

RIDDLE THE STARS THESE MYSTERIES



A Weekly Web-Zine

by

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THE RIDDLE—

From the ends of your seas' four ways,
Riddle for me these mysteries—
You who have dreams borne in the bone,
Who are not alone, going alone.

—Maxwell Anderson

Title poem to *You Who Have Dreams*

EPISODE THE FIRST

“ ‘tis enough, ‘twill serve...”
- *Mercutio, Act III, scene i*

Between the ice-cold rocks and the frigid harbor, a sea of leather-clad Saxon warriors milled about their sprawling camp on the frozen English plain. The ice-blown darkness surrounded them like a damp pelt—except near the small, scattered cones of crackling, orange flames, where huge, blond men sat and stared, while the fires leapt, and the roasting meat crackled as it spat its blood and fat into their fires.

The memory of yesterday’s battles flamed their spirits and the smell of blood lay in their nostrils and they knew that they had the English at bay and that the next day or the day after would rid them of Arthyr, that pitiful nuisance, who alone checked their invasion, their swarm, into the land that they coveted.

They pulled their meat, still dripping, from the fire, with hands that barely felt the heat, and sank bad teeth deep into the hot, roasted flesh. And the few who saw the thin streak of red light that shot momentarily through the camp wondered how fireflies flew in December.

On the rise, where Hengst’s tent of rough hides flapped in the sea-borne wind, a boy of twelve sat down to the battle log. He picked up two padded sticks. Slowly, he began to beat.

His random beating slipped into an insinuating rhythm as, from the tent of Auguar, high priest of Wodan, slipped the Maiden of the Sacred Fires...

...her long, bare legs, moved, to the delicate rhythm of the drum, daintily, upon the rug of reindeer hide.

Slowly, eyes turned and low growls caught in four thousand throats gone suddenly dry, and their loins throbbed, growing rapidly warm as the tempo picked up, as anklets jangled on her naked calves and her muscular thighs orange with cold and the gleam of the fire as she quivered and thumped to the pulse of the drum.

And her jeweled navel swung to the pulsating rhythm, and her firm dancer’s breasts flung nearly free of the thin suede band that held them. Her short skirt of deerskin strips flowed with the curve of her hips, swung nearly open with each sinuous movement, swung just high enough to show how little she wore underneath.

Her eyes, painted dark, seemed to stare at each man and her flaxen hair flew as she tossed her head to the thumping drum, and her sparkling gold chain jumped about her neck.

Augar the Priest smiled. For the lust she kindled in his men would smolder, unsated, in their loins overnight. And his fighters would awaken with fire in their bodies and a rage to smash the last British fighters.

High above, on a wind-swept cliff, Aurion peered from between two boulders. He aimed his index finger at the crowd on the dais in the valley below, flipped his wrist switch to “aim” and slowly squeezed the palmer, so that a thin, red laser ray beamed from his hand to the bare chest of the Saxon war chief who stood, smugly, behind the gyrating dancer.

Just for a moment, Aurion blinked...



SUPPORTING COMMENTARIES

What one sees is relative to where s/he stands.



—Prof. Albert Einstein:
The Theory of Relativity

The Indian: “Our god is now the sun dying,
and we must follow it. For other races,
out of the east, will live here in their time,
one following another. Each will build
its cities, and its monuments to gods
we dare not worship. Some will come with ships,
and some with wings, and each will desecrate
the alters of the people overthrown,
but none will live forever. Each will live
its little time, and fly before the feet
of those who follow after.” ...
Nothing is made by men
But [it] makes, in the end, good ruins:



—Maxwell Anderson:
High Tor, Act III

“Good science-fiction must first be good fiction, and, then, credible science.”



—H. G. Wells:
in the Introduction to one of his books

Good science-fiction should also, like the works Jules Verne, show men and women with different imaginations (perhaps more technological, political, or managerial imaginations) new avenues that they might explore ... new goals that they might achieve ... new “things” that they might invent.



Stephen Ellerin:
in the Introduction to this work

FROM EPISODE THE SECOND

*“Nobody ever drowned in sweat.”
U.S. Marine Recruiting Poster—21st Century*

Aurion drifted back to consciousness, to a dark outside, punctured with the faint twinkling of distant, bluish stars. How strange, so many blues together. How different.

He never pretended to understand the physics of ver-space travel... how one could exceed the speed of light without achieving it. Since ver-space travel must also exceed the speed of telecommunication by either radio or video, there could be no true way to measure ver-space travel time. Watches, most other digital equipment, and occasionally even computer programs, seemed to go haywire during ver-space travel, so their measurements were useless. It was suggested that old, analog watches might do the trick, but nobody he knew had one to test that hypothesis. Besides, how could you be positive how many times the little hand – or even the “month” dial – had gone completely around?

Commy’s higher functions were down, although her basic minimums seemed to have survived the jump. These new chips really were better.

Aurion pushed the re-boot code on his com-belt, and she whirred back to “life”.

“Nearest habitable system,” she purred, “lies 2 hours at cruising speed. Medium yellow sun is sufficient to recharge wing-solars. Third planet out has a habitable atmosphere.”

“Do it,” Aurion said, still groggy.

Commy checked all systems, altered course and re-started her engines for a three-minute burst. As the dry wingsolars sucked up energy, panel lights grew brighter. “No hostiles in the system,” she said and deployed an ionic converter cable. As the ship moved through the atmosphere of this yellow sun, the interplay of electrons between tie cable and surrounding space drew power like iron filings to an electromagnet. Now the holo-visuals came up.

Aurion checked the holos. The third planet would orbit her own sun in twelve orbits of her single moon. Her northern hemisphere was now in mid winter, cold temperatures.

