



Allasnu Nomu

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LINO SKRIPI:

IS TERA ALLASU AFEK

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate —

When you meet a stranger, do not turn from him.

We may appear among you from time to time as strangers, and God Who created all has created nothing unknown to Him. Therefore truly there is no stranger in your midst; but God or His Agents. And God will see how you are with them, and will measure you with your treatments; for God is all-seeing, wise.

And some may require of you charity; and some lodging; and some food; and some knowledge. Turn to these with willingness and let them see your actions; for if you follow the Recitation of God, their hearts may turn to God's will; and God will surely see the good of your works and remember it; for God is all-encompassing, all-remembering.

Therefore, when you meet a stranger, do not turn from him.

The Recitation (revised), surah 140

LODGING AND FOOD

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN THE WAY OF THINGS HERE but it was still strange to me to yield my cloth when I debarked the transit skiff at the starport. All about me, I could see, mature males were being required to do the same. Though everyone who came to this world was aware of the local customs regarding clothing it was obviously making some of the men uncomfortable. They must have been tourists — the more seasoned travelers, regular visitors, had already given up their garments while still aboard the skiff.

I wasn't so put out by it. In my days as an underling I'd gone without cloth of any kind and even after taking my first apprenticeship was often — like all Delphans — nude in casual or private moments as well. Being naked in front of others is not something of which we're ashamed back home. Still it was strange, this odd reversal of status. On Delphos being given a cloth is a sign of maturation, of station in society; on Allahu'akhbar the exact opposite is true. Men, and only men, are nude. All others — girls, prepubescent boys and women — wear clothing to indicate their subordinate position.

Stepping from the terminal into the heat of Ma-kah, the principal city, I was glad of the tradition. Most of all I felt sorry for the women, who were all dressed in full-length coverings, complete with head-wraps and veils, that I imagined could not be comfortable in the afternoon's sultry glow. The boys were less fully encumbered, but even they must have been sweltering.

I glanced toward the sky at the massive disc of Allahu'akhbar's single sun, a bloated red giant that sometimes shot prominences so far out from itself they were visible even from this planet's surface with the unaided eye — unaided save, naturally, light filters. Sunspots were apparent on its face, large irregular dark shapes that marred the otherwise evenly reddish-orange sphere. The sun easily filled twenty arc-degrees of sky and was almost cool enough to look at directly. Only the planet's distance from its primary had saved it from being consumed when the star had expanded, millions of seasons previous.

I donned my pair of filters and felt some of the foreignness of the air about me drop as they began chroma-correction for me, taking the orange from the light and allowing hues to settle more in the range of what I was familiar with.

“It’ll go quicker if you don’t wear those,” piped a voice by my side.

I looked around for its source and saw a boy of perhaps twelve or thirteen seasons, which would make him about eleven on this planet. He had black hair, richly toned skin and large brown eyes — nearly black themselves — that studied me from behind some sort of wire-rimmed clear ecmite, a little like my filters but not apparently doing anything to reduce or modify the light levels. “What?”

“Your filters. If you don’t wear them you’ll get used to the light faster.”

“And you’ve done extensive offworld traveling, I take it?”

The boy looked at me as though he suspected I carried vacuum between my ears. “No, but I’ve talked to lots of travelers here.”

Ah. This must be one of the many local children, then, who sought tourists and other visitors, offering to carry their bags, find them good lodging, secure delectable meals and guide them to the best places to visit — for a price, of course, and leaving out the fact that the hotel, restaurant or souvenir stall is part of the family business. We had been told about them before landing. I sighed. “Listen, boy, I’m not a tourist. I’m a cultural anthropologist from Delphos, so I’m not interested in —”

“What’s a cult’ul ’thropolajizz?”

“Cultural anthropologist,” I enunciated slowly. I was reasonably sure my pronunciation was correct, though the language had taken me some getting used to, particularly its written form, using as it does half the glyphs of Delphic and marginally looser phonetic rules as well. “I make it my work to see how other people live.”

“Why?”

“Because — because I’m curious.” That was certainly something the boy would understand.

“Oh. Well, you shouldn’t wear your filters if you’re going to be here more than a few days, or you’ll never get used to the light and you’ll end up with a headache from wearing them all the time.”

For all his impertinence the boy did have a point. I nodded and removed them and everything around me went pinkish-yellow once more. I blinked and rubbed my eyes. At this rate the predicted headache would arrive much sooner than in a few days,

but I decided to try and tough it out. I was going to be here a while, after all.

The boy began his routine next. “You need a hotel? Food?” He leaned in close and sniffed experimentally. “Bath?”

I coughed. “You’re not very shy, are you?”

He shrugged up at me. “What’s to be shy about? It’s a hot day and you’ve been traveling. Either you need a bath or you don’t, and if you need one you probably know it already. If you don’t know it, it’s good you have me around to suggest it. We’re clean here. If you’re really a cult’ral athrothing you should know that about us right away.”

“Actually Delphans are clean as well. And you’re correct that I could use a washing up.” The skiff had been air-conditioned, of course, but for some reason lengthy traveling always left me feeling slightly grimy regardless of how clean the transport was.

“Come.” The boy hefted the bag that I had, until that moment, refused to let go of. I still refused. He was not going to be dissuaded so easily, though, and tugged at the strap, leaving me the choices of letting go, falling over or following. It was an easy decision to make.

