



SHATTERING

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Bond-Shattering

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AND MEDEEK LOOKED DOWN upon all He had created. And, lo, He observed that Adar was lonely and yearned for the companionship of his own kind. And Medeek took pity upon Adar and provided him Biolab-1, saying: “Scientif and multiply!”

— excerpted, page 2, Chapter One (“Life from the Void”), THE GREAT BOOK; loca data banks Clan Julius Archives, WARXII.

SYCRAIAN MELAT-ADVISER BANEUS THO had witnessed nature's equivalent to this man-made disaster. He'd been on the slopes of High-Mountainclimb, at the time; when across the valley, one small crystal of fall from the sky ice touched down, mingled with dormants of its kind, and began to move the lot. Soon a small, moving ball, to gather more mass. Then, an all consuming roar that sucked up, pasted on, and devoured all, including one small village. Nothing recognizable in its wake, as if ice had become permanent eraser.

Here, *now*, on this scene, if presently off center-stage, was Thuam Moore, of deposed planet Hylan royalty, emigrant to planet Sycra, become catalytic ice crystal of his own. The product not only of the unchecked passions of Sycraian Melat Gaylan West for Thuam, but the duo's involvement in the disastrous plan to capture planet Hylan's City Hideo Max and put Thuam back on the Hylanian throne. Resulting in the kidnapping by the Hylanian ruler, Quin Xu, of Gaylan's Warrior Clan bond-mate Dovio Lix; too, threats made, the latter having become a burr to anger the Warrior Universe with whom Baneus had so diligently sought to open a viable channel.

So far culminating with this: an incoming message. The message's unknown content every reason to make Sycraian Melat Gaylan West and Sycraian Melat-Adviser Baneus Tho anxious. For, if it bore good news for Gaylan, something might yet be salvaged from the input of the power hungry bastard Thuam Moore. For, if it bore bad news, more disaster was risked than the mere erasure of some

small village in a High-Mountainclimb valley.

Anxious, also, was hired transmit-receiver Creer C. Because this t-r's whole surgically manipulated t-r system became more and more endangered as Gaylan vacillated between wanting and not wanting to risk the incoming news.

"Vector coordinates are fuzzed," said Creer C, and his mentasensors automatically tried to un-distort transmission. Creer's gree scales went glossy in his concentration to the contrary.

Gaylan's large fingers ran through his thick black hair. His wide nostrils flared. He licked this thin lips and swallowed nonexistent spit. "Demand site origin before unscramble!"

The surgically sensitized Creer strained retention of the image but mentasensed dealing with a t who could override his mere fourth class r capabilities: another ominous portent to fill the watch. While Creer still had excess capabilities, he, once again, scanned his mentabanks for any indication that his Sycraian host might be of the kill the messenger of bad news mentality. As before, there was little in the source data to be had on these yet to be classified *civilized* humanoids. It was only Sycraian application for reclassification, based on yet to be verified research by some genealogist, which had Creer here in the first place. T-rs went where the fee was paid; Sycra, in the midst of a new prosperity opened by its freshly awarded limited trade access to the civilized worlds of the Warrior Empire, Anthax VI included, had ecocredits to spare.

"Site origin denied," Creer informed. Further indication that Gaylan was in deep shit: nothing Creer hadn't known since long before the present visual had pressed for review. However, a t-r's non politic capacity didn't qualify him for rendering advice. Creer was t-r passive.

"*They* wouldn't deny site coordinates!" Gaylan insisted to himself. "If the Hylanians still control City Hideo Max, they'd want to boast it." On the other hand, Mylax Eaton, Gaylan's armic head of the Sycraian raiding party instructed to take and hold the Hylanian city for Thuam Moore, wouldn't deny his supreme commander coordinates either. As for the Warrior Clan, furious and constantly querying regarding the kidnapping of (and life threats against) its own, Dovio Lix, it certainly never had (nor would) apply incognito status.

"Visual is insistent," Creer informed: as close as he could come to warning

that his damage would not be taken lightly by his Anthax VI initiators. T-r conversions were expensive operations. Was, as rumored, Gaylan's Sycraian brain not yet developed enough to realize the repercussions of r overload? "I have insistence to factor six."

The still scrambled image burned inside Creer's head cavity, the heat creating gree sweat released from reverberating gills. Sweetness oozed and was swallowed for lubricant recycling.

"Where would the Hylanians, with no access to civilized markets, access a t-r with override capabilities?" Gaylan wanted to know.

It wasn't Creer's capacity to volunteer solutions to such conjectures. Transmit. Receive. Those were the t-r mode charter. "Acceleration beyond insurances seven," he said instead.

