

# The Emperor's Star

A Chrononauts Role-Playing Occurrence  
Designed and written by Andrew Plotkin  
<erkyrath@eblong.com>

## • 6:30 - 8:45

The Sun is rising over the mountains, chasing Deimos from the brick-dust sky.

I have seen some thirty thousand Sunrises in my life — most from the peak steps of Astrologe Pyramid. I have charted twenty thousand solar charts, comparing the course of the Sun against the Moons and the planets against the stars, drawing what hints I can for the good and guidance of the Empire.

The Empire has seen some million Sunrises since Xueh the Bright drove the red demons from a river valley at the base of Planitia, and laid the first bricks of Xi City. In a million Sunrises, much can change. A river can wither to dust, and be enhanced, then supplanted, by orderly lines of canals. A city can grow from a scatter of adobe to a panoply of stone peaks and crystal spires.

Much can change in a single Sunrise. If the Chief Astrologe and his pet apprentice can be believed, the strength of the Empire could turn brittle overnight. Morixa has seen warnings, she says, and Magister Noulin agrees that the seeing is true. Well, he is my master too, though I've always had a few Sunrises on him.

But this morning, before dawn, I saw a fugitive planet moving in recession towards a sixfold conjunction. I do not think Morixa has seen it yet. Her warnings speak of the Mother-and-Child crossing the constellation of Salarius — a volatile but familiar sign.

My eyes are old and dusted, but I know the difference between a warning of danger, and a blazon of catastrophe. And I fear the Empire will not see three more sunrises.

(I must go. Noulin has called a session; his apprentice will present her readings to the Astrologes, and we will try to see further. I do not know if I will speak of the fugitive planet.)

## • 9:30 - 12:00

They were right. Or I was right. I cannot see which. The Illuminated Emperor, Taxar the 17th, is dead.

Some madman in a black cloak came out of nowhere, stabbed the Emperor, and scuttled away into the crowd. The blood was on the paving stones before anyone could react. A thousand theories are whirling through the streets, and not one makes any sense at all.

The Sunlit Throne descends to an infant one and a half years old. The Confluent will have to hold special session to choose a Regent. I suppose Regency is a powerful position, and someone might contemplate assassination to achieve it, but who could be sure of gaining the appointment? The Confluent is well-balanced these past few years.

The influence of the Noble Families is strong, but the most respected name in Old Town is Lord Orxino, and he is much too old to take on a fifteen-year Regency. They might put forward young Voxim as a candidate; he shares some of the Sunlit bloodline, which makes him either an ideal Regent or far too dangerous, depending on your view. But Voxim is the older brother of our Morixa, and I suppose the Astrologes will support him if his name is raised. As if anyone in the Confluent listens to the Astrologes, any more.

The Imperial Army of the Skies has many partisans in the Confluent, and they will certainly name Captain Koyen. The Captain has the power of popularity; many regard him as a hero after his resolute action in the Phobos crisis of years past. Most assumed that Koyen's future was assured in the military — he might even replace Zendibar on the Strategy Council when the Great Gamer finally retires — but the Regency could well prove a brighter lure. More than one career has been wasted waiting for Zendibar to show a weakness; I think Koyen knows this.

A third possibility does not glitter so brightly, but is perhaps a better choice for that: Magister Seranst. She is well used to power, for through the Magistracy of Canals flows the lifeblood of Mars. The mercantile companies have grown fat under her office; and no doubt they have returned the favor in many ways. They would be pleased to see her rise to the Regency. Farlen Mait, for example, a trade magnate whose fortune has now grown to be the fourth largest in the Empire, or so I am told. Such wealth buys many votes in the Confluent.

• 14:00 - 15:00

The Emperor has been buried, although the full ceremony of mourning will not be held until tomorrow. I see that Apprentice Morixa has been chosen for the oration — no doubt because of her timely warning, unheeded though it was. The honor is great, and I have no doubt that Astrologe Pyramid will receive more attention in the future. I find no pleasure in that, but it is true.

The city is still stunned. Currents of emotion ripple through the streets, clear to anyone with eyes. One can only hope that the Festival of Stars tomorrow is not entirely cancelled; certainly no one will be celebrating. (One day in the year when our science is lauded, and now it is both disrupted and magnified by the same event. Such are the fortunes of astrologues.)

One riot has already erupted, as a partisan of Koyen cast the assassination's blame to Phobos. Certainly the citizens of Phobos who were trapped in Olympus Square were innocent, but innocence is nothing to an angry mob. Trouble has spread below the streets as well; a canal is blocked by a collision that would certainly not have happened in less distracted times. And I hear of a strike by the drayers that work the canal boats, although perhaps that has more to do with their mercantile employers and the taxes than the Emperor's death.

The Confluent should have chosen a Regent by now. Without certainty, no calm can come.

Perhaps tomorrow.

• 16:30 - 18:00

Perhaps we are merely trying to distract ourselves, but I took part in a ritual of divination this afternoon — casting star-runes over maps of the south polar plateau. The results were gratifying. Overflights of the regions we divined have revealed traces of ancient ruins! We believe them to be fallen aqueducts — signs of a lost Martian civilization. And more, signs of a time when the polar plateaus were warm enough for liquid water.

Trust the scientists of Xi City to be more frantic about ancient ruins than about the murder of an Emperor.

Already the Confluent has approved an expedition to study the ruins. Apparently there is some urgency for lost techniques of water purification and treatment. Perhaps this is to do with the troubles that are rumored about the great plutonium mines in Utopia Planitia. Certainly if they were contaminating the canals... but no, that cannot be right, I remember now: the stories

talk of corruption and theft at the Planitia mines, not pollution. I must try to follow the headlines more closely.

- 19:00

Great Stars, Zendibar lost the tournament after all. A round of Fleuchre is hardly the same as a military engagement — but I do not think I have known the Great Gamer to step falsely in any formal interaction, for blood or for money. Perhaps Koyen should retain his hopes after all.

- 21:00 - 23:00

Already, news on the investigation of the murder. Earlier this evening, a canal worker spotted a figure in a small black boat of some sort. The light was failing, but he caught a whiff of an odor — the same harsh, acrid smell reported by the witnesses to the assassination.

And now the same boat has been discovered at a sheltered mooring, near the headquarters of the Imperial Army. The obvious conclusion is... too simple, surely. Furthermore, another murder has been discovered — the captain of a trade barge. Whether this is connected to the assassination, or the black boat, or indeed the price of candy shares on the Mons Exchange, is quite opaque. The Magistracy of Justice will analyze the evidence carefully, no doubt.

(Or the Magistracy of Canals will — I am not sure which has jurisdiction.)

Hm. Yet another tantalizing connection with the military! In dredging the canal near where the boat was found, workers discovered a knife... a knife belonging to the Hero of Phobos. It could have been down there for weeks, of course. But people are talking.

People always talk.

I am going to bed. My eyes feel the dust earlier every year, and I want to wake before dawn to observe the fugitive planet again. I must riddle it. I feel an uncertainty in the march of stars that I have never felt before... as if the whole world could be turned around by sunrise.