Ma-kah’s even boulevards near the starport soon gave to smaller alleys and byways that held no order, laid out more or less haphazardly in a style that soon left me with no sense of direction. The one advantage I saw to the narrowness of the streets was that they afforded deep shadows from Gabriel’s torrid rays. The boy led me along these canyonlike routes until the pavement gave to red and black fired brick, his sandals clapping on them faster than the strides of my own bare feet. All around me I heard the rich dialects spoken by the inhabitants, strange inflections that also seemed a bit melodic. Until then I had heard just my language course recordings, formal and without regional accents or vernaculars; now I was surrounded by a heady mix of words and pronunciations I had not expected.

Added to the verbal melange was the pungent scent of many foods cooking. Whatever spices they used here were very different from our own, much more rich to the nose, and I found myself salivating slightly. We passed a kiosk smoking with an open char grill and I saw thin long spears over the flames, onto which bits of meat and vegetable had been arranged. The boy caught my hesitation and said, “You want a kebab?”

“Kebab?”

“Those.” He pointed to the stakes of food, hissing and licked occasionally by tongues of fire that seemed washed out by Gabriel’s ruddy glow even in the shade. Without waiting for an answer he sidled up to the kiosk’s proprietor and stuck up two fingers. The man looked him over doubtfully, then at me, and I nodded, reaching into my bag to draw forth some of the smaller coins I had received at the exchange in trade for the bars of alloy I had brought for the purpose. The man nodded back and handed two of the spits — kebabs — over to me. I hissed and nearly dropped them; the stakes were hot.

The boy grinned as I paid for the food, taking advantage of his fortune immediately and setting to work on his stake as I tentatively brought my own to my mouth. The flavor was nearly the same as the aroma, the morsels of food tender and full of juices, and I was left with an empty spit in just a few moments.

“Good?”

“Very good, yes. Kebabs. Never had anything like that before.”

“What do you eat on De’fus?”

“Delphos. We have meat and vegetables and fruit, of course, but we cook them differently and use different spices, baked often, rarely with open flame. And the vegetables here have a different taste. More pungent.”

“I hope you like it, because we use these a lot in our foods.”

The flavors of the meal were still on my tongue, savory and lingering. “I think I can get used to it.”

The boy tugged at my arm again. “You still need that bath,” he said, wrinkling his nose as a light breeze wafted over my body and toward his. “Come. It’s not far now.”

I sighed and let myself be pulled along once more. The boy was right — the bathhouse wasn’t much farther and he followed me obediently into a rented stall, holding my bag for me and watching as I washed. “Do cult’ul ’pologies work hard?”

“All work is hard if it’s worth doing,” I said, pausing in my scrubbing. Carefully I peeled the shroud of skin back from the tip of my works and washed under it as the boy stared curiously. Definitely not shy. “Why do you ask?”

“Your chest is big and your arms are strong,” he said. “Your legs too. You look like one of our athletes.”

“Well, I’m not an athlete and there isn’t much by way of physical work in cultural

anthropology, but I take time to exercise. Most of us do. Back home are trees taller than any building I've seen here so far except the starport's guidance spires, and we climb them and race through the branches for sport. Swimming too."

"I swim," the boy said as I stepped from the water. He handed me a towel. "How fast can you swim?"

"Pretty fast," I said, "though not as fast as some I know. How about you?"

"I'm the fastest in my medrassah," he said proudly.

"Medrassah?"

"The school. At the masjid."

I handed the now-damp towel back to him, feeling considerably more refreshed after my brief soak and scrub. "And what is a masjid?"

The boy rolled his eyes in impatience at my absolutely abysmal ignorance. "Where we worship."

"Ah, of course." Some of my language lessons, it seemed, were missing some data. Well, that was partly why I was here.

"Come," the boy ordered again. "You need a place to stay, yes?"

"Well, I do, but —"

"No hotel. No hotel. They steal your money for a thin shit bed, stinky linen and bugs crawling on you." He spat theatrically. "My home. You stay with us. It'll be much cheaper, and you'll have clean sheets and no bugs and our food's even better than what you ate already."

"Uh —"

"Come," he insisted again, pulling at my hand. "Look, at least. If you don't like it you can find a hotel instead." His tone suggested I'd have to be mad to take that course after having seen the hospitality I was being offered.

I sighed and let him lead me out of the bathhouse down yet more intricately twisting streets. He kept looking back to make sure I was close on his heels, something he didn't have to worry about, as he was now toting my bag and I wasn't about to lose sight of that. We came to a building that looked like all the others, jammed shoulder-to-shoulder and two or three levels high. He gestured me into the door and followed. I found myself standing in what appeared to be the dining area, a staircase to my left leading up and an arch across from me, decorated with arabesques, that gave to another room.

“Papa! Pa! We have a guest.”

A man perhaps fifteen seasons my senior, which would have put him around his fortieth, appeared the arch. “What? Who have you brought this time, Massoud?”

“He’s a cult’ral arthrologist, Pa, from offworld. He studies how other people live. He’s wudu, I saw him wash. He was going to stay at a *hotel*.”

“Ah.” The man smiled at me. “You must forgive my son. He is enthusiastic and fascinated with offworlders. I hope he’s been no trouble. If you’d prefer a hotel and to be away from him and his privacy-invading talents, you won’t insult us.”

“Stay for supper and maghrib? Please?” The boy — Massoud — was tugging at my arm. “Pa, can he? He’s still wudu, and the prayer’s soon...”

“It’s not up to me, son,” he said patiently, then looked my way.

I shrugged. “I suppose we could try one night,” I said. “If it’s no trouble...”

