

Sydrandria

Christopher A. Tucker, Paradox Technologies, Modesto, California.

chris.tucker@paradoxtechnologies.org

Prologue:

Futhar-Syl, worn and weary from battle with the Zek, stumbled aimlessly over the sacred ochre-hill on his journey home. The late after-day sun baked his frazzled and beaten composure, seeming punishing him for his defeat. A defeat that cost the lives of 7,000 (comrades). As far as he knew, he was the only survivor. In his mind, his fading memory could see the faces of his people; their vacant expression of disbelief, of fear of the coming of the Zek--their complete annihilation war tactics--of hatred for the barbarians and of Futhar himself, who had failed them. Oh, does he wish he had perished with his noble comrades and died a warrior, only then could he be with the Goddess, living the eternal with her, with everything. It had been so difficult in his own life to establish the respect and faith of being a male, now all the work had been for naught--the whole world crumbled at his feet. His fate had been sealed, he had been cheated out of death in battle for his Queen; he found himself in a position worse than death--he no longer existed.

He gazed about him to the sands of the desert, Salar; the rippled and cracked hard-clay surface, mocked him. The bits of straggled, blackened grasses left to die at the mercy of the prevailing heat and chill wrote his epitaph. His body was badly beaten, his armor and shield discarded, his clothes tattered--he had barely enough cloth to make a (turban) for himself to wrap his head, and his eye-lenses to thin out Salar's light were long gone. Death at his own hands was expressly forbidden by the Goddess, his soul would be sent to the Outlands where he would never be allowed, in the vast infinity of time, to see another of his kind. Perhaps he would fall into a pit or be devoured by a magna-worm; to have Death come quickly instead of the unbearable agony he knew he must face for any hope of forgiveness by the Goddess. He was doomed to wander like the striped, grotesque Cyana-Horses of the Northern Mountains, to never associate with another, to never speak of his defeat, to no longer acknowledge his identity, and to die in turmoil. He would let his black hair grow long, unkempt and tangled, he would let his pocked flesh wither and fall as dried leather to the ground; he would let his eyes collapse into

their sockets so that he may not see the fulfillment of his fate, so that he not have to look upon himself. He could take no more joy in seeing Jaya rise from the ochre-hills; the splashes of orange and yellow, the sky nearly afire as she put Salar to rest and walked hand in hand with her sister, Menola, as they paced across the heavens. He could no longer bask in her pleasant silver light as it sparkled, falling into the trees, the fields and the river; he could not look upon Jaya, as she parted from her sister and moved across the sky, her silver tail the only thread of connection. All this beauty he would not let himself see, he would no longer insult the Goddess and no longer insult his Queen in thinking such things. For now he can only think of Death, of darkness and of decay, of his body and his mind--he must go live in the caves of Ulhar, in the land of Onyx, where he will lie in disgrace and hope he will never be heard from again. His last mortal thoughts were of his wife and daughters as he set his feet in the direction of the Black Mountains of Onyx; if life could be granted to them he would be truly thankful, but the prayers of the dead fall on deaf ears. But he still had energy to hope, to project himself to his family, he could feel the warmth of their love and the love of himself--the only part of him over the long Jahr that never really died.

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Retha-Ars and Aryrl-Nol lay in waiting to hear the news of the Great War with the Zek. Just four days and nights before, the celebration of the Commander of Armies (Forces), Futhar-Syl, and his warriors was held. It had been a fabulous occasion, the whole town was in attendance--even the Queen had made appearance to decorate Futhar for his past victories and to anoint him the strength of the Supreme Goddess for the upcoming conflict--which brought great awe in the people. Rarely did the Queen ever appear before the public, the affairs of the -Syl and -Nol and the interpretations of the aspects of the Goddess herself took full attention, so when she did, it was viewed a great gift, not only to the body but to the spirit, to be in her presence.

