



Crockett's Spirit

Impavidus Scribere Veritas — The Brave Write the Truth



Volume 5 Issue 12

Merry Christmas

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Fiction

Star Wars - Ashi's Shame

Chapter 16: Atonement

by LT Ashinaga

Moments earlier:

Travis and Grask pushed their hostages inside the city with guns firmly held against the neck of each child. People all over the place screamed and ran away from them, several city security guards approached but stopped when they saw the hostages.

"Stop and release the children," the captain of the guard commanded.

Travis laughed and pointed his rifle up into the sky, firing it twice to get attention. "Don't do anything stupid or we shoot." He put the gun back against the kid's neck.

The captain pointed to his men and by his signal, they formed a line across the street and kept the enemy from going any further. However, they didn't approach for fear of hurting the hostages. After they got into position the captain calmly asked, "What are your demands?"

Travis looked around at all the cats. "Which one of you is the Jedi?"

The whole regiment of guards gave him bewildered and confused looks. The captain answered, "There aren't any Jedi here. I don't think there are any Jedi on Jahala, they're all dead."

Travis got angry and pushed the gun into the kid's neck hard, making her cry. "Don't play stupid! I know you are hiding a Jedi. Where is he?!"

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Fiction

Vanthea: Tyranny's Dawn

Book 2 - EVOR L'RAHK - Part 1

by LTJG Star Eagle

PLUMES OF DARK and acrid smoke rose from the city of Marjal. The Children of Ahn'un, led by the Foreseer, had breached the gate half a day before and were now laying waste to the enemies of the Faith. As the casualties rose, most of the hapless inhabitants fled the streets for any cover they could find, any shelter that could hide them from the hoard of crazed zealots that were at this very moment taking control of the city—thieves, beggars and all.

Evor L'rahk fell to his knees after he used the power of the Foreseer to smite yet another small group of people.

Luda came to his side, running past the carnage in the middle of the main avenue, the way that would eventually lead them to the Great Bank.

"I tire," he spoke quietly. "The power...it drains the body...though their fear gives momentary strength," he finished.

"The fear of the spirits?" she asked him.

"Of course not;" he shot back, "it's the fear of those who are about to die."

She helped bring him to his feet. "My lord, you need nourishment," she said, changing the subject.

A boy ran into the street. He saw Luda and L'rahk as the Foreseer, and he abruptly froze, his eyes fixed in uncertainty.

Luda motioned for the boy to come over, a disheveled youngster of seven or eight years, by Luda's guess. She spoke to him kindly but firmly, "Please, boy! Find some sweet wine and some bread for my master, and bring it here right away!" She pulled a coin from her pocket and gave it to him, adding "And you may keep whatever change is given. Now please go!"

Luda followed the boy with her eyes until he disappeared into the labyrinth of the city. She then focused her attention on L'rahk, who reached out to her as he began his collapse to the street. She

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The captain became nervous with the way the gun was now digging into the fur of the girl. "Look, we don't have any Jedi here. I'm sorry. Don't hurt our children over something as foolish as this." He was now worried that these men were insane and entirely unreasonable for negotiation.

Ashi was listening up against the door with his ear pressed into the metal. The combination of the Jahalan heightened sense of hearing and the metals good resonance made this conversation very clear. He did not allow the woman to listen as well, knowing it would only panic her all the more.

"What do you hear? What's going on?" She pleaded.

Ashi closed his eyes and put both hands on the door. "I can hear them. They're close to us. He's negotiating with someone in the city."

"Well, are they getting what they want? Oh, please tell me they're listening to reason." She controlled herself pretty well, though she was about to pick every last hair out of the end of her own tail.

Ashi now turned his face and placed his forehead against the door as well as both palms. He could sense the force around the city. Just like when he looked into Elbor to sense the children in the ship, he was sensing every person standing near this door. There was a line of Jahalan's and the two mercenaries with the kids. He focused his senses on the one who seemed to be moving the most, who was full of anger and malice. He could feel the gun in the man's hand.

Outside:

Trevis barked, "For the last time! Hand over the Jedi or the kids are dead."

The captain boldly took a few steps closer, his hands held up so not to be threatening. "I can see that you are serious. Come back with us to the palace and we can discuss your demands with the chief. I cannot resolve this here, I don't know about a Jedi, but Chief Askos might."

"I see that you're just going to try and trick us into walking into your fortified stronghold. I'll have to show you how serious we are." He held the blaster out a few inches and pulled the trigger. At the same time as he pulled the trigger the blaster was shoved away slightly and the laser missed her and only burnt the ground. Everyone around the area all screamed and jumped, but they became deadly silent when they realized he hadn't killed the girl. He got angrier and tried again, this time, the blaster was shoved so hard that his arm was thrust upward and he shot at the sky. Now he knew this wasn't just bad shooting. "Damnit, the Jedi is stopping me. You wanna try me!?" Trevis suddenly shoved the girl over to Grask and said, "Take her. Kill her when I tell you."

Grask rapped a lanky arm around both kids and put his blaster their their heads. He crouched down and almost hid behind them out of his own fear.

Trevis, now free of holding a child, walked around

with his blaster held up. He scanned the crowds. "Wanna try that again? Huh? I'll start shooting and you can't stop them all. Show yourself!" He unwittingly was now standing directly in front of a cobblestone wall, where some of the stones had trickled off.

The wall exploded outward and he was thrown across the street along with rocks and an old metal door that flipped over and then slid to a stop up against a far building.

A person flew out of the opening and flipped through the air. He landed in the middle of this scene with both of his swords held out. Ashi smiled as he looked down at Trevis' blaster on the ground at his feet. With a quick stab, he destroyed the weapon while its owner gathered himself across the way. Pointing a blade at Grask he said, "Let them go."