Gaylan paced. Worried. He loosened his belt to disengage the pressure the containing strip exerted on his gut. The resulting expansion of his flesh emphasized he was not in prime condition. Less good living would have seen him commanding on site, instead of here awaiting progress reports in a secret command station on Sycra. Was the good living, brought on by even fragmented exposure to the civilized worlds of the Warrior Empire, about to cease? Had Thuam Moore, Thuam's Adviser Kyle Ieru, *and* Gaylan miscalculated?

"Insistence factor eight." Creer's throat no longer retained the excessive overflow gree; liquid washed glossy scales; hereditary tail trembling ceased; inner resources, menta and muscular, concentrated against image imprint on his brain.

"You have capacity to insistence factor ten, correct?" Gaylan asked.

"*Maximum* ten," Creer reminded. His voice was breathless, hooded eyes glazed, fangs clamped, and muscles taut. He might have been an inanimate grave marker carved by his ancestors in the scattered telmudic stones of Anthax VI.

Gaylan was sweating. His hands were wet. His upper lip was soaked. Rivers ran the folds of his overweight flesh beneath the fine sansil fabric of his Sycraian royal robes.

"Nine plus." Creer suspected his time was running short. Such a waste in that the visual would transmit over his damaged circuits, once the override, and Gaylan would pay dearly for delaying whatever the incoming news.

"Very well," Gaylan surprised and conceded (too late?) to the inevitable.

Mentamortar that had held the incoming message in check dissolved to spill the hologramous image through surgically altered t-r retinas. The dismembered pieces formulated into 3-D projection: the Hylanian AxMan, Ru Zamber; the Hylanian ruler, Quin Xu; the kidnapped Warrior Clan bond-mate to Gaylan West, Dovio Lix.

“And how comes an uncivilized barbarian into possession of a t-r?” Gaylan asked: the best defense an offense. The longer he could prolong the other questions, and receipt of their answers, the longer he could retain hopes of success still possible.

“Borrowed,” Quin Xu replied. With an upturned hand in motion toward Dovio Lix, he added: “As is your Warrior Clan bond-mate borrowed.”

His attention drawn to Dovio Lix, Gaylan was, as ever, struck by that man’s ugliness. Civilized in the creaexegons of the Warrior Empire obviously didn’t provide Dovio Lix with attractiveness by Sycraian/Hylanian standards. There was nothing about the man’s long blond hair, his large eyes, his so-so nose, his full mouth, his muscled arms and ridged abdominals with indented navel, his large cock and well shaped ass, his stalwart legs and large feet, to hold him favorably in any comparisons to Hylanian Thuam Moore whose possession of the very same ingredients were coalesced into something infinitely more desirable to Sycraian aesthetics. Had the Warrior Clan Dovio Lix been more closely akin to Gaylan’s desire level standards, the story might well have been in different progression.

Dovio Lix’s cintuleanblue eyes were accusatory, and rightly so. Sent in good faith by his fellow clansmen as bond-mate to this barbarian with aspirations for reclassification to civilized, Dovio Lix had been given faulty care and protection; he’d become a mere pawn in a play of barbarian politics, which confirmed Gaylan West a fool! Did Gaylan contemplate just how much he had lost for him and his by this machination with the Hylanian bastard, Thuam Moore, for the return of Hylanian Family Moore to a pitiful barbarian throne?

“I warned you of the price to be paid for your interference in plots to seize my rule,” Quin Xu brought Gaylan’s wandering attention back into focus.

“If you think your AxMan is going to scare me into believing...”

“Time is past for debating concessions!” Quin Xu interrupted with an up-lifted hand. “Observe, please, just how late.”

With consummate skill too swift for humanoid eyes to register, the AxMan disconnected Dovia Lix's head from neck and torso. Erupting life fluids geysered to rocket brainorb, hair streaming comet-wise, into a slow-motion trajectory that landed it on the marbic floor at Gaylan's feet with a detonating splat.

"No!" Gaylan protested, the unthinkable beyond thought taken out of his hands.

"Seductive Thuam and his Adviser were wrong, weren't they?" Quin Xu's smile revealed pearly canines that were the last of his image to fade with transmit dissolve.



AND ADAR AND BIOLAB-I begat Evan who was exceedingly comely and attractive in Adar's eyes. And Medeek looked down and was much pleased by what He had wrought. And thus it came to pass that Adar and Evan were of the first Wethin bond-mating and Medeek did perform the Klentatuid Ceremony that they should be formally bond-mated before the eyes of man and Medeek.

— excerpted, pages 2&3, Chapter One (“Life from the Void”), THE GREAT BOOK; loca data banks Clan Julius Archives, WARXII.

“YOUR HIGHNESS! Welcome back to home planet Hylan.”

Thuam Moore turned on his Sycraian Adviser Kyle Icro and mentally replayed the Adviser’s greeting for sarcasm.

Kyle looked calm and cool: a clever aberration in that Thuam knew that the Adviser knew the extent of their qualified success.

“The city is yours,” Kyle said and added, “with the help of Sycraian Melat Gaylan West’s support forces. He who controls City Hideo Max controls planet Hylan.”

