

THE FIRST GODLING I:

XY: DESCENT

A

Legends, Myths, and Prophecies™

Novel

by

A.R.R. Ash

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PREFACE

After publishing *A Narrative History of Temporal Magic*, I took a much-needed sabbatical to rest and enjoy the success of the book. While deciding on my next topic of research, a newly published work by the young historiographer Charl Tanne (human) began receiving wide acclaim. Naturally, I was curious. However, what I found in the *Life and Times of Xy: A History* was more fiction than fact, more fairytale than biography. It was a self-serving account, lacking scientific rigor and filled with apocryphal accounts and fabricated narratives. It was an affront to the field of the historiography of magic, and it debased the work of real academics.

I had found my next project: I would investigate the life and true history of the enigmatic figure who was Xy.

Because extant, objective sources of his childhood and development are nonexistent, I was forced, for the majority of the tale, to rely upon the only contemporaneous records available: uncorroborated primary sources of dubious objectivity and factualness—the journal of Xy’s mentor, Mneris, and Xy’s own journal and memoir. Regarding the last, its earliest entries were written in hindsight and, thus, also subject to all the vagaries of memory. For events or occurrences not specifically addressed or referenced in these documents, I could avail of only hearsay, extrapolation, interpolation, speculation, and tertiary sources, though I essayed to limit such instances to those of necessity.

Of the primary sources, they are held by the Necralatrists, an organization of Black Necromancers who count Xy as their patron. I do not wish to say what I had to do to gain access to those documents. And even then, I could view them only under strict supervision and on the condition I not reveal any of their secrets. Specifically, in the case of some research notes, I was forbidden from including their contents. (Nevertheless, I believe the Necralatrists were impressed by my insistence that I would not impose upon this telling the moral judgments of other times and peoples.)

Let me comment on the language of the major sources for this work. Both Mneris and Xy spoke and wrote in Human, which, aside from some dialectic variance, has remained largely unchanged since their time. Thus, I was able to include the text in their own words, without the inevitable subjectivity introduced by translation. Where necessary, however, I provide expository notes to define archaic, obsolete, or vernacular terms and to give context or clarification to passages within the assorted documents. In instances where translation was required, as from source documents written in a language other than Human, I endeavored to maintain fidelity to the source document, save where transparency or comprehension would be impaired.

As a final note, in determining the authenticity of sources, I used one or more of four criteria: coherence, embarrassment, multiple attestation, and non-contradiction. Briefly, under the criterion of coherence, if information is consistent within a historical context, it is more likely to be accurate. The criterion of embarrassment holds that an author is not likely to include a piece of information if it reflects poorly on him; therefore, if he does include it, that information is more likely to be accurate. The criterion of multiple attestation states that, if information can be corroborated by multiple, independent sources, it is more likely to be accurate. According to the criterion of non-contradiction, if information is not contradicted by other, independent sources, it is more likely to be accurate.

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I would like to thank and acknowledge, foremost, the Necralatrists for making the source documents available. Without their generosity and cooperation, this project would not have been possible. I am also grateful to the government of Sepolis for access to their archives and assistance in locating documents thousands of years old. Lest I forget, I offer thanks and gratitude to my colleagues at the Mageion—specifically, Thoë of Xylopolis (elf), Aetheles the Magimetrician (human), Nax Stouthammer (dwarf), Mnymia the Magilogician (gnome)—for providing explanation and clarification on the finer points of Magiology and on the mechanics and workings of magic.

What you hold in your hands is the culmination of nearly half a career of work, of twenty years of toil, research, and sacrifice (more than you can imagine). Fittingly, it is set to be published on this 60th millennial anniversary of Xy's purported birth. Herein, you will know the truth, the full and accurate account of the life and times of Xy, the First Godling.

D'durk the Historiographer, Editor
Goblin Press
Magipolis, 2,500th Year of the Phoenix

INTRODUCTION:

HUMANITY OPPRESSED, HUMANITY DENIED

Many have heard of Xy. The First Godling. Champion of Undead. Sower of Intrigue. The myths surrounding this unique figure are many and varied. Many rightly question the veracity of these myths, and some indeed discount his existence. Of this second point, I can say, conclusively, Xy was very much real. What I endeavor to do here is provide a true accounting of his life—and beyond. However, this task was made all the more difficult because of the great passage of time and the fact that Xy was human.

Xy was born in the independent city-state Sepolis, situated within the Pelagean region of Eomluran, the eastern continent of the world Mluran. At the time of his birth, humanity was the youngest of the major races. Like all humans, Xy was unremarked by and unremarkable to historians—at least during his early years, until his power and infamy grew.

Consequently, of Xy's earliest years, I provide only an abridged account. Yet if Xy's memoirs are to be believed, he, from an early age, displayed precocious intelligence, curiosity, and ambition. Still, the real story of Xy begins with his fateful meeting with Mneris. Mneris the Grotesque. Mneris the Cancerous. Mneris the Putrid. Despite Xy's prodigiousness, without this crucial encounter, it is a near certainty that no one would have ever heard the name Xy. Because of the import of this meeting, I begin, after a brief recounting of Xy's childhood and upbringing, with both Xy's account (written years later) and Mneris's contemporaneous account.

EARLY YEARS

Xy's Memoir¹

I walked with my mother through the cracked, garbage-lined streets of Sepolis's Human District. It was a route we took every day, from our squalid, ramshackle shanty to the market, and back. The trip took us beyond the Human District to the Market District, where, if we were lucky, we would suffer no more than disdainful looks from the other races, or perhaps an uttered obscenity or insult (a favorite was *P'turik*, the goblinoid word referring to any rapidly proliferating insect). I didn't always understand the words, but the contempt and animosity in their tone and gestures were clear, even at my age.

