

DOLS IN THEIR HEARTS

by Frederick Rustam

"Your fugitive was seen in one of the chapel areas, Commander.... Each of the chapels is connected to two others and to the Plaza by wide pedestrian tunnels. He can move about freely, after hours, without being above-ground for long."

Tethka stood at one of the picture windows that circled the room. From the Administrative Tower's vantage point, he could discern the basic layout of the Gardens. He guessed the tunnels were under the wide concrete walkways which connected the chapels and the Plaza, as Varunar said the tunnels did.

Beside the walkways, flowers and flowering shrubs brightened the area. Beyond the chapels, tall, waving grass stretched to the distant horizon. Widely spaced were tall, pointed lighting rods that neutralized the air over the Gardens, protecting the monks and visitors during the violent summer storms which swept across the plain.... Drawn by the sight of the landscaped temple complex in the vast grasslands, Tethka spoke without turning around.

"Are there any intrusion sensors in the area?...Are the Gardens patrolled after dark?"

"No...no. This is a place of worship — uh, meditation. It was skillfully constructed by the Founders without precious materials or removable furnishings. It was intended that visitors feel at ease here, as in a public park, and not see it as a place of guarded wealth.... Only the casual watchfulness of our Gardeners — the monks you see at work — assures public order during the daytime. After dark, the chapel areas are deserted. Frankly, the monks are afraid to go near the old temples at night. They still believe in the animal spirits."

He continued, "Fortunately, those who choose to visit are usually on their best behavior.... These days, there are so few believers. We lost many faithful visitors after The Conversion."

Prior Varunar took on an air of sadness as he spoke of contemporary conditions at the Gardens. He was a tall, thin elderly man, dressed in a traditional monk's robe. Because of his office, his robe was black, unlike the brown of the ordinary Gardeners. His tanned, wrinkled face bespoke a life of toil during his rise to the Priory. His stainless-steel medallion, suspended from a chain, was hardly what one would expect, though.... Perhaps, it was post-Conversion — its golden predecessor tucked carefully away, somewhere.

Tethka listened, dubiously, to the Prior. He detected no enthusiasm in this man of religion for the task his team had come to perform. These people were probably so glad to have even a "fugitive" visitor that he guessed he would get minimum cooperation from them. They also probably knew that Roko claimed to be an animist — which didn't help things.... Tethka pretended to know nothing about the Gardens, to see how the Prior would explain them. Since the Service couldn't afford a truthseer for this mission, he would have to use his own intuition to guess whether or not the Gardeners were helping Roko.

Tethka turned to face the Prior. "What was this Conversion, of which you speak?" he inquired, blandly.

Varunar's hands, although clasped before him on his desk, moved restlessly as he spoke. It was clear he felt that things here were not as they should be, and that this troubled him.

"Last year, the People's Government outlawed the practice of our religion — 'animal-worship,' they termed it. We had to remove the sacred idols from the temples. They're stored in a government warehouse now.... But, they remain in our hearts.

"We must now refer to the temples as 'Chapels of Meditation.' They allowed us to keep the reliefs, decorative sculptures, and mosaics which are so numerous — so long as we encourage visitors to view them as a kind of zoological menagerie. The name of the complex was changed from 'The Temple of the Seven Spirits' to 'The Garden of the Seven Virtues.' The virtues were chosen by the government, and were cleverly matched to the former deities.... For example, the Temple of the Bear is now the Chapel of the People's Strength.

"It was part of the government's program to discourage religions other than the watered-down official creed which exalts the state. Official propaganda is now deemed to be of more value to the people than the comfort of the old beliefs.

"The Conversion was difficult both for us and the faithful among the populace. We're forbidden to conduct open worship of the old spirits — the sacred animal deities of nature.... Of course, the government allows visitors to believe what they wish in the chapels and gardens, so long as they don't worship openly. And, in the cruelest of ironies, we — the traditional believers — are somehow expected to enforce this edict in the Gardens."

