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THE WORLD SHAR:

CAPITAL CITY OF THE EQUATORIAL LANDS

On the world Shar the skies were dark ochre and the sun was red at noon.

Of all the countries of the world, the Equatorial Lands was the greatest, and included a continent crisscrossed with broad and salty rivers, and surrounded by thousands of islands and peninsulas. Its greatest city had been named Aesh's-Land after the first emperor, and its country was the richest for the growing of crops in an otherwise largely barren world.

In the capital city at this hot noon the present Emperor of the Lands, Aesh Seven, stood waiting, along with the members of his Council, and three representatives of Galactic Federation, in the largest of the birthing-centers.

Its pointed roof rose out of a cluster of low buildings, six-sided like them and tiled in the same deep ochre. Their color was just lighter than the ground, slightly darker than the sky.

Inside, through the tall windows, shafts of the red sunlight lit the dancing insects, and the motes of the dusty air; but the walls were also lit with fluorescent tubes, a rare touch of technology on a world that scarcely needed warmth and could not bear more pollution. The air was still and silent.

A woman was about to give birth. Not quite woman.

And not quite Emperor; the term was an ancient one on Shar, and its meaning these days was closer to chieftain, and Aesh Seven was elected by his Council. He stood among them, one of forty men in sleeveless leather tunics, the guardhairs of his dark fur picking out thin lights from the lamps. His clawed feet were set in leather clogs and there was no other movement in him; only his eyes, like pomegranate seeds swimming in red membranes, flickered occasionally, and his clawed fingers tightened on his staff.

Before him stood the most important Shar in the world at this moment, the attending birther, who had no important tunic to wear, but stood naked, like the child he would deliver. The vestigial webbing in his armpits unfolded and folded back as he dipped his hands into the basin where the female, not-woman, limbless mutant lay, swollen with the unborn.

Near the opposite walls of the room were thirty-odd other basins with these inhabitants, impregnated joylessly by men of Shar, bearing fetuses in various stages of development. There were no other women except these womb-capsules on this polluted world.

The birther's hands reached into the womb's entrance, sought for and found the emerging child and plucked it out easily: a whole-limbed male, as verified by Galactic Federation scientists; otherwise this birth would not have been chosen for the ceremony.

The child coughed, weakly at first, and began to whimper. A tiny creature, glistening with liquids, minuscule fists clenched and trembling, sharp ears twitching in time with the bit of a quivering tail shaped like the ace of spades.

The birther knotted off the umbilicus and delivered it to the Emperor's representative, Kohav, waiting with a blanket. He wrapped it and presented the hairy bundle to the taller of the two Earthers, Genever, the Envoy of Galactic Federation, who was sweating along with his associates in stiff and sober cloth.

“Take,” the birther said in a hoarse whisper.

In acceptance of this trust Genever bent and clutched it, a mere double handful in his big pink hands. Delius, the aide standing beside him, did not bother glancing at his impassive diplomat’s face. It did not matter whether Genever was worried about having his clothes, dark blue with gold frogs, spattered, or whatever else he might be thinking. The Shar are not at all telepathic, and anyway Genever had a subdermal impervious helmet.

The Emperor struck the brick floor with his staff: *Yes!* As if Genever had passed an undeclared test.

The child’s whimper burst into a squall, and the Envoy handed it to Delius, who jiggled it gently, as he used to do with his own infant son. But the birther quickly grasped it from him and placed it in the Emperor’s hands.

Aesh Seven raised it as a gift to his people, and cried out, “Here is the father of our hope!” once in his own language and once in Galactic *lingua*, then placed it on the belly of its unknowing bearer to suckle on one of the three swollen teats. Delius fought to keep himself from shivering, and was not sorry that none but local media had been allowed here.

Now the Envoy presented the Emperor with a document sealed in a red leather case with gold stamping, and spoke in the Emperor’s own tongue: “We will bring you true mothers for your children, help you beget whole ones of your own, and make your world clean. We swear it and this is our sign and seal.” He was well practised in these phrases. Delius was ready to cue him if he forgot.

