

# SESSIONS 10/11: A QUANDARY ON CASTROVEL

A summary of Sessions Ten and Eleven of *Empyrean Skylark*. "**George Aroden**," our Envoy and Leader, is played by Rog. "**Brelkith Bonebreaker**," our Soldier and Big Guy, is played by Travis. "**Thresca**," our Technomancer and Smart Guy, is played by Blake T. "**Flicker II**," our Mechanic and awesomely awkward Chick, is played by Fweeba/Joe. "**Thysella Tethris a.k.a. Thys a.k.a. Codename: Jack**" is our free-spirited Pilot and Lancer, played by Velvet. This summary includes in-session and inter-session play.

## Previously, on *Empyrean Skylark*...

The team had recovered an artifact carrying the trapped and disembodied soul of a former Starfinder Captain, a Solarian named Yanak, during their adventures on Akiton. Now that the time had come to lay him to rest among his Kasatha people on the worldship *Idari*, the team had found themselves recruited to participate in his funerary rites as representatives of the Society to which he'd given his life. And they had also been recruited to bring with them certain items important to the rites, or to emphasizing Yanak's life, interests and legacy.

They arrived on Castrovel in search of the most important piece of this puzzle: an ancient proto-Solarian artifact called the *Orrery of Tranquil Harmony*. It turned out their contact, a Xenodruid named K'Zan, had a further wrinkle to introduce: he didn't have the Orrery, but knew where it was. More than that, he knew of Thresca's disastrous attempt more than a year earlier to cure a Gap-related neural syndrome using something called the Tranquility Implant. In point of fact he had lost a spiritual "sister" of his order, D'Vesh, to that experiment. K'Zan introduced the team to his mentor, Ke Amoru, an aphasic invalid who he told them suffered from the disease Thresca had striven to cure, called Nebular Syndrome.

The Xenodruid proposed that in conjunction with a rare fungal extract to be found in a specific region, the power of the Orrery could be the X-factor that would make Thresca's Tranquility Implant – of which he'd produced his own replica – viable. The Orrery would need retrieving from its current site at the ancient ruined Temple of Magdh, but the payoff might just be curing an illness that afflicted countless thousands across the galaxy. To sweeten the deal, there were certain precious ancient artifacts at the Temple which the team would have his permission to resell.

The enterprise had already proved complicated. The team found themselves wading into the midst of a fraught and violent political conflict between a ruthless corporation and its Hellknight security team and a desperate guerilla faction, the Children of Magdh, who were not averse to enlisting the very wildlife in their struggle and who were, incidentally, the only available guides to the Temple.

That wasn't all. The Temple lay in quite possibly the most hostile environment on Castrovel, the Ocean of Mists. A friendly contact among the Children of Magdh, a guerilla commander named Mantis, had gone on ahead to prepare the ground for their expedition. The Starfinders now prepared to follow him.

## People & Places, Creatures & Artifacts.

MAGDH, CHILDREN OF: A radical guerilla organization battling corporate exploitation  
MAGDH, TEMPLE OF: An ancient temple in the Ocean of Mists  
KAORA (M Lashunta), a guerilla fighter for the Children of Magdh  
MANTIS, anonymous commander of the Children of Magdh, thought to be a Lashunta

THE RIFT, a vast canyon system shrouded beneath the Ocean of Mists  
TESH-KI A.K.A. THE ONES BELOW, an advanced and mysterious aquatic race that dwells beneath the lakes and rivers of the Rift  
MISTCALLERS, a winged predator in the Ocean of Mists that sometimes forms up into vast feeding frenzies called Choirs  
USH-MAL, bioluminescent organisms halfway between algae and plankton that form a basic part of the food chain in the Ocean of Mists

SEVEN CITIES COALITION: Coastal region in central Asana on Castrovel  
TANTIS RESOURCES, INC.: A corporation operating in the Seven Cities region  
SORUMAR: A vast plantation estate run by Tantis Resources  
JAGAN BRYSE (M Catfolk), Director of Operations at Sorumar

ORDO MALLEUS: A Hellknight Order employed as mercenaries by Tantis Resources  
OMS *GRIGON*: A ship crewed by a small team of senior Ordo Malleus Hellknights who also function as Jagan Bryse's senior security officers  
NEZADON VARRUS (M Human Soldier), Captain of the *Grigon*  
ILASH DASS (M Lashunta Envoy)  
OPHIR "O.K." KUTHAN (M Human Mechanic)  
KOLOSS (Ophir Kuthan's combat drone)  
BEATA FALCO (F Human Mystic)  
ARTICLE- 13 (N-B Android Operative)

ORRERY OF TRANQUIL HARMONY, an ancient proto-Solarian artifact  
NEBULAR SYNDROME, a degenerative neural disease connected in some way to the Gap  
TRANQUILITY IMPLANT, a hybrid technology that was meant to cure Nebular Syndrome  
K'ZAN, a Xenodruid of the Therian Order and the team's primary contact on Castrovel  
D'VESH, a fellow Xenodruid of K'Zan's who died while testing the Tranquility Implant  
KE AMORU, a former Xenodruid, mentor to K'Zan and sufferer of a neural condition

## Part Seven: The Long Descent into the Mists.

The team had a guide from the Children of Magdh named Kaora, a guerilla who had been part of an attack at the central mansion of Sorumar and whose life they had managed to spare.