“Never trouble,” the man said. “We prefer visitors to find comfort in our homes rather than from the hoteliers, as the Recitation directs. They’re not ... entirely reputable, many of them, and those that are are very expensive. We’ve a floor that works well to the purpose, the third level above. Massoud sleeps there but there’s a room prepared that I think you’ll find comfortable, and the door locks so you can keep him away when he gets to be too irksome.” He ignored the boy’s exasperated gasp.

I nodded. “I’m grateful for the diversion I got from your son, then,” I said. “My name is Adessa Tetrostionu. Uh, Tetrosson.”

“De’sah?”

“Quiet, Massoud. I am Ibrim ibn Baihaqi. Massoud you know already, more I’m sure than you might have wished. The rest will be gathering soon, my older son and his yearmate. My yearmate, Reikah, will be preparing the evening meal shortly. Massoud says you’re wudu?”

“Ah, well, I don’t know exactly. Does wudu mean foreign?”

Massoud giggled and Ibrim shot him a warning look. “Courtesy, son, to guests. Surely you would be as lost on his world. Wudu,” he went on, turning to me, “means cleansed or bathed.”

“Oh. Yes, then I’m wudu,” I nodded.

“Good. If you’re comfortable, then, you may wish to join me on the verandah for a quick smoke and drink.”

“Uh, yes, I suppose, thank you.”

“Follow me then, at your leisure. Reikah has made a pitcher of her special brew and I’ve some fine fresh-cut leaf for the hookah. Massoud, get bathed and changed into evening dress now.”

“Yes, Pa,” the boy said, and scuttled upstairs as I followed my newfound host out the back of his house.

Ibrim bade me sit and poured some kind of steeped or brewed beverage into a cup, offering it to me. It was chilled and remarkably slaking, made of some herb that kept its cool feeling in my mouth even after I had swallowed, and I smiled and nodded. “Very good. Refreshing and delightful. My thanks.”

“It’s nothing,” he said offhandedly, stuffing some kind of dark brown leaf into the top receptacle of what must have been the hookah he’d mentioned. It seemed to be little more than a pipe that led into a large glass chamber filled with water, with a flexible hose connected to a stem on one side. He brought flame to the wad of leaves and inhaled from the stem, and soon thick white bubbles filled with smoke were roiling in the water, filling the air inside the glass. He drew this into his lungs and held it there a moment, then let it out in a cloud, passing the stem over to me.

I took it and inhaled cautiously. The smoke came out in a thick cool wave, coating my throat and lungs with its pungent tang. Instantly I was coughing and passed the stem back. “Sorry,” I choked.

“You’ve never smoked before?”

“Well — no. We don’t have anything like this back home.”

“Ah. I should have warned you. It’s not for everyone.”

“Indeed.” I wiped my streaming eyes as my chest settled and looked about us. The verandah was a raised deck of wood that looked out into a square courtyard. The other three sides were the backs of other dwellings, each with their own covered porches like this one, and in the center there was a fountain and various plants growing at the edges. It was getting darker; the light from the bloated sun was diminished now and seemed almost like a natural shade to me. “Lovely evening,” I said.

Ibrim drew more smoke from his hookah. “It is mild,” he agreed. “In another month or two it’ll be too miserable to do anything except sit in the fountain, but this time of year the evenings are tolerable.”

“How hot does it get here?”

“Dead summer up to one hundred thirty when Gabriel shines directly on you. A

hundred or more even in the shade. Winter, though, it can drop as low as forty or even thirty, even here, where we're closer to the equatorial line."

"How hot? Over a hundred? How can anyone survive?"

Ibrim looked surprised at my tone. "It's warm, yes, but..."

"Warm! Water *boils* at one hundred!"

"Oh! Oh, you're using the hundredscale. We've got a different system of measurement here. Let's see, on hundredscale the hottest temperatures we get are about fifty, but in winter they can approach zero."

"Ah. I see — I misunderstood."

"I can see how the highs might have surprised you."

I chuckled. "Well, yes. I was wondering if perhaps you were joking." I pondered how the men dealt with the winter. Bare skin was no protection against temperatures that low. "It doesn't get so cold on Delphos," I said, "except at the poles, and even then rarely below freezing. The rest of the planet's fairly evenly heated, maybe to forty at the hottest, but not usually below twenty anywhere. The orbit is almost perfectly circular and the axial tilt is at eighty-nine relative to the ecliptic, so we don't have variations over the season like you do."

Ibrim had started when I mentioned my homeworld and now stared at me. "De'fus. Well."

"Yes — I'm Delphan. Is that a problem?"

My host looked uncomfortable. "I don't know. That's more up to you to decide than me."

"I don't follow."

"First, tell me. Are the stories of De'fans true?"

"I'm afraid you're going to have to be more specific than that," I said, taking another sip of the cooling beverage.

"That you — take license with love."

"License? Well..."

"What I mean," he said, lowering his voice and glancing about uneasily, "is whether you perform the act freely with anyone who might ask it."

"Oh! Yes, that's true enough. Well, mostly. We don't just — share with anyone at random, but we're generally very open about it compared to many other worlds."

Ibrim nodded gravely, leaning back. "That *could* be trouble, then."

“Why?”

“Here on Allahu’akhbar we aren’t so free with lovemaking. We reserve it for our yearmates and none other. Please understand that if you were to ... behave here as you are accustomed to, there could be ... difficulty.”

“It’s illegal?”