Trevis coughed and the yelled, "Kill the kids!"

Grask was breathing quickly and in panic. His hand shook and his eyes darted between Trevis and the Jedi. He finally pushed the kids away and then held up his hands in front of his face.

"Grask, you coward!" Trevis got to his feet and pulled out a small orb.

Ashi quickly shoved Grask to the ground with a force push and then dashed at Trevis.

Trevis held up the orb. "Don't or I'll set it off."

Ashi stopped, now getting a good look at the object. The other Jahalan's did not quite know what this was, but Ashi had seen these before while training on the field with Master Roh.

Trevis confidently walked toward Ashi. "If I turn this on, no one can turn it off. In five seconds, this city will be a smoking crater." The crowds watching this began to flee while the guards all took steps backward.

Ashi's vision was coming true, the image of the city crumbling under a massive explosion filled his mind. He calmly asked, "What do you want with me?"

Trevis answered, "Just a body. Your body happens to be worth a sizable fortune from the empire. Now, either you come willingly, or I blow this city to Tatooine."

"You'd be willing to kill yourself just to get some stupid bounty?" Ashi didn't quite grasp that logic.

Trevis' left eye twitched slightly. "It wasn't my first plan. But, I always have a backup. I'm not going back to prison anywhere, and I'm not going home a poor bounty hunter. Besides, I trust that the Jedi in you cannot allow so many to die."

Ashi looked around at the people, his people. He might try to get that bomb out of this man's hand, but if he was a split second too slow, thousands would die in an instant. He dropped his swords and sighed heavily. "I'll go with you."

"Wise choice." Trevis still held up the bomb for insurance but used his now free hand to pull out a small holo-communicator. Turning it on the holographic image of Drak appeared.

Drak demanded, "What is it!?"

"I have the Jedi. I hope you found a ship. We are..." A blaster shot hit Trevis in the head and he went down with the hologram generator sliding across the ground.

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Ashi wasn't expecting this. He looked to the city guards, but they weren't the source of this. He then looked to Grask and found the man's weapon up and shaking. His hand wasn't confident, but the look in his eyes was severe.

"Trevis...Trevis...what's happening?!" Drak was still talking from where the hologram generator had fallen.

Ashi stepped over and turned it off. The city guards found the small orb bomb and made certain it was secure. Ashi looked at the Trandoshan, "Why?"

Grask dropped his weapon and then put his hands up in the air, he said something but it was only in his tongue.

"Molla, Krith!" The mother finally left the doorway of the ancient passage and met her kids in the street with a big hug.

The captain of the city guard approached Ashi. "Sir, are you who they were asking about?"

Ashi nodded, "Yes."

"I'm Captain Tullis of the Sorkonian city guard." He looked down to the kneeling Trandoshan with his arms still in the air, "Take him away." he commanded to his subordinates.

"Wait." Ashi stopped the guards from apprehending Grask. "I'll accompany him."

"He's just going to the lock-up under the palace."

Ashi took the hand of Grask and helped him to his feet. "I'll see him to your chief. You may assign security with him, but don't lock him away just yet."

Captain Tullis grudgingly agreed. "Fine. You're responsible for him. Trana, Mori, go with him and do not let him out of your sight."

A male and female guard joined them as their escorts through town.

* * * * *

Earlier

Drak finally found the village he remembered from his first encounter with Ashi. It was a hot day and he was tired of walking. But, he knew better than to just walk right in. They probably had his name on a wanted report. In the distance, he saw a small home with a large object behind it. He thought it looked like a covered up old shuttle, but he wasn't sure.

"Come on Trevis, contact me," he muttered, staring at his wrist communicator. His hope was that Trevis and Grask would take care of the Jedi problem and all he would have to do was get a ship to carry the body back to the Empire.

He continued through the dry grassy field as he considered contacting Trevis and getting a progress report. It would be so much easier if he still had his old crew. They all were obedient and prompt. But, they're all dead, thanks to that Jedi.

"Wait...what's that?" He held his hand up to his eyes to shade them from the noon sunlight. A droid came out of the little home and approached the covered object out back. A mechanical door opened up and the droid went inside. "Ah ha, it *is* a ship. Looks

like things are going my way."

His gait toward the shuttle became much more confident and quick. Various ideas of what to do with all that money filled his head. He could just feel those slave girls caressing his arms. Maybe he would even go and purchase one from Jaba himself.

Finally, he made it to the shuttle, the cover's rough spun fabric billowing in the breeze. He took a corner and pulled the cloth free of the craft. It was a broken down relic from the Republic days. Hardly anything compared to the ship that was destroyed at Elbor port. But, it was a ship and that was all that mattered.

Drak opened the back hatch and stepped inside, his small gun held out. "Hello?"

Suddenly R1 beeped loudly and came at him to push him out.

Drak kicked the astromech over. "Don't be stupid. Wow, you're an old thing." He took a large step over the fallen droid and headed for the pilot's seat. A sharp buzz filled his body as he was zapped by R1's stunner. "Why you!" Drak turned around and blasted a hole through R1. The old droid couldn't handle the damage and its circuits overloaded. All of the components on it extended and it beeped loudly until smoke came from the head joints.

With a scoff, Drak returned to his inspection of the old shuttlecraft. "Okay, looks like the navigation has been worked on, weapons are operational, but the power systems are almost dry. Crap, where am I going to get fuel on this backwoods planet?"

Just then his wrist communicator beeped and a holographic image of Trevis came through. The Twi-lek mercenary was on the ground holding up a bomb, but he was smiling. "What is it?" Drak asked.