“And the cost?” Thuam found Kyle way too clever by far to be ignorant of existing complications. Was the Adviser feigning lack of concern to alleviate Thuam’s fears and save Kyle’s neck from Thuam’s special ordering a snarenoose to garrote it? “You know that Gaylan is running scared?” Thuam’s insinuation was that he, personally, wasn’t: a lie. “He believed you when you argued that Quin Xu wouldn’t dare kill the Warrior Clan bastard — despite what Baneus Tho insisted.” More importantly, Thuam *had* believed Kyle.

Lest Kyle read the extent of Thuam’s fear, Thuam turned to the reflecting mirglas and examined his features for outward evidence of inner turmoil. His face uncomfortably flushed: pale pinks clotting original cream. There were sweat nodules condensed on his upper lip and across his brow.

“I underestimated the stupidity of Quin Xu,” Kyle admitted with a helpless upturn of both hands. His fingers were long and tapered, red hair at each large

knuckle. His face was starkly chiseled: milky marbic with rustonic impurities mottling its surface. His eyes were dullest siliasrey and sparked no inner hint of emotion; the wideness of Thuam's eyes was fear fed by comparison.

"And your estimation of the revenge inclinations of the Warrior Clan?" Thuam added. "In conjunction with Sycraian involvement in Hylanian politics."

"Hylan being off-limits since Sycraian consideration for civilized status?" Kyle's observation was superfluous, as was his next: "Barbarian Hylan in quarantine as regards civilized worlds and/or those which aspire to be one?"

"Quin Xu surely wouldn't have so overstepped if he expected maximum reaction." Thuam was more comfortable making a statement than a question. He folded his bare arms over his muscled and nipple punctuated chest and waited for Kyle's additional input analysis of their situation. Kyle's continuing calm demeanor hinted that he — and, maybe, Quin Xu — knew something Thuam didn't. When had Kyle attained his sudden aura of knowledgeable ability, above and beyond that of Thuam? It hadn't been a characteristic when he was first assigned to advise the Hylanians immigrated to Sycra after the Family Moore-king killing had put Dynasty Xu on planet Hylan's throne. It hadn't been a visible characteristic, in fact, until these machinations that he'd personally sparked among deposed Dynasty Moore for throne-regainment. Should Thuam have been more questioning of this Sycraian's plotting in Hylanian politics? Should Thuam be more questioning now? "To what point: Quin Xu initiating the possible suicide of worlds with the swing of one AxMan?"

"Maybe we did make more than our share of errors," Kyle conceded but knew *he* hadn't erred. "However, what is the old bit about not being able to expect your ship to come in if you haven't launched it in the first place?"

He made Thuam nervous. In retrospect, it wasn't a new sensation. If Thuam had misevaluated his initial nervousness as sexual, he now suspected his mistake. The lingering was disconcertingly similar to fear. How had this man so snugly insinuated himself into Thuam's life? How had Thuam, heir to a throne, come to fear him?

"Baneus Tho is giving Gaylan trouble," Thuam said. "He's prophesying doom and destruction, and the newly affluent are paying heed."

"Should you, any longer, concern yourself with Sycraian politics?" Kyle said

and shrugged. “You are a barbarian who has no aspirations for Hylanian access to the Warrior Empire. You have assumed rule of a kingdom quarantined, given access only to worlds of its own primitive ilk. Little chance of you and yours breaking out on a genealogical technicality, like the one manufactured by Baneus Tho to cause all his and planet Sycra’s present problems.”

“When quarantine status was lifted from Sycra, I should have left it, immediately. That’s what the Warrior Clan will say.”

“I think we should await official response from the Warrior Clan,” Kyle suggested. “It may figure the bond-shattering of one of its kind with so recently a full barbarian, Melat Gaylan West, is of little or no consequence.”

Thuam didn’t subscribe to that for an instant. “There was a rumored bond-shattering on Zilia’s third moon, where now the moons number only two.”

“*Rumor*, as you say.” Kyle crossed the room to the bar. “Such tales of woe are always distorted by the time they filter through. On any account, how can you be blamed: a barbarian acting as uncivilized people are wont to do? Gaylan West, now, may have other problems, since Baneus Tho had convinced the Warrior Clan that Sycraians had claim to greater genes.”

“You are a Sycraian,” Thuam reminded. *Adviser to* didn’t make him Hylanian.

“Let *me* worry about me.”

Thuam wanted desperately to believe in success, but his optimism was short-lived. “A Sanatorium spacer, incoming, has been turned back at Atmosphere-K. Hylanian communications with previously accessed quarantined worlds have been interrupted.”