The sound of clattering made Delius glance through an opened doorway and he realized that a crowd had gathered outside the metal railings that fenced the building; their faces were impassive, but those who carried staffs or canes had raised and were clacking them with those of their neighbors in applause.

Aesh Seven then cried out in his hoarse voice, “So you agree now, do you, citizens?” and did not wait for an answer or seem to notice that there

were those who only leaned on their staffs.

Delius knew that Aesh had declared a holiday. And what did these men do on working-days, then? He doubted they had any well-paying employment among the aliens who owned the world, the outworld corporations who lived and worked in the orbiting city of offices and warehouses, giving orders to the crews controlling the robots that dug, the satellites that surveyed, and the factories that refined the riches of the world below. The Shar people had not been built for such work, with their slender limbs and bent-kneed stance, though they were strong and wiry enough for their own enterprises.

But what work, then? Tenders of those womb-bearers, mainly, half their population. Servile without choice to others—who descended only to inspect their fiefdoms—in the manner of tribes caught in the whirlpools of “civilization.” Out-worlders were a bit contemptuous of Shar, and also a bit frightened.

One of those who had not raised a staff lifted it now, and howled through the black O of his mouth words that needed no translation, “Not all of us want these damned aliens!” Crashing his staff against the railing so that it broke in two, “Are there not enough of them eating us up already?”

His eyes flashed, his body with raised arms became a black X of shadow and was—

—nothing—

—then solidly less than half a meter away from Genever, with its oily sweat and strangely sweet breath, with its hint of cloves, that bypassed the Earthers’ nose filters. Delius’s arm shot out across the Shar’s body to stop him and he fell back, his com-rades grasped him and hid him among themselves.

The Shar people are the only known teleports. That is what makes them frightening.

Genever blinked and gasped, but immediately smoothed down.

Aesh Seven jumped forward snarling with bared fangs: “Find me

that one!”

But before any of his attendants could move, Delius bowed and made a gesture of beseechment with hands clasped: “If you please, my lord—”

And Kohav stepped forward and said, “My lord, it is your holiday...”

After that, with the help of Kohav, Genever and Delius performed the small drama of persuading the Emperor not to mar that holiday. Aesh knew well enough that Shar cannot control teleportation; it is their reaction to fear and anger.

The afternoon winds were beginning to shiver through the doorways in prelude to the evening storm, and Aesh calmed himself. “Yes, it is the holiday. Let us serve out the meal then, and eat it.” And the servants began to set up screens around the containers of the wombs. The day moved quickly in its orbit after that.



Delius was relieved to be out of there, in the cool stone chamber of their quarters in the Outworld Center that was attached to the Council complex. He was bored with that smooth simpering Genever and weary; the nose filters clogged quickly, mouth-breathing irritated and clogged his throat, and he had never been comfortable with the oxycap socket behind his ear. Or, for that matter, in the stiff cloth of his uniform, a grey one to show that he was a rank below Genever. He didn't much care for the chunks of prepared stuff outworlders were forced to eat on strange worlds, but he was used to them. In *symbolingua* they were all labelled XANTHROTEK. The deep pharmaceutical source of the money.

There were a few conveniences in these quarters: woven mats of the kind Shar slept on, with paddings added for the comfort of aliens; the rest were provided by the Earther prep teams through the same financial source: self-contained plumbing for washing and toilets, sealed jugs of

distilled water for drinking, more fluorescent lighting, and packaged food. Also a power-celled air filter, so that Delius could clear his nose for now. He was obliged to share the lodging with Genever, his fellow-Earther; the third outworlder, a Bimanda named Makkow, who managed the archives, was a hermaphrodite in male phase for this assignment, and had a room of his own, with his own world's supplies.

Genever, unlike Delius, was contented, just smoothing his gray-winged hair. He was always placid and smiling. He had hooked in his ear comm and was giving his report to the orbiting GalFed ship. Delius listened in.

"No, no trouble ... but then it's all gesture. There are some who don't agree, but their ruler seems to have them in hand."

