

AN EXPLORER'S TALE

Compiled from the Journals

of

RETOROK SENDARE

Captain in the Naval Service

of

*His Most Excellent Majesty
the Electoral Count Palatine in Thace.*



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"Urda's fires, ever-burning" written by Thom Ryng.

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INTRODUCTION

These last few weeks have gone swiftly as we prepare for our departure, though the men are listless and in need of constant direction. They have grown tired of these charnel ruins, and pass quietly past the sadly growing graveyard where we have recently buried nineteen of our fellows in arms. My men have seen for some time now what I have only just begun to admit to myself, that my years have stooped me and I am no longer able to get around like I once was, or even like I was just a few years ago when we made the crossing to this strange and terrible land. Young Collangio had proven his worth as my successor with vigor competence, skillful command, and a clear vision, but since the night of his personal encounter six months ago I worry that he may no longer be the best choice for my successor. But I must confess a fear that his firsthand encounter with the mysteries of the New World has left him with the types of scars that do not heal though his body has mended and is as strong and able as ever. That encounter in the Eldar ruins has changed him, there is a darkness to his face that does not lift, and he seldom speaks home as he once did.

I have meant to collect all my notes from the last five years here in the New World, put them in some order, annotate them for clarity and include them with the artifacts that we are sending back to Thace, but have found it hard to gather my thoughts. I will admit that when I was first assigned to accompany the Yagnarists North into the great unknown I was concerned about spending so much time with them in such close quarters. I was worried about their corrupting influence on my men, or the simple discomfort of dealing with their quarters, their sensibilities, and what passes for hospitality among Yagnar's faithful. However,

we found the Atuburrkans to be very cordial and efficient. To tell the truth, I couldn't really tell that they were Yagnarists. Their society seems to be more secular and commercial than my fears had suggested. The Kommolek, on the other hand, are clearly Yagnarists, but also efficient, and, as I was surprised to discover, reasonable. There is clear sign of the trials that they have faced with the ice; they rarely smile and the very air around them seems a few degrees cooler than room temperature.



I. ARRIVAL

Yagnarists would turn out to be the least of our concerns. Once we arrived in the New World the Atuburrkans left us in the ruins they had told us about, and that my Lord Brannis the Gallant had tasked us to explore in depth. They left us, and took their flying castle across the great river that emptied into the Ocean along the Ruin's western coast. This river's waters flows like the mighty Hûrn, and have always suggested interior mysteries and adventure. Thankfully, we are soon to be departing for those unknowns leaving this accursed place behind.

The Kommolek have faded into the countryside around these Ruins and are fast at work preparing the way for their citizens. It is truly impressive to see the grand scale a Sahûlian nation can affect when they are fighting for their very survival. I do worry for them, as we've had a hard time finding suitable foodstuff. The plant and bird life found here makes us sick, and we have not found a way of preparing it so that we can eat it without harm. Fortunately the fish that swim in the River and in the Ocean are still edible, if not so familiar to our Sahûlian eyes. This will be their biggest challenge as they attempt to settle these unfamiliar lands.

Perhaps that is where I should start, a simple description of the New World. Over the five years here I have had one of our artists prepare some sketches, but he has warned me that a local rat like bird has found its way into his paper store and eaten most of the sketches, diagrams, and maps. He is furiously trying to replace the lost drawings and I have ordered the Paper Eaters exterminated from our camps. The men seem thankful for such a mundane chore.

Nothing on land is edible. The plant life is vigorous

and tenacious; every day I have soldiers beat back the undergrowth of the previous day to keep our camp clear of the entangling shrubs. The bird life is colorful, and noisy, and some of the larger specimens are dangerous. Both plants and birds are poisonous. We thought that perhaps the poisons would not be found in the bird eggs, but alas, they are. The fruits cause crippling stomach aches and rashes. The eggs are distressingly tasty, but always give use what we are calling "the reds" or intestinal bleeding, exiting from both ends. The meat of the birds is somewhat familiar in taste, but seems to block all nutrition from passing from the food into the body, and those that eat their flesh quickly waste away.

Fortunately, one can recover from those illnesses by completely stopping eating the local provisions. We have been rationing out our food stores brought from home, and have made them last many more years beyond that which we had planned. We have even managed to cultivate a few vegetables here in a small plot of land heavily tilled with horse manure, though those Sahûlian plants live a tenuous existence and I dread their loss in some unexpected storm. Even the horses are looking gaunt, but for the most part are still strong, and able to carry us when we drill the cavalry.

We have taken up fishing both the Ocean and the River. The flesh of the fish does not cause us any trouble, and the fish are plentiful. Some species of river fish are dangerous, and will happily eat any sailor that is so unfortunate as to fall overboard. We have begun calling the river *Braku's Feast*, after one so-named sailor was pulled off his longboat by a particularly large specimen of river fish. Or simply *the River Feast*; the fish eat us, and we eat them, a lot of feasting goes on upon and in its waters.

We have taken to calling these ruins *Surprise*, after a

certain phrase uttered by my Lieutenant Downey the first time he was taken off guard by one of the large, docile birds that wander the ruined streets. The exact phrase will have to remain unwritten as it would not be proper to print.

The natives we have encountered are primitive worshipers of Yagnar. And like their Sahûlian co-religionists, are neither mad nor illogical. We have managed to strike up some cordial friendships, which we must spend a fair amount of time maintaining as they are tribal and nomadic, and new groups keep appearing as more familiar ones leave. The only trouble we've had was with the group that inhabited the northern reaches of Surprise. But after a short battle in which we defeated them entirely, they swore some sort of oath of friendship, and left the area.

They look very similar to the Humans that can be found in Sahûl, only they insist that they are not Human. They call themselves *Elves*, and claim that they are descendants of an ancient and immortal blood line called *Eldar*. Their coloring is somewhat different from what I've read about the Humans. They are taller, and their ears are pointy, whereas Human ears are rounded and droopy.

