

# THE STARS DO NOT LIE

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## THE STARS DO NOT LIE

*In the beginnings, the Increate did reach down into the world and where They laid Their hand was all life touched and blossomed and brought forth from water, fire, earth and air. In eight gardens were the Increate's children raised, each to have dominion over one of the eight points of the Earth. The Increate gave to men Their will, Their word, and Their love. These we Their children have carried forward into the opening of the world down all the years of men since those first days.*

—Librum Vita, Beginnings 1:1-4;

being the Book of Life and word entire of the Increate

Morgan Abutti; B.Sc. Bio.; M.Sc. Arch.; Ph.D. Astr. & Nat. Sci.; 4th degree Thalassocrete; Member, Planetary Society; and Associate Fellow of the New Garden Institute, stared at the map that covered the interior wall of his tiny office in the Institute's substantial brownstone in downtown Highpassage. The new electricks were still being installed by brawny, nimble-fingered men of crafty purpose who often smelled a bit of smoke and burnt cloth. Thus his view was dominated by a flickering quality of light that would have done justice to a smoldering hearth, or a wandering planet low in the pre-dawn sky. The gaslamp men were complaining of the innovations, demonstrating under Lateran banners each morning down by the

Thalassojustity Palace in their unruly droves.

He despised the rudeness of the laboring classes. Almost to a man, they were pale-faced fools who expected something for nothing, as if simply picking up a wrench could grant a man worth.

Turning his attentions away from the larger issues of political economy and surplus value, he focused once more on history.

Or religion.

Honestly, Morgan was never quite certain of the difference any more.

Judging from the notes and diagrams limned up and down the side of the wide rosewood panel in their charmingly archaic style, the map had been painted about a century earlier for some long-dead theohistoriographer. The Eight Gardens of the Increate were called out in tiny citrons that somehow had survived the intervening years without being looted by hungry servants or thirsty undergraduates. Morgan traced his hand over the map, fingers sliding across the pitted patina of varnish and oil soap marking the attentions of generations of charwomen.

Euftrat.

Quathlamba.

Ganj.

Manju.

Wy'east.

Tunsa.

Antiskuna.

Cycladia.

The homes of man. Archaeological science was clear enough. Thanks to the work of natural scientists of the past century, so was the ethnography. The Increate had placed the human race upon this Earth. That was absolutely clear. Just as the priests of the Lateran had always taught, nothing of humanity was older than the villages of the Gardens of the Increate.

*Nothing.*

Sick at heart, Morgan turned back to his photographic plates, their silver salts bearing indubitable evidence of the ephemeral nature of such faith in the Increate.

The stars do not lie.

"Gentlemen of the Planetary Society . . ." Morgan Abutti let his voice trail off a moment. His next words, once uttered, could never be taken back. Not before this august assemblage of the greatest scientific minds of the modern era. He drew in a deep breath and plunged recklessly onward. "On examination of considerable evidence from fields as varied as paleontology, archaeology, and astronomy, I have been compelled to confront the distinct likelihood that we, the human race, are not of this world."

He paused to give the audience a moment to consider the proposition. The racket of the city of Highpassage echoed from outside the Society's Plenary Hall—steam whistles, horses, motorcars, the grumble of the new diesel engines powering the latest generations of airships. The seven hundred faces staring at him included a scattering of the paler-skinned northern folk, who were finally entering academe and the sciences thanks to the same progressive policies that had helped pave Morgan's own way to the exclusive University of Highpassage. That women had been allowed to study a generation earlier had cracked open the door that later admitted the traditionally inferior white race.

The world was growing more open-minded by the decade in spite of itself. Were his colleagues in the Planetary Society ready for this, his grand conclusion?

What he'd thought to be shocked silence degraded into murmuring, muttering, even outright laughter in a few corners. Some delegates rose from their seats, ready

to move onward to more fruitful pursuits. Others struck up conversations with their seatmates, or commenced making notes, in some cases with deliberate ostentation.

Morgan had lost the audience, waiting for their reaction to his news.

"I have . . . have assembled a précis of the evidence . . ." he began, but his voice trailed off. A moment later Doctor Professor the Reverend Lucan Matroit, Secretary-General of the Planetary Society, plucked at Morgan's sleeve.

"My deepest regrets, ah . . . Doctor Abutti," Lucan said quietly, his tone as formal and disinterested as if the two of them had never met before. "The Society thanks you for your contributions." He quite effectively twisted Morgan's arm and propelled him toward the heavy maroon velvet curtains marking stage left.

"Dear ones," Lucan called out to the audience, which immediately stilled its unrest at his piercing voice. "Let us now offer praise to the Increate, as redress to Them for the caprice and irresponsibilities of free will . . ."

Morgan did not hear the rest of the invocative prayer. Two of the Society's burly porters—like most of their fellows, former Thalassojustity Marines—seized him by the upper arms, shoved his despatch case into his hands, jammed his bowler hat upon his head, and escorted him to a service entrance from which he was summarily ejected into a dung-spattered alley under the doleful gaze of a brace of hinnies hitched to a rag man's cart.

At least they had not thrown him bodily into the muck. No, even that embarrassment had been trumped with a few mere words from Lucan Matroit.

Gathering the shreds of his dignity, Morgan resolved to retreat to the shelter of his office at the New Garaden Institute. The Avenida Tram line ran past the Plenary Hall, and would deposit him within two blocks of his destination.

Waiting for the next street car to arrive, Morgan noticed one of the porters watching him. The man leaned on a pillar of the rococo façade of the Plenary Hall, smoking a fat cigar and making no effort to hide himself or pretend interest in anything but Morgan. After adjusting his collar tabs and fussing with his shirt front, Morgan held his leather case to his chest as if it could armor him, and waited among the ladies' maids and bankers' daughters for the tram.

Riding among a crowd consisting mostly of servants summoned memories that Morgan had expended some effort setting aside. The human odor of painfully starched cleanliness and faint malnutrition within the tram was far too reminiscent of his own childhood. He stared out at the streets of Highpassage, ignoring the people around him with their muted gossip, and wondered what he'd been about.

Seeking truth, *science*, had been his path out of ungentle poverty. That the good universities admitted scholarship boys at all was still a strange novelty when Morgan had first enrolled. He'd studied beyond reason to qualify, understanding perfectly clearly he would have to do twice as well to be thought half as good as someone of monied birth and good family.

Even now, with his doctorate and his post at the New Garaden Institute, far too few listened with ears of reason. People only saw and heard what they wished. If he'd been a titled scion of some ancient house, Matroit would not have been able to rush him out of the Planetary Society.

The most important discovery of the modern age was being crushed by pettiness. No different from the rough back alley games of his youth. The strongest ones, the ones with the most friends, always prevailed.

Head pressed against the glass, feeling the shudder of the tracks through the tram's iron wheels, Morgan almost wept to realize the world's unfairness had no end. He could never be good enough, never have possession of enough facts, to surpass that barrier.

The New Garaden Institute's offices occupied the majority of an elegant building that had been designed and constructed during the height of the Neoclassical Revival at the beginning of the previous century. It had been one of the first structures in Highpassage built with the intention of being gas lit and centrally heated. Plumbing stacks, gas valve closets, ventilation shafts for the introduction of fresh air to the innermost precincts of the structure—the building had been a truly visionary project from the century's most famous architect, Kingdom Obasa. A brilliant Iberiard educated outside the top-ranked university system, Obasa had very much gone his own way in both engineering and aesthetics. As a result, for all of its brownstone glory, the New Garaden Institute nonetheless resembled nothing so much as a cathedral that had been partially melted.

The recent addition of an array of rooftop electrical signaling devices for the propagation and reception of radio waves had done nothing to alleviate the building's strangeness.

Stung, embittered, saddened by his setback, but firmly in command of himself once more, Morgan stumbled through the vestibule into the receiving parlor only to find the Desk Porter in close consultation with a pair of on-duty Thalassojustice Marines. His view of the wide expanse of maroon carpet, delicate settees, and brass rails telescoped into a horrified vision of another ejection from his barely attained positions of privilege. The Marines' formal red tunics contrasted oddly with the firearms borne by both of the large men. While Morgan had little familiarity with weapons, even he could see that these were not the long-barreled, wooden-stocked rifles carried on parade, but rather short, snub-nosed bits of machined steel slung tight on well-worn leather straps. Businesslike tools of violence, in other words.

"Ah, Dr. Abutti," one of the Marines said, even before he'd turned from the Desk Porter's podium. The man's purple-blue eyes were like grapes squeezed into the unnaturally pale, ruddy flesh of his face.

Morgan was impressed for about three beats, until he realized the Marine had seen his reflection in the glassed-over painting of the Battle of Mino Harbor behind the podium.

"Indeed. I do not believe we have been introduced." Morgan glanced pointedly at the Desk Porter. The Desk Porter—was his name Philas? Phelps?—just as pointedly failed to meet Morgan's eye.

"No need, sir. You're to come with us. Thalassojustice business. You're being called before the Lesser Bench, sir." The Marine favored Morgan with a warm smile that did not meet the eyes. His fellow favored Morgan with the blank stare of a gun barrel casually swung to bear.

"Now?" Morgan asked with an involuntary swallow.

"Now." And after a moment too long, "Sir."

"I may be some time," Morgan told the Desk Porter.

"I'll make a note, Doctor." This time he did raise his eyes with a faint flash of malice.

*When first they hanged the pirate Black upon the beach  
Little did the captains trow what they set upon the sea  
Neither haunt nor hollow, down the long years between  
Justice for the open waves, and a fire upon the deep  
—Lords of the Horizon, Ebenstone (trad. attrib.)*

By sharp contrast with the New Garaden Institute, the Thalassojustice Palace was arguably the oldest building in Highpassage. It was certainly the oldest building still in regular use. The legal and sovereign relationship between the Thalassojustice and

its host city was ambiguous, strained by two millennia and more of precedent, treaty, and occasional open warfare.

In other words, arguably not in Highpassage proper. The Increate, as always, manifested Their power on the side of the big battalions.

Morgan Abutti was treated to a close view of the Pirate's Steps, the ancient risers that led to the formal portico. A temple of the sea, the palace had been looking out across the Attik Main for over a third of recorded history. He knew the building well—impossible not to, as a fourth-degree Thalassocrete. The initiation ceremonies stressed history above all else.

Normally he used a discreet side door for the alternate Thursday lodge meetings. Only criminals and heads of state paraded up the Pirate's Steps. He knew which he wasn't.

"What have I done?" he asked of the two Marines for at least the sixth time. For at least the sixth time, they gave him no answer. Even the false smiles had vanished, to be replaced by a firm grip on each arm and the banging of one Marine's firearm against Morgan's hip.

At the top of the steps, he was hoisted around and faced outward, so that he stared at the bottle-green waters of the Attik Main. Shipping crowded the waves, as always at Highpassage, one of the busiest ports in the world. Great iron steamers from the yards at Urartu far to the east passed above dish-prowed fishing boats whose lines had not changed in a thousand years of beachfront ship building. A white-hulled Thalassojustity cutter cruised past barges and scows waiting for their dock pilots. Overhead, a pair of the new Iberiard dirigibles beat hard against the wind, engines straining as they slung urgent deck cargo to landfall from a vessel waiting too long for a slip.

Highpassage, crossroads of the world.

But the message wasn't that, Morgan knew. He'd sat through too many initiations not to see the point the Marines were making. The hanging tree, the ultimate symbol of both justice and power across the world's maritime extents, stood on the beach below him, memorialized as a granite monument to the largely legendary death of the largely legendary pirate Black. That angry court of captains and bosuns had met on a firelit beach in the teeth of a rising storm over two thousand years past to take justice in their own hands after the King of Highpassage had declined to act. The sailors had broken Black, so the story ran, and unintentionally founded a line of power that controlled the high seas to this day, serving as a pragmatic secular counterbalance to the widespread spiritual and temporal influence of the Lateran Church.

Drawing on that tradition to this day, justice, as untempered by mercy as the sea itself, was the purpose of the Thalassocretes.

"You're a man of keen wit and insight," said the pale Marine in a surprisingly soft tone, to Morgan's surprise.

"I am likely blind to much in this life." He felt as if he were uttering his last words. "Science is both my mistress and my muse. But even I can still see history."

Like estranged lovers met on a sidewalk, the moment swiftly passed. A rough adversity resumed. Morgan found himself pushed within, toward the upper halls and the quiet, incense-reeking rooms of the Lesser and Greater Benches of the Thalassojustity.

The Most Revered Bilious F. Quinx; B.Th. Rhet.; M.Th. Hist. & Rit.; Th.D. Hist. & Rit.; 32nd degree Thalassocrete; and master of the Increate's Consistitory Office for Preservation of the Faith Against Error and Heresy, watched carefully as His Holiness Lamboine XXII paged through one of the *prohibitora* from the Consistitory's most confidential library.

The two of them were alone—unusually so, given His Holiness' nigh everpresent

retinue—in the aerie of the Matachin Tower of the Lateran Palace. This room was Quinx' private study and retreat, and also where his most confidential meetings were held. The latter was due to the architecture of the tower walls that rendered the usual methods of ecclesiastical eavesdropping futile.

Quinx, in both his official capacity and from his well-developed personal sense of curiosity, worried about the possibility of spying via the new electricks. For that reason, he had thus far forbidden any lights or wires to be installed in the Matachin Tower. He preferred instead to rely on traditional oil lamps tended by traditional acolytes who damned well knew to keep their ears shut. And besides which who wore nubble-soled slippers so they could not sneak.

Privacy was both a commodity and a precious resource within these walls of the Increate's highest house. Quinx made it his business to control the available privacy as much as possible.

