

The background of the cover is a grayscale, high-contrast image of a man in a black suit and tie. He is wearing a bright red, textured mask that covers his face and has a small tuft of red hair on top. He is also wearing white gloves. He stands in a dark, wooded area with bare trees. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

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Ulysses & The Fugitive Ch. 10 & 12
When'd He Go?
Ash on the Wind

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Publisher

Thomas Fitz

Editor-In-Chief

Alfred Underhill

Editorial

Writers Ansel Horst
Kain Niemann

Art

Cover Design Kyrin Krauss

Concept Design Despondency and Whiskey

How to Tell us How Amazing We Are

theunnamedjournal@gmail.com
facebook.com/theunnamedjournal

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Chapters 10, 11, and 12
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From the Publisher

I would like to take a moment to talk to you, in a serious publisher's voice, about a matter larger than this magazine usually has in its content. It is in fact, a matter of great social and political import. The very fate of our language and its concomitant culture is in the balance.

It's time to tell you idiots to stop saying the year wrong.

I remember the year 2000. It was a big deal, we were expecting the world to end and a Golden age to begin, all at the same time. It was momentous. How often does the fourth number of the year change? Millennium, you guys! Woo.

So fine, Call it the Year Two Thousand. And the Next year, Two Thousand and One. Sure. You can keep that up for the rest of the decade if you want to. It's fine. I'm fine with it.

But that was a long time ago. Someone born in that year is going to college now. The Millennium passed. It's time to move on.

So this is not the year Two Thousand Eighteen. It is Twenty Eighteen. You got that? Twenty Eighteen. It's not hard. In fact, it takes less time to say. It's easier. I'm not one of those dweebs begging you to pronounce things according to lore and usage which has perished from the earth. I'm asking you to revert to the way we say what the year is. Not buying it? Here's a quiz:

How to you pronounce the year that the Declaration of Independence was signed?

- A. Seventeen Seventy-Six
- B. Seventeen Hundred and Seventy-Six
- C. The Year of Our Lord, One Thousand Seven Hundred and Seventy-Six
- D. Ab Urbe Condita Triginta Duo Milia Quingentorum

If you're not a troll, a Roman Empire LARPer, or someone who got way into the Society for Creative Anachronism, you answered A. So this year is Twenty Eighteen. Continuing to call it Two Thousand Eighteen is pretentious dimwittery, and I will throw things at you if you do it in my hearing.

The issue is pretty good. Enjoy.

Thomas Fitz
Publisher

When'd He Go

A Second Drunk Vampire Hunter Story by Ansel Horst

I was finishing the last of an unremembered number of Wyoming Whiskeys, neat, when my target came into the room. I'd been sitting there in this hipster watering hole that wanted to be a dive bar but was far too clean, drinking among the suburban tattooed, eyeing the barmaid who had done her Hole-era Courtney Love homework and was nailing the mid-90's heroin chic/KinderWhore look, and deciding that even if I was wrong, and the client got pissed and fired me, it was worth it to get this fantastic a view of her cleavage. Sure she did it for tips, but she still wanted me to know what she had. And I was glad to know it.

I wasn't really worried about getting fired. My clients have a desperation for answers that comes from confronting the reality that the monsters of Halloween play are horribly real, and that someone they know has become a victim, and I'm one of the few freelancers who can help them. Paranormal Investigations and Eliminations is an industry so Underground as to be gracefully unencumbered by cutthroat competition.

That can be bad in the sense that it enables the occasional grifter, one step above a TV Ghosthunter, who's maybe read Tobin's Spirit Guide and heard of Malleus Malificium, but otherwise has no idea what the fuck he's doing. The upside of that is they usually get themselves killed in short order, with minimal loss to clients beyond a deposit.

Always insist on a deposit.

But the other side is that, if you don't hire Zack Baggins to find out what happened to your loved one, you stand a good chance of getting answers. Because the rest of us are both knowledgeable (hence, still alive) and dedicated. There's a reason we do this. My reason was a bloodsucker who enslaved my soul until someone like me killed her. I'd rather not go into that if you don't mind.

I wasn't hunting one of those tonight. Bloodsuckers, I mean. Professionals call them Cainites, the wide culture knows them as vampires. I call them my bread and butter. But tonight, something else. Something hipper, maybe, less Hollywood. No, not Slender Man. Slender Man generally keeps to himself aside from eating the occasional dope who goes looking for him, and besides, I have it on good authority he has no agent.

No, this one was a little outside my normal area of expertise, that bit more strange. I was hunting a wendigo. Now, before you nerd all over me, know that I was not expecting an actual antlered titan, grown in proportion to its kills. I was expecting the second, more banal kind of wendigo, a human devouring human flesh out of demonic compulsion. Basically a serial killer, except supernaturally strong and resilient. Jeffrey Dahmer as the puppet for some hateful spirit as old as the Earth.

They used to call it wendigo psychosis before they decided that none of it happened at all. They love to decide things like that.

I sat and I drank a little more, enjoying Harvey Danger's "Flagpole Sitta" which I tend to confuse with "My Own Worst Enemy" even though those songs are really nothing alike. They form a picture of a time in my life. A simpler

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time, before... well, you know. And just as whichever of those songs it was peaked, just as I finished the latest but not last shot, I saw my wendigo.

Skinny bastard. Gaunt, almost, but tall and with an edge of frenzy that marked the room like a stench. People reacted to him but they didn't know why. They thought him just uncouth, someone who didn't belong there, and ignoring the direct flare from the reptilian survival brain screaming at them that this was danger, this was not a thing to be around. They sat their drinking Americanised mules and told themselves it was just his clothes instead.

His clothes were the giveaway. Because they were dorky and ill-fitting. By dorky, I mean they were resplendent of middle-class modesty and aspiration: a purple polo in an athletic fabric, kakhis, running shoes. Clothes that represent determination and the absence or abandonment of creativity. By ill-fitting, I mean two sizes too large at least. He had the wrong look to dress like that, but he still did, even though everything about him suggested that he had no concept of what clothes even were. That meant some idea of needing to seem, to carry on wearing clothes and going to the bathroom remained with him. This was relatively common among the second kind of wendigo, as the madness worked its way very slowly through the desire and the behavior and lastly into habit.

The question was, why was he here. Wendigos usually abandon the trappings of civilization and go life in the forest and effectively become the first kind of wendigo. Unless they get eaten by the first kind of wendigo, which are actually kind of hard to find, inasmuch as they inhabit hidden malebolges deep within the boreal forests. So my trusty Algonquin medicine man tells me, anyway. His name is Big Ed, and he gives me shit about being a white man while he takes my money and keeps me in spirit weapons.

