Excerpt from The Princess of the Victorians

Amid the luxurious furniture of a drawing room at Victoria Heights, the family residence of the Royal House of Errington, before his classmates – Miss Thule and Elijah Coombs, and several complete strangers, Papius found himself working through the slow flowing forms of an Art developed centuries ago on another world. He thought that to a casual observer, the performance of Tai Chi resembled the attempt to move neck deep through a pool of molasses.

“I don’t get it,” Michelle commented, “What is he doing?”

Nicholias spoke up, “Please allow me, Private Thule. My understanding of the principle of Tai Chi is to use the force and momentum of your opponent against him. As Dr. Avonelle rotates his body, he is visualizing an attacker with an incoming kick or punch and is pivoting his shoulders in response as he uses the assailant’s momentum to initiate a counterstrike.”

Papius was glad to hear that he was doing this. In actuality, he had never understood the martial basis of the overly stylized forms he had been taught. For this purpose, he much preferred the Jitsu taught at Concordia. Technocrats were, by-and-large, reluctant to engage in military conflicts of any sort, and tended to treat Tai Chi simply as an efficient exercise routine.

“This is just about what I would expect the Technocrats to invent.” he heard Master Bourne mutter, “Even their Martial Arts are useless when it comes to defending themselves,” Papius did not consider himself very good at reading people, but he thought he could detect disdain and hidden anger,

“Have a care, Randy,” Elijah responded with a slight edge to his voice, “Your tone suggests an unhealthy level of resentment.”

“You’re not actually going to defend them!” Randy responded, “I know your views on the subject too well. When have the Technocrats ever lifted a finger to help in the defense of their Kingdom or even their own colonies? O.K., my problem is not with Dr. Avonelle,” He almost spat the title, “He, at least, is attempting military service, but how many others can you name? Blasted pacifists!”

“While I might not agree with all their social and political choices,” Elijah responded with raised voice, “I can at least respect their viewpoints and appreciate the very many contributions they have made to Victorian Society.”

“You weren’t there at the defense of Magda,” Randy replied, “When the 2nd Royal Marine Brigade deflected the Hun Tzu from sweeping away a tiny Technocratic colony. Two thousand Victorian soldiers against a Horde ten times their size. The Technocrats refused to relocate even though it would have saved hundreds of lives. They just hid behind antiquated agreements stating that the Victorian military was legally bound to protect their status abroad and continued life as normal while the world was crashing

251
around them. My Father was a Captain in the marines and watched most of his Company die under a hail of Hun Tzu arrows. They held them off for three days until a truce was signed and the horde continued their swath of destruction.” By this time, it seemed obvious that Randy was quite disturbed. “The worst part was that not a single Technocrat lifted a finger to defend himself or his family. A lot of good men died in that engagement who didn’t have to.”

“I’m sorry, Randy,” Eli responded with genuine feeling, “I read the reports, but I can only imagine what your Father went through. In their defense, I seem to recall that the entire Technocrat community mobilized to tend the wounded and bury the dead after the battle. A soldier couldn’t ask for better medical care than in a Technocratic colony.”

“They shouldn’t have been there in the first place! The brigade commander pleaded – no, he begged them to relocate, at least temporarily, until the Hun Tzu threat had passed…the point is, no Victorians needed to die at all.”

As Randy and Elijah debated, Papius continued his performance of Tai Chi, attempting to use the steady motions of the Kata to calm his wits. He could see both sides of the argument, of course, and the perspective of the Technocrats differed somewhat from the son of a Company commander. The Technocrats of Magda had chosen that particular site for a reason and really were in love with the shores of the Sea of Galilee, or at least Nova Terra’s version of that great lake, the shores of the original upon which walked the Son of God many lifetimes ago. Still, he thought that would have consented to move if they had not thought it necessary to stay for humanitarian concerns. While nominally defending Technocratic colony, the Victorian Brigade had also inadvertently protected several neighboring villages that were close allies with the Technocrats from the destruction of the Hun Tzu, in the months that followed, Magda became a haven for refugees from the entire region as the Magda Technocrats knew very well would happen. In the end, the sacrifice of the Victorian Military had saved tens of thousands of lives. Only a few hundred of those saved were Victorian, but the Technocrats tended to have a more global view of “humanity” that included the other peoples living on Nova Terra.