Still, having His Holiness leaf so casually through a *prohibitorum* was enough to give a thoughtful man a galloping case of the hives.

Lamboine—who had once been called Ion when they were boys together in a mountain village plentifully far away from the Holy Precincts—raised his eyes from the page. "There is nothing in this world I am not entitled to know, Bili."

"You understand me perfectly as always."

Those words summoned a small, sad smile, one that Quinx also remembered far too well from a youth lost six decades past. "That is why I am the Gatekeeper and you are my hound," Lamboine replied. As ever, his voice was preternaturally patient. "I have always wondered why our friends among the Thalassocretes have never sought to place a man on the Footstool of the Increate."

Ion was one of the few remaining alive who could provoke Quinx to unthinking response. "Do you honestly suppose they never have done so? I am numbered among their rolls, after all."

"They think you their spy in the house of the Increate." Another small smile. "In any event, I should think I would know if one of them had ever held my throne. My opinion is that they have never felt a need to. Truth is a strange commodity."

"Much like privacy," Quinx almost whispered, echoing his own, earlier thoughts.

The Gatekeeper shook his head. "Privacy is just a special case of truth, or its withholding. This . . ." His hand, palsied with the infirmity of age that had yet to overcome Quinx, swept over the open book. "This is truth of a different sort."

"No, Your Holiness. It is not. It is only the Thalassocretes' story. We have the Increate and the evidence on our side."

"What makes you think there are sides, Bili?"

In that moment, Quinx saw Lamboine's death. Flesh stretched tight and luminous across his face, the deep, natural brown of his skin paling to the color of milk in coffee, his eyes brittle as cracked opals. The man's fires were guttering. "There are always sides, Ion. That has been my role these long years here, preserving and defending your side." He paused a moment, then added: "Our side."

The Gatekeeper waited several measures of silence too long for comfort before replying. "I am glad you did not claim a side for the Increate. They are all, and They are everything."

"Of course." Quinx bowed his head.

A trembling hand descended in surprising blessing. Quinx had not even realized that the Gatekeeper had set the book down. "Do not rely too much on evidence, my oldest friend. It has a way of turning against you in time. Proof can change with circumstance. Faith is the rock upon which we must always build."

Quinx remained bowed until the Gatekeeper had departed, shuffling far enough down the spiral stairs to summon his attendants, who bore him away on a wave of

soft whispers and perfume. After a time, he rose and set some incense alight before kneeling on a bolster with a small ricepaper copy of *Librum Vita* in his grip. It had been made in distant Sind, something of a curiosity, copied out in a firm hand by a man wielding a brush comprised of only a single hair. Act of faith? Dedication to art?

It did not matter. The Increate's words fit in the palm of Quinx' hands. From there, he drew comfort as surely as he had from his mother's grasp once so long ago.

*Or Ion's.*

The relief of prayer drew him in then, toward the dim inner light that always filled Bilious Quinx when he sought the Increate in honest, faithful silence with open heart and empty thoughts.

Much later he trimmed the wicks in his office and lit the night lamp. Darkness had descended outside, the evening breeze bearing the itching scent of pollen and spring chill off the mountains to the east and south. Quinx opened his windows, their red glazing parted to let the tepid lamplight spill out and compete with the distant stars.

The Lateran Palace had its own observatories, of course. Someone must demarcate the lines of the world. Even the almighty Thalassojustity had in the past been willing to leave the skies to the Church. The irony of that was not lost on Quinx in these late days. He was certain it was no less lost on the Thalassocretes in Highpassage and elsewhere.

No matter his own initiation into their ranks; the Thalassojustity had always known who and what Quinx was, and whose creature he had been, body and soul. That Ion was dying now changed nothing of Quinx' loyalties.

He considered the *prohibitorum*, lying so carelessly open where the Gatekeeper had left it on one of the round room's several curve-backed writing desks. The book was open to a map of the Garden of Ganj, annotated only as the heretics of the Thalassojustity would bother to do. This particular volume was a first printing of the *Revised Standard Survey, Th. 1907*. Almost a hundred years old, and their color plates a century past were as good as anything the Lateran presses could manage even today.

Ion had left a scrap tucked in the center crease. Quinx plucked it out, his own hand trembling. It was a short note that must have been written before the Gatekeeper had come up to see him, in Ion's lifelong careful copperplate hand, rendered edgy and strange by the exigencies of age.

Dearest—

Do not let them elect you to the Gatekeeper's throne after me. And do not be afraid of what may be proven. Farewell. I regret that I must go before.

Always yours.

So he had seen truly into the Gatekeeper's face. And *Dearest*. They had not used that word between them in over five decades. Quinx carefully burned the note, then stirred the ashes. After that he trimmed his night lamp back to darkness, closed and sealed the *prohibitorum* with a black ribbon, and took a chair by one of the open casements to watch the stars wheel slowly until just after midnight when the Lateran tower bells began to ring their death knells.

When the great, iron bell of the Algeficc Tower tolled last and slowest of all, his tears finally flowed.

*Love is the sin that will not be denied.*

—*Librum Vita, Wisdoms 7:23;*

being the Book of Life and word entire of the  
Increate

The funerary rites for His Holiness Lamboine XXII began at Matins as the first flickering sweep of dawn glowed like coals in the eastern sky. In his role as Preserver of the Faith, and therefore fourth-ranking priest in the Lateran hierarchy, Quinx could have insisted on being the celebrant. The two men above him were already closeted deep in the electoral politics of the Primacy, those same delegates from around the world having received the Gatekeeper's death notice by telelocutor for the first time in Church history.

Quinx had a sick feeling that he would soon grow very weary of that last thought: *the first time in history*.

Instead of celebrating, he chose to attend as a congregant, a man, a priest, a mourner. The Deacon of the Lateran High Chapel led the first round of services. He was a young man with a perpetually surprised expression, now properly dressed in a sweeping black cassock embroidered in gold and silver thread, though he'd begun the services in a nightshirt before being rescued by an acolyte with the right set of chamber keys.

Incense, again, and the familiar tones of the chimes indicating the order of service. As the deacon struck them in turn, Quinx tried to put the memory of the tower bells away. Not to forget, for nothing could be forgotten by a man in his office, but to be set aside.

Prayer was a valve opened to the comfort of the Increate, from Whom all things sprang and to Whom all things flowed. There were times when he could understand the attraction of the Aquatist Heresies, for all that their pernicious metaphors had nearly fatally tangled the Lateran Church in its own liturgies. There were times when he wondered what the Increate truly intended, as if They would speak directly to him in response. There were times when quiet refuge was the greatest gift They could give him. Quinx let the deacon's droning voice lead him from grief to some other place where his cares could wait on the attentions of his heart.

Somewhere in memory, two young men on a hillside scattered with sheep, goats, and bright blue flowers laughed under a summer sky and spoke together of all things great and small.

When fingers touched his shoulder, Quinx was briefly startled. He'd gone so far into meditation that he'd lost himself in the well-worn rituals of the service. *Become the liturgy*, as they used to say in seminary.

He looked around. Brother Kurts, his lead investigator, stood as always just a bit too close.

"Sir," the monk growled. A big man, one of those pale northerners who somehow never seemed to advance far in the Church hierarchy, Kurts carried far more than his own weight. The man was a boulder in a snowfield. Here, in the midst of service, his blocky frame and the dark brown rough-spun habit of his Sibellian Order made him a brutal shout against the soaring of the silk-robed choir who must have filed in to the loft while Quinx had been meditating.

"Kurts?"

"You must come, sir. We have an urgent dispatch from Highpassage. By air."

"By air?" Briefly, Quinx felt stupid—an unusual sensation for him. Of late, matters of great urgency were transmitted via telelocutor. His own office had approved such innovation only three years earlier, well after the undersea cable had been laid between Highpassage and the Lateran, crossing beneath the Attik Main. Matters of great secrecy were handled quite differently, and always with utmost discretion.

Sending an airship across the sea the night of His Holiness' death was tantamount to lighting a flare.



“By air, sir,” Kurts confirmed. “Matroit dispatched the messenger.”

*Matroit.* The man was the very model of probity, and no more likely to panic than he was to fly to the moon. But the timing of the thing . . . It stank of politics. Quinx felt briefly ill. “Was the vessel a Thalassojustity airship?”

The monk shook his head. “A racing yacht. I understand it was put about to have been sent on a dare by some of the young wastrels of the city.”

Not an utterly unreasonable cover story, Quinx had to admit, for all that such defiance of the Thalassojustity was outrageous. *Outrageous* served as the stock in trade of a certain set in Highpassage. He set aside for later consideration the issue of how Lucan Matroit was connected to that set in the first place. For now, a dispatch this urgent would be a distraction to his grieving heart.

How welcome or unwelcome remained to be seen.

He did not bother to ask if Kurts had read it. The man would not have done so. In his entire life, Quinx had only ever trusted two men utterly. The first of those had passed on into the hands of the Increate last night. The other was here before him. Whatever Kurts’ many flaws, the monk was loyal to the bone. *Blood and vows, vows and blood*, as they used to say.

Quinx gathered the skirts of his cassock and rose from the prayer bench. He gave an approving nod to the deacon, now well into the third iteration of the funerary mass and looking distinctly tired, before withdrawing from the High Chapel in the wake of his man.

They closeted themselves in a tiny dining room from which Quinx had by virtue of his office ruthlessly evicted four hungry priests. Plates of plain eggs and blackbread toast still steamed. He considered the contents of the envelope presented by Kurts. The seal had been genuine enough, to the best of Quinx’ rather well sharpened ability to determine. For something that had come rushing over hundreds of miles of open water, the letter within was sufficiently sparse as to seem laughable. A single sheet of crème-colored Planetary Society paper, with that slick finish favored by the very wealthy, though it would take few inks. A rushed hand, script rather than copperplate, the pigments a curious green that was one of Matroit’s affectations. And only a very few words indeed.

But such dangerous ones.

It was dated the previous day though no time was given. He realized on reflection that this missive must have been written before Ion’s death could have been known, just by judging the miles the message had flown even at the speed of the fastest air-racing yacht.

Revered—

The Externalist heresy was proclaimed again today in the Plenary Hall. To my surprise, the Thalassocretes have taken custody of the young man in question, but I have secured his work for the nonce. There is a possibility of empirical evidence.

M.

Evidence.

*Proof.*

Had Ion known last night this letter was coming, known as he was dying? Or was it simply that now happened to be the world’s time for such trials? The cloying smell of cooling eggs provided no answer.

Still, Quinx felt a swift trip to Highpassage would be in order. With their profound challenge to the roots of Lateran doctrine, Externalists were a far more troublesome

heresy than the dissenters such as the Machinists or the Originalists. Putting paid to this renewed outbreak of Externalism before it had a chance to establish and multiply was an utmost priority. And that errand in turn would keep him safely away from the deliberations of the Assemblage of Primates, who would surely be meeting *in camera* the moment the Gatekeeper's body had been sufficiently blessed. Death was an unfortunate pause in events, but politics continued forever.

There was a young man to see, and a Thalassojustity to face down. *Again.*

Why people insisted on resisting the obvious and holy truths of the Increate was one of those mysteries of free will that a priest could spend his lifetime contemplating without any success. If all the saints of ancient days could not answer such a question, surely Bilious Quinx would be no wiser.

Questions he could not answer, but problems he could solve.

"Brother Kurts . . ."

"Sir?"

"Does the airship pilot perhaps await our pleasure?"

There was the briefest pause, then the slightest tone of satisfaction in the monk's reply. "I have already made certain of it, sir."

*The advantages of the reflecting telescope over the refracting telescope cannot be overstated, and should be obvious to any thinking man. While the great refractors of the past century have multiplied our understanding of the Increate's work amidst the heavens, the practical exigencies of glass-making, gravity, and the engineering arts limit the refracting mirrors to less than fifty inches of diameter. Advances in the philosophy of the reflecting telescope have produced designs by such luminaries as Kingdom Obasa's son and successor, Brunel, for mirrors of a hundred inches or greater! Even now, the Planetary Society raises a subscription for such a heavenly monster to be placed upon Mount Sysiphe north of Highpassage, that we might enumerate the craters of the moon and count the colors of the stars to better understand the glories of Creation. A true union of Science and Faith can only prosper from such noble endeavors.*

—Editorial in the *Highpassage Argus-Intelligencer*,  
November 2<sup>nd</sup>, H.3123, Th.1997, L.6011

"Lesser Bench" was a misnomer. Morgan knew that. *Everybody* knew that. The Greater Bench met only in solemn conclave on the beach to hear capital cases, and certain classes of piracy accusations. Everything else that transpired in the Thalassojustity took place under the purview of the Lesser Bench.

The question was which of those benches.

The two Marines dragged Morgan into the interior of the Thalassojustity Palace. The main nave soared to the roof, some eighty feet above, and was lined with enormous statues of sea captains and Thalassocretes through the ages. The joke ran that the bodies remained the same and the heads were switched from time to time. Whatever the truth, the sculpture represented one of the greatest troves of Classical art in the world, with continuous provenance stretching back well before the onset of consistent recordkeeping.

Glorious, strange, and too large for the world—that was the majesty of the Thalassojustity, encapsulated in the dialectic of art.

At the moment, Morgan was feeling inglorious, ordinary, and far too small. Even the marble flags here were oversized, designed to intimidate.

He was scooted a bit too fast past the massive altarpiece at the far end of the nave, through a bronze door wrought with an overly detailed relief of some long-forgotten naval battle, and into a far more ordinary hallway that could have been found in

any reasonably modern commercial building in Highpassage. Electricks flickered overhead, giving a reddish-yellow cast to the light. Entrances lining each side of the hallway were so mundane as to be aggressive in their plainness—dark brown, two-paneled doors, each relieved with frosted glass painted with the name of some bureau or official. Cocked-open transoms above each provided some relief from a warmth that must be stifling in high summer.

