

Retinal Echoes
By Chris Nagele

Vander stepped through the gate to a cacophony of orange hues. Via and Martin, who had gone through before him, uttered ever more exuberant exclamations as they stumbled over to the edge of the viewing platform, high on the western side of one of the Estarana mountains.

Vander followed in their wake, his leather shoes slapping softly on the granite platform. He glanced around to make sure that Selile had gotten through. She had, and nodded at Vander as she continued her conversation with Casker, their guide. Casker winked the gate out of existence with a twirl of his fingers.

Turning back towards the incredible sunset, Vander joined his friends at the edge and surveyed the view below. The landscape dropped off sharply, averaging forty five degrees for half a kilometer. Beyond those moss laden slopes, however, a boreal plateau extended as far as Vander could make out in the fierce rays. The transition from mountain prairie to forest was patchy, and Vander wondered what determined the chaotic arrangement.

His eyes began to water, just as they had the last six times.

Via, her dark hair a foil for the saffron glow, was talking about her lunch earlier that day with an old college friend. '... you should have seen these nuts, Mart. I mean, I don't know if they were actually nuts at all, but they did taste like them, and anyway, the point is that they were huge! Three times the size of my fist.' She balled both her lithe hands to remind Martin what a fist was. 'And each dish was a different preparation. Fried, grilled, steamed, macerated. These n'Thilian chefs are geniuses, I'm telling you.'

'I was partial to the lamb last night,' Vander agreed.

Via, with her large eyes and slender cheeks, looked over, evidently not having sensed that he had joined the two of them. Her smile was delayed only a moment, 'I'm telling you this was so much better. We have to go back there before tomorrow!'

Vander nodded and shrugged, looking out over the vista once more. The colors were slowly modulating, especially in the clouds far above the horizon, where pink was in the ascendant.

Martin's tiny curls bounced as he turned around to locate Selile and Casker. 'Hey Selile, how would you feel about eating some huge nuts tomorrow?'

If any joke was implied, it passed right by their lanky friend. She flashed a thumbs up, then turned back to Casker, but their well dressed tour guide motioned that he and Selile should join the others at the railing. Casker had a low voice that carried, even on the windier of the overlooks through which they had traveled that evening. Vander wondered why the air in the Estarana mountains was so still.

'Well gang, we are now on the continent of Rest, which is in the southern hemisphere, longitude of about thirty five degrees. The local time is six twenty four, and we should have true sunset in a few minutes.' The short man paused to take a drink from his bottle. 'Now, you can see that there are low lying clouds stretching over the plateau to the northwest, but then we also have some high altitude noctilucent much more distant, about two hundred clicks to the west. This is a really rare combination, and I'm delighted we got to see something like this today.' He paused. Vander wondered how rare it was. Could this amber-skinned man ever really be excited by a sunset, when he had seen millions in his lifetime? 'Now, you can already see that the area

just above those nearby clouds is reddening rapidly, and expect that to continue. If you look closely, you can also see a peculiar yellowish hue low to the horizon. This is due to the updrafts at the edge of the plateau, which clears out any dust from the air at regular intervals.'

Martin asked, 'is that like what we saw in the Valker range?'

Their guide frowned, 'the last stop, you mean?'

Via and Vander interjected at almost the same time, 'he means the Grendins.'

They exchanged a solid high five, the clap echoing once off the mountains behind. Via looked wistfully into the distance. Martin smirked, but withheld any retort.

Casker looked bemused. 'Yes and no. The Grendins also have a plateau west of the mountains, but it falls gradually so you don't see these dramatic updraft features. However, there was a significant yellowing near the horizon, and you might recall that that was caused by trade winds blowing in from the Affinel Sea.'

Martin sighed dramatically, much of his hair now hanging to one side, 'that's right! I forgot about the trade winds.'

Selile elbowed him in the ribs, but Casker just smiled. 'If you look closely, you should be able to make out the start of the sunset, just- about- any second- now!'

Vander strained his eyes, but couldn't make out the lower half of the glowing n'Thilian sun. He had to remind himself that it was technically the same star as the one that Adlani orbited, just a bit younger and imperceptibly redder. Casker had explained that any differences in appearance were actually due to planetary atmospheres, specifically the chemical composition and dust molecules originating from two mostly distinct biospheres. Vander couldn't help think, however, of the star itself as different.

As his three friends cooed over the view, Vander found his thoughts once again retreating inwards. It wasn't that this trip had been a mistake, he mused, more that it was something to have been tried. The constant feeling of insecurity derived from his inability to call on magic in this universe nagged too strongly for him to enjoy what had been an objectively fantastic getaway.