“Not necessarily isolation for destruction. More likely a containment exercise for more convenient investigative purposes.” Kyle came upon the bottle for which he’d been searching among those stockpiled behind the bar. “What we need is a sampling of suezun liqueur to put it all in proper perspective. In doing so, we might kill two birds with one stone; in that, what would a Warrior Clan investigator think to find liqueur from civilized Septus-9 on quarantined Hylan? Might blame Gaylan for yet another infraction of quarantine, yes? Might blame you, a barbarian, for dealings in civilized contraband.” He handed Thuam a snejun of suezun.

Thuam hesitated to drink. Did Kyle think he could rationalize his participation to the Warrior Clan by poisoning Thuam?

Kyle drank his in one swallow. He smacked his full lips. “Do you know the booze is triple distilled from the suezun vines on Septus-9, poisonous after both its first and second distillations? The third distillation leaves much of the shuddering killer kick of the original and second but is more satisfying to the palate than suicide.”

“Quin Xu *said* he would kill Dovia Lix.” Thuam could definitely use the *high* of the drink, but he put his untouched suezun on the counter between livspace and nutriastore.

“So, what if I told you I know a flaw in the barricade in case the Warrior Clan investigator should rule against us?” A smile dimpled both Kyle’s cheeks and gave momentary handsomeness to a face usually blandly devoid of it. “All said and done, it’s best to plan for every contingency.”

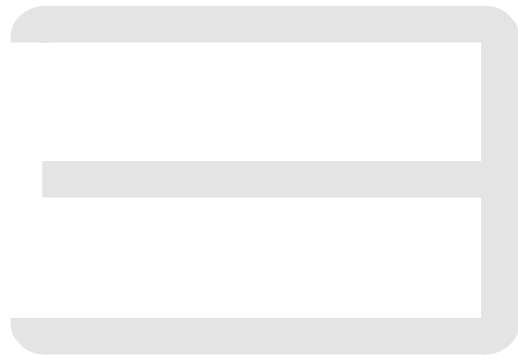
“Yes.” Thuam’s sigh of relief was audible.

“Did you think I’d let you down?”

“I hoped not,” Thuam said and retrieved his snejun of booze.

“The deprived killer king, Quin Xu, is missing; long live the Hylanian *rightful* King, Thuam Moore!” Kyle raised his empty snejun in toast. He tipped the crystal container to his lips to sample whatever residue might have remained.

Thuam drank his fill and died, a self-satisfied Kyle looking on.



AND THE SEED OF ADAR AND EVAN mingled with Biolab-I's eggs-in-glass, begetting Dane and Gable. And Gable was of the fields, intent upon the taming of grasses and nutriastuffs that grew in the Garden. And Dane was of the woods and the mountains, hunting the wild things that did live there, adding meat to the family pottage.

— excerpted, page 6, Chapter Two
("Beginnings"), THE GREAT BOOK; loca
data banks Clan Julius Archives WARXII.

THE CULLING TEAM ARRIVED ON SYCRA with the Warrior Clan examiner and interrogation units.

By the time the Warrior Clan space transport arrived, under command of Family Rajno head, Grenar Rajno, the contingent of Sycraian volunteers was ready for loading.

“Easy living, during their brief exposure to civilized worlds, has made them noticeably softer than we would prefer,” Grenar observed to Roynoldo Lasi who — met at Grenar’s farewell party on Family Rajno home planet, Gulon X, and on extended leave from a biodistil lab on planet Cryfulonto I — had been persuaded to accompany; Grenar might have made a mistake in that Roynoldo was a man with a brain, a docile male less dangerous; danger, though, often aphrodisiacal. “Undoubtedly we would find them better qualified for physical exertions, were we to arrive more into their ongoing retrogression from the good life to bad. Nonetheless, we’ve an onboard regimen that will hopefully bring them up to standards before our arrival on planet Jirat.”

By comparison to Grenar’s perfected and civilized physique, the Sycraian barbarian musculature was, indeed, lacking. However Roynoldo, though he didn’t say so, found something attractive about barbarian imperfection; much like a crack might stand out in a store of otherwise flawless ceramics.

The transport, and its newly acquired cargo, didn’t linger on planet Sycra which, except for its volunteers, had very little to offer civilized people now that

its brief flurry of prosperity had been lidded by forced descent into maximum isolation.

The ship's next stop was a high degree 10006-B3 orbit around barricaded planet Hylan whereat, under Grenar's instruction, a bubble barrier was erected to contain the effects of the nucleoyeast injected promptly into planet core.

"Unbelievably beautiful!" Roynoldo expounded as the connived convulsion converted all planet solids (barbarian, anima, vegeta, minera), and all liquids (water, oil, gas, cilink, quiril), to a gaseous ball whose expanding outward surface was checked by the confining bubble barrier.

"You think that's attractive, wait until you see what comes next," prophesied Grenar, who had seen the recordotapes from the Inquisition craft that had converted Zilia's third moon.

True to his prediction, gravity collapsed the contained gaseous mass, and the strobe-like explosions began that would eventually coalesce the resultant miasma into a new, purified orb, henceforth known as Jx42-B3-Z on all civilized star charts.