When I first saw how close the Elves lived to the land, I had high hopes that they would make for easy converts to the Glory of Urda from their childish notions of Yagnar, but, for the most part, they remain steadfast in their faith, and now that word of Yagnar's Avatar appearing in Sahûl and making plans to travel to the New World has reached these shores, they bluntly refuse to listen to me when I speak of Urda.

Apparently, long ago a great plague visited this land during an all encompassing war. This disease killed nearly everyone, and only spared some of the children. Previous to the plague their civilization could have rivaled Sahûl of

a hundred years ago, but today, their culture has been built up by generation after generation of youth, without the guidance or wisdom of their elders. They seem culturally juvenile, waiting for the return of Yagnar to help them regain the grandness of their ancestors. Their hunters are superb, masters at stalking their prey. The tribes consist of tight knit family groups, and those elders that exist are never seen, remaining at the tribal compound, frail, and protected.



II. CONVERSION

Not all the Elves are closed off to Urda's might and wisdom. It seems that ages ago, Urda defeated Yagnar in battle, removing him from this land, and forcing his faithful into a state of waiting.

Over the years a few of these Elves have come and asked me more of Urda and her might, and what her guidance and majesty could bring to their lives. There might have been more if Yagnar's Avatar did not have such vocal advocates in the Kommolek. It also seems that when the Elves' ancient ancestors, the Eldar, came to this land they were all worshippers of Urda. It wasn't until Yagnar himself was birthed that some of the Eldar fell under his sway.

These dedicated few Elves have converted, and pledged themselves to Urda's will. While I am unwilling to make them soldiers in the Thacian army, I have given them auxiliary status, and the twelve individuals have been proving themselves most useful. First and foremost they are invaluable translators and mediators with their brethren, though they do take a bit of ridicule and mocking, they stand tall and proud in their new faith and in their dedication to us, Thace, and Urda.

While we have gained converts I am reticent to report that I did lose one soldier to conversion the other way. For a while I thought to simply list Private Siat as lost while exploring and leave it at that, but have come to realize that his story will prove to be a cautionary tale. I suppose time spent befriending the Yagnarists on Castle Black did damage to his weak resolve. He was one of many soldiers that were enchanted by the New World with it's brightly colored birds, and slender and graceful inhabitants, but my cautionary lectures seemed to calm their excitement and focus them on the task at hand. The deadly seriousness

of our situation did the rest as we realized that there was nothing but fish and seaweed here for us to eat. However, Private Siat must have harbored infatuation in his heart.

I've mentioned before that after our first hostile encounter with a tribe living just north of Surprise the rest of the tribes in the area respected us and looked to maintain friendly, or, at the very least, cordial relationships. That first battle was more of a scuffle from a military standpoint, but our training, mounted cavalymen, and airships saw us easily defeat the small force they had sent to bloody our nose. We had five wounded, and killed 20 of our attackers while capturing the rest, though I'm sure some got away as the undergrowth at the ruin's edge is dense, and we were not yet familiar with the primitive's skill with the terrain.

In that battle, the primitives had brought children with them, I suppose to bloody them in some Yagnarist tradition. Private Siat was one of those assigned to corral those children we captured. But that night, the majority of them escaped. Whether or not it was his simple negligence, or they were able to trick their way to freedom, or he let them go, he had to be punished, so I put him to digging a seemingly endless series of latrines. I thought it would break his spirit a little and bring him back in line, but I will now admit that it did the opposite.

When he was not digging, he would wander to the edge of the camp where the local primitives would gather in the late afternoon, and converse with them. He clearly was talented linguistically for he had picked up enough of their language in a few short weeks to converse with them. His commanding officer had reported to me that he felt Private Siat had been spending too much time with the natives, and that it was suspected he had even snuck away from camp on

the last few rest days to spend time in their camps.

I had him brought before me, where I lectured him about Urda's grace, the investment Thace had made in his training and in bringing him to the New World, and that he was pushing my lenient boundaries with his extensive fraternization with the Elves. I made him swear that he would stop his contact, and assigned him to airship duty, starting the next day. I hoped that was that, but was not surprised to hear from his commanding officer that Private Siat had not reported for his new assignment, and that he was not to be found anywhere within camp. His bunk had been cleared out, and we could only assume that he had deserted.

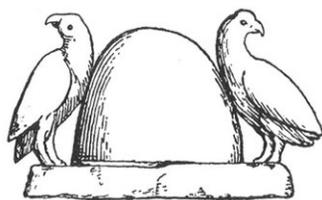
A subtle loneliness had begun to settle over the men by this time as the distance from home was felt more and more each morning. I should have ordered a party out into the bush to track Private Siat down, arrest him, drag him back to camp, try and execute him for desertion. Instead, assuming that his life expectancy would be short living alone in such a harsh and unforgiving land, I ordered one of our carpenters to carve an Urdan Branch, and I added his name to the list of deceased, which at that time was still very short.

It wasn't until some weeks later that the three Elves were brought before me. Two young ones, and the most ancient specimen that I had yet to see, supported by her youthful companions. At this time I called for Evus, one of the handful of Elven converts to join us, as he was by far our best translator, and there was the sense about this elder that it would be important to get an accurate account of her words.

She said they were there to pay their debt, their slave price for Siat. Apparently he was still alive, and well, and in their care. She explained that his heart had been called by Yagnar, and that he now was one of her family. One of

the things that Yagnar had taught her was that the price was always to be paid. And in this case, the slave price, as it was translated for me, must be paid. At this point she crouched down and began drawing in the dirt of the floor. After a few quick marks I recognized the ruins; that squiggle was the River Feast, and those the large rubble buildings that once stood in what we were calling the Center Square. Within a few minutes her map detailed the ruins. Her general map sketched out, she began circling various areas, five in total. They were areas that we had surveyed, but found nothing immediately promising. And here, she told us, those five locations held some of the undiscovered secrets of the New World, and that knowledge of their locations was payment for Siat.