“Most civilizations in later-barbaric stages, or worse,” Commy purred, her syntax improving with fresh power. “One culture, on that island off the large continent, has linguistic base compatible with stored data.” An optical disk whirred. “I can down-load a translator to your com-belt.”

“Sounds good, Commy,” Aurion mumbled. “I’m still zonked... Need sleep.”

“I’ll take us in,” Commy replied.

She landed, with minimal help, on a rocky hilltop and hovered into a clump of camouflaging brush.

When Aurion woke up, it was dark. Chill air drifted in through the barely opened latch.

“Mmmm ... How are we?” he asked.

“I’m re-powered,” Commy purred. Her lights beeped in his direction. “And you’re... almost recovered. There’s a small band of male natives camped among the rocks, 120 meters from us.”

“Describe them.”

“Average height, 1.5 to 1.75 meters. Average weight between 75 and 90 kilos. Varying complexions. Armor: mostly leather; some wood, bone, occasional chain mail; most have metal helms. Weaponry: metal swords, daggers. No electronics. All are highly agitated; apprehensive. I detect fear, but no deceit. Suggest approaching them outright but with shield activated. They’re cooking supper. Primitive stew; meat base made from small, long-eared mammal.”

“Thanks, Commy,” Aurion said. “Might be a good time to join them. Sharing meals helps to bond in primitive societies. Where’s a cape?”

“Charged and ready.” Commy opened a storcube and a shelf with the folded capes slid forward.

He chose a black nightcape – sensitive enough to recharge even in moonlight – swung it over his shoulders and connected it to his skinsuit. He slid on a pair of las-gloves and flipped the touch-switch on his com-belt to “aim.”

“Test target, please, Commy.”

The computer drew a holographic image of an armed male, such as those she had described, standing in front of a flat background of red and white concentric circles. Aurion studied the hologram for a minute, and then sighted along his index finger as his other fingers slowly squeezed the palmer. An intense, red beam of light whisked to the “heart” of the target figure.

“Deathstroke at 500 meters,” Commy commended.

“Guess I’m ready,” Aurion ventured. He puffed his chest and let out a long deep breath. “I guess. Dim lights and open the hatch.”

As the mag-lift deposited him on the strange surface, he felt the soles of his skinboots adapt to the hard rock beneath his feet. His breath puffed in the cold air that stung his face, while the charged solars in his cape sent warmth seeping through the wire grid in his skinsuit. His eyes began to adjust to the dark as he walked toward the rock pile upon which the native men were camped.

All of his life, he’d been trained in the theory of First Contact. But he was approaching his first real one. He pushed the touch-switch for his las-gloves back to “Stun”.

“Who’s there?” a gruff, but weary, voice called out from the campfire. Other hands reached for heavy swords.

The translator module in the com-belt relayed the challenge to the mini-fighter's computer. A laser-disk whirred and the adjusted translation flew back to Aurion at the speed of light.

A small amplifier in Aurion's collar, pitched to his ears alone, translated the foreign query.

"One who would be your friend," he answered boldly. (At least he hoped that he sounded bold; he bluffed.)

"Then stand and come into the fire light."

Aurion's trained senses caught a note of fear in the voice. Men soaked in fear could act irrationally. He walked around a last, jutting rock and stood face to face with the denizens of a new world.

As Commy had detected, they stood slightly shorter than he, but powerfully muscled on broad frames. Most wore leather armor, badly cut and tattered. Wooden and leather shields stood, stacked, nearby. Some helmets seemed to have sprouted horns, although the horns may originally have come from some living animal. Each warrior held, by now, a dull-metal broadsword in both hands. And each eyed him warily, fingers moving around the handles of their ice-cold steel. Frozen breath puffed visibly from each mouth. Some shivered from cold.

Three or four of the men wore armor of some metal; two of these wore formalized eagles forged into their breastplates and their helmets may have once held some sort of plumage. *Strange combination*, Aurion thought.

They began to move slowly, cautiously towards him, fear in their eyes and in the stoop to their shoulders, but strength in their swords. These men looked as if they had been pushed to the wall, determined; and such fighters, Aurion reminded himself again, could be dangerous.

Aurion moved his hands slowly forward, palms extended, in the universal sign that said, "I come in peace; I bear no weapons." After all, peace was what he meant, and these primitives would not recognize his las-gloves.

"I come in peace," he said.

The tall one, with the full eagle on his breast and the remnant of the plume in his helm, with tired but fierce blue eyes, dirty sand-colored hair that hung about a smudged and blood-stained face, moved a half-step forward and cocked his head. "Who are you?" he asked. A tone of authority steeled his voice.

"I am called Aurion, and I am Prince in a far-away land. And I come in peace ... May I share your fire?"

Tension still crackled through the air, but the leader stood a little taller. "How did you get up here? How did you find us? And how did you ... what did you do to our guard?"

"I did not see your guard," Aurion answered truthfully. "I ... came up another way. I saw your fire and smelled your stew."

“Came up another way?” the leader challenged. “We stand atop nearly 7 rods of sheer cliff, with only one way up...” his voice and temper rising, “...and my foster-brother, Cay, guarding it. Now what have you done to him? ... Percival,” he nodded to another, “go check on Cay while we hold him here.”

It took nearly twenty minutes for Percival to dash down the cliff to Cay’s hiding post and to climb, puffing, back up. Aurion’s outstretched arms felt like lead weights. Most of the fighters rested the tips of their heavy swords on the ground, but kept both hands on their hilts.

“Cay’s fine,” Percival puffed, confusion in his voice. “He says he’s seen no one pass...”