The Team's new cover story was not the “fact-finding mission” they had supposedly been here to do; it was now a request from Jagan Bryse himself to try to “calm things down” short-term with the Children of Magdh while he mustered his forces to crush them. Kaora was noticeably reticent about his role in all this but he held up his end, counselling a night-time descent to avoid unwanted outside attention to the finer details of their movements.

Tactically sound though the plan was, it was misery in practice. The hike down into the Mists was two solid hours on a steep, slick switchback trail in patch darkness with virtually zero visibility – thanks to the gathering mists – even for those who had darkvision or low-light vision. Most everyone on the team fell more than once, save Flicker II and Kaora, and even though there were minimal injuries or loss of equipment (Thresca lost a box of scattergun shells but nothing more, thanks to Flicker's timely intervention, and Thys broke her sniper rifle), they were mud-spattered and exhausted by the time they reached the floor of the Rift.

Here they rested on the shores of a large river – fed by nearby falls whose roar could be clearly heard -- while Kaora performed some kind of rite of offering. After an hour or so they launched out onto the river in a small patrol boat as caustic rains came searing down upon them. Between huddling under the boat's canopy and evading the occasional splash of corrosive fluid from the rains and feeling acutely exposed to the sometimes-quite-large creatures that could be heard but not seen in the Mists when the rains ended, the trek downriver was every bit as tense and exhausting as the climb had been, and there was no sleep to be had for anyone.

Finally, the rays of the sun began to exert a sickly radiance through the thick canopy of the Mists. Something else began to happen, too. It started with a small shellfish-like creature that popped onto the deck, looked at Kaora and then went back into the waters. This develop seemed to set Kaora on edge, and K'Zan too.

Then a new radiance began to appear in the waters around them. A shimmering turquoise colour appeared in small patches at first, then grew in frequency, visible as a vast bloom of bioluminescent organisms that soon form a bright trail in the boat's wake and a kind of constellation of light in the river. Their light was eventually even brighter than the light of the sun overhead.

Kaora grew visibly afraid now, and K'Zan was rigid as his antennae twitched in agitation, as the boat shifted course and its pilot poured on as much speed as he could manage. By about four hours after the first rays of dawn had appeared, the boat was pulling within view of a mysterious forest: standing with its roots deep in the water like a mangrove swamp, its trees were all dead, petrified... but they weren't fossils. It was more as if living trees had been turned to calcified mineral in an instant, preserving their fine lattice-work of twigs and limbs.

Meanwhile, sounds began to come from the Mists. The sounds of a great many beating wings... and voices. Musical calls that cycled through discords, antiphony and eerie, haunting harmonies that resolved into moments of aching beauty before diverging again, over and over.

Kaora tensely explained that they were hearing Mistcallers, winged predators whose prey were the *ush-mal* organisms in the water all around them. They normally hunted in small groups and were not particularly dangerous, but the massive bloom of *ush-mal* had drawn a Choir, and he was making for what shelter there was in the petrified forest ahead, which he referred to as the Forest of Bones. Mistcaller Choirs had been known to kill people on the waters with their massed cries alone, let alone their wings and bodies and sharp, ripping beaks.

The Lashunta guide directed the team to make a run for it as best they could once the boat came to a halt. Even as he issued this command, the Choir was becoming visible; a cloud of thousands of dark bodies weaving through various different patterns as it drew closer. A moment later, the boat jarred to a halt and the chase was on as the Choir swooped down toward the glowing waters.

## Part Eight: The Mistcaller Choir.

The team found themselves separated from Brister Fen, Kaora and K'Zan as the mayhem of the Mistcaller Choir descended on them. They scrambled for safety with George doing his best to distract the Choir and earning a few bites for his trouble, Brekith and Thresca struggling to make their way through the tangle of petrified limbs and Flicker and Thresca leading the way with grace and alacrity. The Mistcallers swooped and swarmed around them, battering the party with their leathery wings and bodies, biting at them, showering them with sharp splinters as calcified tree limbs snapped and shattered overhead, and constantly seeming to swirl from every direction at once. Desperation sometimes led team members to do the worst damage to themselves, as when Thresca tried activating the jump jets on his armour and collided with a tree trunk.