"Granted, some Hylanians have been missed this go-round," Grenar admitted, "but attempts are in progress to track down certain strays: some in transit, some visiting other barbarian worlds officially accessed prior to maximum quarantine. Earlier immigrated Hylanian dynasties will be spared. Except, of course, for Dynasty Moore and its allies whose influence and stay on Sycra led to the death of Dovio Lix."

Roynoldo, continually impressed by the conversion of planet Hylan, could only imagine what now registered on the primitive brains of the Sycraian volunteers whose awed expressions were hopefully indicative of there but for the grace of God (or, more preferable, *there but for the magnanimity of Warrior Universe*), go we and ours.

"And the Sycraian Adviser Kyle Iclu, and the Hylanian one-time King Quin Xu?" Roynoldo already knew the Hylanian AxMan Ru Zamber, and the not-long Family Moore King-again Thuam Moore, had been found murdered: two less assignments for Warrior Clan exterminators.

"Scans are operative to ferret out both; they'll soon be found and dealt with. Quin Xu is particularly vulnerable with a stolen t-r in tow. T-r initiators on An-

thax VI are in an uproar in their belief he's using drugging inhibitors to keep the t-r from contacting deep exploratory probes. Killer, thief, and now suspected t-r tamperer, his survival chances are nil. It's only surprising he's evaded this long."

While the visual effects of conversion were still maximum, Sycraian volunteers were returned to their livspace. Roynoldo lingered at the visuscan panel while the majority of the ship's crew routed the transport toward planet Jirat. Only when the glowball of planet Hylan conversion was unimpressively contracted to pinpoint by distance did Roynoldo return to the livspace he shared with the ship's commander who joined him shortly.

"I'd say this bond-shattering on planet Sycra was a bit of good luck for Family Rajno." Roynoldo stretched sensuously on the backdrop sato quarbed covering. His body was a blend of ropy muscles and satiny flesh made more sensuous by elongation during stretching.

Grenar was tempted to comment on how Family Rajno made its own luck but recognized the mistake of inviting Roynoldo to ask for specifics. Grenar reminded himself that Roynoldo was neither sleasestler nor beautcallup. Roynoldo was Warrior Clan Family Lasi aristocrat who, if given half the chance, might detect Family Rajno secrets before Grenar felt it advantageous for such enlightenment.

Grenar gave credit where only *some* credit was due: "Thank God for luck!"

"Tell me of planet Jirat," Roynoldo said with a caress of his own body, from throat to cock, calculated to get Grenar's attention. He had early recognized the erotic pleasure Grenar took in watching, and enjoyed playing for him. On the whole, Roynoldo enjoyed Grenar at every turn. Grenar the epitome of Warrior Clan soldier / aristocrat: his solid rockiness an ideal match for Roynoldo's stony physicality. There was aesthetic pleasantness, too, to their counterpoint: Grenar's dark complexioned hairiness, Roynoldo's blond smoothness; Grenar's black eyes, Roynoldo's blue. Grenar an uninhibited lover who led Roynoldo to places unavailable during the latter's lifespan with far less ready access to aphrodisiacal essence Orchinid than Grenar whose family controlled the monopoly.

Still, there was something about Grenar that kept Roynoldo from the ultimate commitment of final bond-mating that Roynoldo knew Grenar wanted from him. Ironically, Roynoldo found Grenar too perfect and, perhaps, held out for a

sudden glimpse of some as yet undetected and humanizing flaw within him.

“You’ll soon see enough of planet Jirat.” Grenar slipped from his clothes and joined Roynoldo on the bed. His uncontrollable urge for lovemaking was something he temporarily suppressed by way of added stimulation. “Why should we bore each other with something that will too soon consume way too much of our time?”

“I’m just curious.” Roynoldo’s fingers, large and ample, petted his partner. “The transport’s encyclotapes — *Subject: planet Jirat* — remain classified.”

“My oversight.” Grenar positioned himself to give his companion better advantage. He deflected with a half lie: “I’ll declassify, each and every, momentarily.” His thick dark hair fell over his deep, dark eyes.

“Can you at least verify or deny Jirat rumors of danger?”

Grenar watched Roynoldo’s hand hypnotically glide, and he attempted resistance to the resulting pleasures. How quickly Roynoldo could key him! Grenar who had gone through how many men before this one? There was no denying Roynoldo’s sexual expertise, acute even before Grenar had combined it with the enhancer essence Orchinid, remained part of his attraction. Grenar had never thought to find a man to satisfy his physical needs who, likewise, satisfied his Family’s criterion for bond-mating. Was it any wonder he risked so very much by bringing him along?

“Where there’s smoke, there’s usually fire,” he admitted: a double entendre that explained the Jirat rumors and his condition. “Planet Jirat is not without its dangers, of course; on the other hand, Family Rajno has had the essence Orchinid concession long enough to know most of them. You can count upon us to protect you.”