Not really knowing what to say, I thanked her, and assured her that it was a fine price, and now that Siat's slave price had been paid he was never to return. She smiled, and had her two young helpers take her from my tent, and from our camp. I still remember the exact words, or sounds, she used when she named those places. They were unlike any other utterances the primitives of this New World had ever vocalized in my presence, nor did Evus know how to translate them, or what they meant. "Ia'nah, Rekal'th, Para'arrapat, W'znt, H'thus." I shudder writing the words, as now they are inextricably linked in my mind to the things we found. But to understand the natures of those five locations I need to finish explaining the more mundane aspects of the New World.



III. EXCAVATIONS

I have already mentioned how the land dwelling flora and fauna are inedible, and how a great plague of unimaginable scope stopped a war by killing nearly all of the participants. These primitive Yagnarists Elves take pride in their history and have been very forthcoming. At first I took their stories as nascent creation myths. But over the last five years with our work here in Surprise we have unearthed enough supporting evidence of their tales, as well as additional evidence to begin to fill in some gaps. From *the Wall of Urda's Gifts* we learned of the arrival of the first inhabitants to this land. From *Liekki's Tower*, now laying horizontally in a marsh, we learned of Yagnar's appearance in the New World untold eons ago. From *the Chapel of Urda's Might* we learned of how she conquered Yagnar and banished him. In *the College of Medicine* we first were shown the power and cruelty of the plague, and our revulsion was only deepened when we finally opened the place the old Elven woman had called "Para'arrapat". There are too many dig sites, specific chains of artifacts, carvings, Elven tales, and other remnants of a dead society to list them all here. But what I will do is attempt to put down the general, far reaching history of the New World that we have discovered.

First the Eldar, an ageless race of immortals, came to the New World and found a deadly, but tamable land on which to establish a wide spread peaceful civilization consisting of Nine Realms named Hamarscha, Kasichoke, Mayatilochen, Pikaulaynen, Rautakookolo, Sayartinvayato, Valas, Valkosia, and Yilautsanko. Then Yagnar appeared in a cloak of fire and chaos to destroy the land. At first he pretended to be an unknown Eldar, and wooed the realms by creating powerful magic items and casting powerful magic



spells for their benefit. He did this so he could gain access to the Eldar's Sacred Flame, and eventually his gifts and seeming supplication convinced the foolish ruler of Yilautsanko to grant him his wish. And yet Yagnar did not reveal himself, for he was using the Sacred Flame to forge crowns for each of the nine Sovereigns; powerful magical devices to ensure their rule and eventually Yagnar's dominion over all. Finally someone in Yilautsanko saw what Yagnar was up to and they stopped allowing him to use the Sacred Flame as a forge fire. But not many were suspicious

enough of Yagnar (how that might have been I can not say) and he was made Regent of one of the Nine Realms. He was able to use the power of a great volcano to forge the Last Crown for himself. It will come as no great surprise to the common Sahûlian, but this Last Crown gave Yagnar power over the other realms, though a few did manage to remain somewhat independent, probably by refusing to use Yagnar's Gifts. Eventually, Yagnar had consolidated enough power that he demanded of Yilautsanko the Sacred Flame. Upon Yilautsanko's continued refusal, centuries of war ensued that eventually saw Yagnar capturing and removing the Sacred Flame and cursing the vast majority of the Eldar to live mortal lives. It was then that Urda sent a great fierce serpent, who, along with Beetle, Owl, and Raven rid the world of Yagnar and his most powerful allies in a battle that left the New World magically scarred, but free of the personification of Evil.

For centuries the war decimated Eldar tried to rebuild their civilization despite the unpredictably destructive magical energies that still washed the land. They did manage to preserve some of their previous nations and Pikaulaynen, Sayartinvayato, Valas, Valkosia, and Yilautsanko lived on to be joined by new nations Rikkoutuneiden and Lahjontia. But once again, not unsurprisingly, war broke out as remnants of Yagnar's power and the corrupting nature of the Crowns fought for domination. The nations of Sayartinvayato, Valkosia, and Yilautsanko were the only ones to remain unswayed by Yagnar's charms, and were the only ones to stand against his gathering minions. War embroiled all of the New World and it did not look good for those resisting Yagnar as they were greatly outnumbered. But again Urda intervened, not with fierceness, but with indifference. Hooded figures began appearing throughout

the land and in their wake a plague of death the color of blood. Urda's Red Death thrust the New World back into a balanced state under Urda's first church, the open sky.

It is this Land that we have come upon, the primitive people still longing for the power and the gifts of Yagnar. We do hear rumors both from these Elves and the Kommolek that there still are Nations of some kind in the New World, however, we ourselves have no evidence of this. If it is true, one can only expect the New World to birth another great war now that Yagnar's Sahûlian Avatar is on his way. The Elves are giddy with this news, celebrating, sharpening their weapons, stockpiling arrows, drilling their warriors and practicing their hedge magic with abandon. They are vigorously breeding to make more faithful for Yagnar, and the brush is awash with the crying and cooing of children.



IV. THE FIVE CHAMBERS

We have pieced together this general history from the Ruins of Surprise and the tales of the locals. But it wasn't until we began opening the first of the Five Chambers that the old Elven woman told us about that we were able to fill in some large gaps.

I will use the names of these chambers sparingly as to write them still sends chills down my spine, and I fear by repeating them too often, more than memories will be summoned.

V. THE FIRST CHAMBER

Ta'nah had been opened sometime recently and scavenged of any small movable objects. However, the wall carvings and larger statuary had been left intact and from them we learned of the power of Yagnar's Crowns, though nothing of the secret behind the Sacred Flame. I have begun to suspect that the Sacred Flame was just a focus of Yagnar's covetous nature, and not an integral part of the forging of the Crowns. He was making Nine Crowns for the nine immortal Sovereigns of the Nine Realms, but had only created eight by the time he was stopped from using the Sacred Flame. The Last Crown, the one he placed upon his own head, gave him power over those who wore the other Eight. Only a few were able to resist and put down their Crowns.