“...Who... are... you!?” the blond leader called as loudly as he dared, unsure whether to order a charge or retreat. “What are you,” he whispered.

“Let’s just say,” Aurion slowly lowered his aching arms, but kept his palms open and visible, “that I come from another time ... and place. Perhaps I came to help your cause.”

“What do you know of our cause?” from the one behind the leader.

“Only what your eyes tell me: that you believe in what you fight for...” the thought of his own vanquished world fled through Aurion’s mind, “...That you’re greatly outnumbered; And that I believe in good men banding together in worthy causes. Could you, perhaps, use some help?”

“He doesn’t look Saxon,” one of them ventured. The leader lowered his sword and stepped toward Aurion.

As he approached, Aurion noted that he looked fifteen, maybe seventeen, years old, but there was something in his step, in his demeanor, that confirmed the authority in his voice – And implied far more battle experience than Aurion ever wished to accumulate.

“And perhaps,” Aurion continued, contriving hardly at all, “when I have fought for your cause, you will aid me in mine. For I am freshly thrust from my own land, and my father’s throne, by invaders from another worl... eh... land. I can offer you little, but honest friendship and my poor weapons; and ask only the same, of you, in return... And, if you don’t mind, a little stew.”

With a laugh, the leader stopped and put up his sword. Others did the same. “Our stew you shall have,” he said warmly. “It is the due of any traveler.

“Our friendship, you will have to earn.

“My name is Artoris,” the leader continued, as they took places by the fire. Percival scooped stew with a cracked, wooden ladle from a fire-blackened pot and dumped a glop onto a piece of untreated wood that had been partially hollowed to make a bowl. He handed it to Aurion, as Artoris continued, “In the local dialect, my name would translate to ‘Arthyr’. My ancestors served as officers of the Roman legions who once ruled this land of the Britons. When they pulled back, my grandfathers maintained the civilized, the Roman, way of life in this Province for the last two hundred years.

“But now,” Arthyr- Artoris pointed toward the edge of their cliff, “uncivilized hoards from across this narrow channel of ocean, all that separates us from yonder continent of

Europe, swarm across by the thousands in crude longboats, land on our shores to pillage, rape, and burn. And, lately, to stay. They build settlements on our coasts and threaten us for a dozen leagues inland. We petty kings who claim to rule the provinces of this island are no match for their strength ... those cursed, fair-haired giants,” he gnashed his teeth and ground one fist into the palm of his other hand, “with muscles like horses, and battle axes of black iron forged in Hades ... nor can we match their numbers, anymore.

“So we’re pushed back with each new fighting season, until here you see us, the remnants of the pride of Rome, tattered and scraggly, shivering on this rock, like a pack of cornered wolves, afraid to light a bold fire, praying that the Saxons can’t find us until some miracle drops out of the heavens to save us. Now, tell me, Stranger, what would make you fool enough to cast your lot and life with such as we?”

“Sympathy,” answered Aurion at once, “for your cause ... and for mine. Now, let’s talk strategy.”

“Hah!” answered Artoris. “Strategy is for generals with legions at their backs – not for an out-numbered, poorly-armed, barely-disciplined pack of fugitives.”

“Can your men fight?” Aurion asked.

“Can they fight?” Artoris roared. “Why, each man here could swing a broadsword before he learned to walk ... learned to ride before he was weaned... Yes, they can fight. But we’re tired ... our horses gone ... and our strength... “ his words trailed off.

“Well, then,” said Aurion with a sly smile. “It’s time for one of your miracles to drop from the sky.”

INTERLUDE I

“You who have dreams born in the bone
Who are not alone, going alone,
Riding in from the winds four ways,
Riddle for me these mysteries—
You who have dreams borne in the bone,
Who are not alone, going alone...”

—Maxwell Anderson

Introduction to *You Who Have Dreams*

“Don’t misunderstand when I talk about Faith. I would not step in front of someone’s laser cannon armed only with my Faith. The Lord provides us with tools. In war, Faith is a tool. It is like other tools, only more so.

“For example, back on Terrastatum, during the Second Great War.... Hmm... here it is.” He reached for dusty volume as he spoke, brushed the dust off with his sleeve, and continued, “... in a country called...” he squinted at the page, and stuttered, “...Ay-tee-oh-pia ... or was it Ee-tay-oh-pia? ... Anyway, soldiers there, clad in nothing but loin-cloths, met the invading tanks of Ay-tal-ia with only wooden spears. It was flesh against steel, and they were crushed within hours. They were pagans.

“But when those same tanks rolled into Es-pag-ne,” his finger underlined each syllable as he spoke, “the Espagniards prayed. And the Lord gave them a plan.

“By night, they took two sticks of dynamite and a magnet, and tied them together with ordinary string. By day, during battle, each ‘*dynamitero*’ would approach a tank from its blindside, smoking a cigarette. If the arrogant Masters of Technology inside the tanks saw the *dynamitero* at all, they probably laughed at what they considered a suicide ritual. Once again, they thought, flesh against steel.

“But at the last moment, the *dynamitero* would throw himself on the ground, right between the giant steel treads of the tank. As the tank rolled ‘safely’ above him, he huddled safely beneath. Then he slapped a magnet onto the underbelly of the tank, and lit the fuse to the dynamite with his cigarette. As the tank rolled past him, he scurried to safety. A few seconds later, the tank was blown to scrap metal.

“There are lessons in history. That’s why we study it.

“And there is life, and power, in Faith.”

FROM EPISODE THE THIRD

“The only easy day
was yesterday.”
U.S. Marine Recruiting Poster

Aurion stood at the edge of the cliff that overlooked the Saxon camp. Arthyr-Artoris half-crouched next to him.