Only the carpet, a finely napped deep blue that Morgan could not put a name to, betrayed the true wealth of this place.

Well down the hall he was propelled into an intersecting corridor with doors set much farther apart. Larger rooms for larger purposes? The Courts of the Lesser Bench, he realized, as they passed a door where gold-flecked lettering proclaimed “EXCISE BENCH.”

The door he was pushed through was marked “LOYALTY BENCH.”

Morgan’s heart stuttered cold and hard. *The treason court*. Where offenses against the Thalassojustity itself, or against the common good, were tried.

The door slammed behind him. No Marines. Morgan whirled, taking in the small gallery, the judge’s podium, stands for witness and examiner, the interrogation chair, glass cabinets where evidence or exhibits might be stored.

And no one present. No judge, no advocates, no clerks of the court, no bailiffs, no witnesses, no one at all but himself. Defendant?

The walls rose high, two or three stories, though not as tall as the nave. These were paneled with inlays of half a dozen different colored woods to create a pleasing abstract pattern. Electricks chandeliers dangled overhead. Their fat iron arms signaled their gaslamp history.

Morgan ceased gaping and sat down in the gallery. He had no desire to approach the front of the courtroom. As nothing seemed to be taking place, he simply closed his eyes for a moment. His heartbeat calmed for the first time since stepping to the podium back at the Plenary Hall of the Planetary Society.

Without sight, other senses sharpened. He smelled the furniture polish and floor wax of the courtroom, along with the faint ozone scent of the electricks. All of it masked the underlying accumulation of human stress and fear. Perspiration had left its indelible mark in the air.

The sounds of the room were similar: a faint buzz from the lights, the creak and sigh of old wood, the footfalls of someone approaching.

Morgan’s eyes shot open and he stiffened.

The newcomer—no door had opened, had it?—was gloriously dark-skinned as any king of old, gray eyes almost silver in a cragged and noble face. His hair was worked back in prince-rows, each set with tiny turquoise and silver beads so that he seemed almost to be wearing a net upon his head. A silver hoop hung from his left ear, the conciscrux of the Thalassojustity tiny in his right. Barefoot, he wore a laborer’s canvas trousers and shirt, though dyed a deep maroon rather than the usual blue or grubby tan. Despite the attire, this one would not have fooled any thinking observer for more than a moment, not with his bearing.

After a moment, Morgan finally registered how *small* the man was. Barely shoulder high, four foot nine at the most. That was when he knew who he faced—Eraster Goins, presiding judge of the Lesser Benches. *The Thalasscretete*.

“Pardon my state of undress,” Goins said politely. “I was attending to some physical matters when I was informed of the requirement for my presence.”

“I . . . Sir . . .” Morgan made the hand-sign of his lodge.

A crinkling smile emerged that was entirely at odds with the power of this man’s word. Goins could summon fleets, lay waste to cities, claim the life of almost anyone, at his mere whim. “Of course I know that, Dr. Abutti. You do not need to demonstrate

your loyalty or training at this time."

*At this time.*

"Wh-what, then, sir?"

"Well . . ." Goins cracked his knuckles, took a moment to find great interest in the beds of his nails. Morgan did not think this was a man ordinarily at a loss for words. "So far as anyone in the city of Highpassage is concerned, you are in here being thrashed within an inch of your now-worthless life. This matter will be of specific interest to certain Lateran observers."

Morgan was moved to briefly study his own hands. He was under threat, certainly. No one talked to Goins or his ilk without placing themselves at great risk. A single false word could misplace an entire career, or a lifetime's work. *Or freedom.*

"This is about my speech at the Planetary Society, isn't it?"

"Your perspicacity shall soon be legendary." Goins' tone managed to be simultaneously ironically airy and edged with a whiff of fatality. "Perhaps you would care to explain to me what you thought you were about?"

"Am I on trial?" Morgan regretted the words the instant he'd blurted them out.

"No, but you certainly could be." Goins' eyes narrowed, his smile now gone to some faraway place. "You would enjoy the process far less than you're enjoying this discussion, I shall be pleased to assure you."

"No, I didn't mean . . ." Morgan stopped stumbling through reflexive excuses and instead summoned both his courage and his words. Proof was proof, by the stars. He couldn't explain *everything*, but he could explain a great deal more than was comfortable. "I have new evidence concerning the Eight Gardens, and the origins of man."

"I do not believe that is considered an open question. Are you a Lateran theologian, to revisit Dispersionism? That is a matter for our contemplative competitor on the southern verge of the Attik Main."

Morgan made the sign of the Increate across his chest. "I do not presume to challenge faith, I just—"

"No?" Goins' voice rose. "What precisely did you intend to present to the Planetary Society, then?"

He was sweating now, his gut knotted. This had always been the crux of the matter. The world was so *true*, so *logical*. Until it wasn't. His newly summoned courage deserted Morgan, apparently to be followed by a fading sense of self-preservation. "A mistake, sir. I intended to present a mistake."

"Hmmm." Goins took Morgan's attaché case from his unresisting hands, tugged open the flap. "A mistake. That's better. You still haven't answered my question, however." The presiding judge leaned close. "What was the mistake?"

Morgan opened his mouth, to have his lips stopped by the single tap of his inquisitor's finger.

"Heed me carefully, Dr. Morgan Abutti. We have no copyist present. No autonomic locographitor hums nearby. No clerks of the court labor at my elbow to give later inconvenient testimony. I do not ask you this from my seat of responsibility at the head of the Pirate's Steps. I do not wear my robe and chain of office. No oaths have been sworn beyond those we both live under every day of our lives." Goins leaned close. "At this moment, I am merely a man, asking a simple question of another mere man. Both of us stand before the Increate now as always clad only in our honor. After you have answered, we may make other decisions. Other testimonies may be required, each suitable to their intended audiences. For now, I only listen. To the truth entire as you understand it.

"So tell me. What was the mistake?"

"I believed something I saw of significance in the heavens," Morgan said simply. "Though what I found runs against the word and the will of the Increate, and every-

thing that has been taught to us in the six thousand years since They first placed man in the Eight Gardens and awoke us to Their world.”

“Mmm.” Goins stepped away from Morgan, paced briefly back and forth before turning to face him again. “I trust we are not so lucky that this mistake in the heavens was presented to you by an eight-winged angel with glowing eyes? Or perhaps the voice of the Increate Themselves whispering in your sleeping ear? I am going to assume that your . . . mistake . . . arrived borne on the back of evidence derived from the latest and most pleasing artefacts of Dame Progress, objective and empirical in the hand.”

Morgan stared at Goins, appalled. “Had an angel told me what I have learned, you could call me both blest and crazed. Almost all would smile behind their hands and carry on.”

“Precisely.”

“’Twas no angel, sir. No miracle at all, except that of optics, patience, and an emulsion of silver salts painted onto a glass plate to be exposed to the night sky before moonrise could flood the world with pallid light.”

“Mmm.” This time Goins did not pace, but stared instead at Morgan. “And what do you think this photographic *truth* signifies? Speaking in your professional capacity, of course.”

Morgan’s heart sank further. He was close to tears, torn. “I c-cannot deny the Increate.”

“Why not? You were prepared to do so in front of seven hundred people in the Plenary Hall not two hours past.”

“Forgive me. I . . . I did not understand what it was I was about.” He wanted to groan, cry, shriek. It was as if he were being torn apart. “Is not truth part of Their creation?”

Goins leaned close. “What you *did* was take some photographs of the night sky, study them, and draw conclusions. You did this being the good scientist that you are, trained at the University of Highpassage and the New Garaden Institute. One of our New Men, concerned with the evidence of the world before them rather than the testimony of tradition. I don’t want to know what the innocent boy who prayed to the Increate every night believes. I want to know what the educated man peering into the telescope thinks.”

The words poured out of Morgan Abutti with the strength of confession. “There is something artificial at the Earth’s trailing solar libration point. A small body, similar to one of the asteroids. I believe it to be a vessel for traveling the aether. I speculate it to be the true home and origin of mankind. Whatever I believe does not matter, for all will be revealed in due time. This artificial world has begun to move, and will soon be visiting us here in our own skies.”

Goins’ response shocked Morgan. “It has begun to *move*?” he asked in a voice of awed surprise.

Morgan’s heart froze. The presiding judge’s words implied that he’d already known of this. He fell back on the most basic refuge of his profession. “The stars do not lie, sir. We may misunderstand their evidence, but the stars do not lie.”

Goins sat heavily, his face working as if he too sought to avoid tears. Or terror. “You have the right of that, my son. But we may yet be forced to lie on their behalf.”

The racing aeroyacht *Blind Justess* was so new that Quinx could smell the sealants used to finish the teakwood trim of the forward observation cabin. Her appointments were an odd combination of luxurious and sparse. Like the airship’s rakish exterior form, the interior of fine craftwork minimally applied stood in strong contrast with the lumbering, gilded monsters of the Lateran’s small aerial fleet. Those wallowing aerial palaces served as ecclesiastical transports and courts-of-the-

air for peregrinations to distant sees where the dignified estate of the Gatekeeper might not be so well honored.

Quinx had claimed the forward observation chair by sheer presence. The captain-owner of *Blind Justess*, one young gallant by the name of Irion Valdoux, was a scion of the Massalian aristocracy, and very much a traditionalist when it came to handling his own weapons and equipage.

*And doubtless his women, too*, Quinx thought with a distinct lack of charity.

Valdoux was as dark-skinned as any comely lass might hope for in a suitor, with a smile unbecoming a man of serious parts. He had bowed Quinx into the button-tucked seat, upholstery so well-stuffed that a horse could likely have taken its ease there. A glass-walled pit opened between Quinx' feet. At the time of boarding this curious portal revealed a view of dawn over the Attik Main, the ocean opaque with night's last shadows as they plucked at the tumbled ruins along the shoreline beneath the Lateran's airfield masts. Though his head for heights was excellent—Quinx had lived in a tower for some decades now—he found the open space beneath him a trifle unnerving.

"When we're racing for pips under Manju rules," Valdoux explained, "I keep a spotter here with the grips for the electric harpoons." He cleared his throat. "Open class, no restrictions. 'Justity hates it, they does."

"I do not suppose the Lateran entirely approves either," Quinx replied.

Valdoux, who knew perfectly well that the word of the Consistory Office was quite literally ecclesiastical law, and that the word of Quinx was quite literally the word of the Consistory Office, fell silent.

"Long explanations wear on the soul," Quinx supplied a few moments later. "I shall oversee our progress from here." He favored Valdoux with the sort of smile that reminded some men of small bones breaking. "It would please me to examine your harpoon grips, however."

"N-not running under Manju rules here over the Attik Main, sir," Valdoux managed. "But I'll send the boy for'ard with 'em, sir. Will that be all?"

"No." Quinx withdrew his smile. "I expect you to break airspeed records bringing me to Highpassage. The Lateran will be most . . . grateful. As will my office. Brother Kurts shall assist you as necessary."

Valdoux wisely withdrew to the bridge, which was a deck below the observation cabin.

Quinx had managed a decent view of *Blind Justess* on the way up the airship's mooring tower. Her envelope was of very unusual design, more of a flattened vee shape than the usual billowing sausage of an airship. Though he was no engineer, he could appreciate the effort at livestreaming in a racing vessel. Some of the fastest water yachts shared that look. Likewise the high-speed locomotive that ran the express routes between the Lateran and Pharopolis far to the east, the largest city on the south shore of the Attik Main.

The gondola below the envelope was just as unusual, resembling nothing so much as a sleek wooden knife. She boasted a sharp keel that split the air, a fine array of viewing ports in smoked glass, and very few of the usual utilitarian protrusions so common on airships. Just before boarding, he'd noted a profusion of small hatches and ports along the outside of the gondola's hull—clearly this vessel kept many of her secrets from prying eyes.

Within was that odd combination of wealth and efficiency. The carpets felt thick and cool, of the finest wool and not yet showing any signs of wear. Grab rails and spittoons were brass polished to a painful brightness. Most furniture was gimbaled and latched away against violent maneuvers, or possibly just to save space. Her most salient characteristic was *narrowness*.

He wondered what to make of that.

Narrow or not, the great diesels encapsulated into nacelles along the lower curve of the gas bag coughed swiftly to life before growling deep in their throats. *Blind Justess* cast off from the tower smoothly enough, but within minutes she was moving faster than Quinx ever had done while airborne, nearly to railroad speeds.

Kurts had reported a promised velocity of over fifty miles per hour through the air. Quinx had considered his man to be mistaken or misinformed, but as the Attik Main slipped by beneath his feet, his mind was changing.

How much progress had taken place in the factories and laboratories of High Passage, Massalia and the other great cities of the world while he'd spent his life laboring among books and sweating priests and accusations of error? A ship like this, any airship in truth, had been inconceivable when he and Ion were boys. That he could now fly with the speed of storms was . . .

A miracle?

Perhaps the Increate had always intended this for Their creation. Another generation would have to answer that question, Quinx knew. His was growing old and become too tired to look much further ahead.

*Externalism.*

His mind had avoided the point of this journey, dwelling on the mysteries of a machine in which Quinx in truth had no interest.

Heresies were for the most part quite boring, even mundane. And the Lateran of these later days was nothing like the Lateran of centuries past. His own predecessors in office had routed out sin and error with a vigor at which Quinx could only marvel. And sometimes shudder at.