“…I still say, it’s not worth it.” Randy was continuing, “The Technocrats need us a whole lot more than we need them. When was the last time you saw a Technocrat farmer, or banker, or soldier? Victorians do the hard work of living, and the Technocrats reap the rewards. And don’t forget that any time they get into trouble, it’s the common Victorian soldier who takes the brunt of the punishment. It’s not only Magda. We had to intervene in Ceylon, Cape Town, Sannich …the list goes on and on. And when one of them does join the military, he immediately gets posted to the Praetorian Guard!”

“Why, Master Shields, I think you’re jealous!” Michelle interjected with a broad grin, “You think that our dear little Dr. Avonelle is receiving preferential treatment because he’s a Techocrat.” Papius felt the
familiar grip of his guardian’s hand at the back of the neck, her small fingers grinding into pressure points that made him dizzy and brought his Kata to an abrupt end, “Tell me, how could anyone be jealous of this face?” Papius wasn’t sure that he enjoyed the scrutiny that followed, or the discomfort involved with Private Thule’s grasp. On the other hand, Michelle was a rather handsome woman and he was in physical contact with her. All in all, he felt that he came out ahead on the exchange.

“Well, Master Shields, let me settle it for you. Papius is in the Praetorian and you’re not. It’s not because he’s a Technocrat, *per se* but because he’s ruddy brilliant and they didn’t know what else to do with him.” Papius extracted himself from Private Thules’ grip and stood to his full height wondering if there was anything that he could say. He figured that he had better apologize for something, but he didn’t know how to phrase it, “Look, Randy, I know that there’s nothing I can say…”

His description was cut off by a horrendous crashing noise somewhere behind him as if a tower of glass had cascaded onto a concrete pad from a great height. Even before the crash was completed, a woman started to scream, and the party was moving towards the disturbance.

The noise emanated from the landing of the grand staircase only a few paces from their drawing room. Nicholias arrived on the scene first, moving with startling speed and leaping a full flight of stairs to reach the landing. Elijah was right behind him followed closely by Arnold. The site on the landing chilled Papius to the marrow. The great window overlooking Victoria was shattered and a cold winter wind blew through the gaping blackness. Three women were on the landing, and while he descended the stairs he could see Miss Qin wailing loudly, bent over with her face to the ground, while Miss Butler was leaning over a tall, veiled woman in mourning clothes who was lying on the ground, the black feathers of an arrow clearly protruding from her abdomen. It was the Princess.

Papius felt part of his heart die at the thought of Princess Dinah lying there, dead or alive he didn’t know. A whole host of unspoken thoughts and dreams passed unbidden before his eyes, a childhood of things left unsaid and for which the time might never come for their revelation. He found himself almost relieved when Eleanor removed the hat and veil to reveal Miss Angel Robbinson clad in the Princess’ mourning garments. Papius watched as the young woman, turned her head and grimaced in pain. She was still alive then. There was hope.

As Papius came to the landing, Arnold was already kneeling behind Angel, cradling her head in his lap, Nicholias crouching beside him. For a couple of moments he appeared to be in deep concentration before he issued a single command in a quiet, deadly voice scarcely heard beyond their small circle, “Find them.” Papius glanced over at Nicholias and saw a rather shocking expression. The tall man looked at his friend with undisguised rage, his lips curled in anger and his eyes flaming. He straightened like a whip and taking two quick steps leapt from the second story landing into the night below.
Papius thought that Elijah was going to follow him through the window when Arnold reached up and caught the arm of the younger man. “Stay, Coombs! You have no idea what’s out there!” Elijah wrenched his arm free and looked about to leave regardless, “Think, Eli! You don’t even have a weapon! What good would it do the Kingdom to lose you also? The Order of St. Peter will already be scouring the house grounds. Let them do their job. Help me with Miss Robinson.” How precisely Arnold expected Elijah to help with the wounded girl, Papius wasn’t sure. His mind involuntarily recalled old medical reports he had read about survival rates of patients with abdominal arrow punctures. It wasn’t promising.

As the rest of the reception guests arrived at the top of the stairs, an older gentleman he recognized as Caleb O’Brien came up to the landing from below. The Nazarene Master took in the situation at a glance and closed his eyes in concentration. After a moment he called to the Butler, “Do we have a physician registered among our guests?” When Donald returned a regretful negative, Papius felt the Master fix calm blue eyes on himself, “It looks like it’s up to you, Dr. Avonelle.”