The Prior's face was a mask of gloom as he added, "The former Keepers of the Faith are now labeled by the government as 'Gardeners.' They even passed a law — a civil law, mind you — that my monks are free to marry.... It's a great satisfaction to us that none have done so — yet."

"I see," replied Commander Tethka. Since he was an Empire civil servant, he avoided any comment which might be interpreted as criticism of the semiautonomous People's Republic of this backwater planet. So long as they paid their dues to the Emperor, Tethka remained unconcerned about sociological issues here, especially religion. He had a job to do, however, and he intended to get on with it.... He changed the subject.

"I'll need a guide — someone who knows the Gardens like the palm of his hand."

"I've delegated Friar Yanto to be at your disposal, Commander. He's waiting outside. He'll begin your orientation at the Model Room.... If you need anything else, just let me know."

The Prior remained seated as Tethka prepared to leave.

"Thank you, Prior Varunar. We'll try to go about our task as unobtrusively as possible, but I can't rule out violence. We may have to clear the Gardens of all personnel, at times.... Please brief your people."

He turned and walked from the room, adjusting his weapons belts as he did so.

* * *

Tethka was in charge of a team of four SOPs — Special Operations Police. They had been sent to Terradon because a verified sighting of Roko had been reported to Sector Command. Matiash Roko was one of the Empire's most notorious fugitive criminals. He had outraged the Imperial police establishment by killing two officers who had stopped him to search his vehicle for drug contraband.

He had embarrassed the Rural Constabulary by escaping from their custody during the first night after his capture, killing two jailers and a clerk as well. He had eluded the Empire's interplanetary network for more than a year.... The news media had cast him larger-than-life — inflating him from a minor trafficker to a drug kingpin — and delighted in reporting his many presumed sightings.

A fuzzy tourist photograph had been taken of a Roko lookalike in the Garden of the Seven Virtues. SOP image-enhancement revealed that the subject of the photo was, most likely, the famous fugitive. Tethka's team had been sent to the Great Plains of Terradon to apprehend him, while news of the discovery was withheld from the media.

2.

"This is the Plaza of the People, the central area of the Gardens.... As you can see, the Plaza contains the Administrative Tower and the Visitor Center, with its VIP roofport where your

aircar landed." He illuminated, with a spot of light, a tiny model aircar like the one which had been assigned to the team by the People's Government.

"The Tubestation is beneath the Plaza. The last stop on the Tubeline before the Gardens is the Air/Ground Park. For noise and pollution control, it has been sited well beyond the horizon. Airborne visitors begin their visit to the Gardens, there."

The spot moved about to highlight the presentation of Friar Yanto, who wielded its source, a lightwand.... Yanto, who smiled politely at the SOPs, was a cherubic young monk. He seemed to have found his life's work in the service of the Gardens.

The four officers to whom he addressed his orientation were dressed in dark green uniforms with black leather belts, to which were attached the tools of their trade.... Sergeant Reihong, the marksman, carried on his shoulder a black radrifle. Each of the others had a holstered radpistol and a stunjack. The SOPs looked both ominous and anonymous in their black helmets with sunvisors raised for the presentation.... After a while, when it became clear to Tethka that he was getting the Cook's Tour, he interrupted Yanto.

"Where was Roko photographed?"

"He was seen leaving the Chapel of The People's Flexibility ... formerly, the Temple of the Serpent." He threw the light spot onto a miniature of the old temple.

"What an appropriate place for a viper like Roko," remarked Corporal Olyra. She was a hard-faced blonde, who kept her hair functionally short, under her helmet. "He probably lives in a hole behind the altar."

"There are no altars in the chapels — just plinths where the idols were formerly mounted," said Yanto, helpfully.

"Where's he getting his food?" asked Tethka.

"There are free food dispensers in the chapel underlevel for the convenience of the poorer visitors. They dispense only packaged gruel and soymilk, however."