On occasion, we'd encounter physical hostility, but my mother, tears smearing her dirt-smudged face, would put her head down and hurry us away. Sensing my fear, she'd squeeze my hand and whisper, "Xy, it's going to be a'right." Though she had no way of knowing it, I found that simple gesture immeasurably comforting. I did witness some humans defy their tormentors, but they were invariably beaten and left crumpled on the flagstones. Some I saw again; others I never did.

Humans were prohibited from setting up shop in the Market District. Most vendors would not sell to us, for if any were thought to be too kindly to humans, they'd find their stalls, in the morning, smashed and broken and, often, vandalized with the words "Human Lover." Those who risked selling to us reserved the better quality goods for non-humans and forced humans to wait until all non-humans had been served. Again, if Mother and I were fortunate, we'd leave the market with moldy bread and rotting vegetables, bought at exorbitant prices. If not, we'd be hungry. Despite such conditions and treatment, humans were the drudgers who performed the menial, undesirable tasks that often went unnoticed but which were integral and indispensable to the functioning of a city.

Even the high wall separating the Human District from the rest of the city provided little sanctuary for us. The guards at the single gate were there more to keep us in, rather than others out. Bands of thugs, either members of the Non-Human League or young ruffians needing an outlet for their cruelty, regularly came into our district to accost and beat us. More often than not, they attacked playing children or the elderly. Once, peering around the corner of an alley, I witnessed an ogre pummeling an old man. When the brute looked up and saw me, I ran home, fear driving my little legs faster than I thought they could move. It was just one incident among many, and I never told Mother or Father about it.

That's not to say the other races were without their conflicts, yet they all agreed on their contempt for humanity. As Sepolis had been established just over three centuries prior, some enduring members of the longer-lived races had been present at the city's founding. The houses of these earliest members formed the aristocracy of Sepolis. That they'd seen the birth of near twenty generations of humans undoubtedly caused them to see us as transitory, inconsequential beings. Yet, despite our shorter lifespans and shabby living conditions, our numbers grew, and others came to fear and hate us.

¹ This section is compiled from Xy's earliest memories, selected and edited to provide a sampling of his perception and recollections, and to depict the conditions into which he was born and raised.

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That fear and hatred—and, I believe, envy at our determination and perseverance—led to the establishment of the Non-Human League, which sought the eradication of all humans. It counted elves, dwarves, gnomes, goblins, ogres, and others among its members.² Although their actions were illegal, the watch—in which humans could not serve—never seemed capable of finding the culprits.

From time to time, a demagogue—called either *champion* or *incendiary*, depending on one's perspective—arose and argued for humans to resist our treatment. Such fomenters were invariably murdered before too many answered the call. Periodically, when either growing population or dwindling resources drove humans to riot, the resultant loss of human life left more subsistence for the survivors.³

A codger, whom we knew only as the Preacher, stood near the gate of the Human District and espoused the dogma of Syle, God of Suicide. The Preacher ranted about the holiness of self-death, exhorting every human undertake the ultimate journey to Arcadia, where food was plentiful, water flowed freely, the land was fertile and covered in grass and trees, and humans were the equals of others. However, one could reach Arcadia only by dying by one's own hand; any other manner of death would forever preclude one from reaching that realm. The watch tolerated his ravings, I'm sure, only because it was pleased by any doctrine espousing less humans. There were more than a few who accepted Syle's teachings and sought Arcadia. Many sons and daughters awoke to find a father or mother with an opened neck or wrist and a dull, rusty knife nearby.⁴

I admit, I myself felt the appeal of that dogma at times. But putting my faith in the hope of some later paradise seemed like capitulation and an acknowledgement that the other races were superior.

And that was something I could never accept.

Editor's Note

At this point, I think it opportune to insert a comment regarding Sepolis's structure, both physical and political. As Sepolis still stands (though its design has since much changed), I was able to obtain a magically preserved map of its contemporaneous layout from the city's archives. I have included a reproduction of the map in Appendix A.

Briefly, Sepolis was divided into nine districts: Dockside, Dwarven, Elven, Gnomish, Goblin, Highside, Human, Market, and Ogrish. The Market District was the hub around which all the others were situated. Highside, built atop a promontory known as Capitolian Hill, was the political center and the site of the Domocraceion the capitol and residence of the Politarch. A wall encircled the city, yet only the Human District and Highside were separated by a wall within. All the districts, save Highside and the Human District, had a gate to the outside. Except for the western end of the city, which touched upon the Pelagean, Sepolis was surrounded by farmland.

² The Non-Human League is still active upon Mluran, though it has lost much of its influence there.

³ Xy's depiction of life for the humans of Sepolis is corroborated by historical records of the time. See also *A Cultural, Economic, and Social History of Sepolis* by the renowned elven chronicler Älæra of Sepolis.

⁴ I would direct those interested in learning more of the Suicidal God's gospel to the *Book of Syle*.

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The city-state was ruled by five pentarchs, one each from among the dwarves, elves, gnomes, goblins, and ogres; humans were not permitted to serve in the government. The pentarchs served for five-year terms, staggered such that the term of only one pentarch ended each year. A Politarch, chosen by, and from among, the pentarchs, served as the head of the council for however long was the remainder of his term as pentarch.