Papius felt a momentary light headedness at the seriousness of the charge and the stress of the attention. Already, after only half a minute, a pool of blood had become visible beneath Miss Robbinson, and Papius suspected this to be only a portion of the loss. The majority of the bleeding was likely to be internal. While still conscious, the young woman was developing a pale, sickly caste. Papius knew in his heart that immediate operation and transfusion would be necessary, he was not sure that he would be up to the task. Even before exploring the wound he could tell that her odds of survival were poor. His mouth felt dry as he spoke, “She’s suffering from severe, profuse hemorrhaging. I hesitate to move her, but she cannot stay. We’ll need a warm room, preferably with a large table.” Papius looked directly at the Butler, “I will also need whatever surgical supplies you have on hand.”

Master O’Brien responded without hesitation, addressing Elijah and Arnold directly, “Take her to the breakfast room. Follow me.” And he started down the stairs

“Wait!” Papius intervened as the two tall men prepared to lift the hapless girl. He pulled down a large, velvet curtain billowing in the wind beside the broken window, quickly doubled it and laid it over the shards of glass beside his patient, “Carry her on this. And keep it taught! Any abdominal motion could cause more trauma.” The young Lord and Lord’s heir responded to his command, and he fell into step beside Angel as they followed the Master.

Papius took a moment to examine the wound. The arrow was somewhat shorter than the yard-long shafts of the Victorian Long Bow, but was as finely crafted as any made by Victorian craftsmen. It was fletched with black feathers and must have entered the abdominal cavity with great force somewhat below the ribs, angled upward, and appeared to be lodged in one of the ribs near the spine. Reaching between the curtain and Robinson’s back, Papius counted the ribs with his fingers, and tapped on the shaft of the arrows,
being rewarded with reverberating taps and a low groan from his patient. “That settles it,” Papius thought, “We’re not going to pull this one without a fight.”

There was no real way to know how much internal damage the wound had caused without exploratory surgery, but Papius could tell enough to know that time was essential. They had reached the bottom of the stairs, and he realized with dread that these would be his last moments of comparative silence before he would be responsible for directing both Lords and commoners in an attempt to save the young woman’s life. Taking a final glance around to make sure he wasn’t going to run into anything, Papius concentrated on his groaning patient, pushing away the outside world with its confusing collection of sounds, people, and emotions. There was only Miss Robinson, suspended in space against a bright background, with the shaft of a black arrow protruding from her midsection. Immediately, in his mind, clothes and flesh became translucent and he could trace the shaft nestled among various organs from the entrance wound to the posterior rib where the arrow-head was firmly lodged. He rotated his imagined patient onto her side and back, to view the protruding arrow through various angles, magnifying certain regions to focus on one section or another. The outlines of the internal organs were indistinct, particularly the intestines, but it was clear that the arrow had punctured the spleen – his response was an involuntary shudder. He recognized that his projection was based on a composite of images from numerous dissections and medical texts superimposed on the flesh-and-blood woman beside him. While such an intuitive construction couldn’t accurately predict all trauma that had occurred, it gave him enough information that he thought she had a chance.

The vision collapsed around him at the sound of another woman – a familiar cry. He found himself back in reality, a little further down the hall and directly opposite Princess Dinah, her face, a face he considered lovelier than any in the world, a mixture of anguish and fear, “Angel! No not Angel! Dear God, save her!”

As the bearers carried their load swiftly into the breakfast room, Master O’Brien took command of the situation, sweeping the breakfast table of discarded drinking vessels, ordering Lords and Earls to vacate the room, and commanding the fire to be stoked against the winter air that was rapidly flowing into the house. The Earl of Errington remained, standing in silence beside the Nazarene Master. The Princess also stayed, Deborah becoming a protective shadow behind her, “Why Angel?” she cried, “Miss Robinson had no enemies. She wasn’t a threat to anyone! What could they gain?"

“I’m sorry, your Highness,” Master O’Brien answered, “I know it will pain you to hear it, but the assailant evidently had another target in mind. Your friend is arrayed in your clothes, and as she has much your height and bearing, with her veil lowered, the difference in your appearance would be quite unremarkable, particularly at a distance.”