“Remain hidden,” Artoris cautioned. “If they spot our camp, they’ll be roasting *us* on their spits tomorrow night.”

“Commy,” Aurion said softly, activating his combelt link to the ship’s computer, “please estimate the number of armed humans below. Round numbers.”

“Four thousand, three hundred armed males,” she purred, “plus 300 support personnel. And ten females of unknown function.”

“Their armaments?” he asked.

“As your companions,” she returned: “The men have primitive hacking weapons, cutting tools, and some short wooden projectiles with metal tips launched by string from a supple stick; your ancestors called them ‘arrows’. The women have only their...”

“Who answers you?” Artoris looked around, every-which way.

“A guide,” Aurion answered. “Artoris, do you have a man who speaks the Saxons’ language?”

“Yes,” Artoris said, “but...?”

“Please call him to us.”

Artoris beckoned to one of his knights. “Bedivere comes from the North. The Saxons and Norsemen pillaged his village so regularly that his people had to learn their languages to ransom each other.”

Aurion nodded. “Bedivere, can you translate, into Saxon, the message I’m about to give you?”

Bedivere looked to Artoris, who nodded. Then Bedivere did likewise.

“Good,” Aurion repeated. “But first,” he looked at Artoris, “could you point out their leader?”

“In daylight, I could,” Artoris replied. “But not in this darkness.”

Aurion unsnapped a pocket on his belt and pulled out a pair of infrareds. “Here,” he slipped the ear-pieces through Artoris’ hair, “try these. Now tell me what you see.”

“Why,... it’s like green daylight... What sorcery is this?”

“Ask me later,” Aurion said. “Right now, just tell me what you see.”

“Hmmm,... over there!” Artoris pointed. “The stocky one, near the center of that circle, with the ermine-lined cape.”

Aurion stood behind Artoris and looked over his shoulder, sighting along the arm and the finger that pointed. “All right,” he said, “I’m going to ‘point’ to him with a thin beam of red light. Let me know if my light hits the right man.”

Aurion flipped his combelt’s touch-switch back to aim and tried to follow, by resting his own finger on top of Artoris’, to where Artoris pointed. When he thought he had the right Saxon, he squeezed the palmer. The laser beam made a tiny, red spot on the armor of a Saxon.

Already taken with the magic of the infrareds, Artoris was ready for anything. “No, No,” he said excitedly, a little too loudly, “the man next to him. Yes! Yes, that’s Hengst!”

Bedivere, on the other hand, fell back in fright.

“He... he has fire shooting from his fingers...!?” Bedivere cried, pointing harmlessly.

“Commy,” Aurion said softly, “stand by to amplify the voice three feet to my left. Direct it to the barbarians below. Give it thunderous overtones and lots of echo. Come back here, Bedivere; I’m on your side. Now, speak your name softly.” He placed his left arm on Bedivere’s right shoulder. “Commy, lock in on the next voice.”

Bedivere stammered out his name. If Aurion hadn’t known better, he would have sworn that he heard Commy chuckle.



One withered, crisp, brown oak leaf blew past Arthyr’s boots, over the edge of the cliff, and drifted slowly down to the frozen plain below. From that frozen plain rose three stone-cold cliffs, steep and dark and silent. Their semi-circular, orange-clay sides made a bowl that rimmed the frigid plain on three sides. Arthyr and his band stood atop one cliff; between the other two, behind the naked backs of the armored Saxons, one who listened might hear cold, salt spray crash against dull, gray boulders.

The leaf lighted within that bowl of ice-cold rocks, a spear-throw from the frigid harbor, crushed by a sea of Saxon warriors who milled about their sprawling camp on the frozen plain. The ice-blown darkness surrounded them, except near the scattered crackle of yellow-orange flames, where the huge, blond men sat – some hunched on fallen logs and some merely squatted on their hide-covered haunches – while the fire leapt and the roasting meat crackled as it spit its blood and fat into their fires.

The cold air tingled against naked, sinewy biceps, so the men huddled closer to the fire and each other, exchanging broken-toothed grins and stamping their sandals into the dust.

When fierce blue eyes met, each man nodded his head and issued a whoop or a grunt, for the fire and the memory of recent battles flamed their spirits and the smell of blood

lay in their nostrils and they knew that they had their prey at bay and that the next day or the day after would rid them of the nuisance that checked their invasion, their swarm, into the land that they coveted.

They pulled their meat, still dripping, from the fire, with hands that barely felt the heat, and tore cooked limbs from winter carcasses, and bad teeth sank deep into lean, hot, roasted flesh. And the few who saw the thin streak of red light that shot momentarily through the camp wondered how fireflies flew in December.

On the rise, where Hengst's tent of rough hides flapped in the sea-borne wind, a boy of twelve, with sandy, shag-cut hair, sat down to the battle log. He picked up two sticks, each covered, at the far end, with a flap of leather, stuffed with lamb's wool and bound with a leather thong, to make a pommel for his drum. Slowly, he began to beat.

His beating slipped into an insinuating rhythm as, from the tent of Auguar, high priest of Wodan, god of thunders, slipped from his tent the Maiden of the Sacred Fires...

...Long, bare legs placed, to the delicate rhythm, daintily, upon the leather rug.

Eyes turned and low growls caught in four thousand throats gone suddenly dry. And through the cold, underneath worn loincloths, parts of bodies throbbed, growing suddenly warm as the tempo picked up, as anklets jangled on her naked calves and her muscular thighs orange with cold and the gleam of the fire as she quivered and thumped to the pulse of the drum.

And her jeweled navel swung to the pulsating rhythm, and her firm dancer's breasts flung nearly free of the suede band that held them.