As the ordeal went on, Brekith caught the sound of Brister Fen crying out in pain. Searching his way blindly back through the choir, he found the little Ysoki badly wounded – quite nearly cut to ribbons, in fact – and gathered him up to carry him forward to shelter. K'Zan could be spotted gliding through the trees with a Xenodruid's practised feel for wilderness settings, while Kaora turned out nearly to have kept pace with Flicker and Thys in his scrambling through the upper limbs, until finally the feeding frenzy ended, the *ush-mal* bloom abated and the Choir dispersed.

Tired and nerve-wracked but ultimately mostly unharmed – save for Brister Fen, whose wounds Thresca bound up as he rested back in the boat – the team forged on. As they did so, K'Zan noted that they would need to be cautious.

The Xenodruid, with terse side-comments from Kaora, explained that the use of *ush-mal* blooms to summon Mistcaller Choirs was a countermeasure employed by the “Ones Below,” a mysterious aquatic race also called the Tesh-Ki who had their own villages and even towns and cities under these waters. The shellfish they had seen earlier had in fact been a courtesy warning from the Tesh-Ki in honour of the team having made *their* proper offerings for embarking... which had to mean that someone had followed them onto the river *without* making the proper offerings, and the Mistcallers had swept over whoever it was before they reached Team Skylark's boat.

Without the shelter of the Forest of Bones to help them, those pursuers had likely been obliterated by the Choir. But it meant their expedition was compromised by someone from outside the Rift... and it didn't take many guesses to work out who that might be. The atmosphere on the boat was tense as the team headed for their expected rendezvous with Mantis and the Children of Magdh, the stop at which they would resupply before embarking on the final leg of their journey to the Temple.

### **Part Nine: A Spectacle of Carnage.**

When operating in the Rift, the Children of Magdh often used parts of ancient chthonic shrines—left by the Elven religion of the Magdh that had been here long before there was an Ocean of Mists—to double as paramilitary bases. The team were headed toward one such base now. What they found there, even given K'Zan's cautions, would shock and anger them.

The shrine was first announced by the great craggy pillar of a karst formation looming in the Mists, crowning a small islet set in the river ahead of them. The first sign that something was wrong followed shortly thereafter: a corpse floating by in the water. It was an elf wearing fatigues and a wooden mask, a type of guerrilla fighter they'd already encountered during the attack at Sorumar and at the Children of Magdh's hideout above the Rift. They pressed on with foreboding.

Pulling up on the beach, they found the replacement boat that Mantis was supposed to have awaiting them was gone. Stepping further onto the beach quickly revealed stacks of corpses, Children of Magdh that had been shot and stabbed and slashed to death: three elves and five Lashunta, piled separately.

Kaora was distraught, but at first there was no time for grief. Large constructs could be heard clanking about, and presently came looming into view to accost the team. They were large, spider-shaped and made of hybrid technology, dripping with water and festooned with mosses. Apparently contrivances of the One Below, these constructs warned the team that there had been an attack by outsiders in this place and that it was not safe to proceed into the shrine where the Children had kept their base. When the team tried to move past them, the constructs grew insistent, broadcasting a warning klaxon and repeating the message FINAL WARNING.

Brekith's patience was exhausted as the snarling Vesk leaped forward to engage them, his teammates following suit. As the team battled the constructs, though, Thys noted a confusing development as she swept around and behind to trick-attack one of them. At her, the “safety spider” began repeating a different message: HOUSE PERSONNEL WILL PLEASE OBSERVE RULES OF ETIQUETTE. Frowning, she hastily forestalled her teammates from further attacks as she asked it what it meant, and discovered that the device recognized her as a member of an Elven house in “good standing” with its creators. She had relatives who had been to this place and made offerings to the Tesh-Ki to travel in the Ocean of Mists.

Thys was confused at this news, but reassured the constructs that her “good standing” extended to her companions and that she would assume responsibility for their safety. Satisfied, the spidery machines wandered off to continue their patrol as the team searched the corpses for some sign of what had happened here. They found a few important details.

K'Zan examined the slain elves and alerted Thys to an encrypted tattoo on the shoulder of one of their number. It was a spell, he explained, that would change to a new key-phrase every day that would only be readable to Elves of a certain specific number of Houses. From the reaction of the spiders, he was guessing that her House would be one of them. Sure enough, the otherwise-invisible writing appeared to her as the phrase O MY FRIENDS, THERE IS NO FRIEND in Elvish.

Among the corpses of his Lashunta comrades, meanwhile, the grieving Kaora happened across an envelope that—surprisingly—was addressed G. ARODEN. He handed it to George, who was in the midst of promising him that whoever had done this would be brought to justice, and the Skylark's Captain discovered a message inside.