"I have the Jedi, I hope you found a ship. We are..." Trevis was shot mid-sentence, the sounds of the commotion around him could be heard, but no hologram came through.

"Trevis...Trevis...what is going on?" Drak tapped the recall button to get the hologram working again.

Suddenly a hologram came through, it was transmitting the image of Ashi bending over and picking up the communicator. He turned it off and the signal ended.

Drak tried to get the communication back, but Trevis's device was shut down. It couldn't pick up the signal. "Damn it!" Drak slammed his fist against the wall. "Why can't I get this one man?! I have captured thousands of people. Why is he so hard?!" His glorious fortunes were slipping away right in front of him. He has exhausted all of his personal wealth for this venture and now he probably didn't have so much as a single mercenary left working for him. Trevis was obviously gone and Grask wasn't much to speak of to begin with.

Drak got an awful idea. It might work, but he would be playing a pretty delicate game. He sat down at the copilot's seat and checked the computers onboard communicator. He set it to a broad signal and then hooked his own communicator to it. It was his final card to play, but it was going to be worth it in the end.

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steadied him as he fell. She knelt near him and sat herself in the street. She then placed his head in her lap, reaching over his right arm to hold it.

"This body betrays them," whispered L'rahk in frustration.

"No, my lord," responded Luda. "It is their powers that betray your body."

He gave her a questioning look.

"It is as I have suspected," she began explaining. "While possessing a vessel allows them to manifest their powers with great ease, the body of that vessel—any vessel—will eventually begin to fight those powers. They are not of this world; they are foreign, borne across some vast distance only a god could fathom. Our bodies, being a part of this world, will resist their powers until they are gone, or..." she trailed off.

"Or the vessel can no longer sustain them," finished L'rahk.

"I am sorry, my lord," she consoled.

L'rahk thought for a long moment. "Is there nothing that can be done to remedy this? Is there no spell or relic that can reconcile flesh and foreign spirit?" he finally asked her.

"Not to my knowledge, I fear," she responded. Then, it was her turn to pause. "But if anyone would have the answer, it would be the wizards in the Magocracy," she added.

The amalgam within L'rahk stirred, manifesting itself to speak to Luda directly. "Wizards?" it asked her.

"Yes," she replied, looking a bit puzzled.

"The one who came to us in our prison—he called himself a wizard," it answered. "He enabled our escape, and he made the way for us to come to your world."

"What type of prison could hold a spirit?" questioned Luda.

"A prison made of spirit—of what you call dreams," it began. "To describe it would be futile. It is beyond your comprehension. Let us just say that our captors controlled our reality. Whenever we attempted to escape, to find a weakness in that particular reality, our captors would change reality itself. We remained imprisoned this way for eons," it finished, its cold eyes gazing off into the bitter contemplation of dark memories.

"How is it you were able to travel here?" asked Luda, eventually piercing the silence.

"We came here by the power of our wills alone," it replied, although of course this was a lie. They, as individual spirits, had absorbed the energies of stars, comets and nebulae to boost their own powers, but as far as it was now concerned, it had willed that, too.

"This wizard made for us a beacon which guided us here," it offered, "but just before we reached the beacon, its light was doused. We were without direction, being so close to our destination. We had to act quickly. That is when we discovered a man who would let us use him as our vessel."

"Ranib," answered Luda, whispering the name so softly. *Oh, Ranib, were you so desperate to live that*

you would condemn so many others to death? she thought to herself. *You pitiful, wretched fool.*

"We must find this wizard," spoke the Foreseer. "We demand to know why the beacon failed us."

"My lord, I have heard that the Spire—what you call the beacon—may have been destroyed some time ago, along with the wizard who summoned you," offered Luda. "However," she assured, "the Magocracy may still have the answers we seek."

"Then they shall also answer for this failure," it replied. It looked up at her directly. "Where is this 'Magocracy?'"

"Far east of here, over a thousand miles away. It resides in the heart of the Obsidian Empire, my lord."

"Then that is our ultimate destination," it said.

Running down the street, the boy returned. He quickly unloaded a wineskin from around his neck with one hand, and he gave Luda a loaf of roundbread that he'd been carrying in the other. After, he produced the change he'd been given and offered it back to her.

"No, child, it belongs to you," said Luda, pushing his hand away.

"I don't want to die," he answered, shocking her. She then realized that this boy knew that they were the epicenter of this attack, and of all the subsequent carnage.

"Your service to the Foreseer will not be forgotten, Child of Ahn'un," she reassured him, smiling. He offered a weak smile in return. "Please remain in case we need any more assistance," she gently asked him. He agreed by remaining exactly where he was.

Luda opened the wineskin for the Foreseer, and then she cradled its head in her hand to help it drink. At first it drank slowly, almost timidly. Within a few seconds, however, it tasted the sweetness in what it was drinking. It guzzled the wine, squeezing the wineskin so that it could retrieve every drop.

"More," it said, its voice stronger.

"There is no more, my lord," Luda replied. "You must eat some bread to help sustain you." She pulled off a piece of the loaf and offered it to him.

"I don't want that. I want more wine!" it argued, pushing the bread away. The boy ran off.

Luda defied the Foreseer, pushing the bread back in its face. "You must eat the bread. You cannot live off wine alone. You need both to survive," she explained. Then, suddenly, a metaphor came to her. She knew this would be the perfect place and time to show the Foreseer what it must do. Then, the entire scenario ran through her memory as if they had already done this. Another dream was coming to fruition, one she had had months ago. The assurance that she was fulfilling destiny gave her the strength to speak truth to power.

"My lord, you survive from the power that the fear of others grants you, is this not so?" she asked.