FOURTEENTH YEAR OF THE BEHEMOTH

Xy's Memoir

*Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth*⁵

I think I was two and ten (we were too absorbed in daily tribulations to note such things⁶) when Mother found a gnomish merchant willing to exchange fresh fruit for mending a pair of tunics. However, Mother and Father had contracted a fever sickness and were temporarily too ill to travel. Still, they were reluctant to let me go alone to complete the exchange. But I insisted and assured them I was old enough to take care of myself. Mother gave a laugh, which ended in a spasm of coughing, but they eventually relented. Fresh fruit was just too enticing a luxury.

To my relief (despite what I told my parents, I held some trepidation about traveling alone), the trip to the Market District and the exchange occurred without incident, and I left the market with a sack of yanda melons. As I hurried back through the gate into the Human District, I glanced at the small, ovate, purple fruit and felt such excitement that, for once, the constant burden of life seemed to lift. Had I a knife to carve the thick rind, I would have eaten an entire melon before even leaving the market. The anticipation of a fresh melon caused the film of grime on the streets to fade from view and the stench of rancid refuse to pass unnoticed. Seeming to share my mood, the early autumnal breeze brought the bracing smell of brine from the Pelagean on its soothing breath.

The cloudless evening revealed the panoply of constellations in the crowded sky. Among those lights, I spied Phoenix, Dracosphinx, Kraken, Cerberus, Wyvern, Celphie. The eye of Drake glowed with an intensity outshining most others in the sky.⁷

Still gazing at the celestial lights, I allowed my intoxication over the melons to distract me. Though the streets of Sepolis may have felt different to me, not all shared that perception. A burly, hairy-knuckled fist struck my temple and sent me sprawling. The sack flew from my grasp, and the yanda melons thudded and cracked upon the filthy ground. My mind felt as if it

⁵ Because they were written retrospectively, Xy's earlier entries are less specific as to dates.

⁶ Because of the seeming maturity of Xy's behavior, many scholars believe he is older than he claims. Whether Xy was born near the end of the Thirteenth Tetracosiad or at the beginning of the Fourteenth remains unclear. The Necralatrists believe it is the latter, placing his birth in the Fourteenth Year of Phoenix, and so count fourteen as an auspicious number.

⁷ So many stars lit Mluran's night sky that it shone as if in perpetual twilight, never darker than a room well-lit by candles. Even during the day, many of those heavenly lights were clearly visible. Star charts of the period, for Mluran's northern hemisphere, note a marked brightening of the Drake's Eye. See Appendix C for a description of Sepolis's calendrical system.

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were dunked in water when two thick hands lifted me, and my vision was too blurry to immediately discern my attacker. He had the strong, sour odor of drink on his breath.

“Aye, this be th’un,” said the one holding me. “He be th’un we’s to thump.”

“Aye, I rec’nize ’im,” came another gruff voice.

At the time, my fear-clogged mind didn’t register their seeming expectation of my arrival. As my vision resolved, I first saw a thick, greasy, reddish-brown beard hanging in copious plaits over an ample belly. Glancing upward, I locked gazes with two glaring, stone-gray eyes under bushy eyebrows.

Those eyes flashed, and I felt myself hurtling through the air to land in a pile of the liquefying remains of food and human waste. My skin crawled from the cold, wet sensation of slime. Nearly retching, I coughed and spat to clear the putrid taste of the ooze from my mouth. Hearing the sound of coarse laughter, I looked up.

“Ye belong wit’ the rats. Ye humans rut jus’ like ’em and breed jus’ as quickly.” The second dwarf spat in my direction.

“They ’ave to; they don’t live long.” I don’t recall which said this, though they all bellowed a gravelly laugh.

I glanced about, seeking some route of escape, and my eyes alighted on the befouled melons across the street. A black swarm of crawling insects already fed on the sweet juice, and the disheartenment I experienced at their loss nearly overshadowed the fear at my predicament.

A third dwarf approached (or mayhaps it was the same one who threw me—who can tell one dwarf from another?). I don’t know what motivated me, but I heard myself ask, “Is it true there are no dwarven women? That dwarven men rut with boulders?”

The coming blow would’ve killed me, I’ve no doubt. My eyes were clenched shut, and I could hear his thick-soled boots stomping on the stone as he approached. A sudden rustling came from the surrounding garbage, followed by a rush of light pattering, then four raspy screams. The blow never fell.

When I opened my eyes, the four dwarves had disappeared, engulfed by a swarm of thousands of rats as if covered by writhing blankets. Many rats were crushed or thrown about, though the rest were relentless in their frenzy. The dwarves fought convulsively but couldn’t dislodge all their little, biting jaws. The screaming and struggling continued for minutes. Thinking about it now, I should have been horrified, should have fled, but I was entranced by the sight. The murine swarm moved, undulated, like the waves of the Pelagean, and it brought with it a noxious, sulfurous smell of death. Each creature was heedless of its own safety, but all were resolute and united in their objective.

It was beautiful.

So intent was I on observing the scene that I didn’t think to consider where they came from or why they attacked, until a short, black-cloaked form stepped toward me. By this time, the dwarves lay still and the remaining rats—yet thousands—dispersed into the ridgelike middens lining the street. The figure had his deep cowl pulled forward, hiding his face in shadow. I say “he” based on the manner of his gait and posture, though his size indicated a female.

“We must get these bodies from the street.” His voice—assuredly male—was high and scratchy.

Again, I should have run. Why would I trust this stranger? Yet, oddly, I was more curious than fearful. A thought came upon me suddenly, and I glanced up and down the street. No one

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had come to investigate or could be seen peering between ill-fitting shutters. Not that a lack of interest was surprising, as screams in the night were hardly uncommon in the Human District.

