

War Prints

By Neal Ross Atkinson

11/11/09

02/23/10

The tire's fragments softened and flowed under Prosatio Silban's kneading fingers, but he soon realized that his repairs were little stronger than the god which powered them.

O Tersten, Dispenser of Temporary Redemptions, the beefy cook prayed, trying not to wish for a different supplicattee. May a Cold Wall rubberwright be happy to improve my repair for a pot of something delicious.

He was midway up the Long Stair: twenty miles of straight pitted road slashed up the face of a mile-high sandstone cliff. Mountains pierced the clouds to the northeast and south. On the western horizon, the green hills of the Huuan Commonwell undulated toward him from the Misty River; below him flowed the marshy Hidden River on its way to the Rimless Sea. Between the two, the green faded into a tumbled black below his feet – wounds of a war which had finished when Prosatio Silban was too young to understand it.

“All right, boy,” he said, wiping his hands on his blue cotton kneebreeches to conceal his annoyance. “Let her down and we can be on our way.”

The honeywood galleywagon was roughly the size of a caravan-tent, and it settled with a creak and a clatter onto its four great wheels as a smooth chatoyant bulk rippled out from underneath. It extruded something like a dainty-toothed elephant's trunk to accept a maroon fatberry cake Prosatio Silban proffered from an embroidered bag, then flowed into the galleywagon's double harness to become a sturdy pair of jade swamp-zebras. Prosatio Silban stroked the “zebras” noses, told it what a good helper it was, and climbed into the driver's seat.

The tire would hold, or it wouldn't. Just like his faith.

Prosatio Silban had been traveling thus for slightly longer than he cared to remember – longer anyway than his time as a Sacreant, those Huuan priests who interpret the enigmatic Flickering Gods for the inhabitants of the Three Cities and Thousand Villages. He removed from a pocket of his travel-stained white silk tunic a pair of grey artificial eyebrows – part of Sacreantal initiation had involved a permanent depilatory bath, and while the subterfuge was itchy it had proved more comfortable than questions.

Two hours later, the road had curved south, leveled off and widened into a vast semicircular court. A high sandstone-block wall curved away from either side of a broad, three-story gate tower parapeted with mastodon tusks. From a pole above the gate hung three wide pennants of gold, grey and blue, edged with dark red; the respective military flags of Pormaris, Tirinbar and Soharis. Its finial was a mastodon skull inscribed with the cryptic runes of the Xao. Six Xao archers eyed him incuriously from the roof: four men and two women, tall and bronzely nude above grey leather kilts.

Prosatio Silban halted his wobbling galleywagon before the tower's tall gate, which was open and flanked by four solid figures in the blue mail of Soharis, First City of the Commonwell. Long ribbons of the same color fluttered from beneath the long blades of their tall spears. An official-looking man emerged from the gate, swathed in tricolor livery and bearing a large wax-tablet.

"Welcome to the border between the Cold Waste and the Land Beyond The Sunrise, so known in the Huuan Commonwell, or the Land of Two Exiles, so-called among the Xao. Long may they be free and free of fear," the official-looking man recited, and coughed. He raised his stylus. "Name?"

"Quite a climb to get here," Prosatio Silban said. "Not many visitors come up this way?"

The official peered at him. "Name?"

"Prosatio Silban, the Cook for Any Price."

"Business?"

"I hope so, or else this long journey has been for naught."

One of the guards snickered. "If that passes for your wit, it will be," he said.

The official raised a supercilious hand. "You are a visitor," he told Prosatio Silban. "Tell me your business or you'll practice it elsewhere."

Prosatio Silban opened his mouth to say his business was that of any free traveler and no one else's. But then he noticed the man's eyes, and the other guards', Huuan and Xao: a mix of brown and hazel, squints and stares, but the pupils of each were black pits of dispassion. Sophisticate and savage, both have seen the same horror, he thought, and smiled instead.

