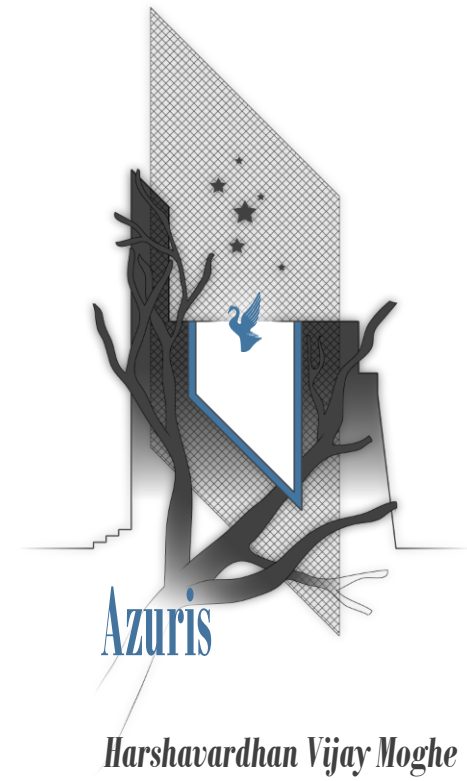




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Preface

Azuris is a series of six illustrated novels - an inspiring story about one's determination, courage and adventure in the universe that is fraught with disorders, humanitarian injustices and existentialist degradation. *Azuris* is a very intelligent, prosperous and advanced state whose Imperial Adventurers of the White Swan descend from the heaven and venture in numerous worlds, wage immortal wars, deal with complex enigmas and advance the imperium and divine. Kingdom *Azuris* is venerated as the universal apotheosis in humanity, adventure and innovation.

Azuris includes several genres in one. These genres include high fantasy, science fiction, mystery, religious fiction, action-packed thriller and horror. The purpose is to a) inspire readers through the tales of its epic adventures, b) contemplate on problems and issues that pertain to the world, humanity and future, and c) illustrate the tremendous power of the Divine Kingdom Azuris that could shape, influence and change the universe.

Inspiration

The inspiration behind writing novels *Azuris* stems from not only fiction including literature, movies and video games but also personal imagination. A few interesting questions come to mind whilst writing it as follows.

What is the value of humanity in the face of aliens?

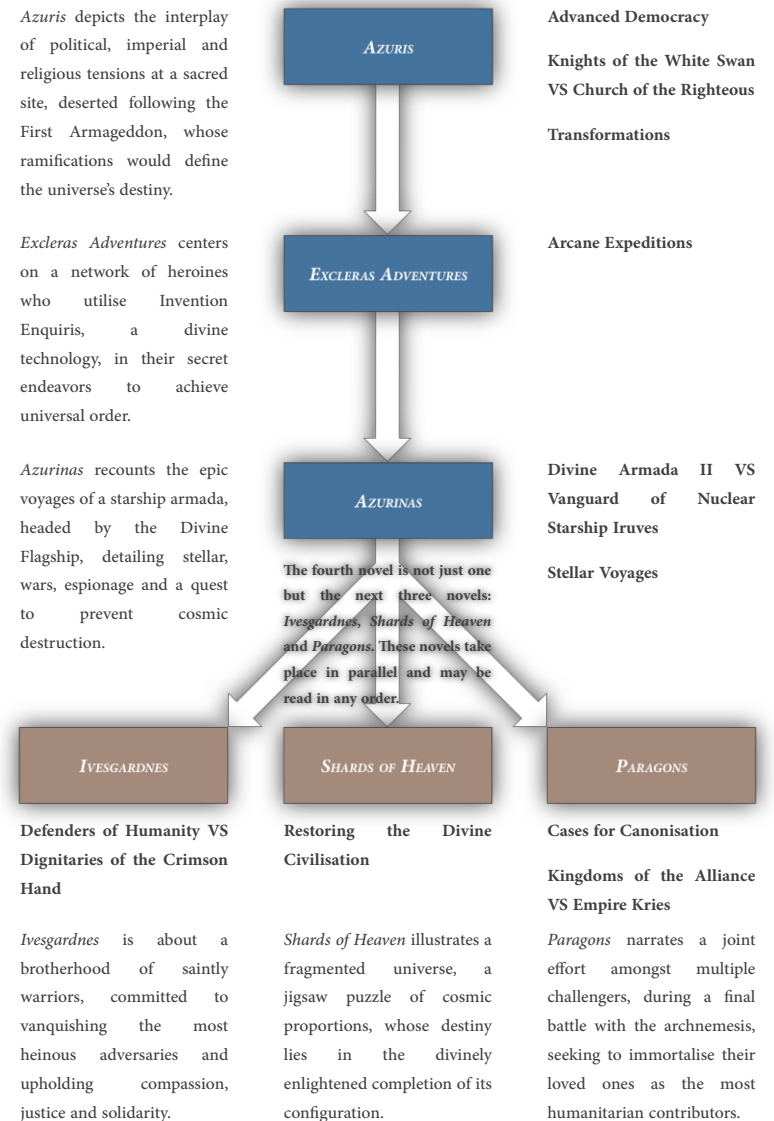
What is it like to reimagine the Divine, challenging its well-established notions found in mainstream religions?

What makes a great kingdom that includes advanced democracy, is the most progressive and appeals to everyone?

