

CITADEL

How to survive the solstice.

BY JOHN GILBEY

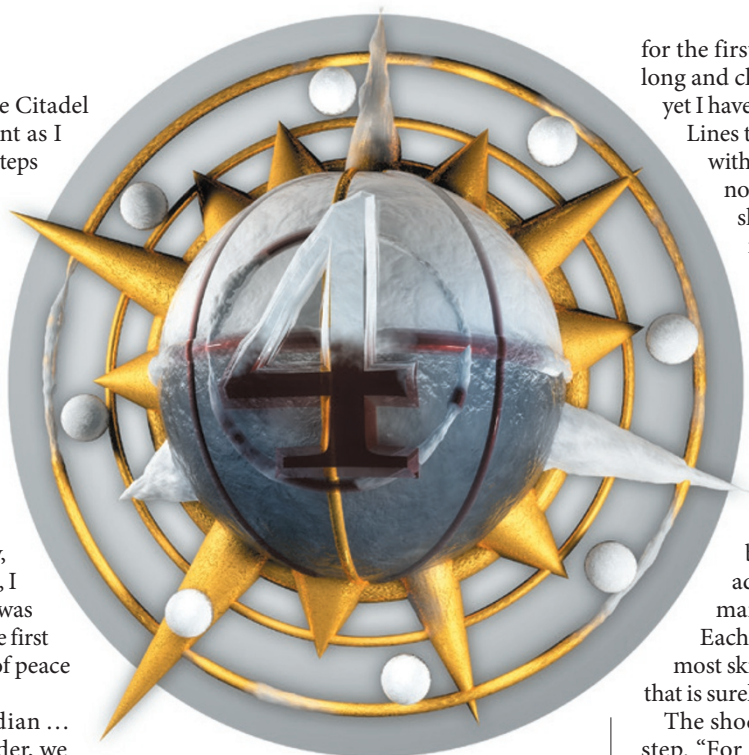
The guard at the gate of the Citadel nodded acknowledgement as I walked up the worn stone steps towards her, my boots crackling in the frost. “A cold night, pilgrim,” she intoned, her breath visible on the night air. I smiled to myself, realizing that she had mistaken my hastily snatched robes for the garb of a common supplicant. The temptation was too great and I twitched aside my cloak to reveal my cryptogram of office.

The reaction of horror was immediate, thus I decided to spare her rank — and so, possibly, her life. “Your pardon, Eminence, I took you for another ...” Her fear was real and I felt a tang of guilt like the first nip of frostbite. I made the sign of peace and she relaxed, fractionally.

“We are all pilgrims, Guardian ... Worker or healer, hunter or feeder, we must all play out our duty to the faith with honour and respect according to our trade.” Aware that I was almost quoting from the creed she cast her eyes downward and muttered a blessing under her breath. I paused while she recovered herself, gauging her adherence to protocol as she scanned my cypher and released the portal. “Pass, my Lord ...”

The great hall beyond the robing room was quiet, aside from the distant sound of the wind moving around the tower above. The hall had set itself for night, so only a low glow followed my progress towards the display. My Lady stood, apparently deep in reverie, before the map that once purported to describe our world — but which we now know is wildly untruthful. She looked up at my approach and pointed to a small red stain on the curved stone of the panel. “Another is gone — that makes three since midsummer ...”

News indeed, and of an import that explained the urgent summons. When we first inherited this duty, only a handful of the myriad marks on the plot were red — the great majority being green, the colour of plants and life. Now, 50 summers later, close to half have adopted the deep crimson of mourning. Lore tells us that these marks speak of the health enjoyed by those sentinel obelisks of impervious metal that gird our



lands, that somehow talk to the citadel and help to build the intricate coloured patterns that scatter the map.

These red marks prey on my mind, seeming to signify the loss of so much more. So many deaths! Folk whose faces glide before me every time I visit this chamber, yet I must remain resolute — as so many others have done before me. If only my parents had not been among those who perished in that sudden, crippling spring ice-fall when I was still so small a child. The knowledge and learning that died with them cannot be replaced, yet the common people still look to the Lady and I for counsel and guidance.

As so many times before, I walked forward and laid my hands flat on the stone panels as if to commune with the hidden forces within. With a finger tip I gently traced the outlines of the glyphs that I feel certain hold the key to the secret knowledge — then hung my head in shame and frustration. I felt a warm hand slide into mine and squeeze it lightly.

“You are troubled, husband.” The smile of the Lady should be able to melt the ice fields that surround us, but that would mean sharing it with others. I turned to her, and we embraced

for the first time in many days. I held her long and close. “Our world may be dying, yet I haven’t the wisdom to read the signs.

Lines traverse the plot, growing longer with every passing solstice — yet I’ve not the skill to know whether they should alarm or reassure by their rise and fall.”

My Lady took my arm and turned me to face the empty hall. “Have you considered, husband, why the ancients who built this place made the hall so large? Surely it is not meant just for the two of us — who alone may enter it today? Perhaps one of the pilgrims who freezes in the courtyard beyond has a shred of wisdom to add to our own? Indeed, mayhap many of them have much to give?”

Each traveller who is sent here is the most skilled of each hearth and trade — that is surely a sign to us ...”

The shock in my face drove her back a step. “For many generations it has been thus,” I stormed. “They stand below and we assure them that all is well, that we maintain control. We alone must hold this place — else who in the land will know their point and worth?”

Her eyes, wide and dark in the poor light, clouded with anger and regret. For the second time this night I had demeaned and cast down one of my folk whose only failing was to share their humanity. Turning abruptly from her, I faced the centre of the display and made great play of deep thought. It was obvious that she was right, there could be only one conclusion.

“Very well. When the winter solstice celebration comes we will open the hall to all and demand — yes, demand — that they share their skills so that we may deepen our understanding of this place.” The ghost of a smile flitted across my Lady’s lips, before she lowered her gaze.

At the base of the plot, the image written thus “Survival Likelihood 3” in the rock became faint for a moment, and the last glyph in the sequence changed to “4”. One day, our children may understand whether that was a good thing or not. ■

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ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

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