255
“Dine, I’m so sorry,” Eleanor whispered, “Angel needed fresh clothes and we thought it would be a fine compliment to you if she was dressed just as you were. We never guessed that any harm could come of it!” Papius noted that Miss Eleanor Butler had remained at his side from the first and recalled something of her vocational preparation.

“I understand, Miss Butler, that you desire to be a physician,” Papius had already removed much of the bloodied mourning gown from the young woman and was swiftly cutting through various layers of undergarments with a sharp knife he had at hand, “Would you, by any chance know your friend’s blood type? Does she have any allergies of which I should be aware?”

“B-positive,” Eleanor responded immediately, “And no. She was in perfect health – the strongest, healthiest person I know.”

Papius looked for confirmation in his patient’s face. Miss Robinson was still conscious, but she was in no position to answer questions of this nature. Her breath was coming in gasps and her expression indicated considerable suffering. Her body was also beginning to shake. Master O’Brien called for more heat. Papius’ concerns were focused elsewhere. “B-positive it is then,” he commented softly. “Have you, by chance, any surgical experience?” he asked Dinah’s friend.

“A little,” she replied hesitantly, “They like you to be at least eighteen to help at the hospital, but I worked under Dr. Booth a whole year at Life-Line.” As he rapidly continued prepping for surgery, Papius recalled an image of George Booth. They had known each other, of course, through Technocrat Chess tournaments. Booth was a reliable if somewhat conventional opponent. Papius thought that he could trust George to train his students competently. Today his efforts might be well rewarded.

“Have you experience drawing blood?” Papius asked, the majority of his concentration focused on sterilizing the exposed abdomen and ordering surgical tools on the side table next to him.

“Yes!” Eleanor replied enthusiastically.

“Very well then, Miss Robinson will require a minimum of four units of blood to survive this surgery. I’ll take twice that if you can get it.” Papius turned his head briefly to the Earl of Errington, “Please assist Miss Butler and organize the guests for volunteers. Minutes count, Sir.”

“Understood, Dr. Avonelle,” Albert Coombs replied, “We’ll need your help, Eli,” the Lord of Errington replied, drafting his grand-nephew to the task.

Papius reflected that he had just issued a command to one of the most powerful men in the world but dismissed the thought. He was more concerned that Miss Robinson was still conscious. “Please

---

1 Life-Line was the Victorian equivalent of the Red-Cross during 20th Century Old Earth but had a missionary mandate as well as a purely medical one. In Victoria, Life-Line maintained an extensive blood bank.
administer anesthesia, Master O’Brien. I assume that a Nazarene operative will be familiar with the
procedure.” Caleb was already moving, cloth and chloroform ampoule in hand with a confidence that
spoke of long practice of putting people under. Papius was quite sure that he didn’t want the details.

As the Master went to work, Papius glanced around the room. Most of the bystanders had been ejected by
the Order of St. Peter. This was for the best. For an abdominal injury, it would be impossible to avoid
secondary infection, but it might be possible to mitigate its effects. Besides himself and the Nazarene
Master, only Deborah, Dinah, and his shadow, Private Thule remained, with Arnold Beckman standing a
little apart – an unreadable expression on his face. He would need assistance until professional help
arrived. “Scrub up, Deb, I’m going to need your hands in about four minutes. You too, Michelle,
abdominal wounds are never pretty.”

“What can I do?” the Princess asked, her face white with shock and anxiety.

“Please pray, Your Highness,” he answered, “Miss Robinson is much more in God’s hands than in mine,
a fact of which I’m sure she would be grateful. Beyond that, you can hold a lantern over the table. Miss
Robinson will require both prayer and illumination if she is to survive the night.” Papius wasn’t exactly
looking forward to seeing the extent of the injury, and the thought he might work better in the dark
offered no comfort.

“It’s just Dine, Pap,” she responded absently retrieving a lantern and getting to her dual tasks, her tall
figure and long arms unconsciously striking an admirable pose. Papius intentionally ignored the view.

“I’ll obtain additional lighting,” Arnold Beckman volunteered, abruptly turning on his heels and striding
rapidly out of the room. Papius lifted his scalpel and made his first abdominal incisions around the torn
and inflamed wound of the otherwise flawless, young skin.

