

ESCAPE VELOCITY

NOVA

Preambles: the history behind the legend

Part V: The Polaris

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Section Alpha

DECISIONS OF THE LEAF: WHERE TO FALL

The Polaris Civil War – Iusia’s story

After this, I can finally allow myself to fall. I have done what I thought was best, and no longer will I mock my sacrifice. My name is Iusia, and until recently I was the leader of the Nil’kemorya, which is the name given to those who have vowed to protect the Polaris. They are the warrior caste, and they give everything, including their entire lives, to this most fateful of ideas. That is their sacrifice, and it was also mine, until I made a mockery of it.

It all started over two decades ago when neither the scientist caste, called the P’aedt, nor the Ver’ash, as the engineer and healer caste are named, could decide which of them should have custody of a particular system. When we originally split into our castes over a century ago, the understanding was that whichever caste could make the most use of a system would have sway over it. This did not mean that Polarians from other castes could not live and work there, it is merely a matter of administration. After all, the Ver’ash know best how to handle Ver’ash business, the P’aedt likewise. This is true for all castes; the Nil’kemorya, the P’aedt, the Ver’ash, the Tre’pira (as the worker caste are known), and the leadership caste, called the ‘Kel’ariy’.

This sort of disagreement was not uncommon. As anyone can understand, many systems have attractions for more than one caste, and so of course there was competition between them. But while there were similar disputes elsewhere in Polaris space, never before had they lasted more than a few years; twenty-two was deemed by both sides to be long enough.

The Kel’ariy, in their wisdom, decided that the Tre’pira should adjudicate over the matter. Perhaps, in hindsight, they should have handled it themselves. But, because the leadership caste is, in reality, a conglomerate of experienced people elevated from all other castes, they decided that a completely independent arbiter would be best, and who better to reach a practical settlement over who should be in charge of a system’s administration than the members of the worker caste?

Unfortunately, the issue was not simple. With an almost ominous inevitability, both sides had very persuasive arguments in their favour, and any decision towards one would have been unfair to the other. So the Tre’pira came to, what was in all fairness, the only decision that was realistically feasible, although in doing so they could not have decided worse. Their arbitration was that neither caste could govern the system at that time, and that they would form an interim administration until any new case was brought forward to tip the argument one way or the other.

The P’aedt and the Ver’ash were outraged, and quite understandably so. The leaders of these castes had been arguing over this system for over two decades. Their opinion was that there would be no new evidence brought to light that would tip the decision towards either of them, and so the Tre’pira would end up with permanent custodianship of the system. They were, more than likely, completely correct in their thinking. For the Tre’pira, the word for which can mean ‘the brightest’, ‘the highest’ or even ‘the purest’, depending on the context in which it is used, are used to being thought of as being the most respected of castes. There are more members of the Tre’pira than of any

other caste, and all young Polarans seem to want to join them. Perhaps their leaders had started to believe that they were the pre-eminent caste and so decided that they were more than capable of handling any non-Tre'pira problems. Or perhaps they really meant to implement the only practical solution that was in any way feasible. I hope so, for it makes the events that followed somehow more palatable.

Regardless of whether the outrage of the Ver'ash and the P'aedt was justified, their next action went just that little too far. Instead of just informing the Tre'pira that their decision was not acceptable, they packed every member of the worker caste that they could find into their ships and sent them out of the system, telling them to keep their decisions to themselves.

While this act in itself was unconscionable, the response to it, which came on with an almost painful inevitability, was infinitely worse. Four men, in two groups of two, went to the systems where the leaders of the P'aedt and the Ver'ash made their homes and assassinated them. None of these men escaped alive, as they were all slain whilst trying to escape. These men wore the color of the Tre'pira, white, and travelled in Tre'pira ships. However, the men themselves proved strangely unidentifiable, it was as if there was no record of their existence. Theories abounded, and they abound still, but nothing could be proved.

Of course, the P'aedt and the Ver'ash blamed the Tre'pira, and despite the protestations of the leaders of the worker caste, war was declared.

This is when I became involved. Until that point, the Nil'kemorya remained aloof. We were not concerned about some minor internal political squabble; we looked outwards as we always have, placing our bodies, our very lives, between the Polaris and any danger that might threaten them. But, put simply, warriors cannot ignore war, and I, as leader of the Nil'kemorya, could ignore it even less.