"I am but a humble cook-errant, lately come from epicurean Pormaris in search of new recipes and palates," he said, raising his hands in placation. "I have never visited this part of the Commonwell, which seemed reason enough. But the road was unkind to my vehicle and I seek now also a rubberwright."

The official raised his eyebrows. "We are near three weeks from the City of Gourmands – far enough to be forgotten by the Flickering Gods, or at least their servants. Do Pormaris' cooks have the zeal her Sacreants lack?"

"So it is said," said Prosatio Silban, idly rubbing an eyebrow. "Who knows? The Flickering Gods let me look after the belly; I let them look after the soul."

"That is what they're for." The official poked at the wax tablet with his stylus, handed both to Prosatio Silban. "Sign."

Beneath the stylized lock-and-eye of Angrim, Watcher of Time, were a half-dozen names and dates, all old, some scratched out. Prosatio Silban's was at the bottom, next to "13 Octopus / yr. Weighted Table.". He frowned. "What is this?"

"You are entering the line between civilization and its opposite," he said. "Such events and such places are the purview of the All-Limiter, may we not soon see his face. Besides, if you are killed, we must know that you were here of your own volition."

Prosatio Silban signed. The Soharin guard snickered.

The first thing Prosatio Silban noticed after his galleywagon wobbled through the gate and into the fortress-village proper were two great square towers tapering stark-red into the late-afternoon sky. Between them and for forty miles on either side stretched Cold Wall's namesake – a fence across the only corridor between "civilization and its opposite." The lowering sun painted the massive sandstone blocks a warm gold, limned with winking glints from the spears of pacing sentinels. Against this backdrop a dozen or so cooking-fires sketched scattered streamers of smoke, with here and there a silk banner or carved skull proclaiming the pride and place of one or another nation.

The snickering Soharin guard – who had been introduced by his commander as Filipid Ilgor – was leading the "zebras" and wagon along a broad street. To the left, the grey circular huts of Xao sprawled in groups of six centered around a common fire; to his right were the clean white lines of Huuan poured stone. Narrow perpendicular lanes branched off at regular intervals. The scene was alive with pre-twilight shufflings: soldiers hurrying home from watch; shopkeepers calling out end-of-day specials; housewomen rattling dinner pots and pans; a passing chorus of greetings. On one corner was a small tavern with outside tables, at one of which a handful of Huuan soldiers played an animated game of dice with two young Xao men. Two Delvers, those squat masters of mountain and cave, stood nearby cheering them on; one caught sight of Filipid Ilgor and waved.

"You see? We have everyone here," said Filipid Ilgor, waving in turn. He looked back at Prosatio Silban. "Do you know this place?"

Prosatio Silban shook his head. "Only what everyone knows – that if it weren't for Cold Wall, relations between the Xao and ourselves would still be in a pitiable state."

"Pitiable?" snorted Filipid Ilgor. "Laughable. Our sainted ancestors flee the sinking ruins of Eldhome for a prophesied deliverance in the Land Beyond the Sunrise – only to find the indigenes expecting sea-born saviors to clean the so-called Land of Exile their own sainted ancestors anciently destroyed. And then leave. As if we would, or the Flickering Gods allow it."

Prosatio Silban frowned. "That's not laughable at all. It's tragic. Centuries of distrust, resentment and war. If not for the Und trying to kill both of us, what – a century ago? We'd still be fighting each other."

“Exactly! But now we have this,” Filipid Ilgor said. “A rotating guard between the Land of Two Names and the Cold of Waste. The perfect place to temper our young men to hardness. Too bad we don’t leave like we – Ah, here we are.”