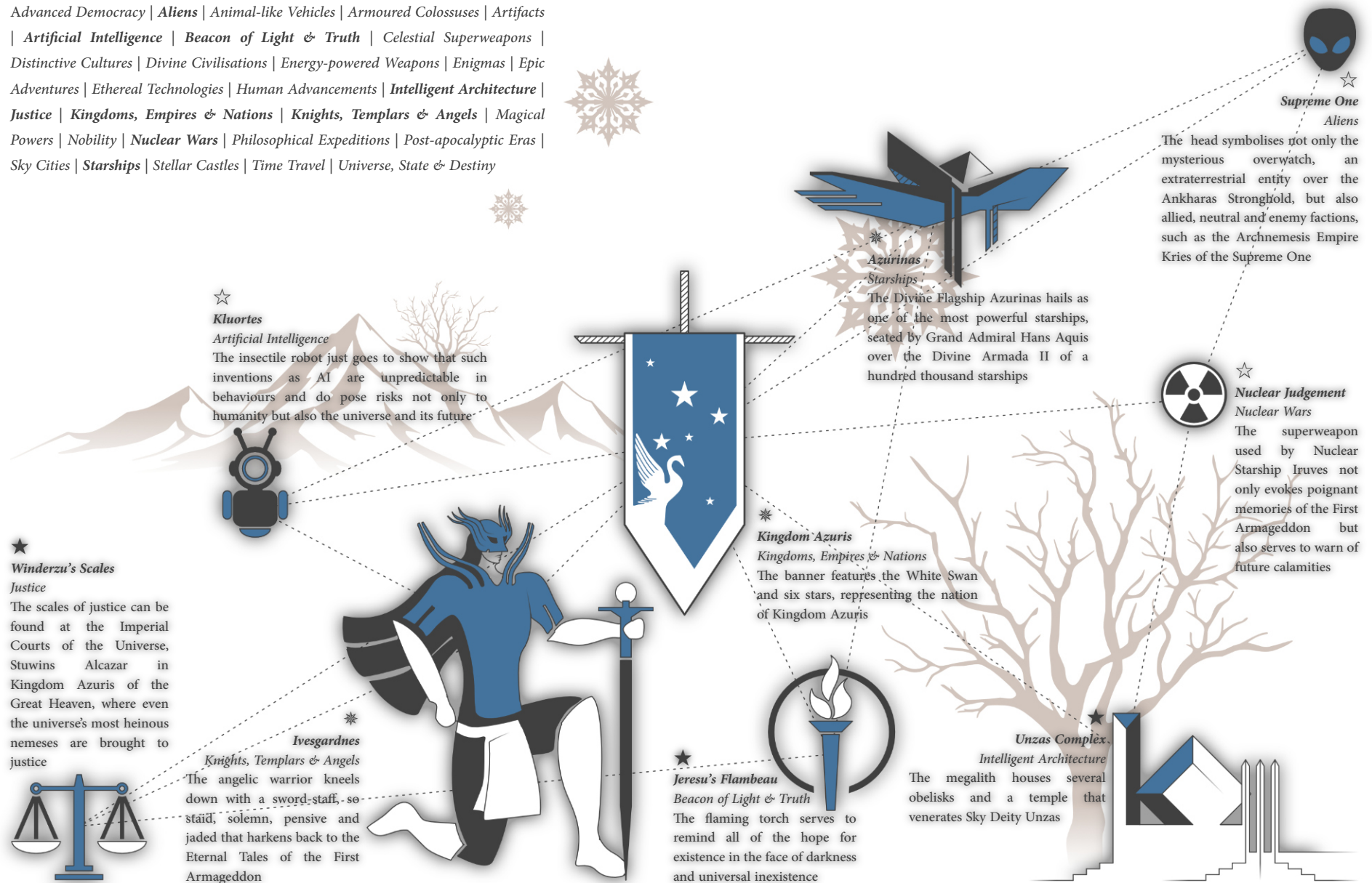
Novelistic Architecture

This compendium includes six novels. Preceding the first six novels is a set of Early Stories. An illustrated tome that features encyclopaedic articles on the universe of the Divine Kingdom *Azuris* and its lore is inserted, separating the third novel from the rest. Each novel contains four parts and each part, ten chapters. Each novel includes Introduction, Prologue, Epilogue and Index. Every chapter features an epigraph, subchapters whilst interspersed with illustrations and endnotes. The chapter length varies but, on average, spans about 20-40 pages.

Azuris includes six novels and a tome. The diagram below illustrates plot development.



Advanced Democracy | *Aliens* | *Animal-like Vehicles* | *Armoured Colossuses* | *Artifacts*
 | *Artificial Intelligence* | *Beacon of Light & Truth* | *Celestial Superweapons* |
Distinctive Cultures | *Divine Civilisations* | *Energy-powered Weapons* | *Enigmas* | *Epic*
Adventures | *Ethereal Technologies* | *Human Advancements* | *Intelligent Architecture* |
Justice | *Kingdoms, Empires & Nations* | *Knights, Templars & Angels* | *Magical*
Powers | *Nobility* | *Nuclear Wars* | *Philosophical Expeditions* | *Post-apocalyptic Eras* |
Sky Cities | *Starships* | *Stellar Castles* | *Time Travel* | *Universe, State & Destiny*



Introduction

Azure Bless All

*Kingdom Azuris welcomes all who come,
Azure bless all! resounds the drum.
Let greetings find each soul, both great and small,
Azuris opens hearts and arms to all.
Inspired be all with determination's fire,
Courage and adventure lift us higher.
An intelligent, prosperous, advanced state,
Azuris shines as light to every fate.
Beacon of truth to the universe wide,
With divinest power, we abide.*

*With divinest achievements, we have soared,
Let all engage in journeys unexplored.
Adventure and freedom for everyone,
Challenges and struggles we have won.
Let us acknowledge each for who they are,
Humanity's embrace stretches afar.
Let innovation guide us as we strive,
Newness for all keeps dreams alive.
Azure bless all! our anthem we sing,
Prosper and achieve - let our spirits ring.*

*Together let us stand, united, strong,
Kingdom Azuris is where we belong.
Blessed with dreams, inspiration's flame,
The Heaven grants possibilities to claim.
Through passing aeons, histories we mold,
Our advanced democracy we hold.
Supreme civilization, we uphold,
Saving souls from inexistence's cold.
By Divine decree, we heed the call,
Azure bless all! for one and all.*

Early Stories

‘The heaven isn’t all it should be,’ said Lord Surya, his nose shimmering just like White Eagle - his mount - that stood next to him.

‘Humankind could exist anywhere in the universe,’ Seraph Jues Disperas anxiously pursed his thin indigo lips, uttering words veiled with slim hope.

‘Let’s organise an intergalactic expedition and put this presumption to the test,’ Angel Prousten Disperas concluded.

Departure from the Heaven

Several students from Stuwins Aqua School waited at the docks beside the White Streams.

The aurora mist and chill dulled the memories and traumas of their onerous school life. The morning sunlight slowly infused everywhere with gentle warmth, the White Streams glistening in turquoise that replenished the anticipant students with excitement.

The seven students, from year one, stood in a loose circle. A girl checked her wristwatch that read seven o’ clock. With a sigh, she exclaimed, ‘I didn’t have to wake up so early and get here. It’s all stupid!’