At first I refused to act.

"The Kel'ariy will not allow this madness to continue," I stated with certainty to my advisers. "We need not fight those whom we have already died to protect."

That might seem to be an unusual statement, but it only reflects our ethos. For we are like the blazing autumn leaf which has fallen so that the tree might better survive the winter. In a very real sense, we have already lost our lives, and we are trying to make this loss worthwhile. This is our 'sacrifice'. We, as 'the falling leaves', have given our lives for the Polaris 'tree', so that it might more easily survive. We are floating along with the breeze, trying to decide where best to fall so as to aid the recovery and growth of the 'tree' come spring.

All the Nil'kemorya were relieved to hear my initial decision, for nowhere in the metaphor we use to define the philosophy of our existence was there cause to harm any part of the tree.

Of course, with a devastating near-foreseeable predictability, I was proved wrong.

The Kel'ariy splintered into factions formed along the lines of their former castes and after different members of the leadership caste announced differing proclamations supporting various castes in their actions, Polaris society disintegrated entirely. Almost immediately the Ver'ash, the P'aedt and the Tre'pira became locked in a desperate cycle of hurt, vengeance and retribution whilst the Kel'ariy fought amongst themselves over which of the three was the instigator and which should be supported.

And so it was left entirely to me. There was no longer an effective leadership caste to order me into the fray, and on which side to enter it. I, as the leader of the Nil'kemorya, was left to decide where, and against whom to strike.

I stood before my advisers after three days of deliberation in my private chambers.

"The tree must not be allowed to die," I nearly whispered in anguish.

"We go to war then?" asked Trearna my senior adviser in a quiet voice.

I nodded.

"But which of the castes is at fault," she asked tremulously, "and which are the victims? Which caste do we choose as our enemy?"

Tears stung my eyes as I stood resolutely before them.

"All of them," I answered hoarsely. "Now get to your duties."

They all stood up, and with a slowness that only those who have felt absolute despair can understand, they left me, alone and afraid. What followed has been described as surgical, even clinical, but those words are far too clean to describe the following events for me. We are the Nil'kemorya, warriors all. We train continuously our entire lives for war in all its forms. The warring castes could not stand against us.

While it is true that over the next seven days we completely incapacitated the ability of any but the Nil'kemorya to make war with a bare minimum of death and damage, that 'bare minimum' cost slightly more than three million lives. In one week, my decision and the actions of my followers under my direction led to the deaths of slightly less than one percent of the entire Polaris population. These sorts of losses have never even been contemplated before in any human conflict in our entire history. I fail to see how the words 'surgical precision' can be used to describe such a horrific event. Only those necessary to any part of the war effort were killed, but still, the number is a stain the Polaris people can never forget.

At the end of the campaign I had the leaders of all the other castes brought to my headquarters. They stood before me sullenly yet still defiant.

I walked up to Bis Lornola, the head of the Kel'ariy, and therefore the leader of the Polaris people, and she looked up at me with spiteful pride.

"We will not surrender to you!" she spat. "You have destroyed that which you were tasked to protect. You are scum!"

I stood, momentarily wrestling with my despair, trying to hold on to my calm exterior. I must have stood, looming ominously over her, because she stepped away from me in fear. I dropped to one knee before her.

"I, Iusia," I began as my eyes began to glimmer, "as leader of the Nil'kemorya, surrender my forces."

The leaders of the castes stood momentarily in stunned silence.

"What?" asked Lornola in surprise.

"We have been fighting a war we cannot win," I continued painfully, "for we have been fighting against everything about which we believe, and so we have lost. To avoid the humiliation of the entire warrior caste as a whole, I surrender."

With a look of comprehension, wonder, and a little awe, Bis Lornola nodded her head.

"I accept," she submitted, almost shamefully.

"There is one condition," I breathed out with difficulty. "The system over which the war started will not be owned by any caste. I claim it and order all members of other castes off the planet in it."

"How dare you!" shouted both the Ver'ash and the P'aedt leaders together.

"The Tre'pira will not allow the Nil'kemorya to take custody of this system!" said the leader of the Tre'pira heatedly.

Only Bis Lornola looked on with tears of understanding in her eyes as I struggled with my emotions.