The injury was grim, there was no mistaking it as he peeled back layers of flesh and muscle to reveal the
internal carnage. As he had suspected, the assassin had used an arrow more suited for unarmored targets
than mailed knights. The broad arrow head had abraded intestines in several places, and ruptured her
spleen before lodging squarely in the twelfth rib near the spine on the patient’s left side. Papius found
himself working as quickly as he dared, but the rate of internal bleeding was considerable and in spite of a
well-placed line for continuous transfusion, Papius was concerned that his patient’s blood pressure would
quickly fall to dangerous levels. He felt himself perspiring heavily in the warm room.

Papius thought that he had worked through perhaps half of an hour of surgery before the physician
arrived. Eleanor had rejoined him as an assistant, relieving Deborah, who in turn held the light on the
Princesses’ behalf.
“Sorry I’m late, Papius,” the physician announced, “A Nazarene pulled me out of a warm bath and threw me on the back of a horse and rode it here at a gallop. What’s the situation?” He glanced around Deborah’s shoulder and Papius thought he instantly turned a pale color, “Lord help her!”

“Terrance,” Papius responded without breaking concentration, “I’ve never been so glad to see a real doctor. We have a lower abdominal arrow puncture wound that ruptured the patient’s spleen and lacerated her intestines before anchoring in one of the floating ribs. We started transfusion as quickly as possible, but I’m afraid we’re losing her. She needs professional help.”

“Ruptured spleen? You’ll need to perform a splenectomy. There’s not much that you can do to repair the organ.”

“Already done. At least the arrow was on the left side. If it had been on the right, it would have punctured her liver, and she would have been beyond even your considerable expertise. The removal of the spleen eliminated most of the internal bleeding, and I have already sutured the worst of the intestinal damage, but we need to remove the arrow, and it has to come out now. I estimate we have less than a ten minute window. Any suggestions?”

Terrance examined the wound while cleaning his hands. Eleanor and Michelle were holding open the patient’s abdomen manually. Papius was proud of them, particularly of Eleanor. There was little that Michelle could do at this point that would surprise him, but Eleanor had been working with fearless competency from the start. Many of his Technocratic friends would have had trouble believed a young lay woman capable of such a feat – particularly when the patient was such an intimate friend.

“Normal procedure would call for arrow extraction by the removal of part of the posterior rib. Have you a trephine at hand?”

“No, although we could probably substitute if we had to, but Frankly, Terrance, I’m afraid that the extra shock of trepanning would kill her. We’re skirting the edge even without cutting bone.”

“You’ve been conducting the surgery, Papius, I’ll stand by your judgment. What would you suggest?”

Papius felt himself swallow. He was uncomfortably warm and far out of his element. He also knew that what he was about to suggest was far outside the boundary of ordinary medical practice, “Master O’Brien can pull the arrow out – with his mind.” For a moment the only sound in the room was the crackle of the stove.

“Are you insane, Papius?” Terrance asked in a voice thick with incredulity, “What have they been doing to you at that so-called Academy?”

The response was not unexpected, “I know it’s unconventional, but we’re running out of options. If we snap the posterior rib for dorsal arrow extraction, the patient dies. If we send a runner for a Trephine for
partial rib removal, she’ll still die. At least this way, she has a chance.” The physician did not respond immediately, so Papius chose to press the issue, “I estimate eight minutes before it will no longer matter.”

“There wasn’t much hope for her from the beginning,” he heard Terrance mutter, “All right, do it your way, Papius. Use the Nazarene if you wish, I want no part of it,” so saying, the doctor backed away, but without leaving the room. As Papius expected, professional curiosity was almost as powerful a force as compound interest.

Caleb displaced the Technocratic physician, “What do you want me to do?” he asked simply.

Papius directed the Master’s attention to the injury, “As you well know, we can’t simply pull the arrow out by the shaft. The shaft would break, leaving the arrow head in place. Even using a pliers or some other mechanical device on the arrow head itself would cause more injury than it would save as the surrounding bone could splinter. I postulate that an experienced Nazarene, such as yourself, might be able to use Cerebrics to flex the rib just enough and apply sufficient, highly-directed force to extract the arrow directly from living bone.”

“Right,” he answered dryly, “This could take a while.” After this, Caleb simply stared at the arrow and the targeted bone, bathed in red, deep within the wound.

Papius took the opportunity to wrap gold wire around the barbed points of the arrow head to protect surrounding tissue in the event the Nazarene Master was successful. Eleanor and Michelle looked at him for direction, but he looked right back at them and could only shrug. He knew that he had nothing to say concerning the matter.