"Can they be monitored to determine when they're used?" inquired Getorix, the team's technician.

"No provision was made for that," explained Yanto.

Tethka make his decision. "We'll send the aircar pilot aloft for IR surveillance, tonight. Maybe Roko'll reveal himself." He looked at Yanto. "Tell the Prior I want everybody out of the chapel areas before dark, and no lights — anywhere."

"Yes, Commander." Yanto left to comply.

"We'll get some chow and shuteye in the Gardner's underground dormitory, now. After dark, we'll separate. You three head toward the Chapel of Flexibility — one in each tunnel. I'll enter it, above-ground.... If I flush him out, and he makes a break underground, one of you should get him."

"Getorix, rig up a repeater at the intersection of the three tunnels under the chapel, so we

can all be in radio-contact."

Tetka briefed his team on terrain, procedures, and radio codes to prepare them for the night's hunt. Then, they retired to the dormitory.

3.

The outside lighting in the Gardens had been turned off, but Tethka's wide-area night-vision goggles turned the starlight into a pale green flood of illumination. He had chosen to keep things dark, and to use his helmet sensors — hoping, thereby, to put Roko at a disadvantage.

Shortly after the team had awakened, the aircar pilot reported an IR target emerging from the Chapel of the People's Flexibility. It had lingered outside for awhile, then reentered the building.

"We have him, now," said Tethka, confidently.

Electric utilicars took Getorix and Olyra to the neighboring chapels, where they descended to the pedestrian tunnels which led to the Chapel of the People's Flexibility. Reihong entered the tunnel from the Plaza.... When they were in place, Tethka started them moving, then advanced toward the chapel on the walkway from the Plaza. The aircar circled the area, watchfully, in case Roko made a run for it on the surface.

Tethka approached the main entrance of the chapel, radpistol at the ready.... The only sounds were those of the night insects and his muffled footfalls.

He entered through the open doorway. The bronze doors had been locked back so he wouldn't make a noise opening them. The lobby was empty. He walked across the marble floor toward the entrance to the auditorium. Stopping at the entrance, he listened for a few seconds. Then, crouching, he stepped through and swept the large room with his goggles.

The light was more subdued, here. The only source was starlight from the tall windows. He moved slowly down the aisle, sweeping his head back and forth, on guard for a sudden appearance of the fugitive. The tension began to mount. He half-expected Roko to jump up from between the marble benches and fire at him.... He carefully checked each bench aisle.

When he reached the front of the room, he moved around the empty plinth where the serpent-idol had once rested. He paused at the stairs of the pulpit, then dashed up them to the lectern. No one lurked there.... He looked out over the rows of benches. ("Roko must be underground," he thought.)

He hurried back to the lobby and moved slowly and quietly down one of the side stairways. When he had descended enough to get a view of the underlevel, he paused and listened. He could see the openings to the lighted tunnels, the food dispensers, and the doors to the restrooms. He stepped slowly down to the floor, and looked around. In the middle of the room was Getorix's radio repeater. It was hidden in a packing box, and was rigged to radio an alarm if it were disturbed.... The box had been supplied by the Prior.

There were two other doors opening off the room. He would wait for his backup before checking them, but he moved over to the souvenir stand and cautiously looked behind it. The shelves under the counter were filled with cardboard boxes.

His unease was increasing with every hiding place he eliminated....

He felt he had to get something solid behind him. He didn't want Roko to throw open a door and get in a first-shot. He moved over to the wall next to the tunnel from the Plaza and stood with his back to it.

He keyed his helmet radio. "Team Blue, this is Blue Leader. I'm at ground zero. Report."

"BLUE TWO ... ZILCH."

"BLUE THREE ... ZILCH."

Tethka waited for Blue Four — Reihong, in the Plaza Tunnel. There was only silence.

"Blue Four, this is Blue Leader. Report.... No response, 2126 hours." This was for the record. The repeater recorded all of their transmissions.