My wendigo stepped into the saloon and walked with a series of herky-jerky steps made his way to the bar a few feet down from me. The bartenders were in no rush to get to him and I don't think he minded. I don't think he knew why he was there. I don't think he knew anything.

As Big Ed has it, the way to kill a wendigo is a stab in the brain with an obsidian dagger. I had one of those. Well, stainless steel tipped with obsidian if you must know, and you might as well, because it was a custom job and way more expensive than you dare to imagine. Anyway, I had it with me, and I was planning on following him out.

He stood there at the bar, not ordering anything, seemingly uninterested in whether he got anyone's attention. There was none of that tense eyeing of the bartender, that unconscious willing of attention that everyone on the planet displays when they want a drink. He just stood there like a confused angry dog, oblivious to the pompa homini going on around him. Why, then was he standing there? Was he hungry? Was he waiting for a signal?

Did he just look at me?

Yeah, he just looked at me.

He smells something. Maybe its the obsidian. Maybe it's the whiskey, but he smells something. There's no way I can stealth this. Now I might have to square off against a wendigo in a crowded hipster bar. This just got a whole lot harder. And of course, no one else sees what I see. They're all wrapped up in their drinking. They drink as social lubricant, not as steel and anesthetic to the soul. They...

Am I on the floor?

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Yep. I'm on the floor. And the world is getting fuzzier around me.

This just got a whole lot harder.

* * *

I wake up on a stretcher in a basement. There's a low-hanging light with a faded blue shade and I can smell an earthy must. I've been slipped a mickey of some sort and stashed away. Obviously the wendigo was in on it, but they're not exactly planners. No, this has all the earmarks of classic misdirection and

"Good evening, slave"

Ugh.

"Good evening rando."

I hear a smirky snort and a light flip and there I am in what's clearly the basement of the bar. I'm surrounded by crates of liquor and beer and plastic trays of glasses. To my left is our friend the Wendigo, standing as he was at the bar, held as if by invisible cords. Self-control being also something wendigos lack, I did not bother anymore about him. Something was using him and holding him back. Something, unfortunately, dully obvious.

"Your feeble wit will not avail you, slave"

Vampires are such nerds. They have these catchphrases and rhetorical frames and they do not ever deviate from them. Like it's some profound code, ineffable to us blood bags, rather than some incredibly obvious dorkery that got written down millennia ago and became Tradition. Like calling me a "slave". Bloodsuckers only do that with ex-Renfields, with servants that break loose or lose their masters/mistresses. When a Renfield, a familiar or servant, is firmly under, they always call them by name. They are aristocratically polite with them, even kind. But break loose, and you're scum, a "slave". I think they think that will trigger something. Maybe it does. But not in me. I just find it boring.

It's a he-vamp, not that it matters. They're kind of beyond such issues as sexuality and gender, even though they all dress like steampunk dandies. I'd describe him but what you're imagining is probably close enough. Next to him is the trendy bartmaid I was so assiduously paying attention to earlier. She's standing there looking at me like she wants to drink my blood, or like she wants to want to drink my blood or at any rate like a fangirl. I'd say I don't know why I didn't pick up on that but I think I covered that earlier.

So the vamp turns to what I assume is his current Renfield (a barmaid servant, I could so see the logic of that) and says "We must not be disturbed. Close up and stand guard over us."

She says "Yes, Master" with great enthusiasm and heads on up, eyeing me like she's trying so hard to be edgy and dark in a way she did effortlessly while I was getting drunk. That explains how I got mickeyed. I am definitely reconsidering trying to make out with her now.

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“So which one of your sires or sirettes did I dust? Can we hurry this up? I’m thirsty.”

“You will receive nothing swiftly, scum. Not even death. Your treason cannot be forgiven. You bear a mark as clear as Cain’s to our kind, and we will not...”

Yeah, he starts monologuing. Of course he starts monologuing. Vamps are so weighted down by the centuries they’ve seen that they cannot shut up. Give them a captive audience and it all pours out of them like a spastic colon. All running from the script. It’s to be torture, oh no. Long and dragged out and

It rushes at me with that terrifying speed they have, where they really seem to be in to places at once. Illusion, but it scares the piss out of me every time. I always yell. I don’t get down on myself, it’s scary. It shows how powerful they are. It’s like a tiger jumping out of the bush at you. Your brain has no time to do anything else.

But the jaws don’t strike, and the claws don’t catch. Because the Kindred have a thing about liquor. They don’t like to feed from drunks. They’ll do it, especially in a dry spell. But they don’t like it. And they can smell it under your skin like a pheromone. Now you know why I drink so much. It’s not just so hipster barmaids can take advantage of me.

I look it in the eye. He tries to Dominate me, not because he thinks he can, just out of habit and obligation. Like I said, they’re creatures of ritual. Then he sneers. “I did not bring you down here to endure your pretend indifference, nor would I taint my blood with yours. You will die, at last, a victim of what you hunt, by the will of those whom you betrayed.”

Sounds like one of my dead ex-mistress’ childer. I could argue that I was a loyal servant until she was staked and chopped, but he wouldn’t listen, and it wouldn’t make us less enemies. Facts are the hobgoblins of little minds. Besides, he’d revealed his plan to feed me to the wendigo. So I knew exactly what to do.

Without taking a step from me, he turned his gaze to the wendigo and I could here it growling like a hound choking through its own hate. I took the opportunity to bite down hard on the false tooth I have on my right side. The tooth contains human blood. It’s not mine and don’t ask where I got it our how I had it put in the false tooth or why. Even if the how was extremely difficult and the why wholly unrelated to my present circumstances, It’s good that I have it, isn’t it?

Oh, you don’t know why it’s good that I have it. I should tell that part.

A mouthful of human blood spat into a vampire’s face is occasionally useful because it surprises them, but if you do it when they’re in full attack mode it usually just eggs them on, and if they’re looking right at you they’re liable to miss. But a mouthful of human blood spat into a vampire’s face when they’re not looking, and that vampire is five feet away from a hungry wendigo (which is redundant, as wendigos are never not hungry - that’s their thing)? That’s a savagely useful thing.

Emphasis on the savage.

I will never equal the joy experienced from gazing into that dimwit Cainite’s face as he realized that his accomplice, to which he intended me to be fed, was instead going to attack him. Marvelousness and marvelousity it was. I wish I could have watched more of the ensuing brawl, but I was busy freeing myself, when I popped up, the vamp was on

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the ground with it's arms ripped off and the wendigo had a hand going backwards down. He was howling in pain and something in rage but he had no arms so he was absolutely helpless. I didn't have my usual gear bag so I didn't have my head-chopping axe, but I still had the obsidian tipped dagger. I walked over as easy as you please and when it's faced turned to me, slow and somewhat sated from its meal, I jabbed the dagger right into it's left eye. It jerked but I held on and drove it home. There was no howl from beyond or even an animal fight. It just slumped over with the vamp's fingers still in its mouth. I noticed that it's skull had the beginnings of antlers. It was on its way to becoming the first kind of wendigo.