Her eyes, painted with large and dark ellipses, seemed to stare at each viewer and each man knew that her twisted smile of hunger was meant for him.

Her hair, like the flax they trampled in the fields back home, flew every which way as she tossed her head to the thumping, and the sparkling gold chain jumped about her neck.

Auguar smiled. For the lust she kindled would smolder, unsated, in their loins overnight. And his fighters would awaken with fire in their bodies and a rage to smash something; and they would scour the countryside for the last British fighters.

And when his men found the remnants of Artorius' army, then the fire in their limbs would explode against the bones of the enemy. Then they would own this little island.

Then the god, Wodan, would be happy. Meanwhile, tonight, Auguar would keep the Maiden of the Fire warm.

"Warriors of Saxony," Bedivere's slow, heavy voice thundered through the sky above them, echoing off the cliffs around them and rumbling even through their bones, "you displease Wodan greatly: You have forsaken My shrines in the land of your birth; you leave My cold alters barren of sweet offerings; you cross hostile seas to waste your blood on foreign soil.

"Your leaders push you astray. Your priests prove false unto Me! Race back across the sea; return home at first light, or taste My fury for your continued folly! Taste of the wrath of Wodan!"

As he finished speaking, Bedivere crossed his fingers – right forefinger over his left – to ward off evil. “Zounds!” he whispered, “I should have never agreed to pretend to be a god!”

Unhearing, Aurion aimed his index finger at the crowd on the dais in the valley below. There was milling and muttering. Hengst and his priest exchanged terrified looks. The priest swallowed hard. It was up to him. The crowd in front of Hengst cleared for a moment and Aurion’s middle fingers squeezed the palmer as Auguar, high priest, stepped forward to shout, “Men of Sax–...,” but the thin, red beam from the sky struck between his eyes and Auguar tumbled mute and dead amongst them.

“Drat,” said Aurion. “Got the wrong one.”

“Even better,” Artorius still wore the infrareds, “you killed their high priest. What better way to throw the fear of their gods into superstitious men.”

“Commy,” Aurion said, “fire one laserblast against the far cliff. And accompany it with the sound of thunder. Make it sound as if the heavens are cracking.”

Even Aurion trembled, as the huge laser flashed through the night, chips of rock exploded from the cliff, and the very precipice they stood on shook from the sound waves. The laser blast must have struck magnesium on the far cliff, for it splattered and flared against the rock and showered intense, green metal sparks on the Saxons who watched, frozen in terror beneath.

“Thus,” Aurion whispered to himself, “can the physical attacker become the psychological defender. Aurie, you’ve taught yourself a lesson, I think.”



FROM EPISODE THE FOURTH

As his focus returned to those around him, Aurion noticed that now even Artorius hung back, the infrareds dangling from one ear, too much white showing in his widened eyes.

“Who ... or what ... are you?”

“Just a kid,” Aurion answered, “...or ... almost a man ... like yourself ... who just happens to come from a world more advanced than yours. Like that eye-aid you just wore, everything I have just shown you has a logical, scientific explanation.”

“Scientif... what?” Cay had run up the hill from his guard post, at the commotion. “Who’s he?”

“Well, let me explain,” Aurion said. “If I put a pinch of dust on this rock, and then take a drop of water from your canteen and place it on top of that speck of dust, and mix them, so you don’t see the speck of dust anymore, have I made that dust disappear?”

“Well, no,” Ambrosius answered. “Water just does that.”

“Exactly,” Aurion nodded. “Water dissolves dirt. Is that magic?”

Aurion noted a general shaking of heads. “Now, if I take a small drawing, a picture, and place that same drop of water upon it, you will find that that part of the drawing just under the drop looks bigger. Have I made magic this time?”

No answer came.

“Of course not,” Aurion saw that he’d have to keep both sides of this conversation going. “I’ve simply used what I know about nature to my advantage. That’s science. And everything you’ve seen me do tonight, and everything you will see me do on your behalf tomorrow, is no more than applied science.”

This time, as he looked around with a smile, the looks he got staring back were less certain. More than once, he caught sight of crossed forefingers.

“Well, at least...” Artorius began, “whatever it is, you will be using it on our side. Let’s be glad of that.”

“But what,” Percival ventured, “if he had happened upon the Saxons first? Would he now be using that same magic against us? What do we know about him? How can we trust him?”

Aurion thought the general murmur would turn against him, when an older man stepped forward. He dressed, not in armor, but in a long, flowing robe and tall, conical hat. In his left hand, a tall oak staff with a crown of silver steadied his walk. Atop the silver crown, Aurion noted a huge, rather stylized, silver bird.

“The Mystery has ways,” he crackled in a voice that silenced all murmuring, “of guiding a good force to the side of Good.”

He shuffled over to Aurion's side. Artorius joined him.

"You have heard his speech," Merthwyn continued. "You have seen his deed. Recognize a gift of Mystery when you meet one. And be grateful that some of your prayers have been answered. It seems."

As he spoke the last, he looked up, squinting at the newcomer. "I, too, have dabbled in science, ah, what did you say your name was? But until tonight, I could only guess at how much there remains to learn. When Arthyr gives us leave, you and I shall have much to discuss."

"But not tonight," Arthyr-Artorius declared firmly. "Our guest was right when he said that there is strategy to discuss. Cay, Percival, Bedivere, join us. Garth, take young Galahad and replace Cay at guard. The rest of you, see to your weapons, and then get what sleep you may. It looks," he nodded, with a half-smile, "that we might have need of your full strengths tomorrow."