“The Recitation does not forbid love, friend Al-Dess’ah. But it does suggest strict means by which it should be channeled to the glory of God. Only in the union of yearmates is it expressly permitted. While I’m certain you’d find lenience, perhaps even tolerance, because you are an offworlder, know that — that such close sharing is best kept to the couples who have taken the vow.” He took another draw of smoke, then leaned in again and spoke very quietly. The smoke wreathed his head and curled about both of us with his voice. “That said there are quarters of Ma-kah, as with any city, where you can find ... relief for a price.”

I nodded. “Thanks. I mean, thanks for the caution. You’re right that we’re a lot more free with ... with pleasure than you are, it seems. It’s good to have this knowledge. I appreciate your looking out for me like this.”

Ibrim shrugged, leaning back once more, and I wondered at the apparent look of approval he was giving me. “You are my guest. It’s my duty to see to your comfort and to make certain you don’t find yourself in a ... predicament.” He set his hookah’s stem aside and rose. “If you’ll follow me now, I believe we’ll find that Reikah and Malanni have prepared the meal.”

My host was right. Inside we found the large table lavishly spread with sundry foods, almost all of them entirely new to me. Ibrim took position at the head, gesturing me to be seated to his right. To my right I found a youth of perhaps seventeen or eighteen seasons. Directly across from him sat a girl about his age, and across from me Massoud gazed at my every move, his stare wide behind his eyewear. At the other end of the table sat a woman about Ibrim’s age. “This is Al-Dess’ah Ter-assan, an offworlder who will be guesting here a time. Al-Dess’ah, my older son Ahmad. Yonder is my yearmate Reikah, who cooked the spreads, and this is Ahmad’s yearmate Malanni, who made the breads and vegetables.”

“I set the table,” Massoud said, earning himself a quick look from his father.

I nodded around at the new faces, smiling greetings and being welcomed. “De’sah is a cultural apologist,” Massoud said.

“Cultural anthropologist,” I said, suppressing a laugh. “Actually almost. I’m just finishing my studies at university and am here to work on my doctoral dissertation.”

“Doctorate!” Ahmad said. “Respectable position.”

“Well, I hope to make it so,” I shrugged.

“And what is your thesis?” he inquired further. Ibrim cast him a look and he reddened slightly.

“I’m not really certain yet. Almost nothing is directly known of the ways and people of Allahu’akhbar back home. There are some thirdhand texts and tourist accounts, books by offworlders, but very little hard data gathered by our own observers. More rumor and story than truth. In fact just being here the brief time I have I’ve already learned more than was described to me before I left. And my world — well, we don’t have much of a history of our own yet, so we’re interested in others’ more than might be usual. Especially worlds where societies have been stable for a long time.”

“You’re from where?” Reikah asked.

“Uh, well —” I shot a glance to Ibrim and he nodded. “Well, Delphos.”

In the awkward silence that met the announcement Massoud said brightly, “It’s very far, isn’t it?”

I nodded to him, grateful for the change of subject. “It was a two-month passage in a deepstar craft. About eighty of your days.”

“Oh, that is far then. And the deepstars really move faster than light, right?”

“They do. It’s a strange thing to see. When they accelerate all the stars toward the front of the ship turn slowly more blue, and the ones toward the rear become more red. Then they all vanish from visibility and instead what you see toward the front is a dim reddish glow, almost like how Gabriel looks about now outside. That’s extremely low frequency cosmic radiation blueshifted into visible light by the speed of the ship itself.”

“It sounds pretty,” Malanni murmured. She, like everyone else, was casting me frequent furtive glances of curiosity. Well, almost everyone else; Massoud was frank enough about it, but not, I suspected, actually curious for the same reasons. I nodded my agreement with her assessment and glanced about surreptitiously as well.

Even indoors the women wore their full-length clothing, though they were unveiled. Ahmad was nude as his father and I, being a matured male, and Massoud was

wearing some kind of mid-length frock that ended just above his knees along with the strange discs over his eyes. The frock had no sleeves, was open below the collar to about halfway down his chest and looked to be substantially cooler than the city clothing he'd been wearing earlier.

I was also watching the eating customs. On Delphos we use knives, forks and spoons, but I saw no such utensils here and waited to see what the others would do. It turned out they used pieces of flat bread to scoop up bits of food, biting both the bread and the morsels. It felt odd at first, eating with my hands like that, but after a few abortive attempts I soon got the hang of the technique. Massoud snorted when I pushed a bit of vegetable off the plate entirely while trying to scoop it up, earning him another glare from Ibrim. I smiled at him and shrugged, laughing with him at my own lack of skill.

“Pa, De’sah says they have trees on De’fus taller than the buildings here.”

“Trees? I’ve seen pictures of those,” Ibrim said. “All we have here that’s naturally occurring is scrub, a low kind of slow growing bush the livestock use for forage along with the tough kusha grass that grows everywhere. All our wood has to come from the hydroponics farther off the sun belt, and it’s fairly expensive. Most trees scorch under Gabriel’s light.”

I thought of the wooden verandah. This family must not have been poor.

“Are there many trees on De’fus?” Ahmad said.