"They're a weird lot, especially with that jumping."

"There are weirder."

"What about the Polar Territories?"

"Treaties hundreds of years old, never been broken."

"Nothing much worth breaking there, I guess, poor juddars. We'll have the teams down there in two days, start handling the business end and collect you. Off now."

Delius was uneasy as Genever was unruffled. "We don't know how many of those rebels there are." *And can we give them what we promised?* Delius asked the silence.

Genever beamed down on him kindly. "Delius, I've never seen anyone more anxious than you. We've done the task we came for and the matter is settled. And it's quite an iron bar of an arm you have there, the way you handled that violent one."

Delius smiled thinly. He had narrow shoulders with hard muscle on them and his build was deceiving. "I need it to keep people like you safe, Genever..."

"And his number two, Kohav, is a help."

Delius agreed with that. "But none of us really knows what we're in for."

Genever could move quickly when he wanted, and was already zipped into his sleepsuit and arranging himself on his pallet. “Others will handle that, others...” Muttering now, “You do too damned much deep thinking, Delius, too much...” And falling into a nest of sleep.

Delius switched off the glaring fluorescents, but stayed awake for a long time. Although he was bored with Genever it was not because the man was stupid. Far from it: he sensed, by subtle hints in his manner, that Genever realized that Delius was the kind of Federation agent who reported to others beside himself. Not any kind of spy: code-cracker, recruiter, traitor. Nothing to do with secrets.

Delius had gone into Galactic Service to see worlds, to use his quick eye and restless mind. After long training he had become a Galactic Federation Observer, travelling alone to judge the health of colonies on the worlds chosen for them. When they were in danger of annihilation by unforeseen disasters, his task was pleading, persuading, begging them to move away. Facing angry settlers who could not, would not see the apocalypse coming, he was lucky to escape their fury with a whole skin. The dead judged him in his dreams.

Enough of this emotional battering among all those worlds and their time zones, and he reached a point where he was no longer sure how old he was, or whether there was anyone alive who knew him.

When he was on the verge of burnout his superiors had promoted him into the Entry Corps that forged the first links in the chains of agreements between worlds. The task was essentially the same: he was a guardian of people under risk, with his “iron bar of an arm”. But now he had support— not much counting on Genever —and he was no longer alone.

Then he had found a wife, had a child and believed he was satisfied. Or perhaps safe?

Here now was a world of horribly vulnerable people. Men who had been forced to deliver their emotions only to other men. Some longed bitterly for women and others had resigned themselves to having no

choices. Some preferred the closeness of men. Now there were teams coming, trying to help coax tax money out of the owners of the mines and factories to clean up the pollution they had intensified by exploiting the resources. After that there would be biology teams working to revitalize the gene pool—and the whole social structure.

More strangers, more interference, and he was beginning to have the same feelings about the Shar that bothered him as an observer of colonists: Watch out! If you don't have enough of them now, there are more Forces coming to take you under control, split you apart! *As I did for all those years.* He knew these thoughts were irrational. *And anyway, Delius, when did you ever dare think you had any power?* Finally he fell asleep, and found himself swimming in the dream of a womb. He broke out of that and fell into dreamlessness.

PROMISES PLUS

After the morning meal, which was much like the evening meal, a call interrupted Delius's packing for the voyage ahead: *Kohav requests a meeting with the Envoy's aide Delius to discuss transcript details.*

Delius agreed to this request with raised eyebrows and said, "I don't know what that's for."

"Something to do with archives, likely," Genever said. "Though Makkow sealed them yesterday. But now we've got this far, do it whatever it is."

After a few moments Delius heard the low lispng voice call out in the atrium, "I am here, Delius!"

Delius plugged his nose with filters, socketed in a fresh oxycap, and pushed aside the heavy leather curtain that served as door: "And so am I," he said less emphatically. Kohav, tall for one of his people, was drawing himself up, doing his best to match the medium height of Delius, and the depth of his voice. "What are the transcripts that you wanted to discuss, Kohav? I thought they'd all been sealed."