Good to know.

"You will pay... You scum..." said the vampire.

I pulled the dagger out of the wendigo's eye. I walked over to the vamp.

"You'll never be free of us..." he snarled.

"Course not," I said, "Hold still."

As I walked up the stairs I saw the barmaid. She was holding a baseball bat in her hands and sitting on one of the upper stairs like a naughty child. She was staring down at me like I, and not the things I just killed, was a monster unfathomable. She looked at me like she expected me to do something horrible to her. Instead I paused, and gentle as a lamb, took away the bat and pulled her up. I looked down deep into her scared lost eyes.

"Go," I said, "Go."

She nods dully and walks out, first slowly and then quickly. I walk up to the empty barroom and I find the Wyoming Whiskey and I sit back down and pour myself a stiff one. I figure if I get knocked out again I'll just get booked for vagrancy and set loose after a night's nap, and if not I'm home free.

For now, anyway. **UJ**

Ulysses and the Fugitive

by Alfred Underhill

Chapter 10 - The Inhabited Agent

Agent O'Flannery opened his eyes then sat bolt upright. He checked his surroundings: he was outside, still near the crash site; the sun was setting. Must have been out for a few hours, he thought.

He felt groggy. For some reason O'Flannery couldn't stand up. He could feel his legs, feet, and toes, yet none of them would move. He tried standing a dozen times.

Not good, don't think I broke any vertebrae. Probably wouldn't be able to sit up if I did. Might still be in shock, he thought.

Something was very warm on his neck. Gingerly he reached back and felt something soft. Some kind of material that didn't feel like his shirt or suit was there. It felt like fur or cloth. It rippled when he touched it, as if it were breathing. Somehow the thing felt weightless. He didn't think he'd have noticed it except for the heat. It shifted slightly on the back of his neck and shoulders. O'Flannery was fascinated despite the panic he could feel rising. He still couldn't get his legs underneath of him.

He grabbed for whatever it was he had just touched, yet found that his hand stopped before it made contact. His hand would neither reach where he wanted nor return to his waist. The agent's arm had joined his legs in rebellion.

Do not resist. You are inhabited. You will only engage in actions we approve of.

O'Flannery felt the voice as much as heard it. The warmth on his neck and shoulders seemed to throb in time with the words.

"What is this? Who are you?"

We are your master. We control you.

O'Flannery swallowed his response when he saw several military personnel walking toward him. It was obvious from their weird struggling gaits that each of them was also under the control of these things. The group approached. There were five soldiers in total; three men, two women. They formed a circle around him. He could see only three of the soldiers well because of the preternatural paralysis that rooted him to where he sat.

"Can any of you hear me?"

"I can," said one of the men, strain apparent in his voice.

"I hear you fine," one of the women said. Fear and exhaustion tinged her response.

"What's the situation? What are these things? Were there any casualties from the operation? Why can we talk if these things are controlling us?"

We let you talk because we are still learning your body. We can make you stop or make you say what we like. O'Flannery and the soldiers said the words in unison. He could feel the creature on the back of his neck pulsing in time with the words. His vision blurred from involuntary tears. One of the men sobbed loudly, the rest the soldiers sniffled and wept. The agent was overwhelmed by terror.

"What do you want?" Someone said. "Why are you here?" It took O'Flannery a few seconds to realize it was his own voice that he heard asking those questions. Silence. He could feel something happening with the creature attached to him, yet he had no way of interpreting it.

Abruptly his body lurched to a standing position and then turned around. Now he was facing one of the saucers that hung in the air silently. There was a flash from the saucer, and then a figure began making its way toward the group. After a few seconds, O'Flannery was able to make out that the individual approaching was female. When she got closer, it was apparent that she was as alien as the saucer. She too had some kind of black furry parasite attached to her, though hers seemed to form a kind of cap on her head. The woman's ears were long and tapered.

"We are here to find the destroyer." Her voice sounded normal, yet O'Flannery was certain that it wasn't really her speaking.

"What destroyer? What are you talking about?"

"The destroyer fled to this place after killing her master. We must recover the master's body, and execute the destroyer."

"Who is this destroyer?"

"A female like this one." She gestured to herself. The look of sheer defeat and resignation in the alien woman's eyes made the fear climb higher inside O'Flannery. Hers was a will that was broken, and her body the extension of a parasite.

"So you need to find this...person. Then you'll leave?"

"That was our initial plan. We had not anticipated finding this world crowded with suitable habitation. Once the destroyer has been eliminated, we will inhabit this planet as our own."

O'Flannery's voice would not obey him. There were a number of rebukes and retorts he vehemently tried to say, yet he couldn't even open his mouth. He felt frustration give way to rage. But the silent paralysis would not break.

The alien woman leered at him with bloodlust. "You will help us find the destroyer. You will hide our presence until we are ready to subjugate this planet. You will do whatever we wish. You have no choice."

O'Flannery felt his head throb and his vision went red as his rage overwhelmed him. The creature on his neck felt like it was getting hot enough to burn him. Every inch of his skin felt like it was being pierced with heated wires. He convulsed on the ground for a handful of agonizing seconds, then everything went black.

Chapter 11 - At Home in Denver

Ulysses parked the rental car in his apartment building's lot. He and Giles had driven straight through from Black Rock City, stopping for breaks when needed. With breaks, it had taken them the better part of 24 hours to complete the trip back. Both were tired, yet they still had to return the rental before they could get some rest.

"Not too bad of a return trip, eh?"

"We did all right, I guess. It took us longer to get here than to get there," said Ulysses.

"Well, we didn't have any enthusiasm left to spur us on, did we, Lee?"

"No," was all Ulysses said in response. His mind was elsewhere; fixated on the woman he'd last seen almost a day earlier. He wasn't overcome with longing. Rather, Ulysses was worried and uncertain for their futures, both hers and his. He also had no idea how he was going to explain to Giles how Nera got here ahead of them.

"Oi, Lee? I know you've been down since you had to say goodbye to sweet, little Nera. But we're back and we got a few things to do before we can check out and get some rest. You might find you're feeling better about life once you've slept in your own bed. So c'mon, mate. Let's get our things and get this car back to where it belongs."

"You're probably right, Giles. Some rest will probably help me sort out how I'm feeling. Let's get to it."

"Right," the Australian said, nodding. He and Ulysses began pulling bags and tubs and gear out of the car. They shuffled everything up the steps to the building's entrance. It took several trips up and down the stairs to stage all of their stuff, yet it was quick work between the two of them.