"Yes, that is true," it replied, a bit suspicious.

Luda held the wineskin. "The fear you crave is like this wine. Both are sweet and intoxicating. They make

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you feel good, for a little while.” She then tossed the wineskin aside. “But if all you have is wine—or fear—then you begin to behave like a fool or a madman. You do things you shall sooner or later regret. Then, the pleasantness is gone, and you soon need more to feel good again.” She put the piece of bread in his hand. “This is also what you need. The bread is good for you. It will strengthen you in ways the wine cannot. It will sustain you even when the wine runs out. It is like—” She was going to use the word “love,” but she decided against it. “--devotion. Give your followers a reason to be devoted to you out of love and gratitude. Only use fear when necessary, against your enemies or to punish lawbreakers.”

The Foreseer stared at her for a moment. It then slowly began to eat the bread. “Fear and devotion,” it murmured in contemplation. “What you are asking me to do is to show kindness and mercy,” it spoke. “I detest such things.”

“But my lord, if you simply take care of your followers and let them take care of one another, they will gladly devote themselves to your laws and your cause. Do you really wish to reach the Magocracy?” she finished.

“Yes, above all else,” it replied, taking another bite of the dry bread.

“Then you will need a great army,” she responded. “With fear alone, you could raise an army of thousands. But with fear *and* devotion, I swear to you: you will have an army ten times as vast.”

The boy returned with another wineskin, quickly giving it to Luda; he dared not touch the other one. Luda gave it to the Foreseer, who opened it and took a sip. It took another bite of bread, and then took another sip. “Perhaps they are both better together,” it said.

“My lord,” explained Luda, “I would never speak for you or defy your authority in front of others. But you wanted me to help you as a guide. Well, this is my guidance. When we proceed to the Guilded Hall of the Great Bank, you must decide what course both you and your religion shall take. Do as you will, my lord, but the way before you is clear.”

The light of the afternoon streamed through the transoms of the Guilded Hall of the Great Bank of Marjal, giving a gleam to the intricate geometric inlays of gold, silver and bronze that adorned the mahogany walls. Each wall showcased slightly different patterns, each one representing a powerful banking or merchant family that had created this bank hundreds of years before.

In the grand chamber stood L'rahk as the Foreseer. At his side were Luda and General Shizaren, who had recently joined them. They faced two groups of people: one, a collection of wealthy bankers, merchants and tradesmen; and the other, a menagerie of priests of the local religions.

“Do you know why Marjal is known as the ‘City of Thieves?’” asked Shizaren, removing his helm.

Luda smiled, already knowing the answer, but she held her tongue so that L'rahk would ask.

Within seconds, he did. “I assumed it was because of all the thieves?”

“Not quite, my lord,” responded the albino. “The true thieves of this city are not the burglars or the pick-pockets, no. The true thieves--” he continued, pointing his spear at the group of bankers, “--are the wealthy and powerful of this city, the ancient merchant families, the moneyhandlers.” He slammed the spear's shaft to the ground. “It is they who have stolen the most from everyone else.”

At this, one of the merchants stepped forward, a rather tall but rotund figure. His tunic bore the same patterns as the geometric designs on the south wall, and strings of gold, silver and bronze adorned his attire in the same fashion as the inlays on the walls. “Begging your pardons,” he began, “but that is simply not an accurate statement.”

Shizaren took a step forward, but L'rahk stuck out his left arm to motion him back. He stopped.

The rotund man continued. “My name is Eron, of the House of Ruhl. My family has been serving the needs of this and many other cities for over six hundred years.” He gestured to the group behind him. “We have made investments in many enterprises which have put those who are willing to work. We helped construct the roads and bridges and walls that serve this city. Much of what we have invested in mercantile endeavors has given us good returns. Are we to suffer for this, my lord?” he asked L'rahk. Then he smiled. “We have also funded the library, granaries and shelters for those without homes. We have done much good for many people both here and abroad. Are we to be punished for this, I ask you?”

Shizaren couldn't help himself anymore. “Perhaps if you'd all pay your workers a wage they could live off of, you wouldn't have to pay for shelters!” he fumed. “Do you even know how many people that the gold and silver on these very walls could house and clothe and feed? You may have done some token good, but you created the gaping wound you are trying to cover with a token bandage!” He spat upon the mahogany floor.

“Enough,” said L'rahk. He gave his wrought-iron staff to Luda, and then he walked forward to join Eron, man to man. Eron took a half-step back, but then he regained his composure.

L'rahk proceeded to speak the Four Truths. He then asked the Four Questions. Instead of demanding an immediate answer though, this time he said something quite different. “Ahn'un is wise and merciful. He gives you one day to make your choice. If you choose to follow His will, you shall all be greatly rewarded.”

Eron spoke. “My lord, this city has seen ages come and go. Empires and armies have advanced and retreated. Even religions take hold and then fade away. All things rise and fall--except for gold. It is the gold which gives rise to empires and armies, gold which outlasts all the ages. If we accept your 'truths' and

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adopt this new religion of yours, all we ask is that you permit us to conduct our business freely and in the same manner as we have done for so very, very long.” He bowed his head toward L'rahk ever so slightly, and then he focused his gaze on him.

L'rahk smiled and took two steps closer to Eron, so close now that the two men could smell one another. L'rahk smelled the bizarre but all-too-common mix of hubris, manipulation and fear. He pressed his fingertips together near his face, then he pointed them out to Eron.

“I offer you a counter-proposal, Eron of Ruhl. You and your associates. If you would all give half of all your worldly goods and finances to the Children of Ahn'un, then He shall let you live.”

He smiled again.

Eron scoffed. “Do you seriously believe we would just give you half of everything we own?”