‘Yeah, who came up with this idea? Your sis will never make it, Sahas,’ called out a boy, shaking his head and rolling eyes.

Sahas Iswan, the youngest and least interested in expeditions, smirked.

‘She met with an accident and ended up in the hospital!’

All eyes turned to him.

What the...

‘So I am the boss - no excursion today! Anyone up for sticks and fights, step forward!’

‘Here I come, friends - anyone still keen on the excursion, step back,’ echoed

Sarasvati.

She finally arrived, the shiver went down everyone's spine - particularly Sahas Iswan's.

'All? Right, line up,' Sarasvati called with a clap.

All responded in unison, 'Yes, Ms Sarasvati!'

'No, don't call me that. I'm still a student - one year higher. The teacher is over there,' she said, pointing to the figure behind her.

Star Commander Nues Isynas!

Star Commander Nues Isynas, lowering her stylish spectacles, radiated an air of authority.

'I will be the supervisor for this mission,' Star Commander Nues Isynas said. 'Sarasvati is one of several year two pupils elected to help lead the expedition and more - congratulations to you all for being selected. I will let her do the honours.'

She nodded at Sarasvati who nodded back.

'Thank you, Ms Isynas!'

Sarasvati turned to the group, took a deep breath and stamped her foot with a declaration, 'As we set off, I am thrilled to announce our first destination - to catch a glimpse of new humankind - is in the Milky Way galaxy, in the Solar System, on a planet called Earth!'

From their departure from the Great Heaven to their destination, the eight expeditionists' faster-than-light journey proceeded seamlessly, as if by magic.

At Tungnath, one of the highest Shiva temples on Earth, in the Milky Way galaxy, a sudden beam of white light shot into the sky at twilight, startling the locals. By dawn, while the villagers of nearby Chopta still slept, a portal within the temple flashed open, and the eight expeditionists stepped out. Before any

locals could wake up and spot them, they quickly left the temple grounds, vanishing into the wilderness.

They descended from the Himalayan foothills, travelling southeast, and later crossed the Ganges River. Deep within the dense jungle, they came across a large grey tree, noticeably different from its surroundings. It had been ravaged by recent monsoons - withered, leafless, and twisted. Sarasvati called the group to a halt for closer inspection. Drawing her wand, she pointed it at the tree and spoke, 'White is to all!'

The wand quivered, its tip glowing bright until a sudden flash of white light erupted. In an instant, a white beam shot into the tree, slowly absorbed by its trunk. To the seven pupils' amazement, the tree transformed from a withered grey to a healthy brown, as if its vitality had been restored. To their further surprise, new branches sprouted, covered in lush, evergreen leaves. Before the expedition moved on, as a gesture of gratitude for the spell of regeneration, the tree uprooted itself from the soil and stepped aside, revealing a path leading to a clearing. One of its long branches extended, pointing the way for the travellers.

The clearing, bathed in sunlight, was named by Sarasvati as 'Sara Glade'. She declared it the perfect spot for a picnic. Gazing up at the silhouette of a starship faintly visible through the overcast sky, she raised her wand and cast a conjuring spell, calling out, 'Summon the Cherub of Arkhuis!'

In a flash, a small boy appeared, hovering just above the ground, mesmerising the pupils. As if teleported from the starship Imperial Cruiser Jorseyus II, which was docked in space, the cherublike child introduced himself:

'I'm Ishan Arkhuis. I came from the sky. What can I do for you, Sara?'

Sarasvati smiled.

'I summoned you to help make our picnic at Sara Glade special. This is my newly claimed place on Earth, in the Milky Way galaxy!'

‘Awesome, Sara!’ Where should we start?’ he asked.

‘We’ll need a table and chairs for everyone. I’m thinking of starting a new reading group. What do you all think?’

The seven pupils, except Sahas Iswan, shouted excitedly, ‘Yay, I want that!’

Sarasvati raised an eyebrow.

‘Can you say that again?’

The six pupils exchanged glances before looking at Sahas Iswan and Ishan Arkhuis. Ishan Arkhuis subtly gestured, reminding them of the missing magic word. Finally, the pupils shouted in unison, ‘Sara, yes please!’

‘Alright,’ Sarasvati laughed, ‘let the fun begin...’

Ishan Arkhuis materialised a large box onto the ground. Almost immediately, Sahas Iswan, still uninterested in the reading group, ran over to inspect it. Within minutes, the box popped open, revealing its contents: one large panel and seven smaller ones. One by one, the panels floated out, hovering just out of reach of the pupils.

‘Stand by, everyone!’ called Sarasvati, raising her wand towards the panels.

With a flick and the command, ‘Unfold!’, she cast her spell. Sparks of energy shot from the wand’s glowing tip, hitting each panel in turn. Instantly, the panels clicked open, transforming to everyone’s delight: the large one became a floating table with an attached chair, while the smaller ones unfolded into seven floating chairs.

Early Stories II

His emerald pupils shimmering through the intense sunlight, Paladin Augustus Stallious leaned forward, discerning at the silver-glinting hieroglyphs inscribed on several sanguine monoliths, located in the White Plateaus. *Damn complex and archaic!* He stamped on the ground, frustrated. *It is the only way to deal with Empire Kries!*

In this day and age, the White Plateaus was one of many worlds declared as forbidden to set foot on since the First Armageddon where nuclear annihilation had wiped out much of the humankind. The White Plateaus still continue to look bleak to this day.

Activating the headset microphone, Paladin Augustus Stallious called his friend who must be sitting in their vehicle, Stallion NZII, parked several miles behind a few hours earlier, 'Hey, my comrade - don't tell me you're stuck on Q-tunes! I am burdened with an archaeological predicament here, helpless studying the monoliths and the intriguing inscriptions on it. Do me a favour - please bring any instrument or two, automaton and tablet, and do some psionic preparations, will you?'

'All is well. By the looks of this searing weather, it strikes me to see that you're still outside! I should take about five or ten to come over,' his comrade on the other end, Akhil Sachenmus, ended the phone call.

Returning his glance at one of the monoliths, Paladin Augustus Stallious rolled up his white sleeves, revealing the sweaty forearms that glistened in the scorching sunlight.

He tied his auburn hair in the style of pony tail.

