

# The Traveller

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*This is a story about a man (Altair da Silva Videira) born on some on a planet much similar to what ours will possible be on 2062.*

*In 2090 Altair is transported to another Universe, against his will. Now he wants to travell and see this alien planet. At same time he is affraid. He fear this travell can change him, despite his best efforts do stay the same man.*

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## 0 - The Vortex

They advise to never start a text telling your name, since no one read anything just to know who was the autor, unless it is a a note of confession for a crime. However, my name is Altair da Silva Videira, and I was born and raised in a city called Cuiabá, on a region called Brazil. I used like to travel my world since I became old enough to do that, therefore, after became adult, I moved to another city called Ankara. Then another called Lion. Then another called Yellow Knife. Still another called Akureyri. None of them in the same nation, or near from any other. After that I moved again, only this time not by my choice. I intend to tell you soo how, and to where.

Before that last turn in my trajectory I was a thechnical adviser. My academic education was in Chemical Engineering, however I never made use of it in the regular way. Instead, I used my knowledge to provide advice for science fiction writers. A choice in career made mostly because it allowed my to work by internet. What means I could do my work anywere in my planet.

Since I can't foretell were this will end, if anywere, let me start by explaining to you about my original home planet. No more than the bacic, since that isn't my actual object here.

We call my planet Earth. Like yours and any other reached by this phenomenon that allows me to try that communication Earth has the same Moon and the same stars in sky. We have only one intelligent species in or Universe, ours, as far as we can prove. We count time, and by our accounts the year is 2090 from the birth of a God, called Christ; however the people who still believe in and Gods, or any prenatal element, are rare this days. According to our History they used to be almost every human not so long ago.

We have one big 'Global Nation', living together whit many local laws. There is extreme legal diferences between men and women, but men were getting back some degree of legal rights and aiming for equity, before I leave.

Some say we do have slavery again, after two or more centuries believing in the immorality of it, but what we actually have is mandatory labor for convicted criminals. Violent crime is a serious problem everywhere, but is an old problem in most places: Education does not fix it, for a long time we believed it should but now finally we know better.

Birth control must be the more serious and urgent bone of contention according to most people, since medicine keeps extending live expectancy even accounting for the murders and we still try to reject by principle the two obvious ways to deal with that.

As for technology: fast transportation around the globe, more energy than we can consume (distribution sometimes can be a problem), free communication in real time, two growing cities on the neighbor planet we call Mars. No mass extinction event in our foreseeable future. A nice place most days, if you ask me.

I had been an adult for little more than one decade, and as I told you most of it was spent traveling. Never visited Mars though, despite the fact that I could stay only up there as well: there is no human being outside our planetary system but in theory our communication should work fine to communicate with people anywhere in our Universe. Just on Earth's Universe, however.

I was on a tourist island, on holiday, when the vortex opened five footsteps to my left.

Before I could move it took me, my beach chair, and the alcoholic drink I was sipping. Placed all three on a narrow strip of green land between a mountain range and a dune desert. My drink was lost on the

grass. I was alone, naked, and confuse.

Two directions were all I had, since the strip of grass was my only real option. It seemed artificial to me, neither large nor hooked enough to be natural. A line litte more that 30 yd large, disappearing on the horizon in both directions. I picked one.

Before night fall I saw a deep valey. My green line widened to embrace a large bay, powered by seven rivers. I was on the top of a hill and could see the ruins of what seemed to me a ancien city, destroyed long time ago.

Outside the bay; near, but not near enough to allow a swimmer to reach it\_ at least if the swimmer was myself\_ I saw an island. On that island there was a city which looked smaller than the one in ruins must have been.

Not far away from me there was a circular stone tower, whit five floors. Light and sound of voices coming from it. Of course, I had no choice but to find out who was inside.

The door was made of iron and heavy wood, but was open. One single room, some chairs, six men. All but one dressed in leather armors, carrying swords and knives; two of them had also wood shields. One was wearing a cassock made of thick silk under a light waistcoat of leather, and gloves.

My entrance caused no surprise in this room. They obviously were accostumed to see people like myself.

The men dressed in silk spoke to me, and after a moment, somehow, I could understand him; despite the fact that I didn't know the meaning of any word used by him.

His name was Helicon, and he presented himself as a mage. That building was a here to welcome, and test, people like myself.

No one was responsible for my abduction, that was effect of some natural force. However the local governments needed to avoid complications. They made places like that, to agglutinate the immigrants. To find the ones who could be useful, kill the inconvenients, let the rest to take care of themselves if they can.

I had many questions to Helicon, however he would say nothing before I answer all his question, and pass the tests. Most of it made no sense to me, however became even more clear to me that I was not the first person from my homeworld who had entered this tower.

Finally he seemed satisfied. Apparently I had some potential Enough to be given a chance of citizenship in the city in charge of this tower: Lutianen.

Helicon of Lutianen finally gave me a first description, told me what I should expect from now on. Also, but only after all that, he gave me some clothes; which were similar to the ones used by the warriors on the first floor, but did not come with weapons.

The humanity on this planet organized itself on tribes, castles, and cities. Each one of this many groups is sovereign, and stay free by right of conquest: meaning, war. There is law only where there is warriors to enforce it (except by one important exception), and not many rules are shared by all.

One thing everyone agrees upon is the Law of Exclusion. Since they had this natural phenomenon dropping people from strange alien worlds right on their backyards for all know existence of this world, they decided to ban any alien technology brought after their "Age of Spiders". Was the only way to avoid chaos, according to Helicon.

They do have ways to enforce that particular Law. And that brings us to the subject magic, or, as they call it, "Xar". That rare field of expertise actually has political and military consequences here: and mages from all nations will mark for death any one who violates the Law of Exclusion. They know when a crime against that particular law is committed, where, and who is responsible for it no matter who isolated the crime scene is (I suppose they could know many other things, using the same method; albeit, to do that they all would have to agree about the investigation, and there is little chance that all mages ever agree in join together to do more than enforce the Law of Exclusion).

Two other things at least everyone from this planet believe. One: human males are natural owners of human females, who, by logical consequence, are their natural slaves; however civilization needs some slave men, and some free women, to get by. Two: human life is not more or less important than any other kind; therefore you will see here no human rights, no movement against genocide or concern for how another nation cares for their children (most cities let the parents decide if their children will live or die until the young grow old enough to assume a place as useful citizens) ; suicide is a natural right here. One almost never exercised by selfish reasons, but that only because people here like too much to be alive. Also, fair duel between free men does not, ever, constitute a crime.

Women born free stay free, as a general rule, as long as they stay protected by the nation they are from. The moment they step outside their cities, feudal domains, or tribes, they can be enslaved any

time, by any free man, legally: makes no difference if they left their nations willingly or illegally carried, by force or deception.

That rule of enslavement alone makes every woman not from this planet a slave, as soon as anyone finds her: even the ones who do have the rare and unpriced potential to deal with Xar will be branded and locked on collar and chains. Only alien men have any chance to become free people here. On the other hand also only men have the chance to be killed in their first days here, just for failing some tests.

Two warriors accompanied me to a small sailboat, and took me to the island city of Lutianen. Our communication was not feasible, since they didn't have the necessary magic to make it possible.

They left me near to a castle. This castle has stone walls, black and high. And hexagonal towers above such walls, leaning over the sea. It is not, obviously, anything near the huge buildings common on my overpopulated homeworld; still, in this alien and mostly primitive world, it does impose itself as something to be respected.

The two warriors left me on a stone pier where some old men, dressed like if he was Helicon's rich uncle, was waiting for us to sit on a comfortable terrace.

Next morning I started my new life, as a student, inside that same castle. Two years after that I left the Black Centaur Tower of Lutianen as an inexperienced sigrax: a low practitioner of Xar. Deemed unworthy of the high costs full and true Xar Masters need to become the proper mages, the ones who never need swords or shields to defend themselves; the ones able to shape the landscape, and the destiny of nations by pure willpower.

For Black Centaur professors to give a sigrax to their city always feels like a half abortion, a bathos of some sort. To me the feeling was much less blue, and much more bright.

I was actually free for the first time since the day when I saw the vortex. Now I knew Lutianen, a bit. True to be told, more from the windows than anything else: still, I was no longer lost on that strange Universe. I was a civilized man, citizen of this city. True, I was beginning my new life as the lowest type of mage. Just happen that be “the lowest sort of mage” still places a person above most other free men on this planet.

In top of all that, a true and proper mage must follow many rules, and deal with many obligations: to his city and, even, to his World. A mere sigrax is spared from most of it. We can travel as we please, rent ourselves as mercenaries for any nation save the ones currently at open war against our home city, be normal people as no true mage is allowed to be.

When I gave my first step outside Black Centaur, being no longer their student, I knew exactly where I was going: to the port, to look for the first merchant ship going somewhere, anywhere. I had to see this World for myself!

First thing I saw was that: to travel this world would be more complicated than I had expected.



# 1 - Luciola from New Castle

Lutianen used to have three kings for about five thousand years. Until the man who was the Ruler of Law and Diplomacy at the time decide to kill the other two kings and take all power. He led a happy and prosper Era, for ten months: then died mysteriously.

A time of marvel and mystery begun. The twenty two years after that our polis has thirty one soverains, one at each time. Every single one died mysteriously.

Until King Cerbion. He was twelve years old when he became tirant. A hundred and forty when he died. His face is everywhere, today. However until he die there was no single statue of him on all Lutianen. Cerbion will never be replaced, I believe. He was a strong, genial, boodthirsty and wise man, just mad enough to do the job.

King Cerbion died about a year after my arrival, and about a year before my last day as a student at Black Centaur. Lutianen had been almost reduced at mere pirate port before him, but was once again a prosper and respected nation by the time Cerbion tranquilly perish. The monopoly of one end of the nearest Green Line\_ the popular name for the Vortex Lines, which are the lines were the vortex mostly deposit the involuntary immigrantes like myself\_ had been used to give impulse to city's economy; the rights of citizenship once much more restricted had been extended by Cerbion to most "involuntary immigrants" , as long we were usefull and accepted to fully adopt city's laws.

However many ancien lineages and institutions in the polis saw that "Policy of Welcome " as a dangerous and unpredictable nonsense. Lacking the strenght his grand grandfather had, king Cerrival was forced to restrict the field of options for "iis" like myself. The navy, both merchant and marcial, was the first field targeted by this new policy.

I admit, I love Lutianen no matter how dangerous and problematic this polis can be. It is a gorgeous place, quite alive. Also, it is the place were I was accepted and allowed to learn what I needed to became a free person. The nation in this strange world were I am not a strange, but a citizen. In some respects I may still be a second class citizen, even so; that is far better than be the unwanted intruder.

As you must know by now I am not from this planet, or even from this Universe. And I did not came here for my own will, or by the will of anyone else. Was a impersonal force of nature, know by the people on this planet for a long time: It is called the vortex. That 'kidnapped' me from my home Universe to let me here, it reaches many diferent Universes but affects that one more than any other. In other Universes no one even notices the vortex, it just take a few people, sometimes animals and eventually objects, but mostly people. I had never heard about the powerfull force of nature before I saw it; except maybe as a legend about swirls in the sea, faire circles working as doors open to a magical realm, things know to be just fantasy.

Here is Sharitarn: the planet were I must adjust myself, or die trying. The vortex don't seem to take people from here, but the opposite is quite usual. People on that planet know more than they would like

about the vortex, because they must deal with all the gifts brought by the swirl. Sharitarn is where the sewage ends, so to speak.

Here I learned that, to my great luck, I was born with the rare potential to become able to use magic. After that I failed to become a mage, despite all the free education I was given; but became the next good thing, a sigrax. A sigrax is someone who uses magic\_ according with the same basic principles and Ways mages follow\_ just not fuses his entire being with the core of it.

Lutianen is build on an island not far from the Continent. Near to one end of one important vortex line, the same line were I was deposited. I was left somewhere in the line and made one choice between two possible directions.

The opposite choice would lead to a more distant place. But I probably would not have reached that far being as I was: without water, food, or clothes. Walking on that direction if I had luck I could have been captured and slaved by barbarians, either from the mountains or from the desert. The Kialau Mountains are at North of this green line, and the Piwag Desert at South: invisible magical walls protect the line from both sides, however both barriers are faulty in some degree and barbarian tribes from both sides have sigraxes capable to take advantage of such flaws. Fortunately I walked to the right side.

There is a gorgeous bay on the Continent, near to the vortex line. After leave the narrow carpet of grass one almost naturally find this place, a small tower were I first searched for help. The Welcome Tower is were Lutianen, welcome, and tests the victims of the vortex to see what use they may have, if any. Once more I could have ended death, and I probably would have ended slaved. However, the magical potential gave me a place in the prestigious Black Centaur, which is the city facility where new mages are made, and where many veterans advance their skills.

On my home Universe magic only exists as fiction, the nearly extinct superstition called "religion" used to play with the idea of supernatural beings with intelligence and power above human apprehension; but science never found any basis of fact on this "creator", or "creators", of Universe and humanity. So, eventually, general interest for all religious superstitions faded; leaving magic for\_ self declared\_ fiction only.

Imagine my wonder first time I saw a man make a gesture and a whole building appear from thin air. This fellow was a mage, recently approved on his last test to become one.

Not being a mage myself I will never be able to do nothing as big as a building, but I can make more or less half of my weight come into existence, each week. Iron, steel, water, wood...; some sigraxes can make things which look like as if they were alive and, to some degree, they even behave as if they were alive. I have not gone that far, yet.

Some mages can actually make live, new species capable to evolve as any other. They sometimes even give their creations magical characteristics. All that is far beyond what any sigrax can achieve.

Save for a few exceptions we sigrax and the true mages have the same "lines" of magic to choose; they just can do the same we do on a much higher, higher, higher scale. Also, they recover magical energy almost as fast as they use it, while we have to plan carefully how we expend our magic because once it is gone take us hours, days, weeks, to have back what we need to a particular spell. That last

fact explain why mages do not carry weapons, unlike sigraxes; and basically any other free adult male on the planet.

Be a sigrax give me many advantages in life, and make me verry happy. Use magic is a pleasure by itself, but it also can be extremelly dangerous; is usefull, if done properly, but is never 100% save. Still, magic brings also indirect problems, not related with magical properties themselves, and some of them one could not have imagined in advance.

I could not just talk to a capitain, enter his ship, and learn the job from there. I could BUY a ship, if I had the money, but needed a envitation from from someone in the Sailor Caste to enter a course and learn who to behave on a ship. Only after all that I could go inside a ship in city's port: even if this ship was mine!

They do not have passengers, normaly, inside the Ships of Lutianen. To be inside one you must be either crew or cargo.

Well, there is a few places were a citizen of Lutianen can go as a passenger, actually. To the North on the coast there is Rujna, Paudin, and a bit after that Miovar. To the South Guadlu. All this places are villages, not cities. They are independent nations, theoretically, but under the influence and protection of Lutianen.

Miovar is a "closed port" a few families control the place and one need a pass to go any were near it. Guadlu is far too expensive for me, but I visited Rujina and Paudin, gorgeous beaches, well cultivated fields, a not much to see beyond that. The Kailau Mountains close the way to the Continent, no trade routes enter that Mountains, and for a citizen of Lutianen without a good excuse to walk on that direction would be taken as an hostile act from the nomadic Kailau tribes. Adventurers from Lutianen and from the villages enter the mountains all the time, to plunder; mainly to capture free Kailau women to lock them into slave collars; and the reciprocity is equally constant. As friendly as this sport may sound, it includes the notion that any individual caught beyond the borders of his own nation who isn't protected by Trade Fair Agreements or hospitality ties is an enemy, to be dealt with following some sort of shoot on sight protocol.

I do like to travell, and would love to see the Kailau Mountains. Even so, plunder primitive tribes and hunt their women to slave them does not fit my expectation as a wanderer.

Enter a ship from another nation on the Port of Lutianen, on the other hand, would pose an different problem. They did not usually hire new crew members at Lutianen, but sometimes that happens. Any captain would accept a new sailor willing to work hard for a year, in retur of half salary: but only if he could trust the man! That is a big "if".

Magic is a amazing thing, useful and loved, as long you are on dry land. Ships and mages do have a long story, and little love in it to be lost.

Existed, and still exist, powerful ship captains who are also feared mages; but if you ask any man from the sea if he like the idea of ad a mage to his crew, he will assume you jest. Exceptions can be made sometimes, but only if the mage is a healer, and the ship has a crew more schoolirised than the

average.

All that if the mage's name isn't recognizable, it is, because a reputation will carry a lot of weight on this planet. Even a sigrax who uses fire too often can be welcome; if he is, for instance, Prodevix the Agoiovian.

My first day looking for a ship was disappointing, my first week got no better. Since I had no money and no occupation my only option was to accept a half time job on a tavern. Most patrons over there are warrior caste, and to have a sigrax working was helpful to keep the peace from time to time. To me there was also another consideration: on a not so big island like that "warrior caste" also means almost by necessity naval background, and I saw a chance to make a name for myself among the same people who could make my project of life possible.

The Vindictive Squid was among the three largest entertainment establishments of his kind in the city. People would come to drink, eat, see the most gorgeous slave dancers in that part of the World and have sex with them, to bet or take part in fights on one of three inside fight rings, to talk about commerce and war, and, also, of course, share their hate for the new king. As a "low mage" and a ii my political opinion was on great demand, no matter how hard I tried to keep it in deposit.

Every night at least a dozen coups d'état would be planned inside the tavern against Lutianen current regent, two times that number in plans to assassinate King Cerrival. After one week I had been included in all such\_ loud\_ secret plans; and playing an important role to most. Shouldn't have been surprised when the guard came, looking for my. But surprised I was.

The prison brought me the solution to my problem, which was the impossibility to leave the city and travel the world. I never liked to stay for a long time on the same city, made my life based on that, and was very uncomfortable with the risk to be forced to stay for the rest of my life here on Lutianen: even if, as I mentioned before, I do love that city.

However, before I could start my first adventure as a sailor, just to be on a polis was an adventure.

Not far from Black Centaur Castle there is a high tower, as almost every building on Lutianen it is made of gray stone, decorated with marble, granite, and other materials less easy to recognize. However, this particular tower has pulsating veins all over its surface; blue, yellow, red and green veins; they illuminate the night and make the tower visible at distance. This building is the Mage's Main Tower, the place where the mage caste conducts its official business in Lutianen. Every mage and sigrax on Lutianen, citizen or not, must visit the place from time to time, for bureaucratic reasons. That is not a heavy obligation, since the place is extremely pleasant to visit.

Sigraxes and mages can enter debates over there, talk and vote on assemblies: but only if, like myself, they are local citizens. Some reunions are for true mages only and pay respect to subjects which affect not just the city but the entire planet. The true mage's brotherhood is the only global organization on the planet. They mostly concern themselves with the problems created by the vortex: the most constant source of global threats and transformations.

For instance: long time ago the vortex would deposit their victims randomly at any point on the planet. The mage's brotherhood changed that. Now there is only a small chance of any vortex opening outside the

“vortex lines”, or green lines. Mages used natural energy lines to concentrate the vortex, and that made the iis much more manageable.

The global organization of mages also is responsible for enforce the Law of Exclusion, such law prohibits the introduction of any new technology carried by the vortex. That seems to be necessary to protect the native society from constant and unpredictable innovations: after the end of the Age of Spiders nothing brought by the iis was introduced . That was long time before the vortex lines came into existence by the will of all mages on the planet, and they still take very serious the Law of Exclusion.

To me the Main Tower itself was less interesting than the large street which starts on it, and enter the city, going up, all the way to the center of the island. Almost every magic professional lives near to this avenue, almost every shop specialized on magical objects open to this street. It is called Lich Achavevian Street, or just LA Street, and soon became my favorite place to expend free time. Between other reasons because it ends near to Luntianen First Market, from were one can see all the city, and most of the island. If you can find something to buy on the planet, chances are that will be on sale here.

To my surprise I found clothes, musical instruments, and even typical foods from places I knew from my home planet. Well, all that were not actually from my planet, they were made to look like the things I was used to see before the vortex\_sometimes perfect replicas, other just inspired by\_ band t-shirts by the old Brazilian band Velhas Vírgens, from the second half of our XX century were particularly popular that year on Lutianen.

Slave girls for sale on auctions sometimes have necklaces and other accessories characteristic of my birth culture. Was only when I saw a image of a vampire character that I knew from a old RPG book covering the naked back of a gir, in black lines, that I imagined this accessories could have some meaning. And I was right.

Luciola, the tatoored slave girl on auction that morning, was born on New Castle, Earth. I visited this city many times, we could have met eating fish and fries, or dancing on some nightclub. Like myself she came to this Universe by the vortex, only she left our planet five years before me, and was more adapted to local ways.

All women using characteristic decoration from our planet were like Luciola and myself, iis. Unlike men, the women who came from the vortex became slaves allways, no matter who they are or even if they have magical potential or not. Women are natural slaves, that’s what they believe on this planet; only women born free who are inside the city were they are citizen are not supposed to be slaved, and even that safeguard is not absolut.

I could not buy every slave on the market, or even every slave from my home planet on that particular platform. Even so, I decided to buy Luciola.

She is a gorgeous girl, shorty and gracious. She has a round face, back hair, boobs a little smaller than average, large hips, thick and shapelly legs which contrast whit her skinny body. Since she was naked when we met I know her boobs have conical protuberant nipples. That day her hair was reaching below her waist almost covering the butt, and she moved small steps of dance, playing with the eyes in the audience. Hiding behind their hair, spinning around herself whit a malicious smile in her face.

Luciola stopped in the middle of a pirouette when the merchant responsible by the auction called her to the front, and commanded her. One by one, under his instructions she assumed the positions used by slavers to show girls who are beautiful enough to serve as pleasure slaves. By the moment this middle-aged man moved her hair away sideways, slapped Luciola's firm butt, and started to fondle it talking about how low the initial price for that piece was, I was already determined to free the young women from that humiliation. No matter how much that would cost me.

I had some money saved for a magical dagger I was dreaming about, and was still far from achieving that goal. Thanks to that the cost didn't break me. But the price for Luciola was not something light either, I would have to start my savings from almost nothing. Still, I was happy with my decision.

After seeing the sigra shield stitched at the left shoulder on my leather armor the good slaver merchant allowed me to take the slave, and pay him next week. To be part of the city's Mage Caste does bring some advantages, even if you aren't a true mage: we do have some reputation of honesty.

\_Is Luciola your true name?

\_Master may give me any name he wants, because of that Luciola is my true name. My former master chose to call me Luciola, as my new owner you can choose to give me any other name, and that will be my true name from that moment to the one when my master chooses to take the name from me. \_ she clearly started speaking assuming that the question was some sort of test. Took her some time to realize that was not the case, so she reworked the formulation:

\_However, if by "true name" master means the name I used to have as a free woman on my home planet, given to me by my parents, then yes master; I was born Luciola. My former master decided to call me that way after he asked what I was called as a free woman, because he liked the sound of it, Luciola sounds like the name of a slave: only now it is a slave's name, given to me by the man who was my owner at the time. May I ask you something?

\_Feel free to talk, and make any questions you want. But first tell me: how you would like to be called?

\_I am used to be Luciola, so I would prefer to keep that name, if it pleases my master. Are you from Earth, are you not?

\_What gave me away?

\_For one thing you seem ashamed to look at my naked body, and you try to conceal your boner from me bringing your dagger from your side to the front just to cover it. Also, you have chosen for me a tunic instantly after we left the auction, and this tunic is clearly intended to be used as household linen for a free woman from the Fisher Caste: it is clearly too maidenlike for a slave, I was not that sheltered since I left the vortex.

\_How that makes you feel, to be sheltered?

\_A little bit out of my element, to be honest. However I will adapt, fast enough, I'm sure. May I ask your name?

\_ Altair.

\_Nice to meet you, Altair! I never met a sigrax before, let alone a sigrax from Earth. That was the first time you buy a woman, I bet.

I could not bring myself to speak, or raise my eyes from the ground. I imagined she would burst into laugh. However, after what seemed a long time I finally to looked the girl's face, and Luciola was very serious.

\_You must know by now, things here are not the same they were on Earth.

Back on our home planet we, women, can look at men any way we please and for as long as we feel like, and no one question it; and, at same time, you, the men, must live your lives all afraid of offend us with your eyes. Look a woman in a way she don't like, or even be in the same room with a woman who say you looked her on a sexually suggestive way, can be catastrophic for a man on Earth.

Some woman will lie about that to steal the man's job, to avenge what they consider a betrayal of any kind, to force reluctant man to serve them sexually or romantically, or sometimes just for fun. Deep down everybody knows that happens, still, what everybody know makes no difference since it stay deep down; protected by mandatory silence. You men will lose your jobs, your right to be on public places, the access to your children. Sometimes even your lives in the hands of lynching mobs or solitary "avengers". No woman will ever be arrested for kill a bad man who was accused online for look women in a weird way ...!

Nothing like that happens on this planet.

Here we, the women, must live afraid. Free women hide their bodies as well as they can and think twice before they look at men in the streets, because when a man decides he want to slave a free woman and will do anything to achieve that goal there is a chance for him to succeed. Also because even if this man fails his determination will, probably, to attract the attention of more skilled hunters; and if that happens eventually, sooner or later, this bold or unlucky woman will fall into the hands of one among such determined males.

\_I am not sure I agree with everything you just said.

\_Still, you must have noticed that here unlike on Earth men look at women, even free women, as they please. Here free women are the ones afraid, they are the ones who must ask themselves how they are looking at you, and what you may think they are thinking about you.

You must have noticed that and more; clearly we, the slaves, are supposed to attract men eyes and to incite your lust as much as we can. Not like women on Earth do, however. Because they do that same thing for fun knowing that they have all power and are beyond the reach of any men, feared by all ! Not us, we are yours to do as you please; we must obey, serve, please you. Sexually, and in every other way you choose to be pleased: always.

\_You talk as if all that was not terrible wrong.

\_Maybe I have just being here for too long, Altair. I was only twelve years old when the vortex found me. Maybe I never learned properly how a woman should feel about to be a women according to our home culture. I can only talk about what I remember and about what I have learned from other Earthling slavegirls like myself.

\_I believe you are right, in some degree, but you don't have the big picture . Any way, you are a free woman now so you can learn how a free woman is supposed to feel about to be a woman, according to Lutianen and his people.

She looked at me petrified. Them finally gave me the laught I had expected before.

\_You are kidding!

\_No. I never intended to own slaves, men or women. As you can imagine I do not believe in slavery.

\_”Pero que la hay la hay!” , master Altair . You are my master now, so, therefore, ...you can free me, if you choose to do so, ...I suppose you can.

\_ Not only I can: I also have done just that.

\_...however, even if you do set me free I will not learn what means to be a free woman! Because I will never be given time to learn anything like that. You see: the first free man on this planet who notice that I no longer have a master will make himself my new owner, as soon as he can catch me. I have no chance to escape that fact, because only inside her city of birth, or inside her free companion's city, a woman can stay free, walking the streets alone.

I am a woman. On this planet I am citizen of no city, have no home. Ergo: on this planet I can only be a slave.

\_Let's eat something.\_ I decided. Because I felt a strong need to to escape that subject.

\_ Thanks, Altair. I am starved !

We decided to try a local lasagna. The food was great, but the cheese used has a smell a bit too strong for the role he was playing. After the meal we tryied an icecream. She told me about her family, and about the masters she had after the vortex.

Then we decided to go home, and sleep on the subject of her status (if free or slave).

## 2 - Pride and Pain

For almost a year Luciola and I lived in an apartment that I was renting. Legally she was my slave since that day on the First Market of Lutianen. In fact we became friends, sharing our stories about the world we both had lost. She understood our new reality far better than I, she had been on this Universe for three years more than I had. To make it worse, I was locked for two years on Black Centaur Castle studying magic, isolated from normal society, while she was in the market as a slave since her first day.

To keep her privacy I had to improvise a wall for some sort in our one room, so she could change her clothes without have to enter the bathroom. She was used to sleep on the floor, but have her doing that was unacceptable to me; so I bought a sleeping bag, to myself, and left the bed for her.

The main subject on our conversations was, of course, our home world. But the second thing we talked about more often was slavery, and how women are natural slaves according to the people in this alien Universe. I would always advocate the opinions I brought from our native reality, she would explain to me why the moral code followed by the locals was more valid. I had the advantages of age and formal education, therefore she would lose this debates often. Still, from time to time, I was be forced to admit that she was right about some important point.

Luciola would ask me about magic as well. Sigraxes aren't that common, and mages are very rare, so most people have little opportunity to make questions about so important part of collective human existence on this World. Many things can not be explained, but the basic fact is clear enough since the first time you see it in action: magic among this people is real, ostensive, and powerful. The basic rules are no secret, just not spoken often outside my Caste, the Mage Caste, because they are considered to be "no one else's business". Being from another Universe, literally, I didn't used to care much about this "need to know" policy most sigraxes and mages like.

I had my roommate tested by a friend, Helicon, the mage responsible for the Welcome Tower. He was the first person how talked to me on this Universe, and the one who gave me the first general idea about what I should expect. Being a man I was tested to know if I had potential for magic, or for "Xar" as they call it, as soon as entered the Welcome Tower. The involuntary immigrants (iis) will be tested only if they are men, there is no need to test the women because the women will all be one thing: slavegirls. Only because I asked Helicon did the test on Luciola, and we knew that she has no potential for magic; not a big surprise, since it is quite rare.

As any local Helicon could not understand what was going on between Luciola and me. However he is a more patient man than most. Either he is so patient because he is a mage specialized on the magic way which generates information and\_his special interest\_ make possible complex communication between people who lack a common language , or he follows this magical Way because he is curious enough about iis to show more patience whit our strange habits than the average guy shows.

Helicon almost never has time to come to Lutianen, so we would visit him about two times a month.

The travel to the continent is made for few people. It is made almost only to supply Helicon's Tower, because there are stories about the ruins of the old city in the bay. Legends taken very seriously by most people in the city. Mages are dangerous enough to ignore such stories, but mages never have much time to spend in visits to the continent nearby.

During such visits Luciola would spend some time upstairs, with Helicon's five home slaves. I think she liked to boast about her freedom. The freedom to talk as she pleased and to choose her own clothes, for instance; simple things, but amazing, since she was legally my property.

I had to spend most of my evenings and nights working, and after that I would sleep, therefore we had little time to talk most days. There was a slave girl who would come to clean the apartment, she also would take our clothes and wash them; I had accepted that service when I contracted the rent, before I met Luciola. My friend was left with all free time to invest.

We looked for alternatives to allow her legal citizenship, necessary to make her free. As long as she was not a citizen of Lutianen I could free her but she would become a slave again in little time because the first free man who knew she was not a local citizen would capture her.

On Lutianen as on any other city around this World the only citizenship entrance is a Caste. Even the children born from citizens must prove their skills before they can be accepted in their parent's caste.

Without a caste one cannot be a citizen, all the rights and support systems which help people inside cities function that way, the Caste helps their own. All the Castes work to the city in some way, and the city deals with their needs, but the city does nothing for the individual human being. You will look for help if you need it, only among your Caste brothers. One can also get some help from personal friends, of course, but that is private business: friends help each other if and only if they want to.

To me it was easy, all I had to do was to become a sigrax. All people who do not fail the Black Centaur's first test gain entrance on the Mage Caste, the most influential caste on any city where true mages exist. Luciola would never become a mage, even if she had the potential to it, because to enter the Black Centaur being a woman she would need a "special acceptance" from an archmage, and she also would have to pay all the costs related to her education.

Luciola could enter another caste, however. Since there are about 100 'options'; and each one comes with a full moral system, social expectations, and even internal laws; she had to make a big choice.

However, there is no "right" to be accepted by a Caste, to even be considered one needs to be invited by a respected member. If she had been born from a free woman citizen of Lutianen she could avoid all that, some castes don't even have a test for women (the Warriors, for instance) and the ones that do have one make it optional for women: they only have to make the test if they want to actually work.

Becoming the free companion of any member of their caste gives a woman all the Caste rights, except the right to work as a caste member. Women from some castes are expected to work doing activities related to the caste function, normally not the same activities their men do. Some castes expect their free women to only care for their homes, some other castes expect their women\_ if possible\_ to make exactly the same work their men do, but will still allow a woman to have an honest life with all legal caste rights if she became a housewife full time.

Being a ii (involuntary immigrant) Luciola would have to earn acceptance in some Caste, by competence and hard work. Her desire was to become a merchant, however that is almost impossible unless you have been born from the Merchant Caste, or have a obscene amount of money. The Scholars as much as the merchants make little to no distinction between their men and their women, but that is an almost impossible caste to enter: possibly the hardest test of acceptance, Mage Caste included (if we don't consider the fact that only a few people have potential for magic, it is). Scholar's test is less dangerous than Mage's, no one die failing it, but it demand so much that no one go through sucessfully and keep 100% of sanity.

Each 20 days give or take three I would stay home, to do a self protection ritual highly recommended for every sigrax. Takes one day to perform such ritual and another day to recover from it.

That "another day" Luciola was particularly restless, so I made an effort to accompany her to a pub nearby, where there was some artists playing all day. As always after perform the ritual to nourish my Energetic Perimeter of protection I was a little headach and feeling a bit of nausea, but walk allone was dangerous for the girl in this neighborhood and we both knew that.

Is usual for the Artist Caste to perform like that, taking opportunity to earn some money, they mostly get by on spontaneous donations. Seems a risky way to make business, however I notice that the good artists seems to have enough money to enjoy a comfortable life style. "To practice generous acts is a luxury only free people can afford" is a very popular saying on this planet. They do like to indulge themselves on that particular luxury more than I would expect from my experience in my former Universe.

We had little money, since life became more expensive after I buy Luciola. Therefore the place where we could go was modest. However, most days the artists performing up there were at least competent, and that particular evening we got lucky. The couple singing had great voices and equally nice dramatization.

She was, obviously, a free woman; but was interpreting a slave being collared. Only Artist Caste women would dare to perform such character in public, and not all among them, but it always attracts the audience's attention.

The man was interpreting a young Builder who had just earned his first slave as payment for his first work as an adult. He was a middle-aged man but his body moved exactly as a young builder would.

The woman on the other hand was maybe four decades younger than the man, and one decade younger than her character, but she also transmitted her character pretty well. She was a woman from the warrior caste, mother of three, captured hours before and at the beginning of this performance neither branded nor collared. They used no theatrical prop, and explained nothing, but just by body language accent and vocabulary we all knew how the characters were before they actually let it clear by conversation.

Ten musics told us their story from the first time they saw each other to the moment when he decide to enslave her again, after set her free and ask her to become his free companion.

She entered slavery quite easily at first. So much so that her young master asks why she don't fight like the other free women recently slaved. What makes the behaviour more amazing is the fact that she was Warrior Caste. The Warriors are a high caste, and know even among the other high castes for being extremely proud.

"I like to think I am just more intelligent than the other high caste women" she sings. "However, I must admit it is probably because I grew up with six older brothers. Each one of them was an excellent hunter of free women, so every week we would have at least one lady to brand and collar into slavery." She tells us about each one of her brothers, and their personal preferences concerning free women to catch and slave.

"Each woman I saw, in pain after receive the kiss from the hot iron, would claim war against her captor. Each time my brothers would laugh. They would fight and promise never submit to their dark fate. Each time my brothers would laugh"

Their fight would earn them only pain. They would protest, feel the whip caress, then they would be raped. All the time, there would be rapes, and locked for the night inside a small cage the slave would cry. We would laugh, talking about it at dinner, my brothers and me.

Some would take three days, some would take six weeks, but all would stop the fight. However, they would not submit: not yet. After the fight they would set limits: I do what you want, just don't touch me in front of others; my brothers would make she moan, all the time, fingering their pussies at breakfast and at lunch in front of us all. I kiss you, just not your cock; and she would suck their cocks after a day, with their butts scratched in red hot lines. I do anything, just not from behind; she would stay three days chained and exposed, anus up, being fucked on the butt hole..."

The Warrior Caste lady then decided that she would avoid all the pain. Because when the slave fight she is whipped and fucked. When she don't fight she is mostly only fucked. If she serves well and willingly she sometimes earn a candy, if she fights at the beginning when touched she never earns one. "They used to be too sweet to my taste, the slave candies, when I tasted one as a lady. However, after a week eating only slave ration I would probably kill my youngest son drowned by any thing that sweet..."

That song ends at this point. But the story advances. The woman proves that she really is "more intelligent than the other high caste women" I ask myself if the idea to that character came from Earth, from a certain bear from old cartoons. Luciola didn't know the bear, I only do because I studied by myself the story of fiction. The period between the XVI and the XX was particularly interesting to me: the invention of childhood was my favorite topic.

I was a scientific consultant for fictional authors in my home Universe. Ergo, before the vortex drop me here I had to communicate with people frequently very confuse in their questions. You know how the same singers who have beautiful voices singing sometimes have ugly voices when they speak. Same thing happens with writers: they can tell very clear tales, which are also quite complex, but can not explain even a simple idea before it became part of their next story.

My clients were mostly videogame makers, doing Adventure and/or RPG stuff. This people can be extremely confuse when they try to be clear, trust me! Most days one has to know something about storytelling just to understand what they want to know.

Luciola was very happy, but she also was drinking too fast, and becoming more drunk than she should. The looks of disapproval started to be more insistent, as her voice became louder during the songs. I decided that was the time to go home. That was the point when the scandal began.

On one could understand why I didn't drop the woman over the table to discipline her properly. Luciola was mostly dressed as a free Mage Caste lady, but she had been careless and her slave collar was now visible enough for everyone in the pub to see it. Many people offered to borrow a slave whip to me, if that was what I needed to give "the slavecunt" what she needed.

Fighting my gentleman's nature I practically dragged Luciola to the street. Not soon enough, however.

Another sigrax had been in the pub, and he saw all the confusion. Was clear to him that I could not handle my slave, and he felt also a little offended by the fact that she was posing as a Mage Caste lady. After inform me all that he challenged me to a duel for the possession of Luciola.

Was he from any other caste, or from my caste but a true mage, I could easily dismiss the challenge. Under other circumstances, had she not behaved that improperly inside a public place, or had she been well disciplined short after her bad behaviour, I could still dismiss the challenge sacrificing my pride and admitting that he was too superior to me for a fair fight. Or, without sacrifice any pride, I could have proposed to sell the slave instead of duel for her, demanded a price so high for the girl that would make him look an idiot if he agreed on buy, and let the man choose between step back or buy Luciola. Under the circumstances, however, I had to either give up Luciola or win the fight for her against the fellow sigrax.

That was a unhappy moment to have a actual fight against a more experient sigrax who seemed almost sober, and in any case was more sober than I was. Could be worse, he could be a Black Centaur master, that was not the case. He was just was a few years more experient than myself, taking by the simbol he was using on his iron breast plate.

Duels are common place on this planet. Sometimes someone dies, but that is not the point. The point is to solve conflicts openly and honestly.

Duegdar had an small ax on his waist were most sigraxes would carry a short sword. A dagger on his oposite side, and a magic glove on his right hand. I had only my armor of lether for shouder and left arm, my sword, and my dagger; noting magical. Also, I wasn't capable to use any blade properly at combat yet; while he was trained for that all his life of course\_ at least as amateur sportsman\_ as almost every man on his planet.

My Energetic Perimeter was in place, and that was the only good thing about the situation, therefore I waited for his move. He could not wait too long, unlike myself, because I would claim that he gave up.

Three black iron blades came in my direction, created by magic, as fast as a bullet propelled by a hmag from my technollogically advanced World would came (actually that's a hyperbole: magnetic hand guns can shoot metalic dust grains so fast that they open holes as big as plates through concrete columns; the swors had far more mass and still didn't carried the same amoung of energy. However, they still could penetrate a concret column up to their guards, if there was any concrete columns to

penetrate on this planet). Creation, that was his magical way, or, at least that was what he intended to look like.

As he expected my Energetic Perimeter stopped his attack, and shot on him the immediate response. My energetic snake ghost exploded on smoke when it hit his Energetic Perimeter, and at same time his response came.

Twenty red iron daggers. Being Creation one among the three magical ways taught on Black Centaur\_ which is the only place to learn magic here on Lutianen\_ I had considered the possibility to fight an “almost mage” like him. The smoke around him has not just for show, it included a displacement spell which made his blades go to many direction, not a single one found mine.

Despite the distance and the cover any common man or warrior takes from a duel between sigraxes, some viewers payed the ultimate price for their curiosity. However, that was not the time to think about colateral damage. We both had lost our Energetic Perimeters main power, now was the opportunity to end the fight using our best moves.

He was confuse, I knew what he was\_ a Creator\_ but he could not put me in a magical way yet. The options taught inside Black Centaur are Creation, Healing, and Divination, the ghost dragon seems either Necromancy or Illusion and the displacement looks like Teleportation (what it is not, would be very impressive if it was because Teleportation is a extremelly rare Way. As a matter of fact it is just a smart use of Creation: to know the real connexion between matter, energy, and velocity do have some utility even in a Universe were magic is real and ostensive)

He decided to play save. Since he had his magical glove whit a illusion spell he used it. I became blind and lost my balance. He could walk on my direction and finish me whit a well done kick, without expend any more magic. That was exactly what he intended to do.

One can use divination in many ways, as you can probably imagine. Duegdar’s main concern was to avoid any use of necromancy I could still make. I took his kick in my belly, could not avoid that even knowing when and from were it would came. However, I did not fainted as he expected, instead I put my dagger deep in his leg. It entered behind his leg, knee-high, and emerged from just above his kneecap.

Duegdar collapsed at my side, screaming. However he didn’t had only Creation Way spells. A illusion spell stopped his pain, one momment after that. Then he reached for my dagger, knowing it had to be plucked away before any healling spell could work.

I was not using divination to know what he was doing, what he have done became obvious enough when I ended my dissipation spell and could see again.

We raise at same time, I was two steps distant from him. He was drawing his ax, and being that close I felt the magic in the weapon. However, his knee was not fully healed yet, and I still had time to dissipate both his healing spell and what was keeping him from feel pain. He felt again, this time on his knee. My foe used his ax to keep balance, and used his glove a second time.

This time I was ready for it, but deflect the spell made my loose the time he needed to heal properly. This time he used a far more powerful healing spell in order to do it fast, something one would keep for

escape death at extreme situations. I saw how seriously he was taken this duel by that, this kind of spell take months to replace and any sigrax can have only a few prepared at each time. Given our level of power and the fact that he was no healer, I doubt he could have more than one.

\_Let's not kill each other for a slave! Step out, let me take my girl home. You are a great fighter and I admire your skills, but that has gone too far already and we both know that. \_ I suggested.

He smiled, getting on his feet: still holding the ax, but lowering it.

\_That does not work for me, fellow. However, you are not entirely wrong and I do admit that. How about a compromise?

\_What you have in mind?

\_You can keep the slavegirl. However, she will not leave this place dressed like a lady: even worse, dressed like a Mage Caste lady!! She will go home naked, except by your collar on her neck. You will also give me your word that you will never allow her to dressed like a free woman in the streets of Lutianen again!

There was a insult implied in his last demand: any man can make his slavegirls use any clothes he pleases, to go between a man and his slavegirl on this planet is to violate a sacred taboo. On the other hand, I was offending both our caste and manhood itself, twice: one by allowing a slavegirl to be seem as a slavegirl while dressed as a Mage Caste Lady (her slavery should stay hidden under such circumstances, let her slave collar visible was obscene), and another by allowing my slave to behave like Luciola had behaved, in public, being myself a Mage Caste man.

\_I'm not sure if I can agree whit that. \_ I was not, really.

For one side I wanted to avoid this life or death struggle against so determinated sigrax. He had not yet used his magical weapon, and there is a good reason why this things are so damn expensive. I could protect myself against his glove another five or six times, maybe more. However, the magic in the glove was not coming from his body, therefore I would almost certainly deplete my reserves of Xar before he spent his. My only chance would be end the combat whit a decisive blow and I had no decisive blow at my disposal in mind.

On the other hand Luciola was my friend, and a sweet girl I had rescued from slavery not long before that day. The idea of force her to go home naked, and never dress herself as a free woman again\_ or at least not dress herself as a free woman untill we manage to get her citizenship\_ was hard to swallow.

\_There is one more thing, Altair of Lutianen.

I waited for it.

\_Since you do not seems to know who to discipline your slave, I will do that for you today. Here and now.

\_That does not work for me, Duegdar of Lutianen!

\_In that case, seems to me that we must kill each other for a mere slavegirl today. Don't you think, fellow ? Or do you propose anything diferent?

My foe had a point. Why would I refuse his very reasonable proposition after mention the small importance of a slavegirl compared to our lifes? The only plausible reason on this world would be insult his intelligence.

By dressing the slave as a Mage Caste girl I was already insulting most sigraxes and mages implicitly. Mocking especially at their free companions and daughters, and for no good reason.

That moment I saw the girl in the crowd. By her face could be no mistake, she was his daughter. He would not step back alive from this fight: now I knew that.

\_I have a proposition, yes.

We agreed. Luciola would be whipped, but not in the streets and not by him. His daughter would do it, she was an adult woman but obviously not as strong as her father. It would be done in private, inside a room I would rent: pubs like that one aways have rooms to allow the confortable use of their slavegirl waitresses by the costumers.

Finally, Luciola would go home not naked but using a slave robe provided by his magic. That point was hard for him, but he accepted it.

Luciola was still very drunk when we entered the pub again. However, she became sober in the momment she saw the whip. To my surprise, however, she neither fought to escape nor to protested against her punishment.

The abuse of my Xar during a day when I sould be resting was paid in pain and physical exaustion for the next moth. For the next 60 days I could not restore my Energetic Perimeter, and do had to use all my willpower just to avoid to loose it entirelly (what would leave me without this important and basic magic layer of self defense for at least one year, probably more)

Luciola had no way to know all that, of course. She kept the humiliation for herself during a week, before start accusing me for it.

Her anger against me was fair, I told myself. I should never have allowed my friend to endure such pain and humiliation, just to save the vanity and sense of superiority of some Mage Caste Lady !!!

### 3 - Imperative Less Than Categorical

Let's assume you will fall on a different reality, next week. A place where you can actually own people as slaves. You also can do anything, sexual and not, with your slaves: not only it is your legal right to ignore what slaves want, as a free person you are supposed to make your slaves bend to your will, every time. You can whip, starve, even kill your slaves: but for as long they live you are expected to control their lives and to keep them obedient.

Now consider that: you can not go back. You never will escape this new World.

Last, but not least: no free person who could interest you will have sex with you, or any kind of romantic relationship actually. By some few but strong reasons they do have to keep you at safe social distance.

Given these three above-mentioned circumstances, how long would it take you to start again your sexual life?

See, that's important: you do not have to actually force yourself on some pretty slave. Most slaves will enthusiastically welcome any advance from you, but they would also welcome any manifestation of desire from any other free person with power over them. You know that, the slaves have no choice about anything. They must please you, their lives depend on it: any experienced slave keeps that in mind and behaves accordingly, all the time, even if you say they are free to choose what to do in your presence.

On the other hand if you free a slave, actually free the slave, for real, everything changes between you two: now your relationship falls under the previous category. Therefore the former slave, now free, will keep you at "safe social distance". That person likely will be much more cold and distant to you than the average person is, as a matter of fact that's necessary to rebuild the free person's public and psychological identity. So, no shortcut to work around the problem.

You are a free person, by some standards you have a financial situation between regular and comfortable, you do have the necessary to own one slave, much more than what any local would consider necessary to rent one for the night, for three nights a week.

Question is: how many years would it take, for you to acculturate yourself?

The most important element here, I believe, is how old are you. Despite your personal feelings and ideological preferences — unless you happen to be a 24/7 criminal — the older you are the harder will be for you to change your behaviour in order to fit any given morality radically different from the one you learned during your ten first years of life. I believe that, however that is only an idea which makes sense to me, I have no proof to give to you. That's all.

Well, I can also tell to you how long took to me. As a matter of fact, I intend to, but first let me say that: I am not proud to give up my original behaviour in favor of adaptation.

As mentioned before my name is Altair, and I was born on Earth, in 2062. In 2090 I was caught by a vortex and dropped on a strange Universe. Identical to my on if you only consider the astronomical level but quite different on geographical scale, and even more strange in its Biology and human culture. Even basic natural laws here seems to have more exceptions than they have on my original World.

Here I was told that I was born with some potential to become a mage, and enlisted on some sort of State University to become a mage. They actually failed to make a proper mage of me, but I graduated as a sigrax \_which, compared to a mage, is the equivalent to a Mechanic compared to a Mechanical Engineer\_ after two years of intense and cloistered education.

At first I tried to travel, see this strange new World were I was stuck from now on. However, here leave the city and run the world isn't as easy as it is on my home World.

Were I came from there is one single global government. Here each city is sovereign and more or less in Cold War with every other nation. The easiest way to do what I wanted to do would be to become a sailor, merchant or pirate (and merchant sailors often are half time pirates any way).

However, sailors do not seem to trust mages, or even sigraxes. Crews with above-average academic background will tolerate, sometimes welcome, a mage/sigrax healer; what does not help me, since I am not such kind of sigrax.

Lutianen, my home on this planet, is an island nation. I understand it has average size to this World, about 50 thousand citizens, 1 thousand foreign residents, 170 thousand slaves, and far less true mages than the citizens would like.

Everybody on this planet believe women to be natural slaves, and men to be their natural masters, Lutianen is no exception, therefore no more than 1% of slaves are male (notice that: they still are almost 2 thousand, not a derisive contingent) . Enemy males and unwelcome visitors who are captured are, mostly, killed; while enemy and unwelcome women are in general enslaved.

Since I saw myself unable to travel I had to find a place to stay on Lutianen. Being a citizen I could choose almost any part of town, as long I had the money to rent it. I had, of course, no money at all. Only my original cloths and the ones the Black Centaur Castle gave to my while I was student over there.

My original clothes, if by "original" we understand from before the vortex, were none existent. I was naked on a naturist beach when the vortex caught me. I had been given some clothes by Hellicon, the mage responsible by the Welcome Tower and they let me keep those, and I decided to use them for my first walk outside Black Centaur as a homeless sigrax.

I had the rest of my clothes, and my letter of approval, signed by Faenglor himself: one between the three archimages of Lutianen. The old man was the first person I saw on Lutianen, after I left the boat, and the letter with his signature presented to the clerk inside the Mage's Tower gave me access to the Mage Caste of Lutianen. I left the Tower as a citizen sigrax, with my sigrax shield waiting to be stitched

on some clothe; the same one I would be using stitched on my leather armor that day when I bought Luciola.

A fellow sigrax invited me to stay for the night in his home. My circumstance was neither unknown nor hard to understand, being Lutianen the end of a vortex line. People like myself, iis, will try to start their lives with nothing except the just earned citizenship. However, to have that citizenship means also have a Caste, and Caste solidarity do make the process of start a life much less difficult than it would be without it.

Next day I got a job at this important pub, the biggest one near to the shipyard. A bouncer sigrax was useful to them, and to me that was not a bad place to start.

Thanks to that job I was able to rent a small apartment on the third floor of a building, mostly destined to small merchants. Most my neighbors were foreigners in town for a week or two, give or take, more often than not using a apartment rented by their merchant house. The internal walls were two foot large, the external ones at least three feet; solid stone; therefore I had to deal with little noise, no matter how loud my neighbors decided to be.

Cities on this planet choose to build heavy strongholds and surround themselves by high walls, as much as possible. The stone used to build Lutianen came in ships from distant lands. Still, almost every construction is made of it. To a closed and a bit xenophobic Nation the merchant houses play here a much larger role that I would have expected.

My new apartment came with furniture, including iron rings in the walls and two small cages, both destined to secure slaves. It also came with a fantastic view. From my window I could see the ships on the coast, and the open sea. I decided to buy no slave, of course, but accepted the service offered by the building administrator; a slave girl would come each five days or so, to clean my home.

Not my accident I was never home when the slave had to do her job. Slaves do make me a little uneasy, even after years on Sharitarn. The feeling goes unnoticed on streets and public places, where I can hide it, on the other hand it became quite obvious if I have to stay with a slavegirl inside my own home. I am sure my discomfort would have made the woman's work unnecessarily tense.

As for my job, it was easy and light enough. The constant pressure of a clock is unknown here, they work as much as necessary and not as much as possible. Most people organize life to pleasure, in a more organic way than they do on my home planet, and honor is far more important to them than comfort or prosperity.

Economic growth does not occupy much place on their minds or politics, maybe that is the reason why their notion of time and History deals with each thousand years as my people deal with decades. Or maybe is the opposite: they have too much History to give importance to Economic growth, since a population (and its Economy) can only grow up to a point before became a living hell to everyone in it.

Actually, their sense of History is only possible because they know their past in more detail than we, on Earth, ever will. They have a magical Way capable to provide that information: Divination Magic. Still, I doubt we\_ on my home planet\_ would not use Divination mainly to make our Economy grow even

faster. On the other hand, personally, I never cared that much for growth and I was lucky enough to find on Earth a job where I worked following my own personal rhythm; while most people don't find any job at all and the ones who are fortunate enough to have one will happily metamorphose into machinery parts to keep "growing".

Another reason why my job as a bouncer was light is that just be a sigrax did most of it for me. Common people just assume we are dangerous.

Well, true mages do not think we are dangerous\_ of course\_ but you don't see a mage causing problems on night clubs every Friday night. Besides, if you do see a true mage causing problems no one expects you to stop him. No one would blame you for run to the nearest exit and keep running for as long you can, as if your life depended on it. No one would make jokes about your pusillanimity just for that, unless you are a true mage yourself. However, the risk is very small because the mages, the true ones, are mostly discrete and self disciplined fellows: they have to be, or life on Sharitarn would have been extinct a long time ago.

It's not that mages do not fight each other. They have as many duels as any other Lutianian men; what is, according to my personal opinion, quite a lot. They just duel on places builded to keep their magic inside, like Black Castle and their own homes.

Mages do not lose their temper easily. They are a extremely self repressed! On the other hand, most non mages still don't test their patience unnecessarily. What would be the point?

My free time I invested walking Lutianen and searching for a ship captain who would accept me in his Crew.

As you know I was not the only person from Earth on this Universe, or even on this city. The natural phenomenon called vortex brings people\_ also, but less often, animals and rarely objects: mostly people, and people who know each other more frequently than the laws of probability could explain\_ from many planets in Universes twins or Earth's. However the thing "stick" itself to one Universe at time, during a handful of centuries.

It is possible, but rare, for the vortex to bring someone from another Universe, while it is fixed on a particular one. Still, some individuals on Sharitarn are the only ones brought from their Universes. What, I believe, is a situation worse than mine.

Lutianen is among the cities which more receive foreigners from other universes. Blessed or cursed by the vortex my 'adoptive country' has citizens\_ and slaves\_ from many Universes, and descendants from this people. After three months working as bouncer I met a English chief mate, mostly a pirate, who had been on this planet for almost a decade.

Fergus is a former military. A law enforcer who used to work on Global Defense Navy: Red Salmon, the elite force of GDN, specialized in eliminate genocide cells. They are famous as the most efficient and quick thinking fighters\_ killers actually\_ on the planet. Living up to that fame the extroverted heir of viking blood adapted nicely to his new reality.

He could not rely on the same innate advantage I have, his blood carries no potential to magic.

Fergus was, actually, slaved for a couple of months.

The farm he was forced to work was attacked by looters from the Continent nearby, wild nomadic man from the Kailau Mountains. Fergus used his chains to kill three invaders, escaped breaking them with the war hammer taken from a corpse; and saved the peasant family almost alone, before any help arrive, while his owner was on Lutianen selling vegetables. After that he became a free citizen, and close friend for his former owner.

In my opinion the former GDN soldier would be captain already, was not for the fact that he was not born on Lutianen.

Funny thing about his story is that Fergus never talks about that time. I only know the facts thanks to Urdezul, a twenty years old boy who is only alive thanks to Fergus. This boy is the oldest son of the family who freed Fergus.

The red redhead men look and behave like a giant ted bear, with a great sense of humor. Despite his size no one could seem more harmless fellow. Until the mad men start killing his foes, I mean.

We became friends by accident. I had been framed by a false accusation of conspiracy against the government: poor choice regarding friends. My fate was death, I could still plead for slavery\_ and have a fair chance to get it, thanks to the fact that I am a sigrax\_ or accept the normal sentence and keep my honor. Most local men, I was told, would choose the normal sentence.

Honor is nice, if you can keep it and also maintain your head attached to your neck, otherwise I see less point on it than "most local men" do: ergo, I intended to beg for my live (as you would probably never do, so feel superior to me. if you like. I don't blame you).

Before I could reduce myself on the eyes of my fellow Lutianians I met Urdezu, who had actually been a member of the conspiracy I had been accused for. He played a small part on it, but was involved. The young farmer knew for a fact that I was not guilty, and told that to Fergus after the chief mate manage to save him from a otherwise inevitable doom.

Through Urdezu Fergus offered my live and my freedom back, with a job as sailor in top of that. However I had to pretend to be a normal untrained sailor, instead of a sigrax, by at least one year; until I was authorized by him I could not use any magic were the sailors could see. I made the deal.

Fergus plan was to spare me the slave brand usually mandatory for convicted criminals, Mage Caste, and for people like myself who was included on both categories. He did that, thanks to his misterious conections inside the legal system of Lutianen. After that, he needed a sigrax or true mage to buy me on public auction from the Justice Palace.

The mage who bought me (after I beg as a slag to the authorities just to save my neck, like I explained before) is a friend of Fergus. He set me free on the same day I was slaved, and I was his free gest for that day and night. Next day, by lunch, I was a sailor apprendice on the Meek Goose, the most misleadingly named pirate ship sailing these waters. Urdezu, Fergus, and Melliag were the only people in the crew who knew about my sigrax portfolio.

The mage Shaivir helped me to make a magical restrain, a anti-magical spell which needs the

cooperation of the person subjected to it to be made. Without such restraint the free Xar on my body could hardly be hidden from the people sleeping, eating, and working all day inside the same small ship were I was. I expected Shaivir to let me no free Xar to use, but the old Healler argued against that strategy: according to him some Xar could be kept flowing with little danger and have that could become necessary during emergencies.

Once I decided to free all my Xar\_ what was an alternative left to me by the spell\_ the process to do such thing would take me months.

Melliag is the bastard son of Shaivir. He just started his adult life, and that would be his first experience outside his island.

To be a bastard on Lutianen may sometimes be a serious flaw, but sometimes is irrelevant. As many things on most State Cities this planet has, all about that depends on what Caste you are from.

To the low Castes "bastards" do not exist, men choose one son to be their favorite and this one will get all the heritage: does not matter who is the mother (or even who is the biological father). The Merchant Caste mostly take free companions to put together family's money and expertise: therefore, the father in law will often push his son in law to choose a heir between his grandsons, unless some previous contract prevent it. Warriors\_ and sigraxes, by the way\_ care little about money: therefore what they have is mostly shared between the siblings, does not matter much if the mother is a slave, the current free companion, a former free companions, or some unofficial lover.

True mages like Shaivir are very particular about the subject, on any city. They make long and complex contracts even before they choose a free companion, and by good reason most of it remain secret, to be seen only by the eyes of other true mages. Thing between them must be like that because the most valuable goods involved are national secrets, crucial for the survival of all city.

I understand from a conversation I heard in his father's home that Melliag will get little, if anything at all, from his parents. Ferus explained to me that the young mage's mother is a slave, sold when he was too young to even remember her face. A little uncomfortable, moved by strong curiosity, I asked the Healler about.

During that one conversation I asked him if he knew where his mother is today. Being a mage he could easily make a Divination spell to find out the poor woman, or he could ask a Soothsayer to do the job for him. Unless she is hidden by some magical mean even a sigrax could find her exact address on about one year without leave his home. A proper Soothsayer Mage would do the same, and would not take more than a few minutes for him.

Melliag told me that he used to imagine himself doing that search. However, once he became an adult it seemed less a good idea and more a childish fantasy. "She had been a slave for about six years when I was born, and has probably stayed a slave ever since, one can not free a slavewoman after that long: do that would be far too cruel to her! On the other hand, I would not like to see my mother, have her inside my home, and allow the woman to stay a slave; I am not sure she would like that either. Would make no good to know what can't be changed", said the young man.

Melliag's point of view isn't exceptional, except maybe for the fact that he actually had plans to look

for his mother during some time. Many people on Sharitarn choose to have their children with slaves, men more often than women. Some free people born from slaves grow with their mothers, or fathers, in the same home, and when that happens there is no secret about the fact and very little chance of trauma: it's just normal life around here. Most free people under such circumstances make little to no emotional bond with their slave parents, since slaves can be sold any time: affective bonds between childrens and that adults responsible for them have nothing to do with blood, it is builded by human actions, inside language and culture.

See how most people her consider "true" parentship (or blood relations) meaningless, unless it is supported by some other bond, make me ask myself about the father's obligations with their childs. They stay legaly mandatory even when the father has no relationship with the child, and not by his fault by the mother's choice. I used to see that as fair and belive the mother had natural right to make every decision about how close or distant the father should stay from his daughter or son. Now, I admit, I am not so sure.

Maybe the mother should actually, by natural right, have the choice about welcome or not the father on her child's life. Or maybe, again by natural right, the father has the obligation to support their childs with love, time, and money. However, if one thing is true, them the other seems necessarilly untrue, because to adopt both (like we do on Earth) would be excessive inequitable.

I noticed a sad tone on his voice, during this conversation. But I probably would have noticed that even if that wasn't really there: the person I still was could not believe in the absense of sadness under the given circunstances, therefore I would have listened the sadness anyway.

The sailors were a colorful group. More non humans\_ actually half-breed humans\_ than we can see on the streets of Lutianen. Also: almost everyone had at least some blood heritage from another Universe, most often than not Earth. Between the people, the new lands, and the alien sea monsters, I had every reason to hope for an interesting trip.

Capitan Vor-Iban intended to lead us for four years, give or take. The ship was going to shore the coast for three months, then enter the Sorrowful River, and go to the end of it. A hard and dangerous, but very lucrative adventure.

The Sorrowful isn't a river at all, it is a Strait, it link two oceans and separates the two largest Continents on the planet.

There is lots of pirates on both extremes of the Sorrowful, but no ship from Lutianen would do piracy on this side of it. Every city between Lutianen and the Sorrowfull is protected by the Insular City, and the ships doing honest commerce between them are forbidden for us.

We should visit as honest merchants, the three small cities on the coast, then visit a large and powerfull port: Shirshan, know as "The Green Poison". We would enter the Sorrowfull, after pay Shirshan for the permission to sail thorough their territorial sea. On Sorrowfull waters we would stay merchants for the first third of our trip, give or take a few weeks, if possible. To see ourselves without goods to sell was always the risk, and inside the Sorrowfull that risk would not mean travel without profit as it would if the same happened before we pass Shirshan.

Under such circumstances we would probably avoid larger cities, like Alkavalla, unless Vor-Iban was feeling particularly lucky when we reached them; fishman's villages and merchant ships would be our preferential prey. On the other hand, if we had good to sell as we intended to, as merchants, Alkavalla would be our first stop on Sorrowfull waters.

Still feels odd to me: around here one fellow can find you while you are doing your job as a pirate, loose his ship and cargo for you after a fierce fight, and he probably will still do business with you normally a month after that, while you are working as a honest merchant. That will only happen if you act as a "honored" man on both situations, of course. They do have very specific ideas about what a honored pirate is supposed to do, and aren't less serious about the things a honest merchant is supposed to do. One thing you can not do is pretend to be one and then behave like the other.

After that merchant fase as long as the circumstances allowed it to be, our plan was to do piracy up to the end of the Sorrowful. Then more two months to shore the coast of the other continent up to a very large polis called Micula, doing honest trade, and then back to the 'River'. Depending on the busines on Micula we would or not do commerce during our way back.

Morally speaking the idea of piracy was not easy to swallow to me, and I probably would have rejected it if the option was to stay working for the Vindictive Squid as a bouncer, or if it was look for another job on Lutianen. To travel this planet had been my goal since my early days on Black Centaur Castle, but I would not have payed the price of became a pirate to achieve that objective. Needless to say, I had been given, by my "good" luck, a more solid excuse to appease conscience.

I made my third birthday on this Universe the same day I first saw the larger city I had met on this Universe so far: Shirshan, The Green Poison. Most towers here are made of a stone resembling jade, streets are marble white and they have allot red iron\_ a extremelly strong and expensive metal immune to oxidation\_ decorating many houses and monuments. Statures and family crests with a green frog are eveywere, transparent snakes made of unbrakable glass are common, and often impressively big.

Shirshan is also very rich on noble woods, and medicinal drugs sold on many streets during most days, in normal times. The city is important to the planet economy for many reasons. However, to me, it will always be the place where I had sex for the first time after be absorbed by the vortex.

Since I left the Black Centaur I saw many slave girls on the streets of Lutianen, and working to the pub. They could be rented by the night more or less for the price of a meal, and taken to a room on the second floor. The men on this planed make no secret about the sexual use of slaves, they see no shame on it what so ever. Up to that momment I kept myself as distant as possible to this habit, because it is incompatible with my original education.

However, after some experiences I changed my mind: or, at least, became less strict in my moral values, driven by complex circumstances. Would be hard to explain that circumstances now: but they will be made clear by this text, in a given point (or so I hope).

I could excuse myself in advance for my actions that night, albeit that would not make any sense to you yeat. However, it's probably best to let to you the decision about whether or not my actions that night demand excuses.

Vor-Iban is a very strict capitan, respected by his peers and trusted by his crew. He is a bald middle-aged man, a bit fat, who loves sweet meat and slavewomen at least as heavy as himself. His grandfather came from Earth when he was only ten years old, during a time a bit diferent from mine, but Vor showed less curiosity about my home planet than most on the Meek Goose deck.

Between Lutianen and Guadlu we saw many merchant ships from Lutianen and from other places, and all came close enough to call witty insults, and hear the suitable answers from our capitan's powerfull voice.

Fergus would have most his lunchs with us, and his dinners with the captain, while Melliag almost never ate, but when he did was in the capitan's cabin. Food and water are optional for true mages, even sigrax can pass long periods without both if we sacrifice some Xar, and the Healer mage probably felt no need to subject himself to the ship's food.

Too bad for Melliag, I ate on his father's home and Lurban's culinary art work abeit simpler seemed much more pleasant to me.

From now on I knew would hardly find chance to eat anything as good as the food on the Goose. During their first trip the sailors are paid half salary, and our participation in the colective booty is also reduced to half. The callow sailor can keep what would count by the rules of piracy as personal conquest, but being a reluctant pirate I had little hope on that front. In top of all that, I had to separate a percentage of every coin I earned to pay Fergus for the bride he had to pay to save my life.

On my home planet no one goes hungry, because the government give free food to unemployed. It is always the same tasteless pap, but nutritive enough. Since there isn't enough jobs almost every one passes all life unemployed; and by some reason there is very little solidarity between common people; without governamental help humanity would be reduce almost as fast as the genocide terrorists desire. Human rights prevent it, giving free food and medicine to all. Here on Sharitarn a citizen can count with his Caste for help during bad and the worse times, but for most castes it only is reliable inside his own city.

Beyond a man's city a free man without friends can starve alone, or have to choose between that and sell himself as a slave.

Knowing all that, I was making my best effort the reduce the risk to became a man man without friends. That made me a laugh stock among the crew, as I knew it woud, but from my point of view be the crew's laugh stock was a small price to pay.

## 4 - The Healer's Diary

The young healer mage Melliag, the bastard son of a man who saved my life days before, was looking the sea, standing on the deck of the ship. The Meek Goose had been on moving by oars for the next two days. Now our capitan, the half merchat hafl pirate Vor-Iban, had ordered the lifting of the ship's sail.

Melliag, in his 17 years, war a curious figure, standing near to the edge of the deck and looking to the distance in front. Long blond hair in the top and back of his head, the sides of it shaved, a shik shirt under a thick overcoar decorated whit arcane simbols, long boots reaching his knees. His handes holding each other behind his body. Many red iron rings whit stones in his fingers, and a heavy red iron chain on his neck whit a pendant on it. The pendant alone probably three times more expensive than the Ship itself.

As any healer I ever saw he was a portrait of physical vigor, in his case the skinny tipe proper for a runner.

What this erudite and a bit shy young man was seeing between the sea and the sky? Was he using magic to look or destination, or maybe our destiny? Was he just lost in thoughts like myself?

For him that was first time beyond the vicinity of Lutianen, his city of birth. My home city by adoption. It adopted me before I adopt it, to be honest.

I had travelled before by sea, however that was a diferent sea. That was a diferent planet, and a diferent Universe. I was still an alien to all that, and be far from Lutianen made it more evident to me than ever since my first days in the Black Centaur Castle. No airplane in the sky, no hight rail above this ocean whit trains passing at 1.200 mph, no cities everywere in the land. If I wanted to spare magic to look the sky above I would find no artificial satelite, no spacial station. No hotel on the Moon, no city on Mars.

On that Universe there was maybe 500.000.000 human beings, not 30.000.000.000. However humans were here for a long time before my ancestrals learn how to walk on two feets. Most cities are more than 50.000.000 years old, human History here goes far beyond that past and before their Historic memory they had a period of exclusive tribal existence. That probably for as long as Earth has large mammals, about 65.000.000 years.

We left port of Lutianen during a dense frog morning. I was concened about Luciola's fate, but also relieved for escape my death or slavery sentence. As a general principle I dislike the idea of be killed, and still that was not the main issue to me in the days spent inside jail. That because the metods used by my city to perform the change between alive and death do overshadow the ending result. Slavery was my choice, given the option, but the option isn't always given and you only know is you will have the chance to be a coward in the last hour.

Sailors do not like Mage Caste\_sigraxes or true mages\_ and my verbal contract whit the man who saved my from execution included my obligation to keep secret about the fact that I am a sigrax. For the

crew the only Mage Caste on board was the young Melliag.

The secret had consequences. As a sailor apprentice I had to work as any other sailor, a little more than the other sailors actually because that is what one expects for the callow dude. As a sigrax I would have been spared from most work and free to focus on my spells all day. For even better reason no one would think, let alone suggest, that Melliag should do anything inside the boat.

Be a involuntary immigrant earned me some sympathy, for the first time since I was brought to that Universe by the vortex. Most people on the Meek Goose had parents from Earth or from other Universes, iis like myself, victims of the vortex. The cooker had a great great great gradfather who came from my home planet when Portugal and Spain were still the most important powers on the globe.

The ships on this world are even more primitive than the ones on Earth used to be back in the days the cooker's ancestral was born. They are made to stay near to the cost. Or only have oars, or oars more one single sail like the Meek Goose, and they don't seem to trust much this sail. For instance, they do not use sails at night.

I believe the capitains on this world don't trust the winds enough to depend on the sail because the mages are constantly messing around whit the atmosphere, on large and small scale. That makes the winds and ocean currents dangerous and unpredictable.

Another factor in the equation is the Law of Exclusion, it bar any possibility to develop technoloy from ideas which came to this World from the vortex after the Age of Spiders. By now, if there was no vortex, they could have developed by themselves many more naval innovations than the ones they use. However, any new technology must be original enough to escape the Law of Exclusion to be viable.

