt. Over."

"Lead Balloon, you say that you have a Reynard on board? Please confirm, over."

Fuzzy chuckled, and Max covered his mouth to smother a laugh. "Our passenger is clearly a type 7 uplift – our medical scan confirmed that fact. Transmitting data file … now, over."

"IDC … confirming. Welcome to New Sparta system."

"Some things never change," Nicholas Joseph Reynard said, shaking his head sadly.

[TO BE CONTINUED]

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #11

George Phillies
phillies@4liberty.net

Comments on Issue 10

Cover: Another fine piece of work from Tiffanie Gray. The fog color is indeed exotic. The hills are jagged.

The Fox's Den: Extremely well written. Conversation by indirect allusion is a well-written style, though limiting the text to dialogues, without revealing what at least one of the characters is thinking, leaves the reader wondering what is going on. It strikes me that the characters may be at risk of talking by each other, so that each character completely misunderstands what the other actually meant and fails to recognize that this difficulty has arisen.

Ronin Engineer: What a magnificent list of possible sorts of equipment. How did you generate it? I did not try asking myself if the prices were reasonably consistent, but the items that I considered seemed to be in good prportion to each other. The surgical robot as a replacement for a surgeon comes to mind. It is aleready true for some sorts of surgery, e.g, procedures where you need tocut a hole into a bone and insert some sort of pin, the robot dies a better job than a person, just as a milling machine gives better parts that a human with a good set of files does.

Me: The website problem was finally fixed. The former supplier could not fix errors that they specified existed that were on their nameserver. We have a new ISP.

The Telzey novel is getting feedback from the readers, and is being repolished to match.

* * * *

No Tears for a Princess

The glade rolled gently down to a deep brook. Little streamers of fog rose from the water into the autumn air. Despite Tegel-La's glare, the sky glittered with brilliant stars, hovering in clots and tangles close above the earth. Elaine, shoulders slumped, listened to the mage.

"You will stay with me tonight, won't you?" he urged.

"Out here in the woods? Naaw, I'd get soft -- like you. Besides, I'm gonna bathe first -- or should I be afraid of the water?" Her last question was baited. They were far enough from habitation for the water to be safe. To her taste Grandoon took an unreasonable number of precautions against lurking monsters.

"Hardly. Not so close to Arburg. Isn't it a little chill? Surely one in your condition ought have better shelter than a few blankets?"

"Oh, just quit pestering me! I'm not some court lady, to need pampering every moment like an Imperial Lap-cat."

"As you wish." He ignored her while she disappeared down-hill. With one boot he scraped an area free of leaves, then produced from his pack a toy house the size of an orange. The house he set in the middle of the cleared patch. He tapped its chimney with his finger, pointed in a circle at the ground, and withdrew his hand. His cabin sprang up before him, reaching in a few

moments its full size. Without even a glance over his shoulder, he stepped inside and pulled shut the door.

The fireplace held a burning log, blazing as though Grandoon had spent the evening sitting before it. A pot of tea, freshly brewed, and warmed bread waited on a tray by the fireside. A distant hiss was the water-tube boiler, drawing water from the outside via displacement gate and heating it for Grandoon's bath.

Grandoon shed his cloak and turned to the large mirror over his workbench. At a touch it frosted, then cleared to reveal Elaine walking toward the brook. Grandoon snapped his fingers, pointing as he did at a bronze mask on the facing wall. The mask's jaw lowered; its mouth pursed. Its graven eyes looked from side to side, finally alighting on the mirror.

"Observe!" commanded Grandoon. "She goes to the stream, bathes, eats, and sleeps. When she sleeps, or if aught else occurs, call." The mask followed Grandoon's words, its eyes shifting slightly to the rhythm of his voice.

In the mirror, Elaine could be seen tiptoeing through the woods, slipping from shadow to shadow as though the Baron might be lurking behind the next tree. Once she stopped, peering intently behind her. She saw nothing, heard nothing. Had he been looking, Grandoon would have seen her stare directly through his mirror. What was it? she wondered. Was someone watching her?

Minutes later, she stood shoulder deep in water, washing a cut in her neck. Her armour lay on the bank. She held her cloak in the water, bringing together edges frayed and sliced in combat. She touched two matching pieces of cloth together; the tear disappeared in a seamless mend. She smiled. The cape was a favorite possession. It was also the only magic item which had ever worked for her. Her eyes went blank as she recalled a young man, tall and thin, pressing it on her as a gift. She had been ever so reluctant to take it, but had treasured it ever since.