He read its contents out to his companions with some dismay. It was a gloating message from none other than Nezaadon Varrus, the Captain of the OMS *Grigon* and chief security man to Jagan Bryse. He boasted of having beaten the Skylarkers here and that he would soon have “whatever they were searching for” at the Temple. He also gave George a couple of warnings out of what he called “professional courtesy”: first that Jagan Bryse was on the warpath against a certain Starfinder who had secretly purchased stocks in Tantis Resources and was trying to call an emergency shareholder meeting to discuss the need for peace (this turned out to indeed be George, a gambit whose “guile” Varrus claimed to admire); and second to warn the Starfinders to turn back, as there was nothing else for them here.

It was clear to the team that the massacre could only have happened an hour before their arrival, while they'd been fighting for survival against the Mistcallers. The gloating message and the brutally-slain corpses around them incensed the team, George and Brekith in particular. They were keen to go straight after Varrus and his people and try to catch them, but K'Zan was insistent on exploring the now-abandoned Shrine. There was still something important here, that Mantis' people had been meant to harvest for them: the fungal extract that, in combination with the Orrery, was going to make his cure possible. The Xenodruid plunged ahead as the team, reluctantly, followed him.

### **Part Ten: The Four Storms.**

The gateway into the Shrine was flanked by female Elven statues badly corroded by the action of the Mists, their features obscured. Everything about the place featured modern technology retrofitted over ancient surroundings: the gate itself was an airlock that had been left open after the fighting, and the first chamber they entered featured artificial lighting – there was a generator humming away somewhere – that illuminated limestone statues of a quartet of Elven warriors glowering down on a small, bare antechamber.

There was a profusion of bloody drag marks on the floor. Somewhere in here, the Children of Magdh had died before being hauled out to the beach to be found. On the west was a secured airlock door the Hellknights had plainly been unable to breach. Through it, K'Zan claimed, was the Shrine proper... and the fungal farms where the substance he needed was to be found.

The team entered with Brekith and George still making the argument to move on and catch the Hellknights; harvesting mushrooms could surely wait. This only seemed to make K'Zan more desperately determined—what was the point of all this if they didn't stay committed to the greater goal of finding their cure?!—as he implored with

Thys to use the phrase she'd found to open the door. Finally the Xenodruid shared an impassioned Mindlink with Thresca, nakedly begging his fellow-Shirren to stay the course amidst an onslaught of images of the blood and sacrifice that had furnished this opportunity.

With reluctance, Thresca finally sided with him. Thys stepped forward and spoke in Elvish the phrase O MY FRIENDS, THERE IS NO FRIEND. And the airlock opened.

The team found the Shrine to be a mixture of rough cave rock and worked flagstones and sculpture, in keeping with what K'Zan said was an ancient Cult of Magdh practice of keeping parts of their holy places unfinished in the goal of staying close to the earth. Brekith and Kaora began exploring the eastern part of the shrine complex, where the Children had their main living quarters—and where a curious skittering sound could be heard—but Brekith was an uneasy about being separated from his comrades and quickly rejoined them with Kaora in tow... or so he initially thought.

As the team proceeded deeper into the caverns they could hear strange, echoing muttering noises and rushing water. Here, everything was in darkness and a sense of chill foreboding hung in the air. Finally, K'Zan found the chamber he was searching for, a bio-luminescent fungal farm filled with many different species of molds and mushrooms. As he moved to one of the largest specimens and prepared to harvest his extract, another power in the Shrine made itself known: the place's ancient spirit-guardians, who had been disturbed by the earlier violence in their domain.

They came out of the walls: four spectral Elven warriors cloaked in auras of dread and wielding ghostly bows. The team engaged them with a mixture of magic and weaponry, in only two cases augmented by a pair of Ghostkiller fusions they had found in a Children of Magdh cache in the village of Mau-Nan (perhaps specifically hoarded against mischances like this). George took some serious wounds from the icy missiles of one of the warriors. Thys, at a loss, racked her brain for an idea of what else might be done and remembered that some Elven cultures had buried warriors specifically to act as guardians in this way and that their remains would probably be nearby. Remembering a cavern they had passed without entering, she took a chance and ran back to it.

K'Zan, meanwhile, managed to find his feet and get to George's side to heal him. Flicker II and Brekith wielded their Ghostkiller weapons to good effect, managing to disperse three of their opponents as Thresca went in search of Thys. They found her shouting excitedly in a rough chamber where ancient cave paintings had been overlaid with Elven arcane writing. A quick analysis showed them that they were looking at elaborate “programming” for what was basically a Control Undead spell: they were in the burial chamber of the four warriors.

Cracking an acid dart from their needler rifle, Thresca sought out the part of the spell pertaining to “attack” and obscured it, immobilizing the final spectre. The team was safe.