Not that he hadn't broken more than a few men, some of them quite literally. But peccation and sins of the flesh seemed to be the flaws in his generation. Not the bonfires of the heart that had sent armies marching across entire continents in ages past, not to mention setting the Lateran time and again in opposition to the Thalassojustity.

No one *cared* so much any more. The role of the Increate in man's tenure on Earth was undeniable—even the poor, deluded atheists were little more than dissenters against a preponderance of evidence from scriptural to archaeological. The rise of science had only reinforced what the Lateran had always taught.

Except for the damned Externalists.

Every time that heresy had arisen, it had been viciously suppressed. Somewhat to Quinx' continued surprise, even the Thalassojustity had cooperated in the panicked months over the winter of L.5964 and L.5965, when he was new in his place as head of the Consistory Office and Brother Lupan had grown regrettably public in his insane claims of having found the Increate's Chariot on an island in the Sea of Sind.

There were a dozen theological problems with Brother Lupan's theory, but the most practical problem was that he'd had such a vivid, imaginative presentation of his claims that the human race, already birthed elsewhere, had descended from the skies in the hand of the Increate. People *listened*, at least at first.

Quinx still believed that the Thalassojustity had intervened in what was logically a Lateran internal dispute simply to protect their Insular Mandate. Trade flowed over the world's oceans under their protection. In return, unless otherwise ceded by treaty, islands belonged to the Thalassojustity. All of them, from the smallest harbor rock to the great, jungled insulae scattered across the eastern verges of the Sea of Sind.

Brother Lupan had been trespassing not only on theology, but also on the private property of the greatest military and economic power on Earth.

Quinx examined the electric grips the boy had brought forward. Huge things, built into oversized rubber gloves lined with some felted mesh. He wondered where

the harpoons were, how one aimed. Was there a reticule to be used here?

It was a silly, juvenile fantasy, and beneath him as a servant of the Increate. No Lateran vessel had sailed armed since the Galiciate Treaty of L.5782, over two centuries ago. In that document the Thalassojustity had guaranteed the safety of all Lateran traffic, as well as the persons of the Increate's servants here on Earth. *Blind Justess*, not being a Lateran vessel, and practically papered over with the money required to build her, doubtless carried a somewhat more robust defensive proposition to accompany her rakish lines and inhuman speed.

Quinx let his thoughts go and stared into the wave-tossed sea swiftly passing far below his feet. Externalism was the worst sort of heresy, because it denied the very basis of the relationship between man and the Increate. That Lucan Matroit had seen it openly declared was frightening. From where did such evil arise, and how so swiftly?

Ever was that the nature of his office. To seek out evil and lay it to rest.

Still, he wondered what Ion had known. Now was not the time for a crisis, not with a new Gatekeeper to be elected and elevated and begin setting his own mark upon the Church of their fathers.

*It is the considered opinion of this subcommittee that the study of astronomy and the related arts be placed under much closer supervision than has heretofore been believed advisable. The impressionable minds and irresponsible imaginations of some of our younger researchers may be influenced toward paths of thought not consonant with this institution's devotion to the spirit of scientific inquiry. A Review Committee is proposed as an adjunct to the Board of Governors, consisting of senior faculty, a representative of the Planetary Society, and by invitation if they so desire to accept, representatives from both the Thalassojustity and the Lateran. We may thus guide the research and observations of our more impetuous young faculty and students along lines fit for men of good social standing, character, and faith.*

—Undated memorandum, University of Highpassage faculty senate

"Show me," Goins said quietly.

"Show you what?" A surge of recklessness overtook Morgan. "I thought you were forcing me to silence."

The judge grimaced. "Show me what you found. Because if you can find it, anyone can find it."

Morgan paused, attempting to sort out if he'd just been insulted. "I hardly think that just anyone could—"

Goins interrupted. "I cast no aspersions, merely indicate that you are not unique. Rather, a man of your time. Or possibly your technology."

"May I please have my case back then, sir?"

Morgan took the leather bundle from Goins, opened the clips, and slipped out the ribboned folder he'd meant to present for review at the end of his failed lecture. Such a mistake it had been to surprise the Planetary Society. His presentation had been posted as an overview of new observational techniques with attention to some exciting discoveries. Morgan had slyly left all the critical information out of both the proposal and the abstract.

He'd wanted his moment.

Well, now he had his moment.

"You are familiar with the idea of astronomical photography? That we can expose a plate coated with silver salts through a telescope to study the night skies?"

Goins favored Morgan with a flat stare. "Yes."

"Good." Morgan tugged the ribbon's knot loose. "Some astronomers study the planets and their satellites this way. Arguing over the true count of moons about Deiwos



Pater is very nearly a club sport among my colleagues.”

“Yes.”

Glancing at Goins again, Morgan saw something very flat and dangerous in the man’s eyes. Here was someone who could start a war on the far side of the world with a mere word. Power was his beyond reckoning. “I am not stalling, sir. Rather, leading you to the point.”

“Yes.”

*No more stalling*, he thought. “I have been studying the Earth’s libration points, both with respect to the moon and the sun. You are, ah, familiar with the concept?”

“First described by LaFerme in 1873.”

Thalassocratic reckoning, of course. “I did not realize you were an astronomer,” Morgan said, surprised.

“A presiding judge must be many things, Dr. Abutti. Not the least of which is a step ahead of the ambitious and rebellious men around him.”

*Which of those categories did Goins consider him to fall into?* “Very well.” Morgan held out a series of photographic prints. “The first two are the trailing and leading libration points in the Earth-Moon system, traditionally accounted the fourth and fifth positions. Each is sixty degrees in advance or in retard of the Moon. Note the photographs show only clouds of dust.”

Goins frowned as he studied the images. “I shall have to trust your word on this. A man can only be so far ahead. With what instrument were these photographs taken?”

“The eighty-eight inch refractor at Mount Sysiphe,” Abutti said, pride leaking into his voice.

“Of which you were one of the principal architects, is that not the case?”

A combination of natural modesty and self-preservation governed Morgan’s reply even in the face of a flush of pride. The Mount Sysiphe project had been much of his doctoral work. He’d even put time in on the manufacturing of the mirrors themselves, as well as supervising the great instrument’s initial installation at the site, beneath the enormous iron dome delivered by the shipwrights. “I would hardly say ‘principal,’ sir. Far more learned and experienced men than I sat as members of the project’s Board of Governors.”

A wry smile flitted across the judge’s face. “I am aware of the distinction, Dr. Abutti. Carry on, please.”

“Your question was important to understanding my . . . evidence. No one has ever seen the heavens so well as those of us with access to Mount Sysiphe.”

“Which has been restricted these past three years.” Goins’ tone made it clear he was in full support of such scientific censorship.

“Yes. Even *my* access was challenged, as an associate fellow of the New Garaden Institute rather than a University faculty member.” The very mention of the incident recalled all too vividly his stung pride.

“Still, you no doubt persevered in the face of great pressure.”

Once more, Morgan found himself wondering if he were being mocked. “As you say, sir. In the end, the Board of Governors found it difficult to deny one of the principal architects access to his own work.”

“Ever has common decency paved the way to uncommon folly. You are forestalling your revelation, Doctor Abutti.”

“I show the Earth-Moon libration points in order to set the expectation. Of interest to orbital mechanicians, but consisting only of a few clouds of dust, and perhaps small rocks. Now, here are the Earth-Sun libration points the fourth and fifth.” He handed another set of photographic prints to Goins, then fell silent.

The presiding judge studied the new images, then compared them to the first set. He was silent a while, but Morgan did not mistake this for confusion or hesitation.

Eventually, Goins looked up from the sheaf of prints in his hand.

"The fourth libration point appears to me to be little more than dust."

Morgan nodded.

"A body is present at the fifth libration point." Goins' tone had gone dangerously flat again.

*The man truly had known all along.* "Yes."

"What can you tell me about that body?"

"Two things," Morgan said slowly. "First, that spectrographic analysis of its reflected light tells us that the body is a composite of metals and carbon compounds. A composition that is literally unique among observed bodies in the solar system."

"And second . . . ?"

"Sometime in the past three weeks, the body has begun to move in contravention to its known orbit. Without the influence of any observable outside force."

Goins simply stared.

Eventually Morgan filled the silence. "Under its own power, sir. Toward Earth, as best as I can determine."

"What does that mean to you? As a scientist?"

"That . . . that there is an artificial object at the fifth libration point. It has been there for an unknown amount of time. It is now coming to Earth."

"Is that all?"

"I . . . I have deduced that this artificial object is an aetheric vessel, a ship of space, as it were. Achman's Razor compels me to believe that six thousand years ago it brought us to this Earth. Otherwise I must conclude the Increate placed *two* intelligent species here in our world, ourselves and some other race to build this aetheric vessel. I find that even less likely than the deduction I reached from the evidence before me."

In the silence that followed, Morgan's own heartbeat thundered.

Finally: "And you were going to announce this to the Planetary Society?"

"Yes, sir. I told them we were not of this Earth, originally." He took a deep breath, and added in a rush, "All of the scientific evidence that points to the Increate just as logically points to my hypothesis. It is well established across many disciplines of science that humanity simply *arrived* six thousand years ago. The question is how. Created whole from the dust of the world by the hand of the Increate, or aboard this aetheric vessel?"

Goins studied him carefully. "You expected to leave the building alive?"

Morgan stopped a moment. "We are all scientists there."

"Of course." Goins shook his head. "You are what, a fifth-degree Thalassocrete?"

Taken aback by the swift change of subject, Morgan shook his head. "Fourth-degree, sir. Alternate Thursday meetings of the Panattikan Lodge here in Highpassage."

Goins made a flicking motion with his left forefinger and thumb. "Congratulations, you're now a thirty-second degree Thalassocrete. By the power invested in me as Presiding Judge I so declare. Someone will teach you the secret handshake later."

Morgan was stunned. "Sir?"

"There are some things you need to know, right now. Truths that carry the death penalty for those not of rank." Goins leaned close. "You are now of rank. Second-youngest ever to reach this height, I might add."

Still grasping at the change in the conversation, Morgan stammered the first question that came into his head. "Who . . . who was the youngest?"

"That is left as an exercise for the astute observer." Goins' swift, savage grin left no doubt in Morgan's mind as to the answer.

*Though sea piracy has long been largely the stuff of legend, air piracy is a novel menace for which our society has not yet developed an appropriate response. The*

*terrestrial powers are rightly jealous of their prerogatives with respect to the Thalassojustity, so the solutions that have long kept the sea lanes clear and active do not translate well to the requirements of this new century, where an enterprising rogue with some funds and a few good mechanics and sharpshooters may set up an illicit aerie in rough country, then cross national borders and Thalassojustity waters to raid shipping and towns with impunity. The White Fleet may not pursue our villain overland away from the coastlines, while few nations yet have the resources to mount their own aerial response, or the willingness to allow their neighbors to pursue miscreants under arms across their own skies.*

—Editorial in the *Highpassage Argus-Intelligencer*,  
January 18<sup>th</sup>, H.3124, Th.1998, L.6012

*Blind Justess* approached Highpassage from west of south. They'd swung their course that way, Valdoux had explained to Quinx and Brother Kurts, to make best use of the shore breeze in their approach to the masts at the airfield.

All three of them were on the bridge now, which was crowded as a result. Admittedly, Brother Kurts was a crowd all to himself, with his looming height, muscled breadth, and glowering pale visage. Still, the man's loyal service to the Lateran and especially to the Consistory Office made him a credit to his race.

Quinx studied the duty stations of the bridge. As a racing yacht, *Blind Justess* was designed to be operated with a minimal crew—as he understood it, the captain-pilot, an engineer up in the gas bag tending to the temperamental high-performance diesels on their wide-slung cantilevers, and a ship's boy to serve as runner and temporary relief.

Yet here were a navigator's station, a wireless telegrapher's station, two weapons stations, and the pilot's station. Compact, almost ridiculously so, but elegant in their gleaming brass instruments, the lacquered loudspeaker grills, bright bells and tiny colored electrics signifying the state of more parts and processes than he'd imagined one airship to have. Except for the pilot, all the stations had small leather saddles for their now-absent operators, presumably to economize on space. The pilot had a real chair, meant for long, comfortable occupation, though it was currently clipped back as Valdoux stood at the helm. His head nearly brushed the cabin roof as he made a great study of Highpassage from their position about two miles offshore.

"See," the captain said, pointing toward a cluster of multistory buildings connected by an aerial tramway, "since the Pharic Mutual Assurance put up that blasted office tower near the airfield, the approach has been tricky. It breaks the wind off the hills, and we sometimes get a rotten shear. Old Piney's widows are suing them over the crash of *Unfettered* last year."

Quinx had no idea who Old Piney was, but he vaguely recollected reading of an airship crash in Highpassage. There had been a scandal—that he did remember. He'd spent little time in this city the past few years, which might have been a mistake. If nothing else, it had grown taller.

Something still bothered him. *Why did a racing yacht have two weapons stations, in addition to the gunner in the forward observation cabin?*

The instrument and control labels were unmistakable. Forward battery. Aft battery. Long chasers. Port bomb rack. Starboard bomb rack.

There must be observers as well, to guide these releases.

"Highpassage is your home port?" he asked casually. Where had Lucan Matroit found this pilot? And with what had Valdoux been bribed? The man was clearly not one of the Planetary Society's operatives. His connection to the Lateran was nonexistent.

Quinx would have known otherwise.

"No, the Racing Society has got a private field a few miles up the coast. Well away

from buildings and such."

He sat down in one of the weapons saddles and began to regret spending most of the trip in the observation cabin. There was more to be learned here. Quinx' blunt, manicured fingers caressed the port bomb rack release.

