

The Gods of Ultima Landra

Sample: chapter 1

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*He came to this world to free his people from a false god.
But is there a real god hiding behind the façade?*

~ 1. The Stranger and the Qhoon ~

In the angry red glow of evening the stranger in the torn spacesuit was hustled at swordpoint before the King.

The sullen disc of the sun was hovering over the western rooftops, its outline hazy through the smoke from the burning town. Light flickered as flames ripped open the front of a wooden hilltop temple just yards away, filling the air with the smell of soot. Guards jostled the stranger to her knees on cobblestones littered with rubbish: out of the metal ring hanging loose on the once shiny fabric around her neck peered the face and unkempt hair of a middle-aged woman; her hands emerged from smaller rings at her wrists. A male figure with a golden crown riveted onto his helmet stood over her, his sword still in his hand, a reddish gleam on one edge.

“What’s this?” The King’s voice was deep and heavy with authority, but his cheeks and chin, like those of the soldiers standing around him, were smooth and hairless. Behind the armed men stood a figure in a purple robe, an incongruous smile on its face. The soldier in charge of the platoon made a brief bow.

“Trying to escape, Your Majesty. When we caught it, says it wants to talk to yourself.”

He stared at the figure kneeling before him. "Why is it dressed like that?"

The platoon leader shrugged. "Talks kinda funny, too", he added.

"Pen the Underling with the rest."

The guard saluted. But as he was seizing the prisoner by the shoulder to lead her away, the woman looked up and said loudly, though in a strange accent, "Great King! My name is Professor Xandith. I've come a long way to see you – from another world. I bring you greetings from Goldring, and the hope – let me finish, damn you! – the hope for peace and friendship between our peoples!"

"From where?"

"Goldring, Your Majesty!"

The King frowned at her and gave a dismissive wave of his hand. Two of the soldiers took her arms and hauled her to her feet.

"I've brought you a letter from the Prime Minister of the Goldring government", she shouted desperately, struggling against the men's grip. "It's very important!"

On the verge of turning to other business, the King glanced back at her. The guards hesitated in order to allow him to speak again, and while they relaxed their hold on her arms the prisoner was able to fumble open the flap of a pocket.

"Goldring fiddlesticks...", the King glanced to one side and spat on the ground, "What letter? You, you're nothing but a fucking Underling who's got no business talking to your betters."

Professor Xandith managed to produce a large sealed envelope with one hand. "Here", she began, "signed by the...".

"Enough fairy stories!", the King growled. "To the Aquarium!" He turned away and paused to admire the flickering ruin of the temple.

The prisoner's eyes boggled with fearful puzzlement, but the guards were already dragging her towards the cobbled street which led downhill in the direction of the town centre.

"What Aquarium?", she babbled. "Don't you know I've come from another world to talk to you, to give this letter to the King?"

The platoon leader snatched the envelope from her, ripped it in half and in half again.

"No! That's smart paper, with a translation patch. You don't know how much it cost!"

The soldier glared at her and deliberately tossed the pieces into the burning building. The prisoner shrieked loudly in despair, but he hit her across the face with a mailed fist and

she fell silent. As they moved on, a small tower atop the roof of the destroyed temple behind them collapsed into the flames with a smoky crash and a shower of sparks.

At the bottom of the hill they approached a wide open square between three-storey buildings. One or two of the houses were on fire, but most had survived the battle intact. A crowd of civilians was milling around, and here it was obvious the way that the prisoner's close-fitting clothes looked out of place among the loose, baggy garments of the locals. She stared at their heads, which in contrast to her own were covered in a short downy fuzz, more fur than hair, whitish but marked with dark green stripes. Some individuals displayed two splashes of colour, some three, but others were without stripes.

Meanwhile down the far side of the square marched a column of soldiers with mechanical rhythm, their pikes slanted on their shoulders, their shields all showing a circular device showing a stylised shark emerging from the waves, its jaws open to reveal a pair of jagged teeth, its outline in black on white against a red background. The troops' iron helmets caught a momentary gleam of the fading sunlight as it fell between the houses.

Like the civilians, the soldiers all had small noses, high cheekbones, a greenish cast to the skin... and wasn't there something strange about the slant of the eyes? *Different from us*, Xandith thought. *Different... alien... inhuman...*

At the entrance to the square the platoon reached a wooden checkpoint. In addition to the usual guards, the prisoner noticed another figure wearing a crowned helmet, but this time a flowing dress rather than armour. This personage was taller and slimmer than most of those standing around, and while the face was womanlike, the expression it carried left no doubt as to the authority it wielded. The platoon leader approached the figure and bowed more deeply than he had earlier done to the King.

The crowned being cast a glance over the group and its eyes rested for a moment on the prisoner in the centre. "Another ringleader?", was the question in a husky contralto.

"Yes, Your Grace. The King himself ordered..."

"Carry on."

The platoon leader bowed.

The prisoner suddenly came to life. "I'm not a ringleader of anything", she protested. "I'm not from this world at all. I'm from – uhhh!..."

A kick from one of the guards forced her to break off.

The regal figure watching them frowned. "Let the Underling speak."

"Thank you. My name's Professor Xandith. I've got important business with the King.

I had a letter from the Prime Minister, but these men... It's terribly important! Are you the Queen? I'm very pleased to meet you." She tried to step forward but was not allowed to move.

"What do you mean by the Pry Minister?"

"He's the head of government. He's like a king..."

"He? You mean, she?"

"No, he's a man. He sent me to deliver the letter and bring you greetings and the desire for peace and friendship between..."

"There are no countries governed by a male", came the voice dispassionately. "Except for Mintaka. Whose king apparently didn't think much of you."