Papius soon found Terrance looking over his shoulder, “What on Nova Terra is he doing?” he asked.

“Honestly? I have no idea,” Papius admitted freely, “My Uncle and I have speculated that the Nazarenes may generate some kind of highly localized, circularly-polarized EM field\(^2\) in the vicinity of the arrowhead, but it’s hard to test.” In reality, Papius recalled that he had worked out the theory of low-frequency EM field coupling to the curtain separating their reality from the Gravity Brane in his Master’s Thesis. It had been promptly marked classified, of course. There were only two copies in existence, and neither was in his possession. Papius glanced over at Deborah who was faithfully holding a brightly burning lamp over the surgery table. Her head was cocked slightly to one side and she had the expression of one listening intently. He continued, “I have been told that there is a certain music surrounding the

\(^2\) EM-field stands for “electromagnetic-field”, which is a more rigorously correct way to say “light”. The EM spectrum includes visible light, x-rays, radiant heat, radio waves, etc. The EM-fields that Papius is contemplating are extremely low frequency, on the order of dozens to hundreds of herz. EM fields are usually unpolarized. However, Papius and his uncle had measured circularly polarized EM radiation apparently emanating from several Nazarenes.
processes of Cerebric communication or Cerebric manipulation, which seems to imply that the auditory cortex is involved somehow…”

“Gentlemen, please,” Deborah broke in, “You have no idea what you’ve asked Master O’Brien to do. He’s trying to simultaneously manipulate several objects. The force required is substantial and the tolerance very slight. Any error and the girl dies. Please keep your comments to yourselves.”

Papius took the advice to heart, as apparently did his Technocrat companion. They watched in silence as the minutes slipped by. Princess Dinah, plucked up the courage to come and see what was happening. She took in one glimpse, instantly became very pale, and backed away again averting her eyes. Eleanor’s hands were beginning to shake from the constant force necessary to hold open the wound. Papius whispered a suggestion into Terrance’s ear that he spell the tired girl. He immediately took her place.

Once or twice Papius thought that the surface of several of his patient’s organs appeared to flutter slightly, but he thought it could have been peristalsis or the breathing, or even the light playing tricks on his overtaxed eyes. Still, the Master continued his unwavering concentration, staring at the wound unblinking as if he could remove the arrow with his gaze alone. In time, he reached his hand to grasp the shaft of the arrow. He worked it ever-so-gently back and forth, the patient reacting beneath by slight groans and shudders. While he waited, feeling helpless, Papius replaced the polymer bag attached to his patient’s I.V. giving her a fourth unit of life-sustaining blood. Finally, with agonizing slowness and deliberation, the Master pulled the arrow directly from the rib as if he had been withdrawing a knife from a block of butter.

Papius found himself gasping and realized that he had been holding his breath as had Terrance and the rest of the party around the operating table. Master O’Brien completed the withdrawal of the arrow from the wound and held it above the table. He heard Terrance utter softly beside him, “If I hadn’t seen it, I wouldn’t have believed it.” The arrow head appeared to be chipped from obsidian, laboriously crafted, deadly beautiful, and impossibly sharp. Its construction explained both the easy penetration and the cleanness of the lacerations witnessed on the internal organs.

“Please close up, Terrance,” Papius requested of the Royal Physician, slightly inclining his head.

“No sir!” Terrance responded immediately, “This is your patient and your call. I’m man enough to admit when I’m in over my head, and abdominal puncture wounds are outside my experience. I would have given up on her a long time ago. If anyone is to save her, it will have to be you.”

“Great,” Papius thought, “Here we go again.” He jumped back into the operation, stiff fingers wielding the surgical tools needed to sew flesh, muscle and skin. Part of him wasn’t surprised at his companion’s reluctance. There was no “standard” way to perform abdominal surgery. You just had to keep at it and pray that you did a good enough job to keep secondary sepsis from setting in. He didn’t give himself the time for regrets. Moments counted.
Completing the sutures on one laceration after another that had previously been inaccessible due to the emplaced arrow, pulling suction on blood and other fluids that had leaked into the abdominal cavity using a hand pump that Miss Butler was now operating, and applying topical antibiotics, Papius knew that he was beyond the scope of his abilities. As he had occasionally done in such situations, he began to relinquish conscious control of his hands, allowing his unbridled intuition to select where and how to do the work necessary to keep his patient alive. He had always found the effect to be quite strange as he watched his fingers switch from gut thread to fine gold thread and from one stitching pattern to another apparently of their own accord, always seeming to find the ideal sites for sutures or the perfect position for suction.