For three days we used the oars, I was of course included on that work. Few boats use slaves on their oars, specially during long trips. Piracy popularity is the main responsible for that, one want to have as many armed free men on the deck of one's ship when a pirate ship came.

The work was hard for me, because I had never before done anything similar. Melliag helped me from time to time, whit a healing gesture. Was not for the secret I could have done some magic myself to help my boy to recover faster from the effort, but I had no tool to do that in a less than obvious way. To the true mage, on the other hand, make such gestures was as easy as blink.

After three days our capitain gave order to open the sail, for about six hours a day, always when the sun was more intense.

At night we frequently would stop, as near to the cost as possible, ships do that on this planet. No one explained to me the reason behind so unpractical habit. However, by now I have one pet explanathory hypothesis.

After another two days we docked in a fortified vilage which is under the sphere of influence of Lutianen. Places like that must pay tribute to their "benefactor", and are often used as preferential target by young Warriors\_ and sometimes bold men from some other caste\_ who want to practice their skills hunting free women on foreing cities. Citizens on this nations always have some resentment against the big power above them. The ressentment can be huge and the need to hide it even bigger, or

it can be light and mixed with respect and even gratitude in some cases, but there is always some bitter taste present. However that bitter taste was not obvious to me on Guadlu, the first village we visited.

Guadlu is a beautiful place, rich Luvianians came here to rest and escape their big city from time to time. They have no castle to form mages, of course, and by consequence they have no true mage. There is only one sigrax on the village, who is training his one apprentice according to his old tradition. Would be my first thing to do there, look for this sigrax, was not for the fact that I had to keep my magic in secret.

Instead, I went to the local thermae with other members of the crew. The people I more or less knew before entering the Meek Goose were not present, and I had my first opportunity to acquaint myself with the sailors. Everybody was happy to be distant from the "important people", and even more happy to be out of the shadow of Mellig.

The attention was focused on me most of the time. They wanted to know as much as possible about my home planet, Earth. My attention, on the other hand, was focused on the dragonlike humanoid Xiirsh. So far I had encountered some people obviously non-human, but not many so different to us.

Xiirsh is about three times stronger than the strongest human can be without magic or some similar help, has a body covered by triangular scales which give me the impression to be metallic, big and pointy teeth, not similar like the ones reptiles have, more similar to dog's fangs. There are two small and weak arms. She is the tallest person in the crew, and by far the most strange one physically, there are two small arms protruding from her torso which eventually will grow into big and fully functional wings, and an articulated tail that goes down to her knees. Only her voice sounds human enough, however, that only happens because she uses a magical bracelet which transforms whatever she is saying into something humans can hear.

Also, yes, she is a female. One must mention that the rule about gender dominance is universal to the human cultures on this planet but does not apply to all intelligent beings which exist here. Some do not even have two genders, others are female-dominant by nature and that is respected by the humans, as long as they respect the fact that human beings are male-dominant. Among Xiirsh's folk there are two genders, but they are identical and only develop differences when the reproductive cycles come. She will not be old enough to that for a very long time, and only know that she is female thanks to the medical technology on her home planet.

Next port we stopped in was Niore. It is a little bigger than Guadlu and much less cute. While Guadlu survives on tourism and fishing Niore is a mining community. Their people have no kinship with Luvianians, they came from the vast desert that at that point came very close to the sea. Luvianians keep a fort here, to repress the commerce between the nomadic tribes and the local miners, that was Fergus's first stop. This time the chief mate invited his young pupil, Urbezu, and myself to go with him.

I noticed that our captain, Vor-Iban, and our healer mage went in the other direction, together. As for the other sailors, most spent their free time near to the port.

The men in the fort were mostly Warrior Caste. The lieutenant colonel responsible to enforce the tributary rights of Luvianians welcomed Fergus as a dear friend.

He invited us to a meal and explained to Urdezu and to me how their relationship with the local authorities work. Lutianen has no right over Niore or any other city under "protection", theoretically. As long as the village pay her taxes, it is as sovereigns as Lutianen itself, theoretically. In fact to be sure that Niore is paying all their taxes, which include percentages over production and fixed values, Lutianen must know every business working on Niore or any other village under protection.

Goes beyond that, however, on the miner village. The commerce between Niore and the desert was always a topic in dispute. Recently Lutianen decided to stop it completely, and to do that my city sent nine warships, hundreds of new Warriors to reinforce the ones already there, and no less than seven sigraxes. It is not martial law, yet, but goes without say how happy the locals are by now with our presence on their streets.

We spent the night in the fort, and for the first time since Lutianen I could practice my spells. By morning the mage and the captain came, and after a good breakfast the five of us went for a walk around the city. It is a poor city, clearly, but their people seem generally healthy and well fed.

Niore's metal workers are well respected, and the best red iron used on Lutianen came from here, therefore it is an excellent place to buy armor and weapons for excellent price. So I regretted the fact that I had no coin to expend, everybody else changed a shield, brought a sword, or something like that.

We left the port near to midday, and as soon as it disappeared in the distance we saw two ships coming from the delta of a modest river. One was a small but fast drakkar, the other had more or less the same square shape the Meek Goose has, and about the same size. From both, loud and clear, the sound of drums was coming and the music announced pirate attack. We had to surrender of fight.

To my surprise Melliag sat down, ignoring what was happening. The only other person in the boat surprised by that was the peasant boy Urdezu.

The faster pirate boat reached us after send and receive two hail of arrows, and their men used ropes to climb to our deck. The fight became widespread, and I searched for our dragonlike lady, since she was doing better than any one else.

No one came close to the true mage. On the other hand he did nothing to help us.

We surrounded the enemy, but then the other ship reached us and the numerical difference was inverted against us. I gave an angry look in Melliag's direction and saw that he was taking notes on his diary.

We expelled the enemies. But we lost two men into the sea, six others lay dead on the ground in the company of four invaders. I had lost three fingers from my left hand, and half of the right ear, severed during the fight; and many others had been injured more.

That was the moment when the true mage closed his diary.

He looked above us, more distracted than curious, and made a brief sequel of signs with his right hand.

I felt pain, as my fingers and ears grown back. Before I realize that all my injuries had disappeared the six dead men raised, also recovering as fast as the rest of us. No more than two minutes after that we

was as healthy as before the fight, and as rested as people usually are after a good night of sleep. The two men who fell were lost, but other than that the crew was intact.

I knew stories about the true mage's healing powers, but before that I never believed most of it. It's not that I actually not believed, for think people whas lying about. I just could not fix the idea on my mind. A healer sigrax is about as good as any doctor from my technologically advanced home world, except that the doctor needs machines, laboratory tests, surgical instruments, remedies, ..., while all the sigrax needs is one sigrax. However, no sigrax can do what I saw that day and just described.

The Goose was not healed, however. The fast drakkar made a hole in the hull of the ship and it could not be properly fixed on the sea. Maybe magic could do the trick but, as Xiirsh explained to me that day, one can never ask a true mage to help only wait until he chooses to volunteer: up to that day I had not, yet, understood that simple fact of life. Despite my two years inside Black Centaur, it had eluded me somehow. Perhaps the Back Centaur Castle isn't guilty in that flaw, some things are hard to interpret in theory even being self explanatory in flesh and blood.

Timurda was the next stop on our journey but we still were close to Niore. The crew wanted to go back.

Was obvious to all\_except to me and Urdezu\_ that we had not being attacked by common pirates. The quality of their weapons was too good, far superior to the ones most of us had. More important, their moves were clearly Warrior Caste, some could be desert nomads but most of them were from a city navy.

They did not wanted to steal our cargo, there was no cargo in the ship valuable enough to worth all the effort. Except of course the mage, however to steal a true mage one brings at least three true mages and they had none. Their goal was to stop us, clearly.

Fergus knew that, I saw it. Vor-Iban knew what was happening too. They forced the others to proceed. Being that my first time on a boat like that I kept silence about all that. After the discussion, against the sailor's will, we proceed.



## 5 - Friends and Foes

I just realized that I never told you what really happened with Luciola. She was my first slavegirl, legally speaking. Even if I never considered her my property, or myself her master. She will go back, and when she does\_ if not before that\_ I close that gap.

Now we are at the Meek Goose, and this ship is in very bad shape. We had a hole in the ship's hull, made by a pirate ship. Or what looked like a pirate ship to me but our crew, except by me and Urbezu, seems to know better. They say this people are warriors far too well trained to be taken by normal pirates.

Our captain and the chief mate decided against the crew to keep the ship going to Timurda, instead of back to Niore. The healer mage on board said nothing, but he seems to agree with the captain on that.

Neither I nor the young peasant Undezu have enough experience on ships like that to form opinion about what is happening. Much less advocate one. And still, I can see clearly that: there is something about the attack that only our captain and his chief mate know.

After half day going forward captain Vor-Iban was called by his first mate who had just seen the deep cut in the wood, obviously made by a magical blade. We could not open the ship's sail or we risked to lose the mast with it. That left us oars only, what is a slow way to travel. No one bothered to complain, obviously would do us no good.

Then Melliag, for the second time, offered his services. The healer did nothing, no word or gesture, however his magic caused a drastic and immediate effect. We row with no effort, time passed and we felt no hungry, no thirsty. We stopped only at night, and only because the sailors on this planet have a taboo against moving their ships in the dark. Even so in a blink of the eye five days were gone, and Timurda was visible.

Guadlu and Niobe are villages. The first one beautiful and hospitable, surrounded by gardens and milk farms; the second a bit hostile, poor, surrounded by mines, a few farms, and a hot desert of stone towers and red sand. Timurda on the contrary is a proper city, anyone can see that from far away. It is not half as big as Lutianen, our city, but is a city no less.

As Fergus, our chief mate, explained to me after we landed: Timurda was a city in dispute for 770 years, up to 300 years ago. At that point it expelled both Lutianen and the powerful Shirshan, from their streets and waters. The two powers that tried to reduce Timurda to vassalage had to retreat. For some time the State City paid tribute to no other nation. However, 55 years ago Lutianen succeeded in conquering Timurda.

Was a great victory at the time. Even more so because Timurda is a lot closer to Shirshan than it is to Lutianen. Also, Shirshan has three times more ships than my adoptive State City; and has a fearsome army while Lutianen, being an island, has almost none.

Lutianen expend in war ships and troops to keep a foot on Timurda more than get as tribute from it. The small city is a first line of defense against Shirshan, as much as it is a point of honor, this two factors make the financial expent worhtwhile .

You find near to the port many shops and pubs whit the green frog, the main simbol of Shirshan, above their doors. However, the locals don't show constant fury behind every gesture, not as I saw in Niore. We can walk alone or in small groups without the constant impression that we are about to be surrounded by a lynching mob. Only the frequent jokes made by the locals about the arrogance of that people from our city let us know that they, deep down or not so deep down, don't like the fact that Lutianen won the war.

For most merchant ships from Lutianen Tirmuda is the last port before enter the Sorrowful River, since they will not visit Shirshan. Most sailors will only pay the taxes of Shirshan for enter the Sorrowfull in one between the six advanced posts placed as artificial islands on the Sorrowfull itself. Ships from Shirshan also avoid Lutianen, but as Shirshan does not rely on commerce as much as my city does it loose less whit the bad blood betwee the two powers.

Our plans, unlike the ones made by most crews, were to visit Shirshan. We had to do that in order to buy the famous "green poison", only produced by their Alchemist Caste. This valuable product can also be used as actual poison but is extremelly important as a ingredient used in elixires and magical rituals; also is a potent hallucinogen demanded for ludic purposes by rich people on some parts of this World . It's hard to get the permission to buy it, specially if you are from Lutianen. Somehow Vor-Iban got the necessary papers.

The Meek Goose needed a week to be repaired. The good thing about being at Timurda Port was that\_ because it is the last port before the Sorrowfull for so many ships, and the last friendly port for many months as welll\_ Timurda has excelent shipyards.

I still had basically no money. Being my first trip I would receive less than any other sailor. But\_ to make that worse\_ I was paying back the chief mate for the bribes he paid to save my life back in Lutianen. For all that I now had to get by on half of two thirds of the normal payment due to a regular sailor. That made necessary to me to sleep on the ship, eat in the cheapest places, and expend my free time walking alone through the city; except when some fellow sailor invited me, at his own expenses.

I was happy to notice that Xiiirsh\_ the person in the crew I was more curious about\_ also would stay on the ship, or as near to it as possible, most time. The dragonlike humaniod is the more unusual person I had met so far. She is also only female at the crew, even if nothing in her body helps us to tell it. Their own kind would have no way to know who is male and who is female until their reproductive cicle start, if was not by medical genetics. She, herself, only learned the fact from a doctor on her home Universe a few years before she was catch by the vortex.

Like me, and Fergus, Xiiirsh came from another Universe. Not by choise, not by some evil plot either. The natural phenomenon called "vortex" drops people here from other similar universes since ever. The locals had to make ways to deal whit us, involuntary immigrants, since they evolved language.

All the Universes reached by the vortex are identical to my on in terms of Astronomical Phenomena. To ilustrate it: is always the third planet from the sun which is touched by the vortex, the year on it has

always the same numbers of days, the day the same number of hours. On most Universes affected, as I understand, the more common intelligent form of life is human, or almost look like human. There is exception, like the Universe at where Xiirsh was born.

Like my own Universe, and my planet on it (which is called "Earth"), in Xiirsh's home there is no magic. No ostensive magic, such as they have here.

The technology she described to me was impressive. Much superior to anything in my home planet had when I was taken from it. We made two agricultural colonies on Mars, her folk travel to other galaxies and billions of them live on structures builded on their version of Jupiter.

They are notting like our ideal of advanced society however. Her culture approves the duel to the death, like the locals here do, and unlike my own people back home. However, unlike most cultures on this Universe where we now are, her people eats the weak: they are cannibals. Unlike my birth planet their people do not consider their females to be superior to their males, but they also do not believe they are natural slaves as the civilizations here do.

None of us can bring our scientific concepts and technological solutions to this planet, moste days whe can't even impose our cultural bias. They have a law against it here. Still, was nice to know about a place where the scientific adventure achieved so much. Even if that scientific adventure in this case has notting to do whit humanity.

Human cities mostly tolerate people like the dragonlike lady, they do not welcome them. That's why Xiirsh decided to stay near to the Meek Goose. She was not looking for a fight.

Not that she can't defend herself, lets be clear about that! During our fight against pirates I tried to stay near to her for my on protection. She is bigger, stronger, and faster than any normal human, and she has a natural armor which helps to improve the protective effect given by the artificial armor she uses, which on his turn is havier than anything a normal human could use. She has claws which to me sound metallic, despite the fact that she says they are not made of metal. However, she uses daggers in her two smaller hands and a spear whit some sort of chooper at one end whit her two big arms.

By the way: I always asked myself why the fictional vampires, werewolfs, and fairies, does not use weapons if they have claws, just because they have claws. Obviously a vampire whit a rifle from 1820 will be more efective than the same vampire using only the point nails given to him by his supernatural nature. Even blades are probably much more effective than claws, and one does not have to be as intelligent as Xiirsh to see that. Have claws probably helps one to hold a spear or a sword, but they do not replace the weapon itself.

After some time I learned a exception for that logic about claws and blades. There is, as a matter of fact, 'things' here who does not use blades to fight\_ most times\_ because their claws are just superior event o magical weapons . Their claws cut through red iron, and sometimes even through magical armor, as if it was not there.

But that is enough for the subject claws, for the momment. Fergus gave me some free sword and shield lessons during this days. He could not leave for too long, or is just too obsessed for his work to let the yard workers take care of their own work in peace. I will never know which one. Xiirsh took part in some

of this lessons and I had the pleasure to see the two master practicing their art which each other.

We left Timurda two days before the expected, thanks to Fergus's resolution. The Meek Goose was now stronger than before. I noticed the absence of Urdezu, before most crew do. According to Fergus the boy decided to stay because he got a invitation from a local farmer who needed his expertiese whit big animals. Many people commented that the boy only stayed because Fergus convinced him that the trip would be too dangerous from now on.

Fergus, our chief mate, do have a paternal tendence to protect Urdezu. He was once slave of the boys family, on their farm, when Urdezu whas still a child; and earned his freedom saving Urdezu's family from bandits; since that time he became a friend of their former master, therefore the sense of protection he had over the boy was reasonable. Even so, I was hoping that the sailors were just being paranoid, or preaching a prank on the rookie. Was eazy to convince myself that the last opition was the case: what was more likelly, really? The captain and the chief mate conspire to drag us to suicide, or the veterain seamen decide to pull my leg for their amusement?

The sound of drums saturated the air whit the well know pirate rhythm. There was five ships coming for us, one much bigger than the Goose, the other about he same size. They were not in a hurry, but clearly we had no chance to go faster. There was no escape.

To reach Shirshan from Timurda one has to pass the entrance of the Sorrowfull River. There is a space between the Continents were the ships can't see land, and at that particular time the Ocean currents coming from the Strait (the Sorrowfull River is actually a Strait) were against us. The air was not moving at all.

No escape existed inside the rules of navigation, I mean. There was one direction we could still choosethat would keep us distant from the enemy at least for sometime. However everyone except the chief mate wanted to give up and surrender. Even the captain this time was against Fergus's plan.

Melliag spoke, the young mage who was for the first time in a ship like that, and never before had left the shadow of Lutianen. He told us to follow Fergus's plan, and after that there was no debate what so ever.

We would go open sea, untill the faked pirates give up. As they sould do soon because "one does not go open sea on this blasted Ocean !" , as Vor-Iban remembered Fergus, vehemently, before the mage command us to do just that. They, the enemies, did not gave up.

The crew was tense for the better part of the day. I expected that any time they would realize how silly their fear was. Once we already invaded that forbiden territory and notting bad had hapened, any time they should came to their senses! I was wrong, their fear only raised as the sun advanced on the sky. The night was near, and many in the crew became crazy. For no reason at all !!!

Or that I was thinking at the time. Sun was now setting.

"It's natural for humans to fear the night, you know. We have evolved as specie to stay active only while the sun is in sky. We can't see well in the light of stars, and we depend far too much on our eyes to survive." I was saying to Xiirsh who was, after Fergus, Melliag, and myself, the less agitated person

on the boat. Screams interrupted me.

Back of us, the ship about two times bigger than the Goose was leaving the sea water to date the sky. I looked to Melliag, the crew celebrating and greeting him. But I was not, because I was not sure that was his doing.

Does not look like the kind of thing a healer would do. Despite the fact that I was hiding my nature from the crew I was still a sigrax: we don't command the absurd power true mages have, but we do follow\_mostly\_ the same Ways of Magic. There is basic principles for every Way, and users of magic tend to only step out their Way of choice if they don't have a proper tool at hand, inside it, to solve the present problem.

Half the enemy ship felt back on the sea from 30 yd high, waving the waters. The sun was still setting. I saw the huge tentacle holding what was left from the large boat, and almost at same time noticed the things climbing it as an army of ants. Risking to break my promise of secret I pronounced the word to activate a spell. Don't think anyone was paying attention on me at such point. The spell gave me the capacity to know things happening in the distance, it is less a way to see things, more a clear intuition about what they are. I knew they were living things, similar in shape to octopuses except they had ten or more tentacles. They were big as horses, and strong enough to climb a vertical surface outside water as fast as a horse can run. I saw no magic on them, but there was intelligence.

The crew was still cheering for the beast below the surface, assuming that was under Melliag's control, when the octopuses started the invasion of all ships. Ours included.

The surprise became fear fast because they started dismembering and decapitating people, as soon as they came aboard. Five men had been shattered before most of us unsheathed swords. I was ready to fight, thanks to my divination spell. Xiirsh and three other thanks to whatever natural senses their species has. Fergus, the former law enforcer from Global Defence Navy on Earth, was ready to fight when the first thing came aboard because these guys are just that good. All others had been caught off guard.

Unlike the former fight we had, with two pirate ships, this time the sailors kind expected help from our true mage. After all, we would not be here if it was not for his command.

I was holding one enemy, dancing with his tentacles as well as I could, but making little damage with my cheap iron sword. Nearby Xiirsh was doing a little better with her big red iron weapon, however no one on our boat had still killed an invader yet. On the other hand they had torn in small pieces another three of us when Melliag stepped in.

The true mage made a simple gesture, and our enemies stopped. For a moment it was as if every single invader had been hit by a lightning. Now that was Healer Magic, attacking them from the core of their beings to the surface of their bodies!

Last only for a moment. Then they started to recover, moving slowly, groping around as if they were blind or too drunk to know where they were. Melliag was surprised, peeved I think. He opened his arms and I felt the energy flowing to him. Then he spoke with his hands. This time the things on our boat died, some exploded, other just felt dead. My foe almost killed me with his dead body, I

escaped by luck.

On the other ships the fight continued. They had sigraxes, I noticed, and more than a few magical weapons. Since only people with potential for magic can use such weapons, and this people are not that common, they had to be very unusual pirates. Fire, explosions, force fields, invisible swords severing tentacles, it was the sigraxes making their magic. As I would be if it was not for my promise to Fergus which had forced me to tie deep down most of my Xar in order to avoid any accident which could give away my magic nature.

The invader came again, ten to each one we \_Melliag actually\_ had killed. He repeated his spell, same result, and that happened again, and again. But after that a new sort of enemy came. They looked like the ones before, but a bit smaller and darker. Melliag looked to me, and I knew what he saw.

They resisted Melliag's magic, ignored it. Unlike the pirates from our last fight these enemies had no intent to ignore the true mage. Half of them moved directly on Melliag. The rest came for us.

The ones who attacked the mage exploded, destroyed by the many layers on his Energetic Perimeter, that showed me they were only resistant to magic, not immune to it. That also gave him time to do something different. This time instead of trying to kill the invaders he forced them to run away in pain.

Guessing that was not the end of it, Fergus used the opportunity to organize a line of defense around Melliag. The mage was nervous now, I saw that, but the boy was keeping it for himself quite well.

\_Can you heal us, like before?\_ I decided to ask. Despite the taboo against asking true mages to use their powers he did not seem offended.

Melliag's spell brought us back to our health, and brought back to life, fully healed, some between our dead. Including Vor-Iban, the captain.

It is an unparalleled spectacle, to see the shapeless mass of blood and organs moving to form living human beings once more. A man whose head was crushed, most of his brain spread all over the deck of the Goose, and almost all his body either devoured or thrown into the sea, came back to his feet in a matter of seconds. However, many were still missing after the spell.

One more ship was gone. There were three still fighting, and they were doing even worse than us. In the middle of chaos Fergus spoke to the boy.

\_Help them!

Melliag did not understand him.

\_Help them, before it is too late! We will not escape that all that by ourselves, this is not the time to worry about conflicts between human cities !!

He was confused. Melliag was not used to being alone, now there was no older mage he could look for advice. Seemingly as the next best thing, an older sigrax, he looked in my direction. I promptly agreed with Fergus, not because I owned my life, but because he was obviously right.

The true mage repeated the same spell he used before. On a larger scale, to help the assumed pirates as well. But there was something else at the end.

\_That will heal you fast, during the fight. You may feel some euphoria for the rest of the night, that's the Xar making your bodies stronger. I included the other ships on that as well, we all will heal much faster. I hope it will suffice! Careful, this much vigor can mess up what your minds and balance...

The enemy must have noticed by then that his main problem was in our ship, because the huge tentacles came for us this time. When the huge living towers covered sky in all directions, approaching fast as a train I saw a thing I never had seen before: a true mage in panic.

The bastard froze at the worst possible moment. I felt The Meek Goose crumbling as the monster lifted it, pressing like three immense anacondas working together to destroy one small defenceless animal. Gravity thrashed us violently before the tentacles do.

There was nothing I could do to help. As a sigra I would have no remedy for that situation, secret or not. The promise made to Fergus had little meaning now. We all would die, and no true mage would be left to bring us back, so what the crew knew or not had no relevance.

The huge monster was holding us, but no longer squashing what was left from the Goose. He was expecting something. After a moment I understood what.

This army was not hunting human flesh or defending a territory. They were hungry for Xar, magic. They would kill all the others, but not us, the users of magic. Somehow, this time I was not happy about the expectation to not be killed.

Fergus must have realized what they wanted at the same time I did, but he reacted fast. Octopuses were climbing the living towers to reach us. Covering the huge cylindrical surfaces entirely. Fergus pushed me on Melliag, and us both through a gap between two tentacles. The three of us fell into the empty darkness.

Before we are crushed against the sea, I used a spell to absorb as much energy as I could from our velocity and invested it on a shield for the three of us. My Energetic Perimeter of protection\_ now inactive because I was keeping my magic in secret and there is too many ways for my Energetic Perimeter to make it obvious by accident\_ take advantage of this same sort of magic to deflect some kind of attacks .

We hit the water like a cannon ball, but didn't die in the process. We could have died little after that however, drowned. We were too deep, and I knew no spell to help us escape that, the water pressure alone should have killed us. Fortunately Melliag came back to his senses, the cold sea water must have helped.

The true mage surrounded us into a transparent bubble, we were now floating in the center of it. The sea around us illuminated by the surface of our sphere of protection was crowded of enemies.

\_Not a healing spell this time! \_ I thought out loud.

\_I graduated at Black Centaur Castle too, you know! Of course I have my fair share of Creation Spells, my dear sigrax.

Fergus was loving our conversation, and let us now that.

\_Great!! Now shut up and take us are here! \_ I doubt someone born on this Planet would have talked whit a true mage like that, but Fergus\_as I mentioned before\_was from Earth.

Not one momment too soon Fergus spoke, because the vast monster who destroyed our ship was everywere around us in the next second. We escaped it just in time, going up.

\_How far can we go inside that thing?\_ asked Fergus.

Melliag looked at him, surprised.

\_We could go all the way to Lutianen, or any other place in the World. I can take us to the Moon if you have time to spare! However, if we approach the cost in that we will have failed our mission. As the things are now, we may have the mages in Glass Viper looking at us already.

\_Even so deep into the open sea?

\_Is possible. They may choose not to risk the attentions such inspection can attract, but there is no way to know before we reach Shirshan.

This time, I was the one interrupting the conversation because our enemy was comming for us, and he (it?) was doing that from te surface of the sea 100 yd below. Before Melliag could do anything we was surrounded again by the monster. The true mage did his best, I am sure about his sincerity, but the bubble of light was pushed back to the sea against his will.

Was impossible to know when we submerged again, the tentacles only let us go to inside a cave of muscles and teeth. The cavern closed fast on us and once more our dear true mage had fear stamped on his face.

This time the boy mastered the panic. His hand reached for the large pendant on his chest. The magic did not came from him this time, only passed through him. It was someone else's magic.

The serrated world around us tembled, and them dismantled like a drop of black ink that falls on a swimming pool. The huge monster existed no more. Most of the other octopuses had the same fate, there was only a few hundred left and they were swimming at random.

On the other hand, our mage was passing out. Melliag resisted long enough to carry us up until about three yd below the surface, and then he fainted. His sphear stoped, and a minute ot two after that evanished.

Fergus helped the unconcious young man to the surface, and we saw ourselves lost, surrounded by floating wreckage.

The fight was still happening on the only three boats still above water. The false pirates had somehow managed to agroup their left boats. The octopuses hunted the survivors still swimming, the same situation we saw ourselves in. Somehow I found myself on a half of some ship's hull, which was floating upside down. I was alone.

I had lost my sword and my dagger early in the night. Unarmed I faced the octopuse raising from the water.

The promisse the Fergus made me keep my sigrax nature in secret from the crew, and the secret left little chance to process my Xar into usefull effects. Not that I could do some effective magic against the present enemy if I had all my tools: that was one of the smaller octopuses, the ones so resistant to magic that even the true mage had dificulty to affect.

\_I probably can not swim faster than you, can I ? \_ He (or it) shook his big head, exuding an odor that I interpreted as mocking laughter.

I jumped to avoid one tentacle, but it stoped in the middle of action. In a blink of the eye I was alone again.

The enemy army was retreating. After about one hour Xiirsh found me, she seemed comfortable on the water. The survivors were being rescued in boats and carried to the ships. One pirate ship was sinking , but the other two were still capable to navigate.

There was more people alive from the Meek Goose crew than I expected, 21 from the 62, not counting the mage. Vor-Iban survived, Fergus was on the other ship whit the true mage, who was still unconscious.

Our human enemies; actually former enemies, and possible also future, but allies in the present; had supported heavy losses as well. From 375 men they had now only 73 left.

\_They will came back. \_ sentenced Vor-Iban to me, in low void\_ The night only started.

Most survivor among the fake pirates where Alchemists, and the others sigraxes, there was no Warrior Caste\_ let un not even mention common man\_ among them. They all carried magical wapons, and used magical armors as well.

Among the sigraxes some had spells capable to tell our position in relation to the coast. The news were discouraging. To make things even worse a thunderstorm was comming for us, no one needed magic to see that.

## 6 - The Wild Sigrax

Riagare jumped the cliff without a moment of wever. Not even one instant before than he needed, because an arrow followed by a tail of black fire burned a line in his back, ruining a good winter coat and the silk shirt stolen hours before.

There was no chance to save this clothes anyway. The archers had the time they needed to reach the cliff, identify their target, disappearing in the distance, and loose two or three arrows, before the sigrax plung int the treetops far bellow. These were magical bows, with greater reach than any archer has right to ask. But there is a long distance between the mountain cliff and the high trees bellow, and there was a the fog of a cloudy day, advancing the night ahead near. Besides, the man would reach ground somewere not so close to the mountain.

The forrest is composed of seven layers of trees. After the four higher treetops most trees are urgais, many diferent kinds of them, all whit the characteristics woody thorns covering the branches, vines and trunk. The fugitive's skill tolerated that whit no difficulty.

The ground covered in leaves, 40 yd bellow the last treetop, received the main impact. The tree trunks nearby vibrated like bells. Gare's legs held the challenge bravely, but in the end they gave up. The accumulated kinetic energy was shared between the ground were Riogare rolled and the large root which finally stoped his movement.

The sigrax's only injury were the one made by the black fire, on the other hand the chothes and boots were beyond remediation.

Whitout time to meditate the lost clothes Gar got rid of the boots and coat and resumed the running.

Warning horns were awaken now, the warriors and sigraxes nearby, in the villages and in the woods, would be looking for him. They would find noting. Riogare entered the cold sea already.

A quarter of day later Gar was climbing aboard the small fishing boat were his young friend outlaw was waything for him. The sigrax regurgitated the small statue, and washed it in the salt water, after a moment he showed Udeoi the thing. Was made of some black and dense substance, an energy similar to the one in the arrows danced inside it, the details were too perfect to be possible in something so small.

\_That is the big prize ? You made me learn how fish well enough to pass by Fishermen Caste, and risked your life invadind a mage's castle for that? What the pretty thing does, after all ?

Riagare smirked, carefully placing the stattuet inside the upholstered bag.

\_ It can do many things, but what matters isn't what it can do, the important is what it means. To me it means a long journey back to my home land, the Piwag Desert. To you, it means the need to find another partner for your adventures. Also, it means to you the ownership of all the contacts and refuges

we now have and my part in our accumulated spoils: assuming you will let me keep this one all for myself. You can keep the boat as well.

\_You are insulting me, old man !! If memory serves me I was an orphan child about to become a bird's meal when we first met. Now I can fight as well as most city warriors, and know how to pretend to be many things, marine fisherman included. You can keep the trinket and the secret about it, if you please! Your part in the spoils is yours to expend or not, anything you choose to let behind will be waiting for you when you decide to come back to your senses and admit that your old dusty desert is too damn hot, and dry, for any reasonable person to live on.

The trinket was quite valuable indeed, powerful magic was hidden inside it. However, Riagare only took it as a distraction. The little statue was found by chance and stolen only to give the ones inside the castle a plausible explanation to why the sigrax invaded their fortress; just in case Gare could not leave without being spotted.

The real reason to all that was to steal one secret information. If the mage knew that the information itself would lose all its value. Then, trying to make use of it would be fatal to Riagare. On the other hand if the deception was successful the sigrax would have a chance to plunder something far more valuable than the black fire seed.

We were at two boats, 47 seven at each one. A sigrax from Shirshan had found an island close enough for us to reach it before the storm came and destroy our ships not made to endure such challenges on open sea. There were two more attacks from the intelligent octopuses, but not in numbers and not as determined as before, they just wanted to keep us on our toes it seems.

Our human enemies, for now transformed into allies by necessity, were really from Shirshan's navy. Their Elite Force. Their mission was to force the true mage Melliag to stay distant from their city. In order to do that they could kill or capture the rest of us, and even let us go if the circumstances demanded.

I could not understand why they would go to all that trouble just to avoid a healer mage to visit their city on the way to the long journey through the Sorrowful River. However, by now was clear to me that: Melliag, our captain Vor-Iban, and our chief mate Fergus, had all the time a plan much different to the one they shared with the rest of us. What this plan was, I didn't know. So, maybe there was a fair reason why these people didn't want Melliag anywhere near to their State City.

We reached a cave inside a high stone formation in the island. Only a sigrax or a mage using divination spells could have guided us safely for that water, and know about the cave, invisible at distance. The tempest reached the island just a moment before our ships entered the cave. But we escaped it intact, and once inside the cave was easy to find a good place to use the anchors.

\_Who long are we going to stay here?\_ I asked Vor-Iban.

\_I have no idea, Altair. That's not my boat. All depends on what their captain will decide, and I am not sure they even know who is that person.

\_What make you say that?

\_Just look how confuse they seem each time something new happens. There is at least two men here who can take the leadership. All their captains died, that's obvious. They have only one chief mate still alive, however for some reason most people do not want to follow him, Being sailors, and trained by their Warrior Caste to protect their city, normal thing would be to follow the more graduated person present. I can only imagine that guy must have made a serious offense to make them hesitate like that.

We had been on the same boat for all night, and I had not noticed the things he was talking about. As a matter of fact I still had my divination spell helping me to achieve information, thing is: no magic can fully replace life experience. Vor-Iban had been a ship captain for as long as I had been alive, he knew what was meaningful and what was not in that context.

\_How is the other person who can became the new captain ?

\_He is the one talking to the sigrax who first discovered this island. I think he was born Scholar Caste, for some words he use. However, he is clearly a salted navy sailor.

Melliag was still unconscious. His spell which gave us supernatural strength and healing power was fading out. We would not have reached that far if he had not made that particular spell to benefit all crews. The next attack from the octopuses would be the last one, if it happened after the spell loose effect completely and before the true mage wake up.

\_How many sigraxes do you have capable to make water?

The one from the cholar Caste asked Vor-Iban.

\_We have no sigrax at all. We are all common people, except for the mage, and my chief mate who is Warrior Caste.

\_In that case we will need to look the island for water and for food, unless someone can tell how long will take for the mage came back to us. We have no sigrax creator and what our sigraxes can produce will not be enough to the travell. Besides, to expend magic on that when we may have to fight our way back to the cost...

\_Do not talk about that to the Lutianian !! I will not have anyone sharing sensible information whit our enemy.\_ said the last chief mate they had left, coming from the other boat thorough the wood bord.

\_There is no secret about the fact that we have no supplies left. Or about the fact that we have little to no chance to go back to the Continent whitout food and water, unless the mage wake up. Or about the fact that no one here can imagine how long will take for the Lutianian mage wake up. Tell me, if

pleases you: what sensible information I was sharing here?

\_No one leaves the ships! We need to repair... everything.

\_About that, how we will repair anything without wood? The plan is to ask the sigraxes to create what we need? If so: how long it will take, lord sigrax?

\_Are you questioning my authority in front of this two?

\_Not at all ! We will follow your plan to the death! As we already followed your father to deep sea, yesterday. What is your plan, captain?

\_My plan is to have you impaled alive in front of the main quarter of your Caste for insubordination, Alchemist!

\_Glad to know, captain. That means we are going back to the Continent. About that, between now and my impalement, if you please: what we will do to reach Silent Square, in front of Alchemist Tower, on Shinshar?

\_I will let you know in due time!

After the two men leave, Vor-Iban informed me.

\_Leadership problem solved.

\_Sorry, but I don't think we listen the same discussion captain. To me the problem could not be worse.

\_Looks like that, but only because you have been looking to the wrong side. The information was never in the two bozos talking to each other. It was in the crew pretending to ignore them. No one will follow the sigrax chief mate, the ones who intended to change their minds. First chance some other sigrax will challenge him to a duel and kill the idiot, or the alchemist himself will do that: after this night the sigraxes have little magic left anyway.

\_What if the admiral's son is too good a fighter to be killed.

\_He is not.

I had to agree with the captain on that. By now we had seen each other fight, and we all knew what each one in this large improvised group was capable to do. My money would be in the Alchemist if they decided for the duel.

\_The new captain's life ends same time the storm does. No one can look the island for resources before that, any way.

The admiral's son survived for much longer than I would have liked. Another night came, three days passed, we were still prisoners inside the cave. The hurricane outside only getting stronger.

The mage was still unconscious. We were all exhausted, the sigraxes barely had magic left to keep themselves well without food or. They could not recharge themselves under such circumstances. The others, alchemists and common men together, had to deal with the salt in the air, the effects of late night and the hangover after the Healer's spell with no help from internal Xar.

The only one with plenty magical energy inside that cave was myself. Since I had used very little magic against the octopuses, and was still keeping secret about the fact that I am a sigrax, I could comfortably with neither food nor water for as long as needed. All I had to do was to be discreet about the fact. Unless Fergus decided to free me from the promise to keep secret about my magical power.

However, thinking about that, Fergus was nowhere. Neither was the dragonlike lady, Xiirsh. I looked for the fainted mage, and he was gone as well. How they managed to take the most important thing in this ship away without no one notice and stop them I have no idea. But, before the fact came to general attention I decided that I would not stay to find out how the people from Shirshan would react to the fact that Melliag was not in their hands anymore.

Was easy to find the entrance to the tunnels used by the others, they went down and bifurcated some times, after a couple of hours I lost the trail. Little after that I found some old camp. The equipments were still there, and also their owners. More or less 26 dead corpses, accordingly to the divination spell I was keeping still they had been here for about five years. They died violently, no magic would be necessary to say that, the light from the torch I had stolen from the Shirshanes could tell that much; animal attack, if I had to bet.

I had lost my weapons since the beginning of the night when when we had first met the deadly octopus people. During that night I took weapons from the dead, some times improvised ones like a kitchen knife someone must have found in the ground somewhere in a ship which by then was already no longer above water. However, such weapons could do little against the intelligent octopuses, therefore the ones without magical weapons would keep the ships advancing while the better equipped faced the enemy. Now I was unarmed, so I looked for a way to remediate that.

The dead were not from the cities nearby. The looks of their still packed tents and the materials of their blankets on the ground suggested to me the image of some very cold land. The equipment and weapons varied in quality, what could mean that I was among dead pirates.

To be honest, the line among honest merchants and pirates on the sea is at very best blurred on this world. When I left Lutianen we were supposed to be a crew of merchants up to a point in the Sorrowful River, a pirate ship between there and the vicinity of the powerful State City of Micula, a merchant ship again on Micula and the cities and villages protected by it, and then a pirate ship again during most of our way back home.

I got new boots, some clothes, rope, and some sweet cakes famous for stay good for consumption for many centuries. There was also some alcoholic drinks I had never tasted before.

I saw two magical tools, a ring made of ivory and a necklace of small bones. The ring gave me a larger resistance against extreme temperature, the necklace the capacity to see in complete darkness. I found both in the same dead corpse, what made clear to me that he had been either an alchemist or a sigrax. Only these two kinds of people and the true mages can enjoy the benefits of magical objects and

weapons, to anyone else they are just hard to brake pretties. A true mage this fellow could not have been, because no true mage carry anything that cheap.

The corpse, which possibly was a sigrax like myself, also two things extremelly valuable: a dagger and a shortbow, both magical in nature. That was the first time I had a magical weapon in my hands. I could not say what power they had, but things like that are very powerfull, and no less expensive.

I decided to hide the magical weapons as well as possible inside the bag I was going to take whit me. Since I was supposed to pass by a common man whitout magical potential they would stay as a last resource. So I looked for the best dagger after the magical one, the best sword not too big to my confort, a bronze shield, and a oil lamp (that way no one had to know about the power given by the necklace, if the crew of the two boats were to find me.

Not long after I felf that camp I found a way out the stone maze. Outside I saw, below, a valley round like a large crater. For the fact that I had only gone down inside the caves I could say I was now below sea level. Sky was clear and a morning was beginning.

A white animal, which looked like a mix betwee a dog and a small gorila, attacked me. It was fast, and determinated. Knoked me on the ground, and I lost my new sword for a momment when we rolled downhill. Putting the shield between his teeths and my face, I managed to injuri the animal whit the dagger in my belt. I was above it, keeping it down whit my weight and looking for an oppening to end the fight, when someone spoke to me:

\_Let it go, is better if you don't kill any of them. \_I decided to follow the suggestion. The animal escaped to the woods bellow.

The person talking to me was a man, betwee 30 and 80 years old, about my height but much more muscular. He explained his words.

\_Once hurt it will flee, they are not that dangerous alone. And if we kill too many that will attract far worse things.

\_Thanks for your advice, fellow. That island is yours?

\_It has been my home, as much as my cage. But I have no desire to call it mine for longer than I have to. How about you?

\_We came here to escape sea monsters. We intend to go back to the continent as soon as possible. Probably would use your help, if you care to join us! My name is Altair, I am a Sailor Caste, of Lutianen.

\_Nice to meet you, Altair. I am Riagare, wild sigrax of the Yellow Lizard, a nomad tribe on the Piwag.

\_I have listened about the desert tribes. I recently visited Niore.

\_You have that advantage over me then. That is the closest I came to Piwag Desert since I left it decades ago!

\_We probably should tell my crew about the white creatures, they will enter the woods for supplies and probably will kill the beasts as soon as they attack.

\_We have time to do that, no ship will leave the cave were your two ships are before evening. The sea is low and there is no way to go walking from the cave entrance to the beach. You have no boat left inside your ships, and if anyone try to swimm they will die before they can reach half the way: octopuses aren't the only deadly thing in such waters.

\_How you know that much about our situation?

\_ Same way I know you are a involuntary immigrant from Earth. Your chief mate Fergus told me.

\_Did they found Melliag?

\_Your mage is save. He still is very injured, and incapable to use any magic, but slowly recovering, Piol is taking care of him. Let's go, they are waything for us.

\_May I ask how many you are on this island?

\_Only two, alive. The octopuses almost never came close to the island, as they almost never enter the main land, but there is other sources of danger.

\_The healer you just told me about, Piol, he is a wild sigraxe from Piwag like yourself ?

Riagare laughed outloud, for a long time. I had to wait to find out why, because oonly answer he gave me was:

\_It's good to hear new voices, after so long.

Once we entered his home, builded near to a waterfall, I met Piol, and understood his sense of humor. There was just too many things wrong in my question. Piol is a woman, not a Healer but a Enchantor, not a nomad from the Piwag but a civilized lady from a important city in the distant and iced North in origin. Not a sigrax either! Piol was Riagare's slave-mage.

I was still confuse about the last detail when Melliag finally opened his eyes. He had been sleeping since we entered.

## 7 - The Mummy

After we find Riagare things started to get better for our group. They escaped the caves and repaired the ships. Our only problem now was how to brake the siege around the island made by the sea monsters.

Thanks to his slave mage Piol the healler Melliag was getting better, and her master was happy to welcome us, and help us to create a plan to escape back to the Continent. As long we accepted to bring he and his slave property with us.

Hunt in the island was necessary but dangerous. Riagare insisted that we should avoid to kill the dog-gorillas despite the facte that they attacked us every time we entered the forest to hunt or woodcutting. According to him kill the vicious animals was the fatal mistake which costed the lifes of the other survivors from the shipwreck five years before.

The wild sigrax had been on a ship from a distant continent, and was going back to his home land, a desert not far from this island. According to him the secret to travel the Ocean is almost lost and only know today for a few sailors from distant lands. There is other ways to do that, but they require true mages whit specific skills, and only work for a small number of individuals at the time. His ship had lost the only one who could protect it from the intelligent monsters who life in the open sea and, that is why they shipwrecked five years before.

Our group was now the precarious alliance formed by a small group of sailors from my own adoptive city, Lutianen, and a larger group from the rival city of Shirshan. We all had entered the dangerous realm normally avoided by humans because we were trying to escape them.

For some reason the giant intelligent beings who killed most of both our original crews would not came to kill us on the island in large numbers. Even being prefectly capable to travel on dry land they avoided it. During his five years as a prisoner on the island Riagare discovered that what protected the island from the octopuses like monsters was somewere bellow the ruins in the middle of it. However, he did not discovered what was that protection.

Not wanting to swim all the way to he Continent, and not having a ship, Riagare decided to avoid the magical traps which killed the other survivors of the shipwrecked. This traps became harder to avoid as one approachs the ruins. Unfortunately for him Piol didn't had any spell capable to transpor both to the continent even if they had a way to avoid the octopuses.

Our true mage, Melliag, had a spell which could take a small group to the continent. However, he was recovering from the counterattack made by one giant sea monster. After one month he was able to talk and walk to hobble a little, but make magic was still impossible to him.

Riagare would now risk to lead a expedition and search the ruins for the protective magic we all needed so much to escape.

However a small group among us had other plans. I was called to a secret reunion by Fergus, former chief mate on our ship, and Vor-Iban, the former captain. My friend, the dragonlike lady Xiirsh, was invited as well.

“The wild sigrax can not reach the Continent!” declared Fergus as a matter of fact. “We must avoid that, even if that means to die on this island.”

“I agree,” said the former captain. “We could even accept to take him, if it was not for the slavemage. But not her.”

“I do not understand. He isn’t our enemy, and even if he was we could deal with the subject after we solve the more immediate problem which is to escape. There is about 90 true mages on Lutianen, can they not deal with one single slavemage Lady lost on Riagare’s desert? Is this nomadic tribe on the Piwag Desert so dangerous that we need to commit suicide just to avoid the girl to join their forces?”

“The Yellow Lizards are a dangerous tribe, yes, but normally they would not be that dangerous. However, the desert tribes are presently join forces to take the village of Niore from us. Their only problem so far has been the incapacity to choose a leader. If this sigrax find his way back to the Lizards bringing a true mage with him, the problem will be solved. Riagare will take Niore from Lutianen, and we can not allow that to happen! Specially not now.”

“What is so special about now, Fergus?” I asked.

“Need I tell you, sigrax?”

Xiirsh explained. My closest friend now, she had been living among the humans native from this planet for much more than one human life and despite the fact that she does not look like a human she understood them far better than I ever will.

“The next war between Lutianen and Shirshan is imminent, Altair. It may be happening right now. Niore is in the middle, you know, and it is an important source of weapons and red iron not to mention other metals.”

I was startled.

“If that is true, why bring a true mage with us in a merchant mission? We would be years far from Lutianen! More than that, they could kill Melliag, the mages of Shirshan.”

“Plan was never to travel all the way to Micula. That lie was necessary to keep the secret about our true mission.” told Fergus, looking tired.

“In that case, I suppose no secret is needed anymore, since we failed anyway. What was the mission Fergus?”

This time Vor-Iban answered.

\_We don't know, actually. Only Melliag has all the details. Our mission was to help him to reach Shirshan, and get more instructions from him after that.

They all agreed about the need to kill Riagare. I could not fight their arguments, once they had been put on the table. We do had to either kill Riagare, or do some other thing to avoid him to reach the Piwag.

\_Are you really up to that ?\_I asked Xiirsh and soon I could speak whit her alone.

\_It is a nice island! Besides, another 3.000 years give or take and I will have my wings. By them I am sure I can pass any army of octopuses by myself.

\_You can't be serious.

\_Well, all I just said happens to be true! Except the part about stay here that long. Call me selfish, my people mostly are compared to the humans I knew since I came to that one: but fact is that I couldn't care less about Lutianen and it's war against Shirshan right now. I am going back to freedom and if that means to help a nomadic sigrax and his slavemage, so be it. For your question, may I assume you agree whit me?

\_I was not sure. Would probably be better to conciliate the interests.

\_If possible, I don't see why not. That probably means to kill the fellow who welcomed us in his home, helped us to survive this island, tould us about the only way to escape that trap, and is about to help us to achive that way. We made a deal whit him, and we will kill the man, or at very least let him behind. Are that course of action smooth enough to you ?

\_Why do you ask?

\_Does not seems like a thing you would normally do.

\_That is hardly a normal circunstance, Lady.

I can not read the expressions writen on her dragonlike face. As far as I can tell she does not have muscles in it to disclose her feeling, unlike us, humans. Maybe that's because her species evoled from less sociable ancestors. Even taking that under consideration, I think she was still skeptical about my determination.

I was happy about the fact that we had little chance to find a actual plan to kill the Wild Sigrax. We had no magical weapon as far as everyone else knew, and I was not about to tell Fergus about the bow and de dagger found by me inside a cave.

Back on our place of reunion\_ near to the cave were our ships were again sheltered afther the repairs\_ we decided that only 11 people would enter the ruins. From our side: Fergus, Myself, Xiirsh, and two other sailors. The people from Shirshan sended their leader, the alchemist born from Scholar Caste, Gripon, and four sigraxes I knew only from distance. Riagare would came. Would have been great to bring one or two true mages whit us, however Melliag was still unable to even walk properly, let

alone use magic. Piol was needed to take care of him, if he was to ever recover his power.

The group left back would protect the ships, the two mages, and themselves, from the island immunological system. Since we had little to no hope to enter the ruins and search it without kill all the dog-gorillas to awaken it.

Before we saw the ruins the animal attacks became more frequent, and more determined. They would not flee after the first blood. The sigraxes from Shirshan would put them to sleep, or hide us with spells as often as possible, but we still killed a dozen before we entered the stone memories of once must have been a city almost as large as Timurda. After 30 steps surrounded by buildings half destroyed by millennia of rain and sun, we had to fight for our lives. The animals came not a dozen at a time, but as a countless horde.

Riagare advanced, dancing effortlessly with one sword on each hand. The sigraxes from Shirshan and their leader alchemist had magical weapons capable to burn, electrify, or dissolve half a dozen animals at each blow. Xiirsh was doing almost as well with her non magical\_ but huge\_ spear/cleaver, Fergus had enough skill to keep the rhythm. The two sailors and myself had only common weapons, and less than impressive skills. I was clearly the less capable fighter, to my annoyance.

Being a sigrax myself, and a man from a World where common people do not carry any weapons on streets, let alone blades, I was naturally unable to properly fight under such circumstances. Soon everyone in the group was asking Fergus with angry looks why he included the incompetent in so important mission.

The wild sigrax obviously knew where we had to go, because after some time we entered a large building, and no animal followed us inside it.

\_The entrance to the maze below the city is nearby. Let's take our breath, because once we enter the surface the actual fight will begin. \_ warned our guide.

The sigraxes healed themselves, and helped us a bit. Once more I regretted the promise made to Fergus that I would pretend to be a common man learning how to survive as a sailor, instead of a sigrax. Now I had most my power bound inside me, and would take a long time until I could properly use it. To make it even worse, Fergus had still not liberated me from that promise: the little magic I had left was to be used only as our last resource.

In the tunnels below the city Riagare's words became true. Here the monsters looked like the ones in the surface, but three times larger, and much harder to kill. We kept our ground for some time, but soon we had to flee. After that we would advance three steps and run back two. Riagare still knew the way, and I started asking myself how that was possible. He told us their crew never came that far, and no one could have entered a place like that alone.

But, of course, by the time he had a true mage with him. Piol, his slave. Being magically forced to obey his every command she probably was a weapon more than powerful enough to face everything we had found up to this point. Even the huge living warmachine in front of us.

The thing looked like a armored dinosaur with eight small legs. As tall as the African elephant used to be before human demographic growth extinguished it on my home World, but five times longer, a bit more

larger, and probably 12 times heavier.

Only magical weapons and spells seemed capable to hurt it. Despite the size the creature was fast enough to escape most attacks, and to kill two sigraxes from Shirshan. I was about to unwrap the magical bow inside my backpack and reveal myself as someone who at least had potential for magic, when the Wild Sigraxe abandoned his swords and transformed his nails into claws. His body grew up in about one third, and he plunged inside the monster, disappearing. Before I understood what just happened the armored dinosaur was twitching, and hitting only the walls and the the roof of the tunnel. Minutes after that it was inert on the ground, and Riagare left by the opposite side, leaving a tunnel one the dead body.

He was almost naked. The blood and what ever was the goop covering him was repulsed by his skin as if they were the same pole of a magnet, soon enough he was clean again. Still naked, however, except by his magical amulets.

\_You could have don it sooner! I lost two good friends to that thing \_ complained Gripon. Riagare ignored him.

\_No one expected that animal was that fast. I am sorry for your lost, but we can't start pointing fingers now. Not if we want to find our way back to the Continent.\_ intervene Fergus, in a conciliatory tone.

\_What about their weapons? \_Asked the dragonlike Lady.

\_We will take them back to Shirshan. They are family treasures, and their families will want them back.\_ explained another sigrax from Shirshan. Gripon was still not willing to speak.

Would make more sense to me let Riagare use the weapons from now on, since he is a sigrax and therefore perfectly capable to take full advantage of magical weapons. Also, he obviously was capable to use two weapons at same time. However, since no one else suggested the idea I kept my mouth shut: there was already enough angry looks on my direction. I saw no need to get more by making suggestions which would probably go against local culture.

We avoided two other monsters as big as that one, from the same species. Finally we found smaller corridors where our concerns were only the small animals we had found before. Spiders and six legged rats attacked us from every were, many times. Some among that rats had two heads and by no reason that was more scary to me than anything else on the underground.

At some point the geometric decoration on the walls was replaced by words written on some strange alphabet. I could probably read it, if I had my divination spell still working. One sigrax from Shirshan helped on it, even not knowing the necessary spell he had a ring capable to give him the capacity to use it.

During the remote Age of Spiders the species which owned this island tried to control the vortex. Like Fergus and myself they had been brought against their will from another universe by the natural phenomenon and wanted to go back. But unlike us they lived during a time when they could use all their technology to achieve their goal.

However they could not open the door they wanted. Instead, they opened another, and what came from it destroyed their civilization.

They probably never knew the octopuse like monsters, back then the seas were not that dangerous. Only millenia after that the vortex brough the giant monsters to the Ocean. The involuntary immigrants, after their disastrous attempt to go home knew they had no chance to survive much longer and decided to avenge themselves by imprisioning their killers. To do so they used all the power they still had.

The incorporial killers needed intelligent beings as food, and since we found no one they probably died at starvation. However the protective field still in place seems to affect the octopuses, keeping most of them at distance. Was make me speculate that the octopuses and the incorporial killers may be from similar Universes, if not from the same one.

The bad news to us was that we had no information about were the field generator was or how to replicate it.

\_Let's look for the most heavily protected area. What we need will probably be up there.\_ suggested Xiirsh. As logical as her suggestion sound, I did not felt particularly happy about that prospect.

After that point Riagare seemed as lost as the rest of us. And we lost our two sailors from Lutianen not long after that, just after we entrer the heavily guarded downward spiral to the lower levels. Xiirsh had one or her left arms, the big one, severed by a explosive trap, and Riagare avoided Fergus's dead in this same incident shielding the chief mate whit his powerfull body. The long scar on the Wild Sigrax's back bled a little by, but other than that he was fine.

After all that, exhausted, we entered a level full of mummified corpses. They had never being human, their skin was covered by exagonal scales which looked like glass now, what ever they looked before. Their heads had a long bony protrusion in the middle remembering a mohawk, and they all had six fingers at each hand.

Many of them also had protheses clearly artificial in nature, made of something which looked like carbon monofilaments: if this people really lived during the Age of Spiders, that would make their cybernetic technology acceptable by the Exclusion Law. One could, in teory, replicate it and use whitout fear the true mage's global power. The idea could have been exciting under diferent circunstances, but I did not considered it exciting at the time. I was too tired to think clearly.

Gripon looked one of his sigraxes. The man understood what he wanted.

\_I have a necromantic belt. It has a limited power, may be finished by now, but if it still isn't then I can bring back one of this corpses. It will not be alive, but will obey my commands, and if he could talk before he will be able to talk now.

Since we had probably only one chance to make it work we looked for what seemed to be the center of command. In here there was one fellow who seemed to be more important than the others, by the way his clothes and implants looked.

The sigrax whit the belt started the magic, and the air filled up whit a purple mist which was coming

from him. Temperature dropped fast, and I felt very uncomfortable for no clear reason. Except by Riagare all humans in our group seemed a bit depressed and left to as far as reason allowed under the circumstances. About one hour passed, before any new development inside that room.

Finally, the corpse started moving. And the sigrax with the belt commanded it to raise, it did just that. The sigrax asked its name.

The sigrax's feet were one foot above the ground. The mummy was holding him by the throat with one hand, and we could not move. As fast as one can consume a small cup of juice it drained all energy and water from the sigrax. A little recovered now, it reached for Riagare.

The wild sigrax still could not move, as the monster drained him. However, unlike the sigrax from Shirshan, he was not immediately affected.

Suddenly Riagare attacked his enemy, moving again. It was strong, but the Wild Sigrax mutilated the arm holding his throat, taking four fingers from it. Once the foe lost contact with the sigrax we recovered the ability to move.

Before we could surround the monster, it escaped the room to vanish in the maze of corridors.

It was never dead!! They are all alive, only drained of all energy. Sleeping and waiting. \_ explained Riagare.

\_\_We will hunt it? \_I asked.

\_\_I don't think that would be wise, given the circumstances. \_ said Fergus.

\_\_You are right, of course. However, we may have created today a far worse problem for both our cities than any threat they may represent to each other.\_\_ replied Gripon.

\_\_It's not only your city, the Piwag Desert may suffer just as much! I intend to hunt the thing right now. However, may be best for you all to go back from here. Alone I can go faster.

\_\_All that was for nothing, then?\_\_ asked Fergus.

\_\_On the contrary \_\_informed the Wild Sigrax\_\_ We know what keeps the octopuses out the island now. We also have the way to protect your ships. Take any dissected corpse with you. We regroup inside the building on the surface, near to the entrance of the underground.

Riagare was gone.

\_\_You think he will ever come back? \_\_asked Gripon.

My immediate concern was if we, ourselves, would ever reach the surface. The journey from up there had cost us much, and we had the powerful Yellow Lizard sigrax helping us. In top of all that, now we would be bearing the weight of a living mummy.



## 8 - Way to Freedom

Took us 10 times longer to reach the tunnels where we had found the words written on the walls than we needed before to make the inverse travel. All our food was long gone, and the eventual monsters were all food we had. On the other hand the monsters seemed less interested on us. Their priority in the underground was clearly to stop people from entering, not from leaving.

The mummy we carried probably had something to do with our easy journey. The monsters clearly avoided to put it in risk.

Was a long travel, and a hard one. The bigger monsters were not as careful as the small ones, and almost crushed the mummy, and the people carrying it, many times. Dicolon was the last sigrax alive from the four who came with us to find the secret we needed to escape that island. That without counting myself, but the fact that I am a sigrax was still a secret up to this point. Would have been useful, maybe, to add my magical ability to our efforts. However, I would have little magic free, since I had most of it bounded deep inside my body to avoid accidental exposure of the secret and take a long time to undo such Xar bonds.

Dicolon had exhausted most his power by now, as I probably would have as well if it was not the secret. However both he and his leader, the Alchemist Gripon, carried magical weapons, and objects, useful to our circumstances. The most important among them was Dicolon's water bottle, which was a portable leather flask always full of fresh water. As any magical object it only worked in the hands of someone born with magical potential who had awakened this potential at some point: roughly speaking true mages, sigraxes, or alchemists. In the hands of Fergus or Xiirsh it would become empty as fast as any other bottle similar in size. Fergus was constantly attentive to avoid the bottle to fall almost empty in my hands, because if that happened would be impossible to deny the fact that I have some magical background.

Xiirsh was more injured than the rest of us. She lost one of her bigger arms, and had trouble staying awake. We kept constantly staying behind as the other three advanced carrying the inert but alive mummy. We all were anxious to see the sun again, but I felt more close to the dragonlike Lady than I felt to anyone else in our group. Fact is, I would not have survived that long if it was not for her, any time a fight got hard I looked for the shadow of her byg spear-cleaver to hide under it. On the other hand, she is even more alien to this planet than I am, and see that she was capable to adjust to the human culture here gave me more hope about my own chance of adaptation.

My hope for adaptation dropped many stair steps when I saw the blockage caused by a collapse in the tunnel we were supposed to enter in our way to surface. We had no water, little food, and I was the less competent fighter in our group since the beginning. Not long after that, looking for an alternative way, we noticed that the smaller monsters were converging again in our direction.

Seeing no alternative I unpacked the magical bow hidden in my backpack, and the dagger hidden with it. I would not die, or let my friend die, just to keep that secret.

That was my first time using a magical weapon, the sensation is impossible to describe. The difference between that and make magic by yourself remember the difference between ride a bike and ride a motorcycle: the first one is all you, you feel it more, and you see everything around you better; but the second is faster and much less tiring.

I had never touched let alone actually used a bow, and the magic in this weapon didn't helped my effort to put the arrow were I needed it. But the arrows appeared as I touched the bowstring, endless. A dense line of black fire followed each arrow, and it burned the monsters as each arrow passed through several of them exploding inside the last one. That was enough to keep the beasts at distance, for some time.

I was worried about what would happen when I finally had to sleep or was too tired to pull the bowstring.

\_So, you've been fooling me all this time? \_ she could keep her eyes open but whit obvious difficulty.

\_I am sorry about the lie.

\_Since you are here because you choose to stay behind and help me, I think I will settle for a "I am sorry" this time, human from Earth. Let's die friends, Altair !

\_Looking forward to it, 'dragon' from Altiva. Will be my honor.

A large human figure emerged suddenly leaning against the wall, crossed arms, between Xiirsk and me.

\_I was about to offer a way out this tunels. However, since you both are happy here...

Riagare was using some kind of invisibility spell. He had a improvised sack on his left hand and a cynical smile on his face.

We reached the surface half day after that, before that I asked Riagare to keep my secret and the wild sigrax agreed to do that. We left the tunels near to the point we had entered them, still inside the build were the monsters would not enter, in the middle of city ruins . The place was full of people this time.

The true mages were both here, and to my surprise Melliag pointed Piol and raging spoke looking Riagare:

\_I challenge you for the ownership of this slavegirl !!

Vor-Iban, the former captain of the Meek Goose was here, most our people from the Goose who were still alive were with him. Most the navy sailors from Shirshan were here as well, and in the absense of Gripon they seemed to have chosen Vor-Iban as their temporary leader. Even knowing the capitain was their enemy, outside this island.

Fergus, Gripon and Dicolen had not emerged from the ground yet with their precious cargo. I had to ask myself if they ever would, if the collapse inside the tunnel killed them, or maybe something else. Given my last conversation with Fergus about the Wild Sigrax I could guess why the mage had chosen to make this challenge but everyone else looked furious at Melliag.

\_I reject your challenge, Healer Mage from Lutianen. Remember, I am only a sigrax! No one expects a duel between a sigrax and a true mage, were I came from. Maybe that is different on Lutianen, your proud island city?

Many voices assured it is exactly the same on Lutianen, and on Shirshan. It is obviously the same anywhere on this planet. True mages are absurdly powerful, much more so than any sigrax.

\_I will have the slavemage, Yellow Lizard ! Give me her ownership, you will transfer the magical key of her slave collar to me, or I will kill you right now.

\_You will kill me and take what is mine, despite the fact that you agreed to bring me and my slave to my home land? Despite the fact that I helped you, and protected you in my home while you were injured and incapable to use magic? That's the honor to be expected from the proud sons of Black Centaur Castle, the Mage Caste of Lutianen !?

After Riagare say that I saw many common men from Lutianen facing the young healer, unsheathed swords at hand. They would die before the true mage notice their existence, but they would not stand still while the spoiled boy dishonored their beloved State City.

\_You aren't a civilized sigrax, desert lizard!! Mage Caste Laws do not protect you.

\_All right! I will fight you, let's have that duel. I evoke the Igdush Law: and since it is from the days before the True Mages, when the first cities were still youngs and the mage caste was all only wild sigraxes like myself, you can not claim it does not apply to me. Will you honor it?

The young mage was even more insulted.

\_How a nomadic barbarian from a traditional lineage of zoophiles sigraxes know about the Igdush law ?!?

\_We "zoophiles" have old lineages, boy. Ask my question!

\_The Igdush do not allow you to escape the duel. It only demand the stronger side to agree with a few demands. Understand: It was never intended to be used between true mages and sigraxes, it was to protect inexperienced sigraxes from powerful veterans. Will not save you from me. However, if that is your choice, I will honor the Igdush: what are your terms?

\_ I may use magical items and weapons. You may not.

Melliag almost fell on the floor with so much laughter.

\_Are you serious? No magical weapon could do you any good now. To make it worse. you don't

even have any!!! I will not sit here and wait until you look for one hidden somewhere on the Piwag Desert.

\_I will fight you in next hour. Using only what is already inside this room.

\_Being that the case, I agree. What else?

\_I get to choose who will start the fight.

\_That's all right. You can attack me ten times before I start: if you can survive my Energetic Perimeter long enough to do so.

The Wild Sigrax waited for a moment. Everybody in the room was against the true mage, even the ones from Lutianen.

\_I get to choose who attacks first. I choose you will, boy. You may begin when you feel ready.

Melliag was confused. That was clearly not what he expected from that conversation. He must have repeated it many times in his imagination, and I bet not even one of the Wild Sigrax behaved like that.

Ferguns, Gripon, and Dicolen came from the tunnel, and that brought Melliag back to the present time. He looked at the sigrax and I felt the magic on my bones.

Riagare was still looking at him, smiling.

Melliag didn't allow the surprise to build hesitation inside him. His next move was energetic, and even the animals in the woods around the ruins must have felt it. Melliag's arms shone blue light and I knew Riagare should be a puddle of goo on the ground by now, even before the true mage finished the spell.

The first idea in my mind was that Riagare was protected by Piol's magic. But if that was the case, the link should have been obvious to any mage or sigrax in the room since the first spell. The second possibility was the so-called "Wild Sigrax" be a true mage himself, by many reasons the possibility was distant. Looking for any other explanation, I noticed the sigrax's hand discreetly inside his improvised sack.

Seeing his enemy untouched by his power, Melliag must have assumed that he was dealing with another true mage. Or with something else, entirely not human. Giving up, the young mage reached for the pendant hanging on his neck.

Riagare protested, when he saw the mage's hand moving.

\_That's how far the honor of Lutianen Mage Caste goes? Nice to know...

Nothing exploded, there was no sound at all, or light. Time just stopped as if there was something very wrong in the gears of existence. I saw the Wild sigrax burn, his skin and flesh melt, his skull exposed in many places. He now had his two hands on the object, and I saw what it was.

Riagare dropped the severed inhuman head and jumped, like a comet but leaving a tail of blood and

flesh in the air. His claws opened a tunnel through Melliag's chest.

The sigrax held the mage's hearth in his hand. The boy's dead body hit the ground. Fergus tried to attack the Wild SigraX, not knowing the details about what just happened. The sailors from the Meek Goose stopped him.

Ignoring the former chief mate from the Meek Goose Melliag ate the true mage's hearth.

I looked again to the head in the ground, the one Riagare had in the improvised bag. It was the same individual who killed a sigrax from Shirshan days before. The thing Riagare hunted down in the maze of tunnels, after it almost killed us all. The bony protuberance on the top of this head was glinting with magical energy.

I wanted to touch the head, see if I could learn something about its powers. Before I could reach it the thing burned to ashes, however.

Riagare left. Fergus took Melliag's magical rings, the pendant, and other small things from his pockets. He was probably the one responsible for the boy, as soon as possible he would bring the magical items back to Lutianen and give them to Melliag's family.

This deal changed a lot for us. Without the true mage the Shirshan navy men from Shirshan could let us go where we wanted. Their mission was just to keep Melliag, the true mage, distant from their city. The secret mission had failed and I still had little idea about what it was.

Now, before anything else, we left the ruins. This time no animal attacked us.

There was much talk about. Riagare wanted to stay on Niore Port, because the village is in the border of his homeland, the Piwag Desert. That destiny was as good as any other to me, as long as Fergus accepted the idea. I still had a long time of work to repay the former chief mate for the bribes he paid to save my life. I intended to make good my word.

Outside the ruins the fight had not been as hard as it was underground. Even so there were many people injured, and some dead. Now, without a Healer Mage, we had no chance to bring the dead back.

Piol is a powerful mage, much more powerful than Melliag was, as far as I understand it, and he doesn't take anything from a mage's power (except the capacity to use any of it without the master's permission, or against his will). However, bringing people back to life from pieces is Healer jurisdiction. Basic healing sigraxes can do, and she did much better and faster than they would have, but that is all.

Piol's Way, as an Enchanter, focuses on transforming common stuff into magical objects, weapons, clothes, armors, buildings, lakes, and so on. It isn't something possible to do fast, and is something hard to do without a proper atelier, but the results are for all practical purposes perpetual. There was a messy way to use this Way, that gives magical properties to objects for a brief period of time, the cheapest use for it is to create a thing, like a rope, or a chip, that will be impossible to break by any means except magic for as long as the magic stays active. Another very cheap use for Incantation is to give strong alcoholic and/or psychotropic properties to common water, for a few hours or days: exactly what we needed that night.

Riagar choose a place not far from the ships, high enough to give us a great view, and safer than most island for our celebration. The mummy was secure, our plan to leave the island was almost finished. Everybody had lost friends to moom, nightmares to gulp, and people on this world seems to really like to “open the doors of perception” in times like that. They made music, they made fire, meat, and told lies about recreance and trues about honorable acts, and vice versa; not for the beauty of the tales or for the pleasure to brag about defects and virtues: just to feel they were not alone in this Universe.

That only made me feel more intensely how alone I actually am in this Universe. Therefore I decided to stop after I drink the first calabash.

Outside the main group, alone, trying to find the stars, I saw someone else who probably was as alone as myself on that planet. Unlike me, however, he had not choosed to deal whit it by staying sober.

\_You still believe we must kill the Yellow Lizard ? \_ I asked Fergus, during our first night outside the tunels.

He seemed distracted by the sounds coming from the forest. Night was debonair and full of stars. I could not blame him for want to escape the heavy obligations of his role as a spy for a little longer.

\_Would be better for Lutianen if we killed him on this island.

He spoke, as if talking about a distant dream. Then continued.

\_ ...but I don't think I can do that, or ask you to do. He saved us too many times in that tunels, and Lutianen already betrayed him once time too much for this trip. On Earth we would kill a dangerous man like him or bring him down at any cost, no matter how many times he had saved our lives. But I am no longer a Global Defence Soldier, and we are no longer at Earth. Let's do what we are supposed to do on that planet: let's follow the Warrior's Code of Honor.

The humor in his words was lost to him, but not to me.

\_You can do that, I assume. I am not Warrior Caste.

\_You could have decieved me, Altair. I saw the honored warrior in you more than one time, inside that tunnels.

His comment brough me back to a uncomfortable quandary.

\_Do you really see yourself as “Warrior Caste” now, already? Not as someone playing by the rules of that alien World to get by, but as someone actually bonded by a code of honor of some sort ?