"Looks like that's the last of it," Ulysses said. "Let's take it in." Giles nodded, and grabbed his clothing bin. They walked up the half a dozen flights of stairs to Ulysses's apartment. Ulysses set his bin down and unlocked the door. He entered and placed the bin at the edge of his living room. He said to Giles, "Let's try to stage it like we did on the way out: keep it all to this part of the living room and the entryway. We should be able to leave ourselves a little bit of room to get into the kitchen until we have all of this cleaned up and put away." He used one of his flip flops as a doorstop.

"Sounds good." Giles stacked his bin next to Ulysses, then poured himself a glass of water from the tap.

"That's a good idea. Think I'll have a little myself before I head down for more." Ulysses poured himself a glass and leaned against the counter. Both men were slightly out of breath between the heat and carrying bulky containers up the stairs.

"Those bloody stairs are going to murder my legs before we're through."

Ulysses laughed and nodded. "Mine too. That's the price I pay for living someplace affordable."

Giles rolled his eyes in resignation. "Well, I do hope you find yourself gainfully employed soon. It'd be nice if you

could buy yourself a little place with less stairs, or at least afford an apartment with an elevator by the time I come to visit again."

"I'll totally get right on that, just as soon as you leave. When is your flight again?" Ulysses set his glass down and steeled himself for another trip down the stairs.

"Flight's at 6:20 Friday night. 'Course I'll have to get there early to go through the gestapo checkpoint. Erm, I mean, TSA safety check." Giles tilted his head back for the remainder of the water in his cup.

"Ulysses?" The voice was female and familiar to both of them. Giles sprayed water into the living room. Then looked toward the front door.

"Hey, man! Watch it! You're getting my stuff all wet." Ulysses admonished as he pivoted to face Nera, whom stood in his doorway looking confused. "Hi, Nera. I guess you found the place okay?"

"Yes," she said. "Although, I did find the surrounding area a bit...confusing." She looked at Ulysses, then to Giles who still looked very surprised to see her, then back to Ulysses again. "Did I interrupt something?"

"No, no. Giles and I were just rehydrating a little before we get more of our things from downstairs. By the way, hi!" Ulysses said hugging and kissing her hello. Then he stepped into the kitchen and grabbed a clean glass. He held it up for her to see. "Would you like some water too?"

"Yes, please. I am a bit thirsty."

Ulysses nodded and filled her glass with water. Giles's eyes told Ulysses he had many questions. "You want a little more too, Giles?" He nodded and filled his own glass from the tap. The three of them stood in awkward silence, drinking water in Ulysses's kitchen.

"Well, Giles and I need to bring the rest of our stuff up. You can make yourself comfortable if you like. It shouldn't take us too many trips to carry the rest of it up here."

"I don't mind helping," Nera said. "Unless you would rather I didn't?"

Ulysses looked at Giles and shrugged. It was his way of silently asking, what do you think? Giles returned his shrug which meant, sure, why not? Ulysses nodded. He knew he was going to have to find a way to explain why Nera was here to his friend.

"Sure, we'd love your help. Carrying the rest up will go faster with an extra set of hands. Why don't you lead the way down?" Nera nodded in response and stepped into the hallway. Ulysses and Giles followed her into the hall and down the stairs.

Despite her slight stature, Nera carried a comedic amount of their camping gear all by herself. Both men looked at each other in disbelief. Within two trips they had everything stacked up just inside the entrance to Ulysses's apartment.

"Thank you for your help, Nera. Lee and I should really go and drop the car off now, so I guess we'll see you when

we get back." Giles's statement was also a question.

"Yes, I will be here, " she said.

"Right. Well, come along, Lee. Let's get that car back."

"Coming," Ulysses said, then he kissed Nera on the cheek. "It should take us around an hour, depending on the buses. Make yourself at home, okay?"

"Okay," Nera smiled at him, then gave him one of her teeth loosening kisses. She eased up when she heard Ulysses wince. "Sorry, I got excited."

"It's all right; I just might need to call a dentist about how loose my front tooth is now. We'll be back in a little bit." He did his best to smile at her and then stepped into the hallway, closing and locking the door behind him. Giles's stare was interrogative.

"What's up?"

"I think it's pretty fucking obvious, Lee: what, exactly, is going on with you and Nera? Like, how serious is it? Obviously you told her where you lived, but how did she get here at practically the same time we did? And why didn't you tell me she was coming? You clearly knew she would be here."

"Yeah, I should've told you she was coming. That's my bad," Ulysses sighed, as they walked down the stairs. "You're right that I told her where I lived. I'm sorry. I should've at least given you a heads up she was going to come stay with me. I would've tried to put it off until after you left, but I don't think she has anywhere else to go." Ulysses pushed open the door to the parking lot. He fumbled with the keys as the pair made their way towards the rental car. He shielded his eyes from the sun with his other hand.

"Right, yeah you could've let me know. Oi, hold on." Giles extended his hand, palm out toward Ulysses over the roof of the car. Ulysses faced Giles with the car between them. "Look: we're mates, yeah? It's your flat, no skin off my back there. I don't mind Nera being around. She's a bit troppo, but she seems sweet enough, easy on the eyes. But are you sure this is the right move for you? I mean, you're out of work. You were talking about going back to therapy last week. You seemed like a man that might be coming a bit undone. Are you sure this is the right time for you to start looking after somebody else? Especially someone that doesn't seem like she can hold down a job of her own?"

Ulysses was unprepared for his friend's genuine concern. He felt guilty for keeping Giles in the dark and for continuing to keep him there. But Nera's situation -- hell, the actual truth of her existence -- was the stuff of science fiction. It just seemed too risky to tell anyone else from this planet the truth about Nera. Even if he told Giles the whole truth, Ulysses just couldn't see him believing it. He forced his mouth into a grin.

"Always the romantic."

"Oi, Lee! I'm serious! C'mon, talk to me about this. Talk to me about her."

"All right, Giles. All right. But let's talk while we're getting this thing back, okay?"

"Okay, Lee. You can talk and drive."

"How generous of you."

* * *

Their conversation only paused in places while they returned the car. Riding the bus back to Ulysses's apartment, Giles continued to press his friend about the specifics of his plans. Ulysses stared out the window at the mountains silhouetted against a pale blue sky as he answered his friend.

"Look, man, I already told you that Nera staying with me isn't forever; it's just for right now. And yeah, I know I need find work, which you've already told me several times today, and I will do it."

"Right, yeah. I'm sure you'll find work. That's not really the part I'm most concerned about. You said it's not forever, but like, how long will she stay with you? And you still haven't mentioned anything about the stuff we were talking about before you met her."