* * *

When Olyra and Getorix reached the underlevel of the Chapel of the People's Flexibility, Tethka gathered them around him in the center of the room, each facing off toward a tunnel.

"First we check these doors — then we go down the Plaza tunnel.... Break!" They rapidly followed him to the men's restroom door, and took up station on each side. Tethka shoved back the door, but hung back to see if Roko would open fire while the door was open. Then, he pushed through the doorway and leaped into the room, followed by Olyra and Getorix. Olyra dropped to the floor, and looked under the stall doors. She saw nothing, but they checked each stall, anyway.... The room was empty.

They repeated the procedure in the women's restroom — with the same results.

Behind the other two doors were a janitor's closet and a utilities room. They were both unoccupied.

The team started down the tunnel to the Plaza, where Reihong must be. The off-hours overhead lighting was dim, but too bright for goggles. They were less than halfway to the Plaza Tubestation when they saw, ahead, a dark figure sprawled on the floor, rifle beside him. It was Reihong.... Tethka and Getorix broke into a run. Olyra followed, while looking backward toward the chapel they had left.

He was lying on his back. His eyes and mouth were open. Tethka knelt and examined him.... He was dead.

The disciplined officers seemed outwardly calm at the sight of their dead teammate — but raged, silently, at their loss. They nervously alternated at looking at the corpse, then

around them.

"What the hell got him?" asked Getorix. "I don't see any damage."

"What's that on his neck?... Olyra pointed.

Tethka looked, closely. On the side of Reihong's neck were two large puncture marks. Dried blood trailed from them.

"Looks like a snakebite," offered Getorix.

"On his way to the Temple of the Serpent," added Tethka, looking up at his officers.

4.

"This isn't Roko's style...." Tethka stood before Prior Varunar's desk.

"...And, I don't see how my man could have been bitten in the neck by a snake while he was patrolling...." He stared at the Prior as if he expected an explanation of the mysterious death of his officer.

Varunar looked grave. "Nor do I, Commander."

"Roko was spotted, by the aircar pilot, reentering the chapel. But, we couldn't find him anywhere in the building. He had to have gone down the Plaza tunnel.... But, how could he have gotten past Reihong? What did he do — throw a snake at him?... I don't buy that."

There was a period of silence, while Varunar looked embarrassed. Tethka watched the elderly man, closely, for signs of guilty knowledge. He was fairly good at detecting them.... But, in the behavior of the self-controlled monk, he saw no such signs.

"There is a old legend..." said Varunar, diffidently.

"Yes?..."

"...That the spirits of the temples guard them against intruders."

Tethka scowled at the Prior. "Are you saying my officer was killed by one of your old deities?"

"I don't know, Commander. I'm just considering the possibility.... I do still believe in the animal spirits, you know — despite the government's fiat."

The outer door opened. Olyra stuck her head in.

"There's a gaggle of media here. They want to know about a snake attack on a policeman at the old Temple of the Serpent." Her voice dripped with acid.

Tethka looked sharply back at Varunar.... This time, he did expect an explanation.

"One of my monks must have talked about it.... I'm sorry, Commander. Discipline isn't what it used to be before the government upset our way of life."

"Well, I hope YOURS is.... Tell them one of your monks was bitten while he was cutting grass. Don't tell them why we're here. I want a lid on this 'til we get Roko."

"As you wish, Commander."

"Tonight, we'll need some of your men at the Plaza end of the tunnels to watch for Roko.... They'll pretend to be working on something. I just want them to watch where he goes, if we flush him out."

"I'll have Yanto post them for you."

"Thanks."

Tethka took his officers out a back door and down to the dormitory.

* * *

Later that morning, before he slept to prepare himself for the night's hunt, Tethka looked over the Plaza from the roof of the Administrative Tower.... He could see that the number of visitors in the Gardens had increased markedly. He knew the media had been sceptical about the phony snakebite story. They had continued to report the rumor that the victim was an SOP officer looking for the fugitive, Roko. Undoubtedly, this accounted for the extra visitors.