\_You never felt yourseld bonded by a code of honor of some sort? I mean, back on Earth.

I never had considered honor as a serious matter before the vortex. It is just a word from ancien History, still used by children's videogames. However, I was not about to admit that openly to Fergus.

\_I think the Law mostly took the place once occupied by the honor on our home world. Maybe not so much for men like you, the military keep the old thought structures for a long time after they have been discarded by every one else in the society. On the other hand, even you must feel that honor is less important than Law and Human Rights for the common people. You don't used to be dressed in your uniform every day. From time to time you would be on vacation, walking among normal peaceful men.

\_Normal, peaceful and dishonored? \_By the look on his face I had helped to solve some old question deep inside his mind.\_ If that is really the case I am happy to be here, and even happier to know that you are in this planet, Altair ! Let's thank the vortex for his gift.

\_I don't see your point.

He left, laughing at my lack of understanding. I expected he would come back, to explain himself after pissing. He never did.

Once I noticed that Fergus has not going back, I decided to walk a little more deep away from the fire. The night was hot, as it mostly is on the region.

Somewhere between the rocks I saw the Meek Goose cooker enjoying a intense carnal conversation whit the sigrax Dicolon, at least that night, between that rocks, there what no impendent war between Lutianen and Shirshanwere. Thanks to the magical neckless I found on that cave here in the island I was able to see in the dark, far more than I would have chosen to. Therefore I walked on the opposite direction.

Xiirsh saw me at same time I saw her. She was debating something whit Riagare, and he stoped in the middle of a sentence when he noticed someone was coming. He could see in the dark as well as Xiirsh and myself.

\_ It is more common than I would imagine, among you people from Lutianen, the taste for walks in the darkness! Welcome, involuntary immigrant Altair. You've forgiven me already for frustrate your romantic last sacrifice for your sister in arms ?

\_ I hope to take my revenge one day, in kind! How are you two recovering from the wounds?

\_I am almost new, after his slavegirl make my arm grow again. It is still weak and feels strange when I walk, but I will be fine soon. His case, on the other hand, is far more complicated.

\_That's a fact, Altair ! However, the boy was your friend, I believe. To be honest I don't know how your people deal whit this sort of thing. Still, I would prefer not to talk about that duel tonight. But, about the wounds, she is correct. It's not as simple to heal that kind of magical damage as it is to restore a lost arm.

\_I know you did only what was necessary, under the circumstances. Let's not concern ourselves whit that subject.

\_Good. Because there is something else I want to talk whit you.\_and then he lowered his voice\_ But first let me ask: are you a sigrax, or a alchemist? A mage you are not, that much I can tell.

\_May I ask why you want to know that?

\_Thing is, I can't fight as well as I am used to, that's just a fact. Ever if I could, the next part of our trip will probably involve some distance between us and our enemies: so I want to buy your bow. If you are a alchemist may be hard for me to find something usefull to you which could pay for your magical weapon, however, if you are a sigrax I may have something.

\_You can tell me how a sigrax manage to slave a true mage. That would be enough.

\_That would be enough. However, ten magical bows would not be enough to buy the information, and it would put you in more danger than you imagine. What you ask involve a well guarded secret, true mages protect it as well as possible and will kill a sigrax to hide it if they can reach him, or keep the fellow locked teaching magic inside a place like the Black Centaur Castle for the rest of his life. I have another sugestion.

I must explain a little that dialogue, or it will not make sense to someone from other planet Caste secrets are somethig basically universal on this planet, inside state cities. Every caste has some, and most people will avoid to search for the ones he has not the natural right to know, is not a crime to look for that information, but is wrong to do so. A Caste Member which became a slavegirl can be forced to reveal all secrets from her former Caste, of course, but most masters will not ask about that. The unique nature of true mages make necessary\_and possible\_ for them to keep secrets not only from other Castes but even for other Mage Caste which are not true mages, meaning the sigraxes.

\_If you agree, I will teach you as much Somatic Transmutation as you can learn. The magical way I follow is a "wild" one, rare between city sigraxes and almost unknow by true mages. It deals whit internal transformation in the sigraxe's body. By now you know a little about what a advanced practitioner can do whit it, take years to teach the Way, but I can give you enough to make diference in a fight. That can help you to keep secret about your magical nature and still stay alive in a fight.

\_That would not be a bad thing to you, Altair. Fight the Warrior Caste humans without a lifetime of training, and without magic, is more often than not suicide for a human. If yoy can use magic in battle and not to breake your promisse I would like to see you do that.

\_I would like that as well, Xiiirsh: but it is a very nice bow! You saw what it can do. How much you thing you can teach me in few days, Riagare ?

\_Two thirds of my Way is in the claws, they are the heart of it, but take too long to learn that and would be less usefull for you, since you need to hide your magic: so I will only give you the first exercice about that, is traditional and you can use if you ever find your self whit the wrists tied by a non magical rope. To keep us alive long enough to use the claws the Way has some tools you should be capable to learn in two or three days: not enough to make much use of them in battle, but enough to be able to advance up to a very effective level of competence practicing by yourself.

\_Seems reasonable to me.

\_However I must ask you one thing. Before I can teach you the Way.

\_All right.

\_You must promise never teach what you learn about Somatic Transmutation. My particular school of it is a Yellow Lizard secret. To teach it I must trust your honor.

\_We are about to face a possible war between Lutianen and the desert tribes, Riagare. Why would you trust a Lutianen sigrax your tribal secret?

\_Because I saw your reaction to my insults to the Mage Caste of Lutianen, Altair. You learned your magic at the Black Centaur Castle, but you are not a sigrax of Lutiane, even if you actually want to be. By teaching you my tribal way I give you a chance to cut your bonds with Lutianen if you ever feel the need to do so, and I make you a blood brother of every Yellow Lizard, after that you will be welcome among us. According to your friend here to be a nomad would not be a bad way to exist on this world to you. Even on your home world you never had an actual home, I believe.

Took us five more days to have all ready to go and when we did both our ships were magical objects, prepared to resist\_ temporarily\_ to almost any abuse. Riagare's exposed flesh and bones had to be covered in bandages all the time, but other than that he seemed happy to finally leave the island.

Nothing less than five giant octopuses were visible in the night, to my magical night vision. But they stayed distant. Our destiny, Niore Village.

## 9 - The True Behind It

Irma was sleeping on the floor, naked except for the slave collar. Her dense hair covering most her face hid the metal collar, but I knew it was there. Inga's head was on her back, hughed to Irma's thigh. Both slave girls were exhausted. Scratches and many bruises covered the surface of their bodies, but all of them were superficial. The bed was empty, it was made of cylindrical logs, softened by many layers of leather and a duvet stufed whit some sort of aromatic cotton.

The duvet was in pieces, half of it was still on the bed, the other part all over the room, mixed with things I imagine once may have been pillows and to the slave clothes used by the girls or what was left of once was slave clothes. I had a piece of gray huckaback on my left hand when I roused from a deep sleep. My other hand was holding a empty jug, it was smelling to a strong substance used on this planet for ludic and cathartic purposes more or less like alcohol is used on Earth.

I was almost naked on a heavy writing table, one arm hanging to the ground, one leg over the only windon, my foot hooked between the inclined bars. The windom was open and from it I could see a strange city. For a momment I could not remmember what city that one was supposed to be.

The place was a small office adapted to be used as a guest room, there was shelves whit books, and I felt relived to notice that all books were intact. The ceiling is about 7 yd above the floor in the lower part, touching the wall were is the door, and rising inclined up to the wall were is the window it reach 9. Both the door and the window would be adequate for average human beings if we all had two times the size we actually have, however, the room itself does not seems larger than normal.

On Lutianen the common theme on decoration is stone, mostly grey stone. Here they like wood, I noticed, rustic wood in many color. From the burnt yellow ground to the white pine covering the ceiling, crossing the deep red wine in the walls, the eyes feast on wood patterns. Only the outer wall and one column are obviously stone. Near to that column I saw other empty jar, and there was more three on the room.

My head was heavy and confuse. At first I could not remmember anything about the vortex, and tried to gess were on Earth I could be. Then the familiar sensation of living Xar emanating from my two magial objects brought me back memories of Black Centaur Castle. From Black Centaur was easy to find the LA street, whit their magical workers, and the Main Market of Lutianen. And Luciola, the gorgeous small girl from New Castle who has a large tattoo of a lady vampire from a old RPG book covering her back. Took me longer to see the Meek Goose in my mind: Fergus, Xiirsh, and the young mage Melliag killed by Riagare, the wild sigrax, he bellongs to the Yellow Lizard, a nomadic tribe on the Piwag Desert, and taugh me something in exchange for a magical bow. What knowledge Riagare gave me? That was important, I could feel that, but was not able to remember more about it.

Curiously enough I could remember the names of Irma and Inga, the slave girls sleeping on the floor.

They are not perfumed and soft sex slaves, but low price beasts of burden. Despite that both are beautiful females, extremely sexy in a earthly way impossible to find in girls only\_ or mostly\_ used by their owners for pleasure.

Irma is tall for a women, but still smaller than Inga. She has black hair, brown skin a little lighter than mine dotted with darker spots\_ almost like a jaguar\_ and intense green eyes. The girl could be a former Hunter Caste from the cities in the middle of the Sorrowfull River, taking by her facial traces. She could be from the forests which constantly threaten to swallow this same cities in order to take back the land where these cities stand. The small breasts, the triangular face with strong maxilar, all suggested that origin.

In any case Irma has been a slave most of her existence, probably since she was a small child, but she was not born into slavery: the slave brand reveals most of that story if you know how to read it.

Inga had her head shaved days before, it is dark red. She is as tall as I am, and very muscular for a woman who never took steroids or hormones, almost no fatty tissue except for her large breasts and round breech. Her skin is brown but in a much lighter tone than Irma's. Her eyes were deep pink; since men on this World do not approve any artificial change in a slave's appearance, other than makeup and slave marks, I knew the color in her eyes was probably natural. Inga's origin was not obvious to me, unlike her chain sister she was born slave but probably not on a slave house, maybe on a peasant farm. However, there was something about her which suggested high caste lineage\_ maybe even Mage Caste\_ something hard to identify but still present.

Guilt and panic felt on me on a suffocating wave and I was forced to sit on the window to not lose my senses. Suddenly every smell in the room brought back to me memories of sex and violence, a beast raped these two defenseless women last night, many times. That beast, somehow, to my horror, that beast was myself ! Since I learned to talk I was educated to never blame the alcohol or any drugs for my actions, to deny any possible excuse any man could present for his offensive behaviour against a woman. Now I knew I had chance to hide from my crime, I should be locked for the rest of my life after receiving permanent chemical castration: and that still was an insufficient punishment, a punishment far too light for my unnatural crime !!!

Became impossible to me stay inside that room. Somehow I reached the door, and crossed the corridor up to a descending ladder. In my hurry I had wrapped a piece of sheet at my waist, do not know when.

The stairs, the corridors, the floors, all that was familiar like an almost forgotten dream. Since this dream was not as consumptive as the memories about the room\_ no nightmare I ever had could be\_ I made my best to escape inside questions about that house. That house, the city where it was, and how I came to be where I was.

The symbol above the main door told me where I was. The Green Poison of the Sorrowfull River: Shirshan. A huge green frog carved on jade, surrounded by red iron, contrasting with the rustic wood theme still dominant on the decoration: that was more than just a house on Shirshan. That was a modest but ancient house, owned by a long lasting citizen lineage: possibly even a founding line.

A strong voice called my name, as if it was the name of a dear friend. The voice came from a Merchant Caste man about seventy years old. He hugged me and then held me by the shoulders looking for something inside my eyes, or maybe on my face.

\_It's good to see you calm, my berserker friend ! Do not think I am not grateful for your help, your

furry was very helpful last night as you know. However, I was just asking myself if that mad look in your eyes was all the time present or if hidden below there was another, less fearful, you! It's pleasant to see that the second option is the case.

\_He does not remember us grandpa ! Let's eat something, and allow your guest time to wake up properly\_ told a young Lady behind the man.

\_You are right, girl ! Let's find you some clothes before that, friend. The fight last night destroyed the ones you had.

Before we reach the second floor she called her grandfather aside. They spoke on whispers and given the distance I should not be able to listen the conversation, but for some reason was impossible avoid to.

\_You will not really give him father's armor, will you? \_ asked the Lady a moment later, before we reach the stairs.

\_Your father have more than one, my precious! Besides, our friend here has lost his armor protecting our house, everything here would be in looter hands by now if he had walked away. Everything, including you.

\_We don't even know his name! Besides, he probably is a spy from some enemy nation.

\_Right now he is my guest, and the man who just saved my home from a angry mob. For the moment that's enough to me, sweet.

We entered his son's room. The man was far away doing business for his father, there was mostly merchant clothes here, the old man asked if he should send a slave to find me a red tunic. He was under the impression that I was Warrior Caste, and that brought me a important memory.

\_For how long I slept?

\_About 12 hours.

\_I must be at Glass Anvil Park as soon as possible!

\_It is not far from here, between the Metal Worker Caste District and the Wall. Easy to find, but not a small place. Do you know where in the Park you need to be?

\_I do.

\_Let's find you some clothes then, you still must eat something before you leave this house!

To refuse food and water from your host\_ the head men inside the house\_ on this planet is a serious offense. To offer it has a important meaning as well: the offer once accepted makes the outsider a guest. Before that point one can be taken as a intruder and killed or slaved by the house owner, after that you became a guest protected by a sacred bond which is even more important than Law for most people. Until someone say something to break the bond you are a friend in this house, and supposed to

welcome the people from this house as friends in your own home if the opportunity arrives.

I accepted the offer. Given the circumstances would be insane not to.

After I was dressed in red robe and armor the old man gave me a sword made of red iron, which had a sheath decorated with a transparent snake. The second more important National Symbol of Shirshan. The sword I had before was damaged, he asked me if I wanted that back any way but I saw no point: I had no particular attachment to the weapon.

“My name is Osdar,” told me the old man, “you don’t have to tell me yours. If you are a spy, as I suspect, would be better for you not to tell me your real name. That will not be taken by me as a violation of your duties as my guest.”

“I am from Lutianen, maybe I am a spy. To be honest I am not sure about that myself, and I hope that is not the case. But I will honor your request, how would you like to call me?”

“I will call you Alex, if you don’t mind. That is a name from Earth, and I am almost sure you are an involuntary immigrant brought by the vortex.”

“You are right about that, Osdar.”

The armor and the sword were both excellent, better than most items used by warriors. It was not heavy armor, but was heavier than the ones used by the city guard, mostly made of red iron. Only the guards responsible for the walls and more important places and people in the city have better protection. It had a red helmet, the first one I used in life, and was obviously designed to be used by someone who needed to hunt in silence. Inadvertently I was dressed as a slave hunter from Shirshan, if he was a very trusted Warrior working for a respectable merchant house.

With the armor Osdar gave me a first aid kit and a long whip. I only knew how to use the first, and not very well, but I accepted the gifts as I was supposed to.

The signs of fight were still visible in the streets. The corpses had been removed, but some buildings still had smoke coming from them, and there were marks of destruction in many places. Few citizens had chosen to leave their houses that afternoon.

My memories about the island and how we escaped it started to come back.

After finding out the island was protected against the octopuses (actually at least “tenpuses”) by sleeping involuntary immigrants brought by the vortex from an unknown Universe we brought one to our best ship. Protected by that living mummy we left the unnamed island intending to reach the mining village of Niore, where the navy sigraxes of Shirshan would leave us.

From Niore Captain Vor, Fergus, and the most trusted sailors among us would take a ship to Timurda Port where we should find a way to reach Shirshan as discreetly as possible. We had a mission given by Lutianen, as far as I knew only Fergus had some idea about what was the mission and even him expected to get the details on Shirshan from some spy already inside the Green Poison.

Our invisible shield worked, for some time. I could see the giant octopuses near to the horizon, only because magic allowed me to see in the dark. They could not reach us from there.

However, as time passed our enemies began to gradually approach. Eventually they started to throw immense rocks on us, their aim was accurated. We escaped for some time thanks to Piol's magic protecting our ships. The true mage slaved by Riagare had transformed both ships on magical objects, that would not last for long, but should last more than enough to the travel. We all agreed to change destination to Shirshan, the nearest Port, just in case.

Before that point the enemy had only attacked us during the night. To our surprise, this time, a little after the sun rise the attack started. Instead of throw rocks they made maelstorms to stop us. Huge traps in the ocean, verry hard to escape even using magic. Still, we escaped many of them, it just cost us time.

This time the small octopuses came. We had not yet seem this kind of small octopuses, it was neither the larger and stronger ones more vulnerable to magic, nor the smaller ones resistent to it. They used some sort of metallic armor, and attacked from distance, with magic. More or less as I or any other sigrax would.

Reagare killed many of them whit the magical bow he had brought by me in the island. What he gave me for it? Does not matter, I would not be able to use the weapon half as well as he did.

When we finally saw Shirshan five giant octopuses were less than one mile distant. Many ships came to help us, and a hard battle started.

Now we tried to keep the monsters distant from the port. They advanced, and we lost terrain inch by inch. That was not my city, but that was a human city. Not to mention our only hope to survive the night. Therefore I did my best to protect the Green Poison. We all did.

Our ships suvived longer than any other, but the octopuses succeeded. They reached the port. The city was a feew miles distant, on higher ground. As two giant octopuses and many smaller ones attacked the port one third huge monster rose from the sea going to City's walls. Even on land the intelligent beast moved very fast.

From the momment we saw Shirshan from distance was obvious that something was not right in the city. By the look of it portions of it were on fire, and the closed we came less likelly seemed that all the problem was the octopuses. Was possible that the smaller octopuses had started the attack before we arrive, but if not something else was happening inside the walls. Something violent, even if not as violent as what was happening on sea.

We had no time to think about the conflicts inside Shirshan, because in the port, things were bad enough to keep our interest. We jumper the ships, surrounded by chaos, and Fergus led us to a destiny know only by him. The alchemist and his sigraxes were too involved in protect their city to care about our escape.

Running down a tight alley we found ouselves looking to a wretched tenement improvised whit useless pieces of boats between the arches and columns of the huge sewerage fed by Shirshan. We entered the

Second Mouth of the Beast, one between the four large outlets, identical twins which stand side by side throwing Shirshan's disgorge on the Sorrowfull.

Our way now was rotten wood, stairs and hillsides, going down. Most of it was barely large enough for one person at the time. The monsters from the sea had not yet reached this place, but the panic had. People was retreating without notion to the direction they wanted to escape. Many fell into the fetid soup below, to vanish in it. We advanced as we could.

Most people who live in places like that are free, they hardly could buy or maintain a slave. Banished criminals without a place to go, bankrupted merchants forgiven by their creditors (therefore neither killed nor slaved), people who lost reputation inside their castes and became incapable to find honest work inside the city but did not committed any offense serious enough to earn a criminal sentence, many other fellows; and of course the descendants of all these happy groups.

“We are going to the city for this sewerage?” asked Vor-Iban, one step after Fergus. Our captain seemed less than exultant with the prospect.

After a few more steps Fergus found a door, and knocked on it, calling a name. There was too much noise to anyone hear him, but someone inside did. Because not long after that the door opened.

Inside this small house there was only one fellow, as thin and pale as most people in this neighborhood. Everything here was as poor and sad as you could expect, until he opened a hidden door to a corridor of stone.

At the end of this corridor there was a room many times wider than the house in the other side. Here there was three bathtubs with clean water, books, weapons, and many clothes. Including the uniforms of the guard Fergus chose for himself and for some others among us.

“Answering your question, captain, we will not reach Shirshan by the sewerage. As far as I know that is impossible, and if it was possible would be far more dangerous and protracted than what I have in mind.”

“Where is my uniform?”

“You do not need one, my friend. Neither you nor most sailors here. You have to lead the crew back to Timurda, Vor. Our Warriors need to know what happened with us so far. What is happening now. You will probably have to steal a ship on the port, but it will probably be easier to do now, in the middle of this battle, than would be any other time. Choose your weapons, brave men of Lutianen, I wish you well.”

“What about the rest of you?” asked the captain.

“We still have some things to do, before we can go home.”

The “brave men of Lutianen” followed their captain. They were going back to the deadly tentacles, but at least behind this tentacles the sea was waiting for them. The sea they all knew so well.

We, on the contrary, had the walls of Shirshan in our near future. And I had little idea about what I would find behind this walls.

Xiirsh was not with us. I could not find the dragonlike lady, or Riagare and his slave, since we jumped on land. Fergus could know where they had gone, or not, but he clearly had more urgent matters to deal with.

As soon as we stepped the main street of the Port a warrior called us, and commanded Fergus, our "sergeant", to help his men. Their mission was to capture one octopus for interrogation. That was a great luck, because after the hard part of the job we entered Shirshan, fast, and without being questioned in the gate.

One giant octopus almost entered the city, it had left now. Two tentacles lost by the sea monster were inside, and there was a deep cut in V where the attempt of invasion was made.

"We can deal with it from here! Take your men back to the Port," commanded the officer, talking with Fergus.

We took another direction as soon as possible, and stopped inside a shadow. Then Fergus gave us instructions about where we should regroup next day. That was fortunate, because before he could split us in pairs a huge rock followed from the sky near to us, a cloud of dust covered everything and we got a crowd in panic swallowed me.

After that I could not find Fergus. Two sailors, as lost as I was, joined me and we made our best to avoid attention. What failed after some hours, in the dusky late afternoon, when a guard patrol saw us and decided to interrogate the unknown comrades. A fight started between the five warriors and us. That is my last memory, something happened to me but I can't remember what. Someone may have knocked hard my head, I imagine; then I fainted.

Problem is, the "then I fainted" theory does not match with the posterior circumstances. Accordingly to Osdar I was very awake when we met.

I entered the Glass Anvil Park, and looked for the red three white twigs which looked like glass and large white leaves, it was supposed to be the only one in the city. And, as Fergus told us, it was big enough to be seen from distance.

I was late, and the former chief mate was no longer there.

My situation now was less than idyllic. Fergus's plan ended at this point, or more exactly the part of it he had shared with me. I was an untrained spy lost inside an enemy city, in the middle of what looked like a civil war.

Stay on one place for too long was a risk, under the circumstances that could attract attention; either from the guard, or for some group of profiteering looters. Even knowing that risk I decided to stay there, hoping Fergus would look a second time.

Go back to Osdar's house was not something I wanted to do. I told myself that was because I could not bring even more danger on the old fellow who had been so generous with me. Honestly, the reason why I would avoid that house at any cost was my hideous memories about the previous night. Even

misty as they are the memories manifested in the deepest core of my mind a unutterable shame, and fear. I had never really met someone who serious believed in after life, or supernatural punishments up to that day, even so the waves of qualm experienced by me every time I tried to imagine that house somehow brough to my mind old poems and paintings about hell.

Sit bellow this tree I could see a lake. The water was blue, and from time to time animals which look like serpents covered in many small turtle shells would dance on the surface, or jump from it to catch a flying mammal or lizard. I let my mind silence looking the hypnotic ballet in the water. Night came.

I was again in that room, surrounded by books and wood. I escaped the roome and then I was running inside a corridor but could not escape this time, a werewolf or some other half human beast was hunting me. But not me; the adult Altair, who is a sigrax and a tested\_ even if less than competent\_ swordsman; I was myself, but as a boy; back on Cuiabá, Osdar's house mixing whit my family home; my feet, ears and my penis bleeding not blood but sulfuric acid: I could feel the smell of acid as it melted my flesh. Then the moster reached me, and it attacked.

The moster was in that room again, but he looked like me, now the Altair spy, pretending to be a warrior, pretending to be a sigrax, pretendind to be a man, trying to pretend to be human and failing. I cried inside my own head, to make it stop, but could not make the moster hear. He had Irma over his sholder, and was holding inga by her neck.

He ripped the women's clother whit violence and bit Irma's inner thing, holding Inga's face pressed on the ground, then kissed Inga's mouth, as if her body did not belonged to her anymore, as if it belonged to him, to it. To me.

I forced the two women to lie down on the bed, knees on the floor, and raped their asses whit no concern about their feelings or about their pleasure. They were not two women anymore; Luciola was not in the room, her round buttocks between the other two, being haped by me. The beautifull girl from New Castle had the long hair she used to have when I first saw her being sold at Lutianen's Market. The vampire girl tattooed on her back was moving, fighting, biting me.

I raped the three slaves many time, whit cruel violence, all the time keeping myself between them and the only door in the room. All that time they moaned, smiled, begging to be used for my pleasure again: I can't say why, but that was worse than everything else for me.

My hand was pressing a throat, someone was bellow me trying to escape. Talking to me.

\_Altair, I am not your enemy! Fergus sended me, we are looking for you.

The man I was trying to kill was Lurban of Lutianen, the Cooker on Vor-Iban's ship now lost, the Meek Goose.

The fellow sailor forgave my moment of madness. According to him we had to walk fast, according to Fergus there was much to do and little time to prepare our next move.

We found Fergus on a apartment on the second floor, above a blacksmiit's workshop. As soon as he saw us, he told me to enter, take a bath, and try to sleep or at least rest. After that he left whit Lurban,

leaving me allone in the apartment. What ever was, the thing they had to do was clearly urgent.

This time I slept without dreams. Fergus woke me up, there was food on the table, and he wanted me to eat fast.

\_We have much to talk about. Now is the time for you to know the true reason why we came to Shirshan.

Our mage council believes that some true mages in this city want to abandon Shirshan, and that they could be convinced to choose Lutianen as their home. No one know why they want to do that, but would be very usefull for our city if that ended well.

A true mage like Melliag was can demand the right to attend to the reunions in the nearest Mage Caste Tower. All we had to do was to help him to reach the city, and to escape whit as many true mages as possible. That's why he had to make this travel, and that is why the navy of Shirshan could not allow him to reach their city.

\_That is why it had to do a secret, I understand that. Does that explain why I had to be here? Sigraxes can be Mage Caste but we do not enjoy all the rights true mages enjoy. The one you wanted to use for improper reasons only exist because all true mages in the planet can join combine power and exchange exchange ideas during their reunions, as if they all were inside a internet like the one we had on Earth. We, sigraxes, have no right to enter their reunions or even know what they are about.

\_ You can not enter the mage's reunions. Even if you could, without a true mage would be very unlikely to convince any mage to risk live and status in a attempt of escape his own city.

However, there is a place where we still can reach the true mages on this city, and a good reason to do that.

The reason is that: Lutianen's mages need to know what is happening whit the mages on Shirshan. They have been less and less present on the Mage's Global Brotherhood last year, by the time I found you in jail there was one week since the last signal of them. To make it even more strange, there is little signal of true mages helping the city to fight the octopuses the day we arrived: sigraxes using powerfull magical itens made most the work. There was some individuals using mage cloths but according to my sources they are sigraxes in disguised as true mages.

\_The mages of Shirshan are diverting all their power to one secret goal then. Something so huge that they need to maintain permanent focus for some time. You think it can be the total destruction of Lutianen. \_ I guessed

\_That is one possibility. They could be all dead, or sick. Or that could be a way to convince Lutianen to attack, either to avoid a destruction or to take advantage of a weakness: being that the case they will be waything our ships whit enough power to annihilate our navy and open the way to attack our island.

\_You think we willl know what they are doing just by talking whit their mages? Seems a problematic idea to me. Do you want to know why?

\_Not really, shut up and let me finish. Each five years the true mages of Shirshan have a month of

festivities, we don't have the specifics but we know that is important to them, so important that every single true mage citizen will make everything in their power to be present. Only death itself, or something almost equally serious, would make them give up that ritual. Only true mages are allowed inside the theatre during such reunions, only true mage citizens actually, if you can find a more than symbolic number of mages up there we will know that they are alive and not in magical trance finishing their "final solution for Lutianen's problem" as I like to call it. If you can't find a reasonable number of mages they are either all dead or so near to finish their goal that they have chosen to sacrifice even their more sacred tradition: in that case, we must attack as soon as possible.

\_As I told you, I am not a true mage. Ergo: your plan has a problem, a serious problem, Fergus.

\_The solution to that problem is inside that bag, Altair. That is not what we need to worry about. Our problem now is time. The festival happens each two nights for a month. Tonight is the last night, and before we can proceed you have to follow a ritual to link yourself with this!

\_Can you explain?

\_Open the bag.

Inside the bag there was a true mage's robe and mantle, both made for a citizen of Shirshan. It was a healer's mantle. Melliag's jewels were there as well, including the large pendant so powerful that Melliag destroyed a giant octopus in one single blow using it.

\_That was our backup plan. That will make any mage or sigrax to take you for a true mage, as you were Melliag. The illusion should fool any superficial inquiry, as long as you don't make any magic yourself. The only magic you will need tonight is the divination spell which will tell you who is a true mage, and that is in the black ring with a blue stone.

\_What if they hide themselves using the same trick I will be using? They could be all sigraxes pretending to be true mages.

\_That is a rare and powerful object. They could have a pendant or two capable to do the same trick this one does. Maybe even five. However, they do not have a dozen. On the other hand any number of true mages below 50 would be as if there was no mage at all in the festival. They are supposed to have about 250 true mage citizens.

\_That's why you had to be a sigrax. That is why you made me hide the fact that I am a sigrax, a magical signature fades after some time if we don't use too much Xar. That does not explain why you had to be me, I am sure you had better trained sigraxes to pick.

\_Of course I could have chosen a veteran sigrax spy. The fact that you are an involuntary immigrant from Earth helps, you may not be able to leave just after you get inside and you can't escape some situation easier than a native from this planet would: we can not know things about our adoptive city, we obviously can't be asked about our family tradition in the city or about our birth caste. There was another reason as well.

\_What other reason?

\_If I had not included you on that mission you would have been impalated. By a coup attempt I knew for sure that you could not have participated in, because I was the one doing all the plans for it.

## 10 - Doing The Job

“Warriors should stay on things they know, like how to kill people with swords, and let the problems related with magic to mages, and to sigraxes like myself !” I explained to my friend Fergus that day, but I will be honest with you: his guess about how long would take the Ritual of Harmonization was as good as mine.

There was too much in stake, we could not take unnecessary risks. He was right to insist, really, I do had to start immediately if I was to have the better possible chance to finish the ritual in time. There was only a brief period of time when would be possible to enter the Amphitheater without call unwanted attention. I had to reach it at same time most true mages of Shirshan would, to get lost in the crowd.

However, once I had done the ritual my energetic signature would be cloaked by Melliag's, anyone capable to see awake emanations of Xar would mistake me for a true mage Healer. What could be a serious problem on a city falling a part precisely because true mages were no longer seem in public as often as they used to be.

Common people and warriors would not notice anything, however to sigraxes with active divination spells or carrying specific magical objects and to alchemists carrying such specific magical objects “my” \_ Melliag's \_ magical signature would be obvious, even from distance. Since Shirshan has the Virshary, a famous secret police, know for it's competence and controled by the Alchemist Caste, only a mad person would risk a stroll throught the market after the Harmonization.

Still, for some reason I really wanted to leave the apartment.

The reason possibly was my guilt for what I did during my psychotic outbreak during the night before the previous one. I had never in my life experienced such lost of control, and could not explain it. However, I knew that, even if I could no explanation would be enough to excuse me monstrous behavior.

Albeit I couldn't remember anything clearly was evident that I had abused sexually of two women. The two, named by their slave master as Irma and Inga, could not refuse my violent harassment, since they are not free by the law of this city. Or by the laws of any community on this world.

Osdar the merchant, master and owner of Irma and of Inga, gave both to me for the night. They had no saying on the subject, slaves never have. Consequently, have sex with them was like rape unconscious women, or as rape women putting a knife on their necks: as far as I could see, their express behaviour and physical reactions of pleasure were irrelevant. By that point on my life I could only see myself as the worse possible criminal, as a monster bellow humanity and beyond redemption (funny how religious that word look like to me, after I have met some religious zealots).

Walking on unfamiliar streets, on a city at edge of civil war, I could silence my conscience. Here I was defenseless against it's light.

I was on a comfortable small home, above a blacksmith's shop. No one was working on the first floor today. I don't know if Fergus rented to building, killed the owner, or just saw the empty place and invaded it. More likely Lutianen put this blacksmith here as a spy long time ago, because his home is well protected against magical scrying by magical stones hidden among the common ones in the walls, and by runes embroidered behind many tapestries.

Shirshan must have similar houses hidden above shops and residences on Lutianen as well. That was the first time I thought about that. In the Universe where I was born humanity has only one sovereign government, and now I see how much resources it saves: no need for spies and diplomatic embassies.

Forced to stay six hours alone inside this small apartment, hunted by guilt, I started this text. Not even knowing if I would ever have a chance to send it back to Earth. Needless to say: no one will ever read the dark self-deprecating jokes that I wrote in that room.

However, I could not write for long. Someone saved me from my self-torture.

An image invaded my mind, knocking me down and making me squirm on the ground trying to cry but incapable to make any sound. It was the strange mummy, the same one we had used to escape the island surrounded by the octopus warriors days before. Except that it was no longer a mummy, now, in the image assaulting my mind, it was awakened and recovered from its extreme dehydration.

I felt a urgency in the alien. "DANGER" was its message: but it was a feeling, not a word. Could be an advice, a threat, or something else. Even if it was his people's way to say "hello" I knew two things: the powerful vampiric monster was alive, free among humans; and I was in part responsible for releasing it.

For the moment we couldn't do anything about the mummy. As Fergus forced me to admit that fact once he came back. We had our mission, given to us by Lutianen, and about that we could do something.

Inside the Amphitheater was easy to find out the most important thing Fergus wanted to know: there was no true mage here. Every person dressed as a true mage was a mere sigrax, pretending to be a mage. My magical disguise was better than any other, almost a little too good, however there was little doubt in any mind: all true mages on Shirshan had disappeared almost a year before.

As far as I could find out no one knew where the mages had gone, or why they left their city defenceless. The sigraxes, the Virshary, and a few warriors considered reliable for the Virshary, created a plan to keep their city alive. Sigraxes moved to each house owned by a true mage, magically disguised to look like the mage who used to live up there. They used magical tricks to pretend their mages were still in the "Mage's Internet" for as long as possible, and surprisingly it worked for months.

Only the true mages knew what this Festival is supposed to be about when it is done for real, but all city know that every mage participate on it as many nights as he can. Therefore the Virshary used it as a chance to show the city that all rumors about the mage's disappearance was false.

They would not risk to send all or even most faked mages just every night, their disguises could not hold that much stress. However, most citizens wanted so strongly to believe the lie that Virshary's trick

worked: not perfectly until tonight, but all “mages” would be present to the last night of Festival, and that should calm even the most skeptical.

When they asked who I was and why no one had seen my face in the previous nights, I invented that I was supposed to be taken by a new mage. Someone just graduated on Glass Viper Fortress (Shirshan’s equivalent to Black Centaur Castle).

\_I am an involuntary immigrant from Earth. The Sand Scorpion tribe from the Piwag Desert captured me walking on the Green Line a little after I left the vortex. Their wild sigrax noticed that I had potential for magic and sold me to Shirshan, apparently they don’t take apprentices from outside their tribes. \_I told that story, more or less in the same words, many times that night.

It is a plausible lie, and as you know the secret to sell a lie is to use enough true to wrap it. Everything on that story could have happened to me. If either the vortex had left me a little more distant from Lutianen or I had chosen to walk in the opposite direction something like that probably would have happened to me.

An invisible wall raised by magic isolates the Green Line where the vortex deposits most involuntary immigrants from the desert on one side, and another similar wall isolates the line from the mountains at the other side. But wild tribes on both sides open cracks in the walls to capture them for use as slaves or to trade these newcomers with the cities nearby for weapons, food or medicines.

Most sigraxes have too much to do in their lives to learn the names and faces of each sigrax in their city. I would only be in trouble if a master sigrax noticed me: I was never a student inside the Glass Viper, of course, and some professors actually teach every single student who passes through his educational institution, and these fellows remember who each one is. One needs magic to keep that much information, obviously, but the sigraxes and true mages who choose to learn enough metamagic to become professors (or “masters”) of magic often do their best to raise the number of true mages inside their cities. Remember who are the students seems to help.

The place where I was, the building itself, is gorgeous. A mix between a yellow beehive decorated by a half human race of snakes and a green amphitheater built for people five times taller than humans. The main room is a large circle, big enough for more than 5,000 visitors to feel comfortable in it. In the lateral galleries perfect statues of human heroes, and other types from several lost species, are distributed accordingly to some undecipherable logic, and from time to time an open door leads you to a garden where huge trees try to reach the distant ceiling, and fail.

Seems a strangely broad building to choose for a reunion like that. The number of true mages on Shirshan would hardly ever reach 500. That in the city’s best times. Only one city on the planet has 1,000 true mages, and the second largest population of them on the same State is about 300.

Well, the important in all that was that I had my mission accomplished about one hour after I entered the building. Now all I had to do was to keep a low profile until morning.

Since I was a spy, in some sense, I kept my eyes open: spying. Between the bored sigraxes and the many statues of heroes, the big and small statues of vipers made of transparent glass, and the green frogs decorating the walls, there were closed doors and stairs up and down. I tried some stairs, but they

led to corridors with closed doors and dead ends.

After the first interrogations I had little trouble walking between the other sigraxes. As I expected.

A nice thing about magic is that once you learn it you never actually need recreative drugs again, not after you learn the first steps. That happens because the most basic illusion spells allow a sigrax to reproduce in himself the effects of any substance he had experienced before. If you have a few minutes to spend that spells will cost you almost no Xar, and you can stop them any time you want, going back to your normal in about a minute. Needless to say that very few people in the fake festival were sober one hour after entering the building.

For some time I was tranquil. People were playing games, talking about theater, women, ancient art, sport, the better places to buy slaves. Until a fellow with a huge black mustache mentioned the rumor about a spy in the festival. According to him the secret police had captured some foreigner, another spy, and forced the man to talk. There was a plan to infiltrate the Festival!

The Virshan on the other hand had a plan to capture the spy. "You can trust the V" many people spoke, almost at the same time, as if it was a matter of fact. No problem!

Except that there was a problem, to me, and that really was a matter of fact. Since I was\_ for some definitions\_ a spy. Infiltrated in this simulated festival. Collecting information which could (and were supposed to) be used by a hostile power in a war against Shirshan. From my point of view "trust the V" could only look like a bad idea. I could not run from the festival, the vigilance outside would catch me for sure.

That rumor about a spy could be a trap, of course. It could also be a fruit of pure paranoia, born in the mustache's mind. However, my mind still looked for a way to escape if necessary.

I had not yet explored all the corridors, maybe some door was open. If I could find a window there I would have a few options to try. Cornered, in desperation, I could use Melliag's pendant to open an escape tunnel through the stone wall. I wasn't sure about how the object made for a true mage would respond to a sigrax, and I had no idea about what could be my next move since I would be in the middle of Shirshan between 162 sigraxes and the most competent secret police this Continent has to offer.

On the other hand, my cover story was not strong enough to survive under investigation.

Could have been the uneasiness I was feeling, but I had the impression that something was moving in the shadows, between the upper branches of one solitary tree and the statues decorating the circular wall around it. I could also swear that some statues on a corridor between this same tree and the main room had disappeared.

Then a tall man, who I remembered to have seen as a statue, entered the room. He stopped for a moment when he noticed I had seen him. There was a turbidity in the air around his body, probably a sign left by his magic or whatever he was using to stay invisible. Some effort was visible on his face for a moment, then his image merged with the room. But I could still smell him, and hear his breath.

Five men, dressed like true mages entered the room, but below their clothes they obviously were

wearing red steel armor and carrying weapons. Since no true mage has any reason to carry a weapon or dress in armor, and no one does any of that, I was sure they were not the lost mages coming back.

I pointed to the place where I believed the tall man probably was, and they surrounded him.

That was a strange fight, since the five men could not see their enemy, which now seemed to me to have grown since the first time I saw him. But was hard to tell for sure, not being able to see him well.

A V. agent flew to the wall, and left a huge red stain on it. His head exploded with the impact.

The invisible fighter was really almost two times larger now. He jumped trying to reach the tree, but a magical weapon hit him. It was very similar to a weapon used a long time ago on Earth, in the South of Brazil, before the Global Era: when Brazil it still was a sovereign nation (or as close to that as it ever was). If I had been born then that would have been my country. The weapon is basically made of tree trunks linked by a rope, the person using it rotates the trunks above his head and throws the weapon. Normal "boleadeiras" are thrown aiming for the legs, once they reach that goal they tie the legs together, holding the animal or person long enough for the hunter to easily capture it. This magical weapon found its way to the giant's neck, ending the fight.

As the agents carried the unconscious enemy. One of them stopped and looked at me.

\_Thanks for that.

\_My pleasure. What is happening ?

\_We are arresting spies, that is not the only one. Let's go to the main room, every person inside the building must be verified as fast as possible.

\_What about him? \_I asked, pointing the dead agent.

\_We will take care of it, but first we must join the others. You can see through their camouflage?

\_Not perfectly, but yes.

\_In that case, stay here for now. I will send someone to join you as soon as possible, until I do you must stop any person who enters. There is some escape route in this room: until we find where no one can reach that tree !

\_Will not be too dangerous? You five almost could not win the fight against one of them! I am no fighter.

The Virshan agent looked at me with disdain.

\_You sigraxes, you must always be like that. Brave paladins of Virshan, every single one of you! Do not piss yourself fellow: I will send someone to protect the room, and you.

\_...as soon as possible: I understand. I am no coward! That's just all new to me.

\_You will be fine. Don't worry.

He left the room, and I climbed the tree as fast as I could. To my happy surprise it was easy, a moment later I was looking for a opening behind the statues.

It was there, invisible from the floor. A narrow passage, almost not large enough for my body. I imagine the giants need magic to pass through it, but I saw one of them grow up to almost twice his size. Logic dictates that they had to be able to reduce their size as well.

After a long corridor there was two ways to go, many doors in both direction, and a stair going down. The stairs was to my left, going to the opposite side I found heavy door with the lock broken. There was room with a table big and heavy behind this door. In this room I saw another door, that one open, behind that I found another stair up. Then a room long and narrow with tapestries on every wall. There was another narrow passage hidden behind one scene were three men\_ a warrior, a peasant, and a builder\_ looked at a big green frog with an open human eye on his back. This passage ended below a sort of vertical opening, a rectangular tunnel up made in stone. I could climb it, with some effort.

The tunnel ended, and I had four directions to choose, all vertical tunnels as small as the vertical one. The one used by the giants took me to a different corridor which looked less like a place to be visited and more as one to be used only for cleaning and maintenance teams. There was which would have been rat feces if it was on my home planet, here I had no idea about what it was. There was lots of dust as well, and that was dust. As for cobweb, the spiders on that Universe seems to be nothing like the ones on my planet, if there was any on that building I would have had little chance to survive the night.

All this time I was following the giant's smell. I had no idea how they could spy anyone smelling like that. The smell was so strong that I had been able to follow it all the way to the opening in the ceiling, through the ceiling liner, and after a little longer I was out the building. Looking to the night sky covered in stars I felt the humidity in the wind, a respectable rain had finished a compact but brief existence moments before.

For the first time I saw Shirshan as a normal city. There was no fight in the streets this night, no fire devouring buildings. Night was peaceful and soapy.

From where I was standing no sign of suspicious movement was visible in the ring of warriors around the amphitheater. The people behind the warrior's line of protection had no way to know about the action inside.

Despite the rain there was still a happy party going on, full of common citizens; with food being sold, music playing, slave dancers surrounded by the crowd competing with each other for attention. Five fighting rings were visible from that point on the roof; one of them being used by free men, other three by naked slave girls. People from this city really likes to see fight among naked slave girls, you almost never find that sort of entertainment on Lutianen.

Fergus was probably somewhere in the belly of that circus, waiting for me. Unfortunately I had no chance to communicate with him. Even if I had, it would probably make little difference since I still would have no chance to escape the warriors.

Not exactly true, I did have some escape options. Actually none seemed like a good idea at the time, but have them were still better than have “no chance”.

For instance I could use my magic to fall really slow and try to find a wind strong enough to carry me to a roof from where I could disappear before the Virshari agents reach me. I would be very exposed in the sky, but probably no one would use bows against me because to do so would destroy all the effort put on that faked festival. I could also use the powerful pendant in my power to blast a large portion of the square and hopefully that would create enough commotion to open my escape route by air: with a bit of luck no one would see me.

Or I could go back to the ceiling liner, look for a place to hide, and wait one day, or a week, before look for a way to escape; what should be easier to find after that time.

On the other hand, there was the option to keep following the giant’s smell. Here it was harder than inside the building, but still possible. Seemed logic to me that they had some way to leave this trap. Besides, was obviously useful for Lutianen to get more information about this giants on Shirshan.

The shadows protected me most the way through the roof, and was impossible to see anyone from the ground for another part of the way. Someone looking from the distant Mage Caste Tower would be able to notice the movement, but only if this person was using magic to see at distance and looking to this building. Actually there was many ways to keep vigilance on the top of this building, or any other, using magic; I knew more than a few myself; and unlike the giants I had no camouflage against any.

As a matter of fact, my healer’s gala clothes were quite conspicuous. So I ran. As fast as my nose allowed me, since I could not risk to lose the giant’s smell.

The trail ended on the edge of a hole, probably made for air circulation or something like that. Even with magic I was unable to see the end of that fall. Knowing I had no time to think, I jumped.

The bottom where my fall ended was a tunnel below the ground. It could be a subway maintenance tunnel, if that was a city on Earth. Clearly the structure had not been made just for the sake of spies. I followed the trail until it joined with a rainwater drainage channel. Or maybe it was some aqueduct made to carry water for the lower sectors of Shirshan, any way, there was a clean river flowing in front of me. In that river I lost the trail.

Losing the giants was a shame, but, as I told myself, I still was better now than I had been inside the amphitheater. The underground river had to end somewhere, and that would probably be a place less carefully watched than the building I had escaped from.

My situation was a bit like when I set foot on this planet for the first time. Confused after the vortex left me here, naked, and with my drink spilled on the grass. That day also I had to choose between two directions knowing nothing about what was in the end of each one, once more I had two directions to pick one, and no information about what I should expect from each option.

However, that day years ago nobody hit me from behind making me lose my senses.

When I woke up again, my dilemma had been solved for me.

I was no longer wearing Melliag's magical jewels, and I was no longer wearing the clothes chosen to make me pass for a Healer, mage, citizen of Shirshan, going to his most sacred festival. Instead the clothes I was as naked as I had been on that first day after the vortex: a little better maybe, because this time I had no drink spilled on me and no sand on my hair and private parts. To replace the magical jewels someone gave me red iron chains: about that part, yes, my circumstance was worse than the one I faced that day on the Green Line.

## 11 - Dilemma

You will remember from last chapter that I was no longer wearing Melliag's magical jewels, and I was no longer wearing the fancy clothes that Fergus gave to me in order to make viable that I could pass as a Healer true mage citizen of Shirshan, wearing my best clothes. That was how I was supposed to be dressed for this important event that only happens once each four years: The Mage's Green Festival of Shirshan. Instead of use this clothes I was as naked as I had been after I left the vortex, in my first day on that planet: a little more comfortable now maybe, because this time I had no drink spilled on me and no sand on my hair and private parts.

Be naked was really not a problem for me. Some people on my home world would avoid the experience, but that was not my case since I was a teenager. Actually I used to look for nudist villages, to make tourism.

Expend free time on places where public nudity is expected helps a person to dissociate the naked human body from sexual contexts. Some people in many parts of my world assume that nudists are sexually more liberals than the average cultural groups, nothing could be less true. Nudists are far more repressive in erotic fields than anyone else: they do have the second more effective tool to repress sexual desire and control the lasciviousness at hand. The only thing more effective than being nude under the severity of the public eye to avoid a boner is to take drugs against libido.

Most lads back on Earth have problem to control erections, as they start being noticed by society. That is a field of nightmares for young boys, and I was no different. To find the nudist community at age of 12 was my personal salvation.

On the other hand, to replace the magical jewels once used by the young true mage Melliag someone gave me red iron chains: about that part, yes, my circumstance was worse than the one I faced that day on the Green Line. Be in chains never was my cup of tea.

Night was hot, as they have the habit to be that near to the Ecuador Line; and the floor was made of wooden planks, which is not a good conductor of temperature; therefore I had no reason to feel cold. Not even with the large doors open.

My head was bleeding a little, and in pain. That was the less comfortable thing about my situation. Except for know neither who the three guys talking to each other near to me were, nor what they intended to do about me.

\_Why the clients didn't come with you two bozos ?

\_Things have gone bad for them. So, we are following plan B. \_answered one of the bozos.

\_You have the mind crystal, I hope ...?

\_Of course ! You can say what you like, as much as you want. Yog. He put you in charge! But we are not idiots. We know how important that blue shit is! \_said the same voice who answered before, the talking bozo.

\_Good. Then I don't have to ask you about this naked guy ! You have chosen to capture him, you probably know who he is and what you will do to him. Isn't that so?

The prolonged silence gave me the impression that wasn't that so. Then the second bozo spoke for the first time.

\_He is some sort of mage, or sigrax. He was following the client. Probably he work for the Virshan. If he sounded any alarm we would not have had time to escape, we could not risk that. Therefore we took his moment of distraction and knocked him down.

The other bozo came to help himself at expense of his friend.

\_Largo wanted to kill him were we was, but I told him that you would need the man alive. Probably our clients will bay a good bonus for his capture! We will have part of it, right ?

The man who seemed to be in charge, Yog, came closer to were I was. Probably he looked me for some time, but me eyes were closed, then he left. Tog stopped somewere near to the door and went again to were the bozos were. Now his voice was much lower, and not as happy as the talking bozo expected.

\_First: he can not be a true mage, Timbo, because if he was you would be dead by now, killed by his Energetic Perimeter.

Any man from a city were exist true mages would know that, no matter how idiot he could be. Therefore Timbo and Largo had to be from a diferent kind of place.

\_He can not be a sigrax for the same reason, unless he is a very incompetent sigrax or one who had already lost his EP before he met you. However, if he is in fact a sigrax I don't think he has anything to do whit the Virshan, because there is no incompetent men working for the Virshan.

Now that was a unnecessary insult! I was prettending to be still unconscious, not only that but I also was very effectively gagged, two details that prevented my timely defense.

\_...besides, if he was from inside this city, for instance from the Mage Caste, you could not had found him alone in the tunels: not on that particular night. Unless he was up there alone preciselly to be captured and followed right to us: but I don't see any magical object on him, which could be used to follow the man so he probably isn't a bait.

Silence.

\_He was carrying magical objects. \_concluded the less than happy leader

Silence.

\_Largo, run to the house. Tell Mutur I need as many muscle as he can spare, fast.

Largo, the silent bozo, was gone. The house was nearby, because he was not gone for long. However, he came back alone. Maybe Mutur needed some time to mobilize his muscle.

No one spoke until Largo came back. I used that time to try a few spells, I wasn't able to make any divination, or even heal my wounded head. Either the chains or the floor had to be magic, the chains seemed far more likely. To have two less than genial fellows from who know were, like Largo and Timbo, walking the tunnels under Shirshan carrying a magical chain like that, who was calling the shots had to be a strange person. Maybe his organization was a "family business".

One does not find antimagic spells frequently, the Antimagic Way isn't taught in any city nearby. I was capable to learn only two basic 'dispells', which is how the Anti Magic spells are called, at Black Centaur Castle; and that was still two dispells more than what most sigraxes leave Black Centaur with. To make a permanent magical object one has to be an Enchanter, and a true Mage (that's why few sigraxes bother to become Enchanters), not an Antimage or "Dispeller". However, to make any magical object one needs to know the spell one intends to imbue the object with; and know it deeply. Meaning: that chain was neither cheap nor easy to replace.

Even if it was not a magical object made to survive the ages, but something I could break if I had all my magic free instead of most of it still locked deep inside, it would still not be something I would choose to trust Timbo with.

\_You took the magical objects hoping to sell them.

\_We are mercenaries, outlaws from nowhere, not city guards!!

\_Keep your voice down! The spoils are yours, take them and leave Timbo. Largo, if you want you may go whit your friend, I will deal whit the rest myself.

\_ I took no magical jewelry for myself. I would like to stay.

I was happy to hear Timbo's steps leaving the shed. Deal with two should be less problematic than deal with three.

Also, I should have been happy not only for myself but for Timbo as well. He had made a fortune, from one night of work! Melliag's jewels worth more than he could possibly hope for; and I doubt Fergus or the person who gave him instructions would risk to include a spell for someone to track this jewels. Especially not having anyone else in our group\_ excluded Melliag and myself\_ capable to do take advantage of magic. Therefore Timbo was probably safe. Albeit, honestly speaking, was a little hard to me to feel happy for him whit my head still throbbing.

\_You want me to take care of him? \_ asked Largo.

\_No, it's already dawning. The workers will be here any minute, we don't have time to kill the man in a way no Healer mage can bring him back. Therefore we would have to carry his body whit us any way. Taking that into account keep him alive makes more sense. About one thing Timbo was right: someone

will want to interrogate him, if as possible.

\_I think he is awoken. \_mentioned Largo. That was my last chance to free myself.

My wrists were bound behind my back, pulled up, the chain crossed drawing a X in from to my chest had been passed between my elbows and my body and linked somewhere behind me leaving little slack. My ankles were linked as well, crossed, and I could feel the chain going from the ankles to the wrists; it would not allow me to stand up perfectly, but since my knees weren't bound I still could fight two adult men with swords and escape before their reinforcements arrive.

Not likely.

Yog grabbed me by my shoulders and told Largo he should catch my feet. I let my body relax, knowing that was a terrible moment to make a move. A better circumstance would come. I was sure of that.

My body contracted and Yog's head was between my knees. Caught by surprise the outlaw flipped forward, and I broke his neck with a fast move of my waist. Next moment, still moving in the same direction, I reached Largo and escaped his sword blade by a hair. Somehow I managed to jump on him after the weapon swing, he fell on his back still holding the sword but I dropped all my weight over his arm and he gave up the weapon.

Largo was the second person more surprised in that fight. I had no idea about what my body was doing, noting about that was making any sense to me. As if a mutiny had happened and my mind was no longer in charge of my body, I could cry in horror inside my own head but nothing else.

My foe had now dagger, but somehow I managed to kneel with one knee above his throat before he could kill me. I heard his dagger falling on the wood, he was almost passing out.

Then the blows came. Six strong men were swinging clubs on me from every direction. Fight ended.

I am Altair da Silva Videira, as you may remember. That furious beast can't be Altair da Silva Videira, not the one I know.

Far from home, in more than one sense. In more senses than I would like, I should say now. To be honest I'm not sure how many more senses I can add to it before I break down for good. Albeit, let's focus on the bright side here: change can be a good thing, as long as you keep what is important in yourself! Or so I was told when I was a child.

Problem is: you have to be in charge of your own actions to keep anything, important or not.

When I first told you my name I was explaining to you a little about the place where I was born and raised, Earth. The nice planet with about 30 billion human beings on it, global government, life expectancy on 165 years and increasing; a society which can produce by second more clean energy than would be able to use during a decade. Violent crime growing, more and more people join terrorist groups dedicated to mass murder, trying to kill as many people as possible just to make room for more

humans on the planet. Education has failed as the main method to change this violent people into decent citizens, no matter how hard we tried, and almost everyone can see that; however there is yet no acceptable alternative on the table yet.

We, the people, normal ones, avoid violence at any cost! Therefore we never want to see, touch, or be anywhere around guns or people who actually has to carry guns to do their jobs. It is a bit silly, since we do need well trained and well armed people to protect us from the mass murders and from the less altruistic kinds of violent criminals. However, people who use violence\_even to stop the nonviolent 'us' to be killed\_ professionally or not, legally or not, do make the normal people on Earth uncomfortable. Most of us admit that no society can exist without a healthy level of silly contradictions, consequently most of us feel fine about use the violent armed people we so despise for our own convenience despite the fact that we despise them so much, and will never trust people who have guns.

Weapons are evil. They are no more than a echo from the barbaric past of humanity, on Earth.

I was inside a small and dark place, something was there with me. Many things, walking on me with tiny legs. Stingers, their poison was painful, but was worse than that. The poison was making impossible for me to wake, I would not lose my consciousness again but my body was paralyzed and in pain, my mind locked in some sort of half dream mode.

You possibly know by now that there is a clear hierarchy between genders both here, on this Universe were the vortex left me, and on my home planet. As far as I know never a human society achieved gender equality, or anything close to it: some people on Earth really talked about that as a goal, but no one on Earth would take seriously the idea today. Civilization is well structured on many layers, each group with more rights and less obligations than the ones in the layers below.

My body somehow was fighting the poison, I could feel that if that wasn't part of my half dream mode. I could hear conversations outside, but not understand what people was saying. We had left Shirshan, I understood that but I couldn't say how had obtained the information. I felt the chains again, they were still there. The animals were around me and exploring every hole in my body. Breathing was difficult, I felt almost grateful for the gag in my mouth. The mystery in my mind was how had managed to protect my eyeballs from the bites and stings.

Another part of my mind however, at same time, was still floating on poison, connecting loose wires at random. Images. But also sounds, memories, abstract concepts, all in this same aggregate of emotion, turning into a logical organization of some sort. Albeit, it was no less painful than the corporal notion of my reality.

At the corporal level I understood that my body was no longer fighting the growing volume of poison in my blood. Somehow my body was welcoming it, as if was possible to use the poison, to feed on it, instead of be destroyed by it. As if the immunological response to a vaccine could be felt by the mind, and directed by the mind it could go beyond just protect the organism; could change the body into something different, less human but more resilient. However, I couldn't remember any Xar use capable to do that sort of thing; and, even during that half dream, I knew very well that nothing outside magic could make a human mind capable to control the immunological system like that.

Without going into detail: white, heterosexual, male is the lowest layer. Being heterosexual and

male I at least still had some people who would shut up each time I started talking. Homosexual males are inferior to any human female, however they do get by unharmed through circumstances where any heterosexual man would lose his job, his right to work and see his kids, his house, and would have to choose between chemical castration and a life time in jail. Therefore, as you probably could guess by yourself, most heterosexual men on Earth will sometimes pretend to be homosexuals as well as they can, to escape personal catastrophe.

Typically, happens like that: you are somewhere public and a woman accuses you to be looking at her inappropriately. Having been accused by a woman you are guilty, case closed. That is the moment to make your best performance: if you succeed, if she believes you only have sexual desire for other men, then your fright will end in laughter instead of jail.

I wasn't above that dishonest tactic myself. Modesty aside I can interpret a pretty convincing gay.

The reason why I told you all that, right now, is because I wanted you to understand what I mean when I tell you that: if there was ever in my life, up to this day, one moment when I felt doubt about that dishonest interpretation I told you about and asked myself if some layer of sincerity could have been present inside my interpretation of homosexual desire, then the moment was that one.

What I am saying is: the lad standing in the top of that seven-steps ladder was handsome. Think about John Buscema's Conan, with a slightly more triangular chin.

The barrel where I had been was open. Someone had knocked it over and a carpet of small black scorpions was taking the ground.

The muscles on my back and neck gave up, my head almost fell on the ground. My vomit joined the scorpions on the ground. Most of it was made of scorpions as well, not all among them dead.

Largo was there, stand up near to the large Cimerianish man. He still had wounds from our previous disagreement. Honestly, albeit I could not see myself I'm pretty sure I was worse than him.

Free the man\_ told the good looking guy, speaking as you would say good morning to your neighbor. Not expecting a original answer.

After the time we had together I imagined Largo would show some reluctance, maybe just a moment of hesitation. Nothing like that, free me from that chain looked like just another task to do in his day..

Three possibilities crossed my mind. Maybe I was so bad that Largo couldn't see any danger in me, chains or no chains. Second option, Largo could see danger in me but that was meaningless to him because the dude stand next to him frightened him so much that I would always look harmless by comparison. I was looking a rag dropped by a dog's mouth, but I had surprised Largo before so theory one seemed unlikely; the fellow was obviously important to Largo, but what noticed in the air was not panic, on the contrary: Largo's moves were more loose, as if he was more comfortable now than he had been on Shirshan. Largo, if I was getting it right, was proud to be taking his orders directly from his paragon.

Who ever this man was, he was so flawless in the eyes of Largo that no hesitation was needed. The silent bozo would die happy, his last action having be obey that man's command. That was theory three, I would had loved to prove it false because it scared me far more than the other two.

I could not get on my feet. Could barely open one eye, speak was unthinkable.

\_I am Threntis, you are in my camp. The man you killed was a friend to me, however I have no intention to avenge his death: he was your enemy at time. You are not my friend, still, for what I was told so far you have little reason to be my enemy. What is your name?

To my surprise, and pain, my voice forced it's way through my body. It came weak.

\_Al...tiir...

\_Take Altir to a bathtub, let him rest after that.

A slavegirl gave me a bath, soft and young woman whit face and neck covered with freckles. Her eyes were blue and calm. After that I was carried to a bed somewere, didn't cared to see if it was in a room or in a jail. Would not have made any difERENCE.

I was on a sickbay. Not everyone on that planet can count on magic heallers, even on cities were true mages exist. Even in Lutianen, were the Black Castle teaches the Healler Way as one among it's three Ways, most people will get by year after year thanks to the Phisician Caste. The Phisicians are common people, without potential to use magic, they do a very decent job given that limitation. Hippocrates, a Phisician from a ancien civilization on Earth, may have worked at sickbays like that one were I was.

The young woman with freckles was massaging my legs whit oil when I woke up. I tried a simple divination spell, was hard to do but after a little it worked. Magic told me that only 4 hours had past since the bathtub, I had been 12 in physical intimicy with the small black scorpions, 2 uncouncious and in chains after the blow on the head in that tunel bellow Shirshan. Almost a day, I could not stay any longer.

I made a second divination to investigate why was so hard to use Xar right now. The antimagical chain was no longer touching my skinn, my spells should be normal.

The poison in my blood. A mage Enchanter had made that species of scorpions generations before, as powerfull antimagical living objects, a powerfull achievement involving advanced antimagic and creation spells. The effect should pass, but would take at least days. After learn that much I had no Xar left for healling.

Fergus was still on Shirshan, waything for information about the true mages. He need to know about the giants. I must go back !

My skinn was gone, the animals had eaten my flesh for a long time, I still could not open my eyes properly and my throat was as swollen as my eyelids. Freckles's oil relived the pain, but it was also making me sleepy. I had to leave that place, that was urgent. Lutianen needed me! "Lutianen is my city

and it neededs me, now, I must go !”.

I held Freckles from behind in a armlock, she lost conscience before she could call for help.

Touch the floor was painful. Outside a outlaw was sit, guarding the entrance. I looked for another way to escape. There was missing bars in the windows.

We were at a castle of some sort, it look like a medieval castle from Earth. Signs of recent battle were obvious: the external wall had holes and big stones like the ones which probably made such holes were still on the ground in the internal terrace bellow the sickbay windows; the tower to my left was half destroyed. No one saw me climbing to the wall. There was about 600 tents outside, therefore about 3.000 fighters following Threntis. More the ones inside this castle.

External doors had been destroyed. However, I still had to reach them.

As I looked for a way to escape the movement outside distracted me. There was something in the sky, a flying animal. People on the ground were obviously exited about it.

The animal looked like a bat larger than a buffalo, with two pairs of wings. The animal's head was longer than a bat's head, it looked like a tapir but with two tursks pointing forward. I had not yet heard about the animal, but I could see the reason for commotion. There as saddle on the animal, and on that saddle a man. Behind him some cargo, including a tied woman.

The winged mount and it's rider landed on the top of a tower. I saw Threntis walking into that same tower. After a little a horn sounded from there and everyone bellow started to dismantle their tents.

I decided to climb up to that strange creature, if I could steal it maybe I had a chance to enter Lutianen again, during the night, avoiding the guard in city walls.

The animal was there, I could hear it, I could smell it, however I could not see it. The tower was circular and there was no place to hide a mouse on it, let alone a buffalo.

I was alone, until I gave one more step on that direction, and them I was lookin at the huge animal, and his cargo.

The woman was on the ground, sit, with her head down and her wrists bind. She her air mixes red and yellow. Looking at me she can't hide the shock, my face bitten by scorpious must be hideous.

She could not recognize me, but we had met before.

The animal noticed me as well, and it didn't liked what it saw any more than the Lady had. Howling High in a sharp tone it attacked. Taken by surprise I felt.

I woke up surrounded by grass and bushes. I was still inside the castle, but there was no one else in the vicinities. I looked for as long as possible, knowing that time was essential under the circunstances.

There was no chance for me to reach Fergus inside Shirshan, not on foot. However, I had still one chance to make contact with him.

Before we enter the city, Fergus took us to a house in a very poor neighborhood. A place improvised in the edge of Shirshan sewer system, where Lutianen hid a safe house for spies like my friend Fergus. That place I could reach. Up there I probably would find a way to send a message to the man.

That was what I had to do, my obligation. However, to do that I would have to abandon the woman captured by the outlaws. The one I knew from Lutianen.

Before all that complication with law, the conspiracy charge against me; before I met Fergus and thanks to him became a happy sailor apprentice among the crew of a half merchant and half pirate ship called Meek Goose; I bought a girl from New Castle city, caught from our home planet like myself, by the vortex: Luciola. Luciola was legally my slave, but in fact we were friends.

My friend Luciola and I once went to a pub, on Lutianen, where there was a couple of musicians performing. I was distracted and saw too late that Luciola was too drunk for her own good, and my reaction to her drunk behaviour was considered offensive by some people inside the pub. Amongst these people was Duegdar of Lutianen, a fellow sigrax.

I had to fight Duegdar for the right to keep my "slavegirl", that ended in a draw and led us to a compromise. That day Duegdar wasn't fighting for his own pride, but for his daughter's. His daughter was the woman captured by these outlaws.

A man from this World under such circumstances would forget the girl.

If we were on Lutianen any honored free man would go through a large amount of trouble to rescue a woman as long as she was from his own caste, local citizen, and had been illegally captured. The same thing happens on other cities, the caste protects their own. The warriors in general would not care much about the free women from other castes, if it was not for the need to keep the peace inside the city walls; the guard does care about keeping the law, and that includes protecting free women citizens from illegal capture. However, all that ends at the city border.

We were not on Lutianen. I should forget this woman, Duegdar's daughter, I not even knew her name. Her father was certainly not my friend! There was no single valid reason for even thinking about her, according to the Laws and rights on that planet, I was supposed to keep my oath to Fergus and help my city to win a war for survival against Shirshan.

Took me time to realize that dilemma. My honor now, demanded one thing from me, I wanted to do another.

After that consideration, I made what may have been my first meaningful decision in life. I decided to rescue Duegdar's daughter.

Find her shouldn't be too hard, the outlaws had left a trail very obvious on the ground. Stealing the woman from their captors could be less easy.

This journey took longer than I could have imagined. I entered the outlaws's camp in the night but the flying mount wasn't there. Then I stole clothes and investigated during two days, we were going away from Shirshan, inside Giant's wild land.

When I finally identified the woman's destination I left the caravan and took a path direct to Zaiaz's domains.

Zaiaz is a Giant War Chief, a powerful one, and he is the one who ordered the sigrax's daughter. It's a mystery why he wanted that particular Mage Caste Lady, but his money is good, and Threntis had sent his more trustworthy agent to do the job.

Giants are a very strange people. They can have sex with humans, and even generate fertile children with us, therefore they are humans. According to some classifications.

On the other hand, they are born very small, smaller than a newborn human, and already with the body shape of human adults. They grow from that, constantly, in the same pace, every year, for ages. They never get old, never stop growing, only go bigger, stronger, and more powerful in their odd racial powers which look like magic but are not. Eventually they reach a size too big to be practical, and there is a ritual of suicide among them to deal with that, but by that time they have millions of years.

To be a comfortable home for people so disparate in size their villages generated very creative solutions. The really old and powerful giants do not share space with their younger brothers; even so, there is still an amazing spectrum of size variation, which leads to many unusual but beautiful shapes on their architecture.

Not all people on their streets are giants however. There is some other species, humans included. I could walk without call attention, just another mercenary answering Zaiaz's call for troops. No one knew who the enemy would be yet.

I had one idea, since they were spying Shirshan's mage festival. They would probably invade the Green Poison.

But then, why send someone to capture a Mage Caste Lady on Lutianen? Maybe she could tell me.

The Duegdar's daughter was being held captive inside Zaiaz's castle. After I invaded it I looked for her on the places normally reserved for very precious pleasure slaves, but she wasn't there. I found the women locked inside a room destined for free prisoners.

She wouldn't recognize me, and I had no time to explain who I was to her inside that castle, then I captured the woman as a slave hunter would have. She left the Castle, and the village bounded, gagged, being carried on my shoulder. That was sad, of course, but necessary.

Outside the village I mounted a stolen birbri, I had stolen the animal before and hidden it inside a cave, Duegdar's daughter bind and gagged behind me. The two-legged beast carried us fast into the woods. We had to take as much distance as possible before the giant king realize she was no longer in his hands.

As soon as I felt safe, we stopped.

Carefully I took the Lady from the saddle and left her sitting on a rock. We were near to a small river,

I could see no signs of intelligent life nearby.

\_My name is Altair of Lutianen, I am a sigrax like your father. We met once you and me, back in our city , at a pub near to the port. I am here to rescue you.

She tried to speak, but could not. Because she was gagged.

To my shame I had forgotten to free the woman before I start talking with her.

\_Thank you, Altair! I remember you; you are the one who own the short brunette slave, and used to dress her as a Mage Caste Lady. My father sent you?

\_Not really, I never saw Duegdar after that day. I found you by accident on that tower, and decided to save you from the outlaws.

\_Oh!\_ she looked surprised. Confuse about what to say next.

\_My name is Hicairi, Altair: my father will gladly pay a fair price to have me back unharmed, I promise you! Up to that day I acknowledge myself a prisoner under your power, Altair, and I give you my word as a sigrax's daughter that I will not attempt escape. Are you goin to untie me?

Once more, I had forgotten someting important.

## 12 - From Hunted to Hunters

Hicairi is a very unusual woman. She while most free women on planet Sharitarn never leave their home city, tribe, or feudal domain she has travelled alone with her father since she was 10 years old. Duegdar, the woman's father, is a sigrax skilled and extremely self confident.

It's hard to imagine what would make a fellow on this planet choose to give such a dangerous life to his only daughter. There was a history behind that decision, I am sure, but she would not tell it to me. Honestly, there was not enough time to share our past any way: our present was hunting us, in the shape of giant warriors. After three days in the forest we entered a open field and had to climb a hill. From up there we saw the group, 15 well armed giants mounted on four-legged lizards, the giants had about 5 yd, except for their leader who was about two yard smaller.

By now I had seem a little about the misterious giant natural powers. They are able to reduce their size, temporarily, but I still had little idea about how much or for how long. They can also became invisible, and look like statues. On their cities I learned that unlike magic their powers are a potential shared by all in the species, however like music for humans not all develop the skills, and there is many levels of hability. Older giants are capable to telepathy, but probably not the ones following us.