Abstracting his conscious mind from his current work often made him uncomfortable, but never more than it did on this occasion. Calculations and projections were one thing, but he considered that giving up control when another’s life was at stake was borderline unethical. He resolved to stay as focused on the surgery as possible, which was a little difficult as his hands were working more swiftly now than they possibly could have if he had been attempting to control every aspect of the operation himself. The effect was mesmerizing.

Around him, elsewhere in the room, others did their best to assist. Arnold Beckman took Deborah’s place holding the lamp over the operation and allowing Deborah to accompany her Princess, now thoroughly overcome, from the room. A tall knight from the Order of St. Peter entered the small room, respectful, but not apparently concerned about the surgery taking place adjacent to him. He gave the customary salute to the Master by striking a closed and gauntleted hand across his chest, “I have been ordered to report to you, Master O’Brien concerning the search of the surrounding premises,” Papius noted that he continued without hesitation, “Three of us, with assistance from Mr. Nicholias Thiel of Pontus have made a thorough search of the grounds. We found three archers that had been hidden stealthily within view of the house. They had the appearance of and were armed as Hun Tzu assassins, a guise I consider genuine due to the great skill required for their successful attack. It appears that two of them shot steel arrows that shattered the great window while a third immediately loosed the third which made its mark.” Papius dared not avert his eyes to observe the expressions of the speakers. He did, however, listen closely.

“Do you have the perpetrators in custody?” Master O’Brien asked.

“The three suspected assassins were found a short distance away; they had apparently been in flight when they were overtaken by some unknown assailant. All three were dead with their necks broken. Whoever found them must have overpowered them with great speed. Him we did not find.”

“I’m not surprised, lad,” something worse than Hun Tsu was out this night. For a short time, I could feel disembodied wrath like a tangible force. Whatever was out there was very strange. The emotions were
something like the *Everto Nox* but deeper, more powerful, and more complicated. I could not identify the source,” the master stopped speaking. Papius could not tell by his expression. His vision was otherwise occupied as he focused on securing thread at the end of a suture.

“If we could not identify the nature of all the assailants, we believe we had greater success with their intended escape. A little more than a kilometer from the edge of Victoria Heights Park we found four horses secured stealthily in a small wood. Another man was there of unidentifiable nationality. He had apparently been charged with securing their escape. He was incapable of carrying out his charge. He had been killed in the same manner as the rest. The steeds are fine Victorian animals of mixed brands and they were fitted as if for a journey of some duration. We suspect that the assailants were intending flight to the interior of the Island.”

“You should send a blood sample to the University medical lab,” Terrance suggested, “Many of the races of Nova Terra have unique cytology and identification could be a simple matter of inspection. Otherwise, we have some simple kits we can run to identify unique SNPs.\(^3\) We should be able to have an identification for you in less than a week.”

“It has already been done,” the Knight responded. Papius heard the Knight salute once more to the Nazarene Master, concluding his report.

“What on Nova Terra was Nicolias doing out there?” Michelle blurted out as the Knight turned to leave. Uncomfortable silence followed. Papius found that his fingers were momentarily occupied rethreading a surgical needle, so he took the opportunity to look up. Master O’Brien was looking at Arnold Beckman with an eyebrow raised in inquiry.

“As the Nazarene Master is well aware, Nicholias Thiel is quite able to take care of himself,” Arnold answered with some reluctance. “He is, in fact, a founding member of the House of Beckman’s personal guard. His current employment to the King of Pontus serves as much in his capacity as a military advisor as a cultural liason and interpreter. This information is, of course, confidential. The Seleucids would consider it a hostile act if we supported the Kingdom of Pontus with military expertise. As such, I would ask you not to mention it again. I can vouch personally for his conduct.”

Papius was finishing the surgery. The final internal sutures had been completed, and his hands were now working with various antiseptics and antibiotics in an attempt to reduce the risk of secondary sepsis.