Flexing his white collars, he pursed his thin pink lips when he thought, *this endeavour should be the last-ditch effort.*

As he brushed his hair strands from dangling over his forehead and right eye, a sweat trickled down either of his temples.

With the sudden gust of sand that started to prickle his shiny nose, he

squinched his eyes, averting his gaze from the crimson sunrise.

As soon as the sun met with the obscurity of the drifting grey clouds, he stretched his legs. His black trousers started to flutter at the hint of an impending sandstorm.

Putting his white teal-striped sunhat on, followed by his antinuclear-tinted sunglasses, he started to stiffen his lips, stoically - *it is now or never*.

As the sun made its way to the zenith, its crimson hue turned into a scarlet-red. Overwhelmed by the piercing scarlet-red, the greyness of the prevailing clouds got subdued to pinkish-whiteness.

Paladin Augustus Stallious shifted his gaze towards the vast deserted horizon, reflecting on the culmination of his journey to this forbidden world, the White Plateaus.

The White Plateaus are something not to touch. All these reddish rocks, white sand and pinkish skies, this world is too desolate, he remembered studying the stars when he was seven, in the Great Heaven, in his homeworld called Elveswyn.

Almost a decade has passed by!

He couldn't imagine the opportunity to explore such cosmic wonders. But something in the shadows of his past started to tamper with the moment right now - he clearly had broken the protocols of the Knights of the White Swan. To this end, he couldn't believe that he had put his ingenuity to a clandestine use -

He had hacked and overrode the encrypted telemetry of the shuttle, Paragon Falcon Serugen III so as to trespass and enter this world, the White Plateaus, without getting caught by the security agencies!

Azuris

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Part I

The White Swan

Chapter I

Adventures in Insguras Deserts

Weakness comes from division whereas strength, from unity.

- Venus Florence

The deserts, an inhospitable expanse, stretched on relentlessly, offering neither respite nor fresh water for miles.

The wreckage of a shuttle lay strewn across the scorching sands, its twin engines gasping like a fallen vulture, helpless and pleading for mercy.

‘Beep, beep, beep...’ sounded an automaton, delicately probing through the circuitry boards with its metallic fingers, scanning for the shuttle’s damage status.

This automaton was shovelled aside by another, intervening to take over the repair process.

A call from a third automaton sounded - it was the red alert, signalling an immediate and hostile danger from outside. Upon hearing this, the first two automatons exchanged glances before heading to the shuttle’s cockpit to search for the surviving humans.

The first automaton gently tried to wake one of the unconscious survivors.

‘Oh, what a disaster...’ the shuttle’s pilot remarked, struggling to get up as he examined the mess that surrounded him.

The computer logs indicated the damage resulted from an unconventional weapon - a variant of surface-to-air missile. Partly corrupted data archives suggested a connection to the elusive Ankharas Stronghold, a location yet to be determined.

A few hours later, after the monitor was restored, it flickered on and revealed that the shuttle’s coordinates matched a region within Insguras Deserts, located in the southern hemisphere of the planet Seurns. Further data tracking confirmed the proximity of Ankharas Stronghold, hidden within the vast region of Insguras Deserts, identified as the likely origin of the missile that had downed the shuttle.

The pilot, along with three other survivors, came up with plan - to blend

seamlessly into the outside world, pretending as if the accident had never happened. They intended this guise for the purpose of conducting their investigation discreetly and to reestablish contact with the other two shuttles, which may have by now met a similar fate.

During the final integrity and diagnostic check intended to confirm the shuttle's operational status, the red alert was invalidated, creating a pretext to deactivate and stow away the third automaton.

Upon summing the peak that afforded the most unobstructed panorama of the Insguras Deserts, the initial clues were given away - a quaint village nestled in the expanse, comprised of huts meticulously arranged in concentric circles. This arrangement projected a hierarchy through the gradual progression of size: from the modest outer cabins to the stately, mansion-esque edifices at its centre, featuring a prominent monolith of towering height, its grandeur embellished by an array of lesser totems standing sentinel around it.

Peering into the distance beyond, a fellow crewwoman passed the binoculars to another and extended her arms, pointing her fingers at two distant landmarks: to the left of the village, the plateaus that concealed Ankharas Stronghold, and on the right, the silhouette of Patzersu, the imperial capital of Kingdom Sangaras.

The crew decided to set off for the village before dusk.

As they slipped across the sunken sand, their boots were caked with dirt from the day's slog.

Just before the gatekeepers came into view, the twinkling stars overheard hushed tales of their origins in the distant Great Heaven¹.

The village's palisades, crafted from sticks, stones, and granite, bore ancient motifs - vivid descriptions of tribal life featuring nomads, warriors, sisters, and a serpent - that faded into the evening's shadow.

When they neared the gates, the automaton, using its inspection device

signalled, 'Threat clear.'

The pilot waved to the two gatekeepers and stepped forward to greet them. Meanwhile, the crewwoman took notes on her scanning device, fascinated by these palisade decorations.

The gatekeepers spoke in a language so exotic, indigenous and indecipherable that the pilot had to request a translation from another automaton.

According to the translation, the gatekeeper said, 'Halt! State your names, your origins, and the purpose of your visit here.'

In response, the pilot relayed through the automaton: 'I am Numvas Vasperes, the pilot and leader of the crew. With me are Uzriel Ellixtes, our diplomat, and Karasme Qudhes, our scout.'

We hail from another world, here to explore and pay respects to the idol sacred to this place.'

The guards exchanged wary looks. One of them, raising his spear, declared: 'I find your visit's terms unacceptable - you are not welcome here. Turn back!'

Pilot Numvas Vasperes looked at Diplomat Uzriel Ellixtes, who simply nodded and shrugged in resignation. Agreeing to depart, Pilot Numvas Vasperes called impatiently for Scout Karasme Qudhes, who lingered, recording last-minute notes of the decorations, entranced by the intricate glyphs.

Back in the shuttle, the crew settled into the cockpit amid the weightless atmosphere, contemplating their next move...

Diplomat Uzriel Ellixtes cradled his head in his hands, visibly distressed, while Pilot Numvas Vasperes stared wistfully through the windshield at the distant stars. Scout Karasme Qudhes, engrossed in her notes, lit up with curiosity. The fourth crewman, intrigued, inquired, 'Found anything interesting, Karasme?'