The cloak was whole again. The chill of the water brought her back to reality. She peered into the glade, still convinced that she was being watched. After the evening's events, she was slightly afraid of Grandoon. He had wandered casually through her mind, tugging at her memories, reminding her of events which she had wished long forgotten. Worse, he had done her a favor, killing half the Baron's party. He would not be the first mage to expect his favors to be acknowledged in an unacceptably physical way.

Her sleeping cloak rested on a bank of pine needles. Her travelling clothes hung from the branch, drying slowly; she wore only a short, sleeveless tunic. Waves of fatigue rolled over her. For minutes she stared at the cloak, too tired even to lie down. She could see the events of the past few days as a unified whole, with those she had aided turning seriatim against her.

Disappointment brought greater pain than did the bruises from ambush and duel. She thought distantly of Grandoon, who was forever trying to drag her off to bed. For all his desires, he had more-or-less always been a gentleman. After all, she was hardly the beauty that some of his more notorious loves had been.

Stiff with cold, she knelt, wrapped herself in the cloak, and nestled her head against her pack. Alone at last, no longer needing to

pretend that she felt neither pain nor sorrow, she cried bitter tears until she floated off to sleep.

CHAPTER 3 (Mages)

Dorrance Bay was a sheet of slate blue edged with red-granite promontories and dense pine woods. The Academy stood on a small peninsula, almost surrounded by water, so that one could stand anywhere on its grounds and hear the distant rush of waves breaking against the rocks. The central buildings were a cluster of ivory tulips soaring gracefully over the tree tops. Other structures merged into the landscape, looking almost like outcroppings of the native stone.

Five mages sat in a solarium atop the central tower. Beyond its crystal dome could be seen the clear sky and the sparkling waters of the bay. One was a tall young woman, her well-filled figure little hidden by a simple tunic. She pressed her fingers against each other, as though playing with an unseen cat's cradle. A second was a dowager, short and dumpy, in a long woolen dress. The third was a young man, sharp nosed and thin of face, who perpetually glanced about, looking for that which wasn't there. An elderly man in blue fur-trimmed robes held a massy bronze amulet in one hand; he nodded sleepily, occasionally talking to himself. The fifth mage was Grandoon, resplendent in red silk and gold lace, puffing occasionally on his pipe while he let the others talk.

'So you received her as a dangerous sending from Lord Pyrrin?" The young lady stared at Grandoon, her chin delicately balanced on her fingertips. A shake of her head sent golden strands of hair shimmering across her face. She pushed back her locks, exposing bejewelled earings.

"Vanessa, I only took the most elementary of precautions." Grandoon punctuated his words with waves of his pipe. "If I'd thought she were really dangerous, I'd not have been so cavalier about having her sleep in my cottage. Even," he added hastily, "across the room from my bed. As I said, through my mirror her aura had no structure, no grain at all. That bespeaks magecraft, or untamed power, of a high order indeed."

"That was a neat trick. She just stepped in front of the mirror for you, when she knew what it did? And getting her to damp her aura..." The young man's stream of words was cut short by Grandoon's nod.

"Her outermost aura, Zoltan. She had inner screens. I glimpsed barriers within barriers, walls beyond walls, constantly shifting against each other. I saw what she let me see, and didn't risk forcing her for more."

"You got the memories you asked for. You sweet-talked her into exposing all sorts of things."

"Only if you call those obscure images 'exposing'," answered Grandoon. "I can't prove her answers were honest. She seemed to know those places, but -- sharp as the images were -- I couldn't name half of them."

"No." The old man realized he had interrupted, waited for the others' attentions, and finally continued. "No, Vanessa, the most dangerous sending yet found by the Apostate is not a little girl with a sword, but a Vissorant."

"Vissorant? ArchPatriarch, the images name no such creature." The young man realized that Vanessa's question to Grandoon

was being answered, that the old man had heard nought that had been said since.

The ArchPatriarch, Gow's voice upon this earth, continued. "A Vissorant, as noted in the {\em Celestial Bestiary} of Omar of Timbuk, is a celestial being formed in the image of the stars of heaven, or of the Sun -- Omar is a bit unclear about which, or thought they were alike, which is truly a remarkable error for such a clearsighted man --with all the star's energies, and the will needed to drive them. Omar likened the beast to a great confederation of cities, peopled entirely by mages, with a single all-wise ruler to lead each citizen in perfect harmony. The actual source of Omar's information..."