"Those don't do nothing now," Valdoux said without turning his attention from their approach.

"Then why are they here?" asked Quinx.

"Because when we run with a full load and all her crew, they do just what you think."

Quinx heard a hardness in the young bravo's voice. "Because sometimes you're racing for pips under Manju rules," he said softly. *Whatever that argot was intended to actually signify.*

"Exactly."

An air pirate didn't need a hidden mountain base, Quinx reflected. That made good copy in those scientific romances that sold so well at street corner kiosks, but the logistics of fuel and spare parts were improbable. All a pirate really had to do was keep an honest face. With that he could hide his airship in plain sight. Who knew, later?

Then they were pitching and turning to approach the mast. "Have you down in ten, sir," Valdoux called out.

"I want you to stay aboard," Quinx quietly told Kurts as the ship's boy laid out a narrow board to connect *Blind Justess* to the mooring mast. "At the least, I shall require a swift return to the Lateran, possibly quite soon, depending on what Matroit is able to tell me. I can imagine several other outcomes as well, for which a fast ship might be of service."

"Sir," Kurts said, quiet acknowledgement.

"And one more thing. Tell Valdoux that he can ready his ship under Manju rules. I may be playing for pips myself shortly."

"What precisely is a pip, sir?" Kurts asked.

"I'm sure I don't know," Quinx replied. "But it's something Valdoux and his set are willing to kill for. If Lucan hasn't already suppressed this outbreak of Externalism, we may be pressed for hard solutions ourselves."

"Yes, sir," Kurts stepped back into the cabin as Quinx left the ship for the platform.

He didn't bother to count the steps in the mooring mast. Far too many, to be sure. Quinx lived in a tower for several reasons—privacy had been the original, of course—but he'd long since recognized the value of having to ascend and descend one hundred and twelve steps every time he wished to do more than stare out the window or piss in a chamber pot. He didn't *think* he was old, but his body had other ideas after a sleepless night, a long day aboard a speeding airship, and now this.

*Ion is dead, which is as old as one ever gets.*

At least he was still walking. By the time he reached the soil, Quinx' heart was pounding like a fist inside his chest. His knees had become rubber. He rather thought he might be joining Ion soon.

Instead he found awaiting him a rat-faced young man with an unfortunately pale cast of skin, wearing an ill-fitting maroon suit. "Dr. Matroit sent me, your worship," the fellow said, bobbing about like a cork slipped down into a wine bottle. The motions made Quinx vaguely ill, which in turn reminded him that he'd not eaten all day.

He did not even have the energy to put this fool in his place. "Please take me to him."

The quadron led Quinx to a motorcar. The priest groaned inwardly. Those beastly things were never comfortable, and tended to break down as often as they ran. This

one was an open-topped steamer, already stoked up from the sound of the boiler. It was pretty enough, he had to admit, with the deep blue lacquer on fenders, hood, and body, and a pleasing amount of brightwork for trim.

"Here, sir, in the back. I gave you some cushions. No luggage being sent down?"

"Just myself." Quinx carried a small satchel, but this trip had been so sudden that he'd brought no trunks or wardrobes. "Please, take me to Matroit."

A few minutes later, they rumbled off to the accompaniment of an ear-piercing shriek of a release valve. Quinx looked up and back at *Blind Justess* now shadowed in the encroaching dusk. She was just a shape in the last light of day, a hawk hovering over the city searching for her next prey.

Lucan Matroit had the good sense to arrange a meal for Quinx at the Plenary Hall. The foolish steamer driver had managed not to kill them or anyone else on the way, and kept the thing running smoothly enough to avoid destroying Quinx' appetite, so he tucked into the cold pickle and pudding as soon as possible after the basic pleasantries were dispensed with.

The matter at hand was so critical that they met alone, without the nigh ubiquitous secretaries, clerks, or servants. Quinx briefly regretted leaving Kurts aboard *Blind Justess*, but he'd wanted badly to keep Valdoux under observation. He also truly had foreseen several potentially critical uses for the airship and her equipage.

Lacking servants, the meal was sparse and strange, something that novices in the seminary might have prepared for themselves. Quinx had grown up on fresh cabbage, preserved peppers, and the occasional bit of goat meat, so even this was welcome. The cold pickle was a fairly ambitious tray of vegetables along with a few regrettable cheeses. The pudding was one of those curious northern dishes that had become popular in Highpassage the past few years, all chewy breadding around plums and bits of organ meat.

Still, he ate, and listened to Lucan's sadly incomplete story.

"... so I had Dr. Abutti shown out immediately," the Secretary General was saying. "In the moment, I was somewhat concerned for his safety, but far more concerned with settling the audience."

"Would they have done him a mischief?" Quinx asked around a mouthful of pungent eggplant.

"In the Plenary Hall?" Matroit shrugged. "Unlikely. But anything is possible. There have been three murders in this building since its dedication, and almost a dozen suicides. The Planetary Society itself is not ordinarily a risk to life and limb. Passions here tend to be more, ah, individualized."

"Three murders?"

"Surely you recall the death of Drs. Messier and Ashbless? They fought a duel on the rooftop over a dispute concerning the orbits of the moons of Mars. We had only the twenty-eight inch reflector back then, and observations were inconclusive."

"I take it both men lost."

"Or won, as it may be. Choice of weapons went to Dr. Ashbless, who unaccountably decided on carboys of high molar sulfuric acid fed into spray pumps."

"Never mind," Quinx said. "I believe I'd prefer to finish my dinner. Please continue your tale."

"Well, I quickly realized I should have detained Dr. Abutti rather than sending him out into the city. I sent two of our porters over to the New Garaden Institute, where they determined that Dr. Abutti had been taken away by Thalassojushty Marines."

*Oh Increate, grant me strength now.* "That would not be the outcome I might have prayed for."

"Nor I, sir."

If the Thalassojustity held Abutti, anything was possible. Their concerns were largely orthogonal to those of the Lateran—the two institutions had co-existed in varying states of competition for the better part of two thousand years, after all—but this was not the Externalist crisis of L.5964, when the Thalassojustity's interests had been directly compromised.

Presiding Judge Eraster Goins was in charge these days. The Consistitory Office had little information on him, none of it sufficiently damning to serve as any leverage. And under his leadership, the Thalassojustity had showed some remarkable innovations.

Quinx' heart grew leaden at the thought of what innovations Goins could derive from Abutti's madness. "I am a Thalassocrete of the highest degree," he said, something very unusual for a Lateran priest, and in his case rarely spoken aloud. "I believe I shall have to pay my respects at the Thalassojustity Palace quite shortly."

His body cried for sleep, but his soul cried panic. Despite what Ion had told him, Quinx was very much afraid of what might be proven.

And by whom.

The quadroon managed to navigate the steam car from the Plenary Hall to the outer entrance of the Thalassojustity Temple, once more without actually inflicting material harm on Quinx or anyone else. The hour was nearly nine o'clock when they chuffed to a shuddering halt outside the tall, studded gates.

Prior centuries had brought more than one angry mob here. Not to mention a few armies. Though most of the old walls were long gone, replaced with timber lots and gardens of roses and blackberries, the fortified gatehouse itself still blocked the only public road connecting Highpassage to the Thalassojustity's territory. This was an international border, and by and large, casual tourists were neither welcomed nor wanted.

The Revered Bilious Quinx was neither casual, nor a tourist. And he was exhausted.

Staggering from the car over the protestations of the driver, he yanked on the bell pull beside the main gate. A pale, idiot face peered from a darkened window in the gatehouse proper.

"Public hours is closed!" the man shouted through the glass.

Quinx leaned close, gathered his fist inside his vestments, and punched out the glass. Cursing rose from within, as the priest leaned close and spoke in the low, calm voice that he'd used for delivering judgments these past forty years. "I am a thirty-second degree Thalassocrete on urgent business to the Presiding Judge. I do not have time for visiting hours, and I will have you swabbing decks in frozen Hyperborea if you do not open the gates now."

Scrambling noises emitted from within, followed by the distinctive whir of a telelocutor. A few hushed words, then more scrambling, then the gates creaked open.

Resuming his seat in the back of the steamer, Quinx told the quadroon, "Drive on, boy."

"Yes, *sir!*" The man's voice quavered somewhere between horror and awe.

Their tires crunched up the crushed coral drive that led to the Thalassojustity Temple. The New Buildings lurked beyond, thousand-year-old fortifications that served as an office complex. Two more recent, taller structures rose past them. Those contemporary buildings were simply referred to as "the towers."

*Know your friends; know your enemies better.* The Thalassojustity had been both to the Lateran over the centuries.

Otherwise the grounds were as gardenized as any cemetery of the wealthy. Cypress trees spread low in the moonlight, hares and deer cropped, barely attending to the wheezing of the steamer as it passed. The sea lay to Quinx' left, its murmuring un-

heard over the racket of the steam car as the waters lapped at the bottom of a sharp decline down which a man might easily lose his footing. The crescent of Black's Beach, at the foot of the stairs from the Temple, gleamed pale ahead of him.

No one was around. Not a Marine, not a night watchman. The lights of the Temple portico were doused, and only a few stray glimmers showed from shuttered windows in the New Buildings or the towers.

Which was odd. Lodge meetings tended to run into the evenings. There were always late-working bureaucrats scurrying about, along with the servants who tended them. Quinx had visited the Thalassojustice Temple more than a few times over the decades, on a variety of errands from the deeply secretive to the bloodily public. He'd never seen it look so, well, abandoned.

The quadroom slowed his steamer to a halt where the drive met the Temple steps. Quinx climbed out of the car again, regretting his long walk down the airship mooring mast. He was desperately tired, he realized.

Where was everyone?

One step at a time. Up. And up. And up.

The great doors at the top, bronze castings forty feet high chased with elaborate friezework, stood open as they always did. Lore held that the doors would only be closed in times of utmost crisis. Quinx had always figured it for a problem with the hinges. A slight man in a crisp, dark suit sat just within the threshold on an office chair that very much did not belong in the nave. "May I help you?"

"I'm looking for Goins," Quinx said, too much of his irritation creeping into his voice.

"The Presiding Judge is not available. Who is asking?"

"Me." Quinx glared at him. "Get a lot of men in red and white robes calling late at night?"

"You are clad in the sartorial estate of a prince of the Lateran, sir, but I have not had the prior pleasure of your acquaintance, so for all of my knowledge you might be a lad about on a lark."

"With *this* hair?" Quinx had to laugh, his foul mood broken for a moment. "It's been fifty years since I could pass for a lad. And believe me, Eraster will talk to me once he knows I'm here. I am the Revered Bilious Quinx, and I am pursuing some very dangerous questions."

"Revered Quinx." The door warden gave the name some thought. "Your fearsome reputation precedes you, sir. If memory serves, you are also an initiate of our own Lodges, and as such should not be required to seek admittance at the public portals."

"I did not arrive by the hidden paths, and time may be of the essence." He moved his hands in the recognition signs of a thirty-second degree Thalassocrete. "And yes, I am the highest level initiate who also serves in the Church's senior hierarchy."

"Who is known to serve," the door warden corrected mildly, words that gave Quinx serious pause. "You were answering the Presiding Judge's call, then? I am afraid you are too late by hours. All of the available senior initiates sailed on the afternoon's tide, aboard Th.S. *Clear Mountain*."

"With Dr. Morgan Abutti aboard?"

"Of course." The man seemed surprised. "Who else?"

Quinx leaned close. "And where were they bound?"

"Thera, I believe. But rumors are often put out to obscure the truth of such missions as this."

Quinx' heart sank. The entire leadership of the Thalassojustice had just abandoned their headquarters. *Why?* Such a thing had never happened, even during the worst wars of the last century.

Whatever Abutti had found must have proven extremely convincing. Ion's prophe-

sied proof was happening, almost before his very eyes. *Externalism* . . .

Even his thoughts failed. "I must to Thera, and swiftly," he said.

"*Clear Mountain* is very nearly the fastest of ships."

"Oh, I can travel faster."

Stumbling down the steps to the quadroon's steamer once more, Quinx wondered how difficult it would be to convince Valdoux to mount his weapons on *Blind Justess*.

*The traditional association between vulcanism and the Eight Gardens is a folk myth not borne out within the received text of the Librum Vita. Neither do any of the Lateran's formal teachings support it. Yet like most folk myths, it likely arises from some transmuted memory of history. Each Garden is seen to be paired with a smoking mountain—Cycladia has its Thera, for example, Wy'East has the volcano of the same name. The Thalassojustity has been notoriously reluctant to permit full surveys of the relevant sites under their control, so most of what can be said about this association arises from ethnography and the study of more primitive folkways than the modern world can boast. Still, it does not require much speculation to see how the Increate's children, early in their tenure upon this Earth, might have associated Their power with the world's own fiery exhalations.*

"Contemporary Survey of Myths and Legends Concerning the Eight Gardens"; B. Hyssop, F. Jamailla, A. Serona; *Ouragan Journal of Ethnographic Studies*, Vol. XCVII, Issue 7

Morgan sat in *Clear Mountain's* forward lounge, a gin fizz in hand, and marveled at the events of the past day. Goins had wasted no time in calling his entire senior hierarchy to witness this . . . unfolding? Apparently the Thalassojustity had been waiting for his revelation for a very, very long time. Ancient secrets indeed, to bring all these old, powerful men so swiftly to arms. Even this vessel was something between a warship and a royal yacht, as the wide, forward facing windows with their armored shutters testified.