“No chance, then, of loss of life or limb?”

“For you? For me? None! Trust me.” His hips, thwarting his conscious efforts to control, commenced a rhythmic bounce in complement to the movements of Roynoldo’s masturbating hand.

“And will you give the Sycraian volunteers similar guarantees?”

“No.” He was glad that *that* admission didn’t seem to disturb Roynoldo.

“Tell me why Sycraian recruits suit your purposes more than the usual criminal contingent.” Roynoldo’s shifting blond head hair and moving lips tickled

Grenar's scalloped and hirsute belly.

"Convicts are more likely to devote more time to attempted escape than to work. Sycraian volunteers, patriots every one, who save their planet from the fate of conversion, see escape as anathema to their greater motivation." He moaned when Roynoldo hard pinched one of his budding nipples. "It's ideal: our unwillingness to overlook the insult of bond-shattering but, with Hylanians made example, willingness to be generous on the Sycraian front." His voice was distorted by passion on the rise. "The Sycraians don't want Sycra blown into oblivion. We need the manpower. The volunteers come out the biggest winners of all, allowed their patriotism, unselfishness, sacrifice. Their names will live in Sycraian legends and in the tone poems of those left behind. They may even become gods in time: heady stuff in payment for whatever their fate on Jirat."

He reached for Roynoldo and roughly pulled him on top, not ready to substitute his partner's warm and funky inner body for that continually caressing hand. He licked Roynoldo's neck to the man's ear and simultaneously stretched for the atomizer on a nearby table.

In anticipation, Roynoldo pushed himself to a sitting position atop Grenar's rock hard thighs. He steadied himself while Grenar sprayed a bit of atomizer contents into the air and onto Roynoldo's manly chest.

If the quantity of spray used would have given some class-II potentates heart failures over the extravagance, it gave Grenar no thought at all. After all, there was plenty more essence Orchinid on Jirat, and the head of Family Rajno contemplated the best harvesting/mining season of all.

Pleasure satiated, for the moment, Roynoldo allowed his menta to click back into think mode. "From what I've heard and read, I don't rate Dovio Lix as having been very high in mentatelligence. It's inconceivable to me that his monitoring reports didn't contain more in-depth, regarding the machinations around him. To have allowed himself to be captured by the barbarian, Quin Xu, no matter the paltry Sycraian security to prevent it, insinuates limited mentapacity, don't you think?"

"Mmmmmmm," Grenar responded and watched the flat of Roynoldo's hand

pool the sweat beads condensed on Grenar's hairy chest. "You think we had applicants scampering to ride out to the fringes of civilization to bond-mate with a Sycraian? What we had were lots of worried men maneuvering *not* to be sent. What we ended up with was a man with very few, if any, political contacts; few, if any, financial contacts; few, if any, brain contacts necessary to extract himself from wheels set in motion. I don't find it in the least unusual that Dovia Lix ended up the last to know what was happening. A few tirems on Sycra, bedding a barbarian who had the hots for a Hylanian bastard, must have left Dovia Lix disoriented and wondering what any of it was all about."

"He was Warrior Clan." Which Roynoldo found particularly galling. Both Family Rajno and Family Lasi were, likewise, Warrior Clan. The very notion that any member could become but a pawn in a game played by barbarians went against the grain.

"Not every Warrior Clan is of as high *menta* as you, my love," Grenar flattered. "Had you and I been in Dovia Lix's position, I've no doubt things would have played out differently. Although I'll selfishly admit I've no bones with the way things *have* turned. Had there been no bond-shattering, there would have been no Sycraian volunteers, and we'd now be en route to planet Jirat with a rebellious criminal contingent. Playing roughshod over killers, and worse, would see us with far less time for each other; it would see us gathering far more ulcers than essence Orchinid. As it is..."

He reached for the atomizer, needing only *that* insinuation of what was to come to instigate renewed penile erection.



AND DANE DID MAKE AN OFFERING to Medeek, having gathered up all form of bird and animal from the wood and mountains. All kinds of wildlife did he gather: the bearin, the wolfic, the wooly lion, the feathered cockerel; the pat quacat, the coyon dog, the zith kil-bird. And Medeek was much pleased. For Dane was a warrior. And Medeek knew many inferior people and inferior animals made by inferior gods over which He might give a true warrior dominion.

— excerpted, page 9, Chapter Three (“The First Warrior”), THE GREAT BOOK; loca data banks Clan Julius Archives, WARXII.

BANEUS THO DIDN'T EASILY ABIDE FOOLS; therefore, he was having one helluva time living with himself. No matter he had early predicted dire consequences from Gaylan West's involvement with the Hylanian bastard Thuam Moore. No matter he had pointed out the foolishness of *any* Sycraian interference with planet Hylan, especially after Sycraian bid for civilized status made barbarian Hylan off limits. No matter he had foretold negative repercussions when Hylan ruler Quin Xu not only kidnapped Dovia Lix but made life threats that coincided with Quin's accusations of "Sycraian meddling in planet Hylan politics."

