

My Time Among the Stars

The Collected Alustro's Journals (Tales from the Fading Suns)

By Bill Bridges

PREVIEW

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Prologue

Thrülday 3, Shenri moon, 4996 (Leminkainen calendar); Tuesday, June 6th, 4996 (Holy Terra calendar)

Greetings Uncle Palamon,

Forgive the years of silence between this and my last letter to you. It is only now that I can again write you, for the years have opened my eyes and greatly changed my soul. I am not the youth you once knew, your dutiful nephew, son to your dear sister, my beloved mother. I realize that you harshly disapprove of the course my life has taken, and your reaction to this letter may cause you to burn it before it is fully read. I ask in my mother's name that you read further. If not for me, then for her, to whom you were indebted for tutelage and upbringing after the tragic death of both your parents. If you still bear her any love — and I know that you do — then read the words of her only son, your nephew who once looked to you as a dog does its master, with both love and fear in its eyes.

Two years have passed since I left Midian to follow Erian Li Halan, my liege, to the stars. Four years since I left the fold of the Orthodoxy to join the Eskatonic Order. You could not then understand my choice; you took it as an insult. But that was never intended. I hope this letter will lead you now to better know the fire that burns in my soul and demands the choices that I have made. Can an archbishop not understand the yearning of the soul for the Pancreator? The yearning for answers to the deepest questions of life, and the thread of meaning that is woven between its inception and departure? I have so many questions, and I have chosen the path that will allow me to answer them, among the stars.

Can you not understand why my life could not be the same as yours? The noble quietude of cathedral, although nourishing as a sanctuary from the world's pain, is to me only a retreat. The career you had outlined for me in the Orthodoxy would have led to my slow pining and suffocation. I mean no insult. You did as you thought best, with the kindest intentions. It must chaff to read a surly youth's attack on your beloved institutions. I know what the cathedral, the Orb and the rites mean to you. They mean much to me, too. I have grown, yes, but that boy to whom you taught the chants will always be a part of me.

I made vows to another order not because I was rebellious or discontented, but because it promised escape. Unlike the Orthodoxy, the Eskatonic Order requires that its priests quest, and questing was the first virtue extolled by the Prophet after his vision of the Holy Flame. Of course, you know that. But why act otherwise? I have met priests of the Orthodoxy who chaff under the strict rules laid down by the archbishops. Do you not know their need? Do you deny it? I tell you, it is not the illusions of demons that cause them to rebel, but the call of creation. Call it heresy if you will. This is a charge my order suffers under all too often. The truth is that your fellow priests refuse to see, to ask, to really discover the wisdom nurtured by the Eskatonics.

But I spend too much time arguing theological knots. This is not what I intended when I picked up pen to write. I mean this as an explanation, not a

reconciliation. If you choose to forgive me after reading this, you must do so without my repentance. I am what the Pancreator has made me, and can be no more or less.

I mean to tell you why I changed, what seed was planted in my breast that sprouted roots and branches. Do not feel guilty when I tell you it was your fault. You could not know how the Emperor's coronation would light in me a flame which only grows hotter with each year. When you invited mother and I to Byzantium Secundus to witness the crowning of the new Emperor, I am sure you only thought to introduce me to the grandeur of your great cathedral. Grand it was, I do not deny that. Indeed, had it been but a trip to see the holy sight where Vladimir was crowned, I might then and there have given up all other ambitions but the Orthodoxy. But the cathedral was not the nexus of that visit. The new Emperor was.

You cannot imagine what it is like to know only war in one's lifetime. You are old enough to remember a time before the Emperor Wars, when the houses were not constantly at each others' throats. Of course, they always have been, I suppose. But in the times of your youth, they at least were discreet and kept their quarrels among themselves. But once Darius Hawkwood made his bid for the throne, the hatreds of the houses, guilds and, yes, even the sects of the Universal Church were naked before all. Since my birth and until Alexius was crowned, I knew only war. A war that killed my mother not long after the coronation, as the last malcontents made their final, failed bid.

But you know this. My point is only that, after Alexius took the throne, peace was finally a possibility. It is now, as I write this, a reality. How long will it last? I do not dare guess. But I pray every morning and night that it does last, that it is eternal.

The other factor in my current development was also your doing. It was you who pulled the strings that placed me in the service of House Li Halan. I was still new to my vows, and stumbled over the chants often, and was imperfect in the eyes of the traditional and stern Li Halan royals. It was the mild ostracism I received there that drew Erian Li Halan's interest. She was coming of age and struggled against the preconceptions her family held her to. We became compatriots against the stodgy elders around us. She chose me as her confessor, to the annoyance of her father, who wished her to be kept under closer scrutiny by one of his own choosing. The fact that I soon after forsook the Orthodoxy to join the Eskatonics became a minor scandal in the house. But Erian supported my choice, although I suppose it was merely a rebellion for her, a means to snub her father again.