As any intelligent creature the giants produce some individuals who can learn magic. They do have some sigrax leneages, but few; humans do not share their knowledge of magic easilly, and they are the ones who have more experience with magic on this planet. At least between the species I had encontered until that point. Almost all, if not all, true mages on Sharitarn are humans, or at least have been born humans.

The animal we were mounted on, a birbri, is a fast beast from the Kialau Mountains. It is much faster than the lizards used by the giants. However, the lizard for all practical purposes, never tire. Neither do giants, as far as I could see. Besides, we were lost, and they knew quite well the land.

Once more I asked myself why I had to give up that powerfull magical bow. Riagare must have used some sort of treacherous mind control spell to convince me to give up the weapon. "He gave me nothing in return !" I complained for no one.

\_Who ? \_ asked Hicairi.

She is a attractive woman, physically. Has a thyin face, it's hard to say if one can call that face beautifull, exotic can be a more precise adjective; almost no low lip, pink line above her mouth, a aquiline nose which could be described by someone as a little too long, her eyes make difficult to notice all that: they are not what one could call eastern on my planet, but almost, and their shape make her expression look always a little distant and cold. Her body is easy to define, that's gorgeous: white skin, a slim body with large wel-padded hips but almost no boobs ; very long , strong, and elegant legs: from such legs one could honestly mistake her for a slave dancer.

I had been trained all my life to avoid to look the body of a woman without her express permition. So

far I had been mostly able to keep the “acceptable” behaviour learned on Earth, even with my friend Luciola who shared an apartment on Lutianen with me, who also had been for a long time a pleasure slave and many days still showed the body language natural to a slavegirl. However, for some reason, was harder to keep my focus now.

Since the island I had lost my peace of mind.

\_Who gave you nothing in return?\_ repeated the girl\_ In return of what?

\_Does not matter now. We must hurry.

\_I can't see how we can hope to escape them. Unless you have some friends nearby, powerful ones.

I had no friend, and no plan.

If I had the bow, and all my normal sigrax powers, I could find a plan with half a chance of success. However I had been inside a barrel full of rare scorpions, which had been made by a mage to take magical powers. The effect was not permanent, but I still was finding living scorpions walking from my feces each time I had to defecate and there was no way to know for how long I would be without magic.

My situation on that regard had not been normal since I left Lutianen. Now it was worse than ever.

Strangely I was not feeling sick or weak, on the contrary. Could be a collateral effect of that antimagical poison, or could be the inexplicable madness I felt a little before I was put inside the barrel of scorpions. Whatever the cause was, I felt more energy than I ever had.

Not enough energy to escape the giants however. The birbri was using the last of his strength, if he could not rest soon we would be on foot. The lizards can climb, they swim twice faster than they run, Hicairi was right: we had no hope.

We only stopped for two hours each time, to feed the animal and let him drink. Finding water was easy, strong rain is a daily phenomenon where we was. However, I had not yet seemed a storm like that one. One day, the world disappeared under water.

It could be a good thing for our foes, since their animals can deal with flooded lands far better than the birbris. Their only problem now was find us in all that rain.

Looking for a high terrain was necessary to us, but the only way to do that was by memory and instinct. Maybe the animal could find a way, before we all drowned.

I saw several shapes coming to our direction, swimming fast, too small to be the lizards. The birbri howled in panic.

Hicairi recognized what they were, and cried:

\_lapis !!

The iapis are predators, more intelligent than dogs and more independent than cats, very hard to domesticate without the use of magic. Wild tribes which live on the forests west of where we were sometimes do that. Their wild sigraxes like to use such animals as messengers, since they have excellent memories and are capable to produce almost any sound used for human language. They are excellent trackers.

Having about the same size of foxes they are no threat for adult humans on dry land, but on flooded ground ten iapis can be a serious complication.

Their faces do look like foxes faces, but they have their bodies covered by something which make them more like to otters or seals. Mostly green or blue, six-legged, they feel comfortable above and under water, and are also great tree climbers. They reached us so fast that I barely had time to unsheathe the sword.

“Use your magic !!” commanded Hicairi. I wished I could obey the Lady.

Using the sword I killed three iapis, before they could do much damage. Hicairi was bitten twice in the legs and once in one arm, I two times in the arms and three in the legs; our birbri suffered the worse attack. When it finally found dry land there was deep holes on his legs, and exposed bone on his tail, his neck had been bitten as well, many times.

The rain had been losing strength but we could hear a tempest even worse coming. Exited by it, and by the taste of blood the iapis formed a circle around us when our birbri felt incapable of keep going. There was much more of them than I had saw before, more than 50.

“That’s impossible, they are never that numerous !!” philosophized my travel companion.

We retreated slowly until we had three on our backs, and a vertical root tall as a building protecting our left side. Most predators attacked the birbri, but a dozen decided to finish us.

A large animal, extremely close, growled in fury. That is all I remember from that day.

I came to my senses again inside a sort of cave made mostly of the roots of a huge tree. There was no water inside, except by the one brought by us in our clothes and hair. My sword was still in my hand, but we had nothing else. All supplies had been lost.

Hicairi was suffering from a severe fever, delirious and too weak to even open her eyes. Without my magic I had no way to heal the woman, or to make fire on a rain forest short after a tempest. I was not feeling sick, but she would die soon without a healer. Her only hope now were the giants, if some of them were a physician or a sigrax maybe she could survive the adventure. I had no choice, I had to try.

Now my problem, carrying the delirious woman in my arms, was how to find my foes.

Instead of the giants what I saw, after an hour or two, was a hunter’s camp built above a small mouth, surrounded by a wall of tree trunks. There was no sentinel, what was strange for such a place.

The door was open, there was no one inside and by the look of things they had left in a hurry days before. As far as I could see it was not a village, no children or free women had been here. Only

hunters, a few at each time\_ 20, no more than 30\_ and maybe occasional slavegirls.

The hunters had left food and medicine behind. If I knew something about drugs that could have been more helpfull, but all I can do is to clean wounds, put the wounded in a warm bed, and give her water.

I was so concerned with Hicairi that I didn't noticed we were no longer alone until they entered the room were we was.

To my surprise was not giants.

\_You don't look like a man from the forests, stranger. You don't look like a giant either. Who are you?

Men speaking to me was old, if we were on Earth I would say about 160 years old, but common people don't live that long on that planet. Some non human people live almost forever, some very powerful archmages as well. Extremelly important people capable to obtain the kind of magical help one can't just buy for money can live up to 200 years, maybe a little more, but not common humans.

Behind the man there was a iapi, far larger than the ones I had fought. It's chin reached the height of my navel.

\_I am Altair, a ii, I came here by accident. We have been attacked by iapis during the tempest: many iapis.

\_Zaiaz's war. The movement of troops coming to join his army disturbed the animals. The ones you met fled to the wrong direction it seems. My name is Faudrin. Nice booty you caught ! I don't think she will survive long without proper care.

\_Do you know where I can find help for her ?

\_Not far, actually. However, Physicians aren't cheap around here and you don't look like someone able to pay for one.

He was right of course, I had almost notting on me at that moment. So I offered the one thin I istill had.

\_That sword, good black iron. Do you think the Physician would accept?

\_ If he does, you would be left unarmed. That's a very bad business for yourself, Altair!

\_I can't let she die !!

\_ That girl is so important to you that you will give your only weapon in the middle of a jungle you don't even know, just to have a Physician try to help her? Are you sure?

\_Yes!!

\_Well, on that case give me some space!

Faudrin helped Hicairi, in his bag he had several herbs and medicinal oils. His beast stayed nearby all morning.

I waited for him outside. Expent the time to trying to feel the Xar inside my body, but I was dry.

\_Your prospective slavegirl will survive long enough to wear your collar, Altair. Since you gave me no name, would be fair to assume you are an outlaw?

\_Well, Faudrin..., I don't seem remember your last name.

\_That's because I gave you none, young man. I had a city once, but that was a long time ago, now I have no second name.

People use the name of their cities; or tribes, or feudal domains; as part of their names. Have only one name on this planet means that you are protected by nation, and no law: that's what means to be outlaw around here. There is some few ways for someone who have a home to became an outlaw, no one is easy for the person involved. I decided not to ask the Physician about the subject.

\_ You know who builded this place and what happened to them?

\_I know them, men of the forest: pointing ears, skins spotted like jaguar's, eyes capable to see on the dark as well as zudras. As the iapis they left to escape Zaiaz's war. Most tribes are neutral, when comes to the conflict between the giants and Shirshan, normally that isn't a problem to anyone. But now, it's diferent.

\_I was told the conflict between Shirshan and the giants is constant, and has been the normal way of things since the first giants have been brough by the vortex as far as 70.000 years ago.

\_That's how I remember that part of History. That, however, is diferent. The giant normaly attack on small groups, and only the smaller ones take part in the adventure. The old and powerful giants, the ones as big as the high walls of Shirshan, as old that they have been born on their species home world, they ignore their youngs. Unless someone attack the giant inside their own territory the "true giants", so to speak, carry on their on misterious business. Not now it seems, if the rumors can be trusted three old giants, as tall as the threes around us, decided to follow Zaiaz. That's not just for take spoils, that's full conquest: Zaiaz intend to rule as kinf of Shirshan.

Was obvious to me why the giants decided to make their move now. Like my own city they noticed the signs that Shirshan's mages were somehow weak. As far as the Green Poison had their true mages and archmages would be very dangerous for any giant, no matter how big, to try a full invasion: not only a mage's power is something to keep in mind, but a group of mages who know each other and share a same goal became far more powerful than just the sum of their individual powers. Making a rough estimation is a potentiation, you elevates the sum of all mage's Xar to the number of mages involved.

True mages will not help their cities to deal with each small raid made by 5 yd giants. They will, however, protect their city against a more serious invasion. Unless, of course, they had disappeared.

Shirshan mages were no longer a obstruction against invasion: thanks to his spies and Threntis's men Zaiaz knew for sure that since the day after the Mage's Festival. Thanks to me, my city didn't.

\_What about Lutianen?

\_According to the fishman I spoke not long ago the Insular City has as much as 100 war ships on Timurda, but their weak king still hesitates. Or maybe he isn't weak, but wily ? They can wait to Zaiaz's move, see how things go for the giants: then attack the Green Poison, after the mages of Shirshan tire themselves killing giants.

\_That could be a dangerous move, Faudrin. Shirshan has strong and high walls, probably strong spells protecting it. Once an army of giants take the city they will have a considerable advantage from inside it. The sigraxes and even the true mages still inside the walls would probably join their invasor to avoid their entire population to be further slaughtered.

\_That's plausible, but only if the giants can overthrow the true mages, enter the city, and take it. That's a big if!

The giants mounted on lizards as far as I knew were still looking for Hicairi, and for the man who had stolen the prisoner from Zaiaz. I would not want to be that man, under such circumstances ! Unfortunately I was, and any time the group of warriors could enter the camp.

To my surprise a troop of soldiers from Shirshan arrived before the giants.

They were looking for recruits. I could have been in trouble if was not for Puze, Faudrin's iapi. The animal noticed the movement in the woods and gave his master a sign. Faudrin helped me to hide Duegdar's daughter . Hicairi was no longer in danger, she would not wake up for some time, thanks to the Physician's drugs, but she could be moved to a more discreet place.

Worst case scenario I would be taken by the army of Shirshan as a soldier, and Faudrin would have Hicairi for himself. The old man would slave the woman, that's obvious, but at least she would stay alive.

The sergeant leading the group of 20 soldiers more 5 recently recruited forest man seemed very happy to welcome one more in his force. There was no doubt about the fact that I would be forced to join that force, as the other fellow recruited before. I could maybe escape latter, that was not the time for bold actions. I was afraid of myself, last time I decided that was not a good time to fight my body jumped into action against my will.

This time, however, Puze was the one who jumped. "Giants" informed Faudrin. A minute later a sentinel cried the same word to his sergeant: my persecutors had found me.

They saw the human sentinel on the wall, dressed as a warrior of his city. To test our determination 10 spears flew. They felt inside the walls, luckily the house were Hicairi was spared but one warrior died.

\_To thee wall !\_ comanded the sergeant.

Five warriors ran, coming our way. One was stoped by a spehar which reached his eye, but the others climbed the wall.

I jumped from the footbridge on the wall and killed one giant nailing my sword deep in his head. The blade broke when I pulled, but I took one from a dead warrior from Shirshan: the giant weapons carried by this foes were too big and heavy to be used confortably.

The giants desapeared in the air, except by one who was too hurt to do that. We all could see their steps in the ground each time they moved but not their arms and and weapons. Even so, the warriors from Shirshan fought bravely. The doors opened and the other giants entered, five more warriors from Shirshan died, and I killed one invisible giant by luck. Another died in the hands of warriors after became visible again.

By that point the small giant (who was only three yards tall) moved his arm, and the sergeant exploded on fire. He was the giant lider, and a sigrax.

The giant with one eye blind was killed by too warriors who were trying to retreat. Two forest man died in the process, once more was killed by a knife throwed by a giant while fighting whit, we were protecting each other. I felt the blade which killed him enter my back, but was only superficial. Before the fellow behind me reached the ground another warrior from Shirshan died, reduced to a shapeless pasta by a giant's hammer.

Some warriors escaped, but almost at same time 50 more entered the camp. Arrows flew and three giants felt, now the others were too injured to became invisible.

The sigrax made another magical gesture, this time holding a magical dagger made of white cristal. Prickly rocks sprouted from the ground killing 20 warriors.

Then the sigrax giant moved his other hand, and a transparent spehar flew growing in the air. It reached the wood large enough to open a holle on in. The sigrax and two other escaped for that opening, The remaining giants where protecting their escape, I wanted to go after the sigrax, but a hand on my arm held me.

\_We must leave now! Unless you want to join Shirshan's army, Altair.

Was Faudrin, and he was right.

\_Hicairi?

\_You can catch your girl in our way out. I already arranged got a tend and some suplies for you two in the deposit. They are waythig for us near to your slave.

He guided me back to the room were Hicairi was, in there he showed me a hatch behind the furry carpet.

Moments later Puze joined his master in the woods.

Faudrin had chosen new clothes for me, and an good hunting bow. For Hicairi\_ who had lost during the iapi's attack the dress she was had been wearing since I captured her inside Zaiasz's castle\_ he took some slave clothes made of braided sisal and lizard leather.

Hicaire complained about the clothes she had to use the moment she woke. The girl would have chosen male clothes made for forest men, like the ones I was wearing. I saw her point; dressed as a man she would be safer, maybe, from distance, the fact that she is a woman could pass unnoticed.

On the other hand the farce itself could be dangerou, because people on this planed strongly disapprove women who pretend to be men. They can indulge it when they are free women inside their on cities, preferably inside their own Caste neighborhoods, but on wild land most fellows would easily kill for less.

To be honest, I thought Hicairi was gorgeous when she complained about the clothes. In my defence, I spoke nothing.

My new friend guided us for two more days, we saw no one else during this time. Neither giants, nor warriors from Shirshan. After Hicairi regain her forces we took diferent directions. He was going west, to distance himself from the war. I needed to go north, and find a way to cross the Sorrowfull River.

My plan was to reach Timurda by land, avoiding the warships of Shirshan. Hicairi insisted that she needed to reach Timurda fast, and from there Lutianen.

\_After you reach the Sorrowfull walk to East, you will find a fishing village. They are nice people, but you should hunt something to trade for your crossing before you reach the river.

\_I will.

\_They have good marked for jaguar fur, three should suffice for what you need. For one more you can buy some salted fish. That would be wise, since is harder to hunt on the other side, and you will have to worry about the hunter tribes from the Piwag desert. Walk fast to Timurda, I hope your friends inside the city welcome you in as you expect, even during the hard times we face.

\_Thanks!

\_One more thing, be carefull between here and the river: It is a dangerou land to travell any time. Even during peacefull times! The war will not make it any safer.

\_You will be well?\_ asked Hicairi to the old man.

\_I believe so, that's not my first time walking between warriors during a war young girl.

\_Thanks for save my life.

\_Your master will repay me eventually, I think: this World has a funny way to bring friends back

unexpectedly when they are more needed. Besides, to make a friend is always a good reason to be feel happiness even if we never see that particular friend again.

\_You may count me as your friend as well. \_she told him.

\_Don't you know? A slave girl's friendship has no meaning, sweet missy. However, as little it may be, I do wish your chains to be as light as your intelligence allow them to be.

\_ I am no slavegirl !\_ Hicairi protested, angry.

\_ Soon enough you will be, even if Altair don't take you for himself. You are far too fetching to escape the brand, girl.

She crossed her arms, looking at him very serious.

\_You know nothing about my life! I can protect myself just fine, old man, no one will slave me. The slave collar is not my fate.

\_ By the way\_ told him to me\_ they have a ironworker in the fishing village I told you about. For one more fur he will brand Hicairi, and make you a collar with you name to lock around her neck. Probably you can get more a shor chain for that price, which is usefull to keep a girl in place when you sleep or need to hunt.

After that Hicairi left us, walking to the direction Faudrin had pointed us as being the one which would take us to the Sorrowfull River.

\_Would be better for you to go after her, my friend. That's a dangerous forest, as I told you before. The old man, once more, had a point. So I followed Lady Hicairi as fast as I was able to. She was walking fast but her smell was easy to follow.

We walked for some time in silence. Then she spoke, angry with me.

\_Why didn't you defended me, sigrax !!? Are we not from the same caste and city ?

\_We are, of course.

\_Do you intend to slave me? Do you intend to have me branded and collared like the putrid mummy told you behind there ??

\_Of course not! I told you already, we are going to Timurda and you will enter it as a free woman!! Even if I have to die to make that happen.

Hicairi smiled.

\_What are you, Altair of Lutianen?

\_You know me, Hicairi of Lutianen. I am the same man you met on a cheap put near to the port of

Lutianen.

\_ Why you are here?

\_Because I was caught by the vortex years ago. Against my will. Also, because I have no way to go back to my home planet...

\_Yes, that much I know! But what you what here, in that wild land. Why you risked everything to rescue a woman who is a strange to you, and who almost costed you has costed you your favority slavegirl ?

\_Being honest, I don't know. Maybe for the same reason Faudrin helped us. "To make a friend is always a reason to happiness".

She looked to my obviously skeptic.

\_Why Zaiiaz paied a so skilled and resorceful mercenary to steal you from Lutianen?

\_Probably all his men are engaged in the preparations to his attack to Shirshan.

\_You know what I mean. Why you are that important to him?

\_Who knows what a giant thinks, with his giant mind?

She knew, that was clear on her face. The information could be important to us, I needed to know if we should expect more warriors from Zaiiaz or not, and that had everything to do whit how important she was for him. However, I saw no way to force the girl to share information.

We made our camp for the night, for the first time after we left the Physician's route. Hicairi made her best fo find us a place safe from most predators, and easy to defend from eventual forest men hunting slaves. She had exeriece travelling the World with her father. That night however the woman made a mistake.

We slept on a bed of of pafix. This carnivor plant attacks at night from the ground, with fast and strong branches covered in thorns. The think is very hard to spot during the day, and can be large enough to cover 10 ac. The one had only trying to eat us had only 4 ac, buy that would be enough to catch us both. By blind lucky I woke before was too late, and Hicairi was already beyond the plant reach, urinating in the woods.

Inch by inch I escaped the branches, I had to left our tend behind, but the plant wasn't interested on it anyway.

When I finally escaped, Hicairi was no longer visible.

I followed her smell, until hear a cry of fear. The I ran.

Hicairi could no move. Looking at her was a huge gijar. It is a near cousing of the iapis, six-legged as

well, they look much like each other, but there is some relevant differences. One is the fact that gijars are completely immune to any magic which affects the mind and therefore can't be trained that way. Another, very relevant to the moment, is that gijars are larger than Earth buffaloes, males reach between six and ten tons: that one was as large as they have right to be.

Before it could attack Hicairi I throwed my sword. Like the spear in the giant's eye, the red iron blade stolen from the dead warrior entered deep in the animal's eye. It forgot the woman and struggled whit pain, trying to free himself from the strang object in his eye.

\_Run !! \_ I suggested to Hicairi. She considered the idea valid, and followed it. I did the same, but in the opposite direction. All I was thinking was that I could not lose that sword.

The fight took a long time, or so it seemed to me. The beast almost took my hear of whit his fangs, many times, but I was faster than it .

The gijar felt, sun had risen, I was covered in blood.

Hicairi, knees on the ground, whit a mad look on her face, asked:

\_What are you ?

This time I had no answer to give to the daughter of Duegdar.

## 13 - The Hidden Signs

\_Impressive ! That's the first time I see someone kill one of these using a sword. Don't think I would recomend the exercise to my friends, but congratulations.

A forest man was talking, he was a young and strong man with all distinctive features of his people. They look like humans, mostly, but humans build to be nocturnal predators hunting on dense jungles. They have claws like cats hidden in their hands and bigger ones in their padded feets, strong fangs similar to dog's teeth, their eyes can see well with very little light, they hear better than normal humans and when necessary they also move faster. Like giants they can breed with humans, and actually the diferences between then and us are much smaller than the ones between both our species and the giants. Forest people became adults twice as fast, and age twice as fast as well: reach 50 years is rare and unexpected among then.

This fellow should have about 17 years, was muscular tending toward thinness, as most of them. His body was naked except for the ropes carring his weapons, and many amulets. There was tatoos and scars competing for for a place on his skin, and a big scar made by fire on the right side of his face had destroyed the ear; winning many points for the scars on the competition. He had a spear one head taller than himself on his hand, and a net on his waist.

Hicairi looked not at him, but around him.

\_They are never alone.\_ warned the Mage Caste Lady. Without move from the point on the ground were she kneel moments before, and now was sitting.

Even if she still does not trusted me much, I believe she trusted even less on that forest fellow. He ignored her comment, and her presence.

\_You are wearing clothes and gear stolen from my people, unless I am wrong. What is your name, and how you got all that?

Before I could say anything another voice came from inside the vegetation behind him.

\_His name is Altair, Panuin. He was on the camp, probably took the gear and the clothes there. Killed more than one giant as well.

The man came to were I could see him. He was older than Panuin and took me a momment to remember but he had been among the unhappy hunters recruited by Shirshan's army. Clearly he escaped, as I did.

\_He helped you ?

\_Not exactly, we just fought the giants together. He did well that day.

\_He did well again, today, against the gijar. However, he stole from our people as well. We are not enemies of giants, or shirshanes, we are neutral.

\_Let me pay for what I took, I have little with me but you can take the dead gijar. Also, if that isn't enough, I can work.

Panuin came closer to me. Looking me in the eye, his moves were like the ones of a panther about to jump into a fight against another ferocious beast.

\_How well you can hunt? \_ asked him in accusatory tone.

\_ That was my first time doing that. However, I learn fast.

Panuin laughed outloud. Five other hunters moved to where we could see them.

\_I accept your offer, Altair from nobody. I am the Panuin of the Silent Climbers.

\_ I am glad you accepted my offer\_ I said, looking at his men, some of them still holding their bows.

Unlike Panuin most men were dressed in leather armor, except by Shid who wore a green robe. Shid was the second most important hunter in the group, and as Panuin he had not been "recruited" by the nations in war.

Missopi\_ the fellow who knew me from the combat on the camp\_ and Pirgo had armors for Shirshan scouts, Vaeg, Nutun and Nizoeg wore the heavier and less graceful armors from Zaiaz's army. The war effort forced the giant's to produce weapons and armors fast, for a force larger than they ever had; while Shirshan, on the other hand, had been an even larger city in the past and now had in their armories more equipment than the men to use it.

They started their work following Shid's steps. The Panuin told them to teach me how it has to be done and left, following the trail left by Hicairi and myself back to the place where I was almost killed by a plant.

I did my best to help the hunters and learn their arts. We took all we could carry, and left the rest for the animal which were already surrounding us, attracted by the smell of blood.

Shid explained to me that the animal's skull is more valuable than any other part of it. The gijars are immune to the spells of Illusion and Mind control, their bones carry some resistance to magic, and the cranium can be used to make helmets capable to protect the person using it against any spell which influences the mind. Unlike magical objects, that natural protection works for any person, not just the people with magical potential awakened.

We walked back to my camp, and to my surprise not all equipment had been destroyed by the pafix. Panuin saved most of it and organized near to a tree, still above the deadly pafix.

\_You will mark the pafix somehow, or we will dig to kill it?

He reacted as if I had made a joke too complex for him.

\_We don't need pafix this time, you do? Why I would "mark" it? We know where it is, now you know too, if we need to dig some later, we will.

Seemed hard to explain what was in my mind.

\_ Someone else can make camp above it. Maybe someone from your own people.

\_That's the point of pafixes, that's how they get by. They attract animals singing a constant cozy sound, too low to we notice but powerful enough to work, and they kill the ones who sleep above them. You can read the signs in your own chest if you pay attention, even now.

\_I am not talking about animals I am talking about people!

\_I don't understand your point, Altair. People are animals. Well, they can be plants, and there is some other less common options, but, mostly, people are animals.

I knew he was right, according to his own point of view. What I was trying to say could never make sense to him. I grew up on a place where human life is so important that we don't even consider to put it in risk like that. To this people the death of a person, human or not, is no more or less serious than the death of a pafix. They will protect their own, die to allow their tribes to survive, risk their lives for their friends: as many other animals do. They will not, ever, clean the world from dangers to protect their clumsy ones! To give that sort of protection, that, of course, was my expectation. Probably will be my first instinct up to the day I die.

Since I could not explain myself, the Panuin changed subject.

\_I will not take your entire prey from you, we will share it. Our plan was to kill the beast, you saved us the trouble. You don't have to work for us if you have some where else to go, but I welcome you in our group if you want to join us for some time.

\_ Thank you, but I need to cross the Sorrowful as fast as possible. The better way to do that is to buy passage on a fisherman's village East on the beach, I was told.

\_Only thing on the other side of the River which is near is sand, the Piwag Desert lies behind a strait strip of savanna and the desert tribes claim the territory as their own. They aren't know for hire mercenaries, Altair. They like to fight their on wars.

\_I am not going to the Desert. I need to reach Timurda.

\_Then you should join us. We are going to Alkavalla city, it is in the opposite direction but up there you have a chance to find a ship going to Timurda. On foot you would have to fight your way inch by inch against the Sand Sporpions and other desert tribes, even if you could do that you would still not reach Timurda sooner than you will on a merchant ship.

\_Can your people's ships pass through Shirshan block?

\_I can't promise that, because things change fast during wars. The more recent information I have is from before I left my village to rescue some friends "recruited" by armies which have no right to recruit any of us. According to that information Lutianen isn't in war against Shirshan, yet, and both our cities are still neutral in the fight between Zaiaz and Shirshan.

\_What else can you tell me about the war?\_ I asked.

\_If you share our fire tonight we can tell you what we know.

I agreed.

Forest men make camp on the top of trees, if that is possible, or at least this tribe do. Given the circumstance I needed help to reach the place where we would sleep. Hicairi wanted to stay on the ground, but before I could say anything one man had already put the woman on his shoulder and was climbing fast the vertical wall of wood. She cried a lot, but calmed down once we reached the place, which was more comfortable than I would have imagined and absolutely impossible to see from the ground. Hicairi grabbed my arm, clung holding it, and neither moved nor made any sound for a long time.

They make the fire above a carpet of animal skin, it protects the wood below and resists the temperature. We eat the gijar, lizard meat, and local insects. Forest people have little love for vegetables or grains, can digest it, but not as easily as other humans do. They season the meat using very little herbs and, mostly, hot blood. They can chew and digest raw meat and they also digest the blood itself. However, when time is not an issue, most of them prefer roast beef to raw meat.

Other humans can't even sip their favorite drink without going sick, it is made from blood, of something, I did not want to know what, and I did not want to know what else is put in it. The stuff smells like evil thoughts, and has an effect similar to sugarcane liquor mixed with lysergic acid on them. It also seems to have some religious role to their culture: they frequently praise a deity, using short and happy exclamations, after drinking it for the first time in the day.

As I suspected by some conversations Panuin isn't the name of a person. It is however the only name used by the man who reached the position of Panuin, between his Ritual of Victory and when he died. No one calls them by the name they had before, no one uses it to talk about them. It is better if no one who doesn't already know how they used to be called before finds out their previous name. The Panuin is a tribal leader, his word is law for their people, and therefore, unlike almost everyone else in the tribe, they don't have a right to a personal name.

There is only one other kind of person without personal names among the forest men. The Panuins are the Executive and military leaders, they often are alchemists like this Panuin but can do nothing with magic. The Maothi on the other hand are the spiritual and magical leaders. Maothis are much less common than Panuins, every tribe has a Panuin but only the lucky ones have a Maothi.

That happens because to be a Maothi, among other things, one has to be a sigrax. Sigraxes are rare. A sigrax can be a Panuin, and a common hunter can be a Panuin, so all tribes have their Panuin.

All that I learned from different conversations, not all at once. What I more needed to know was how the

war was going, and about that they only talked after we start eating.

\_Some hunters here came from the giant's army, and you already know Missopi who was going to Shirshan to fight for the Green Poison City. However, we still don't know where you came from, fellow. Do you plan to share what you know about this war?

I looked the hunter in the eyes, and remembered the sigrax giant following us, me and my travel companion Hicairi. His man, Missopi, must have told his Panuin about the giants. Knowing the war they probably can tell the difference between a giant elite squad from the royal castle and normal troops. Waighing all that I decided to say the true about who I am, who the woman with me was, and why the giants wanted to capture us.

I didn't told them about Fergus or my mission in the mage's festival on Shirshan, because those secrets were not my to share. But I told him that I was told no mage had been at the festival, only sigraxes disguised as mages. When I explained the part played in it by Hicairi Panuin looked at her for what seemed to me a long time, but kept silent. I think he believed she was not telling the true about not know why the giants wanted her.

Seem satisfied for the moment the hunter chief decided to reciprocate.

“Zaiaz, the nine foot tall giant tribal chief who likes to be called ‘king’ Zaiaz, succeeded in gather seven of the eleven giant tribes. More importantly, somehow he managed to sell his war to three Outlandish.”

I had to ask if the “Outlandish” were some sort of iis. He explained:

“Outlandish is how we call the giants old enough to have lived on their original Universe. The vortex stopped bringing people from giant's home planet a really long ago, as you probably know giants never age, instead they keep growing all life, therefore the ‘Outla’ are huge. The smaller guy among this three has at least 70 yd! Giants that old are extremely powerful as well, very hard to hurt, and almost never give attention to small giants: they are the reason why no human city try to invade giant's territory: that gets their attention while nothing else does.

Except this time. Now three of them are going to war against Shirshan. Even if the mages are in the city, just hiding and waything for the giant army, Shirshan will still feel the blow. Now, If what they say among the giants is true as you just confirmed, the mages of Shirshan are not in the game... “

There was more evidence in favor of the theory that Shirshan had lost it's true mages.

“Zaiaz sended the smaller tribe under his command to take Shirshan's port. They did so in half a day, lost almost no one, there was no real fight.

Shishan has troops going to meet Zaiaz's army. Their soldiers believe many allies will send strong support. I don't agree.

Sure, each city in debt with the Green Poison will send some men: mostly warriors, since that would be enough to honor most treaties. Warriors will not be enough now. Some sigraxes will be sacrificed as

well, but no city in this continent will send a true mage to fight and die for Shirshan, they all know what this three huge monsters are and true mages are just too valuable to be put on risk like that .

The only city on the planet which would send a handful of powerful true mages to help Shirshan is far in the North, and have no direct interest involved. Unless Shirshan has something very valuable to bargain Urshawa will not send their mages to help.”

Urshawa, sometimes called “The Mage’s City” is a very mysterious power, placed on the magnetic North Pole. Most common people don’t even know if it is real or not, but in the Mage Caste we have, at least, enough information to know it as a relevant global power. All archmages must visit it, at least once, before they raise to that final apex of prestige.

The Mage’s Brotherhood has no capital, but if it had one that would be Urshawa.

The forest man’s leader knew, of course, which was my main interest. That wasn’t Urshawa. Being a competent storyteller the Panuin left what I wanted to know for last.

“Lutianen on the other hand, has many true mages near. Most of them are on Niore, some on Timurda. However, as you probably know, Lutianen is no friend of Shirshan. More likely it would make a deal with Zaiaz and share the spoils. Question is: will the lost mages ever come back? If they don’t this spoils will be far less sweet to anyone who take Shirshan.

There is much to be taken, of course, but I suspected that is not why Lutianen sent about half of their mages, or why three Outlas decided to join Zaiaz’s project.”

\_The true mages are always the main goal of any force which attacks a city were they exist. They are also the most powerful defense weapon against the invader. \_I said, pointing the obvious.

\_Except that, on this war, they don’t seem to be a problem. They may be all dead, and not the walking kind of dead, but if they are not anyone who take the city before the mages show their faces will control a lot of magical power. The mages of Shirshan will not risk their families, not to mention all the citizens of their city, to fight the enemy! Not when the war already ended. They will make a deal, mages always do under similar circumstances.

Then I understood the reason why the Outlanders had chosen to join this war: they intended to take Glass Viper Fortress. Doing that; if they could also find at least 20 true mages to keep it working, being one or two among them capable to teach; sooner or later it would mean true mage giants. Eventually even true mage Outlanders, possibly, if they have outlanders born with potential for magic.

Humans control this Word, despite all sorts of monsters and races brought by the vortex, because the Mage’s Brotherhood is basically an exclusive club for humans. Very few non human races have true mages, even less among them control institutions capable to create true mages. Gain control over Glass Viper would change everything for the giants.

However that led to a problem Zaiaz may not have included in his calculations. I am not sure how the Brotherhood would react to the risk posed by his victory: they could, for instance, make Shirshan itself evaporate and every person near evaporate along with it. To do things like that all they need is enough true mages agreeing with the “Final Solution for the giant problem”.

Was hard to sleep that night, and not only because I feared to fall sleeping.

Large animals passed running behind us, hundreds, I don't know if they were gijars or something else. Night predators passed flying above us, around us there was all sorts of three climbers.

Hicairi was clearly afraid: something, and was not the animals incapable to talk, worried the daughter of Duegsar. Could be the altitude, could be the forest man who took her body against her will and carried it up to the threetop. Whatever it was, she reached for me as a source of protection, and cried herself to sleep with the face hidden on my shoulder.

I could not sleep. When I was almost doing that, a little after the midnight, the forest men woke up. Before I knew what was happening they were ready to walk again.

I remembered the magical neckless I once found on a cave, which gave me the power to see perfectly in complete darkness. Now that magical object was were? Maybe with my friend Fergus, who should be hidden somewhere on Shirshan incapable to use the magical power because he has no potential for magic.

Think about that, I had lost much more powerful objects since I last saw Fergus. One day I would have to explain what happened with Melliag's pendant to some very angry mages, about that I was sure.

Vaeg carried Hicairi, who this time was too confuse and sleepy to protest. We walked as fast as I could, and after a while my steps became less hesitant. The hunters showed great patience with me until then, I'm sure they could have travelled much fast if they let me behind. However, soon walk fast in the dense forest in the night seemed less impossible than it should be; even accounting for the help given by the hunters.

Divination spells could have a similar result, however I had not being able to do any spell since many days before. Besides, Divination do not give you the hability to actually see in the dark, we will say "see" to make it simple but true is Divination allows use to know what is up there without see it. I was seem in the dark.

More than just seem, I was moving as fast as the forest men, what sould have been impossible for me. No spell I had learned up to this point could allow me to do that.

A little after sunrise we stopped near to a small river to rest and drink. Pirgo killed a snake with a knife throw, we fished, more for the fun than for the food. They all were more relaxed now, and I asked Missopi about that.

\_We are on Silent Climber's hunting grounds now!\_ he said proudly\_ Only our allies hunt nearby, the place were I was born is half a day from here; Alkavalla isn't more than two days beyond. To came that far inside the jungle looking for recruits would be a declaration of war against Alkavalla and all forest people, not even Shirshan would be that arrogant.

I was skeptical.

\_ They hunt forest women for slaves in this same jungle, don't they? Silent Climber free women.\_ I had to ask. A woman called Irma came to my mind, a slave girl. I met her on the house of Osdar, a Merchant house on Shirshan.

Irma had on her skin spots similar to the ones most forest people have. Her racial traits were not as pronounced as the ones around me, but she had some blood from this jungle. Maybe a grandmother.

\_Yes, they do hunt for slaves here! As we hunt for slaves inside their houses, walking their streets at night: there is ways to enter any city, if you can climb well. Shirshan is no exception, and we are fine climbers. However, Alkavalla do not send any hunter to catch free female citizens of Shirshan on their own beds, bind, gag, and carry the Ladies to transform them into gorgeous slavegirls: we go by ourselves, as individuals.

Shid looked curious, he had not heard my question.

\_Are you two planning a slave-hunt trip to a city in the middle of a war? Just after Panin and myself rescue Missopi and Pirgo from Shirshan's army?! Better you both join the war as mercenaries and then just collect your share in the spoils, don't you think ?

\_That's not what we are talking about. The ii just wanted to know how we can be sure Shirshan and the giants will not take recruits by force from our forest, since they do take slaves from here.

\_What one thing has to do with the other? Furtive capture of women is a personal business, a matter of tribal virtue, for some a way to make money. There is nothing personal, or furtive, about recruitment!

\_ Nothing to be proud about either\_ added Vaeg\_ A nation should count with their own warriors to stand, or fall. To ask other nations for help, is acceptable; to pay mercenaries for it is less decent. But to call men who doesn't offered their spears, demand their lives, just because they happen to be walking on some road build by your ancestors and to do business with some people who also do business with you? That is dishonored.

"Dishonored" is a very strong formula on this planet. Don't think I ever heard it said outloud after the vortex, at least not by someone here who was not a involuntary immigrant. Even now, without realizing it, Vaeg lowered his voice a bit to pronounce that word.

Fergus, even being from Earth, seems to give extreme importance to that silly thing as well. "Honor": he even told me that would be worth for me to come to this Universe only to learn about honor. Being honest I must admit that my friend's feelings does not make sense to me. Respect I understand, proper behaviour, decency, even 'chivalry'; but what is "honor" supposed to mean ?

\_Our friend came from another land, and from beyond the vortex, you two can't expect him to immediately understand what is natural for us. He can kill a gijar alone, using only a sword ! Give him time to learn how many better ways to do that there is. \_advocated Missopi in my favor.

I noticed Panuin had been talking with Hicairi for some time, at some distance. She was clearly uncomfortable, probably afraid. However, given the circumstances, there was little I could do to help.

If the Panuin tried something uncivilized I could and would defend the woman. Then, if he wanted to, he would command his men to have me killed in one instant. She would stay with him, as his slave, after that: kept by force and tamed by violence.

On the other hand, since I had been called a guest, maybe they would grant me the dignity of a fair fight. What would change nothing. The Panuin would kill me any way.

Best case scenario we would be left alone. Hicairi and myself, would try to walk back to where we were when they found us. After that we would try to reach that fishman's village, because I would not take my chances on Alkavalla without any man from the forest by my side. Deep down I always knew what the Panuin told us, my plan to walk all the way to Timurda after reach the opposite side of the Sorrowfull had little chance of success; it has the only possible plan before the forest men find us, but it never was a good plan.

However, the Panuin made nothing unreasonable, as far as I could see. He seemed very serious, as if he was a cop from some old movie interrogating a suspect of murder.

He must have concluded that she was innocent, because the conversation ended and he did not accuse the woman of anything.

We walked a little more that morning, but when the day became hot we made another stop to sleep. This time the Panuin invited me for a walk before we climb.

\_There is a few things I would like to talk about, Altair. I am not sure if you made that clear during our previous conversation but you, clearly, are a sigrax. I would say a wild sigrax, but you mentioned Lutianen. The natural for a citizen of Lutianen would be to learn about magic inside his city, so, I am curious about that.

\_I am a Black Centaur Castle sigrax, actually. Why you imagine I could be something else?

\_The way you fight between you and the gijar do remember me something I heard about a wild lineage. But that's not important. The main question in my mind was why you don't mention more clearly the fact that you are a sigrax? Most fellows who share that status feel very proud about, you don't feel the same?

\_Well, honestly, that's not something I would like to talk about.

\_I see. Something is happening to you beyond the normal for your magical kind. If you were a man hunter like myself I would now ask you if that, on your opinion, poses risk to the rest of us; then I would believe your answer. Since you are not, I will not ask.

\_ Well, you are responsible for your peoples lives. To be honest, I would not know what answer to that question. I lost control of myself more than once, I violated defenceless women! I...

\_Free women?

\_I... , don't think so.

\_ What else?

\_I have killed people, in furious rage...

\_Friends?

\_No.

\_Allies, partners...?

\_No.

\_Have that kills being committed as betrayal of trust?

\_ I don't think that was the case. No.

\_I am still listening. Hoping you will reach the point were you mention a reason for concern.

\_I had no control over my body!!! Can't even remember what I did !

He was bored with the sky.

\_ Let me change the subject for a moment. Do you know were we are?

\_No. I was never here before.

\_Don't you recognize the feeling?

\_What feeling?

\_Do you feel uncomfortable here?

I tried to indulge his exercise of primitive shamanism. There was some vibe of Carlos Castaneda's fantasy in what he was asking, nagualist stuff. However, I was his guest and should at least pretend.

\_Don't feel uncomfortable at all, I'm sorry. Actually, that is a beautiful spot! I feel quite well here, comfortable.

\_I see. You feel save, comfortable. More relaxed maybe?

\_It is a beautiful pla...

He saw the understanding on my face. Then showed me the grass more closely.

\_You can see the patten on the grass ? It is very discret above the ground, but once you take a look

in the roots became clear: that's not the same vegetation, or the same soil. The pafix cultivate it here to hide himself, touch it, feels more comfortable than common grass.

\_That's amazing! I would never notice by myself.

\_You should learn to. They are quite common on many places, some species are harder to notice than that one. This time I wanted to show you one which is the same species the one you found before, so it would be easier for your to recognize the signs. You see the signs, don't you?

He was right. Once you know what look for, you can see the borders of that dangerous plant from some distance, almost perfectly.

\_Well, thank you!\_ that had been a generous lesson. He really wanted to talk to me, or the previous conversation had been a excuse to bring me here?

No excuse was needed. I only wished he had allowed me to bring Hicairi with us, she would have loved his explanation. If the daughter of Duegdar knew that much about pafixes he would never had slept above one, she had chosen the place for our camp.

\_You are welcome Altair, just remember: see the signs! Let's now join the others, I would like to sleep a little before I face what is waything for us on the village.

\_What would be that, Panuin?

\_Well, that's not something I would like to talk about, honestly.

Hicairi seemed more comfortable with the forest men now. She was between the brothers Nutun and Nizoeg, asking them about their village and their city. She wasn't by my side when I slept.

We walked all night this time, and by morning we entered the nomadic village which was destined to be our only stop before Alkavalla.

## 14 - Odd Friends

About one hour before reach our destination we passed by a strange garden of green stones, they were the top of buildings constructed by a long extinct race. Somewhere in the middle of all that I saw in stone a image I had seem before on a tapestry inside the Main Amphitheater of Shirshan: the frog with a large eye on it's back. According to Vaeg it had been made by the "frog-people", extinct before the first forest man set foot on Sharitarn, how far he did not knew. The only thing still alive from this people is their religion. Somehow other races kept it\_ or parts of it\_ alive, inside mystery cults; secret societies sometimes, public churches on some places.

Like Earth, the planet I am from, the forest people's original planet had evolved beyond the need for superstitions such as religion. However, after a few generations learning to survive on this planet, the hunters looked for this thing their ancestrals would not have wanted or even noticed. Their tribes came into existence with the first sigraxes playing the role of priests, and the old lineages of commanding officers becoming the first Panuins.

As I understand, at least this time, the priests created the religion mixing unrelated influences. To do that they used elements taken from many places, the frog-people's ruins included. Its not rare to see pendant with the frog on a forest man or woman's neck. Vaeg, for instance, has one.

I expected their vilage to be on the top of trees, but I was wrong. This Silent Climber camp isn't a conventional fortified hamlet like the last forest man's camp I had seem either. It was a collection of buildings impossible to see from distance; placed on high ground, surrounded by a deep and treacherous swamp. To a bold and skilfull forest man would be possible to reach the vilage by the trees, but only if the hunter had deep intimacy with that particular vilage, and only for a few routes; magic excluded, the only visible way for humans to reach the vilage was by raft. One could probably jump from a flying animal on the tree tops, but I doubt any animal large enough to carry a human would be able to fly it's way to the ground passing throught the vegetation.

There is no visible border to the dry land, and is hard to know were is or isn't save to step sometimes, but all seems pretty confortable and obvious for a forest man. I only noticed that we were inside their vilage by the people surrounding us and welcoming their hunters. I could see the buildings only after we had passed many.

There was a large place to reunions build on the middle of it all, seven huge trees touched it's borders; twenty houses surrounded it, each one large enough for twenty families, their slaves, and their animals; most times no more that five families would be inside any of them and many would be empty, but now there was no space left now. There was a room protected by magic were they would stock meal and fish for important reunions like that one, surrounded by a ring of storage rooms for less perishable itens, and a near to another round building were they kept some herd animals, next ot another made for the slaves of collective ownership who are the only ones living permanently in the vilage. This Silent Climber's Panuin lived inside a collective house, like any other hunter, so the "Panuin's House" was empty on this vilage and on every other Silent Climber vilage (as a important semi-nomadic tribe they have many), the "Maothi's House" however was larger than it and very much open for busines: to be

honest, that does not mean anything bad about this Maothi, since the priest's house is at same time a religious temple and a magical workplace while the war chief can do his job almost anywhere.

All that varied constructions are made of twisted twigs with the gaps between them closed by fungus, lichen, and, in some cases, clay. Ropes and bones were also frequently used by the hunters, most furniture being made of it. Every building on the village have three floors, each one at least 5yd tall; in the top of each one there is a cone between 7yd and 11yd tall used to let smoke out and as an entrance during the more extreme floods. The buildings look so much like the common vegetation on the region that one could walk between them all day and never notice the village, if all doors were closed.

The first two floors will be below the water level, most years, during all the rainy season. When that happens all openings are closed up to the water level to keep the inside dry, and they mostly use the part above the water as home keeping the rest as deposit for valuable goods only available for the hunters during this floods. Now, however, the ground between the buildings was dry, and we walked on it, surrounded by festive children smiling with their scary sharp teeth.

Before we have time to understand what was happening a group of strong men came to us, a large and very serious young fellow looked at his Panuin. He stopped, blocking the Panuin's way.

The two men stayed in silence looking at each other, showing no feelings. The other men, on both sides, called insults to the supporters of the opposite champion, all talking at the same time: ignoring their leaders as if they were statues. Vaeg and Pirgo left our side to join the "enemy" but at same time a dozen other forest men came to our side.

As fast as they started, the insults stopped, as if a chronometer had decided the issue. The Panuin and the challenger hugged as only beloved brothers just before one of them submit himself to a surgery with high probability of death could. And I felt relieved.

\_They achieved reconciliation now. Everything is in peace between them now. \_ I said more to myself than to anyone else.

\_Yes, everything is in peace between them. They agreed, peacefully, they will try to kill each other ! As soon as possible they will fight, one of them will die in front of us, and the winner will invite his most trusted friends, and would also invite his free companion if he had one, to eat the other man's body \_ clarified for me Shid\_ That's how 'reconciliation' among us look like, sigrax of Earth.

He was smiling at me, clearly happy to see the funny look of surprise (let me say 'surprise' to avoid horror) on my face. "...I am not among the most trusted friends of the Panuin !", I did not spoke the words, but anyone could see the relief for that fact on my face.

A children tried to bite Hicairi's butt, and Nizoeg sended her to the ground whit a firm slap on the ear. The small bitter would have maybe 6 years if she has from most human branches, probably she has about 3, being forest people. Nizoeg's reaction shocked me and I almost overstepped obvious boundaries to protest. Probably if was my on butt instead of Hicairi's I would have been incapable to keep myself silent.

Hicairi noticed my reaction and came to calm me down:

\_The small beast will be fine! My father explained to me how sensible the people from your planet are about hittin children. Even more female children. However, you must understand how normal it is for us. Not only the savage and uncultured people do what Nizoeg just did without think twice, we, the civilized ones, do the same.

\_Children must be protected! \_ I spoke, knowing how unreasonable the words were on that context. Unable to link that knowledge to my feelings.

\_Of course, and they are. Adults will feed, educate, and protect their children against danger, real danger. Not corretive slaps. On cities people actually talk about how the wild people exaggerate on the care for their children, since they are presented to the tribe: the average parents on Lutianen will not fall into mourning if a babe with less than two years die, there is still not enough person on it to justify mourning. The wild people on the other hand take that sort of lost much more seriously, they only ignore the newborns not yet presented to the tribe.

She was right, I learned about he diferences between the education given by the nomadic tribes and the civilized nations after that, but I already knew how people on Lutianen think about the way we deal with children on Earth. Slavegirls from Earth are seldom entrusted with the care of children, because the parents don't trust their capacity to correct children'r behavior properly.

The childhood on History was the favorite topic of study to me for many years, on Earth. Possible because I would never dare to became a father\_ if I could avoid\_ and always knew that. Have a child make a man a prisioner of the mother of that child for the rest of his live, she can ban him from the child's life and only take his money if she so choose; on the other hand, she can take control of any aspect on a man's existence, forcing him to be present any time she want, give up any habit or believe she does not approve claiming he has the duty to be a positive influence to his offspring.

Besides a man is always a suspect of pedophilia, stay as far as possible from children is the only way to minimize the risk to be condenmed for that crime. Be less present to the life of you own children than the mother decided you should be will make you guilty of child abandonment. Ergo: there is no way to escape fatherhood trap, if you don't avoid it completely.

Even so: I always liked the idea children, since I remember be a father has been a recurring fantasy to me. On Earth I would not dare to do so. Here, I do not dar to do so either: but for diferent reasons. To educate a young human being for survival on that world one must teach this person to be cruel, and I could never teach that to a innocent being.

The slap on the small girl was still reverberating inside me. To escape that uncomfortable sensation I tried to engage the first conversation I came across.

\_They are all over the fields! Going farm by farm and killing everyone. Many from our tribe are helping.

This hunter was talking about the war. The giants with less than 3yd had been sende by Zaiaz to take the Peasant Villages around Shirshan, and kill as many humans as possible. He wanted to attract the warriors from the city to open fiend were would be easier for his main army to destroy them. The

giant king wasn't far from the walls of Shirshan now, there was more warriors inside the city than following Zaiaz but the giant's racial advantages in favor of Giants are far too obvious.

\_I don't think the Panuin will be pleased. He insists to keep our tribe, and Alkavalla city, neutral.\_  
told another man.

\_That's why he must die ! Zaiaz's victory is inevitable, and he will see us as enemies if we stay neutral.

\_Shirshan may still win the war\_ I suggested, just because I was curious to see how the gray haired man would react. He seemed very confident, but not emotional about the subject.

\_Even if Shirshan win the war we lose nothing for join Zaiaz now. They will be broken after this war, and will not look for retaliation any time soon. Zaiaz on the other hand will be reacher than he ever was, and the three tribes which refused to join his war will want to compensate that poor judgement somehow. We have more comerce with the Giants than we ever had with Shirshan, and closer friendship.

\_Besides\_ pointed the other fellow\_ without true mages Shirshan has no chance.

\_Even without the mages Shirshan's wall are protected by powerfull spells. Also, they have more false mages (I was talking about the sigraxes)

\_He do has a point, Morbog \_ agreed the other\_ The giants have few false mages, and they are lost without their general.

\_How they lost that general? \_ that was the first time I listened about that giant sigrax.

\_The man is the only son of Zaiaz still alive, he is supposed to became the king if Zaiaz ever die. I saw the man once, not as big as most under his command, but they say he is the most powerful sigrax on Zaiaz's army. Someone took a Lady from Zaiaz's tent, a important prisoner of war. Before his father knew about the false mage took a bunch of guards and left to take back the woman, and the thief's head.

Something about het sounded oddly familiar to met. I looked around, but Hicairi suddenly disappeared.

\_How Zaiaz reacted to his son's initiative?

\_He is furious !!! The other giants do not deal well with false mages, not even their own false mages. Zaiaz has no good option to replace his son.

\_The Lady isn't that important, I assume.

\_Probably she is, but the prince still is more needed now on the battle field than he is hunting her. The giant king has better men to hunt fugitives, mercenaries. Makes no diference for Zebula, the false mage, once he start something he don't know how to stop before it is finished. Unless the letter written

by his his father can reach him, this man will not stop until he avenge what he sees as his father's honor.

The two man had more things to do elsewhere. As for myself, I needed a bath and a good meal.

That conversation gave me much to think about. Hicairi knew more about that subject, obviously. However, she would not share that information with me; that much was clear.

Any man raised on Sharitarn could force a woman under his power to talk, to give up her most precious secrets against her will and interest. Theoretically Hicairi was under my power, she told me that herself not long after I take her from Zaiaz's stronghold. For a moment I almost wished I could behave like the man raised on Sharitarn: almost.

The unguie arrived during the hottest part of the day, a little after midday. The top of my head barely reached his chest. His skin, grey and slick, shone in the blinding sun. Green hair covered his shoulders, chest, hair, and his many arms, drinking the light. Below the chest his body was covered by a quilt of some sort, made of red rings covered by silver scales, his feet looked like tangly pafix branches and looking at them I asked myself if they were two by nature or he had chosen to separate the low section of his body on two 'legs' just to make himself less odd for us. He had a belt made of a single rope rolled many times around his circular waist and there was seven daggers and two short swords hanging on this belt. A single golden shield, which looked like a police badge, hanged from a black chain at his left side, between two daggers. The only thing visible on his face was the mouth, from which hung a tortuous pipe, from where a dense smoke was released from time to time.

The plant-people is composed of many races and even their closer associates, the forest people, know little about the relationship between their races. Between them are the Mediator Caste, responsible to deal with talking animals like the forest people and other humans. This fellow was a mediator.

Today he was not in this village to negotiate a treaty, he was here to observe. His people keep close relationship with the forest man and the perspective of a power change in one of the most important tribes of forest men concerned the unguie as much as concerned the forest people themselves. The fate of all Alkavalla city could depend on what would happen here, today.

The Panuin had been challenged according to the laws of his people, by another Silent Climber, a warrior and hunter young but well respected between his own people. At least one fighter will die.

If the current Panuin win, the city will probably stay neutral. If the young warrior became the new Panuin, the supporters of the alliance with the Giants would have a influential voice inside the Inner Circle of Power on Alkavalla. The price of neutrality was crescent, and that would only go worse as the war shaped itself: the winner, whoever it was, would remember the omission forever. Even a alliance during the last days of war would not rebuild the lost friendship, or so the giant's friends argued.

The giant's friends were right, up to some point. The giants tribes were the closer nation by land, and had been the most important commercial partner of Alkavalla. On the other hand Shirshan has the most powerful navy nearby, and Alkavalla is a Port, the forest can protect the city for a long time, would be hard to move on it in large numbers, but the Sorrowfull River brings ships directly to the doorsteps of

Alkavalla. Besides, if normality reestablish itself on Shirshan and the Green Poison City triumph, what still is a possibility, a important detail would make the alliance with the giants tragic to ungnuies and forest men: Shirshan has true mages.

Winning the war Shirshan would likely not avenge herself on the neutral parts as king Zaiaz probably would. The victory itself make Zaiaz more rich and powerfull than he ever could dream to became if was not for the momment of weakness from Shirshan; while victorious Shirshan would be experiencing a much worse situation than before the war, too deep in debts to look for new fights. The giant's had little to be taken, and that little would still be on their own lands, protected by Oultlandish giants.

Lutianen was not a aliance to be even considered according to the Panuin. The Insular City was too far away, the Merchant Caste on Alkavalla had already presented some arguments in favor of that option, but no one else took the idea seriously.

To me, and to my city, the best possible ending for this fight was the Panuin's victory. Lutianen needed time to enter war. In part that delay was my fault, if I had transmitted the information I had to Fergus by now Lutianen would be sure about the mage's disappearance. However, I wasn't as convinced about my degree of responsability by now. The lack of information was a problem, yes, that would make the risk look worse that it really is, but would still be a acceptable risk in the eyes of most warriors.

Our king, Cerrival, was frequently accused to be a spineless idiot by his own soldiers. Still, he had chosen to move half of our true mages and most of our warships to outside as near to the conflict and possible. If all that effort was a desperate attempt to prove to Lutianen that he is not as spineless as they think would be a terrible to lost to him if Lutianen lose the windom of oppotunity created by the problems among the mages of Shirshan, because someone lacked the guts to take risk. This war is a matter or life or death for the king, Lutianen could even lose it and forgive him, but would not accept too much hesitation: by now Cerrival has to know that!

\_What happens if both die?

\_What?

Hicairi repeated the question. I was obviously too distracted to consider that possibility. But the Panuin had mentioned it to me. Being a woman she was excluded from conversations as serious as that. Being a outsider I should not be included either but for some reason, or for no reason at all, the Panuin decided to ask for my presence, and explain to me what was happening.

\_If they both die in the fight the Silent Climbers will not have a Panuin to lead them and will not have anyone to speak for them on Alkavalla. The tribe's Maothi will lead the tribe and organise the Ritual of Challenge to choose the next Panuin, would be worse if they didn't had a Maothi, them the tribe would have to survive whit no leader until someone make a "legendary feat", acceptable as such by all hunters.

\_I saw the Maothi, she seems to be a powerfull woman, but a bit insane. Maybe is just impersonation, most wild sigraxes like to look mad in the eyes of their tribes, it fits the expectation I suppose. Are all Maothi women?

\_Quite the opposite, the women are almost never chosen to be trained and become sigraxes, and only a sigrax can be tested to become the tribe Maothi. The former Maothi has chosen his daughter to succeed him, not without resistance from his people. Now she is a powerful and respected high priest, so he probably made a good choice.

\_The barbarian women say that she had some sort of amourette with your friend, the Panuin, long time ago. When they still used personal names.

\_I was not aware. You think that can influence the result of this fight somehow?

\_Maybe, maybe not. Magic is not supposed to be used on the fight, I can't imagine how it would be possible if one fighter was a sigrax but since they both are just alchemists that should be easy. I understand the ungnue is here to see that all rules are respected, to be able to detect the use of Xar he has to be a sigrax himself.

\_I don't think he came to arbitrate. I believe he is here just to see what happens so he can tell it to his people.

\_What you think about the fight itself? You think Lutianen will be better if both die, or what?

\_I am not sure about the Maothi's intent. All I know is that the challenger's name is Sorribe, and that he strongly supports an alliance between Alkavalla and Zaiaz. Therefore the best ending for our city would be Panuin's victory.

\_I will try to talk with the Maothi, maybe I can find out a little more about this situation.

That was the first time Hicairi was taking initiative to help our cause since we met. I was happy to see that, she is, after all, as citizen of Lutianen as I am. More so, maybe, since she has been a citizen of Lutianen from the day she was born while I was adopted as an adult.

To be honest, between iapis and giant hunters she had little chance to help up to this moment.

About the fight I could not do anything, but I could look for a way to leave the village in one piece if the Panuin died. We were here invited by this Panuin; I had no reason to feel optimistic about how Sorribe, becoming the new Panuin, would deal with us.

There was no chance that we could escape the forest men running through their forest. A little less chance than that that any Silent Climber would betray his Panuin to help our escape. As for the visitors from other tribes, I was not so sure they could help even if they wanted.

The Maothi probably could help us, if she wanted: the Panuin has authority to go against the Maothi and disallow her if he chooses to, but if Earth's History can be trusted as a paradigm here then going against his people's spiritual leader must cost a lot for any leader and even more for one who was raised to power only moments before the confrontation. However, the Maothi was on Hicairi's plate now.

Only one other person here was probably able to take Hicairi and me from this village and deliver us both on Alkavalla against the Panuin's wishes.

The ungnuie was standing alone, smoking, near to the entrance of the building here the fight was supposed to happen. His presence was not a frequent event, but was familiar enough to cause little curiosity. Except for the children no one else was interested on him, and the children would not came close or stay long enough to be a problem for me.

\_I would like to speak with you, if possible. My name is Altair of Lutianen.

\_The tool.\_ answered him in a deep and emotionless voice.

\_Well, yes, I suppose. And you, on the other hand, are of course the diplomat.

\_I have a message for you.

\_Are you sure the message is for me? I did not expected to be here today.

\_The Seed of Extinction is in the well bellow the the Ring of Immortality. You must destroy it.

\_Thank you! I will take that under consideration, yes; please, tell the the person who sent the message that I am grateful. Taking advantage of the opportunity, since we are already in the same page here, let me ask: you will be going back to Alkavalla soon?

\_Yes.

\_Is the person who sended that message to my up there, on Alkavalla?

\_Yes.

\_So, after the ritual, would be possible for you to help me to reach this person? I mean, go to were this person is.

\_No.

\_All right, maybe you could help me to reach Alkavalla and, after that, I can I find the person myself.

\_No.

\_May I ask why not?

\_I am the one who talks.

\_Of course, I see your point. Let me ask you, what you think about that war?

\_Inconsequential.

\_Inconsequential? Could it not affect your city?

\_It can, still, it does not matter.

I was not expecting that opinion about this particular subject. Not from a high spokesman of this same city. The ungnuie's diplomacy seemed eccentric. Albeit, I never studied diplomacy myself: maybe that is the normal way to think on this field.

\_You believe the alianse with the giants would be a good thing for Alkavalla?

\_It is inconsequential, Altair. You would like to talk about an alliance between Lutianen and Alkavalla, my people will accept what the hunters decide about that: giants, Shirshan, Lutianen, neutrality, or some other option. However, today you do not seek an alliance for your city, that argument intend only to convince me to take you and your captive to Alkavalla. You are worried about what can happen to you both if the younger hunter wins.

The way he stepped out his enigmatic character was amazing. I wanted to ask if he had actually just changed his state of perception from plant mode to human normality or was misleading me up to that momment for fun. However, I had a more pressing subject to raise.

\_Be dead could jeopardize my efficiency as a took, I imagine.

\_Yes.

\_Would you help us, if necessary?

\_Go against the Panuin's will, is, ... not my place. Maybe you should do something to help the older hunter.

\_I don't think that would be acceptable by their rules, matter of honor and all. Be caught trying to cheat does not seems a valid way to leave this forest alive.

The plant-man smoked for some time. I waited.

\_Cheat in the Challenge Ritual is a dangerous thing to do, yes. One should not do that.

Having said that, the ungnuie moved away, and I understood that our conversation was finished.

Someone was trying to cheat in the fight, in order to help the younger hunter. That if the ungnuie was not mistaken, or lying, and if I had understood correctly his unspoken words.

## 15 - Unexpected Offer

During this brief time in their village we learned a little about the forest people. Their ancestors came to Sharitarn during the previous cycle of the vortex. They have been on this Universe for just a little longer than people who came from my home planet, Earth. Humans from Earth have been brought by the vortex since about 700 years ago, more or less 1430, but before that some have already been caught. The forest people and others from their home planet have been brought more frequently since 1200, give or take. That feels much longer to them, because their is shorter than ours.

Forest people did not evolve naturally. They have been built as soldiers by a society strongly based on Genetic Engineering, about 50 other "Products" came to Shritarn as is, but only they have built an independent society with their own culture.

If their historical data can be trusted their original society was androcratic, male dominant, about as much as humanity here is. That did not surprise anyone here, because it is the normal way for humans and other talking mammals, or so their scholars say based on the History of Involuntary Immigration. Planets like mine, where women have all political power and dictate the rules for men, are a rare exception. So far no egalitarian humanity came from any other Universe, seems to be impossible (even with powerful magic and/or Genetic Engineering) to achieve that goal, despite the fact that it is so attractive to me at very least from an abstract point of view.

Sadly, I was too concerned with a more pressing issue to reach Alkavalla alive to pay the attention I would have, if the circumstances were less distracting.

"Who is this Sorribe fellow?" I asked, as casually as possible.

Missopi looked at me as if I had asked for his bank security password.

"I like you, Missopi, I'm happy to welcome you here, and to learn more about the insane women and the white-livered man who live on planet Earth. However, I must warn you: do not get too close to our affairs, the Challenge Ritual is sacred: consider your words carefully, if you must ask anything about it.

The reaction took me by surprise. Up to this point they had been all very relaxed in my presence. Missopi more than most.

"Well, your beloved friend and leader invited me to accompany your group to Alkavalla, and in the first stop I am told that my life is in risk because he may be killed in a fight for succession and the new leader may not keep the more basic rule of hospitality: "do not eat your guests"! Under circumstances like that, I believe my right to ask about that Challenge Ritual, no matter how secret it is!!

"I can understand your frustration, Altair. You don't have to worry, the Panuin is a great fighter, he will win.

"About half of the Silent Climbers here disagree, if I understand it well.

\_ They do. You may have a point...: ask me your questions and I will tell you as much as I can.

\_Any man can challenge the Panuin and take his place? You, for instance.

Still not enthusiastically Missopi kept his promise.

\_One has to earn the trust of many first, and the respect of all: the insults you saw when we arrived are about that. Without support would be suicide to raise the challenge because the Panuin isn't supposed to accept that unless the one who challenges has the trust of many in the tribe. He also must be someone really trustworthy: strong, intelligent, and someone who would never place his own interest above the tribe.

I am a good hunter, better than most, but I am not that good: the Panuin would reject the challenge and punish me for making it. Would be an insult for our tribe and gods if he did anything different.

\_So, the Panuin has the last word about who is trustworthy enough to challenge him !?

\_The Panuin says the last word about that, as he does about everything, but he does not have that word. We all knew Sorribe's challenge would have to be accepted: what no one knew was the moment when he would choose to raise that challenge. Some Climbers say he would be a better Panuin, some say he would be worse; but no Silent Climber says he isn't good enough to be tested.

\_What makes the young man better than, for instance, you ?

\_You would have to be a forest man to understand the answer for that question. However, if you were one you wouldn't have to ask. I followed him on battle some times, against other tribes and against pirates: he isn't as clever as the Panuin, he still needs to learn patience, but he is solid. I will follow his judgement as Panuin as I follow our current Panuin.

\_You say you followed him in battle, but you are much older than him. How he achieved such position that fast?

\_As I told you before: that is something you must know to understand, can't be explained. He is a leader, I am a trustworthy second in command. That's how it is. I could not be a leader, all I can do is replace a leader when needed and up to the moment a new leader became available: that is all I want, and the tribe ask me no more. He was a second in command for a brief period of time, but that is not the right position to him and his band fellows saw that.

\_What you think will change, if Sorribe became the Panuin?

\_You will die, of course. Your slave-maggot who still poses as "free woman" by your insistence will stay free, unfortunately. He will send her to Zaiaz as a gift, to be used in some political bargain. The giant king clearly needs this Hicairi for some secret purpose, and slaves are useless as diplomatic coin.

\_ You would kill me?

\_Of course I will !! We are all curious about your taste, the Panuin himself keeps talking about how unusual your powers are, for a urban sigrax. You are his guest, and he would never violate that bond, unless you violate it first, but he is as curious about how your magic will affect the taste of your meat as I am.

Not the answer I was expecting. Seemed a good idea to change the subject back to less personal field.

\_ Sorribe will enter the war, I understand. What else?

\_ The Silent Climbers will not enter the war alone. The new Panuin will bring the matter to the Inner Circle on Alkavalla. The tribes will decide the matter up there.

\_The plant people don't care about what will happen?

As I understood\_ and "understood" may be a word too strong here\_ the plant people, called ungnuie, have as much power on Alkavalla and the forest around it as the forest people does. They are the main reason why the forest people have been capable to stablish a society on this world independent of native humanity. Also, independent of the eugenic civilization they belonged to before the vortex. Forest people and Plant people made an alliance since the first carnivore soldiers reached this forest, no one can explain why the ungnuie welcomed the newcomers; they had only one alliance before that, and since their allies became extincts in a great war the plant people had decided to kill any talking animal who dared to enter their domains.

The ungnuie are no more native from this planet than the forest people but they have been on Sharitarn for a long time. They seems to have some advantages, mysterious powers they only use in extreme situations, and a high level of resistance against talking animal's spells. Also, they seems to be almost indestructible.

Having all that advantages is hard to imagine what they need the forest people for. Even so, they seems to follow the short lived hunters almost every time.

\_The ungnuie see things from a diferent point, both races share power equally on Alkavalla, but the ung almost never vote. They support our tribes, accept our ideas, fight for our common home, ask for very little. On the other hand, when they talk we listen and if; when, they choose to make peace or to rise up for battle, we don't ask why. They have our support, accumulated, centuries of it, to invest in what they feel like. Without need to explain their reasons to us.

\_Seems a good free companionship!\_ said Hicairi, who had just arrived.

\_It is good friendship.\_ disagreed Missopi \_ We share a house, they have their families, we have ours.

Hicairi seemed to have something to talk about, that she wanted to keep private. I followed the Mage Caste Lady, sigrax's daughter, to a walk in the woods.

\_I learned more about the Maothis.

\_ Not her culinary taste, I hope.

\_What?!? Because since I am a woman the only thing I would care about would be culinary...? You don't want to know her opinions about party decoration either, I suppose ?

\_ I'm sorry! No, no! I am deeply, I am sorry, I...

She was mocking me, I realized a little too late.

\_There is a couple of Maothi in this tribe, what is even more rare than a female Maothi: their tribes consider themselves lucky if they have one sigrax priest. She is older than him, more or less the same age as the Panuin. The Maothi man was educated by her. She, as I told you before, used to be Panuin's friend/lover before he became the Panuin. Before she became Maothi as well. Now there is no love between the Maothi couple and their Panuin. That was over even before the war started, if it was not Zaiaz's War against Shirshan would be something else: they had been looking for an excuse to destroy each other for a long time.

\_The Maothi couple support Sorribe, if I understand you, not just because they have the same view about an alliance with the giants. They support the new Panuin because they don't like the current one.

\_They can not openly "support" a new Panuin, as a Panuin can not openly "suggest" who a Maothi should take for apprentice. But yes. There is no secret about that "not openly" manifested preferences.

However, the Maothi may not share Sorribe's sympathy for Zaiaz. To her free the tribe from a weak Panuin is the most important thing. I believe she would consider even Lutianen as a possible ally if that idea was supported by reasonable enough arguments, as long as that does not keep the current Panuin alive.

\_ You think that's possible?

\_Possible. Not easy, not likely, but yes: possible.

You will accuse me to be selfish, but my first priority was still not to be eaten in the near future. Even so, I had to try help my city in this war if that was a possibility. Not long before I turned my back to Lutianen, left an important mission to save Hicairi. Without Lutianen I had no home on this planet, and that is a planet where not having a home makes life dangerous.

Not to mention the gratitude I should feel, Lutianen had welcomed me when I was naked (literally) and defenseless. It taught me magic and made me a person capable to deal with that World as a civilized free citizen.

\_You asked the Maothi about? She mentioned the idea or you did?

\_According to my father the best way to start a conversation with a sigrax is by asking something about magic. He says that a rare magical problem will open more doors than bribery among you. Therefore, I did not start talking about war alliances.

\_So, which magical problem you used to pick her curiosity?

The answer to my question should have been obvious to me. I have told Hicairi about my difficulties with spells. Since I couldn't even do simple things, like set fire in moist wood or create clean water, I had little chance to keep my problematic situation secret from her.