Baneus was a fool for not having found some way, somehow, to follow his intuition and prevent the Gaylan West-Thuam Moore fiasco. If necessary, he should have intensified his attempts to see the Hylanian bastard prematurely in his grave. It was little condolence that Thuam had ended up dead, anyway.

Nor would Baneus be surprised if Thuam's Sycraian Adviser Kyle Ieru were to turn up a suicide. Anyone who valued life would have second thoughts about giving Thuam's Adviser succor now that it was common knowledge the fleeing Kyle had so influenced the set of things.

While checking off those who should have died along the way, Baneus might as well include weak shit Melat Gaylan West. Baneus should have turned king killer and blown that Thuam-cock-whipped weakling away, and things might have turned out much differently, much better. Of minor consolation was that Gaylan wasn't likely to last long within a population which had known better

times, worse times on the horizon because Gaylan let his cock rule his brain. It was possible the Warrior Clan knew that and was counting on Gaylan's dissatisfied planetmen eventually to mete out the punishment apparently overlooked when Sykra was spared in exchange for its party of volunteers.

"Melat-Adviser Baneus Tho?"

Baneus looked up from inner thoughts of opportunities lost. He tried, without success, to place the face and body. It was not easy. Of three hundred Sykraians who had boarded the transport with him, very few individuals were known to him by name or sight. He *did* know they looked disgustingly healthy; apparently healthiness was a prime prerequisite for volunteers. Having looked particularly peaked after the ordeal following Dovia Lix's death, Baneus had had to perform yoginitzu for the Warrior Clan recruiter to be proved as able as the *juveniles* picked before and after him. Forty tirems wasn't necessarily an age when death set in, but there were few Sykraians of Baneus's age in as good a shape as he was. Not that he had managed musculature and good health maintenance without effort and energy. In the final analysis, he would have been better served to have devoted far less time to the gym and more to killing high placed people in government.

"There's no rank here," he told the youth who'd addressed him. And, yes, "youth" *was* correct as an assessment; maybe "boy" was more apropos. The smooth skinned little shit didn't look old enough to shave. So, was it fifteen? Sixteen? The kid's muscle definition was adolescent, striation needing maturity. Still, appearances could deceive. The Warrior Clan recruiter hadn't passed anyone who couldn't perform feats to put any pseudo jock to shame.

"You were voted leader," the youth responded, ill at ease.

Did he resent Baneus as a key player in the foul-up that found them both in transport? Going where for mercy sake? From the required physical dexterity, digging goliver from deep pit mines seemed likely.

"I declined to accept the vote!" Baneus sounded surly, although the vote had assured him, at the time, that the majority held him no grudge. It had been general knowledge he, rather than another yes-man in government, had loudly disapproved any moves to endanger the Sykraian-Warrior Clan alliance; there would have been no alliance, nor bond-mating, without his patronage of genealogical re-

search. On the other hand, getting selected leader of this group probably had more to do with seniority than with anything else. Most of the volunteers were mere puppies. Nor did he suspect the whole chosen for their combined mentabilities. Strength and stamina were the primary requisites. “No one leads but our civilized keepers,” Baneus said. “If you have a problem, take it to one of them.” If the kid were as smart as good-looking he’d seek out Warrior Clan Roynoldo Lasi; Baneus intuitively read Grenar Rajno as devious to the extreme, and Baneus would trust that head of Family Rajno no farther than he could throw him. Which, considering Grenar’s obviously superb physical condition, wouldn’t have been damned far, even with Baneus’s yoginitzu expertise. Roynoldo, now, seemed a likable enough Warrior Clan, if any of the enemy could be labeled *likable*. No doubt Roynoldo and the commander were both enemies of every Sycraian; Gaylan West and Thuam Moore had seen to that.

The kid continued to look as if he preferred anywhere but there. So, why didn’t he scoot along, like the good little boy he probably was, and leave Baneus alone? Baneus had his fill of trying to handle problems above and beyond. If this young man had something bothering him, let him take care of it himself. Then, when things went bloody wrong, and they probably *would* go bloody wrong (considering the odds), there would be no one to blame but himself. In the meantime, Baneus moderated his hard-ass attitude by asking for a name.

“Nedlun, sir,” was the answer.

“Dynasty?” Baneus asked, although he was sure he didn’t give a damn. Habit had a difficult time dying, and Baneus had always sought names as tellers of family history, complete with ties and vendettas, alliances and betrayals.

“Dynasty Prax,” Nedlun obliged.

Minor dynasty, Baneus thought, and conjured a mentamage from *Who’s Who among Sycraian Nobility*. There had been a Prax in one of the Sylixic Wars who had exhibited enough expertise as a field commander to warrant awarding of dynasty status.