Futhar and his warriors had been sent off with blaring of Horns, the rattling of bells, and the song of the masses to fight the barbaric Zek, to put an end to their leader, Tuaka, from threatening the peaceful people any longer. Just last season, during the cold months of Heims (winter), Akia, son of Tuaka had tried to overrun them, but Futhar not only defeated his armies, but killed Akia in hand to hand combat. This brought cries of vengeance from the Zek and

promises of widespread destruction of the Erine and their land. The Queen took the threats seriously and after consultation with the Goddess, had given guidance for the Erine to extinguish the Zek that Salar (summer)--an alternate call than what was considered usual from Her--the Erine had spent many Jahr at peace, in fact, they despised warfare. But when the threats of the Zek first surfaced 6 Jahr ago, Futhar was empowered, under the Queen, to be Master of Arms; a disdiction extremely rare. Males were never given the amount of power Futhar had. He was the first of his sex to hold such a seat, for males spent the bulk of their lives learning and providing the crafts of Art (--Tene) and Agriculture (--Ars), and were excepted from any higher positions. There have been no deviations in the limitless Jahr that the Erine have existed as a race.

Even Alo-Nol, Aryrl's friend and mentor, was against the installment of a weak man who was too quick to think foolishly and act only after careful analysis of moot tactics; 'he had no fire in his belly', Alo told her, and was fearful the first real battle Futhar would engage in, he would not only lose, but lose (so) badly enough where the Zek would only be more inspired to take over the Erine, instead of discouraged from venturing forth. "But the Queen is divine in her Wisdom," Alo said. "We cannot disagree with either her or the Goddess. Whatever is to be done, will be done."

Lately, however, prophecies had been surfacing; ones concerning the eminent defeat of Futhar and the Erine under Zek rule. Alo had carefully kept herself apart from such overly-mystical predictions, but the Mithir, believed in them unquestioningly. They had spent many months unsuccessfully trying to persuade the Queen to change her rule; fear had permeated itself into most of the populace, anxiety over news of the War was high, the people waited with baited breath--all night vigils were held, incantations professed, sacrifices made--as if they had to be swayed from the doubts that plagued their minds, as if to change the inevitable truth that lay just on the horizon. A truth not fully realized or acknowledged. But, still, the people had faith in Futhar. He was charismatic, confident, arrogant, and determined to end the threat of the Zek. Alo was convinced everybody was kidding themselves, but she never let her opinion be known--except to Aryrl.

The time was ripe for opinions, and there had been plenty of time to disclose them; Aryrl heard most of them while doing her work in the observatory. Recently, the Magnifier had been invented, Alo had foreseen construction and installation of the device that would enable the -Nol to peer into the vast heavens. Ten Jahr ago, the people had been abuzz about the hazards of

looking into the face of the Goddess; Menola or Jaya shouldn't be seen with mortal eyes, it would violate a basic religious principal and would infuriate not only the Goddesses but the Supreme Goddess Herself. After heated debate, the (argument) had died down to a whisper and the -Nol were left in peace to do their studies. And one of the most exciting discoveries were the new aspects of Menola, that it was a heavenly body, perhaps another planet or the newly coined word *moon*, with similar properties of their own world. They had the same thoughts as to Jaya, but she was farther away and moved so quickly across the sky, it had been hard to keep the lens focused on her. Alo had designed a more efficient way of rotating the magnifier to keep up with Jaya's *orbit* to better facilitate record keeping. The -Nol had changed the calendar several times in the past 2 Jahr, with every new piece of information, the whole fabric of the society was rewritten, much to the dismay of the elders who were constantly at odds with the -Nol trying to convince the Queen to put a halt to their blasphemous work. But the Queen was sympathetic to the -Nol, she knew the importance of Knowledge of the environment and the circle of Agriculture to the sustenance of the Erine. The peering into the skies wouldn't be stopping anytime soon.