The stranger had already begun dragging one of the bodies to an abandoned, decrepit shack nearby. I gripped a corpse by its wrists, slid it around to point its head toward the shack, and shuffled backward. I stared at the remnants of its face and felt no revulsion. Save for its short, stocky build, the corpse was unrecognizable as a dwarf. Its eyes, nose, lips, ears, and most of the flesh of its face were gone. It resembled a flank of raw meat.

Despite the coolness of the evening, I was sweating by the time I dragged the second corpse into the shack.

A surge of thousands of pattering, clicking claws sounded again as the rats, like a living, squirming carpet, streamed into the structure. Yet something about their appearance—to say nothing of their behavior—struck me as unusual. I examined the crushed remains of one. Its black fur was patchy, and its ribs were visible through a hole in its side. It had no eyes, and the skin and fur around its jaws were missing. I dropped the specimen and found another, which also appeared rotted. I thought it unlikely that this condition was caused solely by their encounter with the dwarves.

I turned toward the stranger and, though I still couldn't see his expression, I was sure he was watching me.

Before I could inquire about the rats, he said, "Later. If you want to understand, come with me."

I did. I followed him down the twisting, narrow streets of the Human District, in a direction away from my house. No matter how many times I thought I should run home, I continued after him. We arrived at a cottage, which, by the standards of the Human District, was fair-sized and in relatively good repair. Like all structures of the district, it was made of wood, though the boards were flush and the door hung straight.

Inside were actual walled rooms, rather than hanging curtains to offer separation; the doors to these two other rooms were closed. The entrance room contained simple furnishings, hanging cookware, and a hearth.

The stranger closed the door behind me, though he didn't fasten the latch, then he drew back his hood. Only later would I notice his slicked-back hair, or how his amber eyes complemented his dark brown skin. At the time, my eyes were drawn to other features of his face: an assortment of blisters, boils, papules, and patches of rashy skin—these were of a number and severity uncommon even among the wanting hygiene of the Human District. If he was bothered by my staring, he didn't show it. Indeed, I thought I saw the slight curve of a smile, as if he enjoyed the reaction.

He spoke first. "Many twice your age have not so mastered their reactions. They fear that I have leprosy, and grown men react in disgust and horror at the sight of me. But, I assure you, my condition is not contagious."

I admit, I did consider hurling the door open and running into the street. But as with the rats, I was more curious than afraid.

"I regret the loss of your melons. I know how important such extravagances are." He withdrew a pouch from his cloak. "I have no melons—or fruit of any kind—to give you. But perhaps you could purchase more." He turned the pouch over an upturned palm. Coins jingled as they tumbled out, and he seemed to consider them for a moment. He handed me three obols.

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That was far more than the value of the melons. It was more money than I'd seen all together in my life. Of everything I'd seen and experienced that evening, this act of generosity was the most surprising and peculiar, and it made me the most suspicious.

He must have understood my hesitance, for he said, "It is yours, with no obligation. I wish only to discuss a bargain with you. But however you decide, the coins are yours."

I took the coins, whose obverse showed a stylized depiction of Sepolis. Wanting to reassure myself of their existence, I kept them clenched in my fist.

He smiled. While he had all his teeth, they were yellowed, and his gums bled. "I am Mneris."

"Xy."

He nodded. "Your mother works at the Domocraceion."

He wasn't asking. I nodded slowly. Of all the oddities, that he should know where my mother worked seemed a trivial thing.

"The Politarch has in his library a book, the *Cyclopædia of Magical Flora and Fauna of Eomluran* by Ptarn the Biotamagiologist. Steal for me this book and you can have this." He held up the still-bulging pouch.

I stared at the pouch, thinking of all I could purchase with that money: properly-fitting clothing, a blanket free of fleas, freshly butchered meat or baked bread, fine tools for my father, even some baubles for Mother. "What does the book look like?"

"Ah, yes, of course. You cannot read. The book is leather-bound, with a red binding, and approximately this size." He spaced his hands apart to show the dimensions of the book. "The title is written in lettering formed of leafy vines. The cover depicts a menagerie of magical beasts and plants: a dryad, nymph, fey dragon, chameleon shrub, basilisk, unicorn, melia—a sentient tree."

I listened to his description, then thought of the vendors at the market and their boundless bigotry. No matter how much money we had, we'd always be *just humans*. As much as I wanted—needed—that coin, it would make little long-term difference in our lives. I wanted something that would provide me benefit, give me advantage, regardless of the opinion of the other races.

"I want you to teach me to read."

Mneris cocked his head and seemed to look at me for the first time. He didn't answer immediately and continued to scrutinize me. "Very well. Bring me the book and I will teach you to read."

I gave a single, brisk nod, and he returned a measured one to acknowledge the agreement.

Mneris's Journal

Sixth Day, First Tredecim, Estivalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

Master Thaluin Silvergnome's Emporium of Tomes, Scrolls, and All Things
Written—so read the sign over the warehouse-sized structure.

"Master Mneris." A solicitous gnome in a flowing white toga gave a slight bow as he opened the door.

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I nodded in thanks as I passed. I will credit these mercantile gnomes⁸ with one thing: they did not discriminate where profit was to be made. My appearance, my race, whence my money came mattered not at all if I was willing to part with coin.

The front door opened into a cavernous, three-tiered room, lined with book-stuffed shelves and smelling of musty paper. The interior was crowded with tables and more shelving; every available surface was covered by collections of the written word. Stacks of tomes rose from the floor like literary stalagmites; mounds of texts resembled papyraceous cairns. Somehow, however, the bustling merchants never failed to find what was sought.

