

Expatriate  
By Chris Nagele

York sighed as he surveyed the grim expressions littering the concourse. The holidays were a time of cheer, but that cheer did not appear to extend to inter-universal travel. He took a seat next to a woman, gently rocking an enormous rolling contraption that he suspected contained two infants. As he sat, she looked up and offered a forced smile. He nodded back, fluttering his right hand in the standard new years salutation.

After a moment, the woman looked back at him in surprise. She started to speak, but stopped herself. York grabbed a handful of nuts and dried fruit from his snack box. The woman began again, this time in Dravidian. 'I'm sorry, but I didn't realize-'

'A common mistake. Don't concern yourself overly.'

'I won't then.' She paused, evidently unsure if the interaction would continue. 'Heading home for the holidays?'

York bobbed his head noncommittally, 'I've got a granddaughter who just turned five. This will be the first time she remembers it, I suspect.'

'How wonderful!'

York smiled as he nodded, intending to let that be the end of it.

His intentions were of little concern to the slight Dravidian woman. 'What do you do on Thile? Most Dravidians here are a bit- well-'

'Less old?'

'Umm, yes.'

York chuckled lightly. The rest of the concourse was filling up with dour professionals in their thirties and forties. He was pretty sure he had twenty years on most of them. He turned back to the woman. 'I do this and that. I was like you in my youth, actually. Engineering inter-universal currency arbitrages, that was me once.' He saw echoes of recognition flit across the woman's face; he had guessed her profession. 'But when I retired, couldn't quite bring myself to go home.'

'Really?' She feigned thoughtfulness. York was beginning to like this woman. 'Was it something about Thile that kept you here, or something that kept you from settling back home?'

'You're quite the inquisitive one, aren't you?'

'Well now you've got me thinking about what happens when I retire, old man.'

'And when will that be?'

'I'd say a solid half century.'

York did not rise to the barb. 'Not pressing then, is it?'

The woman smirked, and then looked around the concourse.

'I'm York by the way.'

'Sandra.'

A soft, magically amplified voice filled the terminal, 'passengers to Pouls, Dravid, please proceed directly to customs. Your gate will open in five minutes.'

The two of them stood and gathered their things, but as York was about to set off in the direction of the customs line, he noticed Sandra looking around again. 'Are you with someone?'

'My partner, not quite sure where she ran off to.'

'Social or professional?'

Sandra glanced his way. 'Professional. I'm raising these two tykes on my own.'

'Does she have her bags? I'm sure she can catch up.'

The woman frowned. She wore a black dress and white sneakers, the outfit informal by n'Thilian standards, and definitely not warm enough for the bite of early spring in the southern reaches of this hemisphere. York supposed she had worn a jacket or cardigan before entering the transit hub. 'I suppose so.' She looked round once more. 'In any event, the next gate to Dravid isn't for another three hours, so there's no sense in waiting.'

As they merged with the swarm of other travelers, York found himself unconsciously staying nearby to Sandra and her oversized carriage. Where did this protectiveness originate, he wondered? Surely it wasn't gender. Could it be age?

He admonished himself. It was just the fact that Sandra had lost her track of her partner. He was being companionable, that was all.

Customs consisted of three booths surrounded by glass plating. The booths sat just in front of the gate platform, and the two of the three that were manned were already admitting travelers, though the gate had yet to appear. After about fifteen people had gone through, there wasn't enough room beyond customs, and the line stalled.

York looked around. Most of the travelers were Dravidians, and most of them were professionals like Sandra. He did see a few white hairs towards the back of the line, possibly consulate or Council staff.

As the two mages in technicians robes made their way to the gate platform, York felt something within him stiffen. He glanced at Sandra, just in front of him in line. They stood about twenty people back from the customs booth. The line went back another fifty meters behind them.

He studied the techs. They wore the usual ankle length yellow robes, but their movements betrayed something.

The gate appeared and people started going through.

Sandra went through the central customs booth, while he went to the right. The customs agent was a large man, whose slouch looked unnatural in his finely tailored army uniform.

'Card, please.'

The voice was flat, but not monotonous. York placed his passport on the counter. He knew that not all customs officers went through this charade. The man's eyes flickered with information. 'Mr. Yarke, how long will you be away from Thile?'

'Ten days, about.'

'Uh-huh, and the purpose of your excursion?'

'Holiday.'

The man's voice took on just a little bit of life, 'and is there anything on your person or itinerary that I should be aware of, Mr. Yarke?'

'No sir.'

'Enjoy your trip. Next.'

York swiped the passport and deposited it safely back in his jacket pocket. He saw that Sandra had also had no trouble, despite the infants. She had paused to wait for him, and together they rolled the carriage up the metal ramp on the leftmost edge of the gate platform.

He dipped his shoulder into the darkness.

The scene on the other side spoke of confusion more than anything. They were in a slightly more frugal version of the room they had just left, but in front of them, people milled. Those who were not bewildered shouted angrily at a mage tech, one of the ones who had set up the gate, York realized. Another tech intoned that they should proceed off of the gate platform to make room for those behind.