The Attik Main by moonlight was dark as an old grave and restless as risen lust. He watched the sea move as if lifted by a thousand submerged hands, and wondered whether land or clouds occluded the horizon. Within, all was as lush as man might ask, better appointed than a fine gentlemen's club, but still with that certain rough readiness of any ocean-going vessel.

The Thalassojustity treated its leaders very well indeed. Even the upper halls of the Planetary Society were not so nice as this, and at the University of Highpassage one would have to ascend to the Chancellor's estate to find similar quiet luxuries.

He could grow accustomed to the privileges of a thirty-second degree Thalasoconcrete, if only he better understood the associated duties.

After their initial conversation, Goins had pressed Morgan to provide his evidence and theories to several more audiences. Almost all of the men with whom he spoke were as engaged as the judge had been. No one was shocked, or even surprised.

He felt like a prophet speaking in tongues only others could understand.

Still, it was not his place to ask. Not when serious-faced men with sword-sharp eyes kept questioning him about everything from the construction of refracting telescopes to the proper maintenance of spectrographic analyzers. Oddly, none of them questioned his basic observations, or his conclusions.

It was increasingly clear to Morgan that he was telling some of these men a secret to which they were already privy. *That* was frightening. The rest simply took in what he said, then moved on.

Within hours, the ship was readied, and his impromptu seminars on astronomy, photography, and light had moved aboard *Clear Mountain*. Then suddenly, shortly after dusk, they were done with him. Everyone retreated to some meeting room be-



lowdecks. Morgan was left to drink alone, attended only by a handful of solicitous stewards who went conspicuously well-armed as they brought him drinks, canapés, and cigars.

He'd never even learned any name but Goins'. He did not know where they were bound, or why. No one had told him anything. Only asked him endless questions, which had swiftly become repetitive.

The experience so far was in many respects much like being an undergraduate.

Goins finally found him, somewhere near midnight.

"We will make landfall shortly after dawn."

"Where?" Morgan asked, not particularly expecting an answer.

"Thera."

The name sounded familiar. "That's near the Garden of Cycladia, yes?"

The Presiding Judge appeared vaguely pained. "Yes. A volcanic island under Thallassojustity jurisdiction."

"If I may be permitted a further question, why?"

"So we can show you something."

"All of you? There must be three dozen senior Thalassocretes aboard."

"All of us." Goins sighed. "This matter lies at the heart of our historical purposes. It must be witnessed."

This time, Morgan heard the grim tone in Goins' voice. Had it been there all along? "So close to one of the Gardens," he began, then stopped. His thoughts were tangled by the lateness of the hour and the alcohol, but there was a next link in this chain of logic that was decidedly unpretty.

"You are a very intelligent man, Dr. Abutti. Pray that on the morrow you are wise enough for what will come next."

With that, Goins departed. Lacking a stateroom, or even a bunk, Morgan kicked off his shoes, propped his feet on the ottoman, and proceeded to drink himself into sleep.

Valdoux was at the base of the mooring mast, negotiating with a small whippet of a man who managed to look furtive while standing still and empty-handed. The moon had risen, lambent through a veil of clouds that rendered the night sky into a dark rainbow. The scent of water rode the wind as well, harbinger of a distant storm.

Reluctantly dismounting from the steam car, Quinx dismissed the quadron and his device. The whippet, who had ignored the vehicle's chuffing approach, turned to take note of the priest. The man was another pale-skinned northerner.

Quinx was too tired to wonder why the airship captain surrounded himself with inferior servants. "Valdoux, dismiss your man and take me aboard," he said firmly. Where was Brother Kurts? "We have urgent business to attend to." *And I need to lie down*, he thought. From lifelong habit, he would never confess a weakness before others.

Such confessions were something Ion had never seemed troubled by. Somehow his oldest friend had still managed to become the Increate's vicar here on Earth. Quinx swallowed a shuddering breath that threatened to become a sob.

*Tired, too damned tired.*

"I don't think—" Valdoux began, but the whippet raised a hand to silence the captain. "Do you know who I am, Revered?"

"No," Quinx said shortly. "Nor do I particularly care."

"Perhaps you should care," the whippet said in a quiet, almost wondering voice. "For I do know who you are. I am all too sadly familiar with the mission of the Consistitory Office. Once I was a novice, Revered, before being turned out upon the path of what you call the Machinists' Heresy."

"Then I sorrow for you, my son, that you have strayed so from the Increate. But

still, I must aboard with Captain Valdoux."

"You will not go without me," the whippet warned. "A man in your hurry is always in want of weapons. I am master gunner of *Blind Justess*."

Quinx, who had apologized to no one but Ion in at least five decades, held back his next words. What this Machinist deserved and what the priest was in a position to mete out to the man were far different things. He had his priorities. After a moment, he found suitable alternatives. "That is between you and the captain, master gunner. My hurry is my own, and all too real."

"Speak, then," Valdoux said, finally in voice again. "There ain't nothing you can say that I won't tell to Three Eighty Seven here. He's got to know what it is I hire us out to do."

"You are already hired," Quinx pointed out.

"Not to push off into the sky armed and rushing," Valdoux's eyes narrowed. "East, I reckon. I've heard talk of who took ship today and where their course was laid to."

*Enough*, thought Quinx. There was small purpose in fencing with these two. And he was exhausted besides. If they crossed him over much, he could have them taken on an ecclesiastical warrant later. The Thalassojustity would simply laugh at such paper, but the government of Highpassage recognized Church writ.

"Yes, east. I must to Thera, and quite promptly. And we should fly under arms."

"Afraid of pirates?" The thrice-damned Machinist was positively smirking.

"Afraid we might need to become pirates," Quinx admitted.

"Sailing into the red under the banner of Holy Mother Church?" Three Eighty Seven touched himself forehead, mouth, and navel; the sign of the Increate. "We should ever be so honored." He turned to Valdoux. "Are you planning to take this commission? Ninety Nine will be here shortly, but I must go see to the armaments, unless you think the churchman here cannot afford your hire."

Valdoux laughed aloud. "The Reverend here could buy me out ship, sail, and shoes, if he set his sights on that. The question is whether I figure to take his coin." He winked at Quinx. "Best go to your station, master gunner. One way or another, we'll be playing at the hardest game soon enough, I reckon."

The whippet grinned and trotted up the stairway that wound foursquare around the interior of the mooring mast.

"There are no pirates, are there?" Quinx said. "Just airships and more airships."

"The lines on the map ain't visible from up in the sky." Valdoux cocked his head. "But someone of your experience can't possibly be surprised at what is true being hidden in plain sight."

"No one raids the Gatekeeper's air fleet, so the Gatekeeper's minions do not attend so closely to such matters as others doubtless must," the priest admitted. "Besides which, we have been disarmed these many years, and would be required to apply to the Thalassojustity for relief."

"Their borders are perfectly clear from above. More's the pity. Ain't too many would make such a fight as a Thalassojustity crew trained and ready for action." Valdoux squatted. "You look like the death of a priest. Even the Grand Inquisitor must sleep sometimes."

"This is the hour I would pass over into sleep, yes," admitted Quinx. As if it were not too obvious from his face, surely. "But I need you to take me to Thera, swiftly. And I need to be certain you will attend to my orders, should that become necessary."

"You won't have no say over my weapons. No one does. But I'll take you to Thera. We'll fly armed and ready." Valdoux paused, chewing his lip. Something warred within. Then: "I will also listen to your counsel, should we come to be fighting."

"And . . . ? There is always an 'and' at the end of such sentences."

"More of a 'but', I reckon." This time Valdoux smirked, while Quinx pretended to

misunderstand the jest. “But I got to know why you want to chase after the Thalassojustity’s biggest brass. All hot up and ready to fight, at that. This ain’t something a thoughtful priest would be doing. Or even a thoughtless priest.”

“I fear a great heresy is about to be unleashed. Tonight. Or perhaps tomorrow. And it may sweep the world. If I can reach one man aboard *Clear Mountain* and stop him, I may be able to halt a rising tide before the damage is done.”

“Ain’t no one stops the tide,” Valdoux observed. “That’s why I fly over the waters. Let the Thalassocretes argue with the waves. Storms don’t trouble the top of the sky.” He stuck his hand out. “I’ll take you for a single silver shekel. That seals a contract. Learning what comes next will pay your balance. You’re a mighty strange man, Revered, on a mighty strange errand.”

“A shekel it is.” Despite the process. Quinx was afraid he’d somehow got the wrong end of the bargain nonetheless.

“Look at it from my bridge.” Valdoux grinned again. “Either I’ll get to see the beginning of a tide that floods the world, or I’ll get to see a lone man stop the tide. History before my eyes either way, no matter how the play lands. Or maybe you’re a madman. Even so, I reckon you’re mad with the entire power of the Lateran behind you. Watching that should be good sport, likewise.”

Ninety Nine loomed out of the darkness at those words. Quinx was startled again—from the name he’d expected another Machinist, but not a female. She was clad immodestly in a tunic and sailor’s dungarees.

Valdoux held her wordlessly up the tower. She favored Quinx with one cold, inquisitive glance, then clattered upward.

He stared after her a long moment, trying to sort his feelings from his fatigue, then surrendered the effort and began the slow, aching climb himself.

As Quinx mounted the stairs, Valdoux called after him. “We sail under Manju rules now, Revered. Be sure you really want what you’re asking after.”

Quinx slept the remainder of the night away while *Blind Justess* set her course and left Highpassage ahead of the impending storm. He awoke to a pearlescent pink dawn gleaming through the tiny porthole of his tiny cabin. Most of the available space not occupied by his bunk was filled with Brother Kurts, who snored gently while sprawled upon the deck.

He could not remember ever having seen the monk asleep.

There was no getting up without disturbing the other man, so Quinx lay still a while and watched the sky shift tone from pink to blue. They would be heading very nearly into the sun, he realized, and surely not so far from Thera now unless the winds had been notably unfavorable.

Tiny though the cabin was, it had been appointed with the same odd combination of frugality and luxury as the rest of the airship. The paneling was some wood he did not recognize, doubtless a rare tree from the waist of the world. Brightwork and electric runs across the walls like veins. Even the sheets were silk, which seemed a bit perverse.

Soon he realized he must be awake and about. Valdoux was mercurial, likely to take any number of strange actions in the absence of his direction. “Brother Kurts,” Quinx whispered.

The monk’s head snapped forward with a gust of garlicky breath. “Revered,” he said, his hand falling away again from something beneath his robes.

A weapon, of course, though such was forbidden by the Galiciate Treaty. Kurts worked for Quinx, not the Thalassojustity. The Consistory Office had its own requirements, for all that he must at times pretend to a long lost innocence as to means and methods.

"Everything is well, Brother Kurts. I must have some coffee, and mount to the bridge to consult with our fair captain."

"Six others aboard, sir," Kurts replied. "Two of them Machinists. The captain, his ship's boy from before. An engineer and his boy as well. The heretics serve as gunners and artificers, best as I can tell."

"I met one of them last night. He styled himself Three Eighty Seven."

"The master gunner." The monk nodded slowly. "Gunner's mate is a female name of Ninety Nine."

"I briefly saw her yesterday evening." Somehow Ninety Nine's dubious femininity seemed doubly blasphemous by the light of day, though in truth, Quinx was rapidly losing his capacity for surprise at what might transpire aboard *Blind Justess*.

"I doubt she will challenge anyone's virtue. She is both offensive and unlovely."

"And what do you know of a woman's loveliness, Brother Kurts?" Quinx asked with a small smile.

The monk was not amused. "As little and all as the Increate allows a man of my vows."

"Fair enough. I apologize for troubling you. But I must find my way to coffee before I become more trouble."

They slipped into the short companionway on this upper deck. Brother Kurts led Quinx the half dozen steps to the tiny galley. This was indeed a racing yacht, not intended for full meal service. Or really, any other full service. The coffee machine, however, was an elegant marvel of brass and copper, festooned with a maze of pipes and valves and small, decorative metal eagles screaming for their freedom.

It smelled like a slice of heaven.

"Truly the Increate did bless mankind when They caused the coffee bean to grow," said Quinx.

Kurts grunted, studying the machine for several long moments before launching into a rapid set of seemingly random manipulations that shortly produced a steaming cup of coffee so deep brown Quinx thought he might be able to see the reflection of last year's breakfasts in it.

Five minutes later, fortified by caffeine and a rather stale sticky bun of dubious provenance, Quinx headed for the bridge on the deck below. He was trailed by a bleary-eyed Brother Kurts.

"Good morning to you, Revered." Valdoux seemed as chipper as if he'd just had a week at a Riveran resort. The ship's boy was present, as well as another lad whom Quinx took to be the engineer's boy. To his profound relief, neither Machinist was on the bridge.

"Captain, the pleasure is all mine." Quinx slipped up to the fore, where Valdoux piloted *Blind Justess* with a wheel and a set of levers. Gauges were arrayed to either side of him, but before and sweeping down to his feet was a wall of curved glass. The pale green of the Attik Main loomed vertiginously below, the ripples of waves like crumpled foil.

An oblong island with a sharp-peaked central mountain lay before them. A small settlement nestled on one shore—the south?—dominated by its docks. The rest of the island was heavily forested. Clearly not settled, beyond whomever lived there to service the sea traffic.

"Thalassojustity territory," Quinx observed.

Valdoux made a tsking noise. "Ain't no airship masts. They're behind the times, our naval friends."

Quinx glanced sideways. "You hold no brief for the *Pax Maria*?"

"What do I care for the sea? The air is my place. They can't make neither peace nor

war in the skies. And they ain't made no real effort to claim what power might be theirs up here."

"Where one grasp fails, another will reach," muttered Brother Kurts behind them.