I inquired of a bespectacled clerk where I might find Thaluin and was offered only the reply, “Among the genealogical section,” accompanied by a vague wave of the hand. He never looked up from his cataloguing.

Making my way deeper among the mazelike interior, I made the same inquiry of a gnomish female carrying a precarious stack of books. She directed me to the philosophical corner. My patience dwindled, but I could only huff and continue my search. Among the piles and shelves, I noted some titles—*Enchiridion of Practicable Magic* and *Librum Magika*—that, under other circumstances, would have brought me pause. But I was singular in my desideratum.

Ultimately, I stumbled upon Thaluin, quite by accident, among shelves housing tales of mundanity.⁹

“Ah, Master Mneris, a pleasure.” Hseemed surprised—or, perhaps, disconcerted—to see me, yet the ingratiating smile never left his face.

“Good day, Master Thaluin.” I paused, expecting him to know what brought me.

“How may I serve?”

“You were to have received the tome this day—the *Cyclopædia of Magical Flora and Fauna of Eomluran*.”

His smile disappeared for just a blink, then reasserted itself. “Ah, yes, well...” He wrung his hands in the folds of his red toga.

I narrowed my eyes.

“My grandest apologies, Master Mneris. Politarch Myryn Yr Nuln Windleaf requested that selfsame tome.”

“It was promised to me,” I growled, fighting the desire to wither the skin from his face.

Despite his continuing, infuriating smile, he raised an eyebrow, as if to ask, “What would you have had me do?” He offered, “Ten percent off anything else you want—oh, other than any of the spellbooks, or the new arrivals. Ah, oh, or anything...”

I walked away before anything irrevocable occurred.

Third Day, First Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

For tredecims, I have observed those who came and went from Highside. As a human, I could not enter the district without a letter of passage displaying an official seal, and the Domocraceion itself was magically warded against most types of intrusion, including by many forms of undead. Unobtrusive as they are, my servitor rats could gain entrance to the structure but proved ineffective in stealing the tome. The rodents could enter through any of the cracks in

⁸ A commercially minded subspecies of that inquisitive and industrious race.

⁹ That fictional genre concerning fantastical worlds in which magic does not exist.

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the stonework, or through a cesspit opening into the apedron,¹⁰ though none of these routes allowed for the transport of the book. As for my ravens, the few windows in the Domocraceion were set with glass, and the slats in the grillwork were too small, also preventing access by the birds.

The creatures were, however, far more effective in following the humans who served as maidservants and manservants for the noble residents of the district. Through scurrying and soaring eyes, I vicariously watched from afar every human coming and going from the Domocraceion, followed them back to their homes and again to Highside in the mornings. I have learned which domestics had access to the library and studied them to discover any avenues of coercion or blackmail.

I did consider extorting or blackmailing a non-human in employ at the Domocraceion, I decided the benefit of their increased access and freedom of movement was outweighed by the increased likelihood of my discovery. With other humans, I had little fear that they would go to the authorities, and even if they did they were unlikely to find those authorities particularly helpful. A non-human, however, would far more readily seek the aid of the watch and would receive a far more receptive ear. The government would tolerate no human gaining such power as I have and would bring the force of its apparatus against me.

Eighth Day, First Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

I bribed a laundress to filch the book.

Tenth Day, First Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

The laundress was too fearful to complete the task. When her husband discovered the coin I had given her, my raven overheard her confession and their conspiracy to reveal my interest in the book to the authorities for further gain. Despite my assumptions about the reception they would receive, I determined not to take undue risks, and I eliminated them both before she could implicate me. The authorities will hardly notice, let alone be troubled by, two more missing humans.

I have turned my attention to a footman of the Politarch.

Thirteenth Day, First Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

I abducted the daughter of the footman to compel him.

Fifth Day, Second Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

The footman decided he was better off with one less mouth to feed. Even when I sent him his daughter's finger, he would not be moved. I will return his daughter to him, as I think this the most fitting punishment for his refusal.¹¹

Seventh Day, Second Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

I shift my attention to a cleaner in service to the Politarch.

Ninth Day, Second Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

¹⁰ Latrine or privy.

¹¹ As no records were kept at the time of crimes committed by humans against humans, it was impossible, even if the crimes had been reported, to confirm Mneris's use of such tactics.

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I have learned the cleaner's name is Helora, and she has a husband Tsurik and a son Xy. As Helora seems to genuinely care for her son, I considered forcing her cooperation through him. However, given my previous experience with that tack, I decided against it; love can quickly turn to apathy or even filicide when circumstances become sufficiently dire. As Tsurik works as an assistant to an elven chandler, his occupation is not useful for my purpose.

Rather, I have settled upon another course: I will enlist the child as my thief.

Twelfth Day, Second Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

By his behavior, Xy seems to be in mid-adolescence, though he appears younger: scrawny, ungainly, with shaggy red-blond hair, cut short and uneven. A boy of that age would not be so deterred by fear and would not be difficult to manipulate. The question left to me is: How best to approach him?

I have set one raven to follow Helora, and one Xy.

Fifth Day, Third Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

Some monger has agreed to a barter with Helora, and the makings of a plan form in my mind. If Xy were sent alone to complete the exchange, and some danger were to befall him, it would serve as the perfect opportunity to insinuate myself. Preventing Helora and Tsurik from accompanying Xy would be a simple matter; a verminous bite, ridden with disease, would incapacitate them. Yet I must avoid permanent harm to Helora, as she is the key to accessing the Domocraceion.