She passed him the device and replied, 'What have you been up to all this

while?’

‘I’ve been busy,’ he responded. ‘First off, the automaton’s back online and operational. Also, I’ve been tracking the starships overhead. A few belong to the Archnemesis - no surprise there.’

At the mention of the Archnemesis, Scout Karasme Qudhes adjusted her glasses and peered intently at the device. Meanwhile, in a quiet exchange with Pilot Numvas Vasperes, Diplomat Uzriel Ellixtes shook his head. ‘The mission is stalling - I think it’s time I step down from my diplomatic duties.’

The conversation was punctuated by the sudden sight of a fleet of starships streaming overhead. The fourth crewman, scanning the identity logs, exclaimed, ‘Here! This is exactly what I was talking about - take a look!’

The next morning, Pilot Numvas Vasperes was jolted awake by the insistent beeping and tapping against his body, escalating into a blaring red alert. As he opened his eyes, he got up to an unexpected scene just a few hundred feet away - a group of nomads and their caravan were being held at gunpoint.

As he hurried from the shuttle’s exit, the automaton wielding the inspection device issued an alert: ‘We have an emergency - captors, of alien origin, are outside, along with gypsies, of indigenous origin. Proceed with caution.’

Pilot Numvas Vasperes rushed forward, clutching blinding grenades and readying his pistol. He joined the crew, who were already positioned and aiming at the captors, their focus intense on the perilous situation encircling the caravan and the gypsies.

Scout Karasme Qudhes, gripping her pistol with both hands, cast a swift glance at him, signalling to inspect the prisoners on the opposite side of the caravan before refocusing her attention. Beside her stood the automaton, its fingers poised in the air, pondering as it tirelessly processed translations and relayed information.

The fourth crewman, positioned low at the rear with a sniper rifle, gestured

with his eyes toward the scene. Meanwhile, Diplomat Uzriel Ellixtes, armed with his quantum-computerised Uzi, aimed at the same targets.

The sniper, equipped with an auto-zoom binocular headset, gazed at the distant shuttle positioned uphill. As he focused, the binocular headset automatically adjusted to his eye movement, zooming in for a clearer view. He maintained communication with his crew, updating them moments before the first sign of movement from the alien thugs. He imparted a crucial observation: the shuttle appeared to be associated with a faction known as the Usperes Pirates, a reckless group infamous for their involvement in the black market, pillaging wealth, and scavenging resources.

In their initial act of aggression, a thug commanded a gypsy to step forward, turn around, and place their hands on their head. The thug then frisked the gypsy’s robe, continuing until the gypsy grew uncomfortable and resisted. This resistance quickly escalated when a second thug, positioned behind the group, fired a warning shot into the ground. This forceful act served as a stark warning to the gypsies to remain silent.

But at the very instant the second thug fired at the ground near the gypsies’ feet to intimidate them, Diplomat Uzriel Ellixtes reacted by shooting him dead. This prompted the other thugs to unleash a barrage of gunfire at the crew, with shots flying erratically. Amidst the chaos, Scout Karasme Qudhes used the automaton to command the gypsies to prepare to run and hurled a flash grenade into the fray. When the grenade detonated, enveloping the area in blinding light, Scout Karasme Qudhes shouted, ‘Run!’

The gypsies quickly scattered through the haze and vanished.

Meanwhile, the crew faced off against the thugs. During this tense moment, a final negotiation unfolded through the automaton between Diplomat Uzriel Ellixtes and Pilot Numvas Vasperes, and the thugs. Concurrently, the sniper adjusted his aim toward the shuttle, ready for any sudden movements.

‘In accordance with the White Swan’s Convention, you have been duly

warned: your assault on behalf of the Usperes Pirates against the planet Seurns and its indigenous inhabitants constitutes an attack on the divine Kingdom Azuris and its people as well. You now face two options: a) cease fire, return to your shuttle, and do not return, or b) face your leader's trial at the Imperial Courts of the Universe - Stuwins Alcazar, in the Great Heaven - and risk a declaration of war against your faction.'

Confronted with this ultimatum, the ambushers chose to retreat, withdrawing once and for all.

As the thugs' shuttle vanished from view, a young gypsy girl heaved a sigh of relief. She glanced down at her tattered robe, then looked up and approached Scout Karasme Qudhes. The automaton translated her urgent words: 'We would have been killed without you! You are amazing! What's your name, and will you join us on our journey?'

After hearing the automaton's translation, Scout Karasme Qudhes turned toward the young girl, crouched down, and replied with a warm smile, 'Of course - why not! I'm Karasme. What's your name? And where are we heading?'

Before the girl could answer, an older woman intervened, placing a comforting hand on the girl's shoulder and addressing Scout Karasme Qudhes, who rose with a curious glance. 'Forgive our sister's eagerness,' the woman began, 'but allow me to introduce ourselves properly. I am Irus, the Sister Elder, from the nearby village of Auxestris. We were en route to our village when the ambush occurred. I lead this group of nomads to partake in a significant ritual dictated by the Calendar of Ysunras. Ysunras, our well-fabled and venerable deity, is central to our traditions. On behalf of our nomads, I express our immense gratitude to you, noble *Daxunis*.' She clarified, 'Daxunis is what we call our warriors.'

The young gypsy girl and another gypsy - a boy - were whispering to each other, curiously looking at the crew's distinctive uniforms. Their grey outfits,

adorned with navy-blue pads and stripes, indicated their country of origin, which left Diplomat Uzriel Ellixtes somewhat embarrassed.

During the discussion, Pilot Numvas Vasperes found himself caught between conflicting decisions. Scout Karasme Qudhes was adamant about allying with the nomads, motivated by the young girl's idea and a genuine admiration for their tribal culture. Contrariwise, Diplomat Uzriel Ellixtes insisted that adhering to their original mission - restoring contact with other shuttle crews - was paramount. Amidst the growing dispute, Pilot Numvas Vasperes interjected, 'Guys, can we calm down for a bit? Why don't we head back to the shuttle and think it over first, then come up with a solution. Tell Sister Elder Irus that we won't be too long...'

As the crew walked back to their shuttle, unbeknownst to them, the young gypsy boy and a third gypsy - a girl - stealthily followed. Driven by curiosity about the crew's origins, they trailed them until they spotted the damaged shuttle. The pair hid at the back as the crew entered, the shutter left ajar. Outside, the boy inspected a fragment of the shuttle, scratching his head in a gesture of recognition, as if it jogged a memory from days past.