She doubts too much. She has many questions of faith, and I am hard put to give her sufficient answers. How can I, when I still have so many questions myself? But I do not doubt. My faith is strong. Regardless of the conundrums and paradoxes of existence, I see One hand behind all actions, that of the Pancreator. It is my duty to ensure that Erian comes to see this also. I must endeavor at all times to bolster her faith.

When her father passed away and left her disenfranchised, having given all his lands to her brother, she had little choice but to leave Midian. I had to follow, not just because she asked it of me, but because I had yearned for the stars for so long. I had secretly contemplated leaving, of begging Erian to let me go. But the time to cut the final bonds that held me to the Orthodoxy and Midian had finally come of its own.

The jumproads became my new home. I have always been fascinated with the jumpgates and all the relics of the Anunnaki, that race also called the Ur. Who were they? Where are they now? Did they know the Pancreator as we do? What names did they use to address the Mystery? I was consumed with curiosity concerning the Great Ones and their ways. Now, I could pursue this obsession freely.

I presume you know more of them than even I have discovered. You are, after all, Archbishop of Byzantium Secundus. One does not rise so high without learning some secrets. I am certain the Church fathers know more than they reveal, especially concerning history and the mysterious, inhuman race that left us our star-faring legacy. Like most outside of the Patriarch's favor, there are many things I will never know. All the more reason to seek answers elsewhere.

I have enclosed some sketches from my travels. I include for you the one I made of the Gargoyle of Nowhere, the great monument of the wastes known to give omens and visions to certain pilgrims. I remember when I was very little that you talked about the Gargoyle. Is it surprising that I remember this? How could I forget it? As you spoke, there was excitement in your eyes and your gaze looked off into spaces immaterial. You had been to the wastes on a great pilgrimage with many nobles, sent to guide their penance in return for Church forgiveness. But it affected you more than it did them. You received no vision, but its presence alone was enough for you. It thrummed with Mystery. Imagine now what you felt then and you will begin to understand my whole life. My quest.

In my travels, I have discovered that the Known Worlds are not what we are told they are. You know this already. I suspect your hand in much of the Church's creed. Why? I know the political reasons for the lies, but why do you participate in this scheme of ignorance? I ask knowing that I will never get an answer. You will say you are protecting their souls, but I know you cannot believe that. Not really believe it.

The places I have seen! The people are so different... yet so much the same. The Pancreator's creation is a wondrous tapestry. I could not begin to detail for you the incredible people of the worlds I have walked upon. How the peasants of Madoc, living on their great, sprawling boats, know generosity without measure, sharing all they have with those in need — and they are canny distinguishers of want and need. Their fishers, those most revered among them, know where the largest herds of fish are without any outward clue. They simply know, with an instinct of sorts, the way the old men of Midian know when the weather is growing bad well before the Engineers' terraforming towers tell them anything. How is this?

How is it that the downtrodden, brutally punished rebels of Cadavus still dream and yearn for more when everything the nobles tell them denies the value of hope? I have seen hope, uncle. It is no fleeting thing, but a tenacious, living thing in the heart, in the eyes of those who have it. Those who lack it are empty vessels waiting and desperate to be filled. All too often, they drink first of hate and violence.

The people of the Known Worlds group themselves together in cliques and gangs, guilds and sects, houses and whatever else they want to call themselves. For protection, for companionship, for some sense that they are not alone in the growing darkness. I know from experience that you cannot go alone, through life or the universe. That is death for the asking. All too many prey upon the lone traveler, he with no one to vouch for him or pay his ransom.

I am no fool; I have many friends on the road. We are brought up believing that we cannot trust those who are not sworn to the same allegiances as we, whether it be another house, guild or sect. But it is a myth, a lie like many others made to serve the political needs of the war. Besides my liege, I have friends among the Charioteers and the Vorox. They are boon companions, and we have shared wonders and dangers together. I would gladly give my life for any of them, and they would do the same for me. This is not what I was taught as a child. There were many lies in my youth.

A friend of Erian's, Sanjuk oj Kaval, has a saying she heard among the youth gangs on her homeworld of Ukar: "The older you get, the more lies you wear on your skin."

This, of course, refers to the Ukar custom of writing an Ukari's deeds in scars on her skin, and the fact that adults come to conclusions about how things really are and rarely deviate from those convictions thereafter. But youth is questioning. Why not maturity as well? It is clear that our immediate predecessors did not have the answers to all questions, and our distant ancestors, while mighty in thought and deed, failed in humility. We pay the price for their hubris.

Strange that many of the things our ancestors of the Second Republic achieved and were proud of are now considered vain or evil. Their technology was remarkable, but we spurn it as if it were the tools of demons. So we say, yet without it we could not travel the stars or maintain life on barren worlds such as Nowhere. Though we curse the fruits of our ancestor's labor, it does not prevent us from using that labor and its yield. All recognize the necessity for tech, but the Church teaches that tech taints those who use it, that their egos will grow too mighty, and self-importance will surpass their love for the Pancreator. This, it is said, was the sin of the Second Republic citizens.