“Well, sir, I was initially going to demand everything that you own—” he looked around “--all of you. And your deaths would've been a certainty. I think that, under the conditions I have set before you, that this would seem most merciful and fair.”

He kept smiling.

“Merciful and fair?” Eron whined. “Compared to poverty and death? Sir, we do not deserve this. And, we do not accept this.” He folded his arms to emphasize his statement.

Still smiling, L'rahk simply said “So be it,” while the spirits within him summoned his staff from Luda, who let go of it out of sheer surprise. As the orb inside glowed, he pointed the staff toward Eron, whose eyes widened as he tried backing away.

“Enough of this!” spoke L'rahk, sending a bolt of red energy out to the rotund man. It struck him squarely in his chest. He stopped backing away while clutching his chest. Blood soon poured from his mouth, nose and eyes as he knelt down and then finally collapsed.

Eron L'rahk stared at the other great merchants. “So what say you?” he asked, now with a full grin.

A tall and thin elderly woman stepped forth. “If I may, my lord, I speak for the rest of us when I say that Eron was a fool. He paid the fool's price. We shall gladly accept your conditions.”

L'rahk exchanged his grin for a real smile. “Very well. If you swear to take care of all of Ahn'un's children—to clothe, feed and house those who have nothing but their faith—then your generosity will also be rewarded. But I warn you: breaking an oath is a grave sin to Ahn'un. His wrath will be certain and swift,” he finished.

“Of course, my lord,” replied the old woman. The entire group broke into quiet sighs of relief.

L'rahk then turned to the priests and walked to them. They had been whispering among themselves in a huddle until they saw the staff fly into L'rahk's hand. Now they all just stared at the man with untold power.

He stared at them in kind, two women and seven men. Three of them wore robes of purple, while three

others wore yellow cloaks. Two wore light green, and one man wore black. His face was painted white in the fashion of a skull.

Finally, he spoke. “And what to do with you?” he asked.

An older highpriest in purple, an elder but still possessing jet black hair under his cap, held out both hands. “My lord, you say that there is no god but Ahn'un. Yet, we have also been given powers by our own gods. Would you have an explanation for this, sir?”

L'rahk's response was instant. “They are demons masquerading as gods. They are completely false, and Ahn'un will punish them when He deems it the proper time.”

“But what if the gods that we worship are not really gods as you say?” started the older man. “What if they have simply forgotten who and what they really are? Not gods, good sir, but guides—Ahn'un's servants and helpers. After all, you speak of the return of Ahn'un. Has the One True God been gone from here for so long that His servants have forgotten their own stations?”

This was the product of their huddling and whispering: a way out for everybody, hopefully...

Eron L'rahk—and the spirits within him—considered what the priest had to say. At first they did not like this idea, but then it occurred to them that by incorporating these “gods” into the religion of Ahn'un, the spirits might be able to tap into the powers of these native gods as well, powers that could be gained through their own followers and priests.

“You must disavow your own gods as gods. From now on you shall call them 'Divine Servants,' and you must swear fiely to Ahn'un. You must also remove the largest idols in your temples and shrines, and instead you will display this symbol,” he finished, pointing to the symbol at the top of his staff.

“As you have said it, so shall it be done,” replied the older man. “I renounce Isti as my goddess, instead claiming her as a Divine Servant of the One True God, Ahn'un. I--” He began to choke. As the others watched, his choking turned into suffocation, and within moments he lay dead upon the mahogany floor.

The priest in black turned to L'rahk. “You must protect us before we can renounce our gods, highpriest. Put the mark of Ahn'un upon each one of us, and only then can we swear our loyalty to Ahn'un.”

L'rahk summoned the power of the staff, and the powers of the spirits within, to do what the priest in black had requested. Eight streams of yellow light burst from the staff, each one burning a symbol into each priest's forehead. Within seconds, each one possessed a diagonal square with a circle set inside it.

One by one, the priests renounced Isti, and Alikar, and Grilga, and then the priest in black even renounced Death.

Satisfied for now, L'rahk slowly walked back to Luda. Smiling as he whispered into her ear, he said “Just as you said: wine and bread are indeed better together.”

Fiction

The Alfore Encounter - 51

"The Worst is Yet to Come"

by CAPT Two Wolves

Skonn and Janice arrived at their hotel room in just enough time to sonic shower and to get dressed for the reception.

"It's a pity we didn't have more time to explore," Janice said as she unpacked her shoe choices. Skonn's right eyebrow ascended as he watched her unpack six pairs of sandals instead of three.

"I'm a tall woman with big feet, so when I find shoes that are comfortable, stylish, and fit, I try to buy several pairs."

"That is more than several, Janice."

"I know, Skonn. Someday you'll understand," she said as she retired to the bedroom to dress.

Ten minutes later, they were fully dressed and met in the living room. Janice dressed in her traditional Azotan outfit, Skonn dressed in his best Vulcan robes. Janice stopped and stared, her mouth agape.

"My, you look extremely handsome," she managed to say.

"Thank you. And you are also ecstatically pleasing to my eyes," Skonn responded.

"Skonn, why didn't you just say I'm beautiful?"

"I believe I did."

"Is Echo tucked in for the night?"

"Affirmative."

"Anti-spy device sweepers and intrusion devices activated?"

"Affirmative."

"Then we'd better get going, we're burning daylight," Janice said as they headed out the door.

Though they arrived half an hour early, they were required to cue up with the long line of dignitaries entering the venue. The reason, an old fashioned credentials and weapons check.

Ugh, I already don't like this. Can we go back to the hotel? Janice groused to Skonn mentally.

No we cannot, Janice. As a judge, I'm required to attend this event for at least two hours, Skonn replied in kind.