VI. THE SECOND CHAMBER

The second chamber, Rekal'th, was mostly empty of anything we could make much sense of despite the refuse that had accumulated on its floor. The River Feast in decades, perhaps centuries, of its summer flooding had washed whatever was here away, and in its place left nothing but a foul-smelling mash of rotting vegetation. Once we had dug out the layers of decaying plant remnants and cleaned up the room and the walls we revealed an inlaid inscription circling a large, horse-sized boulder that had been set into the floor, almost like an altar, rising up to our waists. Its white surface contained a slight blue swirl, and in various corners was rubbed smooth as if polished by years and years of hands pressed, caressing its edges. The inscription was titled "The Immortal Plateau" and is loosely translated as follows:

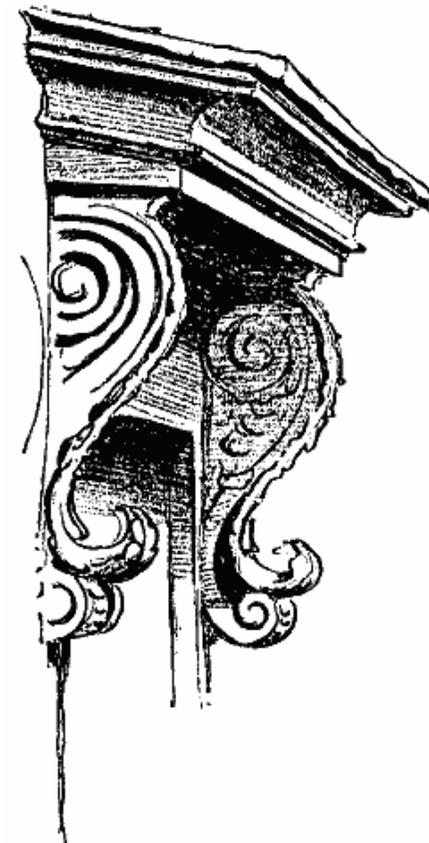
*Urda's fires, ever-burning
In the hearts of those who slept
Deep within the womb of great Katán*

*Trees of Urda's Summerlands
Cannot move me, cannot be
As ever green as those of fair Katán*

*All of Urda's vast creation
Taken in as one great rooftop vista
From the roof of towering Katán*

*Sons of Urda, ever-remembering,
The history eaters, those who slept.
Our grandfathers still breathe the oracles of Katán*

It seems that this Plateau of Katán is where the remaining Immortal Eldar reside, and has always remained free of Yagnar's control. Great vistas, immortals that have seen all that history has to offer, fierce warriors and untold mysteries. It is a place that I dream of visiting someday, but know that time will work its final wonder upon my body before I am able to set foot on its grassy plains.



VII. THE THIRD CHAMBER

Lost my first Saurian to one of these Chambers at W'znt, and would lose three more before we would seal it up and not return. Thinking back over the years, I wonder if I could have done anything differently. By the time we were told of these Chambers by the old Elven woman, we had all settled into a comfortable routine of exploration, excavation, and cataloging, removing and packing any artifacts we might have found. All the dangers here were mundane, and we had learned how to avoid them; cave ins, the large murder birds, or the seemingly safe shallow water where the mudskimmers could easily take a leg. My attentions were becoming less and less required as my lieutenants had learned their jobs so thoroughly, and my continued emphasis on procedure and drill, that morale was steady, if somewhat low. Everyone knew how to do their jobs safely and efficiently.

The evening after the ancient Elven woman had told us of these Chambers, I had called three lieutenants whose work crews were nearing completion of their current excavations to my tents, and we all began drawing up a new excavation scheme. Each crew would, on the completion of work at their current site, then move on to one of the Five Chambers, whichever one was closest to their current work site as to make the transfer of their equipment easier.

Lieutenant Tocora at Ia'nah and Lieutenant Mennendir at Rekel'th both started within days of one another. Lieutenant Vaslas had been delayed by the discovery of a previously unknown and unsuspected room at his current site, so he and his team were delayed beginning at the W'znt site.

Once Lieutenant Vaslas and his team of fifteen began, they easily found the stone door that had been set into the

small square on the interior of the *Place of Quadrants* (a compound designed around the number four). We had originally bypassed this trap door, as it had been assumed it was a simple drain grate. But on further examination it easily levered out on some ingenious mechanical arm to reveal a stone stair. Descending cautiously, lanterns lit, the excavators descended into a damp smelling room that along one wall, rather than stone covered with subterranean growths, opened out into darkness. One excavator approached the open wall cautious of the slick floor, not reassured by the rotten remnants of what was once a wooden railing. As he stood at the edge, lantern held high, a rope secured to his waist and held by companions still on the stairs, braced for any sudden weight, he saw that the space opened up beneath him, and a mere ten feet below was the surface of slowly eddying water under the effects of a subtle current. The water was incredibly clear, and the lantern light revealed a deep pit, full of water that descended some thirty of forty more feet. At the bottom he saw a figure made of stone. Startled by this apparent apparition the excavator flinched, dropped his lantern and jumped away from the edge. There was a splash, a momentary hiss as the water reached the lamp's flame, and then the light went out leaving the room illuminated solely by the lantern on the stairs. The excavator, quickly over his momentary shock, laughed at his own skittishness, explained that at the bottom of the pit there was a statue, sunk in the depths of the crystal clear water. He went on to admit that for a moment, as the surface of the water rippled, and the movement of the lantern made the shadows dance, he had thought that the statue had moved.

The group then proceeded with their examinations, determining that some of the refuse here may have once been furniture, chairs or stools, and that the decayed railing had

once had a gate. There were also architectural hints inside the pit that suggested there once was a wooden platform suspended over the water. They discovered an ingenious light tube that when a lantern was placed in a small cubical would reflect the light downward to emerge at the bottom of the pit, better illuminating the statue.