Aryrl was becoming tired of hearing opinions of this and that, of the War, of Science, of Knowledge, of the Supreme Goddess and of the general moral of the people. She was sick of the debates she had to attend, in the presence of the Queen and her (Consorts), of what the effect of alternate outcomes of the items in question would have on the civilization. Worry, anxiety and fear was the order of the day, it was increasing at a heightening pace, the cries of dissent and despair deafening. If she could hear news of Futhar-Syl, only a slight tid-bit perhaps, then, single-handedly she could put to rest some of the rumors of the impending destruction. In only a short time there would be calls to action of a possible relocation of the Erine, a new homeland. Nayir, a Mithir, first proposed the theory during the debate; instead of calming the crowd (which probably was her original intent) she only inspired more fear, more paranoia and several scuffles among opponents. The Queen took it upon herself to speak on behalf of the Goddess reassuring everyone everything would be find and it was foolish to not only question the intentions of the Supreme Goddess, but to act in contrast to her desires. This statement seemed to relax everyone enough so they could regain their rational senses, but Aryrl felt deep inside her, although her faith in the Wisdom of the Goddess unforsaken, that something terribly wrong was to happen to the Erine. Something so terrible, she felt it better to send her husband, Retha and her son to the

mercy of Salar than have them slaughtered at the hands of the Zek.

Aryrl's son, Rethas, took to playing in the Town Square with his best friend, Okar; they had been watching the girls drawing on the tiles with large pieces of colored chalk, decorating the tiles with shades of yellows, blues and pinks. The two boys had walked up to the girls and politely asked them if they could share the chalk, to maybe give them a piece so they could draw shapes of their own. But the girls had laughed at them.

"Boys don't draw. How stupid."

Rethas and Okar glared at each other and the girls. Rethas sighed and Okar said,

"I always ask first, then take."

He walked up to one of the girls, pushed her and grabbed for the loose piece of chalk spinning on the tiles. The other girls, upon seeing what he had done, went in defence of their friend and fought with the two boys. Rethas got a bloody lip and Okar had gotten kicked in the stomach, and quite a crowd had gathered around, before the fight was broken up by an elder. She picked up Rethas and Okar by their shirts and shook them as she spoke,

"What are you doing to those girls?"

Rethas and Okar spoke in unison, "Nothin'."

"I think you're lying again, like the time I caught you in the fountain. You need discipline. I will speak to your parents, then maybe something can be done with you."

The two hung by their shirts. Rethas smirked and Okar shook his head. It hadn't been the first time and wouldn't be the last time they would get in trouble. It wasn't fair, Rethas thought, that the girls around here get to do everything--play in the square, swim in the fountain, wander beyond the walls of town and go to school. Rethas and Okar had done all those things, except going to school--they were strictly forbidden from going. Boys had no need for education save the Age of Absolution. A time, at twelve Jahr, (Rethas 8, Okar 10) when they would learn a trade; it would be the responsibility of the sponsor to educate them, not before. And if they were sponsored into a trade they did not care for, it mattered not, it was custom to accept without argument, the fate of one's trade, for fear of insulting the Queen. But Okar had leaned quite a bit from his father, who was --Tene, but picked up bits of Knowledge here and there. Knowledge of the stars, the discoveries on Menola, of the possibility of green lands and water; aspects of the true Supreme Goddess and how things in nature worked, stories of which, he passed onto Rethas.

Okar seemed happy to look forward to being a --Tene, like his father, but Rethas wanted to be --Syl, like Futhar. To hold an important office and to be respected.

"I bet Futhar wouldn't be carried away by his shirt if he decided to draw in the Square." Rethas muttered to himself.

"You're probably right," Okar said back to him.

"Quiet you two," the elder said, shaking them again.

Retha and Aryrl lay close to one another; their breaths were short and quick, their minds ablaze with scenarios of the affairs at hand. Suddenly, Retha was perplexed as to his thoughts.

"Why, my love, are we needlessly worrying over this?"

Aryrl smiled. "Can't you feel the tension in the air? Don't you feel what might happen to us? The whole world, as we know it, could be gone anytime."

"I don't know why everyone is so sure Futhar will fail. I think he'll be victorious."

"You're just a man, no wonder you think that. You don't know what's happening around here. You don't have the whole story."

He frowned. "Yes I do. And you know I hate it when you call me a 'just a man'. I have as many feelings as you have, I can be rational--a thinker."

"Sure you can, dear." She kissed him on the forehead.

"No, I mean it. Don't treat me like that!"