When we first met I fought her father, a competent sigrax who follows the Creation Way. Back then I had my magical powers working as they are supposed to, and the fight ended on a tie.

To be a bit more fair, I would have lost and died if we had not agreed on a middle ground between our goals that day. He had a magical glove and a magical ax, and I was using only my personal Xar and my good fortune. He is a well trained Creator, which means he follows a magical Way very usefull on battle ground. I have made a less prudent choice. Even more so for someone who always intended to travel throught lands without law, on a dangerou World were civilized people kill each other on duels every day on the most peaceful and legalistic nations.

My luck was that Hicairi's father did not knew how bad my position was. The same decision that make me less strong than most sigraxes also make harder to define how much magical power I actually have: I can bluff better than I can fight. Or at least I could. Now, If I had to fight Duegdar again with my Xar as it was on Silent Climber's forest, Hicairi's father would have no trouble to kill me on his first attack.

Tell the Maothis about the situation when I neither understant it myself nor trust them would not have been my choice. Even so, I could understand why Hicairi decided to put me on that uncomfortable position. She probably saw the wild sigraxes as my best hope for help.

The Maothi are all sigraxes. Alread trained as such before they can became priests. Probably competent ones since they have been chosen to gide their tribe on magical matters as much as on religious ones.

Besides, ask for their oppinion about my magical problem was a valid way to get the Maothi couple's attention. Curiosity about magical conundrums is a powerful motivation for any sigrax, wild or civilized. I suspect the true mages are just as curious as we are, is hard to know for sure since they do not share much their thoughts with "false mages" like us. Also because their magical conundrums have the habit to be above our heads, by far.

I accepted the meeting set by Hicairi between me and the Maothis. When I heache their home only the young priest was present.

The Maothi man is a tall fellow, not as muscular as Sorribe but still look to be much stronger than the average man around here. Forest people is far from weak, but they seems to be mostly thin. More leopards than lions. Sorribe is a extreme case of muscular hypertrophy, I am not sure if it comes from a diferent lineage of forest man, or from some great giant grandmother captured by his great grandfather to be used as sex slave. What ever it is, as far as I can tell, he look like a "pure blood" forest man. The Maothi man is another case, he is clearly half-breed.

The subject must be frequent among the Silent Climbers, since he brought it to our conversation a little after Hicairi introduce us.

\_Yes, I don't exactly look like most Climbers. My mother is from Earth. Same planet you came from, I believe?

\_You are correct. Where she was born?

\_Some place called New Valdiva, a city under Earth ocean. Have you heard about?

\_I have visited it, actually. Near to America, which is the same Continent where I was born. Your mother's city was builded by a people called Chilleans, not far from the Valdiva. Has a transparent dome above it, similar to the dome above the two cities on Mars. There is about 1mi between the dome above valdiva and the surface of ocean. Your mother told you all that, I suppose ?

He smiled a bit uneasily.

\_My childhood was full of stories about things like that: cities on other planets, ships flying, planetary tyranny, atheism, fast-foods...

\_Well, I would not call "tyranny", but as for the rest that is more or less the world I came from.

\_Nine on each ten men living on state pension, doing nothing usefull for their tribes?

\_They do not actually have tribes, to be exact.

\_Feel like if I could stay and talk with you during days about that 'Earth' of yours, and I which you had the time to visit my mother on Alkavalla. However, Altair, we must go to a sacret place, where my free companion has a ritual prepared to estimate how serious your Xar "short circuit" is. Can you tell me a bit about what is happening between you and the Xar, in the way?

I did my best to explain the situation, without mention anything important to the war, or which could harm the best interest of Lutianen.

We took the raft, and walked back to the ruins I had seem before reach the village with the Panuin and his men, just us both. He guided me to a large building almost entirely buried, we had to enter by what once had been a dome, it was still made of gree stone much like jade and still howding despite the long time. Some parts of it had colapsed, and huge roots entered from that holes creating strange sculptures which reached the ground bellow and penetrated it. We used one of such roots as a stair to reach the ground, and walked from there to a stone chapel where the Maothi women was preparing some sort of ritual.

The Maothi is a mature woman. Like her free companion and many other Silent Climbers she has the body covered on tatoos, and more than a few scars. Despite the scars she stay very attractive. Her posture and the look on her eye remember me an director of art from my home world, another powerful assertive women. I had to deal with her on Earth, as a client; was neither a easy nor a pleasant experience, but once the first contact was made end it seemed just too complicated\_ not to mention

dangerous.

I expected more questions about my magical condition, or a “nice to meet you” of some sort. Instead, she told me to give my sword and gear to her free companion, take my clothes, and pointed a block of stone. “Lie down”, she told me.

Probably I should have asked what she intended to do. Or at least I should have taken some time to walk around the stone table and investigate the place. But there is something about “assertive” women, something we males who grew on Earth felt obligated to obey without hesitation.

The stone was cold in this place never reached by the sun. However, it became hot suddenly. Almost at same time, I noticed that I wasn’t able to move.

\_Zaiaz want he alive, does he not? \_ asked the Maothi man. I could not see the couple.

\_Not really, his spoiled son does. But I could’t care less about Zebula’s vengeance. To keep this one alive without know for sure what he is would be a danger I don’t need to have.

\_ He is a ii from Earth my love, that much I am sure about.

\_Maybe, but he is a magical creature of some sort as well. Can be a sigrax as he claim, can be something else. Any way, to me he is now a potential problem, which will soon be transformed in another source of Xar for our temple: and after that in a nice stew.

\_Should I draw the signs on him ?

\_Not this time, the giants and our men will be here at any time. You must be available to deal with them, I will do the ritual alone. Where is the girl ?

\_Will be here any minute. Our hunters have orders to take her from the village without use force, if possible.

\_I told you to bring the nasty thing with you !

\_Panuin’s men were watching our house. He know who she is, I decided to avoid confrontation. He will die soon then we will be free to give her to the giant.

\_That’s not what he is expecting. We should deliver her today!!

\_I’m sorry, I can go back at night, and...

\_No, what is done is done. They will have to accept that change in plans. She asked anything about our plans for him?

\_She only care about our promise to take her safely to Micula.

What they had spoken before was hard to believe, but not absurd. That last phrase on the other hand

made no sense to me: why would Hicairi have any desire to reach Micula?

Micula is a large and powerful city on the other side of the Continent. The usual way to reach it from here is to travel the Sorrowfull, and turn left after leave it's waters. Like any other human city on this World it slave any women who step it's streets and isn't a citizen, unless she is protected in some way. If Hicairi has a free companion on Micula, maybe that could explain why she feels that could be now a more safe place than a Lutianen in war, but that possibility seems a distant one. She was captured in Lutianen, or near to it: a woman is supposed to stay near to her free companion. On Lutianen she must sleep in his home, I don't know how it work on Micula but I doubt it is that different.

\_Stupid brat !! She really believe we would loose that chance to please Zaiaz just to give her what she want. Am I the only intelligent woman on this World ??

\_You know why she is so important to him?

\_I do. But let's talk about that later, I heard something outside. Probably our friends.

\_I wish I could hear as well as you do.

\_Blame your slavish mother! Is your inferior blood what make you unable to, my pretty mongrel.

He left. She came closer, and I was able to see the knife on her hand.

Once more I tried to move. Seem my effort, she laughed.

\_The magic holding you is old and powerful. Other things, much more capable than you, have been unable to escape the frog people's invisible chains.

I could not even speak, but she was doing that for us both. My good education would have prevented my from interrupt a woman even if I was not being hold by magic, under most circumstances. However, I like to think that would not have been one of such circumstances.

\_ You are even more stupid than your living cargo, sigrax! The chance to be a true mage was given to you, for free, and you lost it: for that I hate you, and all your kind. "Civilized sigraxes", all arrogant and lazy pafixes: sleeping, eating, and noting else. You are no better than pleasure slave girls !!!

That was not the best discourse I ever heard, honestly. However, was not the worse either. People on videogame industry on Earth like to make their characters give moral lessons in words when they can't pass the moral teachings they feel necessary in their actions. That's far too frequent, and you know how boring moral lessons are when one delivered by words, but working for that industry one can't avoid to play the games from time to time.

Still, I could hope for better words for my last moments alive.

Probably she saw the critic look on my eyes. Because she started her work, drawing something on my naked chest with the point of her knife.

\_ If was not for that war I would never have the chance to get what was given to you what you first stepped Black Centaur Castle, ii. Now, thanks to Zaiaz, I may became the first from my people to became a true mage! Once he take Shirshan, I will move to Glass Viper and learn the Mage's Brotherhood secrets. That's why I am doing this, that's why I must make my people join the war against Shirshan.

Her knife began to shine. The glow became stronguer as she cut more simbols on me. After go all way down, up to me feet, she came back and started with my face. Now I could see the pointed teeth inside her mouth, reflecting the lighth. The cuts on my cheast became deeper.

\_It's not selfish! I don't do that for myself !! You think about how important will be for my tribe, for Alkavalla, and for all forest man, to have a true mage speaking for them in the Mage's Brotherhood.

The Maothi stopped for a moment.

\_You have been a good listener. Unfortunately that's the point when I must start the canticled to raise the power from the magical source bellow this stones.

She sang, and I felt the power raising, taking the air and the stone. I was covered in blood, the table surface was red, and that fluid was flowing to the ground. The woman danced around me, her mover were beautiful and precise.

The she stopped, hands above her head as if she intended to plunge her weapon deep in my heart.

I felt pain in my fist, she was on the ground. Her knife yards distant.

Somehow I was free to move again. Without think about I gave a puch on her face, her theets cut me. I jumped to the ground, still too confuse to assimilate the fact that I had punched a woman.

Never before I dared to even dream about raise my hands to a woman! Kill men was always a thing I could think about, even on Earth. But punch a woman was, just imagine that was..., was unforgivable.

Notwithstanding all my education as a child, when I realised what I have done, part of me felt pretty good about it.

However, at same time, the ground and the walls began to tremble, and the first thought in my mind was to blame the desecration of a woman's face by the earthquake.

The floor itself exploded, and we both saw ourselves throw in the air. A huge monster with four arms, two eagla wings, and a tentacles were his face should be, was turned to a door I hadn't saw before. From up there giants and forest men run, on his direction.

\_The demon has escaped!!\_ One amough the Maothi'a men cried.

The actuall word used by the man was not something one could transtale as "demon". Howerer, explain it's actual meaning would take a entire book, and the explanation is uncessary to that story.

They tried to reach the 'demon', but their moves became strange, as if the air around them had the consistency of oil.

The creature's low body was still below the ground, and it was taller than the giants in the temple. One giant vomited a swarm of insects on the monster: a giant's spell. He was a sigrax.

The monster's head was covered by this dark cloud, but it ignored the attack and made a magical gesture. Gelatinous tentacles sprouted from the ground to attack his enemies. Two were blue, but two became red after impaling forest man.

The fight was lost, the sigrax giant decided to escape. The Maothi man wasn't with him anymore, he has taken his free companion in the arms and was climbing the tree from where we came. The monster had no legs, his low body was now free from the ground and it looked like a snake.

Looking around it saw me, I was the nearest person alive. Still too confused, and weak, to run.

The 'demon' came on my direction. I got up, naked. Thanks to my good luck I had been able to reach the sacrificial knife and was not interely defenceless: "at least it is a magical weapon" I told to myself.

\_You intend to use that?\_ asked the monster in a baritone's voice. Mocking me.

\_Only if I have to.

\_In that case, before we decide our next moves, tell me: where are the Lords of this temple?

\_They just escaped by that hole in the ceiling.

\_I'm talking about the true Lords of this city. The ones who imprisoned me to feed their weak spells.

\_If you are talking about the frog people, they are gone. Extinct a long time ago. Or so I was told.

\_What about their allies? The ones who drink sunlight.

\_They still exist, but are distant from here. There is no city outside, not anymore. The ungnuie have new allies and a city near to the Sorrowful river.

\_ "Ugnuie", yes, that's the name. What river?

\_It is the Strait between that Continent and the one at North. You must have known it.

\_No, I haven't. Probably it's new. Are you an ungnuie's ally.

\_I have no grudge against them. My city would like to make an alliance with theirs. Right now, no. There is no alliance between them and me.

\_You know who I am?

\_No.

\_You know what I am? Have you seen others like me?

\_No, I haven't. I'm sorry.

\_Have you decided if you want to fight me, human?

I looked the thing once more. His wings covered the sight of the chapel behind him, his hands had no claws but any of them had the size of a golf car. I considered the matter, very carefully.

## 16 - Rules and Exceptions

I punched a girl, and I liked.

Funny how memory work! What I mean by funny is: that day I met a half-blood forest man who told me about his mother, a Chilean from my home World born and raised on a gorgeous city were I had passed a month having fun after finish a nice contract. I met not one but two wild sigraxes, including the first women sigrax I ever met, who by the way also is the second Mage Caste women\_ or would be if she had a Caste instead of being wild\_ I saw (since I already knew Piol). Also that day I was betrayed by Hicairi, cut several time by a sacrificial knife, almost died not once but twice. All that happened that day, every event seemed important when I was living it (the “almost die” part particularly).

I was involved in all that but as the time passes, memory fades, the thing which still feels important is that puch. That was the life changing experience to me, before anything else.

Not that I could ignore the lovecraftian fellow who talked to me. Or completly forget him.

\_Have you decided if you want to fight me, human? \_ the giant monster asked.

I looked the thing once more. His wings covered the sight of the chapel behind him, his four hands had no claws but any of them had the size of a golf car. I considered the matter, carefully.

Facing the place were his eyes would be if he had any, I answered his question as fearlessly as possible:

\_If is all the same to you, I would prefer not to fight.\_ I am not sure if my voice then, inside that temple, sounded as strong, casual, and firm as it sounded just now inside your head. Since we never will know, assume that's how it did.

\_That's acceptable. I am free thanks to you, therefore would not make me happy to fight you. Even if no gratitude is due. Your blood destroyed my prision by accident, I think. They took it from you against your will, looks like, and they did it here because they did not knew your power.

\_You are correct. To be honest I don't know the power in question myself. From what happened here I would say it has something to do with Antimagic.

\_What you came here for, today?

\_That's a long story.

\_ That's a bad place for long stories, I wan't to leave as soon as possible. The World clearly has changed allot since I last saw it. I would welcome a general explanation about what is happening now. Will you help me with that?

\_Before I answer that, I would like to know a bit more about you. There is a subject I must deal with as well, and that must be addressed with some urgency.

\_Let's leave this city before. The we see if a accord between our intersts is possible.

\_I agree, we can talk somewere else. Even if, as I told you before, there is no city outside this building.

The panorama outside paused the monster for a momment. That was the only visible signal that he was deeply touched by the scene. His "face" was a impossible to read, being no more than a large number of tentacles.

His wings faded with his giant body a little after we left the building. Standing at my side was a strong man a bit smaller and older than myself, dressed exactly as I was. Only his voice was the same That had a distinct density, beyond what is possible for a human. Still, he was less conspicuous now.

By then I did not knew the existence of magical spells capable to transform the shape of people, making someone a complete diferent specie . When I met human sigraxes capable to such feat I felt very disapointed, because their power was much less impressive than what I saw that day. To a human sigrax transform himself on, for instance, a zudras take him a entire day of ritual. Is possible to reverse the process in minutes, but dangerou to leave the decicion about when to do that to by made when you are transformed.

Being a zudras you only have the central nervous system of a zudras, and that isn't capable to deal with words; without words it can't control memory as humans can, and without control your memories is hard to make your body in animal form do the things you need it to do. Magic help the sigrax to deal with the problem, but only up to a point, it does not solve the problem for him.

The monster's mind did not seemed to change with his body. I am not sure if he was using Xar to shapeshift of if that is a natural hability his specie is born with. A giant can learn how to make his body invisible, reduce its size, make it look like stone, after a certain age some giants can communicate thoughts at distance and after that they can learn to move objects without touch them: such giant capacities aren't magic as the Magical Castes understand it, even looking very much like magic for me. Maybe the monster's capacity to adopt the form of a inferior specie was natural in the same sense giant powers are.

He wanted to be called Zagdon, it was not his original name but was the first name used by humans to refer him. Zagdon of Nohere needed information to speed the process of find out by magic whatever he needed to find out. In exchange for that information he found Hicairi using her image in my mind, and teleported us to were she was.

Up to that momment teleportation had been more a legend than a fact to me, some long lost magical Way, perhaps. The experience does not feel like be caught by the vortex, I must say.

The vortex pulls you like a swirl above your head would, to drop you a momment later on another Universe. Being teleported feels like awake from a dream, the place you just left seems unreal for a momment. Untill you look around and remember were you was, what you has doing, and how you traveled from were you was to were you are now.

The daughter of Duegdar was being conducted by forest men, she was dressed like a silent climber man and seemed to be accompanying the group willingly. We followed the group for a short time, 22 hunters well armed they were. More than I could possibly take care of by myself. The monster wasn't inclined to do the job for me, or with me, he seemed curious about what I would do next.

The giant sigrax from the temple was waiting the silent climbers Judging by her reaction that was not what Hicairi expected.

\_What is happen here? How they found us??

\_Shut up, stupid woman!\_ advised the forest man who seemed to be the leader\_ We have business to do with this giants, and you are the cargo to be delivered.

Other man overthrewed her, and used her own belt to bind her wrists. Since the high caste woman still protested he cut a piece of her clothes and improvised a gag using a small branche he found at hand. The process took less time than take to read that paragraph, and I was very impressed by how fast it happened.

The piece of clothe, a bit larger than necessary, was taken from her belly, exposin her naven and would have exposed her breasts if wasn't for the fabric compressing them. The hunter had cut this fabric, used to bind the breasts in order to make then less obvious. but he left a small point still conected . The fabric opened on a inverted V exposing her body inside the open shirt and attracting men eyes more than naked breasts would.

\_Well done! \_told him another hunter. However, the leader did not approved.

\_You forgot she is supposed to be treated like a free woman!?. Despite her behaviour obviously mark her as a slave who needs to be punished, we still must follow the Maothi's instructions.

\_ That's all right! \_ clarified the leader of the giants\_ As long you didn't brand the beautiful animal Zaiaz will raise no objection about how you treat it. Your man did well, she is better company like that.

By then I was surprised to still be hidden. The forest men normally should have found us before we get close enough to hear their words.

\_Don't worry about. You are not invisible, but they will not hear or smell us. As far as I can see no one around has magic powerful enough to penetrate my Illusion. \_ Zagdon answered before I ask.

\_I thank you for your help. Would be faster if you helped more directly, however.

\_Right now I have enough time.

\_Of corse you have\_ I pointed, more for my benefit than for his.

After they conclude the deal I followed Hicairi and the giants who now had her, avoiding the hunters. There was five giants, including the sigrax. During the meeting they all was about 2.5 ft tall, after that

they let themselves grow back to their true size. Some giants are able to reduce their size, as you know, but do that take effort from them and the smaller size is hard to keep.

I was able to see the leader's 9 ft, but I knew his true size from the fight inside the temple. The others had between 3 and 5 ft. I was hoping to avoid confrontation, steal the girl in the middle of night seemed like a good plan. Unfortunately to me they had big lizards faster than horses to ride, the same kind of animal I had seem being used by the Zaiaz's son before I knew the person hunting us is a giant prince.

At any cost I had to free Hicairi before they reach their animals. If they escaped I would never see the woman again. For some reason that possibility was not acceptable to me.

Counting with the element of surprise I jumped from the woods, run to the giant who was carrying Hicairi on his shoulder, stabbed his knee, and carried the Lady.

Three steps later my leg was caught and a giant truck the ground and the nearest tree with my body, as a child sometimes strike things with a doll. I lost my senses.

When I woke up I was in pain, some things were broken inside me and my pride wasn't the most painful among them. I was bound behind a lizard saddle, facing the woods behind us. The animal was running fast.

Someone was chasing my captors.

A larger group of giants, on similar animals, surrounded king Zaiaz's men. Fight was brief. The animal I was bounded to was killed, it's rider had the same fate just after. Once more the sigrax escaped, but lost most his men. His enemies made one prisoner and killed two other.

I looked for Zagdon, but the monster wasn't there, or at least wasn't visible.

The winners healed me enough to answer his questioning. The sigrax among them, who performed the healing spell, was intrigued by what he found inside me when he was doing his work. However, his boss had other interests and assumed the interrogatory. I had questions of my own, but they had to wait since I was the prisoner.

After I present myself as a spy from Lutianen the giant leader became more friendly.

\_If your story is true, we have the same enemy. \_he told me.

\_According to my sources, Zaiaz is the king of most giant tribes except three. The ones which refused to join his war became neutral, did not count themselves as enemies. You and your group are some sort of freedom fighters ?

He seemed amused by my question.

\_Your information smells worse than you, fellow. My tribal chief is in war against Zaiaz since your city still had three kings, before that time actually. The so called "king" has killed all his male children, and slaved his six daughters. In retribution our chief killed all Zaiaz's sons but one, and slaved all his three daughters. We will all be hunted and killed if Zaiaz manage to prevail over Shirshan.

\_That's a good news to me. Lutianen intend to take Shirshan, and for what I know about them I doubt the archmages of Lutianen will easilly settle for share it with Zaiaz. Or with any one else, for that matter.

\_Your city made a first move already, not against Green Poison but against Zaiaz's forces.

\_I was not aware.

\_Zaiaz sended the weaker tribe among his seven suporters to take Shirshan's port. They succeeded. After that Lutianen sended a few ships to that port, one of them with a few mages inside, five is my informants on Timurda are correct.

\_ They took the Port\_ I concluded. Five true mages against one weak tribe of giants, math was simple.

\_Almost. They made a dense poison mist, and killed all giants or half giants on the port or near to it without affect the humans. However, before the ships of Lutianen could move several ships from Shirshan which had been hiding behind the Sorrowfull Islands since the war started attacked. Was a suicide attack, taking advantage of the true mage's concentration for their ritual, but hey destroyed the ships from your city. All men died, including the five true mages.

I was shocked by the news. Five true mages lost was very bad for any city, and to loose that and achieve nothing in return was even worse.

\_After that your archmage advanced from Guadlu to Timurda. We expect some retaliation against Shirshan soon.

There was a important question to be made, about that.

\_Who was the archmage moved to Timurda? We have three.

\_That I don't know.

\_Your chief probably do, and if not he should find out. If Bindhai left Lutianen Shirshan is doomed, and I would keep my soldiers as far from it as possible it I was your chief until that war end: he is the more powerful archmage on the city and know for his sanguinolency. On the other hand if the one on Timurda is Faengor we can count with a long war, were Lutianen will invest as little as possible to achieve victory. lallomir is unpredictable, he is know as a genius, and is far younger than the other two. Many people say lallomir does not have enough experience to be archmage, but he do have the power to deserve the status.

\_You share sensible about your city power more freely than I would expect for a spy, Altair.

\_I do that because you just saved myself, and because your chief may find use to that information against a enemy of Lutianen. Besides, I didn't told you anything your people can not find out placing a spy on our streets, or buying information from Alkavalla's merchants.

\_That's true. Who is the woman we captured with you?

\_Is her well?

\_She is alive, I will let you talk to her after she answer my questions.

He would not, of course, let his three prisoners see each other before interrogate each one alone. A wise precaution.

\_Her name is Hicairi. She is the daughter of a Caste Brother, Duegdar. His father is a sigrax of Lutianen like myself, and a good friend! She had been kidnaped but not yet branded, I found her by accident and decided to carry her back to her father. The poor man has no one else, and is very attached to Hicairi.

My mystake was clear, he knew I was lying and did not tryed to hide that knowledge.

\_What part of what you just told me isn't true?

I did not insisted, I knew better. Either he had already talked with Hicairi, or he had Divination magic at his disposal. Whatever was the case, my better opition was to rectify my testimony as fast as possible.

\_Duegdar is a sigrax from Lutianen, and he is Hicairi's father, but he is not my friend. The only ocasion I encontered the man he challenged my to a duel and we almost killed each other. Everything else is true, as far as I know.

\_All right. You are a ii, aren't you?

\_The vortex brought me from Earth, yes.

\_That make your words belivable. Men from your Universe are know for make stupid things like that when women are involved.

Given the circunstances I decided the insult made for him was something I could live with.

\_What you intend to do with us?

\_Let you go, take your "friend's" daughter and leave. You will need a mount to reach the Silent Climber's territory before dark.

\_Thank you.

\_We have a common enemy. Kill as many Zaiaz's men as you can: that is gratitude enough. I found Hicairi nearby.

We did not spoke, and reached the ruins without incident. The Silent Climber surrounded us forcing the animal to stop.

\_He is the one! The outsider attacked our Maothi, and almost killed her !!\_ someone shout.

She was here, among the hunters.

The forced me to kneel in front of her. Half dozen spears touching my skinn.

\_You set a powerful demon, our enemy! You almost killed me in order to do so, when I was trying to help you!! You came to our village just to do all that, under false pretenses !!! \_ she cried out loud looking my face, then turned and spoke to her followers.

\_Our naive Panuin allowed that ! Thanks to him we lost magical power, and our most sacred temple was desecrated !! The Panuin must die !!!!!

Her last frase did not provoked the reaction she was expecting. Probably because the Panuin had arrived as she spoke it. The Maothi had lost that small detail. He came to our side, and the hunters keeping spears on me stepped back to open space for him.

The two leaders looked each other for a long time, then the woman sigrax stepped back. Her free companion came to her side, looking at the Panuin with fury. He ignored both and spoke to me.

\_ Did you attacked our Maothi?\_ he asked loud enough for the forest men's sensible hearing follow his words.

\_ Yes, I did that. \_ the crowd almost attacked, but the Panuin did not blinked.

\_Why?

\_She captured me by treachery and tried to kill me. I was defending myself.

\_Lie!!!\_ cried again the Maothi woman.

\_Even, 'if', she had done that: she is Maothi!!\_ interfered the Maothi man\_ The punishment for attack a Maothi would still death!!!

The Panuin smiled.

\_The punishment for try to kill a guest of our tribe without the Panuin's permission is also death! Maothi or not, no Silent Climber has the right to go against the laws of hospitality. No one in the tribe, except me can declare who is friend and who is enemy. Or has that changed ?

No one answered.

\_You will not be the Panuin for long !! \_ said the Maothi male, after a while.

At same time, another powerful figure arrived:

\_You can be right, Maothi! Even so, he is still alive. Until that change, what he says is the only law among us.

No one dared to challenge Sorribe's words. He was the one about to become the next Panuin, according to half the tribe. One among these men would die soon, and the other would be the Panuin after that. Both have agreed about my fate, therefore it was decided no matter what the Maothis had to say about the matter.

\_We will kill the Maothi, if you command us to do that.

The hunters' tension was obvious.

\_Never was any doubt about that in my heart, Sorribe. The Silent Climbers follow my will now, as they will follow your will soon after die from your hands! That, if you don't die by mine.

The crowd relaxed, and dispersed. The two Maothis stayed, with the Panuin, Sorribe, Hicairi and me.  
\_You will die, painfully, the day I become Panuin. I promise you !

That declaration did not surprise me. However, Panuin's reaction did.

\_What about the woman he carries with him?\_ he asked Sorribe\_ Will she be raped and branded, will she then be kept among your pleasure slaves. Or you will give her to your king as a proof of Silent Climber's submission?

Sorribe left without answer. The two Maothis did not stay for long after he left.

\_What have you done ? Who is the demon you set free in order to escape their trap? \_ asked the Panuin.

\_To be honest, I did not do such thing. My blood seems to have freed someone from your temple, but that was not my choice. They took the blood from me without ask: I neither knew it could break magical prisons nor knew the temple where I was had a captive inside.

\_Who was, Altair? Tell me his name or describe it for me, before I regret to have welcome as my guest...!

\_He wanted to be called Zagdon.

The Panuin didn't like the information.

\_That can be a catastrophe for Alkavalla. Zagdon is among the most powerful sources of power kept for the Old Ones. He will need time to recover from the long time in prison, but once he does he will seek revenge. Our allies, the Ungnuie, are the closest thing to an enemy he still has left and they may not be able to protect themselves.

\_One more reason to make a new alliance. Your people does not have true mages, but Lutianen has.

He smiled to me, a little bit tired.

\_ Lutianen is far from Alkavalla, and far from win the war against Shirshan. Besides, you should know: join a city with true mages in alliance is seldom is a good idea for a city unable to produce their own true mages.

\_All rules have exceptions.

\_Not all rules.

We walked together. After a while he spoke again, looking to Hicairi.

\_You know she is dangerous to you. She tried to kill you twice now, since I met you both.

She was about to speak, but gave up.

\_She gave me to the Maothis, yes, but she could not have know what they wanted to do with me. Also, she had strong reasons.

She seemed surprised by my trust on her motives.

\_What about before that?

\_That was the only time she did something against me.

\_No, that wasn't.

\_What are you talking about?

\_He is talking about the pafix. I let you to be eaten by one.

That was not what had happened. As far as I could see the facts.

\_You slept above it with me. We both could have died, you only escaped by accident.

The Panuin laughed. Hicairi could not bring herself to explain, then he did that.

\_Is possible to feel when a pafix is aboutt o attack, Altair. The smell change, the ground shiver a bit. A person with enough experience has more than enough time to raise and walk undisturbedly beyond it's reach before the attack. City people don't usually know that, but unlike most women who are citizens of a city, your "travel companion" here has long experience walking throught wild lands.

That new information made me feel demolished.

That conversation ended. Because I could not raise the obvious question: "why?"

When the pafix almost killed me we had escaped a battle againt he giants, she had escaped dead thanks to a old fellow we met who has some experience as a non mage physician, and we were alone in the forest. Does not matter were Hicairi wanted to go, if to Timurda as she told me and I assumed to be true, or to Micula. She had no reasonable chance to reach any city walking alone!

Micula is far more distant than Timurda. There is no need to cross the Sorrowfull River to reach it, but would still be very difficult for a small group of warriors to make the travel without loose anyone. Even if you abstract the natural dangers, a woman alone would have no chance do go far. Not on a World were women are natural slaves, and once out their nations can be slaved by anyone who sees them. Her only chance would be to find help very close, inside that jungle.

If Hicairi had that option, find help so close, she wouldn't have asked the Maothis transport direct to Micula.

She was with me, under my protection. I took every possible risk to keep her save after I rescue Hicairi from her captor. What reason she could have to let me behind and take her chances against a bet as disfavorable as that ??

Am I so monstrous that death or slavery are better than be in company?

\_ By the Ancien Wisdom, sigrax ! A few hours from now I will either die or kill one person who is almost a son to me, and you look like someone who has far problems far whorse than mine!! \_ said the Panuin, as a goodbye. He entered the colective home were he lived and I was left alone with my travel companion.

The fight between Sorribe and the Panuin would start midnight. There was time enough the necessary talk between Hicairi and me. That was a talk I was not looking forward.

Part of me wanted Sorribe's victory. The new Panuin would kill me as he had promised, and probably give Hicairi back to Zaiaz, to serve as coin in the diplomatic game between Zaiaz and Lutianen. What value she had, and why she had value at all to both cities, were questions that part of me was ready to die with.

\_We need to talk. \_ she said, before I could force me to say.

\_Let's...

The voice of Zagdon sounded strong inside my head, and I felt more gratitude for him than I have felt for Fergus when the former Red Salmon saved my live back on Lutianen. The lovercraftian monster was calling me to pay my part one our bargain. I should left the village and he would find me after that.

\_Let's rain check that. We both had enough for one day. If we survive that night we will have time to understand each other.

Does not seems wise to let someone like Zagdon waything, after make a deal with him.

He was waything for me when I left the raft.

\_Tell me about that war, between giants and humans. When the giants arrived from the vortex, I was still free. When they formed their 11 tribes I was present. However, the possibility of a "king" was still absurd the last time I saw a giant warchief.

During our first conversation I understood that our deal was that I would tell Zagdon what I could about the current events on Sharitarn, he would find Hicairi and transport me to the place where she was, and our relationship would be over. His hermeneutic led him to a comprehension similar, but not identical.

According to his version about our contract I should keep telling him about the current events on Sharitarn from time to time, as often as he needed, until he considers himself satisfied.

That small, but relevant, difference was pointed out by me. The debate took as long as you can imagine, and in the end I agreed with most of his demands.

\_I will not stop everything I am doing and run every time you call. However, I will do my best to make time for our conversations as soon as possible.

\_We will see if that's acceptable, once we know what "as soon as possible" means to you.

\_I can't tell you my city's secrets. Or the secrets of any other nation, or person, who has a relationship of trust with me. That may, in the near future, include Alkavalla.

\_That is immaterial to me. My enemy's "secrets", the unguine secrets, would melt your mind before you are able to transport them: let's not even consider understanding them.

Not a eulogistic comment about my mind. However, if he believed that would make him accept my refusal of cooperation I would not try to correct his depreciative opinion about the human mind.

\_Goes without saying: our contract ends the moment I die. You will not raise my corpse as some sort of undead to take more information from it.

\_That was not clear before. However, I will accept your condition if you accept one additional condition from me.

You will help me with more than information. I will not ask you to do anything against your own interest, your loyalties, or your friends, and if I do you have the right to refuse without any consequence. However, as long as I respect that contract you will help me.

\_That's a little too much. That would make me little better than a slave to you. I can't make that deal.

\_That deal could be forced upon you. That, however, would not serve my needs.

\_Maybe if I knew which needs you have, it would be easier to find a common ground.

The monster, still looking like a human, seemed cogitative for a moment.

\_Neither of us have the necessary time for the explanation you suggest.

Zagdon suggested an alternative, and this time I accepted it.

When I reached the village the fight between the Panuin and Sorribe was about to begin. Hicairi was

present, she and the Maothi were the only women surrounding the circle where the fight would happen.

A unguie had insinuated to me that someone would try to interfere, to cheat in order to make the younger fighter win if he could not do that by merit.

Now I believed the Maothi capable to do anything to achieve their goal. Before that moment I had chance to talk with the Panuin about that, but my mind was captured by other subjects. Now time was almost over, therefore I ran.

He smiled to me, and did not seem surprised.

\_Not even his free companion know, but you are right. The Maothi woman has a plan to make Sorribe win the fight. We have found the magical roots of energy below the surface, too well hidden to be exposed. That roots would allow her to send heal and protect Sorribe during this fight, and at same time make me weak and clumsy.

\_You must stop the fight !!

\_That's no longer possible. The fight must happen, it must happen here and now.

\_He will kill you! You have no chance against a sigrax's magic prepared in advance, unless you have your own sigraxes cheating to help you.

\_That would not be possible. That ritual is sacred, and I will respect it even if the priestess does not: to that rule can be no exception.

\_You must have a plan!

\_Before what happened to you today my plan was die for my tribe here, now I have a better plan. But I will need your help to make it work.

The Panuin walked to the middle of the arena. Sorribe placed himself at his side, and the men hugged each other

\_As is my right I call two friends to drink with us this night!

Everyone seemed surprised. Missopi explained to me what was happening.

\_It is a lost tradition, no Panuin have done that for the last 300 years. Sorribe has the right to call the same number of friend.

\_They will help him in the fight?

\_ That would be foolish! No, they will just all drink from the same bowl.

Sorribe called his two friends first. One I did not know, but the other was the Maothi man. The Panuin called my name: doing that he offended, allot, many hunters!

After call my name, he called the Moothi woman.

\_Altair is not a forest man, he will be sick if he drinks sila! \_ advised the Moothi man\_ That strong sila, a acceptable sip, he will probably die.

\_He know that, I explained to him. Even so, he accepted the risk to honor that day.

No, he had not explained anything. He had only asked for my help, without mention what I would have to do, and I agreed without ask because time was short. Even so, was that or let Sorribe kill me after he win the fight.

The large bowl was brought to us, and sila was put on it. Then Sorribe cut his own wrist with his teeth and shed his blood on the sila. The Panuin did the same, and then the Moothi man. One by one, alternating between the two groups, we all gave our blood, before start the drinking part.

The tast was far better than I expected, and I felt no nausea after drink the sila. The bowl passed three times by the hands of each one in the circle. Then it was empty, and we left the two fighters alone.

His plan was to destroy the Moothi's conection with the roots of energy, making her incapable to use Xar for some time. The Panuin was hopping my blood would do that, as he had destroyed the magical prision were Zagdon had been kept prisoner.

The woman's face told me the plan had been a success. Despite my difficulties with magic I felt the Xar extnguishing inside her. That night the Moothi would not be able to do anything for Sorribe, or for anyone else, using magic. There was no way to know fore sure how long would take for her powers came back, or even if they would ever recover.

After that, the two man in the middle of the circle placed their hands on the soil.

\_They are emptying out the magic still left inside their tatoos \_ explained Missopi.

\_They are both alchemists them?

\_The Panuin has magical potential awake, Sorribe has not. Our tribe's Moothis since many centuries ago developed a Way able to give the hability to make some spells to people without magical potential. That's a secret, but since you are here and was even invited to drink would be absurd to keep that secret from you.

There was a moment after that, a peacefull silent moment, and during that moment I allowed myself to feel hope.

Then the fight started, and my hope dropped from a cliff.

## 17 - The Portals of Alkavalla

The antimagic properties we had recently discovered in my blood allowed us to nullify the magical trap build by the Mauthi woman. If wasn't for her, we could never had know about that power in time, trying to sacrifice me to steal my Xar she gave us the chance to learn how to frustrate her plan.

However, to my surprise, the Panuin seemed completely incapable to fight for his life. Even without the Mauthi's magic working against him. His moves were slow and he seemed to be incapable to find out were Sorribe was.

\_Something is wrong! \_ pointed Shid, not far from Missopi and me. On my other side, Vaer agreed.

\_The Mauthi somehow?

\_No. She would have done that discreetly, she know how the Panuin moves and how Sorribe moves. The woman can be treacherous but she is no idiot ! Who is doing that isn't from the forest people, much less from our tribe.\_ Vaeg agreed.

Sorribe's club hit the Panuin's shouder, has only a scratch blow but the experient warrior followed, as if he could was too drunk to keep his balance.

We were not the only ones noticing something strange. Many hunters seemed surprised. Even Sorribe began to exite.

\_Can be the Panuin simulatig weakness to get advantage in the fight?\_ I asked Missopi.

\_He isn't ! For the same reason the Mauthi can't be the one behind it. He know Sorribe would not fall for something that obvious. No one who ever saw he in battle would.

The Panuin kept trying, he managed to avoid a few blows, but he was clearly blind. Another blow hit him, this time his head. Wasn't strong, Sorribe did not seemed secure about if he wanted to win anymore, the Panuin felt again, and again came back to his feet with dificulty.

\_Stop this nonsense! \_ someone protested in the opposite side of the circle.

Sorribe agreed.

\_The fight can not stop!\_ remembered the Mauthi man.\_ There is something strange here, we all can see that. Even so, one fighter has to die! That's the people's way, has been since the first Panuin .

Sorribe dropped his weapon.

\_Kill me, if you must. I will not take part in that farce ! He is wrong about the war, he is too old to lead us, but he does not deserve to die like that. Also, I would not follow a Panuin who had killed his

predecessor in a fight like that!! Would you? \_ Sorribe shouted to the crowd, looking the Maothi man in the eyes.

The Maothi did not seemed to have a answer.

\_ What you suggest them? \_ asked Shid, Panuin's second in command.

Before Sorribe could find an answer the Panuin followed again, his arms pressing the head. He was obviously in great pain.

\_That's magic! Stop it !!\_ many people accused the Maothi couple. There was no circle anymore, people walked without direction. Some tried to help the Panuin, but did not knew how.

For a instant I looked for Hicairi, to know how far from me she was and what direction I had to go in order to take her away from the conflite when the anger reached the point were violence became inevitable. I found her in the same time she had been since I arrived.

Her eyes were blank, she was not moving. I wanted to do something about, but I knew that was not the time.

\_They are not doing that! \_ I shouted. For no good reason since the Maothis had tried to kill me hours before, and their deaths could only help me to reach Alkavalla alive. I felt that was the right thing to do, that's the only thing I can say in my defence.

To my surprise many people looked to me, as if I was someone they should take in consideration. Despite the fact that I was an outsider.

\_If they aren't doing that, who is??

Desperately I tried to make a divination spell to answer that question. That time it worked, was a weak response, but was clear enough.

\_That's not magic! \_ I told them, the Maothis seemed confise for a momment. Them the Maothi man understood what I was saying.

\_That's giant power. Someone look in the woods, they can be far!!\_ his free companion looked surprised. She was not happy with he, but was able to hidde it well after just a momment.

\_The Panuing is dying ! \_ someone screamed from were the Panuin was.

\_If he die now, Sorribe will be the new Panuin. No matter how that happen. \_ told me Shid, as secretly as possible under the circunstances.

\_Bring me gijar's helmet, fast! We can still save him. \_ I told Shid and Missopi. Shid agreed, and told told Missopi were he could finde the nearest one.

\_We must keep the Maothis save. We took their magic and I don't want to see both killed that night,

despite all they did. Our tribe still need them!\_ decided Shid. I joined the group he was gathering for the task.

Someone cut my face trying to reach the Maothis, many hunters still believed they were responsible and wanted to stop the attack against the Panuin, by killing the priests. A fight started, with claws and fangs being used by both sides. To my surprise my naked hands seemed to be doing a decent job. Can't say why they did not use their weapons\_ no one was armed only with claws and fangs\_ but I kept my sword sheathed fearing to make the situation worse by using it.

Someone threw Nutun on the ground and tore his throat out with the teeth. His brother Nizoeg broke the attacker's neck a moment later. At the same time someone fell between me and Pirgo and tried to bite my leg. I kicked his head and his skull made the sound of something breaking, he didn't move again.

\_Stop all that !! \_A imperative voice knew all too well shouted loud enough to be impossible to ignore.

To my surprise, the Panuin had not yet received the helmet. He seemed well, despite that.

A moment later three giants walked on his direction coming from the shadows. One of them greeted me, after saluted the Panuin. He carried a giant's head by the hair, and showed it for all hunters.

The head belonged to the sigrax giant who had captured me before. The one holding it was the group leader from the one giant tribe enemy of Zaiaz.

\_Your ally was the one trying to cheat on this sacred ritual ! \_he explained. Looking at the Maothis behind us.

\_We had no idea he was doing that!!\_ answered the Maothi woman.\_ ...and we have no way to know if you are not the one responsible for all that ! Your tribal chief could have planned it all to make our tribe blame King Zaiaz!!

There was another moment of tension, but this time it ended before any physical arguments had time to be raised.

\_ I welcome you, friend. It's always a pleasure, today more than usual.\_ the Panuin smiled. The giant leader offered the head to him.

\_Accept this small gift from your friend Anvinar, Panuin.

The Panuin accepted the head, and looked at its dead face. He gave it to a hunter, to be taken to the women in the collective kitchen.

\_I want the skull intact. \_ he warned. Before turning his attention to the giants.

\_Thank your tribal chief for this gift, my friend. If you can stay a little longer I would like to talk with you. That assuming I will still be the Panuin after that ritual. There is a place prepared to celebrate the ritual,

would be possible for you and your men to wait me there?

Sorribe looked at the giants, and agreed with the Panuin.

\_\_Even if he can't join you in the celebration, the Silent Climber's Panuin will still want to have a word with Anvinar's diplomat as soon as possible. \_\_ mentioned Sorribe.

Was clear to everyone that the giants would not stay for the ritual itself. It was for Silent Climbers only. They seemed surprised with the fact that I would stay, but no one spoke about it.

As soon as they left looked again for Hicaire. She had felt and was still on the ground, but was not hurt. The Panuin saw my concerns and took a moment to speak with me.

\_\_After what you told me I decided she could neither be left alone nor stay near to women and children who could be hurt by the people trying to capture her. However, she could not see that ritual either.

\_\_You had the women drugged?! \_\_ I complained with indignation.

\_\_She will be fine after two or three days, that herbal refreshment is mostly used for spiritual purposes; it is know for open a person's mind and allow forest people's animal guides to speak with us. She will not remember anything for this days, except dreams, but will be as lucid as she ever was. Perhaps a bit wiser, but that I can't promise.

I was still not happy about. However, he had too much to deal with already and I could understand his motives to drug Hicaire. So I took my travel companion by one arm, and kept her by my side. She offered no resistance what so ever.

\_\_Is nice to see your friend that docile, Altair. You should make her have her another sip every time she start nagging you. We can give you a bottle or five, if you want! \_\_Pirgo joked. He had many open wounds from the fight to protect the Maothis and was covered by blood, most of it from other hunters.

I ignored the poor attempt of joke. He didn't seemed to mind my lack of humor.

The circle was reorganized. This time both fighter were using gijar helmets, to avoid more incidents. \_\_The helmets have been a good idea. They would have saved us if Anvinar's men had not done so when they did. Was a good idea sigrax! I would not have remembered it. \_\_ said Shid, join me, with the other men from the Panuin's band behind him.

As a matter of fact my idea had no effect what so ever. Even so, Shid's words sounded sincere.

Panuin's ears were still bleeding. Even so, the ritual needed to be finished. He should kill Sorribe or die, would be acceptable if both died. They could not both survive the challenge, according to every Silent Climber I asked about that Law can have no exception.

The fight was balanced, without the external interference. Sorribe, as his size and appearance emphatically suggested, was stronger than the Panuin. Both warriors were fast and knew how to use the ceremonial weapon, and their natural ones. Both proved to have extreme physical resistance and determination.

Sorribe took the first heavy blow in the head, but he gave it back later. The Panuin's arm was broken, as several ribs. I was sure both would die, even surprised to see how long was taken for that happen. I didn't see the last blow, until a moment after it hit the target.

The Panuin was on the ground, his left leg just broken. Sorribe looked at him one last time, with great respect, and carefully approached to end the fight. His last blow was fast and precise, but found only the ground. There was the Panuin, stand on one foot after dance his way from the ground, around the larger warrior. His club planted in Sorribe's head from behind, the Panuin left it there, and felt.

Fight was over. The Panuin was alive, and with proper magical help would probably recover after a few days. That worried me.

The two sigraxes who belong to the tribe have proved to be unreliable, to say the least. Even if they was decent and trustworthy would make no difference until the Xar came back to their spells: no one knew how long would take.

I would love to help, but the few healing spells I knew had been placed beyond my reach since I left Lutianen. After I leave that other island, the one no map shows and no one had heard about before, things got worse to me on that aspect. Even the more simple spell, the more familiar to me, became hard and uncertain. I had no chance to help the Panuin with my magic.

To my surprise there was no lack of magic to heal the Panuin. Every Silent Climber helped.

I saw for myself the true about the wild magical way know only for some forest people sigraxes. The Way of Magical Tattoo. Even people with no potential for magic used magical spells to help. Only the Maothis were not present, they left furtively before became obvious for all that they could no longer use magic.

For the first time in the night I noticed the unguine, the ancient plant who was in the village as diplomat. He had been present all night, I think. Their race has a way to stay below the limit of our conscious perception most times, without actually affect our senses: we see them, but do not connect the image with any sense of meaning or relevance. Their presence is just a meaningless detail on our background, until one of them decide to be noticed.

He decided to be noticed, as he was supposed to, in order to be the first one to congratulate the Panuin after his victory.

The hunters carried both fighters. The panuin to the celebration, Sorribe to the kitchen.

The warrior who had lost the fight would be prepared for the more sacred banquet, tomorrow. Only the Panuin's closest friends would be allowed to be present. Naturally the most important item on the menu would be Sorribe himself.

Tonight, almost morning actually, there was a large variety of meat. On a large plate the giant's brain was offered before for the Panuin, and then for other important people present. I was just after the giant ambassador who killed the food. The giant's tongue and eyes could be seen as well, and I avoided

to look at them. Was still a large variety of items to choose, after exclude all talking animals.

Normally I would have avoided the food; feeling, as I was, a little uncomfortable with all the cannibalism happen around my plate. However, that had been a very long day to me, and since the breakfast I had not eaten.

Hicairi did not eat by herself, until I tell her to. When I gave her some food she eat, and seemed to like it. However, she would take no initiative and I had to choose her food for her.

She was able to speak, when spoken to, and would answer my questions without hesitation. She would not keep a conversation however, she could not remember for long what she was talking about, therefore the questions had to be simple and brief.

That night had no chance to talk with my travel companion. There was dance, a proved again the strong drink hallucinogen, sila, which is almost sacred on that land.

They had told me that other humans could not digest sila, and would get sick if they tried. Only forest people was able to drink it. The first time I was told that was easy to believe, because the stuff's smell felt like old blood mixed with salt and evil thoughts. The smell had not changed, but the effect it caused on me was different now. I had proved to myself that the supposed unhealthy effect of sila was no more than superstition, because the effect of it on me was quite pleasant.

The forest men seemed impressed my my resistance to their drink, and several times someone told me I was metamorphosing myself into a forest man.

True to be told, the combined effect of the allucinogenic properties of sila and their suggestions made me feel physical changes inside my body. Touching my teeth with my tongue I would feel them large and sharp as forest people's teeth, my tongue felt abrasive like a cat's tongue. Looking to my fingers I would see claws as sharp as forest people's claws, and larger than the ones most people around me had show during the fight to kill the Maothi couple: concentrating myself I could make the claws disappear below my normal nails, but they seemed to come back always I felt excited by the debates.

Was not a night for intellectual analysis. We forgot Zaiaz's war. My friends ate the corpses of their tribal brothers fallen a little earlier without cook them, had sex with their slavegirls on the ground between free women dancing almost naked and slave men former Artist Caste from Shirshan playing forest people's songs on instruments typical of Shirshan. Even the tree giants took part in the festivity, the only person who stayed quiet all night was the unguie.

The Panuin was still hurt, and could not use his leg broken by Sorribe during the fight. That didn't prevented him from dance and enter some games which looked much like fights to me.

I remember myself asking someone why no one used weapons during the fight to reach the Maothi couple. The person, whoever she was explained to me that weapons are not used during "friendly fights". The image of Nutun having his throat removed by a friend's fangs, and, that same friend having his neck broken a moment later by Nutun's brother, Nizoeg, came to mind when I think about that night and I must admit: events like that still don't feel compatible with the word "friendly" to me.

Both Nutun and the fellow who killed him were present in the celebration, as raw meat being ripped out and devored by their tribe. Nizoeg himself took several bites of both.

I was drunk enough, drugged enough, to accept all that as normal. Even so, fortunately, I was lucky enough to remember Hicairi and keep myself near to her in order to protect the Lady from any eventual excess of effusiveness from forest men.

Despite the particular style of celebration no free woman was violated that night. However, the other free women present were all Silent Climbers. I can't be sure about how they would have treated Hicairi if I had forgotten my travel companion.

The day started and advanced. I decided to leave a little after the Panuin disappeared, taking Hicairi with me. We found the vanquisher of Sorribe already sleeping on his hammock, in the only room in the first floor of the collective home all his band shared with Hicairi and me. The free companions would stay here as well, and sometimes slavegirls would spend the night.

The "night"; in the sense of period used for sleep; in the case of forest people is, mostly, during the hottest part of the day. However, that's what we all spent most of the day sleeping.

Outside the music, dance, food, and sex continued. I don't know if it stopped before I woke up.

Fear startled me when I noticed that Hicairi was no longer with me in the hammock. Her own hammock was the next one and she wasn't there either.

I looked for her everywhere, until Missopi reassured me. The daughter of Duegdar was taking a bath. The Panuin had given to his first slavegirl the task of taking care of her, and everyone would be told by her that touching Hicairi would be taken as a direct offense by him. He wanted me free to pay attention to the banquet that night. My presence was required.

There was one problem, from my point of view. Attending to that event would make necessary for me to eat Sorribe's flesh. However, eating human flesh goes against a traditional and strong taboo kept by every civilized person on my planet. Still, I clearly had no choice, except to offend the Silent Climbers and their Panuin; what wasn't a choice at all, to me, under the circumstances. Lutianen needed that people to win the war against Shirshan, and I needed them to reach Lutianen alive: two important enough goals to make me consider the possibility of eating human flesh, if necessary.

This banquet for Panuin's special guests took place on the Maothi's house. Choice made by the Panuin as an obvious insult to the priests. They had lost the game to replace him for a Panuin easier to manipulate. The couple was in no position to raise opposition against his will, and would not be for some time. Eventually new events would make the tribe forget the offenses committed by their Maothi but until that happens their lives would be in the Panuin's hands in a much stronger sense than usual.

The giant ambassador was telling the Panuin about the more recent facts in the war when I entered the room. Most of it he had already told me, but there were more names and details this time. The Silent Climbers helped me to understand the meaning of many elements I had first considered as having little to no importance. The proportion of destruction was about to escalate. The most unpredictable aspect in

all that was precisely Lutianen, my city.

Many times I was asked to give my opinion about how Lutianen could react to what was happening between Zaiaz's army and the forces of Shirshan. That made me realize how little I understood my adopted home.

Lutiane would fight to control the true mages of Shirshan, and take them to Black Centaur Castle. If necessary the rest of Shirshan would be left to burn or to be crushed by the giants, that was obvious enough to me. Any experient warrior on this planet, who knew a little about the History of our region, would be able to reach the same conclusions by himself, therefore I wasn't saying noting new for the people present. The strange thing about my city's behaviour was the lack of action, and I couldn't help them on that matter.

The only move made by Lutianen so far had been made against the forces of Zaiaz. By now a relevant force composed by true mages and sigraxes and supported by enough warriors could have entered Shirshan, in order to find the true mages. They would have a strong chance to find out were the true mages are\_ assuming that they remain inside the walls\_ had the mages been destroyed, that information could end this war for Lutianen. Without true mages to hope for, Lutianen could and probably would make a deal with Zaiaz for the Port of Shirshan and some other secondary compensations.

That solution would be terrible for Anvinar's men and they didn't denied that. The only good solution to them would be Zaiaz being killed and his tribe humiliated.

Waiting on Timurda Lutianen would achieve no certainty about the more important question in this war: "What happened to the true mages of Shirshan?". To know that for sure some true mages of Lutianen sooner or later would have to enter the city and take control of true important places: The Mage Caste Tower on Green Poison, and Glass Viper Fortress. What was my city waiting for, if that need was obvious from the beggining ?

That question I could not answer.

The mummy from a mysterious island on the ocean came to my mind. We brought it with us because was to only way to protect our ships against the intelligent octopuses which attacked us. They had wanted to kill all the others, and take the Mage Caste ones with them, no one knew for what purpose (and I for once didn't wanted to findout). The mummy, even immobile and dehydrated, had some sort of force field which didn't affected us but kept the octopuses distant.

This mummy was now recovered, and hidden somewhere on Shirshan, or, possibly, under Shirshan. It had contacted me one time, when I still was inside city walls, with a single message. The experience was unpleasant, I learn that I don't like that sort of communication: but other than that I can't say it taught me much.

The experience taught me one more thing: the mummy is pretty much active, somehow involved with what is happening, and not happy. Maybe the reason why Lutianen hesitates has something to do with that ancien monster, maybe the mummy is just another factor in the three archmage's calculations. They may just be fighting against each other for the honor of lead the definitive attack, according to the people the three of them agree about the color of a dessert is a rare event.

That factor (the mummy, not the color of achemage's desserts) I wouldn't dare to share with the Panuin, even in private. Much less would I ventilate the subject with all people present that night. The only person I had talked about had been Fergus, that I did because he was the person responsible for my presence in that adventure. Also because he already knew about the mummy's existence, and just wasn't sure if it had survived.

Next day I decided to violate my moral principles and question Hicairi about the things she had been hiding from me since our first conversation.

I took a raft with the woman and moved to a distance far enough from the village to be sure nobody would be seen or listening to us by accident, and made my best effort to choose a place where a forest man or even an invisible giant would have difficulty to come close enough to spy on us without being noticed. Against magic I could not protect us but the Maothi were still unable to use their Xar, and as far as I knew I had no other enemy nearby.

\_Were you want to go, after we leave that jungle?

\_To Port Micula.

\_Why?

\_To meet with my father.

\_ Why your father is in Micula?

\_The man who took me left behind false clues to give the impression I had been taken by someone from Micula. My father will be looking for me there.

\_Why Zaiaz needs you?

She bit her lips, and blinked some times, trying to resist the drug to not answer my question. She failed.

\_He need me to force my grandfather to delay the answer of Urshawa about it's treaty with Shirshan.

\_What you know about this treaty?

I had to insist on details about that a few times.

\_It was made a long time ago, and forgotten. Never was officialized properly, but is considered valid for some archmages on Urshawa. If it is valid Urshawa must help Shirshan against any enemy nation which invades it, for matter of honor they would have to send many mages against Lutianen.

\_What your grandfather has to do with all that?

\_My grandfather is the Diplomat of Urshawa on Lutianen and come from a house influent on Urshawa . Without his support will take a long time for Lutianen be able to make the matter of this ancient treaty be

revised. If Lutianen attack Shirshan before that, Urshawa will not be able to ignore the subject anymore and the friends of Shirshan will have more argument to their cause.

\_Why Urshawa has done nothing against Zaiaz?

\_I am not sure, can be because Zaiaz has no city and the treaty mention "help against any enemy city". That is open to interpretation, and Urshawa may still go against the giants.

\_Your grandfather loves you so much that he will risk to involve his city in a war it has no interest to enter, just to keep you save?

\_My grandfather have no love for me at all, never had. My grandmother controll him since long before I was born. She don't like me any more than he does, but she want him to became an archmage.

\_How have you back save helps your grandfather to became an archmage?

She told me Bindhai, the most powerfull archmage on Lutianen, has promisse to help her grandfather to achieve the purity of Xar he need to became an archmage. He will do so only if Hicairi became his son's free companion, and to do so she can not be slaved. If she is right Bindhai does not give a rat ass about the War against Lutianen and Shirshan. For some reason he needs that free companionship to happen no matter what.

She on the other hand don't trust her grandfather, her grandmother, Bindhai, or this sinister young man they what to join her with. All she want is to join her father, who is the only person she trust.

Her answers brought me back to mind the ungnuie's attitude about that war. He also seemed to care little, his concerns had been impossible to understand, but clearly they involve a diferent time scale. Maybe Bindhai, like them, isn't limited by human life expectancy; that would make the archmage someone who isn't human, despite the appearences.

That was enough information to me. I still had questions in mind about her past and the strange life she had, but they did not justified the invasion to her privacy. Take advantage of her weak momment to learn what I needed to survive that travel was already bad enough. I would not betray her trust just to satisfy my curiosity.

When we came back I saw the Maothi man, he was looking for me.

\_We need to talk.\_ he said.

\_Need we? Our last conversation did not ended well to me, if I remember it correctly.

\_I did what I had to do, and will not excuse myself for it. That's not about the demon Zagdon either, that matter is above our heads now. We have to talk about a mandate the Panuin gave to us.

\_You and me? \_ I asked surprised.

\_No, me and my free companion. It is about you, however. \_ His explanation surprised me almost as much as the trap he took me to before.

\_The panuin wants us to tatoo you.

They had the magical instruments and ink, but would not be able to use it until their magic came back. So the Panuin decided at least one of them would join me in my travel to Alkavalla, and if necessary accompany me all the way to Timurda.

The Maothi decided he would be the one. She wanted to go somewhere else, I suspected her alliance with Zaiaz had something to do with her plans. The Panuin had the same impression.

Missopi would come with us. He would be responsible for Leandra, the Panuin's first slave. She would accompany us to take care of Hicairi until she recovers from the drug.

To my surprise, the ungnuie had waited for us, and joined the group.

We entered Port Alkavalla during a rainfall. On any other land that would have been a scary tempest, but on that jungle was just a regular rain. After all stories about this city I was expecting a oneiric land with a freakish and surreal landscape. My expectations had not been able to prepare me for reality. There is nothing oneiric about the place, we all have experience with dreams, they are different to the rest of our lives, normal rules do not apply to them, but we have evolved as a species thanks to dreams as much as we have evolved thanks to our awakened state of perception.

Alkavalla is by far more alien than anything I could ever fantasized, and much more beautiful. It is not a human city, not even in that disputable meaning we give to the word "human" when we must include the giants in the named category. It does belong to the forest people, in part, but it was not built by them: or for them. There are some elements from the frog people's ruins visible on the architecture, but that's not the stronger influence.

The vegetal ungnuie mind, older than life on my planet and on Sharitarn, is Alkavalla's back bone. There is no way to identify the borders, the city mixes itself with the forest transforming the forest as much as being transformed by it. There is no way to know what is stone and what is living wood, which giant formations around us are the sentient plant people and which ones are normal trees.

More than anything else the smells dominate you, as you walk, up to a point when it became impossible to feel any difference between what is inside your mind and what is around you and you can only remember that difference as an academic notion. Remember what you are supposed to do and what you have done already, and if it was hours or years before, is hard. Still, the worse part is that the strange effort necessary to achieve so simple mind processes we all take for granted isn't uncomfortable; quite the opposite, there is some pleasure in the exercise.

Once we get used to it, it became possible to function again. Almost as well as we do anywhere else.

As we walk closer to the Sorrowful River\_ were the more touristic areas (using the word "touristic" very loosely) can be found\_ layers of normality are gradually added to the experience. Would be far more difficult, I suppose, to make that same walk from the opposite direction, must feel like walking into an ocean of cold madness dressed in a heavy plumbic armor. Understandable humans and other intelligent animals who visit the city as sailors avoid to leave the commercial district: take a long time to get used with the impression caused by Alkavalla.

Would have been nice to have time to adapt before deal with serious matters, unfortunately my luck was not that good at the time.

## 18 - Dangerous Path

Our small group left the Silent Climbers village after a ritual of blessings officiated by the Maothi woman. The Panuin could not go with us to Alkavalla. He was recovered from the injuries he took during the fight, but there was too much for him to do

Shid, the second in command among the Silent Climbers, suggested that he would accompany us. The Panuin decided to send Missopi instead. The younger hunter had more affinity with me, since the day I met the Panuin's group he had voluntarily to help me more frequently than any other forest man. To be honest I would feel more comfortable to travel at his side than I would have been with the older, more skilled, and more serious, Shid. There was enough people on the group to make me uncomfortable. People who could not be replaced.

One person had been included by the Panuin with a more questionable reason than the others. The Panuin's first slave, a woman only a couple years younger than myself who is not a forest woman. To be honest, Leandra's presence do made me feel a little jumpy.

I didn't know her story at first, but there was something about her that seemed different.

Many slavegirls among them are from other ethnicities, but most slaves; and specially most pleasure slaves; have been captured from other tribes of forest people. That seems to be a matter of taste, as much or more than opportunity. However, when the reproductive choices are on the table, the equation clearly changes for them.

Having peculiar racial characteristics, one could even say "advantages", the wild forest people make sure to keep eugenic practices in general. They accept, and even welcome, exceptions to that general rule: as long as they don't disfigure the rule itself.

All that eugenic posture would have been seem as monstrous by the people from my home planet. They would have been seem as monstrous by me as well, three years before that; or even one year before that. In order to survive I had to accept some monsters are no worse than me, my fellow countrywomen, and countrymen.

The slavery\_ of women, in particular\_ is one thing harder to accept than eugenic principles, or cannibalism. Living on Lutianen I had been able to shield myself against the need to interact with slavegirls as a master, but no friend or professional relationship I had escaped from the category of slave owner. Except Luciola, and she was, legally speaking even if not in fact, my slave property.

Until that moment I couldn't proudly say I never had failed the goal to not use slaves sexually. My only fail had happened and under influence of some strange and inexplicable mind breakdown, probably a side effect of some magical accident.

However, first night after we left the village the Panuin's first slave asked to talk to me in private. Told me a little about herself, and asked my help. That last complicated my plans and goals,

considerably.

Leandra is a tall woman: taller than her master, the Panuin, and just a bit smaller than myself. She is not a forest woman, or a human woman from another ethnicity native from that planet. Like myself, the gorgeous brunette Luciola who lived with me for some time on Lutianen, and the Maothi's mother, Leandra is a ii (involuntary immigrant) brought by the vortex.

She was born on Athens III, Red Athens, the second city built on Mars. Came to Earth to study when she had 20 years, and hated her new life on our idyllic but overpopulated paradise since the first moment. The experience was shorter than expected: less than one year later she was caught by the vortex while sleeping on her bed, and left on Sharitarn.

The place Leandra first saw on that planet was Agovinar, The Ring, a continental city at northwest of the Silent Climber's jungle far beyond the Sorrowful River. It is a city built inside the crater of an active volcano, made possible only by magic. A place as exotic and unlikely for humans to live on as the martian land where she grew up. On Agovinar she learned the behavior expected from slavegirls on that planet.

After a year on The Ring City and more two being bought and sold on merchant fairs and caravans, the merchant who owned her at the time decided to travel between the Giant Mountains and the forest man's jungle: without hire any forest man as his guide! The 100 heavily armed men on his caravan died. The women, most of them slave cargo like Leandra, became property of wild forest tribes.

She was taken by the Panuin's father, because he liked her expression: curiosity, instead of fear. When the Panuin was only a boy and not yet a Panuin, she became his constant company.

Since the forest men age faster than other human, and die on half the time humans used to die before modern medicine, didn't took long for the boy became a man. He liked her, and considered Leandra as trustworthy as a slave can possibly be: therefore he purchased her from his old man. At first she was his favorite pleasure slave; then he found other pets, more lustful than the girl from Mars.

What he never found was a slavegirl he could trust as much as he trusted Leandra. She is no longer her master's favorite, but remain as his first slave. The most enviable status a slave woman can have.

I was very interested. She then explained to me that; as any slavegirl, first or not, she could be commanded to serve anyone. She would have to follow her master's instructions, and in this case her master had said that she should serve me, sexually.

\_I am sorry, Leandra, but I don't...

She looked to the ground, then gave me a sad smile.

\_I was expecting that, of course. Since I first saw you, the day you came to the village with Panuin and the others, I noticed how you look at women. Like any man would look a woman on Red Athens, New Amsterdam or Cairo VII.

\_I am not sure about that. If true probably is something to be proud at, is it not?

Leandra smiled again, shrugging as if apologizing. Avoided my face to answer.

\_ I think it's cute. Master noticed as well, of course. He believe that gentle nature is dangerous to your healthy and probably fatal, now that you are on Sharitarn . He may be right, you know.

\_No, he isn't! I'm sorry, Leandra. I respect the Panuin, but I am doing pretty well job keeping myself alive by my own! Exactly as I am! You may tell him that.

\_Of course, master, you can command me to say that to him in your name. I will obey, but that can only make my punishment worse than it would already be. Even without that I am not sure if I will still be first girl after that travel. You understand that Altair, don't you?

Be the first slave does not mean a woman has been slave in the house for longer than the others, it means she is the one slave the master trust to speak for him when he is not present and to keep the other slavegirls behaving as he want. While most men change who is the favorite slavegirl in the house twice a year, a first slave keeps the status until she looses master's trust: frequently one of them die before that happen.

\_What you mean?

\_Master didn't just told me to obey you as if I was yours, that's the more usual command for situations such as our present one. He told me explicitly to seduce you, and to have sex with you; and to please you, anyway you want, on that field. Therefore I am supposed to give you pleasure, sexual. I'm supposed to show you what is like to have a slavegirl, to own a woman like me. Help you to find out what is like to be a free man, a master of women, on a planet were women can be slaved by force. Where I am a slave, and you can have anything you want from me.

\_You tried. He can't blame you...

I stopped talking. "Of course he can!", was writen all over her face. True to be told I knew he could, probably would, before I start the phrase. She walked away.

\_Leandra, don't leave yet.

Leandra came back, looking me with hope.

I took her hand. She asked for my permission to came closer. When I didn't answered, she kissed my face, touching my chest with one hand, and whispered on my ear: "May a slave have permission to dance for you, master?". I silently agreed.

Leandra was dressed to travel through the forest people's dangerous jungle, she was not wearing transparent silk. The Panuin could have chosen many other slavegirls, younger and more beautifull than her. I don't think any other slave could have captured my attention, and awakened my curiosity (I will be going with 'curiosity' here, but only after scrupulous consideration) as Leandra did with that night.

Under any circunstance a honest man would feel forced, even against his will, to describe Leandra as

beautiful. Her body is sensual and nevertheless athletic. I would not call it perfect, but I have to admit: no perfect body dancing could be more interesting than hers. On her moves one does not only see lust and femininity. I saw all, that but also saw Leandra. Her personality dances for her, more than her skills. With the carnality almost absent in the first steps, inflaming slowly, as if she was alone.

Don't know when she glimpsed me for the first time after the dance start. All I know is that: I stopped her a little after that. Not with words.

\_Had you ever had a Martian before?\_ she asked me.

\_I never had "had" anyone before, Miss. You can tell the Panuin that: mission accomplished!

She smelled my chest, satisfied.

\_Leandra?

\_Yes, master.

\_Call me Altair.

\_Yes, master Altair\_ she joked. I pretended to be angry.

\_Leandra, did the Panuin? Your master, he really I mean, told you to do all that?

She blushed, was very dark but I could tell without see her face.

\_Master may not have been as, specific, as I led you to believe. Altair, a first slave's most important duty is to interpret her owner's commands according to her owner's unspoken will. My master don't have to give me 'explicit' instructions all times anymore! Because I understand his intentions.

\_The, what else the Panuin intend for us tonight?

To my surprise, Leandra slipped down on my body. She kissed my sex, and started something I have never experienced. Women used to extimulate men's penises with their mouths on Earth, but that habit was deemed offensive to women's dignity and eradicated for good. Only by restricted academic literature is now possible to find references to such practices nowadays on Earth.

Well, men on Earth still practice fellatio cunnilingus if the woman wants it; that's very common. Men who enjoy sex with other men also keep the honored tradition of "blow job", and I understand lesbians do that as well. Only a woman give pleasure to a man with her mouth is considered too diminishing to be acceptable.

Was a extremely curious (I am going with "curious" here) experience to me. Strange, pleasant, but also startling.

Sending Leandra, his first slave, with us the Panuin was giving me a message. A very powerful message! I wished nothing more than understand what was written on that message, but I wasn't able to read it by myself.

Ask someone else in the group would do me no good. Missopi is a nice, intelligent, honest forest man; and a good hunter; but he had no chance to understand my question. Even if he did, his loyalty would not allow him to translate Panuin's intentions: had the Panuin wanted to be clear, he would have spoken clearly.

Hicairi didn't know that people well, but she had traveled Shirshan with her father most her life\_ in fact since she was a young child\_ and could have some insights about the message. She was still deeply immersed in the dream state induced by the forest people's drug, therefore I could ask anything to her. Hicairi would tell me the true, as she knew it: without be able to lie, or hidde information. I had already taken advantage of her vulnerable moment, but did so to get far more important information. Use her now would be indecorous. I would not indulge myself anymore, would not violate a woman's privacy like that. Not, unless I absolutely had to.

The Maothi man is a indisputable authority about forest people's culture in general, and Silent Climber's culture specifically: Maothis are their priests and spiritual leaders. He also has a mother who came from Earth, and thanks to that probably would be able to understand my questions better than anyone else inside our group (except for Leandra herself). However, he tried to have me killed days before that, taking me to his free companion's trap under the false pretence of want to help me. If that does not make you distrust someone, a bit, then I really don't know what will.