### **Part Eleven: The Last Leg.**

In the burial chamber, Thresca set about obscuring more of the Control Undead “programming” on the walls, and the team found a series of shallow-buried sarcophagi overlaid with offerings left by Children of Magdh who had been here previously, and that the graves contained weapons and artifacts that had been buried with the Four Storms. K'Zan assured the team it was safe enough to take these if it would make them stronger for the trials ahead.

Out in the antechamber they discovered Kaora, who had never made it into the deeper caverns for the confrontation with the spirits, nursing a collapsed Brister Fen, whose wounds had become infected. Thresca set to treating him as the team searched the remainder of the Shrine.

They found no further danger save for a rushing body of water which exuded its own sense of unnatural dread – they avoided it – and a jury-rigged mobile turret trap (with a camera component Flicker found and disabled) that Ophir Kuthan of the Hellknights had left along with the wry message “JUST KEEPING YOU ON YOUR TOES – O.K.”. In the chamber where the trap had lain they discovered the *aiudara* or elf-gate through which the Hellknights had come, plainly having somehow found and used the very alternate route through Sovyrian that the team had decided against. There was evidence of mayhem and death in the inhabited parts of the base; the Children had clearly been caught off-guard as the Hellknights had come through the portal with guns blazing and swords swinging.

Otherwise there were the odds and ends of daily life (including a curious sort of bedpan with arcane sigils on it that Thresca resolutely refused to examine) and a locked case that someone had tried and failed to bash open. Inside was a beautiful custom plasma revolver with a filigreed handle and a card that gifted it to someone called TAIA from someone called M.

With nothing else to see at the Shrine, and having concluded with Kaora's assistance that Mantis' body was not among the dead, it came time to move on. Getting back on their boat, the team set out again for a last three-hour journey downriver to the Temple, and a rendezvous with danger. The Hellknights were surely waiting in ambush, but with as far as they had come and the things they had witnessed, there was no turning back now.

The team examined the weapons and artifacts they had retrieved from the Shrine, finding names and phrases inscribed on them. George had an obsidian sphere that produced an illusory replica of him that moved as he moved. Thys had a bracelet that could transform into a weapon. Brekith had a fine sintered longsword bearing a fusion for added sharpness, and Thresca a gem that, when they focused on it, helped them replenish one of their depleted spells. The team prepared carefully as they travelled, sharing around their healing supplies and replenishing their courage and resources as they prepared for the final showdown.

### **Part Twelve: Got a Bad Feeling About This...**

As the Temple drew nigh, K'Zan shared a last piece of information with Thresca, or rather a procedure. Mantis, during the expedition that had discovered this place, had at K'Zan's urging buried a control panel and a generator under the flagstones of its inner sanctum. The panel was a replica of the control panel Thresca had used in their doomed experiment. Now they would have a chance to operate it in witness to success as K'Zan tested the implant.

He also made clear the Orrery's role in all this. A conjunction sacred to the Temple and its long-vanished cult was taking place, an event that came only once every sixteen thousand years: the stars of a constellation called the Crown of the Eldest were about to be overhead—in particular the star whence the Elves had originally come to Castrovel, bringing the Magdh with them—aligned with another constellation called the Animal Mother, sacred to the Therian Order. With the Orrery activated at this time, there would be a great surge of arcane power which would part the Mists and catalyse the fungal extract in an injector mechanism in the new Tranquillity Implant. Once transformed, the extract could be synthesized and would provide neural stimulation to compensate for the degeneracy of Nebular Syndrome.

Thresca was uneasy as they realised this meant K'Zan planned to test the implant on himself, but K'Zan shrugged this off; as far as he was concerned – he was loading his precious fungal extract into his replica implant as he said it – the prize was worth the risk. This experiment would bring peace to a great many people.

The Temple was on another island in the river, this one larger, higher and craggier than the one they'd left. The team proceeded cautiously, Thys' keen Elven eyes in the lead, as they proceeded up a narrow, rough staircase in the crags, something that in true cult-of-Magdh fashion could almost have been taken as a natural feature. They emerged, still without having seen any sign of the Hellknights, on a small rocky plateau and got their first look at the Temple, a ruined and corroded stone structure large and lavish next to the small chthonic Shrine they had left, whose upper levels had long ago collapsed or been shorn away.

It was quiet. Too quiet. As the team cautiously searched the Temple grounds, they found little trace of the Hellknights. They did find patterns scratched into the Earth—arcane patterns that seemed to show an Orrery or a star system in various configurations connected by ley lines—that seemed unaffected by the passage of time and that thrummed with magical power.

More and more uneasy as their adversaries failed to appear, the team proceeded gingerly into the precincts of the Temple itself, having to restrain an obviously impatient K'Zan from plunging heedlessly ahead. Flicker II finally found evidence of the Hellknights in a camera rigged up to watch the temple's front gates – she re-edited its footage to show multiple images of the team and confuse whoever was monitoring it – but still there was no attack. Here, too, the ground seemed miraculously preserved for an environment without a roof and open to the corrosive Mists. The floor's elaborate inlaid patterns were still bright and colourful.