Two hours? Why so long?

That is the calculated amount of time needed to introduce ourselves to and converse with everyone of note.

Leave it to you to calculate exactly how much time it takes to meet and greet everyone. Don't you dare tell them who I am, other than my name. These folks don't need to know that I'm with Starfleet.

As you wish. However, certain persons will be

curious and resort to other means of deducing your identity. Remember, I've been a sole attendee for many years, Skonn cautioned.

You mean facial recognition technology? I'll fix that! Janice thought back, as she pulled the head wrap part of her outfit down and loosely arranged it like a hijab.

"I learned that from Yodi. It gets very hot in India and this comes in very handy when you don't have a hat or an umbrella," Janice explained verbally in response to Skonn's raised eyebrow.

They entered a huge, decorated hall bustling with people. While a twelve piece orchestra played, beings milled about food, drink and dessert tables and chatted in a dizzying array of languages.

"Where do we start?" Janice asked.

"Follow me," Skonn replied.

An hour and a half later, the couple retired to a quiet corner on a fainting couch.

"Ugh! This stuff is awful! Thank goodness I ate before coming. You'd think that at an important event like this, they'd serve decent food," Janice complained as she set her plate down on a nearby side table.

Skonn offered her his plate which contained raw, artfully cut carrots, celery and broccoli with a spicy humus dip. Janice chose a carrot stick, dipped it and took a bite.

"Delicious," She said with a smile.

With a crowd this large, it is often difficult to gauge food quantity and quality. Also, there are those who do not possess such refined palates, Skonn replied mentally as he pointed with his gaze toward the Tellarite delegation. Everyone's plate was piled high with the very fare Janice had rejected.

You're right! Janice replied. They'll probably ask for doggie bags. *Why are they here, anyway? According to the program the Tellarites don't have anyone competing.*

Nor will they ever. The Tellarites are the official bench warmers of the galaxy, Skonn related to her as he stood up. *They merely enjoy watching and consuming the free eatables.*

"Are our two hours up?" Janice asked aloud as Skonn collected her discarded plate, added it to his and handed them off to a disposal bot.

"Indeed they are," He replied as he began leading her toward the exit. Apparently, they weren't the only ones calling it an early night. Most of the others were athletes dressed in their distinctive home world clothing.

Away from the public eye, Janice pushed her head covering back and linked arms with Skonn as they strolled back to their hotel.

(Continued on page 8)

(Continued from Page 7)

Janice, dressed in her Intergalactic Karate Championship T-shirt and shorts, was seated on the side of the bed when a blaring sound startled her. Her comtab was ringing. In fact, both hers and Skonn's were ringing simultaneously. Janice answered hers first.

She watched as the Starfleet insignia faded from view and was replaced with Rear Admiral Klarg's visage. Her heart skipped a beat upon recalling the last time she saw his face.

"Forgive me for interrupting, Captain, but I wanted to convey this to you before the intergalactic news nets broadcasts it. There's been an unfortunate accident at Dry dock Seven. There was an explosion and the Nicola Tesla was heavily damaged. There were 226 known fatalities, 123 injured, many critical, and several missing. We are still tallying the official numbers. An investigation is pending. You and your crew have been placed on official paid leave until further notice. I will contact you at a later date to discuss requests for reassignment, as well as whatever Starfleet decides regarding the Nicola Tesla," The Klingon Rear Admiral intoned. "I've notified all of your crew members except for Commander Skonn. Do you know where he is?"

"We are both attending The Intergalactic Karate Championships here on Azotan. He's retired for the night. I will inform him immediately," Janice replied.

"I must also add, if you or any of your crew are approached by members of the press, as per Starfleet orders, all information pertaining to this incident is classified. Refer them to Starfleet Public Relations," Klarg advised.

"Yes, Sir. Thank you for the heads up," Janice responded before the connection was cut.

Skonn, dressed similarly, came out of the bathroom where he had been hiding to avoid the visual pick up.

"You heard?" Janice didn't have to ask, but did anyway.

"Indeed," He replied stoically. He sat next to her on the bed, picked up the remote and turned on the TriVee.

"This just in," the female Andorian stated. "There's been an explosion at Drydock Seven where the U.S.S. Nicola Tesla was being refitted." she said as an ICN news drone swooped in to show the scene and damage.

The entire starboard side of the Tesla's saucer section had been blown away, as well as much of the dry dock. Two starships, five hospital ships and many smaller vessels hovered in the distance.

"So far the fatality count is 233, with many in-

jured. 15 are as yet unaccounted for. Gentalbeings, this is by no means an official tally. Starfleet has yet to determine whether this a terrorist act or a horrific accident," The Andorian woman continued.

"Turn it off, please!" Janice screamed. Skonn complied. "My God! Those people weren't enemy combatants! They were engineers and technicians! What did they do to deserve this? Their poor families..." she continued as she pulled her knees up into her chest, bowed her head and cried.

Some ten minutes later, she took the box of tissue Skonn had handed to her, blew her nose, and wiped her eyes. She then went the bathroom to wash her face.

Skonn watched as she returned and rummaged through her suitcase. She produced a large ball of brightly colored yarn with an appropriate pair of needles. She then sat down at the table and methodically began to knit.

"Janice, it is past midnight. Shouldn't you be resting?" Skonn asked after watching her knit several rows.

"Do you honestly think I could sleep after hearing and seeing what happened?" she asked, without halting her work.

"No, I do not," Skonn replied. "However, the human body requires a certain amount of sleep for optimal health."

"You sound like Dr. Savage."

"That was not my intention." Skonn responded. "However, if it works..."