York snapped his fingers as he shuffled forward. Nothing.

He looked back at Sandra who had just appeared through the gate. He shook his head slightly then snapped his fingers so that she could see. He saw her body go stiff for a second. When she opened her eyes, she nodded at him. The two of them carefully rolled the carriage down the ramp and then, by silent agreement, went to stand in the center of the still forming crowd.

York had no problem hearing the now angry protestations of some of the travelers, but he had to strain to hear the technician's answers.

'How the fuck did you land us in the wrong fucking universe?' Asked a small woman with glasses.

The wiry man in the yellow robe said something, likely ameliorating, then held up his hands, no doubt asking for patience. York turned to look at the gate platform. Almost everyone was through, the new arrivals looking even more bewildered. At the front of the crowd, the shouting increased.

When next he turned, the gate was gone.

Black clad n'Thilians appeared as if from nowhere, gently marshaling the travelers and directing them to stand in an evenly spaced grid. An officer conversed briefly with the tech, then turned to address the crowd.

'Attention everyone, please listen to me for a second. My name is Major Ellerheims. I am terribly sorry for the inconvenience, but we are going to have to ask you to undergo a second customs screening. This should take no more than thirty minutes and we are committed to getting you to your final destination as quickly as possible.'

Someone from the crowd shouted, though only the one. The boisterous among them had mostly wised up at the sight of the gray-black uniforms of n'Thilian intelligence.

Major Ellerheims ignored the interruption. 'Customs agents will come up to you individually and ask you questions. Please try to cooperate as fully as possible.'

One of the younger women in the front row asked in a measured tone, 'Is this legal?'

'Thank you for your cooperation,' was the only response.

York ended up one space behind and to the left of Sandra. Next to her and in front of York was another woman, who happened to share Sandra's complexion. Directly behind him was a young man, possibly still in his twenties, in a tweed suit. To York's left and right were women, probably lawyers or financiers judging by their dress.

York's back was beginning to ache by the time intelligence personnel began to filter into the grid, asking questions in low voices that carried easily. The first person to be approached nearby was the woman on his left. She was larger than her questioner, but her nervousness was obvious.

She was not alone in that regard.

'Let's start with who you're visiting on Dravid?'

'Do I have to answer?'

'It would be easier if you did.'

After a moment, 'my aunt Lestra and her cousins. They have a manse up in the hills above Corsetta.'

The questioner did not look up from her notes. 'When was the last time you visited your Aunt?'

'Two years ago, nearly to the day.'

'And have you traveled to the worlds of Yaril, Thesian, or Adlani in the intervening time period?'

The woman spluttered, 'why does that matter?'

The questioner raised her gaze.

'Fuh. I mean sure, I've been to Thesian, and Adlani too, though that was four years ago.'

She returned her attention to her notes. The next question brought no discernable difference in tone or demeanor. 'Have you been in contact with grand sorceress Silana Selestra or members of her organization?'

York's body temperature plummeted.

'Whoah there, I'm no traitor ma'am.' After a moment she added, 'anyhow, no one has seen the sorceress in years.'

'I see.' The questioner raised her eyes. 'Do you think she gets lonely?'

'Gods between, are you for real?' The eyes did not waver. 'I can't believe you're suggesting that I've been in touch with the most infamous person to step foot on a Council world in the last decade.'

'It's a simple question.'

'What is this, really?'

'Please answer the question.'

The woman rolled her eyes. By this point, everyone nearby was watching intently. York glanced at Sandra, and she appeared just as invested as the rest. 'I don't damn well care if she gets lonely.'

'When's the last time you were on the continent of Aqan?'

'Why, is that where Silana Selestra is holed up?'

'How would you respond if I told you that martial law had been declared in Belingar?'

At this, murmurs rippled through the grid. Any such development could only be an hour old, if that. There had not been a gate from Draavid to Thile since early that morning, but news would have trickled through the Council worlds.

'I think I'm done answering questions now.'

The questioner looked up, then nodded and stepped over to York.

'Mr. Yarke, you are a self employed man, are you not?'

He bit his right bottom lip and grimaced, fearful of what was to come. 'I have that distinction, yes.'

'And in that capacity, you sometimes work as an inter-universal courier, correct?'

'As the breezes blow.'

'Are you currently conveying a package, Mr. Yarke?'

'I most certainly am not.'

'Then you wouldn't mind if we searched your luggage?'

'I think you know the answer to that.'

'Mr. Yarke, you were previously employed as a financial engineer in a Dravidian venture sponsored by grand sorceress Silana Selestra, were you not?'

'I suspect you know that I was.' He could feel the heat of his fellows' gazes on his neck.

'The last time you were in Belingar, Mr. Yarke, did you deliver a package to a woman referred to as Kipsos?'

'I did.'

'Does the name Viridian hold any significance to you, Mr. Yarke?'

'Not that I can recall.'