"Exactly," said Valdoux. "And here is Thera, Revered. We overflowed a fast ship on the water late in the night. I reckon they'll be here by midmorning."

"*Clear Mountain?*"

"I didn't figure on stopping to ask. But that does seem to be a sensible thing to assume."

*How to proceed?* Quinx badly wanted to confront this fool Morgan Abutti before more damage could be done, but the man had spent almost an entire day closeted with the senior Thalassocretes. A more focused assemblage of the powers in the world he had trouble imagining, short of another Congress of Cities and States being called.

How much harm had already been levied? Was the Externalist heresy loose for good and all? Or had the Thalassojustity seen through the madman and contained him?

Valdoux's voice interrupted Quinx' whirling thoughts. "No."

"No? No what?"

"I can't land you in force aboard *Clear Mountain*."

"That was not my . . ." Quinx let his voice trail off. He didn't know what he should do next. He thought quickly. "I would meet them at the dock. Brother Kurts will guard my back."

"With *Blind Justess* circling overhead? Or standing off?"

That took a long moment of consideration. Aerial force was not a strength of the Thalassojustity, especially not in this place. "Overhead. Awaiting my signal."

Valdoux reached down to the bottom of his wheel column and unclipped a fat-barreled pistol. "Fire this. I'll come down hot and fast, guns at the ready."

Quinx looked in wonder at the weapon in his hand. He'd never held a firearm before, any more than he'd ever held a viper.

Brother Kurts reached around and took it from him. "A flare gun," he explained. "But you can still harm yourself with it."

"Or someone else," Valdoux offered cheerfully. "A shot to the chest from that won't likely kill nobody, but the other fellow might wish it had."

"Give me back that flare, Brother Kurts," Quinx said, suddenly tired all over again. "Only I can decide when to use it."

The monk looked unhappy, but he returned the weapon.

It fit awkwardly within Quinx' robes. "Take me down," he told Valdoux.

"I can't land here. You got to go down by rope. I'll send Ninety Nine along to look after your safety."

Quinx' fatigue shifted to a sense of nausea, or perhaps outright illness. He would be confronting heresy under the protection of a female Machinist. Any priest who came before the Consistory Office with such a story would spend long months under the Question, or at the very least in quiet confinement to pray over his errors of judgment and resultant sins.

The expression on Valdoux's face made it clear the captain was testing Quinx. And Quinx knew that here and now, he held no leverage.

"Let us do this thing," he gasped, forcing out the words before the last tatters of his certainty vanished.

Holy Mother Church was infinitely patient. There was always a later. Even for a man such as Captain Valdoux.

Especially for a man such as Captain Valdoux.

*The Thalassojustity has served for centuries as a check upon the powers of the Lateran. Church history documents a much earlier era when the Gatekeepers asserted economic, political, and even military dominance over many of the societies of the Earth. The aggressively secular founders of the Thalassojustity held no patience for the divine right that many of the kings and princes of Earth claimed for their power, and less patience for the generations-long schemes of the Lateran to convert or subvert them. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that the establishment of the secret societies of the Thalassocretes was precisely a countermove against Lateran infiltrations as well as more overt cozenings of their rivals. For make no mistake: this tension between lords spiritual and the lords of the sea is two thousand years in the making, but neither of them has ever misunderstood who their true competition is. Should a significant number of the land-based states around the world ever achieve meaningful confederacy, the power of Thalassojustity and Church alike would be undermined much more deeply than anything either rival could do to the other.*

From the introduction to *Common Interests, Uncommon Rivals*, P.R. Frost, University of Massalia Press, M.2991, Th. 1994, L.6008

There was a great deal of excitement aboard *Clear Mountain* as they approached Thera. Morgan was not sure what the fuss was, as no one had paid him much attention since he'd finished explaining his thesis the night before, but he eventually padded out to the foredeck to find a number of the Thalassocretes staring at the clouds above the island.

Goins wordlessly handed him a set of field glasses. "See for yourself," the Presiding Judge growled. "Watch the cloud formation that rather resembles a camel."

Morgan scanned the sky, not seeing anything he would consider a camel, but pointing his instrument in the direction everyone else was looking. He caught a glint and sense of motion.

"Bastard's hiding in the cloud bank," someone else said, then cursed in a language Morgan did not speak, though the intent of the words was clear enough from the tone. "Airship?" he asked.

"Anyone care enough about you to chase you out here?" Goins made the question sound casual, but the rapid silence around them told Morgan quite clearly what was at stake.

"Not even my own mother," he said. "Not this place."

"Hmm." Goins sounded unconvinced. "The area is under absolute prohibition."

"Can you not force them down?"

"We don't even allow our own airships here."

"Mistake." That was someone behind Morgan.

"The question will be re-opened, you may be sure," Goins said loudly. "Unless it has been rendered irrelevant in the meantime."

"Why are we here?" asked Morgan. "Why do we care about an airship?"

Goins reached up to grab Morgan's shoulders. His fingers were vises, his eyes drills. "I am about to show you the deepest, darkest secret known to mankind."

"Me?"

"It is a puzzle, to which you may have found the key."

Morgan only knew one secret of his own, and he'd already shared it. "My photographic plates. The aetheric vessel at the liberation point."

"Precisely."

"Precisely *what*?"

Another senior Thalassocrete snatched Morgan's arm even as Goins released him. "Precisely shut your yap and see what is to come," growled the other man.

It took Morgan only a moment to realize these very powerful men were all frightened.

*Clear Mountain* approached the dock at Thera at dead slow. Waves slapped her hull, while mewling gulls circled overhead. Someone waited at the end of the pier, but beyond them was a puzzling scene. Several people sprawled at the head of the pier, while two more stood guard, their backs to the sea. A smaller crowd clustered inland, at the village, in a standoff with the guardians.

A fight had taken place, though Morgan could not imagine who would fight here, or over what. Not in this place. Presumably anyone here was in on Goins' great secret.

A great racket arose around him. Crewmen rushed to the teakwood foredeck with rifles. Two set up a Maxim gun on a pintle at the bow. Several relatively junior Thalassocretes were directing preparations for a possible offense.

Morgan debated going below, or at least retreating to the lounge where he could fortify himself with alcohol and be out of the line of fire. But Goins was at his side again. "This is *your* fault," the Presiding Judge said with a growl.

"Mine?" Morgan was astonished. "What does this have to do with me?"

"Everything." Goins gave him another of those long, hard stares. "What did you think would happen when you presented your evidence?"

"I dreamt that my reputation would have been made," Morgan said sadly. "The spirit of scientific inquiry is one of the most powerful forces known to man. With a bit of luck, I could have launched a generation of research."

"Fear is one of the most powerful forces known to man," retorted Goins. "And nothing inspires fear like attacking people's faith. Doesn't matter what kind of faith—faith in the order of the world, faith in themselves, faith in the Increate. And you, Dr. Morgan Abutti, are attacking all of those faiths."

Amid a swash of saltwater, *Clear Mountain* growled to a slow, rolling halt by the pier without any gunfire being exchanged. Goins didn't look to shore, just kept staring down Morgan.

"I . . ." Morgan's voice faltered. "No. People are better than that." His heart fell. "The Increate did not put us on this Earth so that we could pretend away the natural world."

"You, sir, have averred that the Increate did not put us on this Earth at all," Goins said. "And though everyone will cry you down for saying that, the damndest thing is that you are *correct*."

He turned and looked over the rail, at the man on the pier. Abutti looked with him to see a priest waiting. Two dozen rifles and the Maxim gun were trained down on the Revered, who seemed unperturbed. He stared back up at them, clearly identifying Goins as the authority aboard ship.

"If it is not the Presiding Judge," the priest called up.

Goins appeared positively sour. "Revered Quinx."

"*Quinx!*?" hissed Morgan. "The Inquisitor?"

"The Lateran refers to that as the Consistatory Office," Goins told him quietly. "And I know what that oily little bastard is doing here. I just don't know how or why."

Morgan nodded. "The airship your people were looking at."

"Do you have a Dr. Morgan Abutti aboard?" Quinx called up. "I am very much fain to speak with him if so."

"How—" Morgan began, but Goins cut him off. "Don't be an ass, man."

"Ah, I see you have him with you," Quinx said. "I would be much obliged if you'd set the doctor ashore for some private discussions with me."

"On whose authority?" Goins waved the riflemen to port arms.

"I could claim the authority of the Lateran, but our writ does not run here."

"No." This time Goins grinned. "Have a better offer?"

"Remember your history, Judge. Brother Lupan died not so long ago."

Goins shook his head. "This tale does not fly on wings of madness, Revered. It creaks atop the edifice of science."

"Are they truly so different in the face of the Increate?" Quinx stared at Morgan. The man's eyes were like steel, even from this distance. Morgan shuddered at the thought of being alone with him in a small room, under the Question.

"I . . . I have never denied the Increate," he shouted. "Nor did I intend to."

Goins jabbed Morgan in the ribs. "If you are so eager to treat with the Revered, I can put you ashore. *Alone.*"

Courage seeped back into Morgan's heart like the tide rising beneath a sandbar. "Bring him aboard."

"What?"

"You made me a thirty-second degree Thalassocrete. That means I have voice in this floating conclave. Bring him aboard."

"Well, well," said Goins. "Who realized you would have such backbone, Dr. Abutti? No, despite your entreaties, I believe we shall put you ashore. But in company. We did come here for a reason, in all good haste. I do not propose to abandon our mission for the sake of a chaffer with a single churchman, no matter how highly placed. As he is also a thirty-second degree Thalassocrete, the Revered may accompany us up the mountain and amuse himself in discourse with you along the way."

"Where?"

"To where the stars do not lie."

Abutti followed Goins down the gangplank. A line of armed men observed from *Clear Mountain's* rail, but no one among the assembled Thalassocretes or ship's crew objected when the Presiding Judge ordered them to stand down and remain aboard.

Morgan couldn't see how one priest would be so immediately dangerous, even this one. Still, people were sprawled at the head of the pier. Injured? Dead?

"Bilious," Goins said, shaking hands with the priest, then embracing him.

"Eraster." The Revered wore a grudging smile that bespoke the bond that only two ancient enemies could share.

"You know one another?" Morgan asked.

The priest turned to him. "The most powerful man in the Thalassojustice and the most feared man in the Lateran? Of course we know one another, Dr. Abutti." He extended his hand. "The Revered Bilious Quinx."

"Revered," said Morgan, shaking the man's hand. Though rather larger than Goins, Quinx was still a small man, in that compact way that suggested strength, even at an age that must be approaching seventy. His eyes were sea-gray, set deep in a face dark-skinned enough for any debutante's ball in Highpassage. He wore a cassock, faded with wear and laundering, but highly serviceable. A small silver Lateran orbicrux hung around his neck. He was otherwise unadorned with the Earthly riches that Morgan associated with high churchmen. "And now I am acquainted with the both of you."

"To our great mutual pleasure," Quinx said in a tone of voice that promised quite the opposite.

Goins nodded sharply, glancing down the pier. "Enough. We are on an errand of some urgency. Call off your men down there, and you may accompany us. If you simply must interview Dr. Abutti, feel free to do so on the march."

"Amid your mob?" Quinx' voice dropped to a very soft, easy threat. "I am far more accustomed to my own chambers, and *tools*, for such interviews."

"This island is *my* chamber, Bilious," Goins snapped. "I'll thank you not to soil it with my colleague's vital fluids."

"Oh, we gave up soiling with vital fluids generations ago," Quinx replied. "Our



tools are more subtle now. The arts of the mind are powerful.”

“Call off your men, or the arts of the mind will be powerless this day.”

Quinx nodded, then walked up the pier toward his guardians.

“He’s mighty energetic for such an old man,” Morgan said.

“That old man is the sharp point of a very long blade. We do not fear him, but we have immense respect for his power.”

Morgan thought for a moment. Then: “I am too young to remember Brother Lupan. But I have read of him.”

“They teach that in history classes now?” Goins sounded surprised.

“Not in public school, or even when I was working to my baccalaureate. But in my graduate days, we covered him in a seminar on science, myth, and the public mind. The book about him was in manuscript. It had not yet passed before the censors.”

The Presiding Judge snorted. “I marvel that you learned nothing from that.” Ahead of them, the priest had reached his deadly minions. Goins tugged on Morgan’s arm again, a habit that was quickly wearing in its novelty and charm. “We go now.”

They walked up the pier, followed by a parade of Thalassocretes and servants. Approaching Quinx, who was deep in hurried converse, Morgan was shocked to see that his servants were a pair of white people—a hulking, brutish male and a hard-looking female.

She glanced up at him. Her eyes were reptile cold, and seemed preternaturally alert. *Danger*, they said, though Morgan had never thought to encounter such menace in any woman born.

His capacity for astonishment had been played out. “Strange company the Revered Quinx keeps, for a priest.”

“Oh, the Lateran is blind to the color of a man’s skin.” Sarcasm ran thick as mud in Goins’ voice. “But I cannot possibly explain the woman, given the Church’s view on their proper role in society.” His hand dropped, flickering through a quick series of motions signaling someone behind them.

“What of your people?” Morgan pointed toward the bodies beyond.

“There will be a reckoning,” Goins said. “Quite soon. But not in this moment.”

The priest and his servants hurried ahead of them, so that Morgan was the first of the Thalassocretic party to reach the downed men. They were four, two with broken necks and the pallor of death upon them already, the other two groaning and bloody.

He bent to look, but a squad of sailors pushed past him, a pair of them medics with canvas bags bearing the Red Orb.

Morgan straightened again and followed Goins.