Trearna stepped forward languidly.

"You arrogant, stupid fools!" she said through tears of anger. "Nobody in the Nil'kemorya will be taking control of any systems today."

The shouting subsided as understanding gradually sunk in. Bis Lornola nodded slowly.

"We accept your self-imposed exile from your caste and your nation as a punishment for your crimes against the Polaris people," she said quietly, and with sad dignity. "And we will ensure that your sacrifice is remembered above that of all others."

She turned to look towards Trearna.

"Trearna, you are the new leader of the Nil'kemorya?" she asked solemnly.

Trearna stood completely still for a moment.

"Yes and no," she breathed. "For while, as of today, I am the new leader of the Nil'kemorya, I am Trearna no more. There is now a title which will be handed down to all future leaders of the warrior caste, and, as of this moment, I take this title for my name. I am Iuso."

My shoulders only barely shook as I heard this. Bis Lornola nodded.

"Iuso, disciple of Iusia... a good name," she agreed.

She turned back to me.

"Iusia," she intoned officially, "no more will you be allowed to walk amongst us as a Polaran. We hope that you will be the only man we will ever salute because of that."

I stood slowly, struggling with my emotions.

"I suggest you all return to your castes; there is much to be done," I said as stonily as I could manage. "This war is over, and you have much rebuilding to do."

They all stood before me in silence for a moment longer before nodding and leaving to their life-long tasks.

And so here I am, alone on this planet which they have named 'Ar'za Iusia' in honor of my sacrifice. It is a pity that I cannot ever share their sentiment. I keep seeing the faces of those three million Polarans that died, and my only thought is that my sacrifice can never be more important than theirs. It is a stain that I will wear forever. After all, by what right does a falling leaf decide that an entire branch needs to go as well? The only question I keep asking is: 'Did my actions save the Polaris'? I doubt that anyone will ever be able to answer that.

My only defense is that I did no more than what I thought was necessary, although there are at least three million people who stare at me with an accusing lifelessness when I say that. To them, my excuses are of little comfort.

Now, though, I can finally give all my doubts away. There is nothing more left for me to do except to reflect on everything I have done and to somehow stop making a mockery of my sacrifice.

My name is Iusia, and this is where I choose to fall.

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Section Beta

WE ARE THE MU'HARI...

An excerpt from the recovered notes of Bis Mu'har the first Mu'hari to become a member of the Kel'ariy and the leader of the Polaris.

We were born in desperate times out of crisis, despair and tragic heroism. For the Mu'hari came into official existence only a meagre fifteen years after the end of the Polaris Civil War and Iusia's soul-shattering deed which ended it.

Our original charter was two-fold. Firstly, we were to attract those individuals who, for whatever reasons, were 'casteless' so as to give them a sense of belonging and a focus. The leaders of the day, under the direction of Bis Lornola, decided that having several million people without a purpose was like leaving large piles of kindling underneath all parts of Polaris society. They felt that the longer it went untended, the drier such tinder would become, and therefore more flammable. If given a caste to join, it was thought that these countless individuals could become productive, and so less prone to crime and revolution.

Secondly, we were given a rather ominous task to perform, for we would not be a true caste if we did not have a specific role to fulfil. The P'aedt are tasked to push back the boundaries of knowledge, the Nil'kemorya are beholden to protect us from all military threats. Likewise, the Ver'ash, the Tre'pira and the Kel'ariy all have their individual missions. Unfortunately, none of these central philosophies were capable of dealing with the problems that started the Polaris Civil War. Even the warrior caste, with all their skill at arms, nearly fractured during that awful conflict. And if Iusia had not exiled himself from all he loved and lived for, the Nil'kemorya would have destroyed themselves over their acts in bringing to a close that terrible time.

From this, our role came into being. Officially put, the mission of the Mu'hari is 'to provide whatever service that is necessary to ensure the survival and prosperity of Polaris'. In reality this means a great many different things. It means that we are to learn as much as we can to help all the other castes in any way possible. We are the jack-of-all-trades, able to turn our hand to anything as required. We are servants-of-all, standing ever-ready to step in and help any and all other castes as necessary.