They are said to have been a godless people, spurning belief in a deity and exalting themselves in the Pancreator's place. But I find this hard to believe. How can anyone not recognize the works of the Pancreator and his hand behind them? I find this to be the greatest lie we are told about our sinful ancestors, that they knew not the Pancreator. Was not the Church in existence then? Did not the Prophet preach before the Second Republic was formed? I have seen ignorance

and willful denial of the truth, but rarely on such a scale as is claimed here. No, I refuse to believe that anyone who could mold the very substance of a planet to make it pleasing to the body, mind and spirit is one who is without knowledge or love of the Pancreator. The ego alone cannot work such feats, although some will attempt to argue otherwise.

On blessed worlds such as Holy Terra, the maintenance of elder tech is unnecessary. The Pancreator molded that world for humans, and little is needed to maintain it. But on other planets, such as the tragic Pandemonium, upkeep of tech is vital to life. I know that monks now build a cathedral there in denial of the cataclysms caused by terraforming engine failure, expecting the Pancreator to save them from any harm. We are gifted with intelligence and insight; to so foolishly ignore these gifts in the face of disaster is an insult to the Pancreator. Is not the wisdom of science but the perception of the Pancreator's laws? Certainly, we need to beware our own greed and pride when utilizing tech, but this does not mean we must forsake it entirely.

Outside the cloister, people live life as they must; they use what they can to survive. While the Church chants about the sins of tech in its hallowed halls, those living outside the walls scrape as they must. It was eye-opening, I tell you, when I first realized just how many people ignore the laws of the Church. Not just mendicant monks, but peasants, yeoman and nobles — even bishops! They say one thing but mean another, especially when it concerns their comfort and power.

Since the end of the war, the jumproads have opened again. As people travel to neighboring planets long sundered by their ruler's rivalries, they meet strange people, once so much like them but now changed through years of isolation. Some greet old family or friends from other worlds. But others remember old hatreds and simmering feuds. New conflicts have broken out on these worlds, so long united by their lords against rival houses or guilds. But with no direction, they fall back to their old conflicts as if they were instinctual.

Such is the case with Malignatius. Long under the rule of the Li Halan, the morally lax Decados now own the world. People are returning to the ancient sects of their ancestors, denying the Orthodoxy that was imposed on them for so long. Wars have erupted over religious issues; pain and misery is the result. How can those who claim to worship one creator fight so much over the details of his grace?

Yet still I think the best of the Pancreator's creatures, whether human or alien. For while I have seen violence and greed, lust and all the other sins paraded unashamedly, I have also seen the virtues. I have seen peasants suffer the lash of their lords to rescue a fallen comrade. I have seen mercy and forgiveness from nobles when severity was surely the wiser course. Tenderness from a mercenary who had seen the darkest of shadows on Stigmata and survived.

I have grown in ways the cloister would never have allowed. I am convinced that holiness resides not only in the monastery, but among the people, the worlds and the stars. I am not naive, however. I know that evil abounds. I have seen not only the good but the foul. Traveling affords a vision of an evil tapestry as wide

and varied as that of good. As the Prophet said, demons lurk in the dark between the stars, waiting for a fallen person whose flesh to take.

I was witness to one such possessed soul, whose poor family pleaded with me to exorcise him of the taint. But I had to refuse, for I cannot perform such a feat. Only those who have mastered the theurgic rites of the Orthodoxy can dream of attempting it. The possessed one was finally lynched by the townsfolk, who had tired of his tricks and black ways.

Have you ever lost one of your flock? Of course you must have, for you are far older than I. This man was not even one of mine, for I am itinerant and have a flock of one to preach to. But I knew then what it must be like to feel responsible for a soul and then to lose it.

How much more such loss must pain you, for your flock includes all the Known Worlds. Even were there no individual sin and misery, there are the dying suns to doom us all. How do you cope? Penitents must flood your cathedral daily, begging for salvation from the dimming light. What comfort do you give them? Surely you do not tell them the standard canon, that their sins are the cause of the darkening skies? If that were so, then would not the collective penance from all the years since the Fall of the Second Republic have made up for all sins committed or contemplated since the beginning of time?

What be the cause? It is truly the end of history, it seems. Judgment is near. Yet, I cannot accept that we are to be rewarded for sitting still and waiting for death. If that were so, why did the Prophet say: "A sun must burn to birth light. When your passion burns, you give off light." Perhaps the suns die because we lack passion. Passion for life. For the struggle necessary to unlock the Mystery. We are bored with everything, having accomplished all. History has returned to the point at which it began.

Or perhaps the answer still waits for us. Perhaps the dying suns are our spur to greatness, a necessary quest on which we will finally understand ourselves and our place in the universe.

This is a quest I gladly undertake. Erian Li Halan has also taken it, although she knows it not. Indeed, anyone who seeks outward for new horizons seeks to renew the light, wittingly or no.

Farewell, uncle. My liege calls and I must go. To what planet we next travel I do not know. Perhaps I will write again once we've arrived. This letter will probably not reach you until I have left for yet another world, so if you choose to answer this letter, you must send it care of Erian's mother on Midian. There is no guarantee I will receive it, but I will look for it with hope nonetheless.

Your nephew,
Guissepe Alustro

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