Five warriors and one "scientist" retired to a smaller fire backed against the peak of the rock upon which they camped. As adrenaline flowed now out of tired limbs, the numbing cold closed in around them, while they talked of strategies, of how 126 men might out-fight four thousand. Pictures scratched in the dirt became hard to see through tired eyes, and men shivered with wavering attention ...

• • •

FROM EPISODE THE FIFTH

Ninety minutes before dawn, Bedivere spoke again, more confidently, into the amplifier.

“Men of Saxon: I see no preparations for your return home. *Fear My wrath.* Leave this soil *now*, while I grant you your ships. For if you tarry past sunrise, witness what shall be your fate:...”

With that introduction, Aurion launched the mini-fighter from the cliff with a roar and a ribbon of yellow flame. He circled three times above the Saxon encampment and then made a bee-line for the harbor. From 100 feet in the air, he locked Commy’s heat-sensors onto the firepot aboard the smallest of the wooden longboats that lay anchored, just off the beach.

“Play back sounds of severe electrical storms through all speakers,” Aurion said as he pulled up and banked away.

A small crew kept watch on each longboat. They huddled in fear about the small guard-fires on their open decks as they saw a huge, night-blue beast with a sky-blue underbelly launch itself into the air and circle the encampment. Fear turned to horror as the monster dove right for them. Then, from 6 rods above the smallest boat, the monster spat out a streak of flame, followed by a mighty roar. The flame raced down from the sky, straight into the guard-fire, which leapt up and answered in an explosion of flying metal. White-hot shards ripped through furled sails even three ships away, as ice cold water gurgled up from the gaping hole in the hull of the tiniest longboat, until the cold, black sea water filled its galleys, covered the decks, and hissed the last of the fire out, bubbling around what had been a mast.

As the laser fire first flashed through the air, Bedivere led twenty-five knights, shields latched in a make-shift phalanx, down the steep path and out from the sheltering rocks at the base of the cliff that had nearly been their last refuge.

With blood-curdling cries, they fell upon the Saxons nearest them.

“Attack!” the Saxons shouted. “Attack! The Britons show themselves! They come from hiding! To the cliffs!”

“But the god’s warning!”

Hengst leapt to his feet, short sword high in the air. “First to the Britons!” he screamed above the tumult. “Then home to our gods in glory!”

Some wavered. Others turned toward the cliff and charged at the band of Britons. No man thought of the rear flank...

...Until, with their own cries, out from each of the still-dark caves, Percival and Cay led their two columns to fall upon the Saxon rear.

Arrows rained down on the Saxon horde from the British heights.

And then that dark blue monster that plagued the sky turned lazily from the harbor and bore down, swifter-than-dragonflesh, coughing red-yellow streaks of deadly fire from each of its glistening wings. Flesh evaporated where the fire struck, and screams curdled in mid-air. The slash of sword cut some from behind and thrust of iron phalanx cut through the ranks before. Hellfire rained from the thing in the skies and men screamed and died as thunder echoed against every cliff...

This is too easy, Aurion thought. It's like a video-arcade with no monsters.

...while below, grown men threw down spears and swords and ran barefoot, with wide nostrils, skin soaked with the scent of fear, for the safety of their ships....

...Up onto gangplanks, spilling oars and weaker men into icy water as they pulled against rusty oarlocks to gain the safety of the sea.

FROM EPISODE THE SIXTH

Throughout the morning, many more bands crossed the plains to pledge their lives and strength of arm to Artorius ' cause. By dark, their troop numbered nearly 170 and, by week's end, had swelled to nearly three hundred men at arms.

With them, Arthyr moved to secure the pocket of land he had reclaimed. In conference with Bedivere, Aurion, and Merthwyn, he set up a primitive government to administer the rule he now justifiably claimed.

In the old Roman custom, they threw a wine-colored cloth upon the ground and sat in a circle when they dined or governed.

With Arthyr's new legitimacy, came access to blacksmiths and armorers. And, by month's end, as the first heads of multi-colored crocuses pierced the frozen soil, and the morning sun grew strong enough to tingle the skin on the back of an un-gloved hand, Artorius ' sorry band had transformed into a small, but effective force at arms.