---

\(^3\) SNP stands for “Single Nucleotide Polymorphism” differences of single base pairs in the genetic code. In many cases, SNPs have no discernable effect on an individual’s health, but can be used as identifying markers. Early Technocrats were surprised to discover a substantial genetic heterogeneity among the peoples of Nova Terra ranging from unique SNPs and Indels (genetic insertions and deletions) to unique chromosome numbers and configurations. They postulated that this genetic variability was the origin of general infertility in marriages between members of different populations on Nova Terra.
“Interesting!” Terrance noted, the shorter man peering around Papius’ arm, “I see you’ve used a continuous running stitch throughout most of the surgery. That was an unusual choice. Why did you not use the Horizontal Mattress Stitch? It holds very well.”

“Terrance, I’ve never used the Horizontal Mattress Stitch in my life!” Papius responded with some feeling, “You’re the surgeon. I’m just a physicist who is well over his head. If you have way to help this girl, feel free to jump in. When it comes to surgery, I have no ego to protect!” Papius had spoken perhaps more strongly than he would have liked, but it had felt good. He could tell that the initial adrenaline rush had long since given way to cortisone, and even this was beginning to fail him after the stress of the day. Accessing, and especially maintaining, any heightened state of intuition had always been exhausting, and he was really feeling the lack of sleep the night before. His legs, abused from multiple rounds of ballistae practice had begun to shake. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could hold himself together. Fortunately, the surgery was almost done, only the final closing sutures of the various layers of muscle and flesh remained.

“It’s O.K. Papius,” he heard Terrance speak softly behind him, “You’ve done an amazing job – no, it’s more than that. You might even have saved her life. I can close up. Feel free to take a rest.”

Papius didn’t need to be told twice. He stepped back from the make-shift surgery table and turned away without a glance. He couldn’t look at the others around the table although he could feel their eyes upon him. Had he saved his patient? He didn’t know. He couldn’t think about it. He couldn’t think about anything. All he could feel was the oppressive, stifling heat and smell of the breakfast room. He needed to get out.

Pushing open the door of the breakfast room, unwashed hands depositing blood on the brass handle, Papius stepped into the richly decorated hall and felt a welcome blast of cool, comparatively clean air. He stood for a moment, blinking in the relative darkness, the bright lights of the surgical lamps fading behind him as the door closed. Somewhere in the background he could hear Terrance speaking to Eleanor, saying something about a brilliant example of improvised trauma surgery. The thoughts were no longer registering in his brain.

The hall contained several people. Princess Dinah was sitting on the carpet just to the right of the door with her back to the wall. In her hands she held the shaft of the arrow recently extracted from her friend, the same arrow that had been intended for her own person. Her eyes were staring blankly at the obsidian arrow head oblivious to his presence or anyone else in the hall. Protective and alert beside her sat her deaconess, eyes sharp enough for both of them. Papius suspected that she had a very good idea of what had transpired during the surgery. Nazarenes had an uncanny ability to stay abreast of occurrences that
interested them, and her Master had watched the whole. Papius turned to look at her with his dull, tired eyes and saw unveiled feeling and gratitude on her face.

Also in the hall, but to the left of the door, waited several of Dinah’s other friends. Margaret Qin and Randy Shields had been resting on the floor. Elijah Coombs was standing erect. Like Deborah he appeared to be actively scanning the hall, alert for any signs of a threat. Upon his entering the hallway, Margaret and Randy rose immediately to meet him. Margaret had obviously been crying. Randy looked even worse than Papius felt. They were both obviously in shock.

“Is Angel going to be all right?” the girl asked with a halting voice. Papius didn’t answer, and couldn’t meet her anxious eyes. He could only shrug his shoulders and look at the floor.

“Miss Robinson is in God’s hands,” Deborah’s rich, deep voice resonated from behind him, “Where she has always been.”

Randy stepped forward and grasped his arm in a familiar way. “You’re all right, Dr. Avonelle,” this time, Papius could not detect any hint of bitterness in his voice. He looked up into the taller man’s face and saw thankfulness mixed with a little awe. “You’re my first pick on any team.”

Papius felt his legs buckle and he found himself kneeling on the floor. All of a sudden the carpet looked very inviting; he decided to take advantage of its proximity. Falling forward he laid his head on the rich, red fabric and closed his eyes. Somewhere above him, people seemed to be speaking animatedly, but he paid them no mind. Taking a deep breath, he fell immediately asleep.

*****