Aryrl laughed. "Why are you being so silly? Are you not feeling well?"

"Stop that!"

"Retha. . ."

He got up and paced around the room looking at the house (and farm) he had built with his bare hands, the intricate texture of branches, thatch, mud and tile. He was especially proud of what he did with the floor, the multi-colored stone, a checkerboard of sanguine and blue which resembled the night sky. The dwelling was home to him, his wife and his 8 Jahr (M) old son, Rethas. Especial care was taken in the house, it was one of the most exquisitely built houses in town. Retha had always wanted to become --Tene, an artist/craftsman at his Age of Absolution, but he couldn't find a sponsor other than an --Ars, and the past twenty seasons have been spent in anguish. He dearly loved his wife, but she could be so thick-headed at times, and demeaning. Not only to him but Rethas as well. Which he was convinced, damaged the boy in

some ways, the results unrealized until he was older. But, he figured, if he could be as much a part of his life as he was now, he felt he might be able to counteract any small-minded ideas Aryrl might have implanted in his head. Retha's mother had done it to him, his son would be spared if he had anything to do with it. He turned to Aryrl.

"Listen, I don't think we have anything to worry about, but if it made you feel better, we can start getting our things together to leave. Although, I don't want to. I hate the idea of leaving our home."

"Retha, I don't want to leave either. I'll try not to worry too much about it. It's just that. . .everyone's talking about defeat and it's hard not to think like that when it seems the consensus of opinion. I should be more like Alo, she says, if there is news of a defeat, the scout will arrive several days before the Zek could possibly get here. Oh," she massaged her forehead. Retha sat next to her. "I'm so tired. . .I wish. . .I wish. . .ah, let's talk no more of this."

He embraced her and kissed her forehead.

Stirring could be heard on the walk, and the cries of two young boys. Aryrl immediately recognized both of them.

"Oh, no, not again." She said to Retha.

"What is it this time?" He asked.

Retha opened the door only to look into the scorn face of the elder.

"I have not seen boys so badly misbehave as these two." She raised them up and looked at them. "I caught them fighting with the others in the Square. I suggest strong discipline for your son. I'm sure Okar's father will feel the same."

Aryrl pulled the door back and slipped around Retha.

"I'm so very sorry. I'll take care of him." She took Retha from her and held him in her arms.

"I tell you, M. Aryrl, you should keep a closer eye on him. He's always getting into something or another."

"I will. And I hope he won't do it again. Now apologize to --Syl."

An, "I'm sorry. . ." squeaked out.

"There, now that's better. Good travels to you."

"You as well, M. Aryrl."

She glared at Retha and left still carrying him by the shirt. Retha felt humiliated

although amused watching his friend dangling over the walk in such a fashion. But he had to hold back the smiles, for fear of getting into anymore trouble; as it was, he had enough of a task of talking his way out of this one.

"I'm disappointed in you, son," Aryrl lectured. Retha closed the door, his nose crinkled as if trying to figure out something.

"Why did you go and fight those girls. . .?"

"You know," Retha interrupted. "I never liked that woman," he hooked his thumb at the door. "She's too sure of herself and too worried how things look and too interested in everyone's business."

"Yeah, me either, dad." Rethas said.

"You be quiet," Aryrl told him.

"She bothers me, especially when she carts kids around like she does, it's awful."

"She has her reasons, your son has done something bad."

He sat down and put his son on his lap. "Why did you fight with the girls? Tell me the truth."

"They wouldn't give us any chalk. All we wanted to do is play. And they laughed at us and called us stupid. I was really mad, I don't like being treated like that."

"Well, you had to defend. . ."

"You shouldn't be fighting, Rethas. Fighting is wrong." Aryrl interjected. Retha glared at her and he put his son down.

"Would you go out back and check on the animals please, son?"

"Yes, father." Rethas hung his head and left. Aryrl shrugged her shoulders, went to the hearth and staked the coals.

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Clouds filled the sky the morning she had heard the news. Wide-spread panic was in the streets--Futhar-Syl had lost, the Zek army was en route to Erine to destroy and burn anything and everything they could lay their hands on.