"You wouldn't happen to have any sedatives in that bag of tricks of yours?" Janice quipped.

"No, I do not. However, I am well-schooled in the art of massage."

"You promise not to nerve pinch me?" Janice appealed.

"The Vulcan nerve pinch is a defensive art, not a relaxation form."

"Okay." Janice sighed, put aside her knitting, and lay face down on the bed. After a half an hour of Skonn's ministrations, she was sound asleep. Skonn arranged his wife comfortably and covered her with a sheet and the duvet.

"Starfleet has yet to determine if this was a terrorist act, or a horrific accident." Those words reverberated in Skonn's mind as he stood at the window. In his heart of hearts, he knew *exactly* what it was.

He heard the whir of wings and felt Echo light on his right shoulder.

"You've come to keep me company during my vigil, Little One?" he whispered. In response, Echo nudged him on his neck with her snout.

"Thank you," Skonn said in response.

Brain Benders

ACROSS

1. 1938 Physics Nobelist
6. Bar bill
9. *Mutant teenager who can move and shape water
13. Bee-related
14. Narrow inlet
15. Preceded, with "to"
16. Practices girth control
17. Web address
18. Banish
19. *Mutant who can absorb and manipulate photons
21. *Mutant with crystalized skin
23. One of the Bobbsey twins
24. First ____
25. London based news service provider
28. Acorn, e.g.
31. Parody
36. Propaganda, often
38. Arrow from a crossbow
40. Pleasant Island, today
41. Fails to be
42. *Young mutant who can create illusions
43. One of Salome's seven
44. Famous
46. Straight up
48. J.F.K. postings
49. One who is aware
51. Barbra's "A Star Is Born" co-star
53. 1965 Ursula Andress film

54. Marker
56. Half a score
58. *Mutant who can implant memories into and remove memories from others
62. *Mutant who can manipulate magnetism
66. Part of a TV transmission
67. Block
69. Goddess of the hunt
70. Reporters' tips
71. Past
72. Gasket
73. *Mutant who has telepathic abilities
74. Without precedent
75. Parson's home

15. Hard to lift
20. Give the cold shoulder
22. Part of O.H.M.S.
25. *Mutant who can teleport via portals
26. Sioux prey
27. Baghdad Pact Org. after Iraq withdrew its membership
29. Burg
30. Built for speed
32. Pew area
33. Tuneful two-somes
34. Dickens's Heep
35. *Mutant who can disable mutant and non-mutant abilities as well as electronic systems
37. Rabbit dish
39. Nicholas II, for one
45. Moon of Mars
47. Former Yugoslav leader
50. Caviar, e.g.
52. Hardly ever
55. ____ legend
57. Nigerian currency
58. ____ Arden, Flash Gordon's companion
59. Regrets
60. Dutch cheese
61. ____ de camp
62. Forepart of a ship
63. Downpour
64. Lodges
65. *Mutant who has eidetic memory and a computer-like brain
68. Epoch



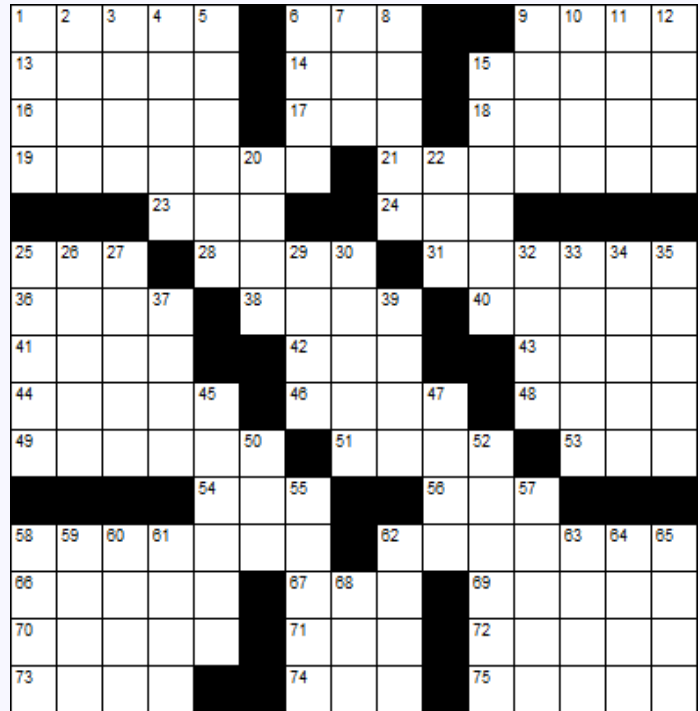
DOWN

1. *Bartending mutant who can become invisible
2. Monumental
3. Cambodian currency
4. Morning in Marseille
5. Yoke, in Capetown
6. Unwavering
7. Ventilate
8. Model airplane wood
9. Waiting room call
10. Mine entrance
11. ____ log
12. Impersonator

ESB Crockett's Spirited Crossword Puzzle

*Those with a Genetic Gift - Part 2

by Brig. Gen. D. Tensa - December 2017



Answers to Previous Puzzle

R	E	E	D			K	A	T	E		J	A	C	E	
A	R	M	E	D		I	R	O	N		E	G	A	D	
S	N	I	P	E		R	A	N	T		T	R	I	G	
P	E	R	I	L	S		B	A	R	D		E	R	E	
			C	H	I	P		L	A	U	R	E	N		
S	E	N	T	I	N	E	L		P	E	N				
P	L	U	S			E	W	E	S		S	A	R	A	H
A	S	K				W	E	E	K	S			A	N	A
M	E	E	T	S			E	R	I	E		A	N	T	I
			A	I	R		S	T	R	U	C	K	E	R	
	T	U	R	N	E	R		S	I	N	H				
P	A	N		E	T	A	S		F	R	E	S	N	O	
O	R	C	A			I	D	E	S		I	N	L	A	W
L	O	U	D			N	O	E	L		P	E	A	R	L
O	T	T	O			A	N	D	Y		S	V	C	S	