K'Zan barely looked at them as he pushed forward again, gesturing to the team that they would find their promised treasures in a complex of priest's chambers on the Temple's western side. As Brelkith and Flicker cautiously investigated this possibility – indeed finding a series of ancient statuettes that appeared curiously hollow – George sternly restrained K'Zan from going further until the team could clear the inner sanctum.

By this time, George was beginning to eye the Xenodruid, whom he'd never liked, with suspicion. K'Zan seemed too careless about the dangers ahead of them, too certain that there was nothing between him and his experiment. It was hard to tell if this was deluded fanaticism or something else. But something was wrong.

Thys proceeded to the edge of the inner sanctum. She could hear creaking metal beyond, but beyond that could find no tripwires or mechanisms for a trap. Carefully, she opened the chamber, and the team saw what awaited them. Here, at long last, was the Orrery of Tranquil Harmony.

### **Part Thirteen: K'Zan's Betrayal.**

The Orrery was far larger than they had expected, at least as tall as a standing humanoid. Its pieces were moving of their own volition, smoothly – although its metal looked tarnished – and clearly the focus of the arcane power thrumming through the structure. Brelkith snarled in surprise: “How are we supposed to take that anywhere?” The team members eyed this in puzzlement as Thys explored staircases that had once led somewhere but now led nowhere.

By this time there was no keeping K'Zan out of the inner sanctum. His great moment was at hand. Pushing past the team, he pried up some flagstones near the Orrery and sure enough, just as he'd promised, a replica of Thresca's old control panel from the failed Tranquility Experiment on Verces rose into view, drawing power from a generator below.

Thresca was reluctant and even frightened, but also in the pull of a great and tempting prize, as they took their place as their controls. The rest of the team returned to carefully looking over the artifacts in the western chamber as the threat of immediate violence seemed to recede. George, meanwhile, seeing Thresca's conflict—and still feeling suspicious about the situation—refused to leave no matter how much the technomancer urged him to for his own safety. “I've backed you every step of the way,” George told them. “And if you want to go through with this I'll back you now... but you're not doing this alone. I'm staying.”

K'Zan, meanwhile, had connected his replica implant to the datajack in his skull. He had pulled an injector from his robes—the same neural suppressor Thresca's experiment had used to simulate Nebular Syndrome for D'Vesh, he explained—and went rigid as he jammed its business end into his arm. He signalled Thresca that he was ready... and Thresca activated the implant.

At first it was just like the experiment on Verces. Nothing seemed to happen.

Then K'Zan, still rigid, walked over to Thresca, reached over the console and clasped a pair of their hands. As the mystical Mind Link surged between them, the Xenodruid spoke in Thresca's mind: *“It is time,”* he said. *“Which means it is time for you to know the whole truth.”*

The images poured into Thresca's consciousness with incredible power and vividness.

At first they were memories of K'Zan coming to the Seven Seas region under the guidance of a very hale and hearty Ke Amoru. Preaching peace and the gospel of Life in the villages, trying to help and heal wherever they could. D'Vesh was in some of these visions, too.

Then there were more bitter memories. Villages burned and burning as the conflict with Sorumar escalated, long before Tantis Resources arrived. Death. Horror. Finally, images of K'Zan taking up a gun. Planting explosives in a vehicle. Haranguing chambers full of fatigue-clad paramilitary troops.

Finally there was an image of K'Zan and D'Vesh together. K'Zan telling her: “This experiment has promise. We may be able to use it. You know what you have to do.” The fanaticism clear in D'Vesh's posture as she bowed.

*“Did you ever wonder how I was so certain that the failure of your experiment was not your fault?” K'Zan's voice rang in their head... or was it aloud? “It is because it was mine. D'Vesh called forth what she did by my order. I'm sorry, Thresca... but I must finish the work.”*

With that, K'Zan broke the link and walked back to the Orrery, leaving Thresca frozen in horror. As if in a nightmare, the scientist tried to move and couldn't, to warn the curiously-onlooking George or do anything else as they saw K'Zan's neural activity spiking to impossible levels. The Xenodruid stood before the Orrery, exultant now and with no sign of being affected by any sort of neural suppressant, as he threw back his arms and cried out: “COME TO US, ELDEST!”

As he had promised, the Mists above the Temple parted as a great shaft of shimmering radiance plunged down from the stars to envelop the Orrery. The sky should have still shown daylight, but it was the stars that were clear, bright and numberless. The beam grew brighter, and something emerged from it: a much larger version of a nightmare figure that had haunted Thresca's dreams for over a year.