If this world were the Emperor's home planet, Tethka could have gotten a censorship order. But, he suspected that Terradon's government resented his team's visit and was deliberately allowing the media to report the news — to discourage future SOP visits. He had to get Roko quickly, before the situation became a media circus and discredited the Special Operations Police.

* * *

"I think Roko had help," said Olyra, scowling. "I think he came here because he figured these animal-worshippers would help him."

"I second that," added Getorix.

They were awake, now, and waiting for a call from the circling aircar pilot. Tethka could feel the anger of his officers at the unexplainable loss of their comrade.

"So do I," said Tethka. "But, I'm damned if I can figure out how they did it. Reihong was too savvy..." His voice trailed off.

Just then, their radios brought them out of their mood, as the aircar pilot reported another IR target like the one last night. This time, it was at the Chapel of the People's Strength. Someone had come outside for a short time, then reentered the building.... Tethka couldn't help remembering that this building was formerly the Temple of the Bear. He said nothing about this, but he guessed that both of his officers were thinking the same thing.

"This sounds like a setup, Commander," said Olyra. "Two nights in a row — at about the same time — someone comes out of a chapel, and hangs around 'til he's spotted."

"Are we going to change our tactics?" asked Getorix.

"No... We've got to cover those tunnels. That's the most likely way he'll go.... If I call you, though, move it. Maybe, this time, he'll stand and fight."

Even as Tethka said this, he doubted it. Roko knew better than to directly challenge an armed, alert SOP.... He'd run.

"Let's go."

* * *

The hunt went off just like the previous night. The chapel was found to be empty. But, when Tethka called-in his officers, only Olyra responded, on the run.

"Damn it!" she yelled out her opened visor. "Where's Getorix?!"

They ran down the tunnel toward the adjoining chapel.

They found what they were expecting, but had refused to discuss the possibility of, earlier that night — a second victim.

They were too stunned to speak, as they stood over the bloody body of their comrade.... His green uniform was lacerated, and his head and neck had been savaged — as if by a bear.

"How?..." Olyra, at a loss for words, looked at her commander with tears in her eyes. "...How?"

"I don't know.... Let's leave him, for now. Spread out — we'll check the other end of the tunnel. Tethka felt that they needed to do something immediately, even if it were something futile.... They had to get away from Getorix.

They moved as fast as they dared down the tunnel, one close to each wall, and into the underlevel of the adjoining chapel. They checked every possible hiding place, while the aircar pilot scanned for a surface-target.

Roko had escaped again.

Or — had he ever been there?

5.

The two officers stood on the roof of the Administrative Tower, watching the visitors swarm up the stairs from the Tubestation.... The media had reported another bizarre "accident" and the rumor that another of the dreaded SOP cops had been killed. They had hinted at the malevolence of the former animal spirits toward unbelievers. It made good copy — and good publicity for the Gardens.

"The monks're doing a land-office business.... Are you surprised?" asked Olyra, her face twisted into a fierce scowl.

"Vultures..." he responded, glumly.

"Are we going to take the bait again, tonight, COMMANDER?" Her emphasis on his title implied that she wasn't happy with his plodding methods.

Tethka felt both tired and discouraged. This was a situation like none he'd ever experienced.... He had nothing to explain the two deaths. Each tunnel appeared to be unconnected to anything along its length, except to an overhead utilities conduit — accessed by panels, but full of pipes and too narrow for anyone to conceal himself — and a floor drain, also too small. But, Roko and anyone helping him had to have a way of quickly and quietly disabling his officers before they could react.

"I don't see that we have an alternative.... This time, we'll send monks along the tunnels from the adjoining chapels. You'll move with me from the Plaza.... Would you rather I worked the tunnel, and you topside?"