“Oh, many and many. Most of the planet is covered with jungle, and jungles are little more than trees, some growing hundreds of meters in height and their trunks so close together you can’t see more than a dozen meters in any direction. From orbit you can see it clearly. Delphos looks distinctly green, almost like a gem. Though not as gem-like as Allahu’akhbar,” I added after a moment’s thought. “We passed the nightside when we were entering parking orbit and Gabriel was eclipsed. I could still see some of its light through the facets of some of the mountains you have. I’d heard of that but couldn’t possibly have imagined how beautiful it was. On the nightside the cities were lit and cast patches of illumination over the dark of the disc. And the edge of Allahu’akhbar sparkled, orange and glinting. It made me think of a rare jewel set in rich velvet.”

“You make it sound — astonishing,” Reikah said.

“It was.”

“I’ve seen viscasts of it at medrassah,” Massoud said around a mouthful of excel-

lent cooking. “Do you have mountains on De’fus too?”

Before I could answer in the negative Ibrim broke in. “Massoud, that’s enough. You’ve harried Al-Dess’ah enough for a lifetime. Now finish your supper and make ready for maghrib.”

“Yes, Pa,” the boy murmured, and we were all able to more fully turn our attention to the spread. There were dishes made with cooked and chilled vegetables, raw cold vegetables, and more of Reikah’s good beverage. There was no meat, but there was the flat bread, and I discovered I was enjoying the light meal as the evening began to cool. The foods were all rich with a taste I would come to know thoroughly over the next few months as I continued my research, one I’ve not been able to find anywhere else in my travels. Reikah and Malanni smiled and nodded thanks at my compliments to their skills, which were formidable.

Soon we had finished the meal and the women and boy cleared the table as the men rose. “You’ve bathed,” Ibrim said to me, “though you may wish to rinse before we go to the masjid for maghrib. If you wish to attend.”

“Very well. Ibrim, what is maghrib?”

He passed me a glance that wondered about my upbringing. “The evening prayer.”

I nodded. “Good. I’d like to see that.”

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate—

Surely your Lord knows that you pass in prayer nearly two-thirds of the night, and sometimes half of it, and sometimes a third of it; and God measures the night and the day. He knows if you are not able to do it, so He has turned to you mercifully.

Therefore read what is easy of the Recitation. He knows that there must be among you sick, and others who travel in the land seeking of the bounty of God, and others who fight in God's way, therefore read as much of it as is easy to you, and keep up prayer and help the poor and offer to God a goodly gift, and whatever good you send on beforehand for yourselves, you will find it with God; that is best and greatest in reward; and ask forgiveness of God; surely God is forgiving, merciful.

The Recitation (revised), surah 73:20-21

PRAYERS AND CUSTOMS

WE ENTERED THE MASJID QUIETLY with a streaming mass of bodies in the cooling evening. Around us, outside as we walked to the large building, men had climbed narrow spires and called out chants in a rising and falling rhythm, sounding almost like a lament as well as an invitation to the prayer. Their voices rose in ululation and sustained notes filled with vibrato, echoing from the low walls of the tightly-hemmed streets. All about us Ma-kah seemed to subdue itself with respect under the cadences. They were evocative, almost haunting, and beautiful.

At the doors to the masjid the men and boys went in one direction, the women and girls in another, and we paused briefly to rinse yet again before entering a large open space. To my surprise, Massoud removed the clothing he was wearing except the strange clear circles that perched on his nose, as did all the other boys around us, and strode as naked as the men into what must be the place of worship.

All about me men and boys, hundreds of them, were kneeling on small rectangular rugs. There were no females to be seen anywhere. Ibrim gestured me to one of the rugs along with Ahmad and Massoud, who insisted on taking a position immediately next to mine. He smiled up at me as I settled back on my heels, imitating his posture, then leaned over. "Watch and do as we do. Don't feel awkward," he said, gesturing to the others about us, many of whom were passing me curious glances. "They know you're from offworld and so don't expect you to behave perfectly."

"How can they tell?" My skin was a little lighter in tone than that of some, but I thought it blended in fairly well, along with the color of my eyes and hair. To me I didn't look very different from anyone around me.

Massoud pointed to my works. "You have not had khitan."

"Not had —" I stopped as a hush descended and a robust man of perhaps sixty seasons stepped before the kneeling throng, all of whom stood as he took position at the front of the room. Everyone around me lifted their hands to shoulder height and said, in unison, "God is great." *Allahu'akhbar*, the name of the planet itself. I knew what the

name had meant but hadn't suspected it was part of their worship as well. Then they put their palms over their hearts and said, "Glory be to You, God. Blessed Your name and great Your majesty. There is no God but You. We come seeking shelter from evil." Then everyone knelt again.

Massoud leaned close and whispered, "Now comes the bismallah."

The man at the front knelt as well and lifted his hands, palms up, before his breast as everyone else followed suit, then intoned, "Praise God, maker of all, the most merciful and kind, keeper of judgment. You alone we worship and You alone we ask succor. Show the next step in the path to Your favor. Keep us from the path of the wrongdoers." He opened a large bound volume that rested before him on a small wooden stand, intricately carved with semi-rounded shapes.

Massoud leaned in again. "Now we hear a surah from the Recitation. I hope it's a short one. Ow!" He rubbed his arm and glared at Ahmad, who had pinched him.

The man selected a passage and began reading from it.

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate —

Avoid the fornicatress and the fornicator.

Say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms...

I thought about the women I'd seen, the way they were dressed, and understood a little better now why they wore their wraps even in the heat of the day. And the line about avoiding fornicators stood out to me; as a Delphan I could possibly fall into that category. Probably did. I glanced over to Ibrim, wondering why he had continued to extend me hospitality despite knowing what he did about my origins. In a few moments my attention returned to the reading. It *was* a fairly long passage, and I was having difficulty focusing on it as completely as I felt I should.