The only thing of real interest was the statue, thirty or more feet deep. Lieutenant Vaslas sent a runner to where our navy, reduced to a fishing fleet, harbored to requisition one of their breathing bells. The sailors were reluctant to give up a tool which they had been making extensive use of while keeping their hulls clear of a particularly destructive local barnacle, but eventually they relented. While the breathing bell and its support pumps, as well as long spears used to fend off the deadly fish while the divers scrubbed the hulls were being hulled to the dig site, the remaining excavators began building a platform at the waters surface. From here they were able to get a better look at the statue itself, as well as ascertain that there were a number of Kindred sized openings leading off from the pit at various depths.

The statue was clearly of stone, and at one point had been covered by paint, as some seemed to still remain in a few places. It appeared to be twice the size of a normal Saurian, it reared up on four legs, reaching upward with four arms, it was uniformly thick about its torso, which continued for some ways behind as a tail. Its head seemed too small for its body and was turned upwards towards the platform. Some sort of brown seaweed or aquatic plant had anchored itself to the statue's back, and its tendrils languidly twisted in the current. It was unlike any creature we have encountered in the New World, or unlike any that walks, crawls, or swims in Sahûl. It seemed a combination of insect and crustacean, and we thought perhaps it

depicted some ancient mythological creature of the New World, but our local friends professed no knowledge of such a legendary beast.

Once the platform had been constructed and the breathing bell and its pumps and tubing had been secured and arranged, the lighting tube outfitted with a long burning lantern, an excavator was chosen, dressed in the breathing bell, secured by rope and lowered into the pit. Ropes with weights and various straps had already been lowered, ready to fasten to the statue so that it could be raise it to the surface for closer inspection.

The breathing bell is a weighty contraption, and without its tethers to the surface would immediately sink the sophant wearing it to the bottom. Our diver was secured by two ropes, held by two excavators standing on the recently constructed wooden platform. The pump that provided a continuous flow of fresh air was resting on the stone floor ten feet above the water, powered by two sailors skilled in its use, pumping air in a steady rhythm. They were accompanied by three others, long spears clutched at the ready to fend off any river predator that might find its way into the chamber. Our diving Saurian also had a short spike he could use for close in defense against such a fish, should it appear.

No one is really sure what happened, but as soon as our diver reached the bottom of the pit, those at the surface could clearly see that he took a moment to examine the statue, they thought to ascertain the best anchor points for our ropes. He then reached for a rope, and moved close to the statue, and threaded the strap around its waist. Then the diver jerked violently away from the statue, but was held fast as his anchor ropes had become entangled on one of the statue's arms. The two Saurians holding the lines

linked to our diver swear that the statue moved, though those on spear duty confess they did not see such a thing, but admit their attentions had been focused on the underwater entrances to the pit.

They all did see the diver thrashing and twisting trying to free himself. The two Saurians on the anchor ropes began pulling, attempting to pull their comrade free of the statue. They took up the slack, and then could pull no more, it was as if the ropes had been anchored to the stone floor. The two Saurians pumping air to the diver, noting that something was amiss, concentrated on providing safe airflow. Then, without warning the ropes came free, and a little cheer went up, but soon was doused, as there was no weight to the ropes and they slid too easily free of the water, revealing snapped ends.

Looking over the side, reaching for the other anchor ropes that would presumably be used by the diver to reach the surface, they watched in horror as their comrade had taken out his short dagger, and was stabbing it ineffectually at the statue itself. Then the scene was suddenly obscured by a mass of bubbles, and a shout came from those at the pump, as water began pouring from the air return. The air lines had been severed as well, and no matter how strongly they pumped, they would not be able to get fresh air to the diver below, so they stopped pumping, rushing down the ladder to see if they could lend their backs to any of the remaining anchor ropes.

As the bubbles cleared they all saw the last twisting gasps as the breathing bell filled up with water, the diver's ropes stuck fast in the hand of the statue, his breathing tubes sheared close to the bell, his defensive dagger dangling from its wrist strap no longer clutched in his hand. They watched, unable to do anything. One Saurian jumped into

the pit, thinking to swim down to assist his friend, but the others pulled him back. The diver had drowned.

After some time, Lieutenant Vaslas came to me with this story, only slightly modified. He did not mention that some of the excavators had claimed to see the statue move. It was only later, after we had tried to recover the diver's body and the breathing bell and had lost three more excavators that they admitted their claims. As he explained to me finally, just before we decided to close up W'znt for good that he himself had seen one of the statue's arms reach out, its claw locking around a rescue diver's arm holding him secure as another claw quickly snapped his anchor rope. We would have lost another breathing bell if it hadn't been for sturdy chain used in place of the rope. Unfortunately there was no way to armor the breathing tubes, and the statue had cut those well before we could yank the diver free.

I could see no reason to expend more lives and more equipment there, so we withdrew, closing the grate, and burying it beneath dirt and rubble. The carpenter was put to work carving four Urdan Branches for the four drowned, unrecovered excavators whose bodies we were forced to leave in the pit with the statue.



VIII. THE FOURTH CHAMBER

While the body and breathing bell recovery were going on, Lieutenant Mennendir had finished excavating Rekal'th, and have moved on to Para'arrapat. This site was located in the basement of one of the buildings in the Medical College, and had been overlooked due to dense vine growth and years of plant decay. After removing the detritus, Lieutenant Mennendir and his group uncovered a simple door. They had to destroy the door itself to get into the Chamber it so wisely shut off from the world. Here, I am glad to say, we found no mortal horrors, but my dreams will be haunted none the less.