Do not get the wrong impression; our mission was specifically worded in such a way that we are required to go out and help others where we can and whenever asked, we have no choice. If any Polaris asks for our assistance in their line of work, we must comply. If any of the castes requests a number of Mu'hari to help them, we are obligated to send them at least the number asked for. More than that, we must go out looking for any instances where we can offer a hand, and a great number of our members spend most of their lives travelling throughout Polaris space helping out wherever they can.

But this is only the half of our role, the half that ensures the prosperity of our civilization. The other half is to ensure its survival. In that, our role is a little less wholesome. We are the scouts, the diplomats and the spies. We work closely with the warriors of the Nil'kemorya and our leaders in the Kel'ariy to keep all external threats at bay. Continuously travelling amongst the Federation and the Auroran Empire gathering information about their movements and their military and diplomatic policies towards each other and towards us.

Unfortunately that is not all we are forced to do; if it were, we could still keep our heads high with pride and hold onto at least a little hope. But external threats are only one of two types of threats to Polaris' survival. We must also stand against the possibility of internal conflict. This requires us to take on a few several different guises. We must act as police, bringing to justice and prosecuting those who commit acts against the Polaris code, for such acts can lead to chaos, and therefore could threaten our society. We also find ourselves the arbiters of any and all internal disagreements, whether they be between individuals or castes. In effect, we are police, prosecutor, judge and jury, and it is a role that no Mu'hari takes on willingly; no sane man would. Prosecuting and judging your fellow man is an act that we humans can only ever do imperfectly. In our roles as lawmakers and bringers, we can only ever hope to do as little damage as possible.

While all that is, in itself, a near impossible job, it is not all that we must do to protect against internal threats. As demonstrated by the P'aedt and the Ver'ash at the start of our civil war, such judgements are not necessarily adhered to by the parties involved. So we must become aware of such potential problems before they become threatening, and we must eliminate them then. This is what makes our task so ominous, for in past ages we might have been called the 'brown-shirts' or the 'gestapo'. We are the organization that watches over our nation. We are the servants who betray their masters for what we perceive to be a 'greater good'. We must spy on our own people, and, if necessary, act against them as individuals or as groups to ensure the survival of the Polaris as a whole.

We may be required to kill our own people if it is deemed necessary for the continued existence of our civilization, and we have done so more than once. We are, in effect, what in times past might have been called the 'secret' police. We work behind the scenes ensuring that our society continues, through our actions. And so our heads hang low, and whatever remained of our pride is left in tatters.

And how do you enter the Mu'hari? Not through success or achievement, oh no! We all enter because we have failed in the tests to enter another caste, because we are incapable of fulfilling roles more glorious and productive. We enter our new caste with shame and with the knowledge that we are unworthy of our position in society, and our shame continues throughout our lives.

Our training is long and arduous, in order to be able to fulfil our multitude of possible tasks. In order to be capable of at least assisting all the major castes wherever possible we must train as physicists, chemists, laborers, engineers, biologists, physicians, merchants, clerks, mathematicians, soldiers, nurses, mechanics and warriors. Along with that we must also learn to be ready to act as police, arbiters, military forward observers, diplomats and spies.

While nobody ever fails to become a member of the Mu'hari, the training takes an average of forty-seven years to complete. I was seventeen at the time of the creation of the 'casteless' caste, and I am now eight years short of my third century. To my knowledge the shortest time to achieve full membership was thirty-three years, the longest slightly more than eight decades. We also lose more potential members than any other caste. For while none fail, many die, most of those through suicide. Their shame overwhelms them, and they choose their only way of escape.

So that is why, even though I have gone on to become a member of the Kel'ariy and the leader of the Polaris, my shame goes with me. For I was amongst the first few to fail entry into the major castes and so 'win' my way into the Mu'hari. Never has that left me, for I in my heart have remained with them, a Mu'hari in everything but name. My shame has shadowed me throughout my life, never leaving me.

So that is what we of the Mu'hari see ourselves to be. We are the jack-of-all-trades, the servants-of-all, the secret police, the diplomats, the judges, the guardians, the spies, and the keepers of peace. Never before has such a small segment of humanity done so much, or held such great power over their contemporaries and been so ashamed of themselves because of it. Hopefully the amount of time we give to

those who need or want it at least makes up for a little of our shame, but it is not enough. Our dishonor is a stain that we can never wash away; it is something we will wear forever.

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