'I see.' The woman shifted her gaze back to her notes, then nodded succinctly, 'thank you for your time.'

York now grasped the brilliance of the n'Thilian's strategy. The questioner moved two spaces down the line, and not twenty seconds later, the man behind him hissed, 'are you the fucking reason for this, Kal'Kalad?'

York turned slowly. He stood straight, though his back pain had gotten worse. He summoned as much steel as he could, 'do I look like a zealot to you, son?'

'Yeah, now that you mention it, you kind of do.'

'Fuck you, asshole. What are you, twenty four? You're not old enough to know what an extremist is.' York shook his head.

'Look man, it's obvious you're guilty of *something*. If you don't confess or whatever, they can hold us here indefinitely.'

'No they can't.' York glanced at the speaker, the professional, currently on his right. She gave him a knowing but worried glance. 'Max twenty minutes, I guarantee it.'

The kid looked around, 'this is the intelligence we're talking about. They can do whatever they godsdamn please, especially if there's been an attack.'

The woman shrugged, but didn't respond.

York glanced around at the other onlookers, finding precious little sympathy. Amongst the larger grid, the questioners continued their meandering. 'Don't you get it, they're setting me up.' No response. 'I'm not the person that they're implying I am. Is it a crime to have made a delivery to Belingar, years ago?'

The woman on the other side chimed in, 'so why are we here? If it's not you, it's gotta be someone else here then, right? It's not like every Council world is going to interdict all travel to David. That would be hundreds of thousands of people.'

He glanced at Sandra. 'Look, I know just as much as you, so let's all just keep a calm head, ok?'

The kid whined, 'I just want to get home, man.'

York held out his hands. *What do you want me to do?*

He turned back to the front.

Several minutes passed in relative silence. Sandra and the man two spaces to her left were both questioned briefly. After a lull in the activity, York spied one of the questioners walking towards him.

'Mr. Yarke, I would like to once again request that we be allowed to look through your luggage.'

York took a deep breath. It was the officer who had addressed the crowd earlier. He looked around him, then at his satchel by his feet. The worn leather did not look to contain much of anything. Then he looked up at Sandra. She was crouched over the carriage, trying to quiet one of her infants.

He nodded, once.

The officer moved forward warily. York stooped and handed him the bag. The officer, Ellerheims, opened the drawstring and pawed at the contents.

A minute later, he handed the bag back to York and thanked him.

Five minutes later, they were standing on Dravidian soil.

The Dravidian customs people were no less abrasive than the n'Thilians had been.

As soon as the process began, however, a green and gold clad brigadier showed up, prompting whispers from soldier and civilian alike. He surveyed the contents of the arrival hall, pointed at York, and motioned that he should be retrieved.

Twenty minutes later, York Yarke sat in an interrogation room.

A woman in chic civilian dress entered. 'Mr. Yarke, do you know who I am?'

'Of course, madam minister.'

'Excellent.' She sat, adjusting her suit coat. 'I would like to explain to me, in the broadest possible strokes, what the fuck just happened.'

York felt his anger boiling over, and he struggled to maintain a calm facade. 'Well, sir. As you know, I have not been on active duty for several years now, but the service maintains the option of activating me in situations of opportunity.' I believe that at or around 3:35 pm earlier today, such a situation arose when I coincidentally sat next to a woman named Sandra. Evidently, this woman is deeply involved with the separatist cause. Do I have it right so far?'

She motioned for him to continue.

'What merited the activation of a long retired field agent was not just this opportunity, but also some kind of terrorist attack, possibly moments before this chance encounter.'

'Forty two minutes prior. Shaped thaumaturgic charges were remotely detonated in a crowded holiday market in Belingar. The terrorists claim, not incorrectly, that seven of the ten casualties were government employees.' The intelligence minister did not attempt to conceal the ice in her voice.

Seven years of peace.

*Shit.* 'I see. Well, as I was saying, this event roughly coincided with the opportunity to embed me with this Sandra character. You, or possibly the n'Thilians, detained her partner, then arranged for us to maintain proximity during the second customs screening. The n'Thilians then implied that I was the target of their suspicions, hoping to ingratiate me with Sandra and her separatist cell. The key to this strategy was to imply that I was an active courier for another rebel cell, as it is well established that the n'Thilians will not violate private property rights.'

'And then what happened?'

He paused, eyeing the woman across the table. 'She was trying to comfort her one year old baby, sir. What did you expect me to do?'

'Seven lives, Yarke. Seven families, violently ripped apart and you're moaning about lying to a woman because she's given *birth*? I guess the terrorists have really figured us out, then! Is that what the government means by guaranteed eighteen months?'

'I couldn't say, sir.'

'You fucked this up, Yarde.'

'With respect, sir.'

'Get out of my sight.'

He stood up and pushed in his chair. 'I'm sorry if I let you down, sir, but I doubt I would have acted differently, even knowing what I do now.'

The woman exhaled, and gestured with her right hand.

*Happy holidays.*