Massive, spectral, almost simian in its posture but with a tangled nest of antlers crowning its head and a trio of deformed and skeletal stag-lake faces, one of whose sockets blazed with consciousness and malice, the creature stepped free of the great shimmering beam and looked around at the inner sanctum's dumbfounded occupants. Its rumbling voice shook the very structure of the Temple as it said: ***“GWA TALIR E MAGDHA?”***

#### **Part Fourteen: The Inner Sanctum Showdown.**

Still in the corridor to the west of the inner sanctum and trying to work out if it was actually safe to retrieve their promised statuettes, the rest of the team was fascinated to see the Mists part above them, the shimmering starlike radiance come shafting down... and then alarmed to hear the rumbling Voice of the Magdh shake the building around.

At that moment they heard the Hellknights breaching the front door of the Temple and were confronted with an agonizing decision. Run to their friends' aid, or head off the Hellknights? They chose the latter, Brelkith moving swiftly to a point of advantage in the corridor and launching a sticky grenade at the first targets to present themselves. They proved to be Ophir Kuthan and his clanking combat drone Koloss, who were both stuck fast. Meanwhile Nezadon Varrus, burning greatsword in hand, came forging past them with a smile of pure blood-lust on his face as he said: “Please, Starfinders. Please, get in my way. I'm begging you.”

At that moment, Thys came pelting out of the inner sanctum to rally the team, saw what was happening and took an insane risk: instead of drawing her weapons she simply confronted Varrus and scolded him. “Why didn't you tell us who he really was?!”

This drew the Hellknight Captain up short. Nonplussed, he said: “Wait... you're not working with Mantis?”

“No!” Thys replied in exasperation. “Also... big, scary thing! Can you hear what's going on?! Help us kill it! We can fight each other later!”

The Hellknight Captain looked positively crestfallen as he realised suddenly that he wasn't going to get to kill the Starfinders after all. But he *could* hear what was happening in the inner sanctum as the Magdh's rumbling voice sounded again, and after a moment's hesitation he gave a nod of agreement, shouting an order to his people to rally with the Starfinders as he ran for the sanctum. Brelkith was just ahead of him, tossing a “Sorry about the grenade!” over his shoulder to Koloss and Kuthan as he went. Brister Fen stayed behind to help extricate the stuck Hellknights as the rest of the party made to confront the Magdh.

Battle, meanwhile, was joined in the inner sanctum. K'Zan was calling out to the manifestation of his deity: “PROTECT YOUR CHILDREN, ELDEST! KILL OUR ENEMIES!” It wasn't clear who he meant by this, but it galvanized Thresca into a swift transition from the look of bone-deep horror he'd been sharing with George into fury. K'Zan got a look of sudden realization on his features as he turned, put his hand to his implant... and saw Thresca cranking all the gains on the control panel to maximum. The implant overloaded, sending a critical shock through the Xenodruid's skull that sent him tumbling to the ground, stunned.

This was no deterrent to the Magdh, however, which now fixated on Thresca with its coldly burning sockets and said: ***“HA ISHAN ARIL VANTU KOMONG-A-PARAM-PARAM E MAGDHA.”*** It attacked with acid dripping from its spectral claws, and as the combined crew of Starfinders and Hellknights rallied to battle it, it rattled its assailants with the cold aura of powerful dread bleeding from its form and immersed them in cones of a breath that was like a storm of lightning and arctic air.

The teams rallied as best they could as more and more of them made their way into the inner sanctum. George, Brelkith and Thresca all worked to pull the fell being's attention hither and yon as George called to his team to take their time and focus their fire. Thys was an acrobatic marvel as she went on the offensive with her new weapon. The Hellknights attacked it with much less effect while K'Zan struggled back to his feet, apparently trying to urge the creature not to attack the Starfinders, but no avail before a Grease spell from Thresca sent him tumbling back to the deck.

The Magdh at first seemed almost amused by the attempts to hack and blast at it, turning back to unleash its storm breath again as it intoned: **“E MAGDHA TIYA FA GAM-AN-GANG ERIFAN.”** Kaora was shouting something at K'Zan as he came running in, only to be killed by this fresh storm that also downed Varrus and K'Zan. Ilash Dass, looking aghast but resolute as he entered and beheld this scene, shouted encouragement to his “boss,” who revived groggily as Thresca, angrily taunting the Magdh now, moved overhead on his jump jets and distracted it with sustained fire from his Ghostkiller-infused Zero Rifle.

Finally the Magdh wound up in a crossfire between the Ghostkiller fire of Thresca and Flicker II as they alternately seared and froze it, the Skylark's mechanic inflicting particularly grievous damage as its ominous pronouncements gave way to bellows of animal fury. The rest of the combined team continued to hack and blast away, Brekith and Varrus fighting side by side, until Flicker finally sheared off two of the creature's faces with a single blast.