“Come,” Kohav said. “I will show you.” And he pointed to a hallway unfamiliar to Delius, and proceeded into it, tapping with his staff and clacking in his thick leather clogs.

Delius was not eager to follow. He pushed at his mind for the right words in the language: “Please tell me where we are going, Kohav.”

The Shar stopped and turned to stare at Delius. There was darkness in him, his black ungleaming eyes, sharp cheekbones, narrow mouth barely covering the tips of the fangs. His ears pointed straight up, like a devil’s horns, his tail curled tensely. That was another reason for certain other civilizations not to love the Shar. They looked too much like the demons of ancient myth.

“You must trust me now, Delius. I have told one lie to bring you out here, but I will not tell another. At noon there will be a group of your people landing, but first the Emperor wants to see you alone.”

The corridor ended at a walled square open to the sky and paved with worn stones, where the red sunbeams fell in dusty angles. They caught on Kohav’s armband of gold filigree. Kohav headed across to its opposite corner, and the tower that joined the two wings of the Council House. Delius followed and did not ask any more.

A few workers were moving about in the quadrangle, some laying out a morning meal for their fellows on a trestle table, others mending cracks in the walls with plaster, or running about with messages. Kohav, preoccupied, did not seem to notice them, although they noticed Delius with flashes of their black-and-red eyes and kept up conversations with whispering and hand gestures before they turned their heads away. Delius did not need to know whether they were dealing in intimacies, rivalry, or comments on the alien stranger.

At the base of the tower was an archway, the first arch Delius had seen on this world of hexagons. There were steps leading up inside it, and when they reached it Kohav lifted his free arm and gestured. “Climb.”

Delius entered the cylinder of granite and climbed its stairs. A few

steps up he realized that Kohav was not following, and kept going. There were lamps set into the walls, old-fashioned electric bulbs, some flickering.

The tower was tall only in comparison with the buildings around it, and after some twenty-five steps Delius found a landing whose walls were lined with instrument panels that flickered and clicked when he stepped on the floor. Detectors ... a great deal more advanced than the light bulbs. Delius was not surprised. He had visited other worlds and peoples that accepted only the technology they truly needed and no more.

Here there was another arched doorway to a room lit by lamps, and in clear and practised *lingua* Aesh Seven's voice said, "Come in."

Delius took the step. The room was high-ceilinged but small. It had two square windows. Aesh Seven was sitting on a rough wooden bench; beside him, a polished round table with grotesquely carved legs ending in clawed feet. On the table there was an oil lamp, and a heavy round stone, the emperor's seal. Aesh had no decoration but a gold clasp on the shoulder of his leather tunic.

Delius only glanced at the tableau. His sight was caught by the endless carved frieze swarming over the granite walls:

Women with babies suckling them, and children dancing, playing games, or riding the backs of their fathers. All colored in red, blue and yellow with dyes—their grains were visible—made from the soil and rocks of the land. Below these Aesh Seven seemed very dark, and radiating darkness.

Delius was forced to be aware of his own white bony face, and the white-blond hair that he combed straight back from his forehead, falling in rough shingles at the nape of his neck. Aware of those eyes, black and red, that watched.

Without greeting Aesh gestured to the walls and said, at ease in *lingua*, "These walls were created by Kessev Five. He had a grandmother." Then, "I'm sure you have noticed the detectors for sensing life and metals, but there are no devices to witness any communications into or out of this place. I want to be free to speak before your teams land. They will pretend

to understand what I want of them and what I do not want. No, take notice that I don't include you among them." He gestured toward a plank bench like his own, and Delius sat.

"I try to understand."

"I realize that. I want someone to trust and I have chosen you, because you seem to be the most understanding—not because I mean any insult to the others of your party. I am taking this chance. But I must say it: if you cannot swear never to tell of this conversation I will swear that we never had it. I'm not speaking of my Council. I trust them, most of them."

Delius said nothing.