...And take for yearmates those among you who are single and those who are fit among your males and your females; if they are needy, God will make them free from want out of His grace; and God is ample-giving, knowing...

Yearmates — some kind of social contract, obviously, and one taken very seriously here. That would explain the warning about fornication.

...Let those of your males who have not attained to puberty be bare among you three times, at the morning prayer, and at midday, and at the prayer of the nightfall. It is not a sin for you or them. And at all other times let them cover their bodies.

And when the children among you have attained to puberty, let them seek permission as those before them sought permission and take yearmates to themselves, and the males may divest of cloth at that time; thus does God make clear to you His communications, and God is knowing, wise...

So the yearmate was available only to the sexually mature, it seemed; prior to that there would be little recourse for a boy or girl to enjoy any sort of pleasure. I wondered how they dealt with that. Back home it would have been almost a punishment to restrict the natural curiosities of youth.

...God is the light of the heavens and the earth. A likeness of His light is as a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass, and the glass is as it were a brightly shining star, lit from a blessed tree, neither eastern nor western, the oil whereof almost gives light though fire touch it not — light upon light — God guides to His light whom He pleases, and God sets forth parables for men, and God is cognizant of all things.

The old man closed the book and all began bowing, pressing their foreheads to the prayer-mats on which they knelt. I followed suit as a prayer was recited, trying to keep up with their risings and lowerings and doing my best to ignore the fact that Massoud was stifling giggles at my poor timing. Then there was a silent time of meditation as the worshippers rested their palms facing up over their knees, their eyes closed. Many had their right hands bound into fists with their forefingers extended and seemed to have regretful expressions.

Eventually the prayers ended with everyone turning to one side and then the other, saying, “Peace be with you, and the mercy of God,” and then all stood once more to file out. Massoud and the other boys dressed themselves again and we left the build-

ing to be joined once more by the females. At my puzzled look Ahmad said, “Women and men do not pray together. It’s unseemly. They’re clothed and we’re not, and it can lead to ... distraction, particularly for the girls and new women.”

I nodded. At least the reading I’d heard explained why the boys had prayed nude like the men, but I could tell from the rest of the content — as well as the rituals that preceded and followed — that I’d have to find and read a copy of the Recitation soon to look out for any other pitfalls I might encounter in this strange society, based as it was so thoroughly in the contents of the text. I’d never been to any sort of religious service before, and felt utterly turned around.

When we got back to Ibrim’s house he invited me to the verandah once more. He lit his hookah and offered me the stem, but I demurred and he smiled. “This was the first time you have been to a masjid?”

“Yes.”

“You must have questions.”

“Many. Would it be rude to ask?”

“No, naturally not — what do you wish to know?”

I thought a moment. Easiest question first. “Well, I guess it’s normal for boys to pray nude, but to remain clothed at all other times.”

“That’s true. God has told us that any mature male can take a yearmate, and when he has reached that age he is to free himself of clothing, but until then he’s to remain covered in public. As the surah said, boys don’t need clothing in the prayers. All are naked before God, who sees all, who made all.”

“And exactly what is a yearmate?”

Ibrim took another puff from his hookah. “Do you not marry on De’fus?”

I knew the term from my studies. “We have bondings, but they’re not formalized, and they’re flexible — I guess you already knew that much. But no, no marriage.”

“So if you have a — bonding? — you yet may be at love with others?” I could tell Ibrim was shocked, though he tried to cover it.

“Well, yes. We’ve got some very different customs, I gather.”

“So it would seem. Here that would be adultery, but then, if you’re not married at all, I suppose it would simply be fornication. A yearmate is the mate one selects for a

given year. Each year there is a ceremony and dance, and the eligible males — mature males — select yearmates for themselves. After that they are married for the year and may carry on at love freely with each other.”

“And the ceremony is repeated every year by the yearmates?”

“Yes, though not always with the same mates. When a youth is still in his first two or three years of manhood he will often select different mates each year, but usually he settles down with one he prefers over all. Reikah has been my yearmate now sixteen times. She is mother to both Ahmad and Massoud. If God wills it we will renew again this year.”

“And what about youths who are too young for marriage?”

Ibrim shifted a little. “What of them?”

“They can’t — they’re not allowed to — to enjoy?”

“No, they’re not. They are meant to hold their virginity intact until they’re of age, at which point they choose a first yearmate and proceed. What of your youths?”

“We’re different there as well, it appears. They’re not — restricted.”

Ibrim shifted again; he looked distinctly uncomfortable. I decided to try for more certain ground. “So the young men can renew with their yearmates after that, as you have with your — wife?”

“They can, but again they generally test the waters, as it were, the first few years.”

I nodded slowly. “So what you do, then, is essentially reconfirm your commitment with Reikah each year?”

“That’s a fine way of seeing it, yes.” He looked at me appraisingly. “You’re certainly old enough. Have you — bonded?”

“I have a bondsman, yes, and we’re quite powerfully kindled for each other.”

“And does he play at love with others, or do you?”

“Yes, we share pleasure with our friends as well.”

He shook his head in wonder. “De’fus is a strange world...” He came to himself with a start. “I apologize, friend Al-Dess’ah. I shouldn’t pass judgment on you or your people, as they were made by God as much as we. Whatever ways you have of living are your own, and I’m certain ours seem odd to you as well.”

“Well, they *are* different — but I’m here to learn, certainly not to judge.” I remembered what Massoud had said to me before the reading. “Ibrim, what is khitan?”