"Look," Ulysses said, "I'll go back to therapy once I have a job again, okay? And I'll sign up for a yoga class too. That make you feel better?" He couldn't hide his annoyance at the Aussie's persistence.

"I guess. A bit," Giles frowned at him. "That would be a good plan if you didn't have someone staying with you for an indeterminate amount of time. Did you ever find out where she's actually from? Furthermore, where's all of her stuff? What woman travels without any baggage, let alone a purse? She showed up at your flat wearing the same clothes she wore all burn, carrying those little tubs of playa dust."

"What? Are you jealous of her or something?"

"Mate, I think your new girlfriend is fucking mental, all right? Combine that with the fact that you were talking about being on unstable ground before she showed up, and I think the picture completes itself." Giles sighed as he met Ulysses's eyes reflected in the window. "And to answer your question, no, I'm not jealous. I am fucking concerned for you wellbeing, but fuck it, man. It's your life."

"Hey, c'mon Giles! Don't be like that." Ulysses turned toward him. "Look, I really appreciate you looking out for me. You're a real friend. I admit I don't have a completely clear plan for my immediate future beyond trying to find work. As for Nera, well, she is pretty fucking weird. I'll give you that. I do like her a lot, though." Ulysses glanced toward the front of the bus. "This is our stop." They got off the bus and walked back to Ulysses's apartment. He did his best to placate Giles along the way.

Upon entering his apartment, Ulysses and Giles found Nera staring intently into the refrigerator. Her head popped up from behind the door. Her eyes were wide.

"Hi," she said, failing to sound casual.

"Hi," said Ulysses. Giles nodded to her. Ulysses joined her in the kitchen. "Everything all right? Are you hungry?"

"I am hungry. I was just...exploring your home. I thought I saw food in there, but..." She trailed off in a way that

told Ulysses she had never seen a refrigerator before. He nodded to her.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I didn't want to leave much behind heading to the burn, you know? Since we just got back, I obviously haven't had time to pick up any groceries."

"Should've kept the car a bit longer, eh?" Malice gleamed in Giles's grin. Ulysses rolled his eyes at his friend.

"Groceries?" Nera said.

"Don't worry about it. How about I just order us some pizzas, and we'll worry about restocking my kitchen tomorrow?"

"Fine by me," Giles said.

Nera nodded the way she seemed to when she wasn't sure of what a certain words meant. Ulysses noted the look and thought very intently about pizza as he reiterated his plan to call in an order for delivery. He saw Nera wipe her mouth as he dialed Grimaldi's.

"You okay?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm just excited by the idea of pizza."

Ulysses smiled at her, then someone at the restaurant picked up. "Hey, how are you? Cool. Well, thanks. I'd like to place an order for delivery. Can I get a Buffalo Chicken, Brooklyn Bridge, and The Garden? Yeah, that's it. Okay. About how long? Thanks." He ended the call, and said, "About forty-five minutes."

"That's the best thing you've said all day," said Giles.

Ulysses ignored him. And went and sat down on his couch. He turned on the TV and flicked through the channels. Nera sat next to him regarding the TV with apprehension. Giles looked on from the kitchen silently. Nera had questions about everything she saw on the television. Ulysses did his best to normalize each of her inquiries.

"What is this?"

"Oh, you know, it's just the news." Ulysses said.

"The news?"

"Yeah, current events? Important things happening here and around the world. This channel has it on all the time."

"Oh, I see. You must watch it constantly."

"I do watch it sometimes," he said. "But I also read the news online or on my phone." He held up his phone to show her what he meant. Her eyes grew a size.

Ulysses could see Giles shaking his head periodically and grimacing. He had several similar exchanges with Nera

about contemporary life and media with the Australian looking on. Nera was quickly revealing how truly alien she was through their conversation. Ulysses needed to change the subject before she all but confirmed that she was, in fact, an alien.

"Did you have fun exploring the rest of my apartment? Or did you not make it past the kitchen?"

"Yes, I looked around. I'm a little confused by some of the things here, but it isn't a big deal."

"Well, I'd be happy to--

"Oi, Lee? Can I have a word?"

"Yeah, sure. What's up?"

Giles began moving toward Ulysses's bedroom and beckoned for him to follow. He and Nera got up, which prompted Giles to say, "Ah, Nera, I need to have a word with Lee by meself. Won't take long."

"Oh, okay," she said, looking confused.

"Just give us a few moments, and we'll come back out here, okay?" Ulysses tried to sound reassuring. Nera looked at him solemnly and nodded. "Thanks," he said.

Ulysses followed Giles into the bedroom and shut the door. He turned around to face his friend, who stood in the middle of the room with his arms crossed. "What's up, Giles?"

Giles shook his head. "Uh, Lee? Where in the fuck, exactly, is that girl from? I thought maybe she was acting weird at the burn 'cause she was partying, but now I'm not so sure. Has she really never seen a TV before? The face she made when you suggested pizza made me think that she didn't know what it was either. Did she ever say where she was from?"

"Not exactly, no."

"Okay, so what do you know about her, eh? Other than that she's cute and you like fucking her? I mean, I have met people from the boonies, man, but none of them seemed as loony as she does."

"Giles, I--"

There was a loud knock on the apartment door. The two friends paused and looked at each other. Nera opened the bedroom door and poked her head in, just as another loud knock came from the front door.

"Someone is outside."

"Yeah, I figured as much," Ulysses said. "I'll come answer the door." He glanced at Giles. "Can we finish this after we eat?"

"Sure, whatever." He was visibly annoyed.

Ulysses nodded to his friend and walked toward the front door with Giles trailing him. Upon opening the door, Ulysses saw a tall man with a buzz-cut wearing a suit. He stood there flanked on both sides by police. He held up a badge.

"Agent O'Flannery. I need to ask you a few questions."

Chapter 12 - Home Invasion

Ulysses looked at Agent O'Flannery. "I have a few questions myself."

"Well, maybe we can help each other out. May we come in?"

"I'd prefer you didn't. So uh, no, you can't come in."

O'Flannery smirked at him. "I'm afraid I must insist," he said stepping into the apartment, forcing Ulysses to backpedal down the narrow path created by the camping gear. In the living room, Giles stood next Ulysses as the agent led the two cops in.

"Look at this fucking hippy bullshit," said the stockier cop, his face drawn into a sneer. He was white, appeared to be in his early to mid 40's. The other cop was a tall black woman, who looked younger than her partner; she grinned yet said nothing. Both wore standard black Denver PD uniforms.

"This is a violation of my 4th Amendment rights," said Ulysses. "I didn't give you permission to enter. You are trespassing." He looked to Giles, who was already filming the agent and the police. They didn't like that.