I could not ask Leandra for the meaning, when she herself was the message.

As for the last fellow in our group, he isn't human or even a talking animal. Ungnuie are plants. That plant in particular is a diplomat educated to deal\_mostly\_ with the forest people, true: but despite all his education and experience, I would still not take advice about complex human interaction from a plant! Hope you will not take as bigotry, I honestly don't dislike plants. Just believe their a point of view can not be close enough to our to allow them to understand and explain all subjects related with human interaction.

The Panuin had said Leandra would come with us to take care of Hicairi until my travel companion regain her lucidity. As she was Hicairi would obey any command but would not eat, sleep, or do any other thing by herself. Without Leandra I would have taken care of Hicairi myself, but was nice to have someone with her experience with dream states. Have Leandra with us during the day allowed me freedom to interact with the rest of our group, and learn what I still could about Alkavalla, before enter the the city.

Recent experiences had given me a relative understanding about the forest people's mind. Far from perfect, but better than I would have had hope to achieve in so little time. That understanding did not come always wrapped in pleasant interactions, sincerely speaking. Even so, I can not complain about the outcome.

Among the interactions\_from my point of view\_ less than ideal was the Maothi's attempt to kill me, in order to steal Xar from my bones. Despite that uncomfortable memory the Panuin had forced me to deal with a situation where my best interest demanded to establish \_some sort of\_ positive rapport with the young priest.

He was here to delivery a present from the Panuin to me. A present no outsider had received before, ever. It is rarely given to a hunter from another tribe, never before had been given to someone who isn't forest people.

What the Panuin wanted in exchange for that present, if anything, was not clear to me. Maybe he was subjecting the Maothi to a test of loyalty, and I was only a mean to that end. However, if that was the case then the Panuin had chosen a huge box for a proportionally tiny message.

Tatooist's work looks like the product of enchanter's Way, and some enchanters will even make magical tatoos, in the more general sense. The tatooists work faster and their art cost little, but that isn't the main difERENCE between their art and the other.

Enchanters can create magical objects\_ and draws\_ by given them one or more spells, or none. They can't let the Xar free inside their creations. Tatooists create power vessels which make any sigrax capable to do his magic as he want, for longer than he should given his personal level. That is still not all.

Normally alchemists can't do magic, but tatooists make it possible. Unlike a sigrax their tatoos will not recharge with their own power, a Tatoo spell is needed to keep them usefull, but as long as he have Xar the alchemist may learn and perform magic as if he was a sigrax. No other Way allow that kind of deviation from the Universal Laws of Magic. It changes the game for the few tribes were the secret is know, but, still: it is not the more extreme difERENCE between tatooists and enchanters.

One basic characteristic of this universe is that only people born with magical potential can use magic, any kind of magic. Magical objects don't work on their hands, some magical potions do work on them but they can not manipulate the basic extracts made by Enchanter Way spells to make their own magical potion (as alchemists, sigraxes, and mages can).

The potential for magic alone isn't enough, to gain access to the magic inside objects. One has to awaken this potential, at least enough to became an alchemist: wich is the lowes magical development possible. That's always true, or almost always.

Tatooists can give magic to common people, no one else can. The magic in their tatoos will not recharge itself, unlike the one made for sigraxes. It can't have free Xar, as it can for sigraxes and alchemists, but it do work. Someone without potential can make spells, specific spells, basic ones, but that creates a universe of unique possibilities for any tribe with a tatooist sigrax.

If used freely that Way would change the foundations of Sharitarn. Tatooists keep their art secret, and only work inside their own tribes, by good reason. The Mage's Brotherhood will destroy their tribes and kill all forest people on Sharitarn before allow the trivialization of Xar.

The Maothi had not being given permission (command) to teach me the secret Way itself, not even a simple tatooist's spell. I would simply receive from the Maothi a magical tatoo. Even so, that little thing represented a considerable change of their traditions, and a prove that the Tatoot Magic is real.

The priest could not yet give me the Panuin's gift, because he had lost his magic (partially becuse of me) and it had not yet regrow. He would, for that reason, be forced to accompany me until his Xar

recover normal levels.

I tried to make small conversation with the young priest, but his mind was elsewhere. No one could say for sure how long would take for him to regain his spells. Without them, his position inside his tribe was precarious. Theoretically nothing can take the magical power from a sigrax man “for ever”, but life can be too short for that make any difference. For a Maothi without Xar, life can only be short.

We entered Alkavalla, and before I notice all my questions and ideas for conversation had been eaten by ravenous wonder. Then an arrow plunged itself in my shoulder.

Their reflexes saved the two forest men from a fate like mine. Three arrows hit the ungnuie, and he lifted his weapons as if the arrows has no more meaning to him than words. Men using masks came from every direction. Fully covered in black robes they had light armors, also black, under their clothes, and swords unsheathed.

The ungnuie threw himself on battle, with five daggers and 2 swords moving faster than the eye could follow. His nine long arms made of wood severing legs and other unarmed ones braking skulls. He was surrounded by enemyes how used magic, with less efect than normal. They managed to slow him down, but that consumed most their resources.

The Maothi, Missopi joined efforts with me forming a circle around the two women. Our enemies attacked fast. They had magical weapons, but so did the Maothi and Missopi.

Once more I was surprised my the power of forest man’s Tattuo Magic, Missopi has no potential for magic. Magical weapons should not manifest their powers on his hands. His arm is covered on magical tattoos, however, and as long as they still have Xar ‘fuel’ the forest man hunter can use magical objects and weapons as well as I do.

My sword was just normal, and despite my reaction in battle surprise even myself for their velocity and streng I was doing less than the other two against our enemy’s magical armors. Even so, we kept them away from Hicairi and Leandra.

A strong smell as sweet as honey spread, the ungnuie call for reinforcements. At same time I saw a explosion, and one minute latter understood it had been the ungnuie exploding. A magical battle hammer cast by one enemy had been too much for his natural resistance against magic.

I knew that weapon. It belonger to a soldier of Shirshan, a man named Gripon, a member of their secret police, the Virshan.

\_They are Virshan! \_ I bawl\_ Shirshan’s men.

\_We all know what Virshan means! Keep your fucking focus !!!\_ suggested the Maothi. In good time, since a ax almost opened my head like a coconut just after the clergyman’s advice.

\_Kill them all !! We only need the blond!\_ decided Gripon, recovering his weapon from the ungnuie’s inert body.

Meanwhile, from the walls around us a army of ungnuie came. The Shishanes realized it fast, and killed their comrades too wounded to run in their escape.

Only them I noticed, Leadra was severely injured. Missopi was on the ground as well, bleeding more than the Panuin's first slave.

The ungnuie took his dead, and disappeared as fast as they had arrived.

\_We need to find help for them! \_ I shouted to Maothi.

\_Trust me, they would want me to do what I am doing. That can be the difference between life nas death for our tribe! \_ answered him. The Maothi was looting the bodies for their most powerful magical weapons and objects.

I could not believe he was loosing time on that, while Missopi and Leandra could die.

\_That sword, take it!

Before I could protest, he insisted.

\_ It trespassed Missopi's belly! Unless I am mistaken the healer will need to examine the weapon, that if we can find a healer before too late.

I accepted his argument. That sword looked much like a scimitar, it's blade had the color of gore. The Xar was more pure inside that weapon than on any other around us. That was probably the most powerful weapon used by our enemies, only weaker than Gipon's hammer.

\_What now? \_I asked. Already taken Leandra in my arms.

\_Let the slave behind! We don't have time to loose \_ observed Hicairi.

\_I would like to see you explain that to her owner, the Panuin!\_ meditated, briefly, the Maothi. He looked at me, and said.

\_My mother's home isn't far. We will be safe there, and she can send a slave to fetch us a Healer. Or, at very least a Phisician.

He was right, the house was not far. More a fortified living castle than a house, actually. The warrior who saw us coming from the top of a tower recognized immediately the Maothi, and a dozen men came to help us.

Violeta, the Maothi's mother, was waiting for us when we reached her door. She hugged her son, before welcome the rest of us. Moments later we were in the main room, waiting for the Phisician who worked to Lady del d'Ombre.

She explained to her son that would be impossible to find a Healer fast enough to save Missopi and Leandra, the severely wounded. According to her, the man who worked and lived in the house, Norpon,

was the next best thing: a alchemist Phisician.

Norpon is a small and fat man, 30 years old but already almost bald. He do seems to know his job. Took him only one instant to heal Leandra, but the hunter situation was much more serious. As the Maothi predicted the asked to examine the magical weapon. After look at it with his Divination glasses, his face became sad.

\_It is a blood-drinker, I'm afraid. That one in particular make cuts which keep bleeding and eating the victim's energy. A true mage would be able to save him, if you culd find one fast. A few hours after he die his body will be so tainted that not even a Mage Healer would make diference.

\_How much time he has? \_asked the Maothi.

As we all knew would be impossible to find a mage, let alone a Healer Mage, on Alkavalla. The city does not have a 'University of Magic' \_so to speak\_ and without one is impossible to form true mages.

Alchemists such as our Phisician Norpon, and civilized sigraxes like myself, can travel the word offering their spells for money. Mages on the contrary don't do such thing. True mage's services are a matter of National Security, the most important one in fact.

Thanks to the Phisician Missopi was able to stay awoken, without pain, during the two hours he still had. The Maothi performed religious rites of requiem a little before the end. Missopi's only complain was not have his body eaten by his tribe. He was sad because would not be possible to follow their cannibalistic tradition, since the tainted Xar destroying him from inside was too dangerous.

\_Are you sure this men are virsharis? \_asked the Maothi, after everything was finished.

\_ Yes, I am sure about that.

\_Then Shirshan will pay for what happened tonight.

There was chance that by giving the identity of those men to the Maothi I had made things worse for the Panuin, and for Lutianen. The attack made by the prestigious secrete police of Shirshan against citizens of Alkvalla, on Alkavalla's soil, would make harded to keep the Forest City neutral. The more obvious choice to them would be to join forces with Zaiaz.

First, that would be bad for Shirshan. However, my city would eventually be forced to fight Zaiaz'z army if Shirshan had not killed them all before that. So, Lutianen would be forced to fight Alkavalla as well, if an alliance between the giants and the forest men happened.

Does not matter, that night I couldn't care less. I wanted to see Shirshan pay for assassinate Missopi, at least as much as the Maothi himself wanted to see the same.

The Maothi still had religious rituals to perform, and would be best for him to do that alone. The Phisician suggested a quiet room near to the kitchen for Hicairi and Leandra. The slave needed some rest, so another girl was sent to the room in order to take care of Hicairi.

That left only me, and Violeta d'Ombre.

None of us would be able to sleep that night, so she invited me for a tour thru her home.

It is even bigger than I has imagined from outside. She keeps a small army in there, none of them from the forest people. Not pure blood, I mean; she do have some mercenaries working for her who are like her son, half forest men.

The internal architecture sometimes give the impression that we are inside an old movie from Earth and not on a planet in another Universe.

Untill them I knew very little about Violeta: she had been born, and lived, on New Valdiva\_ a Chilean city builded under the Ocean. Another thing I knew about del d'Ombre was that she had already been a slave for some time before her son was born. She remained his father's slave until the young man became a powerful sigrax and a Maothi, and have enough influence to keep his mother save as a free woman despite the fact that she has a slave brand somewhere on her flesh.

Lucky for me she was willing to take most responsibility for the conversation.. and her house is a facinating place. Eventually, however, Violeta decided to ask about me. Then I had to tell her that nasty history which ends with her son temporarily loosing his Xar.

She reacted with much less surprise than I expected. The last part of that history, the one where the Maothi had been given the obligation to accompany me untill his powers came back didn't provoked the reaction I had anticipated. The opposite reaction surprised me.

\_ I'm happy to know that! The Panuin found a way to give my son a chance of survival, once more.

Wondering I asked about the strange reaction of relief. The Lady seemed to be happy after I inform her that her son, the Maothi, had been banned from his tribal lands.: for indefinitely time.

\_He would be dead already if wasn't for the Panuin. She is using the man as a took, sending him to do things more and more dangerous. Maybe a time beyond her reach will help my son to see that.

\_By 'she' you mean his free companion, of course.

\_She helped him alot, at first. Wasn't for her they would never had given him the chance to make the tests and became a sigrax. Much less a gain his place as Maothi. Then I would still be a slavegirl, of course.

\_They seem to work well together \_ They do! That efficient conjugal dynamics almost costed me my live\_ better than most couples..

\_That's how it looks like, I know. However, she did all that she did for him just to have a blind guardian to use as a shield for her, and for her dangerous plans. My son is the crossbreed disciple who will never question her instructions. So far, she achieved exactly what she wanted from him.

\_ They seem to have a mutually beneficial arrangement. Sure, that does not means I approve the part

of it which involves trick people to use them as fuel for their magic rituals.

\_Easy to understand your bias against that part, since you almost died on their sacrificial altar not long ago. You may say I am too frivolous about that detail, Altair, but I must admit: after more than one decade among the Silent Climbers, humans sacrifices do not look like a problem to me anymore. What worries me is the logic behind her large scheme, I don't know what she is trying to achieve, but is pretty clear to me that she intend to use her free companion as fuel when the time comes, as much as she wanted to use you.

\_Travel by my side may not be much better, I'm afraid. I must reach the forces of Lutianen, behind Shirshan's navy.

\_Who are you, Altair ? What make you what to go back to this war? Do you consider Lutianen you "Nation" in the same sense my son considers the Silent Climbers his?

That questions I had made myself many times. Looking on Violeta's eyes I noticed that I still was not ready to answer them to another person. There was many ways to answer to Violeta Lechuza del d'Ombre, but none would be close to the true. Because the true, I would not choose to talk about.

Distracted by that conversations I did not noticed, but the sun was rising. And the tour was finished.

\_I suppose it's time to show you a room. You must be jaded, after your travel. Not to mention that figh.

Violeta touched the arrow wound on my shoulder.

\_I believe it's best, Lady del d'Ombre. We woke you up in the middle of night, and I already too too much of your time.

I was not tired, she didn't seemed to was end the conversation yet either. Nethertheless, would be inappropriate to continue.

\_Would you like to eat something, before I let you rest?

\_That seems a nice idea, Lady del d'Ombre.

\_Call me Violeta.

Violeta called the slavegirl, who had been following us all this time so discreetely that I had not noticed her until that moment. Gave her instructions, and led me to the stairs. So far I had seem only the first floor, the social area. The second floor harbors gest rooms mostly. Violeta's personal library occupy most the third, and fourth, floors. The books share space with some larger rooms and a training room with equipment even for the practice of archery and spells. The Fourth harbors a corinthian room with several small hot pools for public baths and a large hot pool were is possible to swim. I was surprised by the scale, from outside the house seemed large but not that large. When we took another stair to the fifth foor and I saw that there was more floors above that, I knew for sure:

\_Dimensional Magic. I had only heard about.

\_It's not so rare on Alkavalla. Seems to be so natural for ungnuie sigraxes, that I am not even sure that's only magic. Of course, most buildings like that belong to ungnuie. My son earned that fortress from the Panuin of another tribe, winning a bet.

We stopped in the fifth floor, inside an large apartment which made me think for a moment that somehow I was back on Earth. Except for electronic gadgets it was a perfect replic of a place a rich robotic engineer with a strong interest for classic music and for archeology could call home on New Valdiva. Even Chilean flags, from the days before the Global Unification as part of the decoration.

We had taken the long way, because there was already hot food waiting for us. Without ask she gave me a chalice, and filled it with some red liquid. The taste surprised me.

\_Wine?

\_I couldn't find grapes. That's made from some sort of fungus cultivated inside deep caves by the ungnuie. Feel like the real thing, does it not?

\_Who are you, Lady Violeta?

She smiled.

\_You know my history.

\_Not really. I remember your name, from home. You used to be a pianist, on Earth.

\_You knew my work ?! Not many people did: it was a bit too, "patrician", for most critics.

\_Even so, your name was well know. How nobody noticed when the vortex took you?

\_That's a question I should make to you, since you are the sigrax here. The vortex is taken people from Earth since the days of René Descartes, give or take a century. No one seems to notice. Maybe that's a magical propriety of that phenomenon?

Food was excellent. She touched with one finger a bracelet on her left wrist, a soft music came from the stained glasses on every wall.

\_That's a smart use for Xar! You are a very resourceful women Lady d'Ombre.

\_The design is mine, modest aside. And yet, two years ago I still was just a forest man's pleasure slave.

\_I didn't knew that. Only two years?

\_Things evolve fast among them. My son, he was born only 11 years ago. And yet, he is a grown man. Nobody can say for sure if he is age all his life like the forest men do, but if he does then he will be an old man when he reaches the 25, probably a dead man before is 40. Even being a Maothi.

\_I am sorry.

\_Don't! Altair, every life has pleasant moments, and parts we would like to avoid if we could. That at least we all have in common.

She put more false wine for us both. It was a bit stronger than wine is supposed to be, but my body seemed unable to feel the effects.

\_May I dance for you?\_ Lady del d'Ombre asked. As a slavegirl would have to.

\_That's your house, my lady.

\_You like to call me 'Lady', don't you? That's who you want me to be, Altair?

\_I am not sure how to answer that question.

She finished the drink, and walked around the lounge chair where I was sit.

\_”Lady”, sound like the name a female dog would have. You would want me to be ‘your’ Lady?

That was surely not my intention! The suggestion alone frozen me where I was.

Without take her eyes from me, Violeta Lechuza del d'Ombre leaved her glass on a balcony. Her face was deadly serious.

\_May I dance for you?

## 19 - Responsibility

Lady Violeta Lechuza del d'Ombre looked at me with cold eyes, and a deadly serious expression on her face.

\_May I dance for you? \_ she asked me, for the second time. Her voice more angry.

I was sit on a lounge chair, still holding a glass of wine half empty. She was now in front of me, dressed on a reserved large dress. Probably same cloth she was sleeping with when we appeared unannounced.

Violeta's facial foundations are Incan, but her eyes are blue and her nose brings to mind some french ancestral, forgotten a long time ago. His body was almost completely hidden, by her moves was obvious that it was strong and nimble. I had seemed Violeta playing the piano in holos (holographic images), see her dancing "to me" could have been under diferent circunstances a very attractive idea.

\_You like to call me 'Lady', don't you? That's who you wan't me to be, Altair?\_ she has asked more than once to be called Violeta. By now I was used to adress free woman a bit more formally, what is the proper treatment on Lutianen, if not on every city on Sharitarn \_"Lady", sound like the name only a female dog would have. You would wan't me to be 'your' Lady, Altair?

As Lady del d'Ombre asked this things came to my mind by no good reason the fact that there was a verry long way between me and the streets outside, and a mercenary army working for her.

\_Shall I dance for you??\_ she insisted once more. The rage growing in her voice.

Unable to speak I made a sign with my head. She crossed her arms, peeved. The, suddenly turned to stomping leave the room.

Took me some time to realise I was alone, because she would not came back.

The door used by the Maothi's mother to leave was not the same one we used to enter the apartment. I was still asking myself what to do next when the magical light globes closed their eyelids, and the room went dark. I found the direction we came from, but the door was locked. As a guest would be rude for me to break the Lock, and I had never learned lock picking: not even to use on normal locks, no need to mention that was probably magical.

Sooner or lather I would have to try the door she had used to leave. That was obvious.

Before I did, blue flames lit the room. Rising on the fourth columns around a circle on the oposite side of the room. I had noticed the place before, a cozy circle of large cushions on straw backrests near to the ground. There was a smallet circle inside, the floor elevated about one foot.

As I looked the flames from the exit door I had been trying to open, the music started. A woman entered running from the same door Lady del d'Ombre had used to leave. She felt on her knees, and

stayed shrunk between the columns of blue fire, right in the middle of the circle.

Getting closer I saw her clothes had a gipsy design, mixed with a style slave dancers frequently use on distant a region of Sharitarn, at North to the Kailau Mountains. She rose her upper body following the right arm when I entered the circle of cushions, beginning her dance.

One night before I had seen the Panuin's first slave, Leandra, dancing for me without music. Was a fluid, intimate, dance; both sensual and sweet. She smiled to me now and then; having fun; with a pinch of irony, as if saying to me "I knew you would fall for it! Not so bad after all, am I ...?". That dance had nothing to do with what Leandra did.

Was made of fast, large, movements, and strong impacts on air. The music had some flavor of 19th century in Spain to me. The air felt heaviest after each chord; I was feeling her perfume on it, there was wine, roses and something else. Cannabis, maybe.

Unable to disconnect my eyes from the woman above me, I let myself rest on the cushions.

Her face was angrier than ever. Her sweat covered her face, dripped from her nose, drenched the long and straight black hair now free. She neither stopped, nor slowed down her dance. Small belts on her waist, wrists and left ankle contributed for the growing tension.

Then the music stopped. She froze. Was as near to me as she could be without fall off the step.

The woman wasn't facing me, but turned to the same direction I was. Her back trembling, her weight on the left leg, the right one touching the ground only with one nail. Her arms open like hawk wings. For eternity.

And the music started again, slow bass. Without the metallic sounds still hanging in the air. For some time she didn't moved.

Then, without apparent movement from the woman, the shawl fell from her shoulders.

Del d'Ombre gave a long step, as if hoping to stealthily escape the piece of cloth on the ground. The flame reduced intensity. She kept the movement going, round, circulating the space where she was, ignoring me most the time. Her dance was now sinuous, but her face was as angry as it was before. When she looked at me, was with rage burning.

When she stepped on her shawl again, ending the first turn, she untied the knot holding a transparent scarf at her waist, and the scarf fell. She did so facing me, when she turned her back I saw.

Right above the skirt, under the spine line, the inverted Y used as a brand to mark slavegirls on that land North to the Kailau Mountains.

The beat speeded up a bit. Her steps became shorter, her trajectory a spiral. Giving the impression that the gravitational pull from the clothes on the ground prevented her from reach the more distant borders of her stage.

Now I was seeing del d'Ombre's shape with little to hide it. If I dared to imagine a woman's body

designed only to please me\_ sexually\_ I could not had reached something better than her forms. Another piece of clothe felt, now there was only the jews, chains with belts, and the last piece of vesture covering her hip.

Del d'Ombre touched her hip, still looking at me with rage. The the expression on her face changed, as if he was surprised, and she felt on the ground again.

Without think about it I appauded. Her body was not in the same pose she had been before start the dance. Violeta seemed to have collapsed over herself. She was not moven, and the prefecion of her theatrical interpretation worried me.

After call for her, twice, I run to her body fearing the worse. She was alive, but had lost conscience.

Them, from the direction she had came from with dancing clothes, five men entered. They seemed surprise, but that only stoped the group for one moment. One moment I used to reach one of them, and brake his neck.

I heard the the sound of bones cracking one instant before I saw the hammer flowing from my left side, aiming for my head. I moved to avoid it, but not fast enoug. The impact did not reach me with all it's streng. Even so, it has enough.

\_Still alive. What it is made of ?! \_asked someone I could barely hear.

\_Don't worry about him. Take the woman, we don't have time for him.

When I recovered, the room was empty.

Was not time to worry about the door, I passed through it as if wasn't there. Almost hit a slave girl who was there, waiting her mistress's instructions.

She guided me to a stair behind a false wall, and we reached the first fflow in no time. Dimensional magic.

To my surprise the Maothi was waiting for me, in full armor, sorrouded by six large fellows obviously not humans. Or at very least not normal humans.

\_I was about to send for you\_he told me\_ Someone took Hicairi during the night! The same men who attacked us I believe.

\_That's not all, they also took your mother.

His face lost the color. Then he spoke, without move his head.

\_Send a message to the Panuin: I am going to war against Shirshan. I don't care for what he think about that.\_ the lack of emotion on him scared me, quite alot\_ Call every friend we have on the city, I am collecting every single favor right now.

\_Let's go! Are you coming? \_ he asked me.

\_Of course!

\_Then you will need that.\_ he gave me the blood drinker sword, and a ring with a large red stone.

\_Put the ring only after we start running, and take when we stop. It has not use in fight.

Waiting for us in the street there was a unguie, but this one was much diferent to the one I met before. He was using a long hooded cloak, and his face covered on shadows seemed to be just a tangle of vines. Saying nothing, as soon as we approached the fellow started moving away: fast. Putting the ring, the Maothi followed him, and the six large fellows followed him. I almost lost the group before remember the jewelry.

We run, jumping obstacles and between buildings as if we had a smooth road under our feet. We reached about 300 mph, and kept the pace. At that velocity was still hard to keep our distance from the unguie constant: I wished to know how fast it could move without the need to guide someone.

We almost left the city, when the unguie stoped inside a hole between the base of a bridge and the ground. We followed him, but could see nothing soe some time and that forced us to stop running.

I could not walk and felt one the ground, dizzy, a few times before a peeved Maothi remember me to take the ring out. My balance came back as soon as I did so.

\_Can you see our guide? \_I asked. I for once could see nothing.

\_No, but there is only one way to go, and he will be waiting for us somewere in front.

We walked for some time, the corridor made several curves, but we were going down all the way.

\_Altair?

Asked the young man.

\_Yes?

\_How you knew they took my mother as well?

\_Divination spell.

We finally reached a larger chamber. There he gave me a small bottle.

\_Drink that, don't last, but will be helpful.

I did what he asked, and the forms around us became visible. My first impression was that I could see as far as I would under the sun, but there was no shadows. The I realized I wasn't really seem anything, could not not be sure if my eyes were open or closed and would make no diference is I hand was in front of them or not.

The Maothi shared the bottle with the other fellows. The ungnuie was with us, but he didn't need the drink.

We moves slower now. There was voices coming from a opening in the ground. From there we saw a large circular room bellow us, large enough to accomodate the Maothi's house and taller than the necessary for that. A small army was there, using heavy armor and silver helmets.

\_They intend to invade Alkavalla!

\_No, Altair, that's not enough men to do so. What they probably intend is to attack the most important tribes, and take strategic buildings and important people. Doing that they can force us to open our Port to their ships and help prevent a alliance with Zaiaz. Do you see my mother?

\_She may not be here yet.

\_Let's hope she isn't.

Before the Maothi finish his sentence the walls around a disturbance started bellow. A dozen ungnuies came from inside the walls and attackd the Shirshanes without make any noise. The six fellows jumped, and felt their way to the fight.

\_Follow me.

The half-breed forest man climbed silently, moving through the ceiling without effot. I stayed behind, considering my options. Follow the Maothi was not among them.

Jump, and the six fellows had done, would not be any better. Noticing my dilemma our guide moved away, and I undertood that I should follow him. This time we entered a more complicated mazo of tunels.

\_We need to reach the battle !! \_ I conjectured. He, as far as I can tell, ignored me. There was a smell in the air, but honestly I am not sure if was him or the city sewer.

When we reached somewere, was not the battle. He turned a corner, and we saw ourselves looking to a group of twenty men, carring seventeen unconscious women.

\_Stop!

\_What now?

\_Something is hapening in front of us. Stay here with your group, keep the ladies save. The rest of us.

They left the women on the ground, four men stayed behind. I notived that they were using only light armor. However, with the same silver helmets used by the small army.

Since the ungnuie seemed in peace with himself standing where he was, I attacked alone.

The other three surrounded me, when I almost divided one in two halves. That sword was a pleasant

weapon to use! A wave of energy came through my arm, and reached my lungs, and my blood. Before I notice, there was only one man facing me.

That man was a sigrax, and a more competent fighter than his pals.

I lost my first attack on his Energetic Perimeter, and felt the wall bang on my back. There was no wall, and instead of one man I was surrounded by seven different versions of myself: the man saw a Illusionist.

I had not moved, and could not attack because the women were still somewhere close. I only could not see where they were. The fellow's Xar was more pure than the one used to make the Mauthi's magical potion of Divination. My enemies, my self, started to move for take me down. I would feel their blows as if they were real, but they would make no real damage: they could let me unconscious, worst case scenario, but nothing else.

On the other hand my real enemy was still there, somewhere. I could not see him. His blows would make damage.

\_You die today, ii !! You should never had invaded the Green Poison, Altair! You should have leaved Fergus alone after your mage Healer die on the island \_said one me, with my voice. I knew the illusionist was not on the same direction my voice, speaking his words, came from. However, he was the one speaking them, that's not the sort of thing you can program a illusion to do.

The blood drinker sword was useless now, so I sheathed it. My only hope was to focus my Xar, and fortify the Divination spell already working. If I could do that fast enough, maybe I would be able to overcome his illusion before he kills me (what was my best chance to do that at all, after he kills me would be much harder to overcome anything).

My selfs walked around me, taking position. When the first strike came I noticed again one amazing fact about the Illusion Way of magic: is impossible to distinguish between a true strike and the illusion of one. Unless you have a Divination spell powerful enough working in your benefit you must wait until the illusion spell end to know if you are hurt or not.

As much as possible I tried to stand still, not a easy thing to do under the circumstances. First they tested my with a few superficial cuts. Then the one me who carried an ax cut my right leg just bellow the knee, and I felt.

Having good fun, they cut both my legs of, and my hands. One nailed me on the ground with his magical sword travessing my belly. Then the ax came again, and took the rest of my left arm, and a bit of the shoulder attached to it.

Unecessary to say, I has completely forgotten the divination spell. All I could do was screaming. I remember beg for forgiveness, and for a merciful last strike.

There was no mercy on me, for me. But one moment later all Altaires stoped. Then I was the only Altair left.

I wasn't hurt, and after stand up I saw why. The illusionist was on the ground, the handle of a dagger

standing on his nape. The unguie had done that, probably just after the shirshane finish his talk. The spell didn't needed him to continue until run of Xar.

\_That was, something...! \_ I mentioned, not expecting an answer.

Hicairi was almost buried under two naked women, one half-breeded giant, the other from a race I had not seen before. She was dressed, but her transparent short dress left little to imagination.

The Maothi's mother was here as well, among the women left on the ground. Except for three cases the women were not dressed to be seen. Most probably had been captured sooner than Violeta, at night, while still sleeping. Some, maybe, had been undressed by their captors. This naked or almost naked women were about to find themselves in a catastrophic position.

Would be impossible to explain the problem for myself, if I could find the Altair I used to be before the vortex. Be improperly clothed outside her home shreds a woman's reputation, that is true on Alkavalla and on almost any civilized place. Circumstances are immaterial. Make no difference if she left by her own will, or was taken like the women I was looking at. Even this powerful and rich woman would lose influence, actually a Low Caste free woman would have a fair chance to leave the humiliating experience with less serious bruises on her reputation than a High Caste lady.

Some unconscious women just rescued by the unguie and by me would awake locked on chains. Between that dark tunnel and their own beds someone would make the decision; maybe a soldier, maybe an employee, or even a relative. No one would take the initiative to prevent the enslavement, in many cases, and once the declaration had been made without opposition the only thing left for the new owner consummate his right of property would be collar the woman. After that, just to make it irreversible, he could have her branded.

Lady del d'Ombre's problem was worse than any other. Her slave brand was obvious on her back. A free woman who is a former slave will try to hide that fact as much as possible. However, even if everyone knows she is a former slave and must have a brand somewhere on her to know that is extremely different than have seen it. No man is supposed to respect a woman after that: "I saw the brand on you" is a strong expression among this people, and when literally true it shut up any woman.

That was not all, actually at least two other ladies on the ground had slave brands on them. The Maothi's mother had a problem worse than being just naked. She was dressed as a slave. A pleasure slave dancer, no less! I could cover her using the dead men's clothes, find someone for her in the bags left by some other shirshanes on the ground, or even steal the dress of another unconscious lady. No matter what I did, would still remain the smell.

Violeta L. del d'Ombre's body was covered on perfumed oils, the specific fragrances on her are never used by free women, they identify pleasure slaves as well as an iron brand. Her long hair was soaked! No one could miss that obvious detail.

I did my best to cover Violeta, to hide her as well as possible. Could find some man's clothes on the bags, and took some from the dead enemies. That, with a little luck, would protect her identity. After that I did the same for Hicairi, but about her I was a little less worried since she would not have to stay for long on Alkavalla.

\_You have to take them home! \_ I said.

I insisted, but the unguie would not touch the woman I had I my arms.

\_At least Lady del d'Ombro!! I take care of Hicairi.

As the impasse continued the Divination spell lost effect, and I saw myself blind again.

I left the Maothi's mother on the ground and searched with my hands. To my lucky I found one dead body soon enough, actually half dead body but that was the half I needed . He still had the silver helmet on him. As I expected there was a Divination spell on it.

That divination spell worked a little diferent than the one I was using before. Instead of a visual image inside the mind it gave me a kind of sonar. Was harder to deal with the information, I understood the advantages for someone who had experience with the thing. Would be possible to know what was inside people, and behind doors. Probably the reach would be better as well. However, for someone with no experience whatsoever the first impression was that would be better to take the damn thing of and never touch it again.

After some insistence, I found del d'Ombro again, and Hicairi was still at her side. The unguie was easy to find, he was the one thing around me I could not "see" inside.

\_Can you at least show me the way?

He reacted, moving away. I run to not loose him, with the two women. One on each shoulder.

We reached Violeta's house after run throught a way I did not recognized. The warriors who let me in made no questions about the large packages I was carring.

As discreetly as possible I asked a slave girl to bring me Leandra.

\_I need a room, with privacy. Far from the two rooms from where Hicairi and Lady del d'Ombre have been taken.\_ I told her.

She talked with lady del D'Ombre's first slave, and the girl showed us a comfortable place close to the library.

\_Do you trust the men guarding the house?\_ I asked Leandra after leave the two unconscious women on a large bed.

\_I don't know. Some of them were spies from Shirshan, we know that for sure. They are gone now, and even if there is more the others will be more watchful than ever.

\_May I speak, master? \_asked the other girl, not looking me in the eyes.

\_Yes, by all means, say what you have to say!

\_Most men working for mistress are honored warriors. Many own their lives to her or to her son, some are true believer who follow the young master's teachings. We don't know yet how the slave hunters entered the house, or how they leaved without being seem, and eight guards are dead, even considering all that I believe mistress guard can keep her and your friend safe until the young master came back.

\_As far as I know she is a good first slave\_pointed Leandra\_ 'As trustworthy as any', so to speak.

\_All right. That being the case, I must go. Stay with them! Protect both.

I looked for the ungnuie, but the street was empty. Then I decided to go back by my own, hopping to be able to save the other women. Or at least some of them.

Before I had been following the guide and the others. The way seemed complicated, but not extremelly so. Thing is, I did not fully noticed how difficult was to even see the way around us while following people at such speed.

This time I could not find the bridge. To make it worse, I could not find the region were the bridge should be. When I finally gave up and took the ring of I was lost on a neighborhood I had never seem.

People on the streets were more exotic than on any street of Lutianen. Few humans, except for forest people, and even them were not one third of the population. I almost raised my sword to kill a octopuse, before I realise no one else was concerned about. Even such monsters from deep ocean are welcome here, for business.

On the other hand the buildings and the ground on that neighborhood gave me some confort. Being less disturbing than what can be found on the rest of Alkavalla.

\_Alex !! \_a familiar voice called from somewere behind me.

I turned to see Osdar, the nice dude who had saved me, giving me a place for stay for one night when I had lost my sence of identity. He decided to call me "Alex" because he had understood that I was a spy on his city, neither wanted to know my true name nor to force me to lie. Being a good host, he saved me from would have been a uncomfortable situation for most guests.

With Osdar was his elegant and cautious granddaughter, Aandi, and a man he promptly presented to me.

\_That's my son, Dulad, I spoke to you about him. \_the proud the old man felt presenting his strong and handsome son, 'Dulad', was obvious. I suspected the reason behind that pride could partially be something more than just the usual feeling of happiness for have a opportunity to present his son to a friend.

\_I have something that belong to you! \_told me the strong man. Making suspense, before show me the dagger.

\_You left it behind a desk, I was not sure if I would ever have the chance to return it to you.

\_You may keep it. I took a good armor from your house, if I remember it well, and I doubt you will ever see it again.

\_You must be joking, that's clearly a magical weapon! I can't use it, no one in the family can, but I had it tested by a friend. It can buy a hundred armors like the one you lost. \_insinted Dulad.

\_Your father saved my live, Dulad. What is a dagger compared to that?

\_Don't make my son think his father is a liar, Alex: that's unfair with an old man! I already told him how you saved our home, and my dear granddaughter here.

\_I was there too, Alex! Things happened as granpa says.

\_I can't disagree with both of you. To be honestly, I still can't remember that night well.

\_I would love to hear about what you do remember from that night, friend!\_ mentioned Dulad.

What I do remember hurt's me alot, too much to even explain for someone from Sharitarn (still used to by the time that conversation happened). It wasn't Osdar's fault, only my on.

Even so, I had a much better reason to refuse his kind invitation.

\_Let me ask you, I am sorry but I have to be direct. Have your visit to Alkavalla any relation with the Virshari?

Both men showed the shock on their faces. The girl was also surprised, but by their reactions.

\_What you mean? \_asked the older fellow.

\_Don't worry about me. You must leave the city, right now. Don't pack luggage! There is a ship you can use? A personal one, not related to the Virshari?

\_We came on a merchant ship, it bellong to my father's house. That would raise less conjectures.

\_Then go right to it. Alkavalla will be a very bad place for shirshanes soon, that if it isn't already! Expecially for shirshanes who helped the Virshari's failed move.

\_ Thank you, friend! You saved my family, once more .\_ Osdar embraced me, grateful. The young girl didn't seemed as sure as he was that she could trust my words. However, she probably understood that the situation involved too many informations she didn't had.

I followed them to their ship.

\_You can came with us. We can take you to Timurda if you want, crew and captain are from Mibavan, my father only rent the ship. No one will stop us, unless they intend to make the Dead's City their enemy.

I would consider myself extremely happy, if I could accept Dulad's offer. I could not.

Hicairi was still under my responsibility, and I could not let the daughter of Duegdar behind. Not in the state she was, drugged. The terrible situation she was stuck in was my fault, and I had to solve it before I could serve my city and pay my debt with Fergus.

\_If you ever need anything from our family, do not hesitate! \_Told me the old man.

As soon they entered the ship left, as fast as any ship moved by oars can go.

Looking they leave, I tested the weight on my hand. Their ship had took distance enough to escape a chase thrown from the harbor, and I looked to the weapon.

\_That is a beautiful dagger. \_I spoke to no one.

The I turned my face back to Alkavalla, and felt butterflies in my stomach.

\_Now, how I am supposed to find my way back?!?\_ I asked, still talking to myself.

Remembering again that first moments after the vortex, I admitted the absolute lack of geographical references, the only two meaningful things I knew how to find were the Sorrowfull River and the Forest: first one was right behind me, the other behind Alkavalla on every direction.

\_That day, at least, I only had to choose between two alternatives.\_ I meditated, starting the walk.

A cold drizzle began to fall.

## 20 - Walk in the Rain

I used to make jokes about the fact that fictional character never go to the restroom to do the things real people use restrooms for. "They only go there to escape!". Well that's not true for all fictional genders, of course. On stories about Adventure is a matter of follow the wisdom of a game's creator from the XX's, named Alfred Hitchcock. Alfred said; "Story is life without the boring parts", there is little chance you will be able to make a scene of adventure with your character sit pissing (unless it is a humorous parody of Adventures). Well, here on Sharitarn men usually piss stand up, you may have a chance with than; but I still don't recommend anyone to accept the challenge.

On the other hand, easy things, like find your way to the home where you are staying on a strange city, can prove to be trickier than they look like. Specially is the strange city were you see yourself is as strange as Alkavalla. More so if it has just discovered an hostile foreign force hidden inside the city. Under such circumstances even leave the merchant zone near to the Sorrowfull river be a bit complicated.

I had to reach Lady del d'Ombre's home as fast as possible. During the night a furtive attack took place there and until the last information I had no one new how the enemy had access to the house (which is a well guarded fortress). The Maothi, del d'Ombre's son, was not home. He was fighting against Alkavalla's enemies, probably still hoping to rescue his mother. I had no way to contact him and inform she was safe and at home.

However, would del d'Ombre and the other women inside her home stay safe? Particularly Hicairi, who as under my protection and has incapable to defend herself. Hicairi had been drugged by my fault, mostly, and until she came back to her normal self I would stay worried about her all the time.

However, to have a chance to solve the problem at hand I had to find a guide. Even before that, I needed a bag because a useful and powerful magical helmet was hanging on my belt. The same kind of helmet was been used by the hostile invaders from Shirshan. Almost no one knew me on Alkavalla, and the guards could not believe my word if I had to explain that I had killed the former user of that helmet to rescue a influential Lady citizen of their city.

Besides, a cold drizzle was following, and I would not like to be outside on the streets if it changed into a heavy rainfall. Around here it often does.

What I needed was a shopping center. The main municipal market was very distant, but that does not mean I could not find a respectable building full of commercial establishments on the Merchant, and "Turistic" part of Alkavalla. As a matter of fact I could not have missed the place if I tried to hide from it. "The Beacon" is about ten times higher than any other building in the neighborhood, it is not a large building even so is impossible not to notice the place. Is the only building on that part of Alkavalla with isn't made of stone, like most city it is a growing living tree.

I'm not sure if the fellow was just pulling my leg or not, but someone told me that The Beacon is the body of a sentient, and extremely intelligent, ungnue. The richest citizen of Alkavalla.

I reached the shopping just in time, a dense mountain of water felt over the world the moment I stepped inside The Beacon.

To my luck I have on me the money I had earned by my hand on the gijar I had killed. The Panuin decided to pay me before our group left his tribal village.

Didn't take me long to find a establishment selling bags, backpacks, and other articles for travel. It was on the second floor, between a place specialized in domestic animals and products for them, and a place selling instruments of torture from all over Sharitarn (so they propagandized, but they only have things from the two Continents in the sides of the Sorrowful and from some parts of the North; still, is a impressive collections).

The owner of the place where I bought a large and strong backpack, waterproof and very light for its capacity to support weight but not magical, was a large fellow from the same ethnicity the six fellows who followed the Maothi into battle (or more exactly who had jumped into battle without wait for him). However, unlike the other fellows this one liked talk, a lot, and made effort to sell me some reinforced clothes, I actually needed a new belt more comfortable to carry the blood drinker sword and that made him very happy.

Their ethnic group don't look like humans to me, they are too big, too large, and their skin has the texture of elephant skin. However, they are as humans as I am; or, at very least, as humans as the forest people are. Their people came from the same Universe where the vortex found the forest people. Like the forest people they didn't evolve naturally but are the product of genetic engineering, their ancestors used to fight side by side with the forest people's ancestors, working more or less as light tanks of war. When the Merchant\_ who was better acquainted with the History of War on Earth than myself\_ told me that I had to ask if they had 'heavy' living tanks of war on his planet: to my shock his answer was 'yes'.

Unlike the forest people this fellow's ethnic group failed the challenge of Shirshan. They never created a home for their 'kind' on the planet. There is no city like ruled by this light tanks of war like Alkavalla is ruled by the forest people.

Describe this shopping center in detail is tempting, if the Main Market of Lutianen is impressive to me (and it still is) that living tower is far more strange and amazing. Even worried about Hicairi and Violeta I could not avoid to feel distracted. The fellow who sold me the bag told me where I could find maps from every place on the two Continents, including the city of Alkavalla. He also indicated to me two other places where I could go to try solve my problem is the map shop was not enough: a shop owned by the Silent Climbers were probably someone would know where the Maothi's mother resides, and a place to hire guides and mercenaries. He described the last one as "overkill", and I agreed with him: I would not be fighting during the way, and if I had to would be a very easy fight with the powerful blood drinker sword I was carrying.

Before I reach the map shop I stopped on a book shop, with also dealt with used books. They had more than just books however. I was there the same mind crystals used by giant spies to record the secret that all Shirshan mages had in fact disappeared and were not just hiding to attract a large invasion and surprise their enemies.

The mind crystals are only good for giants capable to use telepathy and for mages and sigraxs with the specific Mind Carving spells to simulate the giant's natural power. However, there was many other ways to store information, and all sort of texts to buy. I never learned any magic of the Mind Carving Way, but there was also thing like grooved staffs made with Illusion Magic with any one with awaken magical potential could "read". Most space inside this shop, however, was occupied by non magical books.

I was able to avoid the places many selling slaves and/or clothes and/or jewelry. Ony briefly visited a shop expecialized to sell fine works in metal from Niore, because they had a Ironworker Caste working there, making custombuilds slavebrands. He also propagandized to have "all slave signals from all places on Shirshan". I learned up there a bit more about the many "second brands": brands used to mark slaves as punishment, or to inform some special and rare peculiarity, like the fact that a slave is a trained Phisician or Steward.

The second worse brand used to punish a slave is the one which means that this slave has attempted escape. The worse one means the same, except that the slave who has that mark was the first slave in the house when she tried: a forest people fellow was having his giant slave girl prepared to be receive that brand when I entered the shop, I will never forget the expression of terror on her face.

The process of branding itself is surprisingly fast. The most odd thing about that place, however, was the "Earth Brands": simbols, mostly logos, taken from my home planet and used to brand slaves who are from Earth (mostly as a normal slave brand, eventually as second brand). I found a map of Africa, a Eiffel Tower, and the logo of a classic fast food: to my great surprise the ironworker's assistant had a decent idea about the meaning of each draw.

The ironworker was an alchemist, and had the special magical itens necessary to brand the rare "sigrax slaves". He just had the tools to brand slavegirl, because that tools are far too expensive and their use far too rare, one has many than one male slave for each 50 females. As for true mage slaves, like Riagare's slave Piol, he would not "dare to even think about": only the better ironworkers do that sort of thing and the price for their work is something few can afford.

Two other places I was not able to avoid, before I reach the map shop: The Gargoyle and The Banished Minbavane. One can find nothing similar on Lutianen, at least not publicly, and the second place was the reason for a declaration of war between Minbavan and Alkavalla (never taken to action, because Mimbavan is too far from Alkavalla and because to one up there was stupid enough to move a large contingent of men against a city protected by ungnuies without the absolute need to do so).

The Gargoyle, as any industry doing business on Alkavalla\_ legally\_ which does not belong entirely to a local citizen, is a society. That particular shop has a foreign partner from Mimbao, the Dead's City, a authentic true mage Necromancer. The fellow Mage Caste wasn't on Alkavalla, of course, he never had to leave Mimbao in order to do busines, it can be done by proxy. A shame, since I had never seem a necromancer, not even a sigrax,

The Gargoyle sell undead, true undead. It is among the very few places on Alkavalla dedicated mostly to sell magical itens. Those are low undeads, the ones who have no intelligence and can only follow, poorly, the most simple commands. Some happen to be animal corpses, others former humans, but despite their simplicity they all are very resistant and durable. Also, they all are very expensive.

The nice couple taking care of this shop knew a great deal about necromancy, he has no magical potential but was capable to use some minor necromantic spells thanks to the magical tattoos on his chest (he is a forest man, of course). As for the Merchant Caste lady, a half-breed forest woman, she was supposed to know more than a little about the Necromantic Way: she was a undead herself.

High Undeads, the intelligent ones, are "people" as far as most civilized cities on Sharitarn are concerned. However, they are a bit like the gypsies during some periods of Earth History: something goes wrong, a crime is committed, a plague spreads, can only be the undead neighbor. Therefore, as a general rule undeads will keep their condition in secret on Human cities. See one publicly exposing what she is was a clear remind that Alkavalla is not a human city, and has no wish to pretend otherwise.

In Black Centaur they teach us almost nothing about the Necromantic Way, beyond the fact that it exists. The nice couple was kind enough to me to explain that undead are not necessarily made in closed categories. There is some major groups, with general characteristics, and low undeads are almost always designed inside their because that is the more practical way to make them. High undeads on the other hand, are unique.

There is some principles, a necromancer can not avoid some impositions given to him by the Way itself. To exist forever (forever! Well, more exactly until be destroyed) a undead must take energy from somewhere, normal food and water are not enough. Some limitations can be given to the undead and do so reduce the energy necessary to keep the fellow 'healty', some powers can be included if the necromancer is good enough. For a free explanation about the matter I considered myself extremely satisfied with the Lady's generosity.

The Banished Mibavane has nothing to do with magic, they trade items much more rare and exclusive.

A long time ago, before The Age of Spiders end, the vortex did things very strange for the people who study deeply the phenomenon. Instead of focus one Universe, it tuned in two, and instead of let the involuntary immigrants scattered at random on Sharitarn it placed them all on the same small circle surrounded by mountains. The two groups eventually became enemies, of course: one walked east and founded Agoioven within the crater of an active volcano, the other founded Mibavan at west of that valley.

The humans brought by the vortex, ancestors of the Mibavanes, were not the dominant species on their home planet. They had evolved from the beginning they evolved as livestock. The dominant species, the ooe, needed them as hosts: much more intelligent and with a life expectation a few dozen times longer the ooe have no muscles or bones, they can move by themselves and have a very primitive sensorial system. They survive controlling other animals, and they favorite vehicles before they met the vortex used to be the humans.

Since there was many other kinds of humans, and other intelligent animals, in their new home this first ooe brought by the vortex tried to capture as many locals as they could. Didn't ended well for the ooes, probably because they knew nothing about magic.

Today the humans are the masters, they keep the ooes but do something to take from them the chance to establish control over its host. That way the ooes became a little more than living computers, effective shields against many sorts of attacks against the mind, and most poisons. A few are still free

and allowed to use human slaves as hosts, but those are kept under severe vigilance.

With the oods came to Sharitarn a technology that remains secret, and only the citizens of Mibavan have access to: the 'living armors'. Despite the name they are not always armors, one can have many sorts of improvement without any magic involved thanks to the science ooe. Except that, one can't: because they don't sell it, ever!

The only place outside Mibavan where you can find yourself a symbionte, and the only place anywhere where you can buy one, is on Alkavalla, inside The Beacon, not far from the shop where I had to go in order to find the map I needed.

Once you enter is hard to leave The Banished has diagrams and draws of anatomy everywhere, showing different options of symbiosis. It's not impressive, the fellow who owns the place escaped from his city carrying what he could, and that was not the good stuff. Besides, even if he had the "top of the line" it would still not be a match for what a sigrax can do with Xar. Even so: it is amazing! I probably would have bought for myself a third arm, or a tentacle to use as a third arm, if I could afford it.

If nothing else, I would have wanted something like that because no magic involved means zero chance of any anti-magic spell ever working against it.

We already know I could not afford the Banished fine products, therefore I let the place to go where I had to go: the map shop.

What I can say about it? Is a shop, sell maps, that covers almost all. Shelves and more Shelves of maps, most of them painted by an artist without any magic involved: just pure skill. For many different reasons is dangerous for sigraxes, and even for true mages, to look at large regions at once; the Mage Brotherhood has no such problem I am sure, but they will not draw you a map that I can promise! Some regions, larger than I had realized until I enter that shop, can't be seen using magic, not even by soothsayers archmages, because large 'accidents' poisoned all Xar up there. A few thousand years will pass before any magic be possible again inside these places. By all that, the Caste of Geographers of Alkavalla travels Shirshan (trying) to map every part of it: this time, when they say "the whole World" they really mean whole World.

Is a work which will never stop, because the surface of Sharitarn changes much faster than the surface of Earth. However, Alkavalla isn't the only city trying.

The young lady taking care of costumers like myself that day was not the owner. Shvinni is a Geographer Caste, bold enough to be looking for a chance to travel the world despite the obvious danger. It's easy to start a conversation with the lady, she is polite enough to answer questions about the product and help you find what you need. Talk about herself, or any other subject, does not seem to be included in her job description as she understands it.

She is a small and very feminine woman with the face of a child. Not forest people, but something as exotic as them. Her skin has blue spots and her eyes without pupils are metallic violet, her lips and tongue white as milk.

Didn't ask about her race because she gave me no chance. I was not sure if my curiosity would be

considered rude or not if I ignored the girl's reluctance.

The Owner is another free woman. I saw the painting covering the only wall without shelves, and recognized the lady in it as the non human lady I had encountered before, naked and unconscious in a tunnel on the underground.

The picture showed her skin was light blue, with some darker spots; like the ones on the young Geographer, but lighter than the ones on the young girl's skin. Her eyes as metallic as the geographer's eyes were yellow like gold and bigger than any human eye I had ever seen. I had not noticed the colors before, because there was no light and the divination spell I had drunk had been created to show only the necessary information, which did not include colors. The shape of her head, and face, could leave no doubt: the woman represented by the artist was the same one I had let behind to save Hicairi and Violeta del d'Ombre.

\_May I ask who is the woman looking to us?

\_My mother, the owner of this shop.

\_Is she a Geographer ?

\_She is not. My father was. You need any other map...?

I took the clue, despite how subtle it had been, and left the woman alone.

With a map of Alkavalla I entered a pub, asked for something light to eat, and started the exercise of planning my way home. Reading maps is no longer a useful skill on my home planet, on real life, but enough videogames still demand it. Thanks to that, I had developed the necessary intimacy with that kind of thing to be able to read a map without losing time rotating it in front of my face asking myself if it would make more sense upside down.

I had chosen a map with the areas on the city controlled by each major forest man's tribe had been indicated by different colors. I knew the Maothi's mother did not live inside the Silent Climber's territory, but close to it. My notion about how far her house was from the border of Alkavalla was not accurate, and could not be because the borders of Alkavalla are impossible to define. All that said, I now had a reasonable idea about where I should go.

\_That is a nice map.

The man in front of me seemed interested in what I was doing. He was not a citizen of Alkavalla, that was obvious by his clothes. Was dressed like a Fishman Caste, but the high quality shield he was carrying was not compatible with that: the man could only be from nowhere: a lawless mercenary.

\_Your first time on Alkavalla? \_ I asked, returning the smile.

\_Not really, I like to come here from time to time. See a true city, walk among the people. You? \_ "sell your services", I almost said. There is an obvious tolerance on Alkavalla with visitors, lawless included. The guy had no need to pretend he was not one.

\_Yes, it is my first visit. Came to do some business with the giants, a good moment to do that: there is always money to be made in wars.

\_That's true. Now you are looking for a place here on Alkavalla, I noticed. Intend to buy a business, or a home?

\_Find a home, actually. Not to buy, I just lost myself on the city and want to find my friend's home, the place where I am staying on the city.

\_Your friend is a Deadly Bite, I understand. \_ he said, pointing to the small dot I had made on the map.

\_Silent Climber, actually. Their Maothi. He let me stay at his mother's house for a few days.

\_That must be a very close friendship! I would love to hear how you managed to make a friend like him. However, you will not find the place where you want to go there. It is on the opposite side of their territory: Bone Brakers. About here.

If the information was correct I had run more, a lot more, than I first imagined using the Maothi's red ring.

\_Thank you for your help!

\_We "fishermen" must help each other from time to time! If you ever need a hand to "visit a friend" ask for me at the club, if all your "friends" are as good as the Maothi's mother we can share 70/30! Or you can take 50% if more hands prove to be necessary for the 'visit'. Two floors above where we are, ask for Simbad.

\_I will! \_ I most certainly would not! My travel plans did not include invade people's homes to steal goods and kidnap women. That was the kind of "visit" Simbad had been insinuating.

There was still rain outside. Sometimes a tempest continues for days, no where on Earth has a weather like that. Some large wild animals enter the city to hunt during such rainfalls and most citizens stay where they are for as long as necessary to avoid the many dangers outside. That was not the case now, the rain was weak now. I decided to risk myself on the streets.

After a few short sprints using the ring, and a few conversations with the locals, I found out that Simbad had been mistaken. The place where I needed to go was more or less where I first had imagined it to be.

After another sequence of sprints I found myself on a place that seemed familiar. Lady del d'Ombro's house was maybe three 'sprints' distant.

An flying ax almost found his way to my chest, and to avoid it in time I lost the red ring. It made a turn on the air and came for me again, moving so fast that all I could see now was a disk dancing in the air.

My blood drinker stopped that dance, and the explosion of Xa created by a magical weapon being destroyed threw me to the other side of the street. Before I could stand up I was surrounded by three men. They attacked fast, but I jumped beyond their reach with minor injuries. My sword was intact, but too far away.

By her own mind my hand touched the dagger I had never used. The moment I took the blade two mirror images of myself appeared around me. They looked exactly like me, but moved by their own.

When the enemies attacked I understood that wasn't an illusion for all five senses. Unlike the figures who had tortured me in that tunnel these mirror images affected eyes and ears, but not the flesh. The confusion caused by them gave me time to stab one enemy, and break the leg of another, then I ran for the blood drinker. It was not where I saw before.

Another man came from a shadow, and attacked. He had the Blood drinker in one hand, and an axe like the one which exploded a little before in the other. His friend still able to fight decided to stay behind and help the one with a broken leg. A wise choice, I wish I could do the same. The mirror images came to help me, but even with their help I was not doing well against the enemy.

Man was slower than me, but not by much. The dagger proved to be an excellent weapon, but to keep the nasty blood drinker away I created opportunities for the axe. My best strategy was to keep some distance, and look for the red ring. If I could find it, maybe I would be able to escape that fight.

\_I know you! 'Largo', isn't it? You are the Silent Bozo!!

He gave me the time I was fishing for.

\_You killed Yog!!

\_Pardon me! I was not myself that day. Besides, you and your friend had kidnapped me, chained me, and I had all reason to believe my life was in danger at the time.

He threw his axe, I escaped it but his friend behind me also did it. Unlike me he had been expecting for his fellow's move. Before I regained balance he hit my leg with an Indian's bullwhip, and pulled me to the ground. I cut the bullwhip with one blow a moment later, but the axe took my right arm in his way back to his master.

Bleeding and unarmed I stood up, still trying to find the ring. Largo had left the magical axe on the ground, and was holding the blood drinker with his both hands now. From behind me his friend was approaching as well. I stepped on my severed arm, moving to avoid to have one of them at my back.

The axe had finished his dance for the day, that was a different dance. Both of them coming closer to finish me.

They allowed me to put my back against a wall. That would be neither the clean kill made by a professional assassin, nor the honored kill by duel. That was vengeance.

I turned and jumped to the wall, kicking it I got velocity enough to reach the non magical dude in the

head with my shin. He felt, I took his sword and put his body between me and his fellow armed with the magical blade.

\_You will die today, monster. \_informe me the lawless alchemist.

His observation was quite valid. The sword I had, in my left and now only hand, was a common weapon. Regular black iron. He was armed with a blood drinker. I could make time, dancing around him. Would be a grotesque dance, with my blood flooding me and marking the ground behind my steps.

My shouder was bleeding alot. My arm had been taken from is, and I could not even see it on the ground anymore. I could not even see the ground anymore. Largo, walking to me with the sword was the only image I was able to focus.

I Tryied to punch him, but he jumped to my side, cutting ribs behind my arm.

He came back, and attacked my face with the sword. Then he punched my nose making me stumble on the corpse of his dead fellow, I felt on my back.

While I was trying to stand up he came, and severed my rigt leg, a little above the knee. I felt grunting.

Kicking the ground, reaching for the wall with one hand, I saw Largo moving for the last blow.

Them he stopped.

\_That's personal. Leave me alone! \_said Largo's voice, I barely could see him.

\_That's not a duel, and that's not a contract! You used our resources to borrow this men, and made enough noise to attract every forest man guard and possibly awaken the ungnuie sleeping since before your mother grow a moustache. Was not for the mess made by the shirshanes today we would all be answering questions made by a forest man torturer by now; or, much worse, questions made by a ungnuie torturer ! What is goin on here??

\_I don't have to answer to you! I only answer to Threntis !! \_ Largos voice staid in the air, unanswered. Then a third voice spoke. That voice I remember well.

\_Start by answering why my name is being said out loud in the streets, on a city were my men are supposed to be secretly.

Largo did not explained that point. Had never occured to him, probably. The first man who had spoken resumed the conversation.

\_Then tell me: why are you attacking a man we explicitly told us to leave alone?

\_He killed Yog!!

\_If you have problem with that, Largo, you call him for a duel. Then it will be a private matter.

Largo walked away, and I could no longer see were he was. His leader spoke again, that time his

voice came from closed.

\_Just don't call a duel here, or on any other place were we are supposed to not be. Also: don't do that before we have the answer from Zaiaz about if he want or not contract us to assassinate him. You will not kill for no charge a man we can be paid to kill few days latter, Largo. You are supposed to know better than that, don't you? You know what is in stake.

\_I am sorry. Will never happen again!!

\_I believe you. Now help you brother to clean that mess you made.\_ decided their leader.

After a little I saw Threntis, looking to me from above.

\_Altair. Can you talk? \_the fellow's voice is strangely persuasive.

\_Yes.

\_Our conversations seems to only happen on circunstances like that!

\_Not, fault.

\_They would like a lift to somewere?

I must have told him were I intended to go, before I pass out. Because the next thing I the Maothi looking at me, he and his guards carring me to a bed.

Then Lady del d'Ombro was standing at the side of her son, Leandra somewere behind them. Looking worried, both women. The Maothi seemed less sure about if he wanted me to survive or not. Someone was cleaning my woulds, I could not see who was, but didn't seemed someone big enough to be the bald Phisician Norpon. Them shadows drowed them all.

## 21 - Death

I felt no pain, saw no light, my entire existence did not come back to bore me with the same mistakes I made and experiences I did not like the first time. If anything I felt deeply sad for understanding that I will never be able to make a home to myself, anywhere. Sad for the things I still wanted to see on Sharitarn, and for the things I will never even hear about: Missed to look at Luciola's tattooed backs while I was taking the small brunette from behind; to rip out Hicairi's clothes and hit her with a cat of nine tails until my mind came to peace with her small treasons; to have the Maothi woman branded and collared, rape her all and make her suffer until she begs for forgiveness for trying to kill me, until I tame her so completely that she would suck my penis and swallow my sperm every day without dare to bite me with her pointed teeth, missed to make love under the stars with Violet and spend the rest of the night naked, talking with her about music and robotic engineering: missed the things never done, and the desires I would never admit to my mirror. Also I missed Black Centaur; missed my home at Ankara, the most beautiful city where I ever lived; missed the word "saudade" left behind and not used by me, even in thoughts or dreams, since the day I left Cuiabá. On the other hand I didn't miss Violeta's dance, didn't miss Leandra's smile and the feeling to be defenseless in face of her seduction, and lost inside her: those real experiences of pleasure and amazement I did not miss, because I did not remember.

Sadness is cold, even near to the Equator.

Having accepted the end of my existence, with sadness, I was surprised to hear voices. They were familiar, but I was not immediately able to determine who was speaking.

"I respect Altair. I want Altair alive and healthy. I need Altair strong and well".

As a camera floating freely, or a third-person omniscient narrator, I saw the comfortable room where the woman was sitting in front of a mirror which covered the entire wall. She was exotic and beautiful, and had an absent look on her face. Her body was covered only by a diaphanous smock frock. She repeated the same words again and again, looking at her image on the mirror in the eyes. Another woman was sitting behind her, paying attention to each word.

A third woman entered the room, a bit older than the other two. However, the only way to know her relative age was by the serenity disguised as cynicism hidden somewhere in her face. Her forms were as firm as the bodies sitting on the floor, and her heart played a stronger music.

After staying still for some repetitions of the phrases, the third woman spoke. It was no more than a whisper:

\_Interesting.

\_ She only hears my voice now, mistress. She only hears it when I speak directly to her.\_ explained the woman sitting behind the one looking to the mirror. That continued repeating her lines, in the same slow tone.

\_Was my impression that people in dream state produced no memory what so ever. If that's o, which purpose you intend to achieve whit that exercise ?

\_She is now passing through the last fase of the dream walk, mistress. During another six hours, give or tak a few minutes, Hicairi will remain highly sugestionable. After she wake up she will not remember a thing, however, she will follow the commands with little to no hesitation.

\_For how long?

\_Depends on the case, mistress. For a single command said once, and which goes directly agains the person's self interest and inclinations, most people take a little more than a year to realize what is happening and star to fight to get rid of it. After that, depends one the person's will and if she can find specialized help to solve the problem or not.

\_What you are doing whit this bitch make the command stronger. How much more strong?

\_My master specified the precise words I should use. The mirror helps to fix the commands even more. However, I don't know the exact answer for mistress's question. A Mind Carving sigrax would be able to get rid of it in one day, after the first week, if it had been done with him: no matter how well it had been done. The same sigrax would be able to erase de command from another person, but would take him a little more time. About true mages I have no idea mistress, probably they never enter that sugestionable state.

\_You are trying to escape my question, slavecunt? Would you dare to even try?

The girl giving the explanations was not sit on her knees, turned to the woman stand up. Her hear down as she speaked, her eyes on the ground. She was bigger than the woman who was making the questions, but completelly submissive. Under total control.

Unlike the other two women the one giving the explanations had a iron collar around the neck. Unlike the other two women the one making the questions had her body almost completelly covered my luxurious jewery and decorous clothes.

\_ I intend no disrespect mistress ! I just don't know how much I can speak about that subject. Would be better if I could ask my master before give more answers...

\_The Panuin ever told you to keep that secret, from **me**?

\_He never said that! Nethertheless, master is always very careful about who he gives that informations to.

\_Let's make a deal: you will pretend you are a slave sleeping under my roof and eating my food. You will answer my questions and obey my commands, everytime: except if what I tell you to do would brake a direct order given to you for your master. Then, the first day you see the Panuin, you tell him every thing I asked, and everything your told me. If he don't like something, well, that's my problem!

\_Mistress, I...

\_Your owner is the Silent Climber's Panuin, don't ever forget that cunt. In the end of the day, if he decide I know too much he may always kill me. If my son didn't like that, he can kill him too. Now, stop testing me! You will not like my next argument, pet: I promise you.

\_ The process makes the command much stronger, mistress. To a woman like her, without magical potential awake, there is little risk that she will ever be able to realize by herself what I am doing now: a Mage Caste could by accident step on it learning a spell, even a alchemist could bump by accident on a magical object made to reveal that sort of crude manipulation of the mind, but not a person without magic. Even if it was completely absurd, strange to her mind, and dangerous to her, she would probably follow the commands during years. Since it is harmless, probably she will follow it until the day she die.

\_She needs to repeat for herself the commands. Anything else?

\_One clear command would be enough. Repetition fixes it, and when she is the one saying the words the effect is stronger, and faster. Beside that, I know no other rule.

\_Well, I know a few more rules! But that's not a matter to debate with you. Now: tell Hicairi she will listen my voice from now on. Leave the room after you tell her that.

The slavecunt seemed in panic. She was desperately looking for any argument that could make the older woman change her mind and let the girl in dream state doing what the Panuin wanted. There was no argument, she could say her master had closed that door, but that would not please her master more than her obedience to that mistress.

Controlling herself, the woman who explain things turned again to the woman in trance. Spoke with the woman in trance in the same deep slow voice she had before:

\_Pay attention, Hicairi. You will listen another voice, soon. Wait that other voice. Obey that other voice, always.

After give that commands the tall woman left the room. The woman who had forced her to leave took her place on the floor. She expected until hear the door closing to begin. When she did, her voice sounded more intense and clear than the one used from the other woman to give the commands. Far more imperious too.

\_Hicairi, pay attention.

Nothing changed on the surface, but I could feel Hicairi's focus becoming more intense.

\_Do you masturbates?

\_Yes.

\_How often?

\_Once a week, if I have time.

\_Tell me about the time before today, the last time you you masturbate.

\_I was in my room, at the giant's palace. The flying knight had taken me to Zaiaz in person, and I had been given a luxurious room with rich clothes, everything around me was as exaggerated as my room in my grandfather's house on Lutianen, but less tasteful. I did not like the place, so I closed my eyes before I touch myself and tried to imagine I was on a camp, looking to the stars.

\_What else you imagine?

\_The flying knight, carrying me away, tying me on his scare beast.

\_What else?

\_My father.

\_Continue.

\_My father rescuing me. Fighting against the flying knight in a duel and killing the flying knight to protect me, the same way he killed many other men before to protect me.

\_Continue.

\_I began touching my vulva, imagining my father coming to untie me. Covered on his enemy's blood. Instead of free me, I imagined my father cutting my clothes with his dagger, telling the ropes on me. He commanded the beast to fly with both of us on its back, and kissed my neck from behind. I tried to scream, but was still gagged and could not make any sound.

\_What you would scream in your fantasy, if you could?

\_No! Don't do that! You don't have to do that, daddy; let me alone, you are hurting me!!! Please daddy, don't touch me like thaaa...! I beg you, ple...

\_How often you imagine your father doing sex with you?

\_Once a week, if I have time.

\_Your real father ever did that to you, in your real life?

\_No.

\_He ever touched you, sexually; he said or did anything that suggested he is sexually attracted for you, Hicairi ?

\_Daddy never touched me sexually. Daddy never said anything that suggested sexual attraction for me. Sometime, when I appear somewhere he isn't expecting me, for one moment I see lust on his eyes, but only for one moment: then he realize that he is my he looking at, and the desire evaporate.

\_You like those moments before he realize is you he is looking at, Hicairi?

\_Yes, I like.

\_How many times you have done sex?

\_Sixty-seven.

\_How many times you did that with free men? How many of them have you been forced?

\_Three times. I was never forced.

\_How many men?

\_One twice, other one time.

\_Did you imagined your father was the man with you, every time?

\_Yes.

\_Touch your self now. Masturbate, Hicairi.

Hicairi obeyed

\_See your daddy's face, Hicairi. Feel your daddy's smell now, and feel your daddy's touch.

\_Now, Hicairi, see your daddy's face slowly evaporate, very slowly. You can't see daddy's face. Feel daddy's smell disappearing. As his smell disappear, Hicairi, feel daddy's touch weakening, stopping, his hands are gone now. Feel daddy moving away, far away: daddy is gone!

The hand of Hicairi slowed the pace, until stop completely. She gave me the impression that she would take it away from the middle of her legs.

\_Keep masturbating! Keep touching your vulva, Hicairi. Caresse your vulva. Feel your own smell, feel the floor behind you, and your ass touching your naked heels.

She obeyed, a expression of confusion twincled on his face before submerge in the emptyness of her dream state.

\_Are you horny?

\_I am a little horny.

\_You will feel the lust growing, and as I speak you will continue to masturbate. Each touch make you feel more horny. Each time the air enter's your lungs it makes you want to move your fingers faster. Keep moving your fingers as same speed you are now. Each movement your fingers make touching your vulva make you want to come.

Hicairi's face and respiration breathing began to show the first signs of her obedience.

\_As you touch yourself, and find out that you are very horny, you find out that you need to let your body feel the pleasure. Your body needs to cum, now. You can't cum! You can't move your hand faster, but you can't stop. Something is missing, you need to come, your body want to cum, you can't stop and you feel more horny than ever before.

\_You will feel that need every day, from now on. Look your eyes on the mirror.

Hicairi did so, the effort to open the eyes was evident on her face. Despite that, she continued doing what she was told.

\_Repeat : "I will feel as horny as I am now, every day. I need to cum every day. I can only sleep after I cum. I need to masturbate every day. My vulva becomes hotter every time a man looks at me with sexual desire. I touch myself every opportunity I have "

Hicairi had to repeat it a dozen times, before the other woman demand her attention once more.

\_Are you horny? How horny you are?

\_Yes...: I can't, I never felt a need that strong to reach the orgasm.

\_ You will feel that need every day. You will not reach the orgasm!