Seventh Day, Third Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

The time of the exchange has been set for two days hence. I dispatched rats to deliver their diseased bites. Next, I called upon the Drunken Dwarf, a drinking house which catered to the meanest and surliest of that already crude race. Despite my dark cloak and drawn hood, my stature—taller than the shorter races, broader than an elf, and far less bulky than an ogre—readily revealed my human heritage. I received many challenging looks, but my presence was not unknown in the disreputable neighborhoods of the Dwarven District. Over the years, I have many times availed of the services of those who were none-too-discerning in how they earned coin. And I paid well.

The Drunken Dwarf was a squat, one-story structure that leaned slightly to one side, seeming to remain upright by will alone—in that way, it very much resembled its namesake. Above the door swung a sign depicting a dwarf lying on his back, his upstretched arm pouring the contents of a mug into his waiting mouth. Even at my shorter-than-average height for a human, I had to crouch to pass within.

My entrance caused such utter silence to fall over the common room that I would have thought myself struck deaf, if not for the sound of chairs scraping across the sticky floor.

“A round for the house.” I flipped a quarter-obol to the taverner. That seemed to appease the boorish dwarves, though I knew it would last for only as long as they took to finish their drinks—not long at all.

Unlike most adult men, I was able to stand upright in the common room. Still, I had to duck beneath the heavy beams that spanned the ceiling every few paces. The smoky and stale atmosphere rivaled that of any alehouse of the Human District. I made my way to a lopsided table, my boots squishing in the urine, blood, and beer—among other likely liquids—that coated the moldering floorboards.

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At the table sat four rowdy dwarves, each with a tankard in hand and near two dozen empty mugs before them. Despite their excited conversation, they turned as one toward me.

“What is it be you want, human?” one asked, his mouth, but not his contempt, hidden behind his red-orange beard. Beer dripped from the explosion of hair on his face. He spat.

These four were gutter dwarves; even among the dregs of the dwarven race, these were the lowest—unwashed, uneducated, degenerate. Still, among non-humans, such creatures were counted above humanity.

“Nothing you would not do anyway.” I opened my cloak to reveal a weighty purse. Their unfocused eyes lit, and I prepared myself for an attack. They would not find me defenseless. But they did not aggress. I had hired these four before, and perhaps they saw more use for me as a steady source of income.

“Well?” asked another, unleashing such a belch that, had the walls been painted, it would have peeled a coat right off. I fought to keep from gagging.

“Two nights from now, a human boy will be returning alone from the market. You need only attack him.”

Their bleary-eyed expressions become even more vacant, as if their ale-addled minds searched for a trick.

“That is all,” I confirmed. I described Xy and emphasized a crucial point: “Do not kill him. You need only make him fear for his life.” Placing the pouch on the table, I added, “And another when the job is done.”

All four reached for the pouch. Within moments, the table was overturned, shattering mugs on the floor, and the dwarves rolled around after the scattered coins in a punching, kicking, and biting heap. I noticed others in the establishment who looked at me with no less hostility and at the gold with no less avarice.

I left in haste.

Ninth Day, Third Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

Xy was alone when he left his house. My raven followed him as he made his way to the market, then trailed him as he returned. Another raven kept watch over the dwarves. I had made another visit to the Drunken Dwarf the night before to ensure they had not forgotten our arrangement.

As Xy neared the waiting dwarves, I felt my heart rate quicken in anticipation. I would have to be ready to intervene. Xy seemed very much the child, looking wide-eyed at the sky and seeming oblivious to his surroundings. The blow that took him unawares nearly made me wince. The boy went down in a dazed heap but, despite his obvious fear, did not cry or beg. To the contrary, once regained of his senses, he hurled an insult at the dwarves. I caught myself smiling in strange, unexpected pride at the boy’s courage, but I quickly pushed that thought aside. The dwarf would kill him if I did not act; I had not counted on Xy’s provoking them.

The dwarves had proved useful before, and I had not intended to kill them. However, enraged as they were, I knew they would not willingly abandon their prey. I unleashed my army of undead rats, which overwhelmed the rock-fuckers with thousands of tiny teeth and claws. The dwarves were fortunate in their deaths; had any escaped, their deaths would have been far more excruciating from the myriad diseases carried by the creatures.

I dismissed the rats and stepped forward. “We must move these bodies from the street.”

Xy continued to surprise me: He showed no fear of the rats or at my presence, but seemed detached and curious. As I dragged a body—dwarves have a compact but dense structure,

Xy: Descent

making them much heavier than they appear—I glimpsed the boy examining the murine remains. Breathing heavily from the exertion, I searched the corpses and retrieved any coin, before unleashing the rats to devour the remains.

I admit, Xy's reactions had surprised—and impressed—me, yet I could use his curiosity to my advantage. "Follow me if you want to understand."

He did, and I led him to my home in the even squalider section of the Human District known as the Rats' Nest—an endless supply of soldiers for my verminous army. Once within, I lowered my cowl and gauged his reaction to my appearance. Again, I credit the boy for his calm, and I told him as much.

"I have none to give you, but allow me to purchase you more melons—or any other fruit you desire." I offered him some coin and, by his reaction, I feared I overstepped, raising his suspicions. Generosity and kindness were rarities in the Human District. I quickly tried to reassure him. "They come with no obligation."

He took the coins and held them so tightly until his knuckles whitened.