"I'm going to give you exactly two seconds to put that fucking phone away before I shove it up your ass," said the male cop.

This elicited a laugh from his counterpart, who said, "He'll do it too. I seen him do it before."

"What is this about anyway?" Said Ulysses, pretending to ignore the cop's threats. He was hoping he could draw out their interactions long enough to get something recorded he could use in court.

"I'll ask the questions here," said O'Flannery. "But first, you better tell Mr. Taylor to put his phone away right now before he gets deported back to Australia with a rectum full of Android." The agent looked at both cops, who nodded in affirmation of the threat.

"Put it away, Giles. It's not worth it." He gestured to his friend without looking away from any of the three home invaders. Giles put the phone in his pocket with a sniff of disdain.

"You really want your ass kicked, don't you?" said the male cop.

"You want to touch me that bad, eh?" Giles retorted.

"I'll fucking stomp a mud-hole in your ass and then walk that shit off!" The cop lunged towards Giles, but the

female cop intercepted him and pushed him back.

"Chill, Jones! We said we'd take our cues from Mr. O'Flannery here. Relax!" She turned her back to Officer Jones, keeping her body between him and Giles. "You're lucky I'm on shift, man. Some of the other cops in Denver would've just let Jones here toss you around until he was done with you. You better watch it."

The old good cop, bad cop routine, thought Ulysses. Agent O'Flannery grinned at the display. He obviously enjoying being in control. He breezily retrieved a pen and notepad out of his jacket, affording Ulysses and his friend a view of the gun the agent had holstered beneath it.

"Now that we've established who is in charge here, I'm going to ask you a few questions."

"Yeah, whatever," Ulysses said crossing his arms.

The agent was unperturbed. "Have you traveled to the state of Nevada or California in the past month?"

"Yes, both."

"Did you encounter any individuals with whom you were not previously acquainted?"

"Yes," Ulysses said.

"How many?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. We just got back from Burning Man. I met a whole lot of people there I didn't know before."

"Can you provide the names of the individuals you met at Burning Man?"

Ulysses looked at the floor, then at Agent O'Flannery, and then to the cops. He let out a sigh. "Am I under arrest?" The agent looked annoyed at his question.

"Not yet, punk. Answer his questions, and we might leave here without you in the back of a squad car," said Officer Jones.

Ulysses nodded once; his resolve was set. "You are trespassing. I know the three of you know that. If I'm not under arrest, then we're going to leave. If you try to keep me here, I'll press kidnapping and false imprisonment charges against you."

There was a pause as the two officers and the agent looked at each other with blank stares. Then they simultaneously burst into laughter.

"Ulysses? Who are these people? What is going on?"

His heart skipped a few beats when he saw Nera standing at the edge of the hallway. She had emerged unnoticed while the agent and cops were laughing. Time slowed to a crawl instantly. There was a weird kind of recognition on

O'Flannery's face as he and Nera locked eyes. The cops were sizing her up.

"Officers Jones and Washington: arrest that woman," O'Flannery said. The cops nodded and stepped toward Nera.

"Just come with us," said officer Washington.

Ulysses felt frozen in place. He saw Nera's expression harden into a scowl. He had only seen that expression on her face once before and knew what would happen next.

Nera moved so fast it looked like she flew. Ulysses couldn't see the individual blows land, but the popping sounds that her fists made striking the cops' heads and torsos seemed to happen in one continuous burst. Before the officers had hit the ground, she was gripping O'Flannery's trachea with her right hand. Her left pinned the agent's hand inside his jacket preventing him from drawing his gun. She squeezed her right hand until O'Flannery crumpled onto the couch.

Something black and gelatinous burst through the agent's shirt. It congealed on the apartment floor into a quadrupedal shape. Frozen in terror, gaping at the thing inches from his feet, Ulysses thought that whatever it was almost looked like a black cat. A black cat, except the head lacked any sensory organs. The creature's head opened vertically, emitting a piercing screech before bolting for the window.

Nera snatched the creature out of the air and held it thrashing in her grip, as it howled in pain and rage. In mere seconds it turned translucent then white, shuttering and seizing, before going limp in her hand. Grim-faced, Nera shook the thing's corpse until it resembled a cloth much like the one her hair was wrapped in.

"Bloody fucking hell! What in the fuck of this godforsaken world is that? What the fuck is happening? What the fuck?! What the fuck?!" Giles's screams got more incoherent until he went completely into shock. He sat straight down where he had been standing, shivering and gibbering.

Ulysses stared at the proceedings as though it were a gonzo episode of some sci-fi TV show being shot inside his living room. It didn't seem entirely real. He noted hazily that he felt like a fly caught in honey. He couldn't seem to move. When he noticed Nera's worried expression, Ulysses realized that he too was in shock. Clumsily he tried to sit down but fell instead. Nera caught him before he hit the floor, and helped him to lie down.

Eventually, Ulysses felt like he'd reentered the normal flow of time and sat up. Nera was crouched by him. He realized that the back of his feet had been resting on Officer Jones's head. Officers Jones and Washington were motionless, as was Agent O'Flannery. Giles sat a few feet away, rocking in place quietly. Ulysses felt queasy and shaken yet lucid.

"Nera, we've got to help Giles." She nodded and moved toward the Australian. Ulysses crawled over Washington's legs to follow Nera. "Giles, buddy, I'm going to help you lie down, okay? We don't have a lot of room in here because of how these guys are sprawled out, but we're going to help you get comfortable." He grabbed a pillow off the couch and put it behind his friend's head as he guided him toward the floor. "Nera, can you prop his legs up on the edge of the couch?" She nodded and lifted Giles's feet on the edge of the couch. "Just take it easy, boss. Stay with me. Lie there as long as you need to, all right?"

He sat and watched his friend. Giles's breathing evened out after a few minutes. Consciousness returned to his

eyes.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like ran over shit," Giles said as he took a deep breath and tried to sit up. He quickly gave up but continued breathing normally. "Fuck. Guess I'll just lie here for a little bit longer then." He said, followed by an involuntary moan. After staring at the ceiling for a few heartbeats, he said, "What the fuck exactly happened? What did I see?"

"Don't worry about that right now, man. Just rest until you feel like you can sit up."

"Right, yeah. All right." Giles said. He laid on the floor for a few more moments before slowly sitting up with Ulysses's help.

"We can't stay here," Nera said. She looked solemnly at both of them.

"She's right," said Agent O'Flannery as he shifted and sat up on the couch. **UJ**

Ash on the Wind

by Kain Neimann

Exan Huraldi, Blood Prior of the Sublime Order of the Star Bindu, arrived on Gevendra Prime two days before his death. His mission was plain - First, to determine if within the Hidden Temple the most ancient copy of The Way of Life, the central text of his order, was intact, and Second, to remove it from the planet if it was. There were no third orders, and as always, the Council instructed him to take every precaution to preserve his secrecy and his life from the forces of the Death Emperor Stygius.