“My son has been speaking out of turn again. I should warn him.”

“It’s no trouble. He just mentioned everyone could see I was from offworld because I’d not had khitan, but didn’t have time to explain what he meant before the man came out to read.”

“The imam, yes — the man’s an imam, well learned of the Recitation, but a layman as all imams are. Khitan is a rite all male infants pass through when they’re no more than a few days old. It’s the removal of skin from the end of the — the male genitals.”

I looked down to my shrouded works, then inadvertently glanced at that of my host. He was right; there was a physical difference to be seen between us. I hadn’t consciously remarked it before, but when I thought about it I realized that all the males here were similarly altered, boys and men alike. I had thought it might have just been a simple genetic difference. “The skin is removed?”

“Yes. It’s a quick procedure but required by God to show we are among His faithful.”

The tip of my organ throbbed in sympathy. However brief the procedure might be, it sounded painful. “So that’s how everyone knows I’m from offworld.”

“It is rather obvious at a glance,” Ibrim nodded. “At least, from the front.”

I chuckled and he joined in. “If only it could be obvious from behind as well!”

He stared at me a moment, then got it and began laughing loudly, slapping his knees. “I’ll have to watch you, Al-Dess’ah,” he said. “You’re a quick one!”

“Papa?” It was Massoud, lurking in the deep shadow of the doorway.

“Yes, boy, go play,” Ibrim gestured.

Massoud ran past, a flash of bare skin scalp to toe, and jumped into the fountain, letting its cool water cascade down his body. Within a few minutes several other boys, of a wide range of ages, had joined him from the other three houses. Some wore clothing that resembled nothing more than it did a Delphan loincloth, though a bit longer and apparently of thinner fabric, but most were as bare as my host, myself and his son. “We’re at home now,” Ibrim explained, “and in private, so the boy doesn’t strictly need to bother with clothes. If it troubles you, I can tell him —”

“No, no, that’s all right,” I said. “Underlings — boys — never wear clothes on Delphos.”

Ibrim’s eyes widened. “Not at all?”

“No. Girls either.”

Now he was truly unable to hide his surprise. “You let your girls go nude? Doesn’t that put them — at risk?”

“At risk for what?”

Ibrim stared at me, unable to fathom the depths of my ignorance.

“Oh. *Oh*. Actually that almost never happens. We’ve got — very harsh punishments for forced coupling. It’s a throwback to the days before the Uprising, when freemen could do anything they wished to any slave.”

“Slavery?”

“Yes, Delphos was originally largely a slave planet. Well, entirely a slave planet — but there were many more slaves than freemen. There was a full-scale Uprising there a little more than a hundred seasons ago, about eighty of your years, begun when The Martyrs were executed at the hand of a particularly vicious master.”

“We’ve had martyrs as well, so I understand what you’re saying there. They can move entire peoples to great deeds.”

I nodded agreement. “They were really little more than boys themselves, about eighteen seasons aged, perhaps as old as Ahmad. Young. Barris had attacked his master, eventually killing him after learning his sons had been murdered by the freeman, and was tortured and dismembered for the act. Allis chose to remain with his beloved and face death with him rather than betray him and save his own life. They died together.”

Ibrim nodded. “Love’s power.”

“Yes.”

We ruminated a moment. Every time I spoke of The Martyrs my chest would constrict; they had been so very young, handsome and full of the vigor of youth, and they had been tortured without mercy and killed in a terrible way in sight of each other. We had seen the recordings of the viscasts, part of our history lessons, and most of us had had haunted dreams after that for a while. They had strode to the inducers each day, resigned but noble, had faced their torment and their deaths with a quiet acceptance that seemed, somehow, to be brought from their feelings for each other. It had been terrible and tragic; and yet from that tragedy had arisen freedom for all others.

I broke my reverie before I could become too maudlin. “So. On Delphos when you get older — when you mature — you’re apprenticed and given a cloth of station, but until then you remain as nude as we are now.”

“So coming here must be strange for you. Reversed.”

“It is a bit of a mirror image. I was thinking that just this afternoon. Might I try the hookah again?”

Ibrim passed the stem over to me. “Just pull at the smoke with your tongue, and when you get a mouthful, inhale through your lips to mix it with the air.”

I did as directed and this time didn’t feel my chest needing to convulse as much as before, though it still stung a little. I held the smoke inside for a few moments and then let it out in a cloud. I felt a sudden buzzing in my ears and my heart accelerated. “Wow,” I said. “That’s a strange feeling.”

“Not bad, eh?” Ibrim smiled as he took the stem back.

“I suppose I could learn to like it,” I allowed, and he chuckled again.

“Slowly at first,” he cautioned, “or your stomach will become upset and you’ll get a headache.” Many things seemed to carry the risk of headache, so I took it easy with the hookah.

We passed some more time and I learned that the palms-up gestures in worship were there to invite the glory of God to fall as rays of the sun into the hands of the worshippers, after which they would press their hands to their faces to spread the blessing onto themselves, which seemed to me to be quite a beautiful thought, and that the fists with extended forefingers meant that a particular supplicant was praying for forgiveness for a sin.

I tried a little more of the smoke and then Ibrim called Massoud away from his play, directing him to bed. The boy assented, grumbling only a little, and offered to lead me to my own room. “It’s next to mine,” he said, “on the top floor. You can see all the stars at night when you open the windows. Come and I’ll show you.”