Inside this Chamber we discovered our most disturbing and visceral evidence of Urda's plague and it's effects. By this time rumors of what had happened in W'znt had begun to circulate, and at first the excavators refused to enter the Chamber as the fifteen statues stood silently, promising to animate and clutch at anyone that should venture close. After Lieutenant Mennendir had reminded them of their duty and reasserted his command, they entered the Chamber. A series of half scale stone sculptures, painted most lifelike, detailed visually the process of death brought on by Urda's Red Plague of Indifference, her most terrible aspect. At first the family of three Elves stood next to each other, healthy and strong, disrobed to show the extent of their eventual decay. The next group showed their skin color lightened, and blood could clearly be seen seeping from their noses, eyes, ears, and other areas. This was a medical college, and these statues were created for medical description, and some of the excavators blushed at the Elven nakedness. The statues following showed eyes blind, full of blood, and their very skin had turned red as their life

force began to seep out of their very pores. The next group showed the woman of the family laying face first on the ground, dead, a massive amount of blood poured from her mouth and other orifices. The man was doubled over, still vital enough to live and fight, but in clear decline. The child, however, seemed to have survived, and was on the mend, his skin color returning and his body covered with crusted blood. His eyes were clear, though still tinged with sickness. The last group showed the child standing strong over his parents, his mother much as before, dead at his feat. However, it is his father's condition that I try to avoid thinking of, as he fought for life on all fours, the very flesh of his limbs had pulled away in gelatinous blobs, the muscles of his stomach had dissolved and his organs drooped from their natural cavities. On closer examination we could see that the very bones revealed as the flesh slipped away were cracked and broken.

As if this diorama were not enough, in a side chamber we found detailed carvings describing the same things, and what appeared to be an open coffin. The coffin had been filled to the brim with a yellow orangish substance much like amber, and was covered in a thick dust. After we had cleaned off the dust, and polished a portion of the amber's surface, we were able to look inside, where we saw a figure similar to the sculpture of the man, only full sized. His skin was clearly discolored with blood, and in parts of his body his flesh was deeply bruised and pooling off the bone. They had preserved a corpse that was in the final stages of dying from the Urda's Red Plague of Indifference, for what purpose I could not say.

There was another side chamber here that contained medical diagrams and disease descriptions. There were also three large stone containers containing oil. Submerged in

the oil were 25 metal plates. They were not so much like the pages from a book as each plate seemed to be self contained in its style, perhaps more like illustrations: self contained and descriptive on their own. The text was written in a language that we could not read, nor could our translators, and judging from the images engraved on each plate they seemed to detail individuals along the line of historical portraits. What they have to do with the Plague of Indifference we were unable to ascertain.



IX. AN INTERLUDE

After the ordeal that Lieutenant Vaslas and his men suffered in W'znt, I ordered a day of rest for all the men, even stopping Lieutenant Mennendir and his work in the Medical College. I knew that rumors would run rampant unless I took immediate action, and distributed the most truthful story, if lacking some of the more disturbing details.

The local Elves here were always very intrigued with our horses as they were more powerful than their local riding birds, though not quite as fast. We had to keep a close watch on our stables as we had lost ten horses due to some Elven thievery shortly after our arrival here. This interest worked both ways, and some of my cavalry Saurians had become interested in the speed and dexterity exhibited by the flightless Elven mounts, the kura. They had worked with our Elven converts, and had captured a few wild kura, and for entertainment had learned to ride them. These cavalry Saurians had been petitioning me for some time to hold a more formal event based around kura riding, and I thought that now might be the time as to help take their minds off our recent tragedy.

Over the next week, a course was laid and cleared of rubble. Some of the friendlier locals were invited to observe, and we even sent an invitation to the local Kommolek commander. By this time we had closed up W'znt and were all trying to forget it. Lieutenant Tocora had finished his work on Ia'nah, and was moving on to H'thus, which was proving to be a major excavation just to locate the entrance to its Chamber's door.

One of the local groups of Elves, when they heard a race was in order, requested that they be allowed to participate. After some discussion with the cavalry commanders,

it was decided that we would hold a series of three races. First would be a simple race on horses by Thacians. Then would follow a race on kura by Elves, and then to close out the events would be the long sought-after race of kura by my cavalry Saurians.

The day arrived, and the air hung thick in the bright sun. Once again I had given the men a day of rest, and only left a small guard on duty, though the last year had seen no incidents with the locals, it always paid to be cautious. The race route through the Ruins of Surprise were lined with Elves and Saurians, the largest crowd around the finish line. The first race was my cavalymen on their horses. It was an exciting event with only one mishap, but the commander of the Third Light Division won the race, with Lieutenant Tocora being thrown and breaking his leg when his horse stumbled on a slick stone surface as the lieutenant tried to pass a group of riders clogging the path.

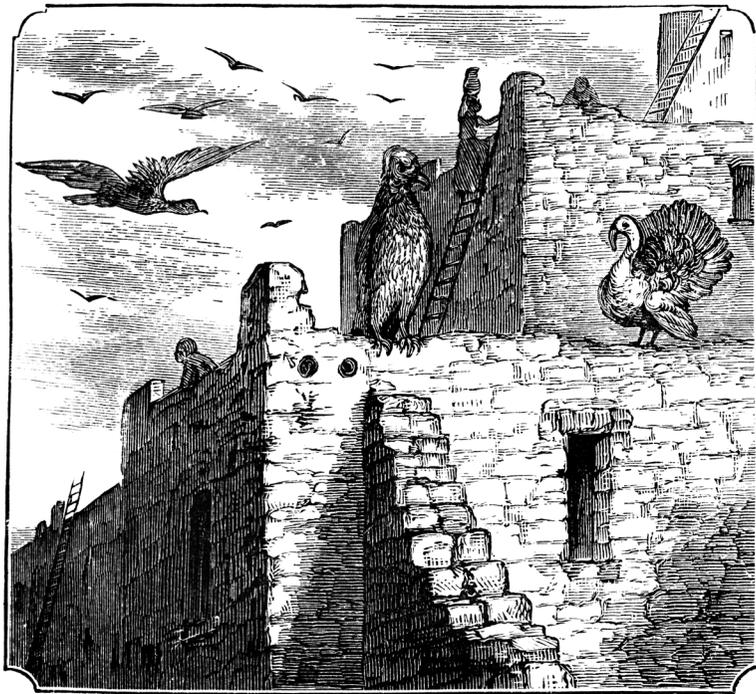
The Elven riders put on quite a show, wearing full war paint, and riding with weapons drawn. They had requested that, according with their practices, bow targets be set up in three locations over the course, which I obliged them. Their mounts, larger and faster specimens of the riding birds than my men were planning on riding, sped through the course, their riders slowing only momentarily to fire arrows at the targets. Oddly, the kura rider that crossed the finish line first was not the winner as he had missed one of the targets. The second place finisher had struck each target, and was within the misses of the leader, so was catapulted into the winner's slot.