Huraldi laughed inside. He knew what this meant. There was no need to risk his skin for a book. They wanted the source scoped. They wanted to know if there was anything in the population of Gevendra Prime worth the effort to save. They knew he would be gone for years if successful, and not at all if unsuccessful. They knew this but could not say. Ordering a brother to his death was a common necessity in this, the bottom of the Cycle of Death, but the Bindu would not be the Bindu if they could do it dispassionately. So they lied. Huraldi understood the lie.

On the night before they left, Huraldi went into the bare white cell where the young man named Curlus, who had brought them the news that the ancient copy of The Way might still be there. Curlus sat up as Huraldi moved the screen to come into the room.

“Prior” he said, tonelessly

“You said you had seen the Hidden Temple”

“Yes.”

Huraldi reached out into thin air and snapped a fly with his fingers. He felt it crush between him. The boy did not budge a muscle or even blink.

“How far inside did you go”

The boy looked Huraldi in the eye. “Just to the Blue Arch.”

“So you said. What was in there?”

“Nothing. Wind.”

“So you said. What makes you think the library’s intact?”

The boy looked away.

“You have some idea that you don’t want to tell me,” said Huraldi, dropping the dead fly to the floor. It fell without a sound. “Know that I have my doubts about you. And so does the Council, or they wouldn’t send me. So if you’re telling the truth, your obligation to it demands that you convince me.”

The boy's chin quivered. He stared off into space and said "Have you seen what the Deathguard do?"

"Of course I have."

"Then you know what a place looks like when they've been there. The Hidden Temple doesn't look like that. It looks empty, and quiet... but not like that."

That at least has the ring of truth, Huraldi thought. The boy has seen things, has suffered under our enemy's hands. But that may only be the way they got him.

They left on the next starlighter.

* * *

They arrived under cover of a great storm of purpled water of the kind that traversed Gevendra Prime several times during its solar year - a pigment from the arlinium in the atmosphere mixing with the runoff from the basolm found in almost all the soil. Red and Blue made a deep violet that briefly stained everything it touched but washed off without causing harm to any life. Scientists even claimed the combination produced a healthy neurological effect - a boost in executive function and a slight mood-enhancement. The result was marginal, but that had not stopped many from trying to reproduce it, to varying result. Such alchemy was of course, illegal now. The Empire regarded Gevendra Prime as something of an embarrassment, and trade with it and access to it was greatly restricted. Since the beginning of Stygius' reign, the population had dwindled.

In fact, the straighter carrying Huraldi and Curlus did not even take them all the way, but dropped them in a meteor-pod, which would mostly dissolve on its way through the atmosphere and the rest succumb to weathered rot. The return would require contact with smugglers interested in the arlinium-basolm mix - known as arba - and would take a very long time. Given that meteor showers were common on the planet (some even said they were the source of the purple rain), and that beyond the Imperial garrison of Kalish there were few inhabitants, this was an easy way to avoid detection. Huraldi could have had smugglers bring him in, but he wanted to impress upon Curlus how fully he was resigned to disaster. His distrust had only grown as he had tried to pry the truth out of him. The story Curlus told was consistent, Huraldi agreed, but there was something wrong in the boy, some reality desperately covered.

He was supposed to be the younger son of a prominent merchant family that has fallen on hard times. Such families often pawn their extra children to indentures with commercial interests, when available, or to secret societies and criminal syndicates when not. Curlus said he had always wanted to be a Star Bindu. He said it with heat and with passion. Huraldi believed him and it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

The meteor-pod split the trunk of a golsch tree and sent yellow spores burning through the air, sparking from contact with the nitrogen in the air. This was a common thing for a golsch to do, but not in this season. Anyone who saw it would mark it. Huraldi doubted anyone did, but assumed the opposite anyway. He dragged Curlus quickly out of the burning husk of the pod and they marched two miles at the quick step before Huraldi would allow him to stop and rest. They were not injured and no native fauna - not even the song of birds - made notice of their movements.

Stopping for a few minutes, Huraldi reckoned their location. They had come down on the right continent. This was the Geleric Forest, far past mountain and vale from Kalish, with their destination - the Hidden Temple - between

them. Meteor pods were usually aimed at a general location - otherwise, they'd have small used - but Huraldi was surprised by their fortune thus far. *It means we are blessed by the Hand of Fate, or being raised up for the deepest of suffering*, he thought.

Curlus was breathing heavily but trying not to. The descent through fire and storm, the deadly landing in tree, and the forced march had pushed him, and he could not conceal it. He looked up at Huraldi and said, "You are a Blood Prior."

"I am," replied Huraldi.

"I do not know what that is," said Curlus.

"Do you want me to tell you?"

The boy's calm returned. "Yes," he said.

"A Prior is the head of a single community of Bindu, whether male or female. They are commonly called priories, but I prefer the old term, stupa. The Prior is not the community."

"This I already know," said Curlus.

"Very well," said Huraldi, offering the boy his waterskin, "Blood Priors are like the Deathguard of the Bindu. We are the commanders, the assassins, the masters of war. We have no specific community. Our responsibility is for the whole."

"How many Blood Priors are there?"

"Right now, twenty. I have trained most of them. But in a Cycle of Death, almost all Bindu need to know the ways of war. Otherwise we do not survive."

"How long will does a Cycle of Death last?"

"No one knows. This one has lasted almost 500 years. That's longer than some. We can't guess, though. We must await the signs of a Cycle of Life returning."

"What are the signs?"

"They are subtle. Beauty and growth is seen. Mercy and quiet."

"And Justice?" said the boy, perking up.

"Of a kind, yes. But you know what people say of Justice."

Curlus' mouth twisted. "The Emperor is Just."

"Yes. And to many, that is an irony of cruelty hiding in a statement of submission. But Stygius' servants say it, too,

and with no irony. They mean it. And they are not wrong.”

Curlus started. “How can you say that?”

“Death is the supreme Justice. It is no respecter of persons. All die. Even Stygius is not eternal. He will pass into the void he serves one day. And the Cycle of Death often starts in a longing for Justice. The end of a Cycle of Life is often a time of great confusion, great absurdity. Those who serve Death start in a revulsion against such times. Their revulsion is honest.”

“You almost speak as though you admired them.”

“It is not a question of admiration, or even approval. Life and Death vie in struggle. A thing creates its reaction, its shadow. I cannot serve Stygius because I am not of him. But he exists in no small part because we exist.”