I stood. I was feeling fairly tired and ready to turn in. “All right,” I said, then turned to Ibrim. “Thanks for your hospitality. What’s the fee for lodging?”

My host waved the question aside. “We can settle it in the morning after you’ve had some rest —” his eyes cut to his son — “and a chance to decide if you want to stay here at all, or if you’d find better peace under a highway. Sleep well if you’re able.”

I nodded and thanked him again as Massoud impatiently tugged my hand and led me upstairs to the third level, where he told me ordinarily only he slept unless his family was boarding a guest like myself, his bare feet leaving wet prints on the floor.

“My brother used to have your room, but after he became a firstman he took up a suite on the second level with his yearmates.”

“Has he had many?”

“Three,” Massoud nodded, “one man and two women. He might renew with Malanni this year, he says. He likes her.”

“So men can take each other for yearmates?”

He gave me his signature look of disappointment with my ignorance, very like his father’s. “Of *course*. It’s not haram. This is my room,” he gestured, letting me peer inside. It was every bit a typical space for a boy his age, a little messy, the bed rumped and unmade, as many clothes strewn about the floor as were properly hung in the wardrobe. There were toys and games everywhere. He led me a few steps further. “This is yours.”

It was not huge but it was certainly suitable. My bag rested in the middle of the bed, the mattress perhaps twice the width of my shoulders. A closed connecting door adjoined my chamber to his, which surprised me a little until I remembered this was actually a family dwelling, not a commercial boarding house or hotel. The room was clean — beyond clean, it was almost a surgery. I nodded to him and smiled. “Looks great. Thanks. Oh — the jakes?”

“Jakes?”

“Um, yes. For, ah, relieving myself of water?”

“Oh, the RC — uh, relief chamber. Yes, down the hall — there at the end, see that door that’s open just a little and light glowing? The light stays on at night so you can find your way around.”

“Ah. And not splash.”

He stared up at me, puzzled, then began to giggle. “Yes. Yes, be sure not to splash. I don’t want my feet wet with your puddles.”

“See to your own aim as well, then,” I smiled at him. “This is fine, Massoud. Thanks, and good night.”

“Good night,” he said, lingering in the doorway as I turned to my bag, still obviously full of curiosity.

“I’ll show you what I brought with me, but not tonight,” I assured him. “It’s late and I’m rather tired. All right?”

He smiled and nodded. “Will you also tell me more of Ba-rass and Al-lessa?”

“How much did you hear of our conversation?”

Massoud had the good grace to act abashed, though I was certain it was just an act. “Most of it,” he admitted. “The courtyard carries sound from the verandahs very well.”

I sighed. “It seems to, particularly if there’s a boy nearby with ears the size of platters. Well, surely you’ll have more questions for me, then, and I suppose I’ll have to answer them. But not now. Sleep well.”

“And you.” He closed the door softly as I began to unpack. It didn’t take long — I had no clothes, of course — and soon I had my pad, toiletries and my holo of Relesso set up on the little desk in the corner. In its drawer I was delighted to find a copy of the Recitation and sat back on the bed to begin reading, first flipping through it to familiarize myself a little with its layout and to see if I could find the passage — the surah — that I had heard tonight. It didn’t leap out at me, so I just dove in and began.

The book was beautiful, scribed and illuminated carefully and obviously by hand, the text wrought black and rendered in gilt in places with red and blue accents. Each page was framed by inked borders and looked like a fine work of art. It was striking to be holding an actual bound volume as opposed to simply reading something on a pad, and I carefully turned the leaves, perusing the right-to-left flowing linear alphabet with a little effort.

It was a fairly thickly written text, the prose stilted and formal, and after about a half hour of poring over it I set it aside with a sigh. I didn’t think I’d be able to absorb it all at once, certainly, and expected I’d have to tackle it a surah at a time. I marked my place and padded down the hall to make use of the RC. The door was still open a crack and I was about to go inside when I heard a rustling from within, seeing a flash of skin. I halted, not intending to spy, but could see just enough of the interior to show me that Massoud was in there, seated nude on the bowl. He was leaning back and his eyes were closed with a distant expression of pleasure, and his hand was working rapidly up and down between his legs.

I smiled to myself, amused, and stole quietly back to my room, waiting until I heard a rinsing of water followed by the boy’s light footfalls coming back up the hall and the soft click of his doorlatch, then rose to use the facilities for their designed purpose. As I returned I saw Massoud’s door was now half open and I heard his voice call softly. “Good night, De’sah.”

I paused a moment. “Good night, Massoud. See you in the morning.”

“If God wills it,” he answered.

I entered my room, shut the door quietly and stared at the holo of Relesso a while, as I did every night since we’d parted, missing him still. It had been two months of cycles since I’d last seen his living visage, and would be at least a season, probably, before I’d see him again. I scrubbed my face with my palms, doused the lights and opened the windows as Massoud had suggested, letting the starlight in — Allahu’akhbar has no moons at all any more, not even one — along with a cool waft of night air. He had been right; the heavens were effulgent with gems. I looked for constellations I might know, but without much hope of finding any. Allahu’akhbar was very far from Delphos, and I knew the parallax of the distance would distort any patterns I recognized from my world to the point of being unrecognizable. Still I enjoyed the spectacle as I climbed between the sheets.

Lying in the comfortable bed I smiled in the dark, thinking of Massoud giving himself release. We might have different customs for clothing, for bonding and for pleasure, but it seemed that boys on Delphos and Allahu’akhbar were the same in at least one respect.