"But among aliens, you were the one who learned our language, as I learned yours. You are not afraid to look at what is left of our women, your face does not twist, and you held our child as if it had been your own." He slapped his hand on the black stone seal, with its engraved triangles and hexagons, tiny suns and planets with eccentric orbits, small embedded jewels like stars.

"I will swear," Delius said, and set his hand on the seal beside Aesh's. Even alongside Aesh's hand the coolness of the black stone drew warmth from his own as if it were blood. And again it was a case of not shivering because of the primitive depth of the ritual.

Aesh pulled back and said, "The companies that dig out our riches and bind our world in debt are quite content with its polluted state. They claim that they have made us an honest bargain, they pay us with food, because it is hard to grow on this world, with meat and leather because that is even harder to grow, with electric lights, and instruments that click and buzz. With bits of gold. They take our breath away with their smoke and filth, and we had too much of those before they came. Perhaps they believe because of our shameful history and our distaste for recording it, that we are less than intelligent."

"Not in the eyes of the Federation."

"Yes, Galactic Federation has made promises, but most of those who

have tried to help us over the generations have broken themselves on this world ... and we have had rumors of threat from the governors of other states, as if we had not enough trouble among our own people. Not all of our people are like me, who want to beget mothers. Some are afraid of change, some are afraid to offend our food givers, some don't want true women and are satisfied with the monsters we have. If your Federation cannot keep its promises peacefully I will not keep this tower long, and those who don't care much for Aesh Seven may like Aesh Eight even less."

"I'll work to keep those promises, but I have no power," Delius said.

"And neither do I," Aesh Seven said and drew in a breath that was his version of a sigh. "In this moment, I have this tower, and this seal," he slapped it again, "and I hope an ally among the aliens." He did not blunt the harshness of the word. "It's time for you to go, now."

Delius went past the life detectors and down the spiral stairs. Kohav was waiting at its base, but not to escort him back. He stood aside until the arch was clear, and went into it; Delius heard the cold rap of his clogs and the tapping of his staff up the steps, and crossed the square alone. The way back was straight enough.

"Now what was all that about the transcripts?" Genever was staring at him. "Makkow always takes care of them."

"I speak *lingua* better than he does." This was the truth.

A slight flush on Genever's face. "Then what was it about?"

Delius sighed. "There was some doubt about the wording, but everything seems clear enough to me."

Only too clear and a heavier burden. He hefted his baggage and went out toward coldsleep chilled already.



Upstairs, in the room wreathed by the frieze of women and children, Aesh Seven nodded and gestured for Kohav to sit. "I don't want to have

to trust more aliens, but these seem to want to give us something. I don't know why, but there must be a price. Their source of funds is a manufacturer of goods just as much as the ones that are working in forges and mines on our world. Of course I don't trust them completely, yet—while we have the chance I want to go ahead as quickly as possible. It will take years, but, to begin I will call a Council meeting, and ... eventually I will send you out as my emissary to wherever we are called. Whatever has to be done, I doubt it will be on this world. You will choose your own aides—you know how to find the right ones.”

Kohav clasped one arm with the other and looked down. “You are separating yourself from me.”

“No,” Aesh said quietly, almost in a whisper, “I trust you most in the world, and only the Angry-God knows what will happen to us in this country...”

Kohav had little to answer. He pulled himself up from the bench with his staff and touched the cold stone seal. The feel of it chilled him. “I'm pleased to have your trust in me.” He descended the stair and crossed the quadrangle, tapping his staff and raising an open hand to clerks and officials; all replied to the gesture in varying degrees of friendship and respect. Outside the wall he walked down the dusty street while the red clouded sun rose past the quarter-mark of the day.

Presently he reached the birthing-center, where the guards let him through the gate without question. The air was still unmoving at the open doors, and the heat as heavy inside as out. The attendants did not even turn their heads as he passed down the dark aisles of basins until he reached the one where the newborn child lay on its belly sucking the teat of its bearer. He stared down at that bearer, with its twisted knot of a head and flipper limbs.

Yes, the Emperor trusted him: he had offered Kohav's first-born son to the world.