\_Now, you see a face at distance.

I noticed a single tremor of hope shaking all her body. She continued slowly masturbating, her clothes sticking to her belly and breasts becoming wet thanks to her perspiration.

\_It grow, closer. You see it. Is Altair's face.

\_Oh! \_let Hicairi escape, surprised.

That surprise was shared by me, since I realised who that Altair is at same time she has. I am Altair.

Seemed to me ruthless cruelty to force a woman to masturbate thinking on a dead man. As we established in the first paragraph I died before all that scene in front of a mirror start.

However, exactly because I was dead I could do nothing to help the poor woman. She was alone under the cruelty of that evil mistress.

\_The face of Altair grow, became more clear, and it make your vulva feel more sensible to the touch of your fingers. You feel Altair's smell, and it make you feel fear, because his smell make you obedient, Altair can make you do anything. You see Altair's hand, and your body beg to come, and you body beg to come closer to Altair. Your ass need to feel Altair's hand. Your big, beautiful ass need to be grasped by Altair, It need to be gently slapped by Altair everytime you imagine Altair's face. You feel Altair grasping you by your waist and pulling you closer, to grasp your ass. You fear his hand. The more you

fear Altair's hand, more you want Altair to grab you! The more you want Altair to grab you, more horny you feel. More horny you feel, more you fear Altair's hand.

\_Look your eyes on the mirror. Repeat: "I fear Altair's hand. The more I fear Altair's hand, more I want Altair to grab me. The more..."

The formula was repeated, over and over, until I stop counting.

\_Altair is looking at you. You know Altair is here, you can feel his smell. Don't hasten your hand. You need the orgasm. You can't have the orgasm. Your need continues, your need became stronger every time you breathe. You must have Altair's permission, without Altair's permission you will never reach the orgasm. Repeat:

"I must have Altair's permission to reach the orgasm, every time. I can't have orgasms until Altair give me his permission. I need to have orgasms. I always cum when Altair command me to cum. Any time, any place, when Altair command me to cum I have stronger orgasms and they grow until I lose my senses, or Altair tell me to stop. I must have Altair's permission..."

The smock frock was as soaked as it would be if he had just left a pool. The effort Hicairi was doing to keep breathing was now so evident that I asked myself if it was not a peculiar murder technique. Any moment the 'mistress' would say "now your heart stops" and the wet woman would be as dead as me.

\_Altair is here, you feel his presence. You can't escape! You are bind, and Altair is approaching.

The imperious woman was horny herself, by now. However, her skin never touched Hicairi. Not even her hair. She stayed as close to the defenceless woman as possible, without touch any part of her. The imperious woman stayed as firm and controlled as it was when she entered the room. I could only be sure she was making a recent stoic effort because I could come closer enough to feel her smell.

She conducted the same scene Hicairi had described, controlling the intensity of Hicairi's masturbation. In the middle of it, she made 'daddy' vanish, and Altair replaced him. Near to the end of it Hicairi started moaning without have been commanded to do so. A long and slavish song of supplic.

Ignoring the wordless begging the imperious woman continued, steel cold.

Once more, as had happened during the dream, Hicairi loosed the fight against the rapist. Which clearly was more a fight against her own sexual crave than anything else. The evil woman was perverting Hicairi's pure and honest sexual crave for her own father, but the evil woman was not changing anything about the violent aspect present since the original dream.

\_You need Altair inside of you. You need to hear Altair's voice giving you instructions and commands. You can't think when Altair ask you to do something, you obey. You can't think, when Altair give you a instruction, you follow anything he say. You can't think when Altair give you a command, you obey. You always obey Altair.

\_You need Altair's sex inside you, you need Altair's the voice telling you what to do. Listen to Altair's words, like a slave listen her master's words. Hicairi must please Altair, Hicairi must cum, Hicairi feels

horny and obedient, and Hicairi must always please Altair. Repeat:

...

A voice tremble, dragging, followed the instructions.

Now Hicairi would try to speed her hand, to reach the orgasm, despite the lack of instructions to do so. The other woman would let her, for some time, before crush the defenceless woman's hopes.

\_Have you being touched on your anus by a man?

\_No, I have not.

\_Have any man tried to convince you to do anal sex?

\_ I never gave the chance for any man to feel comfortable enough to suggest that. Some man looked to my ass more intensely, caress it a bit too much, I never let it go beyond that.

\_Touch your ass now. Caress it, feel it from outside before you put one finger inside. Get acquainted with the sensations, before you caress your anus with two fingers, put two fingers inside. Don't stop touching your vulva.

Hicairi could no longer stay sit, she felt on the ground, doing as the other woman had instructed.

\_Imagine it's not your hands. Imagine is the hand of Altair inside your anus. Altair want to take your anus, he want to cum deep inside you butt. What will happen.

\_Altair will have me, as he wants! Altair will put Hicairi on her knees, and invade her arse. My body belong to Altair, I will beg for his mercy, I will ask to be spared and even offer my cunt to him. Altair will ignore my requests and rape my reluctant bunghole for the first time, and I will love him for that for the rest of my life!!

The scene continued, reach in details that any other. Actually, each situation seemed more detailed than the one before. More intense, as well.

The tension was so unbearable that even the imperious woman could no longer breathe in her constant, steady, pace. Without any clue, a third-person omniscient narrator could have used to anticipate, the imperious woman stomped one hand on the ground saying:

\_Stop!!

The other woman froze where she was. Looking like a person who was at one uncomfortable position to stay still.

\_Sit in front of the mirror. Look your eyes on the mirror.

The interaction was still going on, but I lost the rest of it. Because someone else entered the room. That person, however, did not use the door, but came from somewhere behind me. The direction I had

not looked at, because I experience a feeling of fear the one time I tried.

\_Finally! We need to talk human. Can't wait the end of whatever it is.

I turned to face him. Could not see what it is, only that it has the general human form. It's arms were behind the back, it's head inclined on my direction, it's posture like the one some professors assume without conscientious deliberation when they are dealing with students dumb and slow.

Behind the thing with a male voice I saw a bed, and a body on it. For some reason I felt strong waves of fear when I looked directly at that body, it gave me uncomfortable chills.

\_Let's leave that room, because I need your attention. Follow me.

I did what the thing wanted. We passed through the door, and found ourselves on a familiar corridor. It was Violeta's house, and I realized that the woman in the room behind us was Violeta.

\_Who are you? Are you taking me to the giant bird people on this world believe to eat the souls of all intelligent beings after death?

\_I am not working for anyone, much less a bird. I don't even like birds! Besides, you would be useless to me, if you were dead. I intend to use you: therefore, you are alive. We met before, you helped to carry my body to a ship, and I talked to you once on Shirshan. Took me sometime to find a way to leave the place, and I could not pass the city walls on my magical body. They are protected against that sort of thing.

\_You are the mummy!

\_No need to name calling here! I am trying to have a civilized conversation with you.

\_Who do you want to be called?

\_Call me Douglas, the name is fresh on your mind and seems to have a light feeling attached to it. You didn't like the last time I tried to talk with you using my own language. I should have done so, but I was too confused still, and the matter seemed urgent.

He was right about Douglas. I had not been conscientious of it, but the scene between the two women reminded me of him. The fellow is a friend from my childhood, who became a rare male doctor, and after that a Psychiatrist with a subtext of shamanism hidden on his personal style of doing his job. I looked at him to deal with a problem once, and he used hypnosis to help me; worked.

\_All right Douglas, what do you want from me?

\_I want your help to save this planet, and possibly this Universe, from annihilation.

\_Look like a valid goal to me. When do you imagine that annihilation would happen?

\_No more than a year from now. Probably sooner.

\_How?

\_A mage on Shirshan intend to to do things which can't be done with forces no one can't control. He is about to start something no power will be able to stop after it reach a certain point.

\_Have you ask the Mage's Brotherhood? Seems to be the kind of problem they exist to solve.

\_I have contacted them, they are the idiots and paranoids who will not believe me enough to look the problem for themselves before is too late.

\_Why me?

\_A few reasons, I will not explain to you them. One is the poison on your blood.

\_I see.

\_You must go back to Shirshan as soon as possible, Altair.

\_I am on the middle of something, as you probably noticed by yourself. May take some time.

\_Do what you have to do. Just don't procrastinate! I still have things to do, and the end of all Universe now did not fits in my projects.

\_Who is on that bed, inside the room?

\_You are. \_ I lost my conscience suddenly when he told me that.

My experience to came back this time was like my experience entering Alkavalla for the first time: gradual, and disturbing. I was in pain, and there was someone else with me.

I was kissing someone. Another person was kissing my belly. Was difficult to tell were the pain was, but I felt something was not right with the right side of my body. Something was wrong with the left side of my face as well.

\_Are you sure? That will not hurt him even more? \_asked a woman from some distance. I recognized the lady del d'Ombre's voice.

The woman who was now kissing my penis stopped for a moment, to answer.

\_That's his best chance for survival, mistress. I can't be sure about anything, his body don't behave like a human body is supposed to: what is a good thing because a human body would have died before reach this home. I am using the same therapy I would use on some species with metabolisms which react more or less like his.

\_Do your best.

The woman went back to her work. I did not recognize her voice.

My eyes opened, and I saw that was Leandra who was kissing my mouth. With effort I moved a bit, and became clear what was wrong with the left side of my body. My arm was missing. My leg wasn't there either.

The shoulder felt fine, given the circumstances. The place where a leg was supposed to start on the contrary was burning with pain. My left eye had been destroyed and a huge scar was covering the left side of my face from the chin to the forehead. Despite all that, I was feeling the beginning of one erection.

I moved a little more, and noticed a wound on my belly. The blood-drinking sword had entered there, and its tip had reached the other side. I not even felt it during the fight, but was pretty obvious now. There were a few more wounds, painful but small, on me.

Hicairi was not present. Except for these three women the room was empty.

I had sex with both slavegirls, after ejaculating once on the unknown throat. Somewhere during the second time I remembered who was the woman I was embracing from behind, with the help of Leandra to find my balance.

Only once I had seen her before. She was the pretty physician who treated me after the Threntis's men transported me from Shirshan to a castle recently conquered. The one my mynd had named Freckles the first time I saw her face, and slavish décolletage.

After we had exhausted all our forces, we cuddled. Their warm bodies at my both sides created a sensation of calm and comfort.

Dra. Freckles was at my right side, with her eyes closed. For no reason I felt the need to kiss her neck. When she opened her eyes a thought crossed my mind.

\_I am sorry for knocking you out on the sick bay, when we met.

She smiled.

\_Thank you for your kindness, master. But a free man never needs to feel sorry for what he does to a slave. Besides, I would have called a guard as soon as I knew you were awoken. Your only chance to escape was to make me unable to do so before I had the chance.

\_I am pleased to know you kept no bad feelings about the incident. I am not a man from Sharitarn, and I don't feel about women the same way they feel.

\_I believe we have that in common, master. The first part, I mean: the four people inside the room have all been born on Earth.

She had included the number as a strategy to remind me the fact that Violeta was still with us. She was now sitting on a chair, not in my field of vision. I moved a moment later, to look at the free woman. She

said greeted me.

\_Is a pleasure to see you awaken. The soft bunny talking to you is a former doctor from our World. After the vortex she was trained as a Physician, according to the Caste Laws slaves can learn their skills, at least on some cities.

\_That's fortune for me!

\_Indeed! Norpon left us.

\_He was a spy from Shirshan?

\_No. We found him with his throat cut, two hours after I wake up.

\_Where is Hicairi?

\_She is fine now. The dream state ended yesterday, she is a bit indisposed but according to Dra. Honey Pot here it's nothing to worry about. By the way, is just 'Honey Pot': they don't give titles to slaves, unless they are joking.

\_How you came from that castle to this house? \_I asked directly the Honey Pot. That could have been rude\_ since I was talking with lady del d'Ombre, and she probably knew the answer to my question\_ if the people inside the room were not all from Earth.

\_I belong to the lawless warchief who saved you on the street, and wanted to interrogate you before that. He sent me to care for you for as long as necessary. Master ask only that you have me delivered to the 'Club' in the Beacon. Someone up there will know what to do with me.

\_For how long I have been sleeping?

\_A little less than three days. Your recovery is wondrous Altair! No sigrax should be able to survive the wounds made with that sword: the only thing I had seen before which heal like that was a Djhalard!

Honey told us, forgetting her slave status for one minute, so moved she was by intellectual excitement.

I had to ask what is a Djhalard. She explained to me that they are large creatures covered in fur which look like the mythological Wendigo from our home planet, and have a natural process of regeneration that make a Healer sigrax's spells look like a lemon balm tea. They founded Micula, before it be named Micula.

Despite their brute strength and scary metabolism they have been expelled from their land by humans and are almost extinct. That, according to Honey Pot, is why we almost never hear about them.

As the naked Physician explained this things her hand was working, with exquisite elegance, to make my sex rise again.

She succeeded, the Violeta's evident joy. However, before I could do anything a unexpected thing

happened.

All my body contracted, jumping without my intent. So strong it was that Honey Pot and Leandra fell far from the bed.

Waves of pain moved inside me without origin or destiny, before my wounds began to burn. I wanted to scream, but could not breathe.

When the air finally accepted the insistent invitation made by my lungs, all women in the room were on their feet. Only Honey Pot didn't look surprised: I had a right arm again.

It was not a human arm. Looked like a gorilla's arm after some sadistic handler shaved it with a dull blade. The hand had the human shape, but the fingers were too long and ended on claws larger than any forest man's claws. Unlike forest man claws they did not seem like small cicles designed mostly to grab and climb. The claw I saw were black, almost conical but with a side so sharp that it marked the stone when I used the wall behind the bed as a support to raise. Forest people's claws hide inside their fingers like cat claws, mine don't.

The wounds made by Largo with the blood drinker were closed now, but they left deep scars. To my disappointment I had lost my right leg, and my left eye, neither grew back.

Leandra pointed another thing I had not yet noticed:

\_Your new hand has six fingers, master Altair !

I could not take my eyes from it. She was correct, of course. Still looking at my strange hand I asked:

\_Please, call me just Altair! If not all the time, then at very least when there is no native from this planet present.

\_The order will put her in some risk, Altair. Slaves who became used to deal with free people in private as if they were also free people have a good chance to eventually make a mistake by distraction, I'm afraid. Leandra must obey you, of course, but do that may end on a meeting with the whip for her.

\_advised lady del d'Ombre.

Leandra silently nodded.

\_Being that the case, forget I asked that. I will have to deal with 'Master Altair', sooner or later.

\_Since you are on your feet again, Altair, there is a free woman who is waiting to speak with you. She seems desperate to do so, and almost begged me to call her as soon as you became available.

Violeta's domineering voice during talking with a defenseless Hicairi in front of the mirror, the same mirror I was looking at, which covered the opposite wall, came to mind. I froze.

Del d'Ombre must have noticed, but either decided to ignore or attributed some other meaning to my odd behaviour. Her reaction, or lack of reaction, allowed me to relax, a bit. Since my conscience came back I was suspecting the mirror scene to be just a meaningless dream. On Violeta's innocent face I

saw the confirmation of that hope.

If she had really done for real all the things I had seem she doing in my dream, I would have noticed at least a small sign of shame on her face now.

The fact was that: before see anyone else I needed a bath. It proved to me dangerous.

I almost severed Leandra's arm and Honey Pot's ear before lady del D'Ombre allow both to leave, and let me alone. Once I was by myself, control the new arm became easy. Even when I could not make it do what I wanted, it did not moved against me. A natural instinct, perhaps.

Once I relaxed in the hot bath, I noticed more one thing about the strange arm. First it seemed to be articulated as arms are supposed to be. If it is not, once I distracted myself it started to move more like the body of a snake than like an arm. Was a alien sensation, but not unpleasant by itself.

When I left the bathroom a pair of wooden drutches was expecting for me at the door.

Move was not as hard as I expected, but the process felt, obviously, slow. The stairs became a challenge. Took me a long time to reach the first floor.

For some mad reason people on that planet tend to assume without ask that you are a proud and self sufficient dude who would feel offended by any offer of help on circumstances like the one I was facing! That's why no body would date to volunteer a little help to me in my fight against the stair steps. Or could be just the fear to be decapitated by my new and still poorly controlled claws, I can't now for sure.

Once I finally reached the room here food and people were expecting to me, I identified two important informations. First was that I had been starving for some time. The other was that the woman expecting me was not Hicairi. (that one was on bed, with a minor flu).

\_I need to hire you, Altair of Lutianen. \_told the lady before I had time to reach the food.

She was Shvinni of Alkavalla, the beautiful non human Geographer Caste who administer a map shop inside The Beacon.

Her mother did not came back, after the diplomatic incident between Shirshan and Alkavalla. That was not all.

Most women taken from their home by the spies from Shirshan, all free and influent women, had been slaved on their way home. A predictable risk I had been able to protect Violeta and Hicairi from. However, every one of them had appeared by now: slave brand or not their whereabouts was know. Only "The Blue Lady", sigrax Nidriz of Alkavalla, had vanished in thin air.

Her daughter's concerns was understandable and heart touching. Despite that, Shvinni's ask for help reminded me Douglas. Not the doctor and hypnotist from Earth, but the foggy mummy from my recent dream.

\_I feel sorry for you, and would love to help, but as you can see I am not capable to do much right now, my lady. What make you think I am the right person to find your mother?

\_I don't believe you are! Not at all. Notwithstanding, I need you. The best tracker and detective on this city will only help to find my mother if you accept to take the job with him.

\_That's odd. He gave you a reason?

\_He gave me no reason, because that fellow only talks with other ungnuie. They didn't ask him why he wants you on the job because according to the consensus opinion among the ungnuie this fellow is insane. All that is irrelevant: he is still my only hope to have my mother back, and that's why I am here!

\_Basically, my job would be to walk behind a mad plant with these crutches until it finds and rescues your mother.

\_Give me your price.

I asked myself for one moment what would be the value on a mercenary price table for stumbling on crutches through possible dangerous places behind an insane ungnuie while it searches for a woman probably already enslaved, branded, and owned by lawless men. Maybe I could go to "The Club" and ask Simbad about.

\_I will think about your offer.

\_Please! My mother can't wait much longer. She needs a unique medication to stay alive, if she doesn't drink it in the next two days I will lose my mother! Also: Alkavalla will lose a sigrax who has unique powers, in the middle of a war. If you will not do what I ask for money, then do it for your city. I promise you: you help my family, save my mother, and we will fight for an alliance between Lutianen and Alkavalla, against Shirshan and the giants! Ask your friend here about who we are on this city.

The Maothi seemed worried. Clearly upset by the situation he agreed to talk.

\_Her mother does not age, she is on Alkavalla since a little after the first forest man arrived. Her magic did not work like ours, we call her a sigrax to make it simple but she learned her magic before the vortex. The house where we are now was built by Nidriz. She does not have a seat on the Inner Circle, but her voice carries almost the same weight as the voice of your friend: the Silent Climber's Panuin.

Shvinni accepted to leave, and I promised her an answer next morning.

The Maothi man, and his mother, stayed in the room.

\_Would be too much imposition from me, if I asked for a room here in the first floor? \_I asked, to break the ice. Also because I did want to avoid the stairs if possible.

\_I will find you one, and move your things.

\_Things? I was not aware that I had things, I assumed my clothes could not be saved.

\_You assumed correctly. However, your friend mercenary brought your belongings with your almost

dead body. \_explained the Maothi. I would have felt happy to find out that I had so many friends. That, if I believed him about that.\_ Before he send the slave-physician.

\_Humm...?

\_He brought us the ring too, but it belongs to the Silent Climbers. The sword is yours, of course, your dagger is also here. The backpack with your magical helmet and the money you earned for kill the gijar will be waiting in your new room too. I understand you spent part of it buying a map of Alkavalla: the map is inside your backpack.

\_What you think about this offer I must decide about ?

\_You ask me to either betray myself and my free companion, or lie to you a second time.

\_What my son means is that the offer is good. Shvinni does not have on her family half the power she pretended to have in order to sell you the deal: her mother listen her as much as my son listen my, which is not at all. However, in the present circumstance Nidriz needs you. I believe she will honor any deal her daughter make with you.

\_You looked that unguine for help when we needed to rescue Hicaire and your mother. How mad he really is?

\_I looked the unguine's help, in general, it was the one who appeared. "Drift" is how we call he. He is fast, and always find what he is looking for. I never had problem with him, but most hunters say he can't be trusted. Their own people have many strong feelings about him, and as far as I can tell no one good.

\_What about the price?

\_I need Sharitarn to fall, and Zaiaz to take the magical University. That's the better end for my tribe, the Silent Climbers need a true mage. Therefore I don't want to do anything that could help the victory of Lutianen. Nidriz does not have the power to make Alkavalla join your city in this war, and Alkavalla does not have the power to make sure the victory of Lutianen against Shirshan and against Zaiaz. All that clear: if I can offer you something to convince you to not ask Nidriz to advocate for a Alliance between our cities, let me know.

\_Advocate for that Alliance would cost Blue allot influence. Probably she would prefer to pay you with money if she was the one closing the deal. A fair price under the circumstances could probably change your life: for instance, right now you need a right leg. I am rich by most standards, but I don't have enough money to buy you a symbiont to replace the one you lost without go bankrupt. My son's tribe could pay that price, maybe the Panuin would if you asked, but I don't believe you will. On the other hand, the only honored answer for your dilemma that would be acceptable in the eyes of most people on this planet; my son included; would be to ask for the Alliance. The only thing I can advice is that: don't go greedy: Nidriz will only honor the deal up to a point. If you ask both money and diplomatic help, her daughter will say yes, but I bet you will end empty handed.

We still talked a bit longer. I asked them for suggestions about numbers, the answer they gave me could make me a rich man. Not as rich as a true mage, but enough to buy me a excellent symbiont leg,

two ships as nice as the Meek Goose used to be, and still have some money left to start a small business of some sort on Lutianen. That all, without forget to pay the money I still owed to my friend Fergus.

Or, instead, I could keep my honor. You may not remember by now, since the last time I mentioned the subject was a long time ago, but I never understood the concept of honor. People on Sharitarn care a great deal about it, but they can not explain the idea or defend it for a skeptic. And when comes to honor I am nothing if not skeptic.

Once I had time to actually think about, became clear that I had nothing to think about.

Would I risk my life to rescue a defenceless woman? Yes, that was not a choice. That was the only thing a man could do, woman's lives must be protected at any cost. Would not be possible to say no, even if there was no payment for the job.

Would I do the job for money or for honor? Again, no choice to be made here.

I had finally digested that Mathematics, on my new bed in the first floor, and was ready to sleep. Someone opened the door carefully, and closed it. The sneaky person was inside the room, and moving closer. I pretended to sleep, if was a assassin I intended to surprise him. There is one good thing about have claws as big as dagger blades, after all: one is never unarmed.

Before I jumped to surprise the possible assassin, she surprised me:

\_I need to talk with you for a minute. \_said lady del d'Ombre.

\_No problem, my..., no problem Violeta. You could have knocked on the door before you enter. What you just did could have caused an accident, almost was.

\_I could have knocked. However, my son would be worried if he knew I am here. He still is awaken, drinking and thinking in the living room behind that wall.

\_We should keep our voices down then?

She moved gracefully, as she always moves. To sit by my side, on the bed.

\_No need to it, I have chosen to you a room with a heavier than normal door, and surrounded by thick walls. Once the door is closed we can shout out all night and no one outside will hear us.

\_You have in mind a fight between us, then? I did something insulting to you during our last conversation. I wish to apologize for not call you the way you asked to be called, I had no intention...

\_Chill, Altair! You saved me from humiliation, and probably by slavement. You can call be your bitch if you want. As long no other free person is around I will bark for you any time, if you want me to do so.

\_Of course I d...

\_Chill, Altair! You have no reason to feel jumpy. That night I was behaving like a bitch, to scare you.

Is a rare opportunity for me: be with a legally free man, who is in his heart still a man from Earth. We would do no harm to each other, just jape a little. That is past!

\_You don't mean that is past because now we will make some harm to each other, I hope.

\_I can't say that, because what I have in mind do involves some risk of each of us hurt the other. That, if you accept my offer.

\_As a saleswoman you are a great pianist, to be honest.

She captured my face between her hands, looking my one eye as a panther that intended to eat it. The she interrupted my attempt to say something fun, speaking serious.

\_Long story short: I want to became your free companion. You men must be the ones asking us to join in free companionship. Ergo, I came to sell you that idea in private.

I thought about the time when I believed to be dead. For a singular instant I reggretted having been wrong.

\_...shaw I send someone to bring my piano ?

## 22 - First Chapter

Drift's patience with how slow I moved was astounding. That first day working together we started our search where we had seen Midriz, the dark tunnel. I used the magical silver helmet all the time, and started thinking on it as my "bat ears". My sense of smell was more accurate than ever had been before the fight with Largo, but by the middle of morning was evident that I was not doing anything except slow the unguine's work.

The vegetal hound continued making as much sound as a shadow usually makes. He was not able to speak, and I doubt he would even if he could.

A grey and large fellow was with us to help me go through the more challenging obstacles. Avenao is one of the forest people's 'cousins', a human ethnicity designed on their home World to be living war tanks. Most of them on Alkavalla are lawless mercenaries accepted on the city for a limited period of time, but Avenao's great grandfather had performed an important service for a Panuin once, and was rewarded with citizenship: which on Alkavalla is a hereditary status.

By cultural imposition Avenao was trained as a Warrior Caste since he learned to walk, five days after he was born. By choice he worked mostly taking care of people old or sick who could pay for his services. I would gladly have allowed him to carry me all the way, instead only to overcome the worse obstacles: by cultural imposition from my original culture I am neither proud nor self-sufficient. However, I do have a sense of self-preservation, and accept more help than I actually needed would make me a waste of food in the eyes of most people on Sharitarn; what is a consequence dangerous enough to be avoided, when the price to avoid it is just a little sweat.

To travel between places we used a small but comfortable lizard. Avenao allowed us, the animals, one stop to eat in the middle of the day. Since all three of us could see in the light of stars as well and we could in day light, one way or another, we did not stop our search all night. By the middle of that night I suspected that Drift already knew where Nidriz was, and was delaying us on purpose.

By the middle of morning, on the last day we had before the Blue Lady entered in risk of die for the lack of her medication, we found ourselves entering a small fishing village. By its location had to be the same village an old lawless Phisical, Faudrin, suggested to Hicairi and me. According to the nice fellow we could rent a ship there to cross the Sorrowful River, in order to walk our way to Timurda.

Once we reached the place, Drift entered the Sorrowful. To follow him I saw myself forced to rent a fishing ship, and pay the fisherman to wait close enough to the river bank to see us when we needed to go back.

Since those were times of war, and we needed his services promptly, the fisherman's price for his services cost me all the money we still had for expenses and I still had to complete the payment with half the personal money I still had.

Once on the other side, we travelled as fast as the lizard could take us. Drift was waiting for us in front

of a head.

It was the head of a giant statue, the rest of it could not be seen anywhere and the head itself was half under the ground, its back covered by ground and grass, only the face was visible. What was visible, however, seemed to be untouched by the time.

The mouth was open, in an expression of surprise: unpleasant surprise. Was it impossible not to ask why someone would make a statue that big and put an expression of shock on its face. Monuments like that are always built to pay tribute to epic achievements, in War or Science. The expression may be triumphal, wise, or something in between. Avenao agreed with me.

Drift, using the opportunity created by our distraction with that conversation, stabbed my belly with a dagger.

Was a painful, and unpleasant, surprise. Before I was able to react the mad unicorn had entered the statue's mouth.

The injury was less serious than looked like. Avenao made a fast bandage, and we moved to follow and maybe kill our guide.

He was finishing the drawing of an arrow head on the ground with strange symbols inside it, using my blood. We entered in time to see a wall of blue light appear on the air in front of Drift.

Before we could reach the plant fellow, it threw the rest of blood on the wall. When the blood reached the blue light a hole opened on it. Large enough for three people to walk through, even one of us being the warrior caretaker.

\_I understood.\_ I admitted.

We had just passed the wall, and five undead attacked us. Those were clearly low undeads, in life had been forest men. They were clothed in armors of red iron, long destroyed by rust. Their shields and swords had the same destiny. The necromancer who created them had given them enough intelligence to understand the futility of those weapons and they abandoned them on the ground. The undead attacked us using only claws and fangs.

My contribution to the fight was to use the mirror images created by my magical dagger to distract the enemy. Had the situation been worse I would have risked to attack with my own claws, since I was not helpful about my chances to avoid a fall if I tried to unsheathe the blood drinker sword.

Fortunately Drift armed with daggers and Avenao using only one of my crutches as a weapon needed no help to finish the fight.

\_Here!\_ Yelled a woman from somewhere close.

We followed her voice. The Blue Lady was behind bars, covering her naked body as well as she could with both hands. Her cage was just deep enough to allow Nidriz to escape the reach of the undead arms.

I gave the woman a robe, and a bottle with her remedy, taken from my backpack. Avenao took care of the bars after that. He did the job fast enough.

The Lady's wrists were bind by a short chain, but that we could neither broke nor open.

\_Who did it to you? \_I asked during our way back to the Sorrowfull river.

\_I woke up in power of Sand Scorpions men, I don't know if the wild desert tribe captured me following their on agenda or if someone hired them for the job. Their wild sigrax had this anti-magical chains, I can't use magic locked like that. The sigrax also knew the magical word to allow us to pass the magical protection, and had the key to open the cell were you found me.

\_The people who captured you were not Sand Scorpions, or any other desert tribe. They Were Shirshanes, virshari agents to be precise, I recognized one. The same nighth they took you, they also took several other influential ladies from Alkavalla.

\_You did not took your remedy, yet.

\_Is too late for that. Who contracted you?

\_Your daughter, Shivinni.

\_Well, that means it is probably a potion to put me on dream state. She has been trying to force me to reveal magical secrets to her and her lady friends for a long time. For the last 60 years I had been carefully with any gift from that girl.

\_She tould us you would die without it.

\_May I ask your caste?

\_Mage Caste my lady, I am a sigrax from Lutianen.

\_Well, them you have some chance to understand. I was brought by the vortex from a Universe were magic is far more powerful and abundant than it is here. To keep my magic I need to drink concentrated elixir of Xar, from time to time. You came too late, I will not recover my powers for a long time, and will need more than a elixir to have a chance to get them back. When comes to Xar the only thing I can still do is the one thing my younger daughter want from me since her thirteenth birthday: teach.

\_Will you?

\_Would you? I'm sure she is the one behind my kidnaping. Probably she used her contacts on Shirshan to arrange the hole thing, and gave them the opportunity to serve their own interests both to pay for their help and hidde her participation on the adventure. No! I have citizenship, I have money, I have friends. I will survive without magic untill I get it back. If you had arrived one hour earlier I would probably had taken the potion before even think about: the need for it is overwhelming. Luckily to me that need fades away instantly when the 'remedy' became useless.

\_What happens now?

The only answer the Blue Lady gave me was a smile. That smile told me more than enough to satisfy my curiosity about the subject.

\_I know him\_ she pointed the water were the unguie had disappeared\_ well enough to know his reason to be here. What my daughter promised to both of you for your services?

\_I was hired by someone else, just to help Altair to travel. My contract has nothing to do with you, and I am happy to keep things that way my lady.

\_I respect you work ethic. How about you, sigrax?

I mentioned the monetary value promised to me by Shvinni. She smiled.

\_That is a reasonable enough value for the job. I am not sure about your participation on it, but is not my place to question it, since the job is done: one way or another. However, I may need a few months to pay you. That's acceptable?

\_I'm sorry, I can't wait that long. My plan is to leave Alkavalla, I'm going to Timurda no more than four days from now.

\_The war ended?\_ asked her.

\_It was still going on when we left your city.

\_Give me some time to think about.

We reached the village I wanted to wait for Drift, but the Blue Lady convinced me to give up that idea.

\_Drift is not coming, in his mind he did what he came to do. Let's go.

\_We could look for shelter among the fisherman. Is already dark, and if I remember well the forest isn't a good place to be after the night fall, unless you have a experient guide.

\_Are you not supposed to be one?

\_Actually, I was included in this group because your friend Drift would not do the job without me. Could be possibly, because he needed my to overcome that magical wall. However that only make sense if he knew the wall would be there.

\_I'm sure he knew the wall would be there. My dear Avenao, could you please ask some fisherman if they can rent us a house for the night? Tell them the Blue Tower will pay for it. \_She did not waited for his answer\_ Altair, may you accompany me for a walk ? I understand you can't walk fast, but I don't intend to run.

The walked by the river, she stayed by my right side, despite my monstrous arm. Maybe to accentuate her experience with that sort of thing.

\_When you made your contract with my daughter, a ungnuie was present. Probably Drift. Isn't that so?

\_Yes.

\_You are supposed to take me back alive to be paid. There is nothing mentioning my health condition when I reach Alkavalla. On the other hand, was mentioned that you would still be paid even if I was slave branded?

\_That's all true.

\_The ungnuie knew what my daughter planned! That's their way, is how they to deal with conflicts between us, their animal partners.

\_I don't understand.

\_ They let Nidriz do what she wanted, expecting she would ask their help. What she could not avoid to do, because was the only way to appear innocent. Join another city against Alkavalla is a crime she did not wanted to pay for! If was not for the ungnuie I would have drunked the dream potion in time to be taken back home and Nidriz would have kept me as a source of magic spells and knowledge for therest of her life, legally I would stil be a free citizen.

\_Why not have you slaved instead?

\_If I am slaved I loose my citizenship, as if I had died. All my properties would go to someone else, Nidriz would have nothing because I decided to let nothing to her.

\_Then, why mention the part about the possibility of your slavement? If she needed you free would have been better to let it as a necessary condition for my payment.

\_That was not her, the ungnuie demanded that when they accepted to help her. Include Drift on the deal make it seems one more whim made from a insane mind. My daughter has no way to know, but thanks to a detail in the contract I made with the ungnuie to became a citizen that mention about my return make impossible for me ignore the contract now. I must pay you, or loose my citizenship: as someone will tell you the moment we step on Alkavalla.

\_Why is important for them to make you pay me?

\_Because they know I don't have money to pay you fast enough, and they know you must leave Alkavalla. They will give me the money, if I ask, but I will have to sell direct to them some spells I brought with me from my home planet.

\_Can't you pay me with something else? Magical objects perhaps.

\_I never liked that sort of thing. My money is mostly on real state, everything I have inside my house would not be enough to pay you. I do have ships, and investments on many distant places. However, the plant people will; very discreetly; make impossible for me to find a loan anywhere on Alkavalla.

\_That seems a bit too devious.

\_Their species never die from old age, my lineage on my home planet never die from old age either. When intelligent people have unlimited live expectancy they sooner or later become a bit sinuous.

\_Why keeps you from offering me a contract so advantageous that I would accept it? Let's say twenty times what you would pay me. You could make me your partner in something that is valuable.

\_True! However, I would have the same problem I would have to find a loan. The city will not ensure your payment, the Merchant Caste will find an excuse to not open its doors until after you leave the city. You would have to trust my word, and take the risk. Someone will advise you against it, and not without reason: I just lost my magic, will not have it back any time soon, that's bad for my partners and is impossible to know how much the new will affect them; there is a war happening and a great chance for our cities to enter it on opposite sides, what would let you with nothing, since you will have no documents to prove the deal; Alkavalla itself can be destroyed in the war, or I could be enslaved, or I could be killed; anything on this list would leave you empty-handed. Or I could be lying to you about all that, just for fun, since I truly am a bit too devious myself: that would leave you empty-handed as well.

\_I see...

\_On the other hand, a forest man will offer you a deal. They will pay you what you have right to ask, or possibly half of it to avoid your suspicion just because you are obviously from Earth and may not help to put a woman in risk of being enslaved. You will give that person the credit, take your money, and leave.

\_Let's assume I believe you about all that, my lady. What do you suggest?

\_We could have some fish for dinner, possibly some drink. Enjoy a good night of sleep, listening to the murmur made by the Sorrowful. Eat some more fish for breakfast, make conversation about anything else. After that I ask a fisherman to take you and take me back to Alkavalla, and you take me to a discreet place in the forest, where I will be able to free myself from that chain. Then we sit together, go back to that conversation, and look for a remedy to that situation. One lucrative for both of us.

That sounded like a good idea to me. I wondered if she would try to seduce me, to get leverage on our negotiations next day. Probably she would have succeeded, pains me to admit, but is hard for me to refuse anything to a woman after having sex with her. Even knowing that, on the other hand, I am not sure if I would have resisted that night to a serious attempt of seduction made from Nidriz: since I got the monstrous arm became harder to control my sexual impulses as I wanted to.

The three of us talked about many subjects, none important, and each of us slept alone. With no sexual innuendos between us, we took our way to her safe place hidden in the forest. The lizard was not happy about entering deeper in the forest than he was used to, but after some insistence did so.

\_Your people have a city on Shirshan, or they are what they call “wild people”? \_I asked, after the lizard calm down.

\_Only seven of had the ‘privilege’ to be chosen by the vortex, the phenomenon does that sometimes; takes one or a few individuals from a Universe, just once, instead of a small population during some centuries. I was the only user of magic among us. I don’t know where the others are, or even if they survived, but I reached Alkavalla and brought my citizenship from the unguie before someone had the chance to slave me. Not being human the rules about female enslavement are less strict to me.

\_Do not take me wrong, but you could pass for a human female, easily. Rare and exotic, of course, but feminine and attractive! ...to most men.

She considered my comment very funny.

\_Yes I could, thank you. There is little in common between my species and yours, if you look inside, but the exterior seems almost identical. We can have sex, but I would not be able to have children from you until my magic came back; long after you die from old age.

I may have blushed a little. If so, the Blue Lady was kind enough to ignore.

\_You never looked for the other people from your Universe?

\_We came together, but we are the opposite of friends. To avoid making that old history longer than necessary, let me just say that: I would be dead if the vortex had not appeared precisely when it did. Not by natural causes.

The way she indicated was complicated, and the magical energy on it became obvious. Some very strange kind of magic was working around us, and I was completely lost already when Nidriz told me to enter a hole between two rocks. I could see the forest beyond that natural ring of rocks, but when we passed the forest was no longer there.

Instead, we were at the top of a mountain, there was a forest deep below, but it was not green as the jungle we had just left. The only green I would see was above us, and surprised me because neither on Earth nor on Sharitarn I had seen green clouds on the sky. Until that moment I never had considered the fact, but the clouds on Sharitarn would not surprise anyone as they could be transported to Earth.

\_We are still on Sharitarn, most things around us are just illusions. Not exactly identical to the illusions you can learn to make on Sharitarn, but nonetheless illusions. I created that place to look like my home world.

\_Seems to be a formidable place!

\_In some ways it is.

The lady made a gesture, and a tower made of green glass appeared in the air behind us.

\_I don’t expect anyone to find the entrance to this place. Even so, if someone does, there is little chance they would be able to reach that building using the magic they have on Sharitarn. Keep secrets

like that save is one reason why I don't want to share my spells, even now.

\_You could stay here, and escape the proplems outside for ever. Could you not?

\_Possibly. I don't need my magic to keep that here, and control it in some level. After some time I would die, because is still is Sharitarn and I do need to drink concentrated Xar to survive here: Shvinni did not lied to you that much, except that I need to drink it to stay alive at each few centuries, not at each few days. On the other hand, long before I die for lack of Xar I would have killed myself just to escape insanity.

The idea surprised me. So she explained.

\_My kind is even more social than yours. We need personal conflicts, public debates, wars and orgies. Alone we can not survive, even small societies are not healty for a long time. Alkavalla is only big enough to be tolerable.

\_You would love my home planet then! However, that place around us seems a bit empty for the life you just described.

\_That is the place were I lived with my family. Wasn't a life typical for my species, and that has something to do with the fact that I was about to be killed. However, unless you want to have that narrative as payment for your services I will not talk more about the subject.

\_I am curious, but not that curious.

\_Then let's go inside.

She opened the front door to us, and closed from inside.

The interior was mostly blue, whit a little pink and white on details. Was a room larger than the entire house seemed to be from outside, but there was little here. The floor, smooth as glass, made not fall harder than it had been in the stones near to the Sorrowfull. I suspect she liked it.

\_Have you considered that all my problems would be solved if I killed you right now? \_ she asked.

\_The thought crossed my mind yesterday, a little after you suggest that trip. Seemed too easy, and I imagined that the ungnuie would not have let you a escape like that. If you could solve "all your problems" killing me, Drift would be here to make that a bit harder.

\_You do have a point. Honestly, I don't know what would happen if I killed you now. Probably you left someone on the city responsable to get the money in your name if you don't came back, possibly without even realise the fact. I doubt that person would be as open to negotiations as you have been so far.

We passed through a door, and entered a very diferent room. This one looked like a place a sigrax would call home, on Lutianen, Alkavalla, of Shirshan. There was a windon, and beyond that I could see Alkavalla.

\_That's not a place from your home planet, I suppose. Why place the illusion here?

\_That's no illusion. We are in my home, on Alkavalla: took me a long time to make the passage we just used. The spells to create that sort of structure are among the things the ungnuie want me to teach.

\_How distant can reach that portals?

\_ If you have enough time and people capable to work the right magic to build, the distance can be astronomical. However, I don't have the skill or the resources to reach much beyond the point where we entered. Most my time after the vortex was invested making houses on Alkavalla.

\_The famous natural talent ungnuie supposedly have to Dimensional Magic?

\_To be fair I doubt any ungnuie ever took credit for my work. They allow people to believe they are the ones doing the job. That belief made my life considerably less dangerous for about three thousand years, by the way. May you help me with this thing?

I followed the Blue Lady to her workshop. With the right tools, and an anti-magic table, was easy to open the locks. One slavegirl found us working and her mistress demanded some food and drinks for us, before asking for new.

The girl knew nothing beyond what I had told already to the Blue Lady.

\_I don't suppose you could help to create a military alliance between Lutianen and Alkavalla, or could you?

She considered my proposition.

\_ I can try, however the chance of success is small. Right now Alkavalla is between neutrality and an alliance with Zaiaz. After the 'incident' I'm sure neutrality lost ground. Lutianen is not even on the table for most Panuins, and they will be the ones choosing the path.

\_Well, I suppose that's the best deal we can do.

\_Serious? I was expecting a proposition of free companionship.

\_That would give me control over all your business for one year, enough time to take the money you should pay me from any investment you may have on a city like Timurda, for instance! I had not considered the possibility, the ungnuie would not dare to interfere with a matter that sacred, and private. On the other hand, you would be the one taking all the risk, I could steal everything from you, just going to the nearest Merchant Caste with the proof that we are free companions.

\_I would have to trust your honor.

\_You see...? That's the problem! I am not a man from Sharitarn, I was born and raised on Earth. We have no honor. Because the concept itself lost all meaning to my people, long before I hear about it

for the first time.

\_I don't think your word can be trusted, Altair. Not about honor, at least.

\_So, we have our deal. Before I go, there is one last thing I want ask to you.

\_Yes?

\_Do you know how the Virshan was able to make a plan that bold succeed? How they entered so many houses, that fast? I know they had spies inside some houses, I am staying in the house of Lady Violeta del d'Ombre and some men disappeared the same day the 'incident' happened. However, shoud have been more difficult for them to leave the house I imagine.

\_I know what you are thinking, my answer to your question shoud be no. However, after the visit the that cave, tell you the true feels like a good small vengeance against who I can not punish. That way I don't have to direct all to my daughter, the person responsable for all that who is inside my reach.

\_Please, let's spare the poor Shvinni as much as possible.

\_She did that. All the houses created by my magic are conected to the same net, is not my choice: I don't do 'Dimensional Magic', what I do looks like the Way they use on this planet but follows other principles. Would be impossible to me build separated houses bigger inside than in the outside, or apply my magic to backpacks and Dimensional mages often do. On the other hand, what I do cost me much less energy than their work cost them; my way is more stealdy, and almost as durable as true mage's Enchantents can be.

\_Your daughter has access to all passages?

\_I don't believe so. She probably got some sigils over the decades, there was a time I actually trusted the girl. Now I must chance all my "keys", and give another shape to the net itself just to be sure. Not that Shinni herself will have the chance to use her knowledge against me again, of course!

\_Can you chance the sigils, even without use magic?

\_Without my magic I can neither create new passages nor change the sigils. That will not be a problem, I am sure.

\_You have other users of magic who know your secrets, them. Trustworthy disciples.

\_Not yet. By this time tomorrow I will have! A small group of slavegirls sigraxes, perfectly capable to help me. Freshly collared, but with a strong desire to learn my methodes. Don't worry, they will keep all spells I teach them secret for the rest of their lives.

Was time for me to leave.

\_Altair, there is something I would like to ask you. If you don't mind.

\_I don't mind.

\_You said you are staying in Violeta's home. What is your relationship with her?

Took me some time to answer that question, we ate in the middle of it, and when I reached the end was night. The blue Lady invited me to spend the night, and I accepted the gentle invitation.

For a person as rich and influential as everybody agrees she is, lady Nidriz of Alkavalla sure has a surprisingly frugal existence. Her home is made of large rooms and huge internal gardens one could easily call parks: but very few objects. I saw only three slave girls. Lady Violeta for instance, who is far less wealthy, has ten, and that seems to be closer to the expected from her. The only magical objects I saw were on the place she works, and most of them could not be sold fast given to the fact that they are extremely specialized tools.

I saw one slave boy, playing with small animals on her garden. Noticing my curiosity the Blue lady said that he is the son of one of her slavegirls, and she had not yet decided what to do with him. Normally slaves get pregnant when their owners want, and only when their owners want, but that was an exception. The girls inside the house were not being given the bitter drink used to prevent the conception because they were not supposed to leave the house, and no man was supposed to enter it, but the house's first made a mistake. The children, of course, belong to who own the mother.

\_ Last time something like that happened, and the child was a boy, I decided to have him trained as a free warrior and by his own choice he became my personal guard. That however demands some natural inclination, I think. About his boy I am not yet sure.

The room she had chosen for me opened to a waterfall on that same garden. After showing me that, when she was leaving, the blue lady commented with a smile.

\_If you ask, I will say yes; you know.

\_ Tempting! However, I do have a serious prevention against marriage; which is what we call 'free companionship' on this world. Would not be an overstatement to call it trauma.

The lady made a funny movement with her head, turned, and walked away. She still said one last thing, in her way out.

\_I was not talking about free companionship, Altair.

It took me some time to decipher the meaning hidden behind the Blue Lady's words. When I did so, she was gone.

The same slavegirl who had served us last night brought my breakfast. Her mistress was working on something, outside in the city. Was not hard to guess what that something was: the enslavement of her daughter Shvinni and her lady friends.

The nice girl was Lilu, the first girl in the house. She is human, and was neither a forest woman nor a fiend from my home planet. Born on Shirshan once was a Mage Caste lady born with the potential to use magic. Never bothered herself with the subject of magic, instead of trying to awaken the potential she had been

gift with Lilu (obvious not the name she used as a free woman, but I was learning that most slaves feel uncomfortable when asked about the subject) invested her time and energy studying administration. Can not use magical objects much less make spells, but the administrative skills probably help her more now than magical ability would.

Lilu showed me the way to the stable, and helped me to mount a fat old lizard female. The animal, already sealed, made a happy sound when noticed that we would gain the streets. It liked the outside.

That same day the Hicairi left Alkavalla on a ship to Micula. The Maothi man and his mother had paid her passage as a personal favor to me. They also contracted two Warrior Caste to protect her until the ship reach Micula: not lawless man, but proper Warrior Caste citizens.

After Hicairi enter the ship she looked back once, just for a moment. Was probably the sun light playing with my imagination, but I had impression to see her face blush.

The Maothi man convinced me to keep him company, and exercise my crutches. We went to lunch in the Beacon. I was curious to see the map shop, and as I expected it was closed.

\_You don't have to come, you now. I can expect to have my magical tattoo some other time, the honor to be offered to me that gift is more than enough to me now.

\_If I don't leave Alkavalla with you to anywhere you choose to go, I will leave it to my brother's stomachs next time the Silent Climbers visit the city. Our Panuin was crystal clear about that, when he explained me the situation.

\_I am sorry for you. Lady Violeta will be safe with you far from the city?

\_My free companion promised to me she will take care of my mother, I am not worried about that. You could, of course, choose to stay with us and I am sure that would be better for the three of us. Missing one leg you will not be much useful to your city as a soldier, especially without spells. I could stay near to my mother, and not far from my free companion: I don't have to leave, I only have to stay by your side. My mother would have someone from Earth, who is not a slavegirl, to talk about her home planet.

I considered his arguments. The Maothi wasn't aware about the suggestion his mother had made to me. She wanted me to propose free companionship to her. Accept her idea would make me his stepfather, I suppose.

That was not my reason to leave Alkavalla, of course. I needed to reach Lutianen's navy, I owned that to Fergus. He had sent me on a mission to find out what I could about the true mages of Shirshan. Now the information was possible obsolete, but I was not sure about that. Besides, I had learned other things which would probably be as important as the fact that the true mages of Shirshan had really disappeared.

Violeta came to my room that night. We had our breakfast on bed next morning. In the afternoon we took a ship to Timurda, the Maothi and me. He was clearly not happy about the fact that his mother had been alone with me all night. However, we had a lot more to think about. The navy of Shirshan was between us and our destiny, and that was a ship from Alkavalla. Shirshan and Alkavalla were not at war

against each other yet, as far as we knew, where sure on the edge of one. They could reach the point of no return any time during our trip.

Even so, the sky was clear, the wind was fresh, and a gorgeous slave girl with shaved head had been left out of her cage to play a mandolin on the deck. The girl, almost naked, had a wonderful voice. My new travel companion asked me why, and I had no answer to give. Even not knowing why, the fact itself was clear: I was happy!

Could not remember the last time before that when I had felt that much happiness.

## 23 - The Green-eyed Monster

The large face of the powerful ship turned in our direction. Having the faster and more maneuverable vessel, and being on the middle of the large Sorrowful River where we could not see land on any direction, our captain had every reason to hope for an easy escape. Before the pirate drums announced the identity of our foe. A huge dragon's head carved in wood became visible when the music started, a head with a line of red iron horns, and three bright green eyes making obviously the magical nature of that keel.

Those used to be the borders of Shirshan waters knew, these days everything was unreliable. Shirshan was in war against the giant war chief Zaiaz and my own city was about to enter that war fighting against both sides. Our merchant ship belonged to Alkavalla, a neutral city. More precisely a city which was neutral when we left its port.

Three warships from Shirshan had been seen by us, so far. They allowed us passage. A small boat visited us, bringing men who presented themselves as customs authorities from Shirshan but looked more like wild nomads from the Piwag Desert; since they had no shields to prove their identity the captain refused to pay anything. A fight started by consequence.

The Maothi joined the fight, helping the crew. I had lost my right leg days before and my left eye during the same discord, but against my better judgement saw myself in the middle of this fight.

Was not as if I was completely defenceless. My right arm was now large, and monstrous, ending on six powerful fingers with black claws almost as dangerous as magical blades. On my left hand I had a magical dagger capable to generate mirror images of myself to mislead my foes. All that arsenal didn't save me from the humiliation of fall in the deck and fail to raise up again, however.

That would have been the end of this fight to me, if a bold desert warrior had not decided to gain a magical dagger, and possibly a magical sword. I did not see the man coming, but my new arm somehow knew he was approaching. The man's intestines felt next to me, his sword missed my head by very little.

Our captain moved us to deeper waters before other four boats coming from the Piwag Desert reached us. Everything happened fast, the day was ours and with it the spoils. Our enemy from the desert had little valuable things on them; despite that a merchant, who had been hiding with his cargo, paid me a few coins for the spoils I had conquered. A sword, a knife, a helmet, and a round shield; all designed according to the desert style, but nothing magical. I was happy to accept the money he wanted to pay, after my last adventure saving the Blue Lady I was left with almost no coin.

As things were, I had more weapons than I could use: powerful magical weapons, which would reach high prices if I wanted to sell them. The most powerful one, the blood drinker sword, I had not been able to use since I lost my right arm. Because this monstrous thing with claws seemed unable to hold a sword.

Ships on the planet Sharitarn don't travel at night on oceans, except for the vessels from a few cities which have some sort of deal with the sea monsters living in the open sea. However, we were on the strait known as Sorrowful River and here it is normal for the captains to keep their ships going all night. Despite that our captain decided that would be too dangerous to do so, according to him in the dark we could be caught by a trap far too easily.

I could deal with the dark well enough, as could my travel companion, the Silent Climber Maothi. We had silver helmets taken from Shirshan spies, magical objects which allowed us to locate ourselves in the dark like bats or dolphins can. He was more comfortable than me using that strange Divination magic, but I was learning. I obviously volunteered my help to the captain, for free, since reaching my destination as soon as possible was in my best interest. However, like most sea men on Sharitarn this captain did not trust magic and rely on it only when he has no option.

That distrust has nothing to do with not believing magic to be real. The panic on our captain's face looking at those three magical lights was evident. It made me realize that the large ship was nothing like the boats we had encountered before. A moment later a sailor shouted the reason behind his captain's fear.

“The Red Dragon!!” that was the ship commanded by the legendary pirate captain Sigraax Providex the Agoivian. Even being from Earth, and not a sailor, I knew that much.

There are very few sailors from Agoiven, it is a city far from any sea: Agoiven was built on the crater of a volcano and only can exist thanks to a magical Way invented by their founders. The Fire Magic, which allows the sigraax or true mage to store and transform any kind of energy he can understand. As the name suggests the main interest of most fire mages is to deal with, well, fire.

If not on anything else, in his spell preferences Providex is a typical sigraax from his city. Fire was what exploded our sail a moment after the sailor shouted his feelings out loud.

“We must surrender!” suggested intensely this sailor.

“No! I will not put my life in a pirate's hands! Let's escape to the nearest river bank. We can leave the boat and enter the woods” argued the merchant who had bought the spoils from me. I have good relations with the tribe who own that part of the forests.

“The nearest river bank is the desert. Better die fighting the Red Dragon than be hunted and tortured by the lizard people from the desert!! The human tribes up there are little better.”

Our captain decided for a third course of action. He took a fast water stream and trusted his vessel, hoping to lose the Agoivian on the Sorrowful: praying for the salty river itself. Also, possibly, imagining we had a chance to find help. The Shirshan navy was on this same water and supposedly should keep them safe from piracy.

The Red Dragon followed us. His sail became useless, because, to our luck, the wind stopped. However, while our ship had only oars the Red Dragon had Providex himself.

He obviously was using magic to move his ship. I could see no oar on the water, and the Red Dragon kept constant velocity. He was saving his men for the fight, even knowing they were at least five for each

one of us, and all warriors.

Providex kept his ship between us and Alkavalla, but allowed our attempt to escape for the middle of the Sorrowfull for as long as our captain continued it.

\_We have a chance to loose him after the night fall!\_ suggested the merchant.

\_ That's Providex, he has more than enough spells to follow us in the dark. Our only hope is a tempest, that would make possible our escape: but no tempest came when we need one!

The sailor was wrong. A scary tempest came fast form the Giant Mountains before nightfall, and we do escaped the Red Dragon. What we did not escaped was the tempest itself, which turned into a furious tropical hurricane. Our ship died on stones, most sailors with it.

The Maothi was not a man of the sea but he stayed on deck to help as he could. Being a sensible dude I entered the ship, the best help I could offer under the circumstances was not block the crew's way. Before the impact I saw the merchant going to the slave cages, to free his property and give the girls a chance of survival as small as it could be. He died before he could reach his destination, his hear smashed against a support beam when the ship fould the rocks.

Unable to find the keys for the slave's cages I managed to hold myself on the bars with my right and monstrous hand in order to cut the locks using the magical dagger. Water was rising very fast, and I had to swim under it to reach the last cage. The girl inside it was the same one who had played the mandolin to us on deck short after we leave Port Alkavalla.

She was alive, but had lost conscience. Somehow I managed to pull the girl to deck and jump into the revolt water taking the woman with me. The ship was lost, and our only chance now was to reach a rock or a floating wreack before we drown.

That wasn't my first shipwreck since the vortex left me on Sharitarn, but was the first one I had to deal with counting on only one leg so swim. As you probably know all body is involved in that process but the legs are usually even more importante than the arms.

To make it worse the slavegirl woke in panic, and I had to fight in order to keep holding her above water with my human arm, while the other arm was fighting against the Sorrowfull.

In the middle of all that I 'saw' the Maothi. He was on a boat made by his creation magic. We found each other using our magical helmets, but reach each other would be hard. He, or course, had to do most the work. When he finally succeeded the woman shrinked on his both.

Inside it I could better see that it did not looked like a normal boat. Was made of what seemed to be living roots and more stable than would have been possible for a boat of that size. There was very little space inside, but despite the water entering it stayed above water, and that was good enough for the moment.

The Maothi had only one oar, when I asked for another he explained: "is my personal magic, but not from today. I had it on my tattoo, It kept the Xar, but can not make another oar"

The tempest continued to toy with us for sometime. We saw that gijars around us were killing the people in the water. Gijars are large and powerful predators, I once killed one with a sword, but that was in the woods. Those animals are dangerous on dry land, but far more so on the Sorrowfull: they swim even better than they run, much faster than white sharks on Earth used to be able to before they became extinct. They are also larger and heavier than white sharks.

Was impossible to know using the helmet magical senses what happened, too much noise. Could have been a rock like the one responsible for destroy the ship. More likely was a gijar, jumping from the water as they like to do, but isn't impossible that I just lost my balance. Whatever it was I fell from boat, and came back to water. For a moment I fought to stay alive, then the jaws caught me.

With my claws I attacked the animal, but gijars have strong heads and powerful jaws. It could cut my body in two any time but his problem was not my puny effort to free myself. His concern was his brothers and sisters disputing the food. He wanted me inside his mouth as fast as possible, to avoid the risk of someone steal a piece or two of me from him, and in order to make the necessary move to achieve that goal he decided to carry me as deep as possible without sacrifice his chance to go back in time to catch another prey .

The thing attacking the fellow before he could eat me was not a gijar. Something smaller and faster crossed his body leaving a hole on it and a red cloud in the water.

When I realised what was happening I was breathing again, holding myself as well as I could on the neck of some animal. The hurricane was worse each instant. Then the sea was calm, the sky was clear.

Looking to one side I could still see and hear the hurricane, a perfect dark wall of chaos. Save for a few small waves, the chaos was totally separated from the Sorrowfull where we was now. The air was hot and the only smell I could feel in it was salty water.

I could not see well, and barely could hold myself, when we reached a beach. Once I felt on the sand and the animal came to lick my face with its three tongues, I recognized it. Was Puze, Faudrin's iapi.

After lick me Puze braided its three tongues again into one, to welcome his master with a song.

\_It's a pleasure to see you again, Altair of Nowhere ! I notice you lost some weight since the last time we talked, mostly on the right leg. You also have a ugly wound on his belly, I'm afraid.

\_Pleasure is mine, Faudrin. I have no money with me, again, but as you can see I do need some help from a physician. This time for myself.

The old man looked me in the eyes. Then gave a long look on my injuries.

\_You would heal, in time. That would give us time to talk, and maybe I could explain better the situation to you. However, I don't have the time right now.

By his words I imagined that he would let me on the sand to survive or die for my own. Instead he

made a gesture, and the effects caused by the gijar jaws were all healed: as if they never had being there.

\_You are Mage Caste!

\_That's true, but is not all. Walk with me, I will show you my home, and we may talk about

\_I was on a boat, with two people. Can you save them as well?

He closed his eyes, using some sort of divination spell.

\_Possibly, but not for free. This time I need to ask something for my services.

\_Give me your price.

\_Someone is trying to destroy me, now this person may have within his reach a weapon able to do the job. Therefore I need you to protect me.

\_Of course, I will help you Faudrin! I need to reach Timurda as fast as I can, but I will not leave you defenceless if you think I can help. After everything you already did for me I own you that much. Even so, I really need my friends safe.

\_That's good to hear, Altair. I will send someone to rescue your travel companions, but we still must talk. I believe would be best to have that conversation before they arrive.

Faudrin helped me to stand up, and walk. He was obviously far too strong for the small old man he seemed to be.

\_Another friend of yours visited me today. He left hours ago.

\_What fellow?

\_Zagdon, the one who escaped a ancien magical prison tanks to your blood. He was prisoner since long before my time, but was looking for help against the unguie, and found me.

\_I understand. But if he looked you for help, you can not be a mere sigrax! Maybe an archmage? Maybe something else. Will you help him?

\_As I told him, I have no interest involved. The plant people never did anything against me.

Was hard to me find a anwer to the question "Why someone powerfull enough to be visited by Zagdon would need my protection? Protection against who?".

\_You said you are going to Shirshan?

\_Timurda, I must reach Timurda. I never mentioned Shirshan.

\_Why are you going to Timurda?

\_My city needs me to do that. I am sorry, I lied to you: I am not a lawless but a citizen of Lutianen, and I have important information for my king about the war. Things king Cerrival must know before is too late.

\_I believe would be better for you to go right to Shirshan, and leave that war solve itself.

\_Why?

\_Let's say I have a strong intuition about that.

\_Well, as I told you, I have a duty to Lutianen. I will help you as I can, but after that I must go to Timurda, and talk with our archmage up there. I have no reason to visit Shirshan before that, or even after.

\_Of course, I understand. You remember me a young true mage I used to see every day, on the mirror, some time ago. Feel as if it had been yesterday.

\_I had a dream full of strange symbolism about something you just talked about. The need to go to Shirshan, and look for something below the city.

\_Of course you had. I had a dream very interesting myself a few nights ago, about the end of this Universe. Who know ? Maybe you should not worry too much about, most dreams are metaphors, aren't they? Sooner or later we reach the place where we much go, or not. If we don't, what happens is what must happen: if the Universe ends in a few weeks I can't complain much, I had a full and rewarding life. So let's not talk about our dreams anymore, we need to talk about another sort of dream, from someone else.

The forest ended, in front of us there was a calcined land. Heavy odor of dead corpses involved us. Animals looked at us, an army of undead beasts looking with no eyes. A single tower like a twisted tree in the top of a hill was the only sign of civilization, and a dense feeling of fear was emanating from up there.

A two wheels carriage, big enough to be pulled by two undead gijars, was waiting for us.

Puze had no eyes anymore. His head was little more than a skull of iapi, his body had some exposed muscles and falling skin, his backbone and many ribs were exposed. More surprised than I should have been, I looked to Faudrin. Saw the white bones, and the head surrounded by magic fire green and blue, that proved my situation to be more serious than I could have imagined. He was still dressed like a poor old lawless man, the Physician he pretended to be. The clothes looked misplaced, now that I knew what he is.

\_Your kind is feared and hated. Not even on Mimbao they accept Liches. I am in danger now?

\_We all are: in danger I mean, not necessarily feared and hated. You have nothing to fear from me Altair, if that's what you are curious about. Mimbao welcome "my kind" well enough by the way! As

long as we don't try to stay. The land around you explains why no living thing wants us as neighbors. On the other hand, you will not stay here long enough to have problems: take time for the effect of my presence taint a place or a person.

I accepted his help to reach the sit on the carriage. Would be silly try to escape, or fight.

\_Who are you, really?

\_Believe or not, my name is Faudrin: 'Faudrin of Ludrien' to be complete. I use other names, from time to time, but that is the one I had when I was a boy on a city long gone. You must have seem my home city at least once, before you reach Lutianen for the first time: what is left of it.

\_The ruins on the bay!

\_I was born and named long before Ludrien became ruins. I grew up to became, of course, a necromancer. A archmage, eventually. Then I became too old to keep learning, my memory started fail. That was when I decided that there was still too much to understood about this universe, my life, and magic itself. So that's who I am, an avid student.

\_I have a friend, Hellicon. His mentor is a archmage obsessed to find out how your city was destroyed: Faengor, is his name. He is the second most powerfull archmage of Lutianen.

\_Let's not spoil the nice fellow's fun, then. I'm sure he will have more pleasure looking for the answer than finding it! Getting back to the point, the person I want talk about is also an archmage of Lutianen: I need your protection against Bindhai.

\_Well, that will be easy! He is just the most powerfull among the three archmages, according to some people the man's could kill the other two at same time with little effort.

\_I believe he could. He was already a powerfull illusionist when he looked for my help to became a undead. I was still selling that sort of service, you see: very poor idea, but I insisted on it for two thirds or my life.

\_Bindhai is a liche?

He laughed.

\_I just told you, he is an illusionist. Not a necromancer.

\_I'm afraid you wil have to explain that a little more.

\_They don't teach anything for you kids this days ? All right: liches are a specific category of undead, unlike the other kinds we can't be created by others. Every lich performed his own transformation. That's a rare and extremelly advanced necromantic spell, one only the better necromancers have a chance to understand and perform.

\_I was told that undead are not actually created by categories, each undead is unique. Necromancers

only use basic recipes for low undead, the ones with no intelligence.

\_ By a matter of ethic I don't like to reproach fellow my necromancers, but on that I will: I hope you trust me on that, honestly, not many people can speak with more authority than me on that subject. The person who taught you was not completely wrong, but was not exactly correct. With my experience, I can build something "original", but most days that would be a stupid idea. Under almost any circumstance following the categories is the best way to design a new undead without lose too much Xar in the process. The logic behind each group is solid, it allows enough variation to be applied to a infinite variety of cases, and it works.

\_ Then you transformed Bindhai, and he was not happy about the service provided. What I can do about it now?

\_ He was quite happy about my job, actually. Problem is that, neither I am a mind carver nor he asked me to cure his paranoia. He fear my power over him too much to trust on my honor. He imagine I'm going to break our contract, and is trying to destroy me in order to prevent it .

\_ He imagine you could use your power against him? Secrets from the ritual that transformed him.

\_ Something like that.

\_ Why you need my help for? Don't you have the secret he fear? You could just use it to make the man give up.

\_ Oh yes, I have! Every necromancer has a powerful advantage against the every undead created by him: not because we want, is just the way Necromancy works. However, on cases like that when someone buy the transformation, we usually swear never use that advantage against our client. No matter what he does, I will not violate that oath: if necessary I will destroy him, but using other weapons.

\_ As for my: "what I can do for you"? I don't have a intimate trust relationship with Bindhai, only saw him a half dozen times and only from distance. Until our conversation I not even knew his magical Way: most people on Lutianen believe he is a healer. If they knew he is a illusionist they would demand the inclusion of the Illusion Magic among the Ways taught in Black Centaur.

\_ Don't worry about how you can help me! Bindhai, using his influence over you as archmage of your city, will demand from you a service that would result in my destruction. All I need from you now is your word that you will not give him what he wants. Make me that promise and I will give you back your friends.

\_ All right, I agree. You have my word! That may put me in trouble, since I am a citizen of Lutianen and he is an archmage. Even so, I will not help him.

Faudrin's island was in the middle of the line which separates the rain forest in the south of the Sorrowfull from the Piwag Desert at north. The hurricane was still going on, but it did not touched us on that side of his island. We expected next to the wall of chaos until six undead low undead humans came walking from the tempest, two of them carrying dead corpses. I looked the liche with rage.

\_You intend to transform them !? That's not what we agreed upon!!

\_I told you, I don't make high undead anymore: too much trouble. On the other hand, I don't think you would consider my part in the bargain done if I decided to give them back to you as walking corpses. No, I intend to bring them back to life as they used to know it.

\_I believed that only Healers could do that.

The undead left the dead corpses with us, on the carriage.

\_Resurrect a person recently deceased is simple enough, even if you are not a healer. Assuming you had enough time to learn it, of course. Took me about seven centuries of personal effort.

The carriage reached the extreme north of Faudrin's island, and he gave me a bag. There was a beautiful beach here, and a small village made of stones, which was desert and looked like a place which had not been visited by anyone for a long time.

My eyes could not see the land on the other side. Even so, thanks to the calm atmosphere was possible to find it using the silver helmet.

\_I will assume my disguise again, before I do the magic. Forest people are notorious for their distrust regarding liches: their love for the land where they live probably has much to do with that.

Faudrin did what he had promised. We left the two sleeping inside a house, and waited under a tree.

\_I have to ask: could you help me with that other problem? \_I asked, pointing to the absence of a leg.

\_Let me give a look!

He touched me where a leg should be attached and I thanked my good luck for the illusion spell he was using. Even with that he touched by Lich's hands, knowing what he is and having seemed the white bones a moment before, was not a comfortable experience. After looking for some time, asking what he had done it, and looking at the blood-drinker blade, Faudrin answered.

\_We have here a tricky problem, Altair. I don't know enough healing magic to solve it I'm afraid. I can take a leg from an undead and place it here, if you want. However, I don't have the ideal raw material right now. All my human undeads are older than would be desirable, therefore I can not tell you how long my solution will last: the energy of your sword will fight against my work. What is worse is that the blade has cut not only your physical leg, but the counterpart of it on your magical body as well.

\_I imagine this right leg would look like an undead's leg, would it not?

\_That could be avoided if I had a fresh corpse. However, as things are, your leg would look and smell like a low dead's leg.

\_Can't you take one leg from the Maothi, and make it grow again before he wakes up?

\_Of course, but his legs are covered on magical tattoos. I can not reproduce them, I am not a tattooist.

I did not considered even for a moment the slavegirl. To take part of a woman's body for my selfish interest, even knowing it would be replaced a moment later, was not a possibility in my mind. Faudrin probably waited for that obvious suggestion, but since I did not made it he said nothing about.

\_The undead, if you do that for me, how we would explain for the Maothi?

\_I probably could present myself as a lawless sigrax necromancer. Or, even better, you could tell them who did that was a sigrax necromancer since I do have more pressing matters to deal with.

I looked to my monstruos arm, and considered how strange I would look, and feel, with that arm and more a undead's leg. Then I thought about how far Timurda was, and how long I would have to walk before we reach it

\_The smell would be the more complicated. Not how it looks like.

\_There is something I can give you that will not smell as rotten meat. However, that will involve some diferent complications.

I did not asked Faudrin if he coud help also replace my lost eye. As things were, he had done for me far too much. I ever would be able to pay this debt.

The Maothi's magic was coming back, but too slowly to carry us to the Continent . His magical tattoos absorbed Xar from him even when my antimagical blood was still on his stomach, but it needed a few days to recharge before allow him to create the boat again.

I suspected something else was going on. He did not wanted to continue our journey. Leave Alkavalla, and his tribe, behind was something he only did for lack of alternative; that was no secret. Now that his magic was coming back, the opportunity to end his mission and travel back home has close. The faster we could resume our journey further away from his homeland we would be, and harder would be for him to go back.

On the other hand he had a strong argument against resume our travel. One I could not blame him for.

\_We must go back, because I lost my magical instruments on the tempest.

To my luck Faudrin visited us the next day, and proposed a solution:

\_I believe you will find everything you need inside that small house up there. It used to bellong to a Maothi tatoost like you, his 'refuge'. He was killed by a desert sigrax when my beard still had some black on it.

\_That's amazing! Can you remember the Maothi's tribe?

\_Deadly Bites, I believe.

\_A Deadly Bite's legendary Maothi used to travel alone from time to time, no one ever knew where he was going. That was long before my birth but they still talk about the mystery on Alkavalla.

\_I suppose you now will find out.