Meanwhile, the girl gazed in awe at the shuttle's interior before daring to step inside. As soon as she did, an automaton sprang to life with a series of beeps, its head tilting as it made eye contact with her. They studied each other intently, each anticipating the other's next move, their mutual curiosity making them seem almost like objects of fascination to one another. Before the girl could ask if she could befriend the robot, it initiated a game of hide and seek, ostensibly to distract her and encourage her return to the caravan where Sister Elder Irus might be growing anxious. However, the game soon evolved into a profound conversation. As they played a second game - naming objects - the automaton mimed gestures of revelation, as if feigning 'eureka'²³ each time the girl cleverly labelled various items it presented. Unbeknownst to her, the robot subtly gathered insights into her backstory, weaving probing questions into the flow of the game.

Just as the crew's voices signalled a decision being made, the automaton interjected, 'Hey, they're coming, so let's wrap up and hide! Why don't you head back to the caravan and deliver this message to your Sister Elder?' It then activated a laser from one of its fingers, inscribing a message onto a leaf - one of the objects from their game. The leaf was neatly folded, its contents intended to be revealed later.

Immediately upon the girl hurrying over to urge the boy to retreat, he nodded and gestured toward a particular shard of the shuttle. He observed the interlocked segments of the hull, which bore a deep grey sheen, and pointed out an inscription:

Shuttle IX-SP, Knights of the White Swan: Stellar Estate, Pilot Numvas Vasperes - acquired in Stuwins, Kingdom Azuris on 12.01.4091 SX

At the Village of Auxestris

The day had eclipsed into twilight, the stars above gleamed like divine wonders, each holding different meanings for those who gazed upon them. In the midst of lively music and dancing, Pilot Numvas Vasperes, Scout Karasme Qudhes, and the fourth crew member relaxed, observers of the village festivities. Across a small round alabaster table laden with clay jars and food pots, the village chieftain sat between Sister Elder Irus and his daughter. Some jars brimmed with a honey-flavoured drink, a rare treat distilled from the giant wasp nests found in Insguras Deserts. Nearby, pots of cactus flesh, spikes thoughtfully removed and repurposed as chip-sticks, awaited dipping in jalapeño sauce.

Pilot Numvas Vasperes introduced himself and his fellow crew members to the chieftain with genuine curiosity. 'The food is truly unlike anything I've experienced. I wish we could stay here longer,' he said.

Scout Karasme Qudhes gulped, remarking, 'The cactus-flesh is so succulent! What is it called...'

The fourth crewman slurped and added, 'The honey-flavoured drink is so luscious! I wonder how to make that...'

'If you haven't been introduced yet, I am Pilot Numvas Vasperes. She is Karasme Qudhes, and this is Zalorin Threxas,' he gestured to the fourth crew member.

'You have such beautiful names,' responded Chieftain Khuras. 'You've met Irus, the wise Elder Sister, and this is my daughter, Venus Florence.'

As the sage approached the chieftain, with scrolls marked in an enigmatic script, the chieftain rose and proclaimed to those gathered:

'By the exalted Grace of Ysunras, it is with profound reverence and solemnity that we enact a venerable rite to solemnize this momentous day. Let us, henceforth, inscribe upon the annals of time itself and enshrine the indelible memory of the three amongst our midst, coupled with the pair of stilt-walkers as our saviours. Without the valour and unyielding spirit of these five souls, our demise would have been irrevocably sealed. Thus, I extend an earnest invitation to one and all, to convene at the hallowed totem, that we may collectively bear witness to and participate in this sacred celebration, testifying to our deliverance and the enduring legacy of our champions.'

Later on, the automaton, serving as a language translator, gesticulated like an orchestra conductor, puzzling and somewhat alienating the gathered villagers. Pilot Numvas Vasperes subtly nudged the automaton, signalling it to moderate its overly pretentious and pompous gestures. Nearby, the other automaton, engrossed in the cultural artefacts, discovered two objects resembling ouroboroses³ and beeped, 'This is quite an anomaly, not in line with our era's technologies. Let me adjust this...' As it began to tinker with the items, Pilot Numvas Vasperes, spotting the potential mishap, wove through the dancing villagers and intervened, instructing the automaton to cease its alterations.

The trio of young gypsies hurried over to Pilot Numvas Vasperes, eagerly asking if they could interact with the two automatons. With a resigned sigh,

Pilot Numvas Vasperes acquiesced, admonishing, 'Okay, but you two - behave sensibly. No antics or foolishness, understood?' The automatons responded with a low, contemplative hum: 'Hmm...'

As the group departed, Pilot Numvas Vasperes found himself alone, his gaze downward, burdened by the weight of recent developments and Chieftain Khuras' unexpected praise. His cheeks tinged with red, he was still processing the flattery when a veiled figure approached. Glancing up, he offered a tentative 'Hi, there,' curious about the newcomer's identity. As she lifted her hood to reveal herself as Venus Florence, he warmly remarked, 'Your father is an extraordinary man. It's a privilege to be part of this rare ritual!'

Venus Florence, sidestepping the mention of her father, got straight to the point. With a smile, she watched the children playing with the robots and said, 'I've realised that without the stilt-walkers, leading the nomads in rituals would remain dull for the youngsters and nearly impossible for me to perform my clerical duties, especially teaching the young and future generations at such an early age.'

Pilot Numvas Vasperes looked puzzled, as if reassessing his judgment regarding the automatons' value to others, very keen to understand how so. 'Really? Perhaps I should have been more considerate towards them. I appreciate the insight - I've never considered it that way. I'd like to pass this compliment on to them, but remember, these are robots. Are you familiar with what a robot is? They lack human emotions or creativity, which fundamentally distinguishes us - and of course, you - from them.' He then added, with a hint of surprise, 'By the way, you're the only person I've met in this village who speaks English! How is that?'

Venus Florence appeared visibly shaken, tilting her head as if deeply intrigued and mesmerised by this factual revelation about the machines. 'I apologise for calling them stilt-walkers. Let me jot this down...' She carefully unrolled a compact scroll and, with a delicate quill, inscribed the letters: R- O - B - O - T. 'What language does this word derive from? Can you enlighten me on its

origins?'