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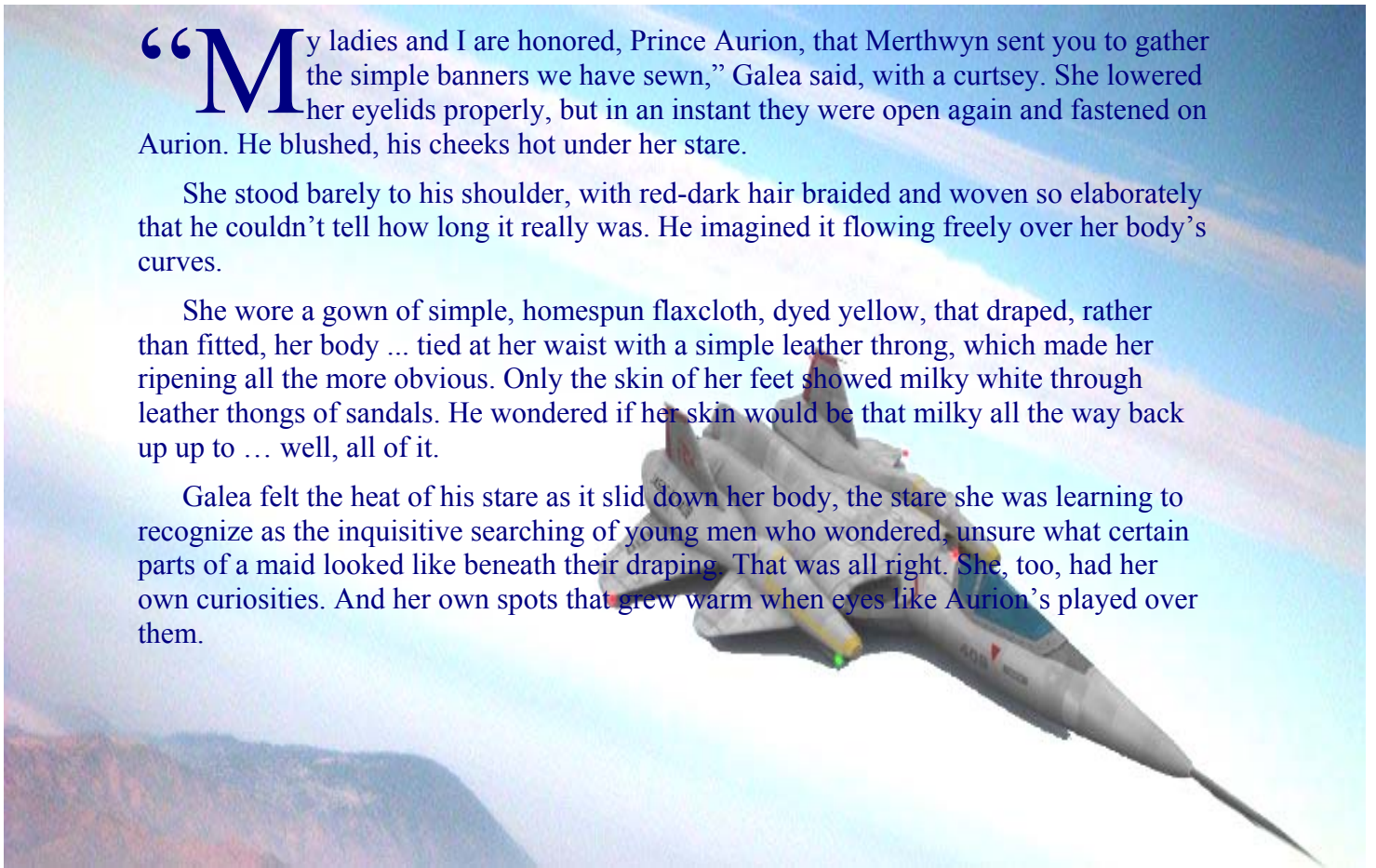
FROM EPISODE THE SEVENTH

“My ladies and I are honored, Prince Aurion, that Merthwyn sent you to gather the simple banners we have sewn,” Galea said, with a curtsy. She lowered her eyelids properly, but in an instant they were open again and fastened on Aurion. He blushed, his cheeks hot under her stare.

She stood barely to his shoulder, with red-dark hair braided and woven so elaborately that he couldn't tell how long it really was. He imagined it flowing freely over her body's curves.

She wore a gown of simple, homespun flaxcloth, dyed yellow, that draped, rather than fitted, her body ... tied at her waist with a simple leather throng, which made her ripening all the more obvious. Only the skin of her feet showed milky white through leather thongs of sandals. He wondered if her skin would be that milky all the way back up up to ... well, all of it.

Galea felt the heat of his stare as it slid down her body, the stare she was learning to recognize as the inquisitive searching of young men who wondered, unsure what certain parts of a maid looked like beneath their draping. That was all right. She, too, had her own curiosities. And her own spots that grew warm when eyes like Aurion's played over them.



He flushed when her mischievous grin caught his eyes. And when she lowered her eyes again, in the ritual (only) of modesty, the heat spread far down inside him.

The other girls sewing at the table, or pretending to, sensed the magic flying around them and, under the pretense of holding up cloth for viewing, exchanged smirks and stifled giggles.

Boldly, Galea picked up a neatly-folded cloth of burgundy. She held it, with both hands, just above her waist, held her head and shoulders high. As she inhaled, long and slowly, she felt her dress rise against her breasts. She took a step forward.

Aurion both sensed and saw the rising of her dress, as he tried, for a moment, to keep his eyes on hers, but his throat went dry as he swallowed.

Galea tingled from the warmth of his stare as she walked toward him. How his clothes fitted him ... except ... why the bulging in his pants?

“I have the first banner, as Lord Cawdor requested,” she said softly, stopping but inches from him. She stood straight, her breath fully inhaled, and raised the folded flag slightly.

“I...um...thank,” Aurion began, but Galea seemed to drop the flag and they both stumbled forward to catch it till fumbling hands grasped and caught each other’s.

They stood there a moment, hands touching, holding the flag together, her large, liquid brown eyes looking up into his misty, mysterious grays.

“I..um...” he began to step back.

“Let me carry it,” she said, and led the way from the room. Aurion followed. He watched as they walked how her hips flowed so smoothly, against the rough cloth and the sway of her muscles beneath her clothes looked like two little kittens tumbling around in a burlap sack, until, at the end of the hallway, she stopped and turned and started to hand him the flag, but she let the flag slip and pulled it around them. He lowered his head and she raised full, soft lips and his pressed against hers and then all of him against her and his hand on her breast as she pulled her arms around his neck. Her lips burned with a fire that seared down deeper than she wanted it to go.

“Ahh, Aurion, there you are. Yes, Galea, ah the flag came out perfect,” Merthwyn said. “Yes, just what I had in mind. Let’s show it to Ambrosius. The golden dragon looks perfect. Galea, can your women make another ... a spare ...just in case we need to raise another dragon?”

“Prince Aurion and I were just raising one, m’Lord.”