His reverie was broken by voices behind them. Vander turned to see another gate hanging in the mountain air, with another tour group coming through. The guide shouted some jibe at Casker, and she laughed as she received a playful bolt of magic in return. The tourists themselves looked to be Xresian, or perhaps Dravidian. Vander's gaze locked briefly with one of the men and he quickly looked away, unaccountably embarrassed.

The orb was fast becoming a sliver, its light refracting brilliantly from the clouds which appeared just above. From the noctilucent clouds Casker had pointed out earlier, deep purple hues burned themselves onto the sky. Vander tried to focus on those darker colors, only for retinal echoes to dance across his vision.

Selile leaned her long form far out over the railing. 'Why have we never done this back on Adlani?'

Martin shrugged in the way that only he could, 'Adlani doesn't have sunsets like this, does it?'

Vander glanced over at Casker who shook his head. 'I've never been, though some of my coworkers do go offworld to compare sometimes.'

Via spoke with implied authority, 'Adlani surely has sunsets like this, if people just took the time to find them.'

'Speaking of, do you guys want to stay here for the afterglow or head to the next stop?' When no one immediately weighed in, Casker continued, 'we could jump up to the northern hemisphere to the Doldrums, where the sunset will start in two minutes, or we could try Mt. Octavia. We don't normally go there, but it's forecast to be really good today.'

Vander used his most reasonable tone of voice, 'I'm fine hanging out with this afterglow for a while.'

The others agreed.

After a few minutes of soaking up the sight in silence, Casker turned his back to the railing. His trench coat was made of a light woven material, seemingly at odds with the mountain chill. 'So Vander, Selile told me that she and Martin are in banking, and Via does real estate. That just leaves you, buddy...'

Via snorted, 'this should be good.'

Casker looked up in surprise, 'what, is he famous? I didn't mean to-'

'Don't worry, it's fine.' Vander spoke slowly, choosing his words, 'I am a lieutenant-'

'Oh cool-'

'In the Adlani Air Force.'

The man's eyes went wide, 'Oh.'

Martin laughed goodnaturedly.

Casker continued after a moment, 'so, you're like-'

'Yup.'

'-like, an actual soldier-'

'Yes.'

'-not a bureaucrat?' The n'Thilian turned towards Vander and looked him up and down. 'Well. How about that?'

'Indeed.'

'I mean, that's awesome, man, but I wouldn't have necessarily had you pegged as- well-'

Via supplied, 'as one of the most powerful combat mages on Adlani?'

'Well- yes.' The man looked him over once more, 'sorry, I didn't mean to sound-'

Vander jumped in, 'it's fine. I get it all the time.'

Via couldn't resist one more jibe, 'I mean, after all, just look at the guy.'

Vander and Martin laughed, though it sounded a bit forced even to Vander's ears. The Adlani turned back to watch the embers of the sunset, but Casker could not contain his curiosity. 'So, you're in the air corps, does that mean- you can actually- you know- fly?'

'Yes sir.'

'That's so cool, dude. We had to give it a go in high school gym class, but to do it for real.' He shook his head. 'Next level. So what does that entail, day to day I mean?'

Vander glanced at his friends, but they were focused on the fading light. 'Well, I'm trained for inter-universal incursions, so you can give your buddies at n'Thilian intelligence a healthy warning next time you see them.' Was the resulting laugh just a shade too high, Vander wondered. 'But day to day is mostly first responder stuff. Earthquakes and volcanoes are the two main culprits. Hurricanes and thunderstorms occasionally, but those are slow moving so we usually don't need to get involved.'

Casker sized him up for a third time, 'that's awesome. Honestly I never would have guessed.'

Vander turned back to the view, but after a moment, their guide interceded once more.
'What's your top speed?'

Vander gave the n'Thilian his most beatific smile.

'Ah right, classified probably. Well, can you tell me if you could go a thousand kilometers per hour?'

'I might be able to. Why?'

The n'Thilian gestured to the west. 'Well, have you ever chased the sunset?'

Vander saw Via and Martin both glance up at him. He pursed his lips. 'Maybe I'll give it a go one day.'

Casker nodded, looking vaguely disappointed, and leaned forward on the railing.

In the distant sky, purple faded to black.

Minutes later, their guide rounded up the group and Via asked where they were going next.

'Bsescas ridge. It's a well known spot, two hundred clicks southwest of here. They have nearly perfect cloud cover today.'

Yet another beautiful sunset.

Vander could not keep an edge of sarcasm from his thoughts.