Fuming, Quinx fell into step beside the heretic Abutti. They were already well above the tiny dockside village, following a path that was not much more than a goat track up the slopes of the island’s central mountain. He could do little about whatever foolishness Goins had in mind. The closer they came to the top of the mountain, the closer they were to rescue—or brute force—courtesy of *Blind Justess*. Brother Kurts and the woman were under close guard behind him, but the Thalassojustice party did not seem to be armed.

When this business was over, all he needed was a shot from the flare gun. And perhaps a convenient fall for Dr. Abutti.

“Revered,” said the heretic. Polite but nervous.

Quinx had a lifetime of working with those cues. “Dr. Abutti.” And to hell with the listeners crowded not so subtly close around them.

The path ahead narrowed to little more than a foot’s width, rising sheer on the left and dropping sheer on the right. A chain was fastened to the rock, to which the party clung as they climbed. Almost thirty of them, strung out like flies on a wall.

"H-how may I be of service to you?"

Quinx took the matter by the knob. "This is a complex affair. Much history and passion is caught up in what I understand you are even now pursuing. I would have liked to invite you to present your findings at the Lateran before making your thesis public."

"I am not yet so public, Revered." Abutti sounded oddly sad. "I was ejected from the Planetary Society. And, well, these Thalassocretes are not so indiscreet with their confidences."

Honeyed words flowed from Quinx' lips. "So you are saying we could put this affair to rest without widespread comment?"

A moment of rough breathing and dizzying fear as they crept around a bulge in the side of the mountain. Then Abutti responded. "Would that be a permanent rest for me, Revered? I saw those men at the dock. I know who you are in the hierarchy."

"No fool you," Quinx replied. "To be blunt, you have poked your telescope into matters much better left undiscussed. Externalism is no trifling affair."

"So I've been told." Abutti's breath huffed a bit. "Should you wish your thugs to shove me off a cliff top, Revered, I surely cannot stop you. But I am not the only astronomer on Earth with a telescope. The facts will out. Even your Increate cannot deny this truth written in the skies."

"My Increate?" Quinx was both amused and frustrated by the assumptions embedded in that phrasing. "And yes . . . I can hardly ban telescopes across the world. Regardless of whatever you think your truth is."

Abutti stopped, turned back to Quinx, clinging to a stanchion as pines whispered in the wind hundreds of feet below him. "Do you not know what I have found?"

"Not precisely, no," Quinx admitted. "And in fact, it does not matter. You seek to unseat the holy truth of the Increate and reinstate the Externalist heresy. That is enough for me."

"You accuse me of ecclesiastical crimes when all I pursue is the objective truth!"

"Move it along," shouted one of the Thalassocretes from behind them. Abutti turned and hurried along to where the path widened to a ledge, then waited in ankle-high grass for the priest to catch up.

Quinx did, breathing hard as much from the stress of the heights as anything. "Do you not fear I will toss you off myself?" he asked, glancing past Abutti at the slope beyond.

"No. Men like you do not toss people off cliffs. You have people tossed off cliffs. That's why you have that monster monk and the dreadful woman." Abutti paused, obviously chewing on his next words. "Not so long ago, you would have had a tall stake and a hot fire awaiting someone like me."

"Holy Mother Church never burned anyone," Quinx replied, stung.

"No, you merely passed sentence and had the secular authorities carry it out. I have trained in logic, Revered. I know who holds the responsibility there."

A line of Thalassocretes pushed past them, though both Brother Kurts and the woman were pulled aside by their guards rather than go ahead of Quinx and Abutti.

"When one raises rebellion against the Increate, one bears responsibility for one's penalty."

"Rebellion against the Church is not rebellion against the Increate," Abutti grumbled. "And I raise neither. Only truth."

Quinx had no answer to that, but he knew he had the measure of this man now. Smart but weak. Too willing to be turned aside.

Still, the astronomer had the right of it. There were more telescopes in the world.

"What did you find?" he asked as they began following the line of march again, finally drawn back to the question despite himself.

"Evidence of an aetheric vessel." A stubborn pride swelled in Abutti's voice. "The

Increate's ship of space, that brought us to this world."

"I do not believe you," Quinx replied. "Simply not possible."

"Then why are we tramping up the side of Thera?"

They both looked ahead, to where Goins was long vanished at the head of a receding column of Thalassocretes variously in their blue-green robes and khaki excursion wear.

*Archaeology represents one of our greatest challenges in unraveling the mysteries of the human experience. Geology tells us much about the age of the world, and through the sciences we understand that the Creation narrative of the Librum Vita is a grand metaphor for the natural processes of the universe. Yet archaeology shows us a literal view of the Increate's placement of human beings upon this Earth. How to integrate the inarguable inerrancy of the Increate's word with the interpolations of the geological sciences remains one of the greatest doctrinal challenges of our century, and perhaps centuries to come.*

—His Holiness Lamboine XXII, Posthumous Commentaries

Morgan drew away from the priest as the group summited the crest of Thera and began clambering down into the crater within. Quinx' retainers, for all that they were under guard, frightened him. He was certain that at a word from the Revered, the two would tear free of their bonds and throw him from the cliffs.

Goins gathered his group in a sloping meadow a few hundred feet below the rim. Already the Presiding Judge was talking, urgently and low. Not an exhortation. Morgan hurried to catch up and hear. They knew *his* evidence already, everyone who had been in the lounge of *Clear Mountain* the night before.

Whatever Goins had to show them here fit with Morgan's own work like a ratchet into a gear.

"... passed into our trust with the foundering of the Bear Cult at Truska."

Thalassocretes nodded in return.

"Only certain among you know anything of this secret. None of us, not even me, have ever come to this place. Even those who maintain the upward path along the outer face of the mountain are forced to spend their lives on this island." His voice dropped. "Until Dr. Abutti's telescope opened the heavens to our eyes, this was without doubt the deepest truth upon this Earth. Brother Lupan had the right of it."

"The Increate's Chariot?" Quinx stepped up next to Morgan. "A ridiculous fantasy embedded in a foolish heresy."

"A truth, embedded in the heart of each of the Eight Gardens," Goins replied, his voice booming now. "I give you the Chariot of Cycladia."

He turned, walked across the meadow, and began tearing at the vines that draped a grove there.

Quinx reached into his robes and pulled out a firearm. A fat-barreled gun. Morgan stared a moment, incredulous, then tackled the priest as he raised his weapon and fired it into the sky.

The next few moments were blinding confusion. Something hissed high before popping—fireworks? Shouting echoed around Morgan as the enormous monk and the woman with him broke free of their guards as he'd feared. Morgan stumbled back to his feet, fleeing the priest and the lopsided fight behind him toward the dubious safety of Goins and the Thalassocretes who were tearing down plants to reveal a mottled wall of . . . something?

Engines strained overhead as an airship circled low in the sky. He looked up to see a narrow bag with a knife hull beneath. Copper lances protruding from the hull crackled with visible energy.

Morgan ran toward the Chariot. "Judge Goins, we are betrayed!"

Goins turned, stared into the sky a moment, watching in apparent disbelief as

lightning forked across the heavens to ground into the trees behind him with a series of explosive cracks. He began to laugh as smoke rose. Now his voice boomed like a parade sergeant's. "Quinx, you are a greater fool than even I thought. Do you doubt the Increate's Chariot can defend itself?"

Another bolt lanced from the airship, striking down half a dozen shrieking Thalassocretes in a groaning mass. Quinx scuttled toward Goins, trailed by his dangerous guardians. Above them, the airship strained lower, barking bullets that sprayed across the meadow in a scythe of flying dirt that somehow claimed no lives on the first pass.

The flash of light erupting from the trees blinded Morgan for a moment. A sizzling noise followed, which terminated in a thunderclap. He rolled over, rubbing his eyes, to see the airship aflame and lurching toward the other side of Thera's crater. Quinx was still on his feet but stumbling. The monk was down, while the woman howled at the sky a long moment before rushing toward Morgan and Goins.

"You are all mad," the doctor shouted. "All of you!"

The woman headed straight for him. Her eyes glowed with a death-madness that Morgan had never before witnessed, having only read of such things in his scientific romances. Goins simply stood, staring down a hundred and fifty pounds of racing anger. Above them, something exploded aboard the airship.

Still running, the woman caught up to Quinx, grabbing the priest by the arms. She continued to sprint toward Morgan and Goins, carrying the shuddering Quinx over one shoulder. Instead of plowing into them, she pulled up short, her breath a bellows.

"Show me the Chariot," she demanded. Her voice was a deep, threatening growl. Behind her, the monk arose and stumbled toward them.

"Who are you to ask?" Goins asked.

"A Machinist." Her voice was a growl. "This is my future. The future of my faith."

"The past," Morgan said, correcting her. "The future is coming in the sky."

Behind them, the mottled wall whirred. He turned to see a section slide upward to create an opening. Faint crimson light glowed beyond. The airship crashed in the distance with another whoosh of flame and heat.

The Machinist continued to stare them both down. "My lover is dead, as is my captain. You allowed them to die. You owe me this."

The monk caught up to her, tackling her from behind with his hands spread wide to catch her eyes and the edges of her mouth. The woman dropped Quinx, who bit off a scream as he hit. Then she bent to seize the monk and wrestle him to the ground in front of her.

He bounced up, obviously rattled, but ready to engage. Goins tugged Morgan's arm. "Back," he hissed. "This is not our fight."

"None of this is *my* fight," Morgan growled.

Goins tapped the wall of the Increate's Chariot. "This is one of eight aetheric ships here on Earth. You have found their origin, the great ship that is their mother. You were right all along. Do you now doubt that our history is coming home in the sky, from your liberation point?"

"No, I do not doubt." Behind them, a screech. The monk and the Machinist were circling dangerously as Quinx staggered to his feet.

Strangely, Goins was ignoring the battle, focusing his entire attention on Morgan. That in turn drew Morgan's gaze back to the judge. For all his curiosity, he was terribly loath to step within. He hadn't wished to be *this* right, to confront the meaning of his discovery so personally. "But I did not summon it."

"Then who did?" the judge asked impatiently.

That, in a moment of inspiration he could answer. "All of us. With our telelocutors and our airships and our engines, sending rays of energy into the aether as surely as if we'd lit a bonfire in the night. If this Chariot knows enough to defend itself, doubt-

less the mother ship can watch our Earth for us to rise high enough to see it in return. We have had electricification for a generation. It can see that.”

With a flicker of his eyes, Goins drew a gun of his own and shot past Morgan in one motion. Startled, Morgan turned to see the monk falling to the ground, his face bloody. The woman was on her hands and knees. Quinx lurched slowly toward the two of them with a slightly unfocused look on his face.

The Presiding Judge handed the pistol to Morgan. “You choose. The past, or the future.”

Morgan promptly dropped the weapon into the grass. He’d wanted the truth, by the Increate, not such a mess of power and violence. “I am a *scientist*. I do not have people thrown off cliffs.”

Quinx reached for Morgan’s hand. “Ninety Nine,” he gasped. “Brother Kurts. Please . . . Stop it. You didn’t need to do this.”

The Machinist shuddered to her feet. One eyeball was gouged loose, and her mouth bled. Morgan glanced at the dying monk and wondered just how tough a human being could be.

Her eyes were no longer mad. Instead, they were haunted. “Stop,” she said, echoing Quinx’ words.

“Go,” Morgan replied. He had just lately learned the measure of his own courage, and was not sure he could step into the chariot himself. “Go into the future. It cannot be stopped. The stars do not lie, and they are coming toward us.”

“They are my stars.” She stared at them with her remaining eye. “Ours. Not yours.”

The woman stumbled weeping through the opened door. Quinx turned away from Morgan. “It cannot be,” the priest gasped. “I must go where Ion has already led.” Face twisted in some inner agony of the spirit, he followed after her.

“And you?” asked Goins. “Do you choose the future as well?”

Afraid, he stood unmoving a moment. Then: “I would have thought to . . .” The doctor’s words ran out as he marshaled his thoughts. “No. I’ve come to understand that the future is here with us. Whatever comes, comes.”

Morgan Abutti looked up at the smoke trailing into the blue sky from the ruined airship. Goins squatted next to him, pistol still in hand. The door into the Chariot had slid shut.

“What next?” the scientist asked.

“Surely the Increate knows,” said Goins.

“Quinx would have said that the Increate knows all.” Morgan thought about those words. “It seems to me that They do not think to warn us of the truth.”

The remaining Thalassocretes gathered around. Some tended the wounded and the dead, others discussed the advisability of sending a party to look into the crash of the airship.

The Chariot began to whine, a low hum that built slowly in volume. Goins rose, gestured for a general retreat. It seemed wisest.

Morgan was slow to move, staring at the chance of greatness that he’d abandoned. He was the first to see the Chariot break from the trees and rise into the sky. The rest stopped to watch as clouds of dust and steam spiraled beneath it.

“Good luck, Revered Quinx,” muttered the doctor.

Goins tugged at his arm. “The choices are made. You were correct. We must go.”

“You have it almost right,” said Morgan. “*His* choices are ended. *Ours* are just begun.” His courage returned to him once more, like a whipped dog coming home. “This is what I get for uncovering the truth. What I had declined to see clearly before. There are great consequences to be accounted for.” He glanced away from the departing chariot. “Are you ready to face those, Judge? I am.”

“Remember, your aetheric vessel was coming anyway, whether or not you had seen

it first. You did not cause this." Goins paused a moment, searching Morgan's face as if for some truth. "Science finds the path where the light of faith has shown the way."

Morgan could not tell if the judge meant to be ironic or not. That did not matter. He patted the other man's shoulder. "Let us go, then. There is work to be done."

Above them, the future rose ever higher, shedding six thousand years of mud and plants and tradition as it climbed to meet the oncoming stars.

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