"Hell, no — I can handle myself." Olyra bridled when she assumed her boss was treating her as less than a warrior. "Just give me Reihong's radrifle.... What'd Varunar say about Getorix?"

"I didn't see him. I figured he'd just look hangdog and sympathize.... Yanto briefed him."

"I'd like to be alone with him for a few minutes," Olyra said.

"We're far from the homeworld, Corporal. We can't roust the locals without good cause.... The monks're playing it straight, so we just have to do the same — for now."

"Great.... They'll hit us again, you know."

"Maybe." But, he knew it was likely.

6.

As they expected, and right on schedule, the aircar pilot reported another IR target — this

time at the Chapel of the People's Determination — formerly, the Temple of the Bull.

"I ought to be able to hear an oncoming bull," Olyra joked, lamely.

"If anything but me is oncoming, stun it before it gets close. Don't take any chances.... And, don't forget to sing out."

"Count on it."

* * *

For Tethka, the chapel sweep was becoming routine. Because all the killings occurred in the tunnels, he didn't expect to find Roko above-ground.

He entered the auditorium in his usual cautious way, however.... Before he could look around him, his eye was caught by a dark mass on the plinth at the front of the room. Even in the pale light of his goggles, he could see it was a body.

Slowly, he approached — while looking around to make sure it wasn't some kind of bait to distract him.

He moved around the prone figure so that he faced toward the front entrance. Looking around, rapidly, he turned the corpse over with his boot. He gave it a quick glance.... It was Roko. Even with the hoof-wounds all over his face, he could tell. He had a hole in his chest the size of a bull's horn. His shirt front was soaked with blood.

Tethka relaxed and keyed his radio.

"Blue Two, this is Blue Leader.... Come on up to the auditorium.... The matador is down."

7.

The bodies had been transferred from the refectory meat locker to the aircar. Olyra was waiting beside it, Reihong's radrifle slung over her shoulder, her boot tapping the roofport pavement, impatiently.... She was waiting for Tethka, who was in Varunar's circular office, taking his leave.

* * *

"I won't be troubling you any more, Prior.... But, then, I HAVE done you a service, haven't I?"

"Yes, Commander. I'm grateful your fugitive will no longer wander around our chapels at night." His face was an unreadable mask, but his hands were still restless. Tethka admired his cool performance.

"That's not what I meant."

"Oh?..."

"It seems almost everyone wants to rediscover the power of the animal spirits. I've increased your 'gate' tremendously — at the expense of my two men, of course — not to mention Matiash Roko. I guess you figured you couldn't kill all of us without having an army of SOPs descend on you. You calculated that a loss of two was tolerable."

"I don't know what you mean.... I'm truly sorry about your loss, Commander."

"My loss is your gain," countered Tethka. His frustration at his inability to avenge the deaths of Reihong and Getorix caused him to drop his usual diplomatic demeanor.

The Prior stared blankly back at him.... Tethka continued.

"The way I see it, you intended all along to make use of Roko and my team to get around the People's Government by giving the old crowds something to come back for. 'Marvel at the power of the seven spirits. See how they destroy those who disrespect them.' ...Something like that, eh?"

"Commander, I..."

"I don't know how you did it, but I did check the People's Central Records. It seems you have, among your monks, some ex-cons and a former commando.... I wonder where they were, the last three nights?"

"I assure you..."

"There's no way you can assure me. Don't even try.... If this were my homeland, I'd take you apart until I found out the truth.... However, I don't have that authority on this mudball.... I want you to know how I feel, though."

The two men stared at each other. The monk showed no fear of the policeman.... Finally, he spoke.

"I'm glad you got your man, Commander. Observing you in action has been most enlightening.... Have a good journey home."

Tethka wanted to retort, but he couldn't think of anything more to say. He turned on his heel and stalked from the room.

* * *

That evening, and every evening thereafter, the Gardens were open to the public until midnight, and special tours were conducted which showed visitors where the recent tragic events had occurred.

The idols remained in the government warehouse. •

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