The boy cast his eyes down. “Oh,” he said. And he said nothing else when they resumed their journey, doubling back in a circuitous route that would take them distantly past the crash-site towards the Valley of the Star.

* * *

They arrived under the Blue Arch two days later. It was mined of almost pure basolm, beautiful and shimmering even in the low light under the thick canopy of Carnaf trees. Huraldi stood under the arch, and with the devotion of a child, spoke aloud the Mantra of Self. His tones and rhythms were chosen to induce Curlus to break his silence and, if he knew them, speak the words as well - a teacher’s art common among the Bindu. And on the final line, “the Way flows through me,” Huraldi indeed heard Curlus’ voice.

“Is this what you saw?”

“Yes,” said Curlus.

From his side Huraldi drew his iridium blade and, by drawing upon the living Way, caused it to glow with a deep blue flame. He looked at the boy.

“You are one of us,” Huraldi said. “Or you wished to be once. But you are also Stygius’ tool. I read it in your dead eyes the day you came to us. Everything you have done and said confirms it. Give over the deception. Tell me what awaits me inside.”

Curlus responded as if in a dream. “Deathguard.”

“How many?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do they want?”

“You. Captured.” A single tear trickled down the boy’s cheek.

“They killed your family and tortured you, didn’t they?”

“Yes.”

“Someone in your village knew of your wish to be one of us and informed, didn’t they?”

“Yes.”

“And you have put all the blame on yourself, and on us, because we can suffer, as a justice for what your family suffered.”

A second tear, from the other eye. “The Deathguard...” he said, and broke off. Then he said “They do not suffer. They never suffer.”

“You are wrong, Curlus. They will suffer. I will show you. I will enter there, and they will try to take me alive. They will not succeed. I will spill their blood, and they will kill me. And that will be failure. Stygius will feel great rage at their failure. He will punish his servants, who will punish their servants. Your family will have Justice.”

“And then what?” said the boy.

“Then you will enter the Temple, and you will find the lost copy of The Way of Life. They have of course preserved it, as bait for us, haven’t they?”

“Yes.”

“And you will take it from here. Hide it if you must. Hide yourself. Take years if you must. But bring it back to the Council. Tell them what you saw.”

Curlus wiped the tears from his eyes. “I will,” he said, softly.

“Go,” said Huraldi. “Do not let the Deathguard see you.”

And he walked under the Blue Arch. The path led deep under the ground and the calan torches lit as he passed them. There was no thought of stealth. They would know where he was. He just needed space to maneuver, space to see them coming. He would make for the Chapel of Azura. As he formed this plan, his step grew light, and he began to sing:

*The sons have set
In place the god
Who finds the light,
The fathers have stretched
The threat before them
Like a river of golden dreams.*

Huraldi heard the footfalls behind him and he grinned devilishly. He stopped at a fork in the path, breathed once, and then took off into a dash down the leftmost corridor, singing gaily. He heard shouts behind him, angry shouts. He laughed as Azura of the Great Color burst in fine arba statue form in front of him. He ran inside and a rainbow

lit up the dome above.

There were forty of them, and they ran into the room and drew themselves into formation by squads. They all had the telltale black uniforms with the silver skulls at the right breast and the eyes vulture-red. Curlus had not lied. A third of this number would be sufficient to kill him. This display of force meant that he was to be brought kneeling to the throne of Stygius himself. The honor was greatly to be esteemed.

“Come fools,” said Huraldi, brandishing his blade “I will give you your name.”

They smiled and they saluted and then they charged him like a wave.

He drew upon the Way and time slowed, grinding seconds into lens-filaments, finer and finer, and he danced between the edges of the red blades and they did not catch him. He poured out the life’s blood of ten of them in a flash, his own weapon cutting the air in their throats. They did not curse him. He could feel their twisted love. They had dreamed of him.

On slaying the eleventh Deathguard he was a step slower, and the edge of a blade sank a flesh wound into him. Not deep, just a scratch, and his mind recorded it without pain, as a mere fact, but he understood that his awareness could not run as perfectly. There would be more wounds. The next one came after the fourteenth, the next on the eighteenth, and each time the dance got harder. The twentieth Deathguard struck him deeply, and his mind winced and reeled and he retreated, but they were fast. He took another flesh wound quickly, and this roused his anger, and he allowed it too, and he charged through points uncaring to slay five more without another weapon touching him. But he could smell his blood, and so could they. He retreated again. The next five Deathguard each struck him a blow as they fell beneath his blade. Some were feeble, and some were well-thrust, but each of them scored, and died happy.

There were ten left. Huraldi limped tactically towards the altar-pit at the chapel’s center. He could play it safer there. They were not supposed to kill him, he knew, but he had lost more blood than was safe. In the pit, he would take a few more, and one would take him.

He staggered down, sliding. Three Deathguard followed him. One leapt eagerly onto his blade. The other cut a gash on his head while he extracted his weapon from the first, and would have finished him but Huraldi with a final burst of strength slipped out of line, and blade free, cut his head from his shoulders. But that was the last. The third Deathguard knocked the blade from his hand, and thrust his own weapon into Huraldi’s heart. The transition to the eternal came in the blink of an eye.

* * *

Curlus watched the Blue Arch for the rest of the day and deep into the night. He watched eight Deathguard walk under it, turning left up a goat path and into the deep cover of the woods. One of them had a second Iridium blade in his hand, in addition to the one on his hip. They walked out in single file and did not look back. Curlus waited until night to enter to be certain it was not a trap. When morning came he second-guessed himself and waited more. Then he went in.

He walked through the Arch and down the path as the calan lamps lit up to mark his passage. He felt calm even as the air tickled his nose with an iron smell that had not been there before. He knew that smell. He remembered it

Ash on the Wind

well.

He made his way to the fork and took the rightmost corridor. This was the way he had been before, and this was the way to the thing promised. When the corridor opened up to the Great Hall, the lights blue and red burst on, and Curlus closed his eyes in the purple. Then he made his way to a stone just slightly dingier than those around it, and he moved it aside and there he found, in a thick oilcloth bag, bound in blue leather, The Way of Life. It was printed on a static vellum that avoided decomposition by a unique electromagnetic device that absorbed energy from the atmosphere. It had a kind of hum to it, and Curlus breathed a cleansing breath. With a snap and a flick the book opened and with his eyes still closed he flipped pages swiftly. He pointed a finger, opened his eyes, and read:

*Deeds do not perish
Even after aeons untold.
The ash scattered on the wind
Finds its right soil
And Life draws from it.*

These were the words, when the Cycle of Life began again, that ran along the Great Red Arch of the Unhidden Temple on Arkala 3, with the relics of two holy ones, names lost to time, at both bases of it. **UJ**