"I am Mneris. I wish to make you a bargain. Yet those are yours, whether we strike a deal or no." I related my desire that he steal the *Cyclopædia* from the Politarch and offered him what amounted to a fortune for one of his perspective. His response was one I did not anticipate, would never have imagined: He wanted to learn to read. Despite myself, I was impressed and agreed to the bargain. I had intended to kill him once I had the tome; still, although I cannot say if I will uphold my end, one of his astuteness may prove useful.¹²

Xy's Memoir

Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

Mother and Father remained ill for days. Moaning in delirium, they shivered and sweat, filling our shanty with the stale air of sickness. This recalled to me how, shortly after her birth, my younger sister had wasted away over the course of just a few tredecims.¹³ It wasn't uncommon for our neighbors to contract some disease and never recover; so as the days stretched, my concern grew. Still, though they didn't seem to improve, neither did their condition worsen.

Fortunately, with the obols given me by Mneris, I was able to procure eggs and bread and a thick black beer said to aid in convalescence. I'd spent a quarter-obol on the earlier goods and occupied my time—and my mind to keep from worry—imagining how pleased they'd be to see the remaining coin. I thought about all the opportunities that would arise once I learned to read. It wasn't illegal, but any literate human, as if trying to rise above our station, was even more stigmatized by the other races.

And I dwelled on my meeting of Mneris. Strangely, the attack itself by the dwarves hardly rose in my thoughts; almost like an event that had occurred to someone else, it seemed

¹² You will note some small differences in the details of Mneris's and Xy's accounts of their meeting, though they agree on the relevant facts. Because of the contemporaneity of Mneris's journal, I am inclined to give his account more credence.

¹³ This is the only reference I have found to any sibling of Xy. Even he never again mentions her in his memoir or later journals. And given the hardships of life in the Human District, it is unsurprising that there is no record of the death of an anonymous human child.

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like an afterthought, a passing occurrence that held no lasting significance. What did occupy my musings, however, was my rescue. Mneris had never admitted responsibility for the savior rats, though he must have controlled them through magic. And the practice of magic by humans was illegal and punished with execution. He took a great risk even revealing that much to me. I could picture his ravaged face, yet what stood clearer in my mind was his calm when faced with four homicidal dwarves. How did he come by such power? And such coin?

A few days after the incident, a contingent of the city watch, led by a hulking ogre carrying a steel-banded club, came to the Human District looking for the missing dwarves. Humans go missing regularly, and the watch never sends such a force to find them. Unsurprisingly, no one knew anything about the dwarves.

Finally, my parents' fever broke. They smelled strongly of the musky odor of perspiration and the sour stench of vomit; their hair was matted and their garments stained from dried sweat. Mother and Father were so ravenous that they didn't initially think to ask where the food and drink came from.

When I showed them the coin, Father asked, "Who'd ya steal it from?" He was more concerned than excited, as if frightened someone would come seeking its return.

"I found it on some dead dwarves." The lie didn't sit well with me, but I wasn't prepared to tell them of the attack and of Mneris's generosity. They wouldn't understand, and I didn't want to have to justify my choices.

"Dead dwarves? Where?" Mother was horrified, likely that I'd be associated with their deaths.

They questioned me incessantly, incapable of believing that whoever had killed the dwarves didn't empty their pockets. Yet this was easier to believe than the truth: that I was saved by a stranger and given the coin free of obligation.

Within a day, Mother and Father were eager to return to work. Had it not been for the coin, I'm sure they wouldn't have waited even the day, having gone so long without wages. After their initial surprise and concern over the money faded, however, and when no one came to claim it, they accepted the good fortune and even took small comfort in it.

"Mother." I sat beside her on the straw pallet the night after her recovery. "I want to work."

"Your father'll take you as an apprentice next Estivalis."

"I want to work at the Domocraceion with you."

She looked at me for several moments. I prepared my arguments to persuade her.

But she nodded. "I'll see if there's work you can do. But only until you begin your apprenticeship with your father."

I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her cheek.

When Mother returned the next night, she told me that the majordomo of the Politarch said they had no need of additional help at the moment. I was crestfallen, thinking only that I would lose my opportunity to learn to read.

Mneris's Journal

Second Day, Fourth Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

Xy: Descent

Through the raven perched outside the window of Xy's hovel, I heard Helora tell the boy that he would not be given work at the Domocraceion. Then I would create a vacancy, or as many as needed, until Xy gained a position.

Sixth Day, Fourth Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

She was a scrubwoman. Young and attractive—a small, round birthmark decorated her throat—she seemed to be on the cusp of womanhood, while retaining an innocence of expression. That she remained unjaded while living among the realities of being human in Sepolis was remarkable and captivating.

And she presented the ideal opportunity: I would make of her another concubine and create a vacancy for Xy. To preserve her features unmarred, poison would serve best. Favoring *grith*,¹⁴ she often stopped by an ogreish vendor along the edge of the market nearest the Human District.

“Greeting, Dorin,” the brute would say in his crude, oafish accent with a foolish, tusk smile whenever she called upon his booth. If I considered him a threat or impediment to my efforts in any way, he would die. As it was, she would be mine soon enough.

Seventh Day, Fourth Tredecim, Autumnalis, Fourteenth Year of the Behemoth

The corporeal component for the spell was straightforward: a sample of the beverage to be poisoned. A raven followed her progress from Highside. The sun had set, leaving the market bathed in stellar light, and many of the vendors had packed their wares. I loitered nearby, beside a booth usually occupied by a furrier, whose trade thrived due to the coming of Metautumnalis. I was near enough to see the spittle collect on the tip of the ogre's tusk when she appeared around a turn, between two wooden stands. Perhaps I would kill him anyway.