He stopped the galleywagon in the southwest corner of a sparsely populated square; a few people filling pitchers at the square’s central fountain, a handful of farmers bundling the day’s unsold produce. Bordering the square were a shuttered inn, neglected-looking shrine, and a well-maintained barracks and public bath, all of painted Huuan build. The barracks were connected to the Cold Wall itself by a poured-stone causeway, crossing a wide open space which ran the wall’s length. In the corner between barracks and shrine stood a rickety stall, next to which a middle-aged male Xao wearing a grey leather apron was scrubbing out a large black cauldron.

A brief round of introductions and inquiries ensued, after which Filipid Ilgor departed for his post, Prosatio Silban retrieved two bundles from his galleywagon, and Tharch – for such was the name of the Xao rubberwright – placed a large wood-and-iron device under the injured wheel. Soon, the galleywagon had been stabilized, its wheel removed, the zebras seen to, and Prosatio Silban busied with a portable grill he had unslung from beneath the galleywagon. Xao palates were simple, and Tharch had expressed a particular fondness for pack-lizard, vinegar mushrooms and red blowberry, skewered and roasted, then drizzled with salando. Prosatio Silban rubbed the meat vigorously with stinkbulb, sprinkled it with salt and pepper, and rolled the chunks in a small silver dish of golden sesame seeds. He lit the grill and noticed Tharch looking away from him again. The burly Xao had mounted the wheel in a wooden stand and was stripping the rubber-pocked rim, between furtive glances from eyes that Prosatio Silban had begun to think of as a Cold Wall birthmark.

“Yes?” Prosatio Silban said, thinking vaguely of native superstition. “Did you change your mind about the lizard?”

Tharch looked down, then back at Prosatio Silban. “I am wondering,” he said slowly. “Why are you here?”

Prosatio Silban looked reflexively round. “Why do you say that?”

“Those are not your eyebrows,” Tharch said, and grinned. “You are a Huuan godsgod, yes?”

Prosatio Silban grinned back; the Xao were renowned for their acuity. “Secrets are a necessary inconvenience in civilized lands, the more so at their borders,” he said. “Suffice to say that I once was a ... godsgod, but I was on better terms with the Flickering Gods than I was with the other godsgods. So I left.”

Tharch nodded. “I am hearing like-things from many of your people, but I am born here and am not understanding them.” He stepped closer, lowered his voice. “Huuan godsgod, why are the people of Huua still here?”

Prosatio Silban paused. He knew the answer to that question, or part of it. The Huuan

prophecies of the Land Beyond the Sunset did not concern a permanent settlement, but one which depended on the people's eventual "integritation" – the ritualized acknowledgment of mistakes and shortcomings as the particular unfolding of an individual's life. Integritation was central to Huuan religious thought; it was said that once a sufficient number of the Huuan faithful had integritated, the Flickering Gods would proclaim the "Year of the Folded Sword" – and the Huuan Remnant would be allowed to return across the Rimless Sea to Eldhome Renewed. For the Huuans designated their years not by sequence but by whatever their gods revealed to the High Sacreants, and the High Sacreants to the Year Day throngs surrounding Pormaris' Great Fane – that is, if "Year of the Parted Robe" or "Fifteenth Year of the Lurking Jest" could be said to reveal anything.

(What was not revealed, but which Prosatio Silban had accidentally discovered, was that the Year of the Folded Sword had arrived not long after the Huuans. But the Sacreants who received that news had seen themselves and their people profit from the current arrangement. As keen students of human nature and logistics, they demurred (for a time) their people's salvation; this had become common knowledge among the High Sacreants by Prosatio Silban's time, yet he was not half so undone by his discovery as by his superior's cynical, "So?")

He looked at Tharch with genuine sympathy. "I truly do not know why we're still here," he said. "What do your people say about it?"

Tharch frowned. "Many things. Some are saying our gods are punishing us. Some are saying your gods are stronger. And some say we must wait and see. I am born here, am not knowing my grandfather's grandfather's land. But my grandfather is fighting when this Und war begins, and the first wall is built but the Und are climbing over on the bodies of their dead piling against it. So the wall is being higher than the bodies, and the bodies are piling no higher, and still they are coming. And never are they speaking."