“Of the House of Wenable Prax,” Baneus stated. He didn’t make it a question. He prided himself on his ability to summon these little knowns to impress more hard crusted personages than this wet nosed little snout. Still, he couldn’t help being pleased by Nedlun’s surprise at Baneus’s ability to distinguish Dynasty

Prax from Dynasty Praxx, the latter a more illustrious line. “Without Boris Prax’s successful arbitration of the trade pacts at Fston, we would have forfeited much of that tirem’s floxal crop.” Baneus was embarrassed to have come up with that bit of trivia designed to impress a nobody even farther. Diehard vanity wasn’t a quality presently that valuable in this particular marketplace.

“You do Dynasty Prax honor in the remembrance,” Nedlun said. Baneus had to agree there wasn’t all that much about which to remember. Did Nedlun know that by his leaving on this transport, on the eve of the Gaylan West debacle, the boy probably assured himself becoming the most well remembered of all Dynasty Prax progeny? Probably not: Nedlun came as a patriot, not as a seeker of celebrity.

“You need be of little hope if you’ve come with any real problem,” Baneus warned. “What authority I have among the volunteers is voted power I’ve refused. What authority I have among our civilized keepers is nonexistent.”

“It does seem important I report it to someone.”

The question: Did Baneus bother with this all important *it*?

“He didn’t come back.” Nedlun decided not to wait for a better opening. He felt obliged to report to someone in authority. He knew there was little *he* personally had any chance of doing.

“*Who* didn’t come back from where or from what or from when?” Baneus wondered aloud. A better question: *Do I care?*

“Crater Sandix. Gone last evening with Sergeant Mishum Borne-Rajno to Bay Five.”

“Maybe it’s a work duty disappearance, then,” Baneus suggested. He hadn’t paid that much attention to comings and goings. He’d been perversely preoccupied with mentaplayings of *what might have been*.

There was a pregnant pause into which Nedlun didn’t bother injecting “No way!” “Maybe.” Or, “Yes.” He looked embarrassed, or Baneus might imagine it so.

“If not work duty, then, what?” Baneus asked, not up to fifty questions, or any variation thereof. Especially if, as suspected, Nedlun *was* qualified to fill in the blank. “Well?”

“Sergeant Mishum Borne-Rajno hung around after hours,” Nedlun said.

Which didn’t come across real answer to the question, and the one-time

Melat-Adviser was hard pressed to keep from insisting a point be made — if there *was* one. Still, there was no denying this a diversion, of sorts, and Baneus had spent an unhealthy amount of recent time contemplating past errors. Maybe he should get back to the here and now; life, as it was, was all there was. He'd cut all ties when he'd volunteered. Left on Sycra were imbeciles who would watch the last of their one-time potential slip away. Fools the lot! On the other hand, Nedlun was of the new and possibly deserved more than Baneus was giving.

"The sergeant..." Nedlun said and added, after a pause: "...was *interested*."

"The sergeant was interested." Baneus wondered what was to be made of *that*.

"No denying Crater's reciprocal interest," Nedlun added.

"Both interested," Baneus amended to what conclusion?

"Interpolated from the eyes and actions."

"Ah!" Baneus boasted sudden insight. "A sexual liaison."

"There was a head count last night," Nedlun said; to where the keepers expected their kept to disappear, within so completely controlled an environment, was beyond Baneus's thinking. "The Warrior Clan counter was chagrined at Crater's absence. Laurence volunteered the reason for Crater's missing."

"Laurence?" Baneus queried automatically but decided he really cared little.

"Laurence Tors. Crater and he were ... well ... close on Sycra."

"So, one jealous man ratted on his ex-lover." Baneus found it trying: his new life beset by such petty trifles.

"The Warrior Clan counter was adamant as to how the sergeant was not authorized sex with a volunteer," Nedlun said. "Let alone keep one overnight."

"Then, I suspect, you've answered your own question," Baneus decided. "Crater Sandix and the recalcitrant sergeant are somewhere suffering the consequences of rules disobeyed."

"And the punishments for such infractions are what?" If Nedlun noticed Baneus's *why bother me with this* expression, he stood his ground. He elucidated his personal concern: "Crater is my cousin."

"What do we know of what our keepers consider adequate punishments? Ambiguous, yes: their destruction of planet Hylan but preservation of planet Sycra for the payment of one work team?" Nevertheless, Baneus succumbed to the

young man's obvious concern. "I'll make inquiries."

Baneus pushed himself to his feet and wondered if he shouldn't welcome this excuse to approach the enemy, one on one. Knowing an opponent made for far more interesting game play, and one always learned so much more when forced to confront a superior across the playing board. For too long, Baneus had been forced to play power-politic with inferiors, fools, and nincompoops. His prime impetus for being here was his quest for change.