Pilot Numvas Vasperes replied with a thoughtful nod, 'Sure, just give me a moment to think...' as he struck a contemplative pose reminiscent of the famous *Thinker* sculpted by Rodin⁴.

After a brief pause, he continued, 'You know, the term robot actually originates from an intergalactic language Czech, from a 20th-century play titled *Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti*, which translates to Rossum's Universal Robots. The playwright, Karel Capek, named his artificial laborers robots, from the Czech word *robota*, meaning forced labor⁵ or drudgery. These beings were created to serve humans, to undertake tasks that were either too mundane or too perilous.'

Struggling to mask her surprise, she replied with a slight nod, 'Oh, really?' Her gaze remained locked with his as she tilted her head slightly. 'I'm not surprised...'

For a moment, Pilot Numvas Vasperes seemed unsettled, prompting her further with a curious 'Hmm?'

Quickly, she shifted gears, her voice steady but her emotions - a mix of critique and deep concern for the robot's plight - carefully veiled. 'Anyway, thank you for sharing that fascinating information. In return, how about I confide a secret with you? Would you like to come along?'

His interest piqued, Pilot Numvas Vasperes' eyes widened with intrigue, though tinged with a hint of self-doubt about her reaction to his explanation of the etymology of the term 'robot'. Eagerly, he responded, 'Of course, I'm all ears. Let's go...'

The young gypsies returned to the scene, visibly wearied yet thoroughly amused by the robots' clever wit and entertainment. They told Venus Florence that these automatons were the best companions they had ever encountered. Venus Florence suggested, 'Tell that to the pilot here!'

When the children approached him and shared their thoughts in their local tongue, Pilot Numvas Vasperes looked to Venus Florence for translation. Once she relayed their words, his face lit up with pleasure. Then, the curious boy posed a question, 'Are you friends with a boy I met somewhere? Parts of your shuttle resemble his, and the style of the engravings is similar - only the words Sahas Iswan are different.'

The mention of Sahas Iswan abruptly startled him, but he managed to maintain his composure and urged, 'Go on!'

Venus Florence intervened before the boy could continue, saying, 'I'm sure there's plenty of time for this. Our guests will be here for a few more days. It's late now, and you really should be heading to bed. Go on home...'

The boy looked disappointed as he trudged off, accompanied by the two young girls.

Deep into the night, stars twinkled overhead, their light casting playful grins as if they were privy to the vibrant murmurs of resplendent butterflies flitting about in the mystical gardens and hedge mazes, waiting to be deciphered.

The air was tranquil - silent and unmoving, a passageway leading into the unknown...

Captivated, Pilot Numvas Vasperes followed the glowing trail of Venus Florence, anticipating the unveiling of magical secrets yet to be beheld.

The journey took a serpentine path, darting left and right, with each bend casting shadows that for the moment obscured Venus Florence. Time was fleeting to grasp this golden opportunity before it slipped away into the realm of chance in the night's embrace.

It was only when he lost sight of the last shadow that the true loss became apparent - nowhere to be found within the labyrinth. Glancing upwards, Pilot Numvas Vasperes realised he was at the heart of the sanctum, encircled by ancient totems, a mighty monolith standing centre stage. Scanning the area,

his eyes landed on Venus Florence below; she returned his gaze and then waved, a silent beckoning to leap down. Wary of the darkness below, akin to staring into an abyss, he paused, tentatively extending a foot to gauge the void. It felt weightless - merely air encompassing nothingness. Baffled by this peculiar space, he succumbed to her summoning and took the leap, as one might off a cliff, into the unknown, with no inkling of what was to ensue.

It was only moments before his feet made contact with the ground in the depths. The void relinquished the aroma of swamplands, enveloping him with the dampness of its atmosphere. He sensed the deep alluvial deposits beneath, feeling himself gradually sinking as if he were a condensed drop of soul merging with the sea.

'Now what?' Pilot Numvas Vasperes asked, his smile deliberate, an attempt to mask the impatience etched across his visage. Venus Florence raised a hand behind her, signalling him to stop, while the fingers of her other hand danced across the wall, searching blindly for the hidden button - a mere camouflage, reliant on intuition in a trial of the senses. To his astonishment, a crack materialised along the wall, outlining a clandestine door that then retracted inwards, creating an aperture through which to advance.

Once inside, the door swung outward unexpectedly, but Venus Florence reassured, 'We'll be capable of exiting, so fret not - I've brought a thread with me so that we can trace our way out.'

Pilot Numvas Vasperes curiously glanced at the thread Venus Florence held, shimmering slightly as if touched by some ethereal glow.

'Like Ariadne's gift to Theseus⁶,' he remarked, his voice a mix of awe and skepticism. Venus Florence smiled, the corners of her lips twitching with a secret.

'Exactly,' she whispered. 'A golden guide through this labyrinth, ensuring we won't lose our way as we delve into the unknown.' With that, she led the way into the murky shadows, the thread trailing behind them.

Suddenly, they found themselves engulfed in darkness, as though exiled from the universe or encircled by the tohubohu⁷ faced by Peer Gynt when he met the elusive and vexing Bøyg that the dramatist Ibsen writes about in the Norwegian fjords⁸.

Pilot Numvas Vasperes fixed his gaze on her, filled with curiosity about his peculiar situation. 'Is this it?'

With a hint of anticipation, Venus Florence pursed her lips, her fingers fidgeting nervously in the air before she elegantly swept her arms in the fluid grace of a master of tai chi. This grand gesture activated the barely visible studs peppered across the blackened walls, floor, and ceiling. Miraculously, they ignited into brilliant constellations of light, as if she, a deity of sorts, had torn through the cosmic veil to unveil the innumerable stars in their pure, unobscured glory.

'Wow,' Pilot Numvas Vasperes interjected, awe-struck by the magical culmination of their journey thus far.

Like how Beatrice led Dante⁹, Venus Florence served as a heavenly guide, touring Pilot Numvas Vasperes through this celestial mosaic. She gestured towards various constellations and explained their significance.

'This is the secret labyrinth housing all arcane knowledge - past, present, and future. The lights you see are not mere illuminations; they're interactive, changing in response to events affecting the external world. Have a look at these two stars, for instance...'