As the day wore on, rain threatened in the distant west, but it did not diminish the crowd, as the Saurian kura race was the main draw and both my men and the local Elves expected quite the spectacle. The fifteen riders lined up

nervously at the start, their horseriding reflexes subsumed under the strange and different requirements these large, wingless birds demanded. With a wave of the flag, they were off. By the first bend not one hundred yards into the course the first Saurian was dismounted as his kura stopped to gobble up some grub it had spied in a bush. This sent up a great roar of laughter from both my men and the visiting Elves. The fellow was unhurt, but a bit chagrined, and he unwisely attempted to mount his kura again, unsuccessfully, and then proceeded to chase it around the starting area.

Two more riders were dismounted by distracted birds before the halfway mark, and one bird and rider took a detour that disqualified them both by the rules, and by the added hour it took for him to regain control and find his way back. Three riders seemed to have learned the subtleties of the kura riding, and were gamely competing for the lead. Chardoeth, a city boy from Sendarein whose father I had served with on the Steppe, road with fierce control; Langolio, the son of a noble family from Snamarthis rode with abandon, but I dare say it was his kura's will to win that kept the pair near the lead. And Tethu, the smallest Saurian among my troops, an airman from the mountain region of Andiga, was as dexterous as his kura. He and his mount road with one will, and took the lead shortly after the halfway mark, as beast and rider raced with the same rhythm. It was this diminutive Saurian who managed to hold onto the lead, and win the race. The Elves were even cheering him on at the end, without the mirth exhibited by those at the start. For his victory Tethu won himself and his unit another day off, as well as a special meal. The Elven guests had also brought a prize, and bestowed upon him one of their finely wrought bows and a quiver of arrows.

As the prizes were being revealed a light rain began to fall, and the crowd dispersed, the Elves returning to their wilderness camps, and my men to the rest and recuperation in their tents. Lieutenant Tocora had been removed to the hospital tent and his leg tended to, but he was in no shape to resume his command, so I appointed Lieutenant Collangio to take over for him in the morning and continue the excavations of H'thus.



X. THE LAST CHAMBER

Iwish our new orders from home had arrived before we were able to open that accursed place, and that we had left it undisturbed. Since that star cursed event I shun the cloudless night sky and pray for the dawn to come.

The day after the race saw the drizzle dry up as the clouds receded into the east, the breeze bringing the first scents of fall. Lieutenant Collangio had stopped by my tent before he made his way to the work site. We had talked about the race of the previous day, and laughed at the way the Saurians looked perched so awkwardly on the kura. We had discussed, in all seriousness, training the men to ride the kura in case we were to lose a significant number of horses without being able to replace them. He mentioned that he had been up late in the evening writing a letter to his wife.

For me the day proceeded like any other. I looked over all the reports from my commanders, and everything seemed to be in order. We had even had a bit of good luck with the sailors and their fishing, as they had encountered a rather large school of a meaty fish we are calling cowfish, and had been packing away nearly half of the catch for consumption in the lean winter months when the fish wander on to warmer waters.

Lieutenant Collangio was to have reported back to me that evening when the work on H'thus was done for the day, but as I was finishing my solitary dinner I noted he had still not arrived. The change in the weather had been twisting my bones, and my whole body ached, so rather than search him out, I decided to leave it until the morning as I had complete faith in the lieutenant, and knew that he would not have missed his evening report without good

reason. Having written my captain's log for the day, and doused the light, I lay back in my bed, and was just drifting off when I heard something at my door.

I sat up, and lit my lantern to see Lieutenant Collangio standing in the entrance way, turned sideways, almost as if when entering he had caught himself on the tent flap and been pulled off his path. Standing there, without facing me, he spoke as the light filled my tent "Sir, you must come and see."

I threw back my blankets and stood to look him in the eye, shocked that he may have been partaking like some degenerate soldier in the smoking of one of the local poisonous plants. But when I looked more closely at his face, expecting the blood shot eyes and the slack jaw, I saw that something was amiss. His eyes shined brightly, and, rather than turning his head toward me, they were thrust to the sides of his eye sockets. His uniform was wet, and covered with a splattering of mud. His face and head were similarly bespeckled. He had lost his weapon, and there was a slight trickle of blood on his hand.

I immediately grabbed him about his shoulders and pushed him out of the tent and toward our hospital, assuming that he must have suffered some blow about the head in an not unheard of collapse of some treacherous ruined local.

The doctor on hand, a young Saurian still in training on night watch, took us in and seated Lieutenant Collangio. He first removed the lieutenant's jacket and shirt, revealing a small wound on his shoulder. He then began cleaning the mud from his head. Throughout this process the lieutenant sat very still, his head unmoving, neck locked, eyes dashing about. The wet cloth easily washed away the mud, but as it did so it left behind small oval shaped detritus

scattered across his head, crest, and chest. They were in small groupings of about ten, in a repeating pattern that somehow seemed familiar, but I could not place it. On closer examination they appeared to be similar to the mollusks that we would find on the beaches and stuck to our ship's hulls. Only these had a deepness, a smokiness to their shell that, while to the touch they were simply attached to the lieutenant's skin, to look at them was to look into a dark pit of swirling blackness.

The junior doctor began picking at one of the limpets as I continued to question the lieutenant about what had happened. He batted away the doctor's hands, as he repeated, "You must see." At this point the junior doctor said that this was beyond his experience, and that he would wake the senior doctor to attend the lieutenant. Then I was alone with Collangio once more.

"Sir, you must come, and see."

"Lieutenant, what must I see?"

"H'thus, sir."

"But Lieutenant, first I must make sure you are well."

"I am better than ever. And you must come and see."

"And your men, Lieutenant, are you're men well?"

"Oh, they are very well, they have seen, and are well."