"He didn't understand. I tried to tell him where I'm from, but..."

Her voice trailed away as she realised that her words were not having the desired effect, but she bravely added, "You can't imagine how much it cost to send us here!"

The crowned figure stared at her for a moment, and then said, "The Underling's obviously mad. Sergeant, carry on."

They dragged the prisoner away.

"No, wait, you don't understand... Let me talk to the Queen, I've got important business!"

"That's not the Queen", the platoon leader snarled at her as they dragged her past the checkpoint and into the square. "What would she be doing in the middle of a war zone? That's Miliuda Gwenix, the Qhoon."

"The Qya...hoon?... you mean... she must be... I mean, qui must be... do they rule this planet now?"

The soldiers laughed and led her further past a low wooden fence that separated off the crowd of people on one side.

The prisoner found herself being led towards a huge, dull grey object with square sides that occupied the middle of the square. A wooden gantry had been constructed against one side, and a number of soldiers and civilians were performing some activity at the bottom of the gantry. Before she could see what it was, she was forced to join them.

"Take that stuff off!", she was ordered.

The sword point jabbing at her spacesuit left her little option but to obey, and she was forced to strip to her underclothes. One of the soldiers picked up the discarded trouser section, tested the pressure-tight fabric and the smooth metal rings at the joints with his

fingers, a puzzled look on his face.

The evening air was chilly on her bare skin. Professor Xandith felt loops of rope tightening around her hands and feet, securing her to a rough wooden frame. She glanced to right and left and saw that she was one of a row of a dozen semi-naked people, all normal-looking women with frightened faces, all in the same predicament.

She felt a lurch, and the platform they were standing on creaked aloft, winched by a couple of soldiers turning a capstan. It stopped when it was a little above the top of the grey object, and it was only here and looking down that the Professor realised its connection with the King's earlier reference to an Aquarium. It was filled with water to a depth greater than a person's height.

The row of prisoners stood and shivered for several long minutes. Xandith looked around and saw that the noise she could hear was shouting from the crowd in front of the giant iron tank with its large glass windows, and that they were expressing hatred and lust for revenge. A number of oil lamps had been lit around the sides of the square to reinforce the fast-fading sunlight. One of the soldiers was making an announcement, but his voice was hardly audible over the commotion. She noticed that the Qhoon had come into the square and was watching the execution.

A flicker in front of her caught her eye. A fat hover-fly the size of her thumb was poised at face height, shifting its position from one prisoner to the next in a blur of movement as if checking flowers for pollen, the buzz of its wings inaudible above the clamour of the crowd. Its body was a shiny metallic blue. Reaching the end of the line without finding anything worth landing on, the fly lost interest and whisked itself away into the gathering gloom.

One of the soldiers, dressed only in a pair of shorts, joined the prisoners on the platform. Being without a helmet, the light glinted off the shiny fur on his head, striped like those of the people below. His nose and ears were small, his eyes bright, his body smooth and hairless. His fingers and especially his toes were long and webbed, froglike. He grinned at them, sat down on the edge of the tank and slipped quietly into it. The water closed over his head with scarcely a ripple.

Xandith shook her head, then, seized by a fit of rage, screamed back at the crowd in her turn, "But I'm not part of your filthy war! This is unjust!" Her voice was lost in the general noise. She felt a jerk on the chains supporting the platform, heard an incoherent sob from the woman standing next to her. Just below their feet, the water gleamed dully.

Rather than continue to look down, she raised her eyes to the equally comfortless sky. When she spoke again, it was quietly, as if to herself. "I never expected to find such madness. Why didn't you warn me? Are you getting this?" And then, a little louder, "Why don't you reply?"

There came another series of jerks on the platform as it swung out over the water with a rattle of chains and began to descend. As the frame with its helpless human cargo entered the water, Xandith felt the cold liquid quickly cover her feet, then her legs, then her belly. She was shouting now, unheard in the general din, "Did you pass my messages on? Why don't you do something to save me? At least – if you can hear this – at least you must protect Vekter! Please protect him! His mission is vital! Please help him escape..."

Only when the water reached her neck did the panic rising inside her choke off her voice. The descent continued.

Of the dozen people visible from outside through the glass window of the Aquarium, only one was not fighting for life as the water slowly choked her, and that was the soldier who had slipped in ahead of them. He now sat quietly, still grinning, at the bottom of the tank. Long after the bodies of the condemned had ended their hopeless struggle for air, he still sat there, until finally, after checking each drowned corpse to verify that the sentence had been carried out, after ten minutes or so underwater, he glided smoothly to the surface, hopped out of the tank, breathing as comfortably as if he had been under no exertion whatever, and signalled with a wave to his comrades that the dead might now be removed.

As the platoon leader was marching his men out of the square, the Qhoon stopped them.

"What exactly did that Underling say to the King?"

The soldier bowed. "The same as it said to yourself, Your Grace."

"That it had brought a letter? Did you see the letter?"

"Yes, Your Grace. I checked it very carefully, but it only contained nonsense from beginning to end. Wild fantasies, nothing more. So I burned it."

"And it called itself professor?"

"That's right, Your Grace. Professor Sandy, it said, something like. Odd name. Who cares? – only an Underling. Said something about coming from another world." He rolled his eyes. "Mad, quite mad."

"What other world?"

"Oh, don't you know, that was Goldring, like in the fairy tales."

The Qhoon gave him a sharp look. "Goldring?"

"That's right. I've come from another world, it says, all pompous like. But there aren't any other worlds. Are there?"

"There's Welkinar."

The soldier bowed again. "Yes, Your Grace. But nobody could live there."

"No, of course, not." The Qhoon frowned, turned away from them and departed from the square.

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