Prosatio Silban started. "They don't speak? Do you mean that no one has ever talked to the Und?"

"No."

"Not even in the early years of the war, or before?"

"I am not knowing of it," Tharch said, irritated curiosity shading his voice. "Why?"

"Why?" Well ... how do we know what they want, or why we are fighting?"

Tharch smiled, but not with his eyes. "To your question a Und is answering an axe in your head. Why ask your killer why he kills you?"

"Because perhaps you can get him to stop."

Tharch's barked a harsh laugh and turned back to the wheelstand. Prosatio Silban felt a sudden pain in his left shoulder. One end of an arrow was sticking in it; the other was tipped with three

dark brown feathers. He cried out.

“Und!” shouted Tharch, shoving Prosatio Silban to the ground with one massive hand.

In an instant, the afternoon was shattered by shouts and screams. The arrow throbbing in Prosatio Silban’s shoulder was one of dozens whistling through the skies to fall with clatters and shrieks in the square and adjoining streets. A handful sprouted from the galleywagon’s sides and top. From his position Prosatio Silban couldn’t see the “zebras;” only a few prone figures and armed men running.

Tharch dragged Prosatio Silban into his stall and yanked the arrow from his shoulder. The cook screamed, then screamed again when Tharch pressed a pungent soaked rag against the wound.

“Hold!” the blacksmith spat. “Und dipping arrows in their dung.” Then he rose, snatched a bow and quiver from under the counter and vaulted over with a yell.

Blood and numbing fire seeped down Prosatio Silban’s arm. He pressed the rag tight and closed his eyes, feeling with his mind for the Flickering Gods who carried the present. Among a boiling of personal savior-deities he could clearly discern Valmasorn, Defender of the Way Home; Bohoran, Giver of Inexplicable Strength; and, of course, Angrim, the Watcher of Time. He wondered for the all-pervading comfort of Galien, Spring of Life - but she was diffuse, like a memory of some now-unobtainable sweetness. He threw away the rag, touched his wound with shaking fingers, chanted her name in an accent and cadence fashionable centuries ago. The skin sealed but the pain was unabated.

All around him Prosatio Silban could hear the sounds of people dying and killing: calls for help or mother; commands, rallying cries and sobs; metallic clashing; bestial bellowing. He had no weapons to speak of save the cook’s knife and ladle tucked in his belt - as a Sacreant he had never needed them, and as a man he’d never wanted them - but as he looked out from under cover of the stall he saw the sprawled form of a Soharin spearman within scrambling distance.

It turned out to be Filipid Ilgor, sneering into the sky despite an arrow through the heart. Prosatio Silban bent and closed the man’s eyes. “Who saw you come, see you go,” he said, and took up the spear. A shadow fell across Filipid Ilgor’s silent form, and Prosatio Silban looked up into a face out of nightmare.

The Und was nearly twice Prosatio Silban’ size, with twice as many arms, covered in a patchwork of brown and black matted fur. Its six eyes glittered with hate from a vulpine head above a distorted mouth bristling with fangs like broken obsidian. Each knobby claw held a crooked flint knife wet with blood.

Prosatio Silban smiled, trying to project confidence. Holding the spear as inoffensively as possible, he said in a calm voice, “Friend?”

The Und screamed like a dying ox and lunged.

Prosatio Silban raised the spear crosswise to the Und's attack, countering his enemy's first thrust even as two others ripped like burning ice along his abdomen and right forearm. Another blow cracked the spear haft. Jagged stone nicked his left ear. He fell to one knee, saw the Und raise all four arms like a triumphant spider, and winced.

The Und screamed again. Prosatio Silban opened his eyes and saw two bronze arrowheads sprouting from the Und's chest. The monster turned and swiped at Tharch, who was drawing the long knife sheathed at the small of his back; the swing caught Tharch's left shoulder, whirling him around and down to the ground. The Und grabbed Tharch's wrists in its lower claws, pulling them wide while gaping claws sought his neck.