Our conversation went on like this for some time until the senior doctor arrived. He quickly examined the lieutenant, taking care to observe his head and crest, as if looking for evidence of a blow. He said that the parasites that had attached themselves to the lieutenant were unlike any in Sahûl, but should most likely release their grip when applied with intense heat. He directed the junior doctor to begin heating up some surgical tools. Unable to find any indication of a head trauma, the senior doctor surmised that the parasites had released some toxin into the lieuten-

ant's blood that was making him daft. The hope was that with the removal of the parasites, the blood would clear itself naturally, and the Lieutenant would be back to his old self.

Once the medical tools were hot enough the doctor selected one and applied its tip to a limpet attached to the lieutenant's crest. The parasite immediately changed color to a deep purple, and fell away from the lieutenant's skin, leaving an oval bruise with a black center. I had two soldiers come and hold him so that his thrashing would not stop the procedure.

"You must go and see, sir. You must see. You see. See sia sia..." The lieutenant began to wail as the limpets were removed one by one, tears in his eyes, splashing down his face.

And now it was time for me to go and see. I warned the doctor that he might soon have more patients, as I feared that H'thus had been some repository of the parasites, and that Lieutenant Collangio and his men had all been infected. I gathered some soldiers, torches, and as an afterthought some barrels of oil. I also ordered the men to cover their skin, and they begrudgingly put on their rain gear.

Marching over to the location of the Last Chamber, I could see that the lieutenant and his team had made good progress that day. The door had been located, and rather than more general excavation, a trench had been dug directly down to the entrance. The door had been broken open, and from the gapping maw of an entrance flickered the light of a single torch, smoky and dim.

I approached first, cautious, and ready to brush aside anything that might fall upon my skin. Stepping over the broken rubble of the door, I stood upon a landing, stairs running down to my left. It took me a few moments to

figure out what it was that I saw, and the men at my back stopped and stood quietly, waiting for my orders, as they could not see the scene below.

The stair descended into a pit whose rough hewn floor was covered in pockmarks and natural basins. Some of these containers were empty, but others were full of a black, oily looking water, and still others were covered in a reddish foam that slopped over their sides. Around these depressions the floor was dark, and thick with some sort of vegetation with the clear tracks of Saurian booted feet. In the middle of the room stood a particularly large soldier, his uniform stripped off and his body covered with the limpets to a denseness such that I could barely see his skin. In his hand was an axe with a long blade of the kind that we used to clear brush.

He stood unaware of our arrival as he was intent on his job. Scattered around his feet were the bodies of his companions, missing limbs, butchered and bleeding. As I watched in uncomprehending silence he reached into the heap and with a few quick chops removed a leg, turning to one of the depressions with the black oily water, and began chopping off the flesh, blood and meat dropping into the liquid, which shortly began foaming. As I looked I could see the tiny limpet like creatures lining the lip of the basin, they moved and crawled over one another leaving behind frothy trails, as they devoured the offering, and as they left behind their seed and eggs in the bloody soup.

Shaking myself out of my horrified paralysis, I motioned for the soldier behind me to step forward. Not giving him time to think I commanded him to shoot the large Saurian covered in the mollusks until he dropped. While he was firing, I commanded the barrels of oil to be brought forward. Ushering the moaning Bowman back out of the

Chamber, I began breaking open the barrels and rolling them down the stairs. Soon the smell of oil mixed with the smell of blood and the smell of the limpets' procreation.

I shouted for the soldiers to get back, and tossed my lantern into the pooling oil. As it flew through the air I swear I saw the mollusks moving like a thick carpet toward the stairs, the occasional one jumping forward to advance more quickly. The flames sprang up as the lantern broke against the bloody floor, and the fire began consuming the parasites. I quickly backed out, not sure if the flood of parasites had made it to the stairs before the fire could stop them.

My soldiers waited silently. I was able to fall back on my decades of experience, keeping the horrified part of my mind that wanted to run and scream bottled up. I had them quickly pull out a few key braces along the trench, collapsing its sides, covering most of the broken entrance to the Chamber of H'thus, leaving a smoking hole that belched a thick, black, somewhat salty smoke.

I moved them back away from the site in case any of the limpets might escape and had another barrel opened and the surrounding ground soaked, a torch at the ready. I left them with instructions to finish burning the ground and cover the site once the smoke and fire subsided, and headed back to the hospital where I found the junior doctor collecting the dead mollusks in a jar and Lieutenant Collangio resting peacefully, his face, crest, and chest covered in the odd bruises, and some burns where more aggressive heat had been applied.

XI. ONWARD

Lieutenant Collangio sits here at my desk now, my orders having arrived only recently, thankfully sending us away from this place. The jar of dead limpets removed from the lieutenant sits here too. They don't look like much, even though their color is hard to gaze at for long. The men have been packing up the New World items to be returned to Thace for further study and examination. The preserved plague victim has been buried, and all evidence of its location hidden. Only myself, and the five man detail that buried it know where it is, and they have been sworn to secrecy. I have finished organizing my notes, and telling the tale of our experiences here, and now must decide whether or not to include this jar of innocuous mollusks.

Two days after the H'thus incident I was walking back from a late night dinner with some of my commanders, and stopped to take in the unfamiliar night sky to the north. Fall has begun to work its colorful wonders on the Ruins of Surprise, and the winter sky has begun to show its star field. After five years here it has begun to become familiar, though sometimes I'm still taken aback when I look up and do not see the constellations of home. However, this night, I felt the fear before my rational mind was able to present the cold fact of what I was seeing. Just above the northern horizon there was a grouping of stars I had not given much thought to in years past. But this grouping of stars, this constellation, will always stick in my mind, especially when I look upon poor Lieutenant Collangio, for it is identical to the pattern of scars left by the limpets on his skin.

I will not include this jar of dead specimens. It is better that the only record of this particular event be my words.

Without physical evidence I suspect that the veracity of my tale will be doubted, but better that than some remaining life in these dark, swirling beasts make its way to Sahûl.

— End —