With some final assistance from George's continued shouts not to let up, it was Thresca who dealt the fatal blow, taking the Magdh directly between its malevolent eye-sockets as the creature screamed, stumbled back into the beam of radiance from which it had come... and vanished.

## Epilogue.

In the aftermath, as the two exhausted and battered crews took stock of what had just happened, something became clear. The Hellknights' primary target all along had been Mantis, the radical guerilla commander. When George asked where he was, Varrus simply pointed at K'Zan's prone form – now being bound by Beata Falco – and said: “Right there.”

The shock of this betrayal, at the extent to which they had been used, rattled the team... but everything fit. After retrieving the precious statuettes, Brekith worked out his own angry reaction to the news by going out to pummel some unfortunate trees on the pretext of clearing landing space for the incoming *Skylark*. (He would keep using their trunks as a de facto heavy bag the whole flight back to Qabarat.) Thresca horrified George when he retrieved the slagged Tranquility Implant and crushed it, finally abandoning his dream cure; it was just too dangerous. The Starfinders were a little shell-shocked and saddened, glad as they were to be alive.

Amidst all this, there was time for some calmer conversation in the wake of their confrontation with the eldritch ancient spirit. As the Artificial Personality named Abbott piloted the *Empyrean Skylark* in to retrieve the Orrery and the combined crews

– with characteristic graciousness, George offered a ride to their former adversaries and even some healing supplies to Varrus – the Hellknight Captain let slip that it was Mantis' own bodyguard, Ovate Tiaahe, who betrayed him to them, outraged when he heard his commander promise off-worlders the right to pillage his faith's sacred places. Clearly, Mantis' fanaticism had taken him a step too far even for some of his followers.

There was even a little levity when Ilash Dass made a failed attempt to hit on Thys, commending her “badass moves” with eyebrow waggles, finger-guns and cheeseball claims to be able to “appreciate” a “strong, confident woman who's into knives and back-flipping.” Withering looks from Varrus and Brekith combined with her lack of interest deflated him, but he recovered his pride with the final sally “the Lashunta Love Train has left the station” (Thys muttered “*more like dodging a bullet than missing a train*” in response).

There were more intense and difficult decisions to come, though. Thresca appealed to all assembled to make sure the secret of the Magdh died in the Temple; he wanted no one trying to follow Mantis' “work.” George agreed on the condition that Mantis be allowed to represent his people at a peace conference, not out of compassion but necessity; and he was finally able to persuade K'Zan and Thresca to agree to this when the Xenodruid regained consciousness.

In Thresca's case it wasn't easy. The idea of K'Zan walking free after the appalling things he had done—and in particular his deeply personal manipulation and betrayal of them—combined with his apparent lack of repentance to infuriate them. Most especially the revelation that Ke Amoru had found out he was Mantis and had paid a dear price for crossing him; the man, K'Zan had confessed, did not have Nebular Syndrome, which at any rate in the Xenodruid's estimation was as incurable as the Gap itself. After which revelation Thresca swore, after his participation in George's emergency shareholder meeting-cum-peace conference, to kill him. K'Zan was unmoved, perhaps too deep in the despair of failure to have any fear left in him, and simply said: “I'll be waiting.”

The Starfinders nevertheless were able to salvage plenty of good from their expedition:

- George's peace conference – with the Starfinder's eloquence and attention to detail aided by the miscalculated bravado of Jagan Bryse and surprising amounts of cooperation from Captain Varrus and Mantis – was a surprise success and the talk of Qabarat.
- Thresca, hearing some trace of conscience emerging in K'Zan at last during that conference, and having literally confronted and defeated a ghost from their past, found themselves more at peace than they had ever expected.



- Thys took an interest in the fate of Ke Amoru, who might find himself left with no-one to care for him; and found Mantis (in the midst of packing for a trip into solitary isolation) unexpectedly willing to assist her. If her trip to convey the invalid to her relations and their care in Sovyrian did not exactly lead to reconciliation with her family – that prospect might still be centuries off – it did lead to unexpected hope of it.
- Brekith got the chance to savour an unlooked-for taste of home when a spaceport bar in Cordona proved to have a bottle of '78 Alpeasak *uruketo* in stock, a Vesk drink which left Thresca and Thys legless in short order.
- Flicker II, who had been simsense-recording their adventures on her exocortex, finally mustered the courage to share her work with the galaxy, providing an inside view of their harrowing encounter with the Mistcallers that proved a runaway hit.
- Brister Fen might have been chagrined at missing out on most of the action, but he got some killer shots.

When the *Empyrean Skylark* took the Orrery aboard and lit out for the *Idari*, it was with a sense of both rejuvenation and purpose among her crew. They were more than ready for their next adventure, wherever it took them.

***What awaits our intrepid heroes out there in the heavens? Find out next time on  
Empyrean Skylark!***