Pilot Numvas Vasperes peered at the stars, which resembled the smallest of needles lost in the most immense haystack imaginable.

'I have an idea - stand there and focus on these stars. Now, I want you to think of one positive and one negative thing about me, then observe how they respond...'

Awe overcame Pilot Numvas Vasperes as he marvelled at the enigmatic

behaviour of the stars.

'I'm stunned that out of the unnumbered luminaries shimmering in the heavens, only these two react uniquely when I contemplate my impressions of you! So, what does all of this signify?'

Venus Florence revealed that this place, an ancient relic from the First Armageddon, was one of many fragments scattered across various worlds, each connected to the seminal device known as the Invention Enquiris. She explained that it was designed to deliver 'prophetic revelations' through its divine technology and sophisticated intelligence architecture.

Pilot Numvas Vasperes, eager to absorb every detail, was jotting down notes on his device.

'So, how can I tell apart which stars correspond to which real-world phenomena?' he inquired.

Venus Florence smiled at the profundity of his curiosity and responded, 'Well, close your eyes and think of something that deeply resonates with you. When you open your eyes, look for the brightest shining light. Close your eyes again and think of something closely related to your first thought, then look up once more. What do you observe?'

As he mulled over two matters of personal significance - a) the pleasure of eating an apple, and b) the comfort of sitting at the dining table - he discerned, from the multitude of stars, two that shone more brightly than the rest. Intrigued by the distinct constellation they formed, he turned to Venus Florence with more questions.

'Well, Pilot Numvas Vasperes,' Venus Florence went on, 'these lights represent souls. Their brightness inversely correlates with the happiness index, which encompasses several characteristics such as strangeness, beauty, charm, stability, orderliness, and equilibrium, among others. The way these nodes of light interconnect symbolises the real-life relationships and the very nature of

the connections between the entities in question.’

‘So, Sister Venus Florence, does Einstein’s general theory of relativity¹⁰ have any bearing here?’

Venus Florence paused with a hint of reflection. ‘Actually, no,’ she replied thoughtfully. ‘The Invention Enquiris, a divine construct, transcends the very fabric of space-time itself - it’s an ethereal concept designed to sift through information on the most spiritual plane. Now, for another thought experiment, consider your deepest fears. The things you despise, the things that...’

As Pilot Numvas Vasperes pondered these darker aspects, he observed shadowy voids forming among the lights, darker and more profound than the most abyssal gulfs between the stars, leaving him in a state of deep astonishment.

Ultimately, he inquired whether he might have permission to utilise this space again for his own benefit. Venus Florence responded, ‘Yes, but under one condition - you must not associate these lights with the Serpent! The mere instant you entertain the thought of Ysunras, as I’m about to demonstrate, this function will immediately cease...’

However, Pilot Numvas Vasperes allowed his mind to drift towards the Serpent, influenced by the decorations he had observed in the village, and the lights abruptly extinguished. ‘Oh, why is that?’ he asked.

Venus Florence brought the demonstration to a close, stating, ‘It’s indisputable. That’s another secret you’re not yet entitled to. To learn more, you must first join the Sisters, I’m afraid.’

‘Could we possibly start afresh?’ he asked. The sacredness of this space was not lost on him. ‘Your candour in revealing this sacred place is unparalleled. In the spirit of reciprocity, why not confide in me your aspirations, allowing me to discern how our homeland’s technologies, resources, and political influence

might be mobilised to your advantage...’

Venus Florence, clearly surprised by the offer, lifted an eyebrow. ‘Very well. Let’s engage...’

In time, Venus Florence confided the sentiments held by herself and the village towards two significant locales: the sequestered Ankharas Stronghold hidden amongst the plateaus, and Patzersu, the imperial capital of Kingdom Sangaras, across the expanse.

As they stepped through the doorway, Venus Florence carefully coiled the spool of thread they had used to navigate the labyrinth into a container and presented it to the pilot, marking the conclusion of their journey. In a solemn voice, she said, ‘You may keep this. However, you must promise to bring it back, a promise you shall swear to keep. Should you fail to return it to me, I’m afraid I won’t be able to assist you with any further secrets. Use it wisely!’

Thus, Pilot Numvas Vasperes swore the oath.

As they made their way back to the village, he reflected on his enlightened dialogue with Venus Florence. His realisations were profound:

Firstly, Ankharas Stronghold - contrary to the widely held belief of abandonment post the First Armageddon - was indeed peopled. Its denizens were descendants of those who survived the catastrophe, yet they remained oblivious of their shared lineages and past glories, living divided by class and language, all under the watchful eye of an imposing extraterrestrial entity. Secondly, Kingdom Sangaras - with its theocratic veneer - housed fundamental flaws. The villagers harboured cynicism towards not only the political machinations but also the religious ‘church’, where fundamentalists and fanatics bore hostility toward the pagan ‘Sisters’ of Venus Florence’s enclave. It was clear that the sacred and the secular were at odds, held in a delicate and tense balance.

Endnotes

1 | A universal sector, home to the divine Kingdom Azuris and its alliance.

2 | 'I have found (it)'; a phrase from Ancient Greek, attributed to Archimedes, who reportedly, in a fit of jubilation, leapt straight out of the bath and ran naked down the streets shouting it.

3 | A circular symbol that depicts a snake or dragon devouring its own tail and that is used especially to represent the eternal cycle of destruction and rebirth.

4 | The 'Thinker', a bronze sculpture by Auguste Rodin.

5 | 'Robota', a term coined in K. Capek's play R.U.R. 'Rossum's Universal Robots' (1920).

6 | According to Greek mythology, Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, gave Theseus a ball of thread to help him navigate the labyrinth and escape after killing the Minotaur.

7 | A Hebrew term originating from the Old Testament of the Bible (Genesis 1:2), which translates to 'chaos' or 'disorder', often used to describe a state of confusion or tumultuousness.

8 | The *Bøyg* is a mythical creature from Norwegian folklore, often depicted as an elusive and shape-shifting entity that challenges and obstructs those who encounter it. The Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen incorporated the *Bøyg* into his play *Peer Gynt* (published in 1867).

9 | In Dante Alighieri's epic poem *Divine Comedy*, Beatrice serves as Dante's guide through Heaven, representing divine grace and enlightenment.

10 | Proposed by Albert Einstein in 1915, this theory revolutionised our understanding of gravity and space-time.