Fires dotted the plain for a league on either side. Men huddled around the fires, rubbing hands to stay warm. Yet excitement rode upon the air. For Arthyr’s meinie had swelled to over five hundred men. More came everyday as news of Arthyr’s victory

spread. Other pledges of fealty came from lords further away: gifts sent by swift messengers – who rode through the late winter wind, whipping foam-flanked steeds whose hooves pounded into the green-brown earth – bearing golden rings with crudely carved crests that passed a clear message between men unlettered.

And besides, some small, furry, ground beast had emerged from its winter hole the day before and not seen its shadow.

FROM EPISODE THE TENTH

“We’re trying to find the place in Merthwyn’s vision,” Aurion said briskly. “I might find help there. Something I need to free my planet. Magnify this field again, another five-fold. Better make that ten-fold.”

“Training center of Paternium is restricted,” Commy responded as she magnified the heads-up viewer. “All information about requested site is restricted. Key ring required.”

“I wasn’t asking you for.... How did you know what I was looking for? And what do you mean, ‘key ring’?”

A small section of the ship’s lower dashboard slid forward and a small drawer opened. “Key ring required for access to Paternium information.”

“Hey, that section of the dash isn’t supposed to... Hmm.” Aurion looked at the elaborate, curving symbol on the rear wall of small drawer that had just opened. He took the ring from the chain around his neck and looked at the face of it. Then he turned it around.

“Merthwyn,” he cried, “I’ve been looking down at this ring... from the top. That’s upside down to the way you would see it on my finger. Look, turn it around, and the... whatever it is on the face... it looks like an ancient rune... matches the backdrop of this drawer!”

“Key ring required for access...” Commy began to repeat.

“Alright, alright!” Aurion said. “I’m putting it in.”

As he touched the face of Pater Aknahton’s ring to its matching face on the rear of the drawer, a slight vacuum sucked the ring in and held the stones together.

“Level 9 access acceded,” Commy said. “The information you requested now available and on-line.”

“Where’s the Paternium’s home planet?”

“That information is not available to level nine access; however, the Paternium’s main training planet is now visible in the cluster on the heads-up display. Shall I highlight it for you?”

“The what...?” Aurion and Merthwyn echoed.

“The Paternium,” Commy purred. “Interstellar Priesthood of the Ancient Mysteries. Shall I magnify it enough to see?”

“What the blazes do you think we’ve been...”

“Never mind,” Merthwyn patted Aurion’s arm, “just tell her ‘yes’.”

“Definitely,” Aurion barked. “And then lay in shortest course to that star.”

“Done, Prince Aurion.” Commy’s unflappable, silky voice answered.

“Well, now,” Merthwyn leaned back in his lounge. “I’d best be letting you leave. But ahh, how my old bones are going to miss this chair.”

• • •

The ship’s engines roared back to life, and Commy flung the mini-fighter into the high sling-shot orbit that would gather momentum from the Earth’s gravity and hurl them toward the one star that offered Aurion a ray of hope.

“Amazing,” Merthwyn kept muttering as he stood next to Arthyr and waved to the long streak of blue light in the night sky. “Amazing.”

INTERLUDE II

“Young men [/women] are fitter to invent than to judge,
fitter for execution than for counsel,
fitter for new projects than settled business.”
-- *Sir Francis Bacon*

“My name is
Li’a Xci
Sung, also
known as
First Daughter Li’a.
Sometimes I am called Tiger
Kitten. I am sixteen
revolutions of the mother-
planet in age.

And, with this essay, I am
applying to the Headmistress
for formal admission to The
Academy of Spiritual
Defense.

“My mother, as you
know, was Major Persimmon
Li’a, before she gave birth to
a boy child and, therefore, as
is required in such cases,
retired beneath the veil of a
lady of the Dhao, where she
still serves us admirably. I
hope to follow in her tiny
footsteps, although I intend
to avoid her shame and
produce only girl children, by
means known to your
Ladyship.



“As regards my fitness for this position, I am slender of build, although the Master of Eunuchs swears that I show good promise. He has cast stones and predicts that I shall reach nearly 1900 cm tall and full ripeness during my 17th revolution. I have begun my life-long worship of the Moon Lady, and my body already responds to her cycles.

“The Mistress of Calligraphy approves of my skill with the brush and my form. At her suggestion, I offer the humble poem attached to this application, which I have printed carefully on a simusilk scroll. I pray that it will not offend your noble sensibilities, and even dare hope that it may please you.

“My other academic studies receive generally favorable reports, although I do have trouble computing cube roots above the number 27 in my head.

“At present, I wear the green belt of our Order. Although I did manage, in my last examination, to stop the charge of the simulated rinosaur with my first blow, Instructress said that my hand movements lacked elegance and so denied my advancement this year. I work with my Assigned Senior Sister daily, both to toughen my hands (I did bruise my palm in that exercise) and to refine my form, and trust to be ready for re-examination before the Academy reopens this fall.”

The Headmistress laid the application on her green jade table. Yes, she knew the girl.

The Headmistress chuckled. Apt to be very like her mother, although hopefully more careful. And she had seen the Head Eunuch’s report, projecting that the girl would be ready for the assault on the Paternium by the summer of her seventeenth revolution of the planet. Ready she will be, indeed. Tall and golden; Ripe and full. The essence of the force of yin, with a fullness of body that will set their jade stalks a-twiddle.

The Headmistress selected her favorite writing brush and dipped it into the fresh, black ink.

With quick, precise movements she drew a pictograph at the bottom of Xci’s application.

“**ACCEPTED,**” it said.

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Follow the daily adventures of Prince Aurion, the lovely Samaurae Xci, the lizard-princess Merwissas, the Masters of the Paternium, and the warriors they enlist in their battle to wrest control of Aurion's star system from the grip of the Malphescium.

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