As expected, Dorin stopped for a mug of *grith*. I placed my own cup of the beverage on the ground, then sounded the syllables that would turn her drink into a lethal mixture. The casting required mere seconds, and, when completed, my cup was empty.

Dorin paid for her *grith* with a smile and a few words, then moved off, drinking her beverage as she walked. I followed. We passed into the Human District, and the haughty elven guards gave us the same disdainful appraisal but said nothing. Within blocks of the gate, Dorin began to cough. She doubled over, coughing more violently, before falling to her hands and knees and vomiting blood. Her body spasmed, and she fell over, still.

I stood over her, looking to the whites of her eyes, which had rolled back to hide the liquid brown irises. A shudder of excitement, as I had not felt in some time, shook my body; although my appearance is one of decrepitude, my body is yet vigorous. I placed an arm under her legs and another beneath her neck, lifting her slight form from the ground, and began toward home.

¹⁴ A gray tea and yellowberry beverage, most commonly consumed during the colder seasons.

APPENDIX C: CALENDAR

Mluran has three moons, but they are so distant and small that they are often lost among all the other lights in the night sky. Because of the difficulty in tracking the moons, they are rarely used to define temporal periods. Consequently, most calendrical systems of Mluran use a time scale based on the solar year.

Overview

Sepolis counts its years from the city's founding, beginning with the First Year of the Phoenix. Years are named for one of twenty-four constellations (see below), and each occurrence of a particular constellatory year is numbered sequentially, as in the Fifth Year of the Wyvern. Each twenty-four-year cycle is known as a Tetracosiad (or sometimes as an Icositetrad).

The New Year is marked by the first day of Metautumnalis. A solar year comprises approximately 416 days, corresponding to roughly fifty-two days per season (see below). The seasons are divided into four thirteen-day periods, called tredecims. The days of the tredecim are not named, and the numbering of the days of each tredecim begins at one.

However, because the solar year does not have a whole number of days, an intercalary tredecim, known as an epagomenos, is inserted between the end of one Tetracosiad and the start of the next. This added tredecim is a time of great celebration to mark the start of a new Tetracosiad.

Seasons

Like most cities of Eomluran, Sepolis recognizes eight seasons. Estivalis and Hibernalis begin on the solstices, and Vernalis and Autumnalis begin on the equinoxes, though the exact start date for each season changes slightly from year to year. A harvest festival is held at the start of Metautumnalis to celebrate the New Year, and smaller fetes are held on each equinox and solstice. Though not so in Sepolis, some locales hold fetes at the start of Prevernalis and Serotinalis as well.

The following table lists the seasons of Eomluran.

Season	Adjectival Form	Modern Equivalent	Description (Major Activities and Occurrences)
Metautumnalis	Metautumnal	High autumn	New Year; farmers hold harvest festival; leaves begin to fall; birds begin their hibernal migration
Hibernalis	Hibernal	Winter	Equinox; farmers repair equipment; most leaves have fallen and begun to decay; birds reach hibernal habitat
Hiemalis (Bathohibernalis)	Hiemal (Bathohibernal)	Deep winter	Farmers plan for next growing season; trees are leafless; birds reside in hibernal habitat
Prevernalis	Prevernal	Early spring	Farmers till fields and prepare for planting; trees sprout foliaceous shoots; birds return from hibernal migration
Vernalis	Vernal	Spring	Solstice; farmers plant crops; leaves take shape; birds nidificate and mate

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Season	Adjectival Form	Modern Equivalent	Description (Major Activities and Occurrences)
Estivalis	Estival	Summer	Equinox; farmers care for crops and remove weeds and pests; leaves grow fully; eggs hatch, chicks are born
Serotinalis	Serotinal	Late summer	Farmers prepare for harvesting; leaves begin to fade from green; chicks mature
Autumnalis	Autumnal	Autumn	Solstice; farmers harvest crops; leaves fully change color; birds prepare for hibernal migration

Constellations

The twenty-four recognized constellations, in order within the Tetracosiad, are:

- Phoenix—A flaming bird portrayed with wings displayed and elevated.
- Amphisbæna—A dragon-like creature with a head at either end.
- Kraken—An enormous squid.
- Hydra—A tricephalic (three-headed) dragon.
- Roc—An enormous horned bird.
- Ouroboros—A serpent swallowing its own tail.
- Cyclops—A monocular giant.
- Pegasus—A winged horse.
- Dracosphinx—A leonine dragon.
- Leviathan—A selachian (shark-like) dragon.
- Salamander—A fire lizard.
- Drake—A bipedal dragon.
- Behemoth—A cetacean (whale-like) dragon.
- Unicorn—A single-horned horse.
- Wyvern—An aquiline dragon.
- Cerastes—A large, horned snake.
- Zaratan—A chelonian dragon; also known as a dragon turtle.
- Celphie—A hexapedal (six-legged) bull.
- Cerberus—A tricephalic (three-headed) dog.
- Ahthuin Gnomegod—God of gnomes.
- Drakhar—God of dwarves.
- Lythaläl—God of elves.
- The Ogre God—God of ogres.
- Ghorkht—God of goblins.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

D'durk var Thrag'gath vith Turkhat vin Khutakh (goblin) earned his Core Degree at the New Magiceum and his First through Fourth Order degrees in the historiography of magic from the College of History at the Twin Universities, where he studied under Rulara of Gnopolis (göbelin), the great historian of magic herself. The disquisition for his First Order degree was on the contributions of goblinkind to the understanding of magic, and each disquisition for his three higher order degrees centered on the development of one of the three Advanced Schools of the Standard Model of Magical Manipulation.

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