More Brain Benders

SUDOKU PUZZLE

December 2017
 Hard, Non-Symmetrical
 by Brig. Gen. D. Tensa

	6		2		5			
9	7			6				4
3							6	
		1			7	3		
7	4		8		6			2
			3					
1				4		9		6
4				8			2	

Solution to November's Sudoku Puzzle
 Medium, Non-Symmetrical

8	9	1	2	7	5	6	4	3
3	2	5	6	4	1	9	8	7
4	6	7	8	9	3	5	1	2
1	3	6	9	2	7	8	5	4
5	8	2	3	6	4	1	7	9
7	4	9	1	5	8	2	3	6
2	5	3	4	1	9	7	6	8
9	1	8	7	3	6	4	2	5
6	7	4	5	8	2	3	9	1

WORD SEARCH

Dec.'s Topic: Stephen Moyer Roles
 Look for 27 character names
 by Brig. Gen. D. Tensa

R	E	E	D	S	T	R	U	C	K	E	R	Y	M	T
I	D	R	M	A	R	K	E	L	L	I	S	W	E	D
H	E	L	F	I	N	L	E	A	D	E	R	G	L	R
G	T	J	O	H	N	G	U	I	D	I	R	T	P	R
H	D	P	R	O	U	I	X	M	T	O	Z	U	B	O
Y	A	E	U	K	W	O	I	W	F	E	P	M	R	N
A	N	D	R	E	W	L	T	A	C	B	V	A	A	H
E	I	J	C	Y	N	L	L	A	J	R	I	R	C	A
U	E	A	M	B	Y	Y	P	J	A	U	N	C	H	M
N	L	S	A	O	U	N	I	O	R	T	C	U	J	I
I	R	O	R	G	E	R	X	S	E	U	E	S	P	L
C	E	N	K	W	M	B	T	H	D	S	N	F	J	T
K	E	T	O	M	B	R	O	O	K	G	T	O	S	O
B	S	T	E	V	E	N	H	U	N	T	D	R	A	N
G	E	R	Y	G	O	D	W	I	N	Z	Y	D	M	N

Solution to November's Word Search:
 Amy Acker Roles

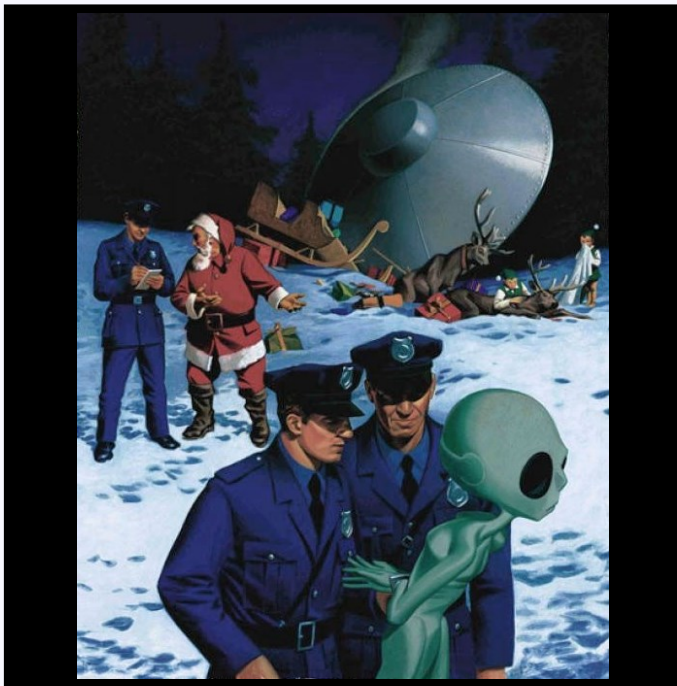
M	H	E	L	E	N	A	J	N	O	V	A	D	C	I
W	O	C	T	R	I	S	H	A	R	K	I	N	R	F
I	M	L	H	R	N	V	E	Y	C	G	E	F	Y	X
N	I	A	L	G	A	V	L	A	I	K	J	K	S	K
I	G	U	F	Y	I	S	O	P	H	I	E	T	A	
F	G	D	I	C	L	N	G	L	O	P	R	E	A	T
R	Y	I	K	L	T	R	A	C	E	Y	O	C	L	E
E	S	A	M	A	N	T	H	A	G	R	O	V	E	S
D	M	E	L	I	S	S	A	G	H	K	T	W	Q	T
B	E	A	T	R	I	C	E	S	O	N	X	H	V	R
U	N	M	N	E	V	V	V	K	J	O	D	I	E	U
R	A	A	N	D	R	E	A	B	A	R	R	S	N	C
K	N	N	L	P	E	N	E	L	O	P	E	K	U	K
L	C	D	I	Z	D	A	W	N	J	O	N	E	S	E
E	Y	A	N	I	L	L	Y	R	I	A	S	Y	S	R

Brain Benders

Word Search

December's Word List:

Andrew	John Guidi
Ben	Josh
Brach	Marcus Ford
Brutus	Mark
D.C. Burton	Nick
Det. Daniel Reese	Olly
Dr. Mark Ellis	Owen Pace
Dr. Ron Hamilton	Prouix
Gery	Reed Strucker
Godwin	Sam
Guy LaForge	Steven Hunt
Helfin Leader	Tom Brook
Jared	Vincent
Jason	



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