As Faudrin had suggested we entered the house, and found the equipment. The Maothi was so amazed that he admitted these tools and inks to be far superior to anything he had seen before. He even found some drawings, and studied them for a long time.

Discreetly I asked the Lich if what he had said about the Deadly Bite Maothi was true, "almost" he said. "The story is true, but the place where it happened was not here. I carried the instruments to my home, to study them, and commanded a low to bring them to that house after I learned about the gift given to you by a Panuin."

\_ I believe I can start my work with you now. My magic is coming back, and the preparation is something I can do with what I have now. \_ the tattooist informed me after one of these study sessions.

\_I hope you are not just wanting to try some spell you had never done before, and just found hidden inside those drawings you have been studying. Are you?

\_What if I am? I will give to you everything the Panuin told me to give. However, the final design of this magic is a matter for Maothis only, and as you know I am the only Maothi here.

I accepted his argument. What else I could do?

While the Maothi studied his next step I used what he had taught me to fish for us. My main concern was to keep Kiva away from the forest, more exactly away from the undead's land beyond it. The concern wasn't necessary, since she only entered the woods nearby to pick up some fruits, and passed most her time making me company.

When night came I noticed a small change, at first I thought that the Maothi seemed a little less grumpy. However, he wasn't less grumpy in general or with me. His mood was a little bit lighter only when he was talking with Kiva.

That made me look at the shaved head girl under a different light. Comparing her with the two other women I knew to be important in that young sigrax's life. Violeta, his mother; and the Maothi woman, his mentor and free companion. All three have something one could call a "strong personality", to be more precise all three have a deep sense of self confidence based on some real skill. Violeta and the Maothi, in different ways, are free women who "fight the slaves inside themselves" (as they would say on Lutianen), more obviously than the average free women.

Lady Violeta L. del d'Ombre is a former slave, she was a pleasure slave on a wild land for a long time, and the wild lands are known to be heavy places for slaves. She still has some slavish shadow, hidden below her powerful self confidence; that sometimes shows itself in her voice or her posture, and becomes obvious even if just for a moment; possibly that slavish shadow is what we were trying to exorcise when he made that gorgeous and scary dance to me a little after we met. On the other hand Violeta is a lucid

woman who has a realistic image of herself.

The Maothi woman on the other hand is skilled but not even by far as skilled as she believe herself. Her arrogance is nothing if not evident for someone who have used magic. She is a good person and means well\_ even when she triedto kill me, she did so for a greater good\_ but will kill herself if she ever succeed in reach the test to became a true mage. There is no slave on her, as far as I can see. Unlike Violeta she never was on my home planet, even so, and despite the pointed theets and sharp claws, is easier to imagine her walking on a piazza on Rome or inside a train from Tokyo to San Francisco (two cities on Earth linked by a train that passes inside a tunel bellow a ocean), than is to imagine the Violeta I knew on Alkavalla. The Maothi woman moves and talks like women on Earth do.

The 21 years old slavegirl Kiva on the other hand is a slave, not a former one. She was tring to impress me, possibly even seduce. Having the other two women in mind, after notice the Maothi's interest on her, I made a little more questions about to the beautiful woman about her life, to my surprise she was glady to talk about her past.

Kiva was born on Parviprae, a city without a Mage Caste which has in the commerce of products derivated from urdus it's main source of sustenance (urdus are herd animals, they look like rats but with thee tails and four eyes, some races are as big as elephants but the most lucrative ones are just a little larger than oxen). Parviprae is has Port, but most of it is builded far above the ocean, in the top or a tall cliff linked to the port only by a serie of stairs that can be easily blocked to make attack from the sea more difficult.

Parviprae was founded by immigrants who had to flee from "Scar of Xar", a region were the Xar was poisoned by some catastrophe and because of that magic became impossible. Sush scars does not last forever, the planet heals itself, but they can last millenia.

Kiva's father was a Musician Caste, he had accumulated a small fortune traveling the Word as furtive thief and mercenary spy and invested most of it in land and urdus. He stole Kiva's mother for a neighbor city, Alkalanddre; she was from the Warrior Caste, before she was slaved.

The thief's daughter was raised on Parviprae, but moved to Shirshan to study music on the Cristal Academy and after that builded a solid reputation as singer. Also, a more select but equally solid reputation as thief. Her pride came more from the second than from the first, I believe. Despite her skills\_ which I was had only her own words to vouch for at the time\_ she was caught by Alkavalla's guard, and sentenced to slavery a mouth before. Friends of her father, trustworthy fellows caught with her, died for the crime just because they were men. Her master intended to sell her on Lutianen.

As a free woman she took part in several raids to steal and slave free women, with that same friends of her father who died the same day she was sold. Steal high caste women was what she intended to do on Alkavalla, and failed. One thing she was happy about, her father had retired, and was not with them but safe on Parviprae taking care of his animals.

With a strange look on her face Kiva told me that she used to feel herself "one of the boys" when they were traveling together to steal women and 'other things'. "As as if my femininity was just one layer in my false identity", she told me.

That life history seemed a bit like what I imagine the Maothi may have experienced. For some reason

her father decided to teach her as only a male son should be taught according to the forest people's culture. She is not just "one of the boys", but a high authority fanatically followed by many hunters and at least respected by almost all Silent Climbers. Respected as usually only men are.

The Maothi man not knew anything about Kiva, but maybe he could feel something on her face and body that reminded him his mentor. I don't know, maybe the fact that this woman was not the powerful Maothi woman who made possible for him to be accepted by his tribe but a slave, in all practical ways under the power for free man, touched him somehow. The mix of similarities and contrasts.

What I know is that he started to show strong feelings for Kiva, romantic in nature.

Probably the fact that she was determined to stay by my side helped to intensify the young man's feelings. Was well established that she was a slave, and the matter of ownership could not be put in debate, legally speaking. I took the woman from the ship and brought her to his boat, that gave me a clear claim of propriety: we were allies, liked him or not, therefore he could not steal the woman from me.

He could not call for a duel and risk to kill me either. Because if I died before he had made the tattoo demanded by his Panuin he would be forever banished from his home land: and he feared nothing more than that. Claim her by law or challenge me for the woman were the only two options on his mind, the third obvious way to get a slave was to buy her and he knew enough stories about Earth to correctly assume that I would not sell a slave. He had wait, sooner or latter I would declare the girl free, and then any man near would have the right to slave her.

He suggested I should do that, and questioned my beliefs, that first night on the island. However, he made the mistake to touch the subject in Kiva's presence. The bald woman made as clear as possible her wish to remain as she was, my property. Next day, I felt the need to ask her why, and she gave me a very honest answer:

\_You will eventually reach a civilized city, possibly Lutianen if not Parviprae itself. Being a man from Earth you will probably say 'yes' then, when I was you for my freedom; just as you would have tonight. Between now and then I may convince you to ask me as your free companion, what is the only way you can keep me free on any city other than Parviprae; as your free companion I will have at least a chance to enter the Artist Caste on Lutianen and become a citizen protected by law.

\_I must say to you, I don't think I ever will ask a woman to be my free companion. I had extremely bad experiences with that sort of relationship.

\_Then, maybe you will find time and generosity to take me one day back to my home city. My father, if he is still alive, would gladly buy me from you to set me free. Most fathers would not, since having a daughter enslaved is a shameful experience, and seeing a daughter who is a former slave would be a painful reminder of that shame. My father, however, is a very atypical man: probably most good thieves are.

\_As soon as possible, I will try to reach your home city.

\_See? On the other hand, if I became his slave I will have to endure slavery on a wild land. Besides, he is a pussy whipped puppy who belongs to an older woman. Even if I could get some influence, despite the

fact that I as a slave and can not play the same games free women play all the time in order to achieve power over men and look for your weakness, that achievement would vanish the minute he was again in the presence of his “free companion” mistress.

\_You are being too hard on him, I think.

\_ For how long have you know the man?

When I answered that question, became clear even for myself that I could not talk with authority about the subject in discussion.

Eventually the Maothi decided that was time to start his work. After shave my head with a ritual knife\_ much similar to the one his free companion once used to prepare me to be sacrificed, if not the same one\_ he started a preparatory drawing on me.

The place for the magical tattoo was not my choice. When I asked him why my scalp he smiled.

\_First: you have the nasty habit to loose parts of your body, and replace them for odd appendix each one worse than the one before. I will see that my work goes deep enough to fix itself on your skull, I hope you will not loose that.

\_That’s a touching precaution. In glad to see you don’t dislike me as much as I imagined before.

\_I could put it on your chest, above your heart, you probably will not loose it too. However, the magical energy I must use to do what the Panuin demanded is too intense and could stop your heart.

\_It will not cause me a stroke?

\_A what?

\_It will not hurt my brain?

\_Possibly! There is little to loose on that front, so don’t worry about.

\_I see...

\_There is another reason, however.

\_Which is... ?

\_The Panuin was very specific about one thing: I must use the tribal symbol for Silent Climbers as basis, and must put the draw on a visible place. He wants anyone who sees you to know you are a Silent Climber, that gives you citizenship on Alkavalla and the right to walk among our allies as any other Silent Climber would. Also make you a recognizable enemy on any enemy of our tribe.

\_He forgot to mention that last detail to me, when he explained the gift ! Or I forgot to pay attention to that? I’m not really sure.

\_I imagined that you could not like the idea. That way I obey the Panuin, since there is no place more visible than your head, and let you the choice to frustrate his intent by letting hair grow to hide my work. Honestly, I hope you will let your hair grow: have an outsider like you traveling Sharitarn with this symbol visible on his body as an insult to every Maothi in my lineage.

\_I promise, I will consider your feelings carefully each time I choose a new haircut.

Before the Maothi could do much in terms of draw, Kiva's screams stopped his work.

\_Zombies !!! (as I once mentioned about Demons, the word "Zombies" does not translate the proper meaning present in the word she actually used: would take too long to explain the actual meaning of her word here. The word she used is from the Merchant Language, a language mostly used outside nations, learned by most people, and by almost all high caste members. Except in the most xenophobic communities, I must say)

\_We are doomed !!! ("doomed" describes nicely what she said)

We left the house in ruins, and saw the slavegirl running from the woods, followed by a countless crowd of undead, both humans and animals. Somewhere in the front I saw the false face Faudrin had been using to talk with the Maothi and Kiva. I knew that was probably not him, but a zombie with an illusion spell on it.

We could only run as far as the Sorrowfull, there was no other direction free from undeads.

\_Kiva is right ! We are doomed . \_I said, looking to the Maothi.\_ You told me that your magic is not yet recovered, and your tattoo still doesn't have enough Xar to create the boat ! There is no chance to fight this horde, even if we both had all our spells would not be possible to win that fight.

The Maothi did not answer. Instead he faced the Sorrowfull and made a gesture with his right hand. Three small tattoos shone on his chest, and the boat made of roots was between us.

\_Let's rescue Kiva!! \_ he commanded.

The Maothi had obviously lied to me about the time his magical tattoo needed to accumulate enough Xar for the creation spell. However, there was no time to dwell on it.

To be fair, I was being partner of Faudrin on a lie too. I was pretty sure that undead would not attack us. He probably just wanted his island free from outsiders, and knew by Divination Magic that the Maothi was already able to take us to the Continent any time he wanted.

I silently thanked the Lich, while the Maothi used the oar to move the boat away from the low undeads as fast as possible.

\_Can you make me an oar, so I can help you ?

The Maothi looked me with rage. That was his only answer.



## 24 - Savannah

We run for our lives, every other concern forgotten.

The air was too dry and when Kiva could not keep up I carried the slave girl on my back. To our luck she is a small and skinny young woman.

We were surrounded by savannah, the sky was gorgeous and the moon was almost full. There was nowhere to hide, nothing to slow us down, but our foes knew it better than us, and were better adapted to it as well. We escaped the camp before they could reach it, thanks to the Maothi's magic. His powers were recovered now and he kept a divination spell running precisely to protect us against that sort of thing. He noticed the beasts from distance, but that distance was lost during the day and when the night came our situation only became worse.

Darkness was no issue, since we both had silver helmets capable to inform us about our surroundings well enough to compensate for the lack of vision. By now I could use them well enough to identify the forms around me while running, and he was even more comfortable with the magical object. Problem is that boldus came from a planet without any light, they run better when it's dark.

I don't know if their universe is all dark, with some alien thing making the role stars play both on the Universe of Sharitarn and on the Universe of Earth. Possibly their "Earth" are just covered by clouds, or they evolved below the ground. Their world may not have light, but it sure has magic and that fact gave us our problem.

As alien as the magic they evolved to endure was their resistance against it made them hard to affect by the spells at our disposal.

Boldus hunt on packs, most packs have between ten and twenty animals. The one behind us was made of thirteen; two large males, nine females and two males smaller than most females. I can't say if the small males are some sort of variant or just young, but they were faster than the others. One, in particular.

Boldus mouth cover basically all their faces, the teeth make them look a lot like sharks. They have no eyes and their ears resemble cats ears. The large males have twice the size of tigers, the females a little more than half the size of normal males. Many predators on Sharitarn can resist spells that affect the mind more or less well, boldus are able to do that in some degree but they have an even better resistance against other kinds of magic. Nothing capable to worry mages, the weaker of them wouldn't even notice their resistance. Unfortunately we had no mage among us, just mere sigraxes.

Give me Kiva! demanded the Maothi You are slowing us down!!

That was not true, the slavegirl's weight was easy to forget. Being half forest man he is faster than the average human, but I was larger and much stronger. So far I had been capable to keep up with him, deep down he probably knew that to be true.

Since the lich's island the Maothi had been developing some sort of romantic feelings for Kiva. We had not yet talked about that, but being more wise than most men are at his age he was clearly aware of his own feelings, and about the contradictions between then and normal self. I decided to ignore the fellow until I actually need his help, and he did not insisted.

\_They will reach us any time. We should have run to the Sorrowfull ! \_ I complained. This time I was the one being unreasonable, and noticed it before I finish the protest.

We had not stayed near to the Sorrowfull because a large number of gijars were sleeping up there. We tried to escape back to the water, but the two faster boldus prevented our escape. To continue on that direction we would have to fight, and the rest of their pack would probably have surrounded us during that fight.

Returning my favor the wild sigrax ignored my unfair comment.

With the first light, in the morning, Kiva saw something.

\_There is some fallen trees on that direction, we can make fire and keep the animals at distance! \_ proposed Kiva.

She should not have spoken without permission, according to the rules for slave behavior on that planet. However, in theory, she belonged to me, and I couldn't care less. True to be told, under the circumstances no master would care, not if the suggestion was good.

\_We must do as she said!

\_Have you not explained to me that boldus do not fear fire? \_ I asked, almost losing my temper. Romance is one thing, I am all for it: as long as it does not result in Altair eaten alive by nasty wild animals (or by any other kind of animals, honestly).

\_They dont! However, there is a small cave up there, and a wall of rocks above it. She can hide inside the cave and we can use the wall above in to protect our backs. We are already surrounded and they will not allow us to find any better place to fight.

He was right. Now our only hope was to fight.

\_Give your dagger to Kiva! It's magic will not be usefull, since it only affect vision and our enemy do not see. Better not leave her unarmed!

He was right, I would probably have done it any way, but was interesting to notice how concerned he was with Kiva's safety. Under similar circumstances most masters would have kept the slavegirl unarmed, since they are actually supposed to be defenceless. If we could prevail against the boldus she would be fine, hidden behind us; on the other hand if we could not have a dagger would make little diference to her. Even if by some amazing luck she escaped the predators using the small weapon, after we both die, she would be alone on the savannah. Actually, even if she could escape the animals using

the dagger and then walk to safety, most masters would still not have allowed her the chance: the survival of one slave is less important than follow the traditional rule that forbid slaves to touch weapons.

I think Violeta del d'Ombre, the Maothi's mother, would endorse his suggestion; as long no civilized local man or woman could see her son arm a slave. On the other hand, I would very much like to hear what the man's free companion would say about the young man's idea.

\_There is something bellow the cave, some sort of tunel blocked by stones.\_ mentioned the Maothi before I had time to notice. You think she will be safe inside?

\_Better up there than here. Actually, can we use the tunel?

\_I could explode the wall, but I fear that would make the tunel fall and block our escape since we do not have time to dig. Besides, this place smells funny! I believe I know what kind of creature live here, and I would rather take my chances here than enter that tunel.

\_I bow to your superior knowledge about this land.

\_Coming from a ii who came to Sharitarn less than half decade ago you humility means little, Altair. The beasts did not hesitated. The larger males attacked from the sides, two females followed each one at some distance.

To my surprise I was able to hit the large male coming for me with a stone. The creation spell made one large and fast enough to stop the predator and force his momentary retreat.

For a long time I had been unable to make almost any magic, and that spell is far more demanding than the few I had being able to make since Shirshan. The attempt had been more instinct and desperation than real hope. The magical tattoo on my shaved head was almost finished, but according to the Maothi it would not work untill he conclude the draw and activate it.

The two females stoped for one moment, ready to dodge any other rock I could send against them.

A explosion happened behind me, it was the Maothi using the heaviest weapon on his arsenal against the attackers. The larger beast had exploded, his head and half of his body were covering a cone behind it's dead body, including the two females now two confuse to continue.

\_I hope that will be enough to them.\_ I mentioned.

\_Keep your eyes in the enemy in front of you! I don't think they are leaving yet.

He was right, the two females coming for me had begun their fast and silent run. I had no more rocks to stop them.

I was too slow with the blood drinker sword in my left hand even to reach targets as big as boldus. More by lucky than by skill my blade opened a deep cut in the first paw that attacked me. The magic on the weapon made me stronger, and faster, but the nasty lady did not gave up.

My right arm, moving like a serpent, attacked the beast's neck with six black claws capable to cut stone. The wound was less serious than I would have expected, but it was deep enough to save my life, and another time I felt grateful to destiny for the monstrous appendix which moves with a mind of his own.

I danced with the boldus to keep its body between me and the other lady. However, they knew that dance better than me, the hurt female rolled on the ground distancing herself from the stone wall. At same time the other lady jumped its sister, and almost crushed me under its weight. To escape I was forced to give away the ground between me and the Maothi.

The male I had attacked with the creation spell was back, the top of his head was bleeding a little, but other than that he seemed well enough to kill a sigrax. His sister was on the other side, and one small male started a long and painful whistle between the two directions, forcing me to divide my attention even more.

The Maothi was doing a little better. Kill the larger male in the pack with a spectacular explosion he had forced the two girls behind that foe to walk back until they could recover.

Two other ladies had continued from where the others stopped, but one of them was now incapable to move, bind by magical roots. The Maothi was dealing with the other; fighting with one magical sword and his ritual knife, matching the beast in speed and ferocity.

The helmet saved my head from the lady's claws, and my monstrous arm pushed the ground just in time to send me beyond the reach of her brother's jaws. I was alive, but no better than before. Actually, now I had them between me and the stone wall. The rest of their pack on my back.

When a small male attacked I panicked and lost my sword. He was not fast enough to catch me, however, and roll on the ground placed me under the female. My monstrous arm plunged deep in her belly, destroying something vital. That had been the larger female on the pack, and I escaped to be stuck by her height for blind luck.

Both the males fighting me, the larger and the smaller one, surrounded the dead corpse before I could recover. Then the three of us stopped in shock.

The female I had just killed came back to her paws.

I stepped out, trying to put some distance between her and me. Then I saw something had changed. The other two beasts were no longer interested on me, their attention was on their sister.

Before stop to contemplate their behaviour from a philosophical point of view I took advantage of it to recover the blood drinker sword. Three other females joined the male and the female who had been attacking me and destroyed the one I had hurt deeply before I could understand what was happening.

Somehow the lich's leg attached to me had raised the deceased boldus female and an undead. It was some sort of zombie and did not move as fast as the living animals of her species, but seemed harder to put down.

Distracted by the action I did not see the small male attacking. The sword was beyond my normal reach, but the monstrous arm stretched to catch it and threw the magical weapon. It entered the bold's mouth and the blade appeared on the forehead like a unicorn horn.

The other small male noticed it. He came closer, and his brother faced him.

I asked myself if what had happened with the female would happen again, but the animal with my sword on his head was still alive.

The other small male changed. Its form moved closer than the human shape, and its still animalistic face looked at me with obvious rage.

It struck me like a bolt. The two small males were not from the same species as the others in the pack. They were some sort of people capable of assuming the shape of animals. Without the proper divination spells and Xar to spare I could not say if they were sigraxes following some Way I never had heard about or a race of iis with the natural ability to shapeshift into beasts, but they clearly had been accepted by the rest as pack leaders.

The monster took its hurt brother on his shoulders and faced the sky. That was some sort of signal, understood by the pack.

The zombie had been reduced to pieces too small to move, the Maothi had killed one female, and the one bound by his spell escaped just in time to follow the pack. Taking by my own experience with the effects of my blade I would bet the small male hurt by it and the female with a cut in its paw will probably die. In the end of day; assuming I am correct; they had lost one large male, three females including the larger one, and one shapeshifter. Only eight would survive from the thirteen who had attacked us.

On the other hand, I had lost the blood drinker sword. Not a bad deal, if you ask me, considering that when that fight started our more optimistic expectations were far worse.

Before I could catch my breath the forest man's priest brought to my attention another setback provoked by the conflict, even if indirectly.

\_Kiva is gone !!!

Of course she had to be gone. Why should we have enough luck to enjoy a moment of peace?

The stone wall had been opened from inside, it was closed now and for all we could see there was no way to move it from where we were. I was worried, but the look on the young man's face scared me.

\_Slow down, fellow! That anger will not help Kiva, or us. If there is a maze of tunnels behind that door they must have other entrances, all we have to do is to find one.

\_What makes you think any entrance they have will be easier to open?

\_Well, I can't promise you that. But if the people below the ground need to breathe and if they aren't using magic to produce all the air they need, then we will find places left air intakes. They may be

larger enough for allow our entrance, or not, but is a better hance than the one we face here.

I tried, but the Silent Climber priest wasn't listening anymore. He had entered the small cave.

A loud explosion came after that. I run, to find the Maothi on the ground, too weak to raise.

\_What, by the love of your crazy gods, you just did??

Was a rhetorical question, I knew the answer and even if I didn't he obviously was too weak to give me it. He had risked his life draining every single drop of Xar to make his more powerful spell happen a second time in the day when his body had no inner resources to produce it. That could have killed him, would possible leave permanent sequelae, and had already left him too weak to speak.

\_Now every whatever is in that hole know we are here and intend to invade their home!!!

Was cruel of me, I am not proud of my words. One must respect the man's attitude, risking everything to save the defenceless lady. Maybe up to this moment he had no idea that he was in love for Kiva, the girl who was theoreticall mine. The Maothi acted with passion, forgiving every rational consideration for the sake of his love: a beautiful motivation.

Problem is that among the "everything" he was risking my neck was included. Since that trip started I had put it in danger frequently enough by myself, according to my personal feelings.

The Maothi's romantic gesture was as futile and useless as that kind of behaviour usually are. I could not leave him alone in his current state to enter the underground maze and try to save Kiva. Will never know if he overvalued or undervalued his power as a sigrax and the streng of his will; in the first case he can have assumed that he would be able to raise and keep going despite the pain and exhaustion, in the other he expected to die making the spell and let me free to rescue is beloved. Maybe he never stopped to consider anything beyond his need to open the way between himself an the woman.

Before I had time to try any healing spell and hope it would work, like the creation spell worked moments before, the silver helmet revealed to me the first glimpse of the fellows whose home we were trespassing. I carried my unfriendly friend and run, to take him outside, so he would not be in the midde of the fight when that started.

Was the first time I saw people from the race that leaved the cave, despite the fact that they aren't exactly rare on the tropical areas of Sharitarn. I decided to avoid the name used for the locals to call their race, because to translate it into phonetic writing would be too hard for my poor linguistic skills; decided to avoid the nickname used to call them as well, because it is an ugly obscenity. For the lack of better name I will call then lizard people.

My dear friend Xiirsh, who I described to you as a dragonlike humanoid, has the basic aspect of a reptile with human form. She has four arms, two of them are smaller and thinner which according to her will grow into wings and make her capable to fly, but other than that her shape is basicly humaniod. Those reptile humanoids were clearly not from the same kind.

Even if I had never heard about their specie before I would be able to tell that they are far bellow humanity in intelligence and civility just by looking at them. While the dragonlike people seems to be, at

least according to the first criteria, on the opposite extreme.

They small black eyes showed little sign of reason, their weapons were made of bones and sharp rocks, their bodies covered by paintings and rags.

I took my dagger and the mirror images of myself appeared immediately by my two sides.

The first five who left the underground attacked holding their spears with two hands. The heavy short weapons were the only things made of wood they carried, and with my right arm I had a better reach than them. Avoiding to stay in the same place, to make hard for them to find out who was the real me, I was able to kill all five without came close enough to use the dagger in my left hand.

Unfortunately to me no corpse raised as an undead to help me fight the other lizard men. By now I was surrounded by more enemies than I could count. The monstrous arm attacked fast and with deadly precision, but the talking beasts were fast and vicious. They bit the arm in the air while it moved like a snake, and used knives when the spears seemed too slow: like Xiirsh they preferred such weapons to their natural claws, what seems to me a reasonable enough choice.

My monstrous arm was now covered by a protective layer of grey fur, even so their sharp teeth opened some painful wounds on it.

Seven more enemies died, three of them I killed with the magical dagger in my left hand. The Maothi was awake, but still too weak to move. They ignored him, but started throwing their spears from some distance, and I saw myself forced to distance myself from my unfriendly friend to avoid the risk of someone kill him by accident.

Eight more lizard had fallen, two of them after apparently harmless kicks from my skeleton leg. The lizard men were tying the Maothi's arms behind his backs. I feared that could be the end of this fight, if they threatened to cut his throat I would have to surrender. Instead, they carried their prize to the tunnels. I had too much in my plate to stop the four lizards carrying my fellow sigrax.

Twelve more died, I had not being touched by any serious blow, but then a spear found its way to my left thigh. That part of my body was still the one I had brought with me from Earth, and the heavy would penetrate it like a barbecue stick.

Bleeding a lot, unable to continue the dance with my mirror images, I was overcome and immobilized.

After hit my head a dozen times, give or take, they started the complex operation to tie me without touch my right leg. The monstrous arm was their main problem, after roll it around me three times tying each sector on the one above, they immobilized each one of my six fingers individually. Before all that they covered my right leg in many layers of rags and tied it in my human leg, which was bleeding abundantly since one of them recovered his weapon.

Surprised me the fact that they did not just cut the arm and the leg off, and let them behind. Among them was a individual I recognized by the 'smell' of Xar as being a sigrax. This wild sigrax decided that I should be carried inside with my monstrous arm and leg. I can imagine a few reasons why that would seem convenient to him, despite the obvious danger involved. For instance, if he intended to study the

magic involved to replicate it cut off the arm or the leg now would make his job harder, maybe even impossible.

They had taken from me the silver helmet, most the way inside the tunnel was completely dark. From time to time they would make a curve and I would see some light until the next corner. The flames in the walls were smaller than the ones most humans could have chosen to illuminate the same areas, even forest men would probably need more light to walk comfortably.

Not that I imagine there was much to be seen. What my eyes could reach was stone and dirt, lots of mud and small bones decorating the walls or hanging from the ceiling. The smell was awful all the time during that journey. I noticed that they like to talk all the time with each other, in their harsh language, fast and low. No lizard tried to establish communication with any of us.

We reached what, by the sounds, I imagine to be a larger chamber. Up there our captors separated themselves, I was carried by two lizards surrounded by six others. Their wild sigrax was leading that group, with my dagger on his belt and lizard children at his side carrying the rest of our magical stuff. I can't say were they took the Maothi, or why they decided that he was so dangerous that almost all warriors they had should accompany him instead of me.

Quite frankly, that detail irritated me. I was the one killing dozens of them, why they put only a small number of men, and a bunch of children, to keep an eye on me and invested almost all their resources to him protect themselves against him ?!

Soon enough I was thrown in a hole in the wall and a thick door of glass was closed behind me. The place was so small that my face touched the glass while my feet were pressing the wall below. This cage had the shape of a cone with its tip blocked by a wall of stone. It was not parallel to the wall, but inclined down like the hole someone who did not know how to hammer a nail and had try to sometimes leave behind.

As far as I could tell I was no longer bleeding, that was a good thing. However, I couldn't see or hear. My best bet would be that the lizard sigrax's workstation was in to other side of that glass, and the fellow user of magic what up there preparing some sort of spell to find out what I am and how he can extract as much power from me as possible before allow the rest of his band to kill and eat me.

Despite all concerns I was too tired to keep worrying about, and sleep overtook me.

## 25 - Cold Waters

The war against the three nations affected more lives than anyone could account for. Far from the dark cage were I was common peasants of Shirshan were fighting for their homes and for the survival of their children. Trying to protect their food from hordes of young giants, many of them smaller than human toddlers. Giants start their lives very small, however they are born with the same body proportions of adults and take little time to become as nimble as cats.

Those enemies of Shirshan; who now also were enemies for my city, which also was in war against the Green Poison; need more than 500 years to reach the size of adult humans. Most of them do not survive that long even under normal circumstances. Giant's culture is violent and young giants are not known for their caution. The free human men in this world, peasants of Shirshan not excluded, are not greenhouse flowers either; common men carry weapons all the time. Even not being as skilled in use of their swords as the Warrior Caste has to be few common men will reach adult age without defeat at least one other common man in a duel.

Peasants are even less used to trust their warriors and sigraxes for their own protection than any other civilized people. Unlike most castes they make their homes in the borders of civilization, their children grow up seeing lawless people and wild nomads about as often as they see the warriors of their own nation. Even peasant women are supposed to hold their ground if necessary, when their men are dead or far away.

Zaiaz's army had lost many young soldiers to take the food and the lives of those humans already when the warriors came. From three dozen cities bounded to Shirshan by old alliances came warriors and a few sigraxes. Some mercenary bands came with them, but not many. Most mercenaries had answered the call of Shirshan itself, they waited under the shadow of its walls and would be the first line between the East Gate of Green Poison and Zaiaz when the giant chief reached it; as he inevitably would.

Most mercenaries hired by the human cities were humans themselves, some were wild men but in general the war had attracted civilized warriors, or sigraxes, from cities not involved in the conflict. As always happen many lawless bands had been formed, those men would fight not only for wage and spoils but also for the distant hope to earn citizenship for their brave acts.

In the past my adoptive city, Lutianen, rewarded large numbers of lawless mercenaries with citizenship. Sometimes even mercenaries who were not humans. Shirshan has for habit only welcome a few heroes as new citizens, and never non humans. The Green Poison, albeit that dislike for wild non humans, isn't above to hire non human as mercenaries. Even the primitive and moronic lizard men had been invited to help the powerful city. Several dens of lizards between the Sorrowful River and the Piwag Desert vacate, all their inhabitants gone to fight the giants.

Other lizard chiefs had been smart enough to refuse the offer made by the large city beyond the Sorrowful. The bands following those chiefs were now visiting the caves of their neighbors; to steal their eggs, raise the better children as their own and eat the rest. What had been small and weak bands

before that war became the strongest lizard nations near to the Sorrowfull River thanks to the dirty tactic.

All the trick is in invade den and steal the eggs without have your on eggs stolen for other chiefs who believe to be smarter than you are while you are doing that. A easy enough game, if wasn't for the lizard bands arriving from the desert.

Because the war had not affected just the other side of the Sorrowfull.

For a long time the powerfull mages of Lutianen kept the wild human tribes of the Piwag separated from their civilized cousins in the village of Niore. Dispersed by more fractricidal conflicts than the stars in the sky the desert tribes had never being able to take Niore from the "protection" of Lutianen. Now, thanks to that war, Lutianen does not look capable to keep the miners and blacksmiths of Niore under control. Noticing that the desert tribes started the hard process to put join forces and put their warriors together against my adoptive city.

All that unusual movement on the sand and stone disturbed the non human races in the Piwag. Unlike the civilized nations the proud wild tribes on the desert does not hire lizards as mercenaries. In general they hunt and kill the lizard bands in their way, to use their skin and bones as trophies.

Having choice most lizard chiefs will choose to invade the lands of other bands of lizards instead of stay and fight the human tribes of the desert. The human nomads on the Piwag have millions of years in experience learning how to kill the lizard people. As a matter of fact the lizards had just the same time to learn how to kill the humans, but the cold blooded hunters seems to have less adaptative brains.

Other non human races more intelligent and better armed than the lizards also avoid confront the human nomads of the Piwag on their desert. Even my city, Lutianen, do not chase the nomads into their desert.

Sleeping inside a small hole in the stone wall of a lizard den I was not aware of all that. I had felt in the claws of this lizard band thanks to a less than prudent move made by a fellow sigrax. The Silent Climber Maothi action had a reason, one that I can understand better than any man born on this planet: the safety of a woman was all that he could see at that point, his own survival became irrelevant.

On my planet any man is supposed to jump to certain death when that is necessary to save a woman, any woman, from discomfort. Honestly there is nothing altruistic about, on Earth is just common sense: their freedom and confort are infinitely more important than our lives. Besides, the price for not jump to death under such circumstances is not as attractive than a moderately fast and equally painless death.

I am sure that the Maothi would not have jumped to almost certain death for just any woman. He would have done something like that for his mother, probably, and certainly would had done that for his free companion and mentor. I saw with surprise when he throwed his life away for a girl he had met days before, a girls who was a slave; and in theory, even if not in fact, my slave.

If there was a plan behind his action my part in it was to rescue Kiva from the lizards after he die to open me the way. As far as I could see he was captured alive, and Kiva had no reason to hope for a rescue from me.

My cage of stone had a door of glass, did not tool me much to find out that glass had antimagical properties. Probably it had been part of some larger structure, maybe a building on some long lost city, the lizard people seldom make antimagical objects and never as strong as that. They also have very fell individuals capable to make any kind of glass.

The idea that I had been locked by their sigrax on his personal laboratory was logical, but incorrect. I was in the quarters of a sigrax, but not the same one who had captured us.

The band in this maze of tunels were not the original owners of it. They had no intention to stay either. Had our trouble on the surface happened a few hours later we would have found Kiva save in the cave and would have left with no trouble. No trouble except for the possible one still offered by the shapeshifter who hunted us before, I mean.

The lizards had been looking every were in this tunels for the chamber were the eggs had been left by the owners of this house. One group had found Kiva by accident, thanks to that I was captured.

Once locked inside a small hole I slept. Before the vortex, on Earth, that would never be possible. I liked to travel and could sleep on a diferent bed every day, for weeks in a row, but such were comfortable beds in safe motels. Any danger would keep me awake. Here on Sharitarn I would not sleep as easily as I used to on my home planet, not even on my confortavel bed in Black Centaur Castle, but that changed one night; some time after I left Lutianen. My the danger became a constant to me, if I could not sleep with it I would not sleep at all.

Nightmares became frequent to me, that night I had another bad dream.

In my dream the vortex brought someone from my past to the lizard's maze. Someone I hoped never see again. Then complete darkness made me realize that I was awaken and I enjoyed a moment of happiness, before reality reach me. Touching my face I convinced myself that wasn't another dream, my eyes were open and either I was blind or there was no light what to ever.

The hope used for the lizard men to immobilize me was still here, but like a pinchy blanket. I was no longuer binded and by that rope, and took some time for my confuse mind understand why. My monstrous right arm had transformed itself back into a normal human one, and the smaller fingers easily slipped out the rope. My legs were still incapable to move, and the general sensation of being locked in a coffing made of stone was less than pleasant, to me, personally speaking; but the fact that I could move my arms still gave me a degree of satisfaction.

At least feel the stones around me searching for some way out was something to do, and would help me to pass the time. I had little hope to actually find the way out I as looking for, but to my surprise a rock moved with a 'click' when I pressed it, and a passage opened bellow my feet.

Dragging myself with some effort I moved down from the inclined cage and felt in a tunel. Took me a little to free my legs without the black monstrous claws I was starting to feel as my own, but no one interrupted my work and a little later I was walking alone in the tunel.

Remembering the stone I had been able to create earlier I tryied a creation spell. The phisical effort was so intense that I had to sit, but was whorty, a small sphere came into existence on my hand. A white light strong enough to illuminate the nearest walls and a few steeps in fron of me was emanating

from the ball, and after my eyes adapt I became able to have a better idea about the place were I was.

After a little a wall blocked my the way, and I was forced to try the opposite direction. That gave me the idea to try a divination spell. Was too soon and my body lacked the necessary Xar to make it work, but I felt the energy growing inside me, and that helped me to improvise some hope.

There was a wall on that direction as well, but that one was made of fur and ropes. After a moment I noticed a opening between the many layers of fur, large enough to allow my passage.

The other side was cold as a freezer, and I regretted have left behind the blanket wich had been used to bind my legs and protect the lizards from the contact with my skeleton leg. The ground was covered by a dense mist and the tunel ended in a large chamber. My source of light only allowed me to see a small part of it, but both the source of low temperature and the reason for it became clear very fast.

Black towers as tall as myself were scattered around. I had seem similar objects before, the Vindictive Squid had one to preserve the food and keep some drinks cold, but those were twices big and there was many.

I mentioned the Vindictive Squid to you some pages ago, it is the pub were I worked after leave Black Centaur Castle as register myself as a sigrax in the Mage Tower of Lutianen. It is a large recreational establishment near to the port of Lutianen, but does not need more than one cold stone. What I was seem inside the cage represented a fortune in form of black metallic towers.

The lizards do not create that stones, I am sure. It is the product of civilized spells or rare natural resources worked by expecialized alchemists.

Everywere there was eggs just a little smaller than a human head, and I needed no spell to know what kind of animal was inside such eggs. That explained the need for a cold environment, probably those eggs had been left here waiting for something.

Something else had been left inside the cave as well. Surprised I noticed a egg broken, someone had eaten it. There was two more like that one near.

\_You are very welcome, sigrax. \_the person who had spoken moved from behind a table of rock covered by lizard people's eggs.

The man showed his hands, to make clear to me that he intended no conflict. He had a sword binded on his left thigh, and a knife confortably sheathered behind his open shirt. His hair is lilac as the tail of a pony from a cartoon intended for young children, and his eyes have the color in a tone a bit more metallic and light.

\_I am Tongue, of the Zudin tribe. Needless to say, that's not my home and I will bet that neither of us in a friend ot the lizard people in the tunels around us.

\_That's a easy bet, as fat as I can tell. My name is Altair of Lutianen, I am looking for my friends who have been captured with me by our hosts. After I find them we will need a way out. Would be too much a imposition to ask for your help, Tongue of the Zudin tribe? \_ I had never heard the name Zudin before,

that didn't make a difference to me given the context. He on the other hand had heard about Lutianen, and smiled to me.

\_ When I left home my people had just joined the war against your city, Altair. Notwithstanding I will accept your offer, for our mutual interest, in good will. A truce up to half day after we escape the lizards is acceptable to you?

\_It is very acceptable.

\_Can you speak for your friends as well?

\_They are not from my city. One is a forest people, of the Silent Climbers. The other a slavegirl.

\_Good to know, my people have no quarrel against the Silent Climbers.

Tongue explained to me a bit about the lizard people, including the information I mentioned before. The cold stones had been payment given in advance by Shirshan for participation of in the war.

\_I came looking for lizard people's eggs, they are valuable among the desert tribes.

\_Your people eat the eggs of intelligent races? \_ you will remember that forest people do eat human flesh, and that I had to give a bite or two in some for diplomatic reasons. Nevertheless, the concept of eat people or people's embryos was so repellent to me at the time that I still was not able to digest the idea while sober.

\_Some of us eat the lizard people, but isn't usual. My people use them as trackers and guards, mostly. To develop intelligence a lizard must eat only the flesh of intelligent animals, usually humans, during the first five days after leave the egg; after that they still need to eat rational animals from time to time, at least until they reach adulthood. Most bands have about one third of intelligent member, the rest are animals. Such bestial lizards are about as intelligent as the dogs from your home planet, and have a even better sense of smell.

\_Why you say "your home planet"? I have never mentioned Earth, or have I?

Tongue seemed to think I had made a funny joke. Instead of answer it he decided to raise more the more present subject.

\_Took me sometime to find this cave, once I did open the entrance was easy enough; from outside. When I noticed the other thieves, before they could catch me, I closed the doors. I was confident that I would find a way to open it from inside after they leave; that, however, was a mistake.

\_Neither could you find another way out, I understand. However, the lizard are still in the tunnels.

\_The band outside was about to leave when something happened, your arrival probably. There is some places in this caves where one can hear what happens in the tunnels outside, by now I am confident that I will be able to avoid the large groups of lizards, rescue your friends, and leave; all that assuming that you can move fast and silent enough to follow me. Well, that if your friend is still alive and being kept

were I believe he is.

\_You can understand their conversation?

\_About as well as I understand your Merchant Language, despite your heavy Earthling accent.

\_I see...

\_Can you take us from this cave using your magic without make too much noise?

\_ We will find out soon enough.

First I insisted in leave the cold area, Tongue was comfortable enough with the temperature, but he was the only one who could say that. The I made my investigation, sit in the ground, with my eyes closed. Took me some time, to give up Divination. The Xar inside me was too dirty to allow a divination capable to reach more than a few steps far, with that we would need a huge amount of luck to find a way out before the lizards diggest Kiva and the Maothi.

Something stopped me when I tryied to open my eyes, a kind of energy I was not used to feel. Xar, but moving into a strange pattern.

Images of shadows forming animals, and people. Whispers accompanied by waves of icy panic, waves colder than cold stones. The feeling was replaced by a smell of dead flesh coming from inside my brain.

When necromancy deals with 'ghosts' of intelligent people the process is very diferent than the one used to deal with the immortal 'spirits' of irrational beings. Intelligent beings, say the common people and the necromancers I had asked about, are destroyed a little after they die, only the non intelligent spirits keep going and will reincarnate for all eternity. However, intelligent animals do leave something behind, empty shells full of memories and emotions which more often than not look like the peoson who produced them for someone using necromancy.

Empty shells that speak outloud the secrets the dead kept when he was alive, frequently. Generations after generation of lizard men had eat their first meals inside the cave. People are brought alive to places like that in order to be killed by the horde of hungry cubs.

Divination would have showed me the facts, the scenes of what happened. However as any magical Way Divination has limitations, the intense Xar dancing his angry dance inside necromatic patterns is beyond the reach of divination spells. Never having learned any spell from the necromantic Way I was both surprised and scared with the new source of information opened to me.

Thing is, I was not scared enough to refuse the answer I had been looking for, just because it came from ghosts. If I was, I probably would have left one more ghost inside that cave.

There was many doors that could be opened from inside, by someone who knew their locations and how to open each one. The nearest one was the one I had used to enter the chamber, but tongue said that was not the better option because from there we would have a large group of lizards between us and the Maothi, their sigrax included.

We used another door, and moved fast almost without hear any lizards. The few in our way were in groups of three and distracted enough to be killed before they could give any alarm.

According to Tongue I walked fast enough, and was an acceptable killer. All that, despite the fact that I made more noise walking than “a pack of zudras having sexual intercourse inside a china shop” (that’s a very free translation, I must admit).

Tongue showed me the way to a corridor full of cages, taking for the aspect of it the lizards had not understood the Maothi’s magical status. Those were cages for people unable to use Xar. That suggested to me that my temporary allie could be lying to me about were the Maothi was supposed to be, but before I had time to express that thought the uncanny sense of smell I had since my first morning on Shirshan confirmed to me that Kiva abd the Maothi had been inside a cage nearby.

The lock had been opened without magic, but not forced. Probably Kiva’s work. Either the Maothi was still recovering from the abuse of his own magical body made to open our way in the lizard’s maze, or he had been locked in some sort of antimagical chain. Both things were possible, neither would keep someone like him unable to make spells for long. Under the circumstances the information that, for the moment, my travel companions were probably defenseless in this tunels was very important to me.

\_They have gone on that direction\_ I pointed, following the couple’s scent.

\_That’s the wrong direction, I would not go on that direction if I were you. As a matter of fact I am not sure if I will being myself. The main horde of lizards is up there, it cut the main corridor they must use to leave the maze fast in large numbers; which is preciselly what they will probably do.

\_I can not blame you if you leave now. Our deal never included that level of risk.

\_On the other hand I said I would help you to rescue your friend, and leave the tunels. Even being a sigrax you don’t know the tunels or the lizard people. Magic is a poor substitute for experience, most days, according to my experience.

We entered deeper in the lizard’s maze, together. If the Maothi had his magic I could have decided to leave. “He must have a spell capable to open his way out, and probably is looking for our magical objects”, I would have assumed. Since they had left the cage by mundade ways probably both were lost, groping walls in the dark with no idea about what expected them.

\_Forest men have a amazing sense of smell, and a hearing pretty decent. Your friend may be able to stay two steps in front of the lizards for some time. With lucky we may find he still alive, but the slave is another matter. If he stay with her, his chances are far worse.

The Maothi is a half forest man, his mother is from Earth. His senses and reflexes are not as sharp as the ones a normal forest man have. Kiva on the other hand is a human native from Sharitarn, which for practical purposes means she has the same physiology iis from Earth (like myself) have. She is a experient thief, that can make a big diference, even so Tongue was probably right. Whatever the case could be I knew for a fact that the Silent Climber priest would not leave the bald musician girl behind.

Avoid the groups of lizard men became harder as we advanced, and there was more of them on

each group.

\_Still no sign of fight, that's a good thing.

I turned my face to Tongue in order to agree with him. The word died in my mouth.

Behind him was a dark lake, reflecting the small light above it like a mirror. The mirror was blurred by bubbles in the instant I looked at it. Moment after that the surface of this lake elevated itself in waves caused by a hundred heads. I looked around and saw no place to hide nearby.

\_They have not seem us yet.

As I pronounced the words I noticed the one lizard looking behind him, facing the opposite direction every one else was. Our eyes met, just when his adapted to see above water.

I could not move, until the Zuding tap twice on my shoulder with two fingers and whisper.

\_Run. \_ Tongue suggested, before vanish from my side.

He was going to the direction we came from, the only possible option since the other way out that chamber could only be reached bypassing the dark lake. More by blind instinct than by careful consideration, I followed the wild man's initiative.

## 26 - Open Sky

Tongue was about ten steps ahead of me when another group of lizard men turned the corner. They were only seven, but by the time he reached the first two and killed one the lizard in the rearguard was singing the alarm. His song was beyond human's hearing but his posture was clear enough to allow no doubt about our fate.

I reached the fight in time to kick a lizard's leg when it was about to attack my ally's back with his sword. Then I jumped back, being remembered that unlike the wild nomad from the Zudin tribe I was unarmed.

He took advantage from my help to kill the lizard before he could stand up, but two other lizard warriors decided to kill me before I could do more damage. My magical dagger had been taken taken by the lizards when I was captured, my blood drinker sword was lost before I enter the lizard men's tunnels. Even the monstrous right arm that had saved my life more than once in the past days now had transformed back into a normal human arm. I never understood why my arm had grew back as something so strange, it's transformation back into a regular arm was equally unclear to me; by that time I only knew that I was feeling the lost of claws more than I would have thought possible.

My way was blocked by the lizards we had been running from before we met their seven fellows. In facing me were at least 50 enemies, organized in lines like a proper army would be. Those wild non humans were still dripping, they unsheathed swords in a single collective movement. The groups we had encountered before in this tunnels had mostly stone axes and spears but those were red iron sword clearly made by some human ironworker from a civilized nation.

They also had shields, and used them as Warriors from Shirshan would.

We saw ourselves surrounded, me and my two pursuers. I escaped only because the well armed lizards were more interested in their cousins, who died fast by the way.

I caught a stone ax on the ground, but before I could attack the enemies still fighting my ally their fight transformed itself into a collective race. The lizard men from the lake were coming for all of us, and as soon as the tunnels gave us a chance Tongue pulled me on a direction different from the one chosen by the more primitive lizard men.

\_Has happen back there? That's a civil war of some sort?\_ I asked the man who obviously knew much more about the lizards than me.

\_More like a proper war against different nations. I can't say for sure, but looks like the people who builded this tunnels, parents of the eggs we saw in the cold cave, are back. That's bad for the other lizard, but can be useful for us.

Thinking about the two groups I remembered more differences than just weapons and posture. The ones from the black lake were a little larger and more muscular, their scales had shape of diamond while

the other group had them triangular and smaller. The ones from the lake also had bone plates on the top of their heads and on the back of their necks. In the poor light we had inside this tunnel was hard to notice but the color most of them had was a very dark tone of yellow with stripes in the same color old clotted human blood has.

I found a sword and a shield on the ground, near to a lizard corpse. The red iron weapons were nothing like the magical ones I have used to, but were still far superior to the stone ax.

\_Follow your friend and his slavegirl by smell make no sense! Unless you can find their exact location with a spell we must leave, Altair. That's as far as I go, if you stay I wish you luck.

\_There is one last place I would like to visit before we leave, after that I give up the search. Can you take us to the sigraxe's room? I mean the place with the cages to imprison users of magic, the cages with doors made of glass.

\_That's not in our way to the exit.

\_You more than fulfilled your part in our agreement already, I admit that. Let me suggest another deal. I believe my things were up there, at least the magical weapons and objects. Among those things are a magical dagger capable to generate illusions very useful to distract one's enemies. You can have the dagger, if you help me to reach that room.

\_That's a fair deal, a magical weapon is always a sharp and trustworthy one. Since I don't have magical potential it will generate no illusions when used by me, but I can always sell the dagger for a good price.

\_I can not promise you the weapon is up there. Logic dictates all my magical objects must have been taken to the place used to their sigrax and kept there until he could identify the exact utility of each one. However, I can only hope the dagger was not given to some lizard by now.

\_I understand. Let's go, this fight between lizards will not last long, and when it ends any non-lizard still under the ground will find himself facing a serious complication.

We reached the right corridor without trouble. The groups of lizards we passed by ignored us, because they were either in the middle of some battle or running to one. Our way was blocked only when we reached the entrance of the short corridor that leads right to the magical workshop.

A conflict had reached a deadlock. Outside was the sigrax recently arrived flanked by three alchemists carrying magical weapons. Two groups of warriors from their tribe formed barriers between the magical battle and any enemy who intended to intervene. We could not see the other limit of the short corridor from where we was, but the lizard sigraxe was obviously inside.

\_We can not wait here until they finish. A fight like that can continue for days, depending on the kind of spells used. I am sorry, we will not reach the dagger I promised to you, or my the rest of my stuff.

\_ Let's go back, then.\_ Tongue agreed.

Before we could move dozens of lizard warriors came from the corridor behind us. Seem us close to the battle they assumed we had joined forces with their enemies and attacked us without a instant of hesitation. At same time the sigrax inside the magical workstation decided he did not liked long fights and attacked. With a energy spell, in form of lightning bolts he leaved the chambe, followed by one young aprentice and seven alchemists.

I lost my ally in the chaos, being attacked by lizard warriors from both sides, and fighting back as well as I could. In some point my sword passed through a enemy, twice, and I understood that he was a alchemist using the magical dagger I had sold to Tongue.

The center of all was the two sigraxes, now facing each other with no morer than six steps between them.

A magical machete travessed my red iron sword as if it wasn't there, almost severing my left hand in the process. Maybe was the pain, maybe the realization that I would not last longer in the middle of that fight with a useless left arm and non magical weapon in the other, but my right arm turned back into the large monstros tentacle I hated and needed so much.

My wounds were healing almost as fast as they were made, despite the fact that I wasn't making any healing spell. The corpses of common lizards now were everywhere, which is normal during battles were warriors, does not matter if civilized or savage, fight side by side with people using spells and/or magical weapons. The scene reminded me the fact that my ally had no potential for magic, and I looked for him. I kind expected to find the Zudin's head somewere, far from his body. What I found, instead, was a circle of lizards trying to reach Tongue, who moved two red swords faster than my eyes could see, cutting both common lizards and alchemists and blocking their blows.

The swords were magical, I think, because non magical weapons can't block attacks made by a alchemist with a magical weapon. In Tongue's hands the weapons had no magical powers, but still resisted the blows that would have easily destroyed any non magical sword.

The distraction caused both by the two sigraxes and by my ally allowed me to reach the short corridor and enter the workshop. Taking by the number of corpses the sigraxe and his apprentice had taken the chamber back from their enemies, a little more than dozen corpses of "black lake lizards" were here, none in one piece.

A fast look revealed my backpack, and the Maothi's, in a stone that could be the sigraxe's worktable. I looked for any other item easy to carry that seemed usefull, put all in the bags, and was leaving when Tongue entered, with my ond dagger on his belt and one magical sword on each hand.

\_The bone head lizards have won the day! That was the definitive battle, will not take long for their sigrax came for us with. That corridor is no option now, good thing we have another way out. Were is the cage from were you reached the cold cave ?

Until he ask I had not considered the subject. When I was captured and locked there was neither light nor time to look at the chamber. Now, in the magical light produced by my magical stone, I was seem several doors of glass just like the one I remembered from my time inside the small hole used as a cage for magical prisoners.

\_Well?? \_insisted the desert warrior.

\_That is embarrassing...

\_What? You know were is the door we need, don't you?

\_I have some idea, but may take some time to find out exactly were it is.

\_That's less embarrassing than dismal. You should start now, before dismal change to fatal.

I faced de glass doors on the wall, but was distracted by the sound of fight. Four warriors had entered the chamber. Tongue was dealing with them well enough, with his preternatural reflexes. Them I saw a fifth lizard behind the warriors, a one of the alchemists. This alchemist had a magical staff of cold stone on his hand, exuding white vapor, and I guessed that would not go well for my ally.

I threw the first thing my right hand found on the alchemist lizard, without even look what it was. A green explosion sent small pieces of glass in all directions; a floating ball of green smoke cover the alchemist and dissove his body were he stand, waist to head bones; two lizard warriors try to escape, but fail, the smoke dissolving in the air does not catch them with all it's power but is enough to eat their eyes and lungs. With two lizards still dying a painfull death Tongue of the Zudin killed the remaining enemies, beheading one with one sword and piercing the other in the heart at same time.

He turned his back to the door, probably intending to boast.

\_Move, you fool!! There is still smoke in the air.

The green tentacles of dead dissipated, but far slower than would be reasonable if there was no Xar in the mix. A nasty intentionality moved them in our direction, but since we were the only living things in the room I did not took it personally.

\_That was close. Thank you, men from Earth.

The lizard surprised both of us. He was the young apprentice we saw before the fight, accompanying his tutor. The sigrax who teached him was the same one who had me locked in a cage hours before.

The sigrax apprentice was with the staff of cold stone, and we prepared to jump to avoid the blast.

Instead of attack the young lizard felt on his knees, presenting the weapont to me.

\_I surrender to you, sigrax. Don't kill me, please, take me with you.

I was too surprised to answer. Tongue helped me.

\_His side lost the battle, his tutor is dead or soon will be. His fate in this tunels is not a tempting one Altair, I can assure you that much. One can never trust a intelligent lizard, but I can use a slave like him if you don't want the trouble.

The suggestion of let Tongue slave someone who was and could stay free helped to speed my decision. I took the staff from the kid's hands, and then a idea crossed my mind.

\_Show me were is the cage where your tutor had me locked, and I accept your surrender.

I had to carry Yake throught the cold cave. Tongue explained to me that older lizard men are able to stay awake in low temperatures, with great effort. The cold slow them down, alot, but they can still function. In those like my prisioner, almost reaching what for a mammal would be puberty, cold inevitably causes lost of conscience.

Lizard sigraxes must have spells to protect them against cold caves like that, but the boy had not learned any.

\_We must be prepared to fight our way out\_ warned Tongue before we left the cold cave.

\_Why? I assume they have more important thing to worry about. Take care of their wounded, clean the house, that sort of thing.

\_Catch us will be their priority. If we escape the location of this tunels, and especially of their eggs chamber, will no longer be a secret. By now you understand how important those secrets are for them, I'm sure.

\_You are the one who know this tunels. Choose the exit you think better and we will try our luck.

\_Alea iacta est!!

\_You speak Latin !?

\_Just a few expressions. I used to have a slavegirl from your planet, the daughter of some important Scholar according to her own oppinion. She was my favorite for a time.

\_What happened with the girl?

\_Died. The Piwag is a unforgiven land, and she was not as young as the expression "slavegirl" suggest, but I never felt a death as intensely as I felt hers.

Before Yake awake up, or we reach the exit Tongue had planed, a good surprise gave me a new hope. Near to a wall, in a tall chamber, we noticed a plant. By the aspect of it the twisted trunk had grow it way from the ground to open a hole to the surface above us very fast, because there was still remains or rocks and dirt soil displaced by the growing tree.

\_I saw that plant before, in the ruins of a temple near to a Silent Climber village. Maothi's magic did that, I'm sure.

\_Even if it was natural I would still climb to look for a way out.

Was almost midday. The sheer sun brough Yake back to his feet very fast.

\_You must really keep that one under vigilance all the time. Don't sleep without first bind him well, or you will wake up with blood spouting from your throat!

\_Was a pleasure fight side by side with you, Tongue of the Zudin tribe!

\_Likewise, Altair of Lutianen. I wish you well.

\_There is one thing I want to ask, before we take opposite directions. You told me that your tribe joined someone against my city. Was Shirshan, or your people will fight for king Zaiaz?

\_Neither, we joined an alliance of human tribes. They want to free Niore from your people. We want weapons, a district inside Niore, and maybe one vote in their assembly.

His words persuaded me to look at him with more attention, and I noticed the pointy vulcan like ears. The color of his head and eyes were obviously strange for a human, but I had assumed that was not important. By now I had met more uncanny types who are defined both by themselves and by other Sharitarnes as humans.

\_You are not human?

He looked surprised.

\_No, Altair from Earth, I am not. Your species call us Blood Elves, that's a name as good as any in my opinion.

In the light of the information the way he moved sometimes made more sense. His reflexes were something beyond the possible for humans, but they were not like that all the time only when he needed most. Even when we were fighting he moved as a human, an extremely good swordsman but nothing beyond the believable; he showed a different kind of deadly perfection just one time, when we needed most. Since there was no magic in him I should have guessed his non human nature.

Some giants can make themselves invisible, reduce their size, and read minds from distance. Sigraxes can do things like that too, if we have the proper spells, but giants who are not sigraxes and who have no potential for magic have the same chance to learn their natural powers the sigrax giants have. As far as the Mage Castes on Sharitarn are concerned there is no magic involved in the use of racial powers like the ones possessed by the giants. The same can be said about Tongue's reflexes.

\_Altair, you made me questions, and I would like to reciprocate. You had a skeleton leg when we met, then your right arm transformed into that big furry thing with black claws. What Magical Way is that? You are transforming yourself in something very peculiar. How that end?

\_I can't really answer your questions, Tongue.

\_Well, that does not surprise me. Involuntary immigrant or not you are a sigrax, and sigraxes like their secrets! I will not hold that against you.

\_I'm glad to hear that\_ I could try to convince him that I could not answer his questions because I had

no idea about how answer them. Does not seemed a good idea to pull argument on that direction, however. That because either he would not believe me or I would see myself forced to say much more than I wanted to about my participation in this war; more likely both, I would share more war secrets than I should and he would still not believe me about how little I understood the magic affecting my body.

The young lizard in the middle of his training to became a sigrax came with me. I gave him one backpack to carry, and experimented a feel topics for small talk.

He was capable to speak with me thanks to a linguistic ring. The lizard people has Language, but they don't share enough vocal affinity with humans to use our words, and their sensorial systems deal with far too many sons below human hearing to allow us a fair chance to learn their Languages. Unlike the magic that allowed Xiirsh to speak Yake's ring translated what he wanted to say, and what I had said to him.

Hellicon, the mage responsible for the Welcome Tower of Lutianen, used a similar resource to talk with me when we first met; this kind of divination spell is his strong hand. Xiirsh's magical stone on the other hand just make the human sounds her dragonlike throat isn't able to make, she has no problem to understand the Merchant Language without it.

My reason to mention that particular information right now is the need to illustrate to you how great I am when it comes to make conversation. Despite all that amazing skills invested on him the lizard boy seemed adamant in his decision to not engage in small talk. I suspect his people has some cultural bias against chitchat, possibly religious commandment enforced by decapitation.

Know my new partner of adventure wasn't my only concern. Ideally I would be doing everything I could to find the Maothi and Kiva, that was the most important thing to do.

The obvious way to find someone in a open field is by making a fire. Actually, that's the faster way to be found by someone. I could not see the Maothi's fire anywere, and he would not be able to see mine, because I wan't going to make any. The shapeshifter and his beasts would probably be still looking for us, to share their feelings about our past enconter. If not, the bone head lizards would be looking for us for sure. We had to find each other without be found by any one else.

Feel the silver helmet once more on my head was a huge relief. The sensorial magic in it would make hard for anyone to approach me without being noticed. That way we could keep walking after night fall.

Yake's eyes could do at least as much with the light of stars as they could do with sunlight. The way they people illuminate their homes made that evident to me.

\_The Thick-Skin are leaving the tunels by now, captor. The hunter hours begin now. \_informe Yake.

The sun was about to plunge behind the red plains stained by green spots, all mixing now into the same dark blue. That was the time for hunt, according to the young lizard.

True to be told, I had no reason to trust him. Except the assumption that he wanted to walk into the nearest "Thick-Skin" hunting party about as much as I wanted that, what is not at all.

\_What you would do now, if you were alone ? \_ I asked.

\_ That's their land, I would not be here alone. If I was hunting on Thick-Skin territory with a hunting group our leader would probably have a place in mind to hide us until the hunting time pass. However, I don't know if that can be done by a hotblood like you: your kind is too easy to find.

\_My kind did just fine hiding from your tribe back in the Thick-Skin's tunnels.

\_That's different, you leave heat trails behind you in the tunnels but they don't last and we need to come close to where you was before it vanish to find the trail. Up here there is no walls of stone, therefore the air can carry your smell far and nothing prevent your body's temperature to attract attention. My people is almost impossible to find when we hide, and don't move.

\_Well, that's good to know. You probably would have more chance to survive the night without a hotblooded nearby, right?

\_Of course!

\_ What would you do if you escaped them?

He had no prompt answer to give me.

\_If I was not your prisoner, after I escape their land I would run to my home.

\_Your family will be waiting for you?

\_ My people will be, we are all family to each other. Our leader died in the tunnels, my tutor died as well. Any survivor will hide and run away until the Thick-Skin lose their trail, then run back to our tunnels. If no one else survived I would be the one giving details about how they died, but the fact would be clear to all.

\_ To who would the facts be clear?

\_There is six guardians taking care of our eggs and keeping our tunnels safe. If no one came back they will be the only responsible for the new generation.

\_I was told that your young must eat people to learn how to talk. Is that true?

\_What difference it makes to you?

\_Let's just say I am interested.

\_ We don't learn our words as easily as you do. Few among us would still be able to control their own memories, think about complicated issues, or use words, without eat the flesh of animals like you.

\_How is that possible? The flesh of, let's say, a human, or a giant, isn't different of the flesh of a iapi or zudras. The difference between a talking animal and a non talking one is small, it is in very specific

structures in the brain which are made of the same nutrients found in any other animal brain originated from the same Universe.

\_If that's true, how the vortex target more talking animals than any other living thing? How the potential for magic is found in every single talkings specie but no were else?

\_There is theories, but they have nothing to do with flesh and blood.

\_We have our explanations as well, they are not your business. Everything you are, everything that make your body and mind what they are, is hidden in every drop of your blood; even more vividly present in your bones. Same for any other animal.

Occurred to me associate that idea with the concept of DNA, but that would be me forcing my own ideas about reality where they did not belonged, in Yake's point of view. What he was really talking about ? I could not begin to understand; the best I can do, right now, is to admit that.

Matter of fact: I was not just indulging my curiosity.

\_What if you are wrong? What if your people just think they need to eat people, talking animals, but in fact they dont? You cold be as intelligent as you are ("not much!": but I kept that thought to myself) eating just low animals, you just don't know that.

\_ What if you humans could breathe underwater, without spells, and you just don't know that?

\_That's not the same thing!

\_I grew up in a place were some people can eat 'talking flesh' and others can't, because we never can catch enough for everyone! That's not fancy metamagic, I saw siblings loose their ability to think as persons and start behaving like what you call "low" animals !!\_ my line of questioning had clearly dissatisfied the lizard people boy, somehow.

I gave him a little more espace. To be kind with him, and to be able to defend myself better if he decided to use his pointy teeth on my human leg.

\_My potential for magic placed me among the first to be fed since I was old enough to be tested by our sigrax, it gave me the chance to see what happens when we don't have enough talking flesh to eat. I am telling you, men from Earth: you are chewing old-cold meat! We are what we are.

\_But still, what if you could keep your intelligence without eat "talking flesh"?

\_A magical spell, you say? That work for experient sigraxes, but can't be done for all tribe.

\_Suppose it could. Let's just say you find a way, would your people start eating humans?

\_You make hard questions, human. Remind me my dead tutor.

\_I suppose that comes with the process of learn magic, don't matter if civilized or wild. Try to answer the question.

\_Would my people all stop eating yours? I doubt. We would not hunt talking flesh as frequently as we hunt, would have more energy to fight our own kind for the better tunnels and hunting grounds. Even so, we would still have to fight your people as well, and would still eat the ones we kill. There is also the problem of our sacred dates, some celebrations demand that we eat talking flesh: no one in my tribe would give up that traditions.

\_Not even you?

\_What are you saying, Al-tir? \_ I jumped most mispronunciations, did that for all "ethnic" types I met to avoid draw a caricatural picture of people who just don't speak the Merchant Language in their day-to-day lives. That is here because Yake's magical ring gave him a perfect pronunciation, actually more according to the Mevringau's pattern than my own. He selected the wrong way to pronounce my name on purpose, to prove a point.

\_I would not give up the sacred dates, not all of them, is impossible to do so living in the tribe. Beyond that I could be convinced to eat talking flesh only when and if necessary to keep myself sane, but I will not be convinced to do that for free.

\_You want your freedom back, of course.

\_That would be nice, because the bone head hunters will find you soon; and they will kill us both, if I don't leave your side before that.

\_I will make a spell, to be sure you will never break that promise. After that, you may go.\_ I was bluffing. Spells like that do exist, but I never had learned any.

\_To do that promise I will need more than just my freedom.

\_Why?

\_My tribe is almost all dead, to make it worse they lost their only sigrax. I was a good apprentice, I think, but will never be able graduate into a sigrax by my own. I want you to teach the necessary, if you escape alive.

\_That's not possible! There are differences between civilized sigraxes and wild ones Yake.

\_Magic is magic.

\_Magic is magic, but we don't teach it like your people do. Wild sigraxes must learn how to teach magic, civilized sigraxes don't. Few among us are capable to make possible for a student to turn raw magical potential into power to cast spells. I could not teach what you need to become a sigrax if my life depended on it.

I was not lying to this lizard boy. We civilized sigraxes have a huge advantage over our wild counterparts when number and variety of spells are in consideration, that because we don't invest time and Xar learning how to teach magic. They don't have places like Black Centaur Castle to count with, every wild sigrax is a University of Magic in one person, that take a lot. To them is the only way. Except

for enemies most wild sigraxes will met only two other sigraxes in their lifes: the one who teached them when they where young, and the one they had teached after they became old.

\_You can show me the spells, can't you?

\_Yes, but there is more in magic than that.\_ there is more that show spells in teach magic, but the other part was a lie, as you know. I had no idea if I would or not be able to make spells again.

\_That's sad, because your life can actually depend on that deal.

\_What you mean?

\_There is a way to hide you until morning. Instead to go home empty handed to became a irrational beast day after day, I will die with you. However, if you give me a chance to help my tribe as their sigrax things will be different to me. Things will be different to my people. Things will, also, be different to you.

That placed the whole subject under a new light.

Right, I had never learned how to teach magic! Neither had learned how to teach magic the first wild sigrax who started a traditional line. Not untill he reach the point were he had to try, I mean.

Was not as if I had to lie in order to save my life, all I had to do was to promisse that I would try, "I will do my best". I could say that, you probably would have done the same if you were the one looking for a place to hide that night.

After that I followed Yake until a circle of large rocks. Except that they were not rocks, but a flock of large herbivores.

\_I can only go that far, they would go mad if they felt my smell. My people don't eat those animals, but other kinds of lizards do. They are hard to hunt, not worth the trouble, that's why all lizard people avoid their flocks. Cover yourself in their feces and stay with them untill they leave the bone head territory, you will be fine unless one of them step on you. Even if the enemy find you they will probably not have enough people to send right now, and will not send their sigrax before he rebuild their magical defenses.

\_What about you?

\_I will hide myself, and tomorrow I follow them.

Last time I had accepted a advice about where spent the night given by someone who knew the land better than I do I almost ended eaten by a pafix. On the other hand, given the circunstances be eaten by a pafix was more desirable than many thing that could happen to me if I refused Yake's orientation.

Few animals moved to look at me, and they accepted my presence well enough. Between the large beasts there was many smaller animals, also sleeping. Those living islands of safety are looked for many species, including some day light predators. The flock only rejects the predators which pose danger to their cubs. They also seems to hate all lizards.

One animal in those shadows attracted my attention more than the others.

\_Altair, is that you?\_ whispered someone, trying to not disturb our large protectors.

\_That's me, yes. I am glad to find you in one piece, young fellow! Write to your mother telling her how I lost her only son unconscious in lizard's hands would be unpleasant. I tried to start the letter in my mind several times but could not find the proper words.

\_Your death would be a serious inconvenient to me as well, but you already know that well enough. We looked for you in the caves for as long as we could, but when things became too dangerous I was forced to leave. Since you are here I imagine you found my way out, and also found enough Divination magic to point you the right direction. That's the safer place nearby, and I doubt you could imagine that by yourself without magic.

\_You are partially right. Did you saved Kiva?

\_She is here, sleeping. A lot happened since the last time we saw each other, the girl is wretched. Kiva is strong, seasoned, she will recover.

That was not a comment I would have expected from a man born and raised on planet Sharitarn, especially not when that man was a forest man and a wild priest-sigrax. She should be, to him, a slavegirl; beautiful and attractive of course, in need to be protected as well. He was supposed to keep her safe, and authorized to use her for his pleasure by the circumstances. He was not supposed to talk about a slavegirl as if she was a free person, with that kind of respect, even less when that slavegirl did not belonged to him. By the unforgiven laws followed by the wild and by the civilized on this planet she was my property.

I was happy to notice his peculiar inclination in that matter. Maybe would became an option to me free Kiva, after all. If the Maothi could be persuaded to carry the girl back to Parviprae, her home city and the only place were she had a fair chance of stay as a free woman, then I would be finally able to look my own problems, and forget both of them.

I still had a debt to pay with Lutianen for welcome me and teach me magic. Also owed my friend Fergus for save my life and give me the chance to travel with his crew.

\_Altair...?

\_Yes. What are you worried about, son of Violeta? \_ I had not really started several times the letter to tell his mother about his death, but I was still a bit peeved with him for place us both in the situation he created opening the entrance for the lizard's tunels. Bring the name of his mother in the conversation was a low blow, for many reasons, but to my shame I used it.

The Maothi proceeded as if I had said nothing.

\_ ...why are you covered on feces ?