Prosatio Silban grasped the broken spear and swayed to his feet. The Und's back was to him. The cook raised the spear over his head with both hands.

It was the early Huuan philosopher Panateo Gostis who first described worldly existence as "a dance between Life and Time, freighted in moments of malleable length." This concept had always struck Prosatio Silban as both axiomatic and enigmatic, although despite having devoured all six volumes of Gostis' "Lockless Key" he had never really felt he understood it. But now, everything was calm and utterly clear: a carved crystal tableau he could rotate and view at leisure. And he understood that a moment lasts exactly as long as needed.

He could feel the uneven ground beneath his feet, the fire roaring in his wounds intoxicating his limbs, smell burning wind whistling through dilated nostrils dry mouth sour with fear, the sounds of battle receding dimming beneath his throbbing heartbeat, artificial eyebrows slipping from sweat soaking his face and silk tunic. He saw the small patch of skin between the Und's shoulders, the whet marks on the spear tip hanging before his eyes. He knew he had to bring them together.

The Und's claws found Tharch's throat, squeezed.

Prosatio Silban had never killed anything bigger than could cling to a fishing line; had never considered killing as anything other than an academic exercise. He felt small and unsure and yanked and, more keenly than ever, the absence of Galien the Lifegiver.

Tharch's legs began to kick. The Und began to laugh.

What if I'm wrong? he thought. O Galien, where are you?

And then came the rough liquidy ffft of blade; the soft chuk of bone; the whupump whupumple of alarmed heartflesh, and he sobbed and groaned and pushed as it screamed and beat and died and died and died and die damn you died.

He let go. The Und rolled to the left, twitching. Tharch rolled to the right, coughing. Prosatio Silban stood in between, trying not to heave, and presently a dim semblance of the dead Und oozed up from the monster's mouth and nostrils to hang like an oily film on the surface of the air.

“Why do you kill us?” Prosatio Silban asked it.

Its whisper was a liquid rustle and stink of rotting leaves. “Because you live.” It spat at him as it faded, and Prosatio Silban felt something cold and ugly dripping down his face.

A long hour later, night had covered everything but what pools of torchlight revealed. The Und had all been killed, their limp bulks piled in the square not far from the bodies of their victims, and the night was hazy with Xao ululations and Huuan weeping. Prosatio Silban had seen to Tharch, then wandered the streets as a “lay Sacreant,” dispensing what kindnesses he could – easing the dying, consoling the living, and praying for everyone in between.

He was feeling neither well nor inclined to discuss it as he returned to the blacksmith stall. His hands held the memory of the killing, and he didn’t like that either - nor the “I killed/No, you saved” war in his heart. He was grateful that the galleywagon’s damage was minor, and more so that his strange dray beast had flattened itself into the ground and thus escaped injury. He patted it affectionately, and a soulful brown eye looked up at him.

“It’s okay, boy.” he said. “We’re leaving in the morning.”

The big Xao had righted the fallen wheelstand and was gathering his scattered tools. He grabbed Prosatio Silban’s hand in his, searched his face. “You are not killing before this, and not liking it now.”

“What? Of course not. Does anyone?”

“Only the Und,” Tharch replied. “That is why we are killing them first.”

Prosatio Silban did not like the sound of those words, much less the cold logic behind them. He shook his head at himself. The world is not only for me, but for everyone he thought. Not for the first time - and knowing that, he felt Galien’s healing touch in his left shoulder.

Despite the ebbing pain, he didn’t like that much either.

Prosatio Silban sighed, began picking up his own gear. The grill had burned itself out, but the skewers looked salvageable. To live, we must eat, he thought. But why? He reached for the empty silver sesame-seed dish, picked it up, and caught in it the reflection of his eyes – of his new and terrible eyes.