

(setting idea and plot twist, world is a moon of a rogue gas giant flying through interstellar space. Gravity of gas giant causes massive tectonic shifts heating moon from within. Moon is being pulled further and further into the gas giants toxic atmosphere forcing surface life underground. Moon's descent has been speeding up. At the end they need the help of the outsiders (change from federation to commonwealth) to pull their moon up before the jovian atmosphere crushes their world.)

All about was darkness, and in the darkness an arm moved. It reached out through the viscous fluid as the young body it belonged to unfurled. The acids around her stripped away the hoards of unclean parasites which had grown across the surface of her scales. As the hand gripped the rock wall in the darkness the vibrations woke the creatures in the pool. They swam about her form hissing and rattling and instinctively her scales lifted into rings of razor sharp spikes down her arms, legs, back, and tail. Keeping calm the scales atop her head remained flat, and she concentrated, the scales rippling back down in waves.

Even with her training she couldn't keep the scales from moving as the creatures slithered up her legs and arms. Some of them caught under the moving scales and pried their way in, wriggling under her skin and penetrating the muscles below. As more and more of the creatures entered her body she began to grow. It wasn't long before she passed the one meter mark as she grew stronger, her claws forming into diamond tipped scoops perfect for digging. She felt invigorated, renewed, and ready to serve her Lord.

Uttering a prayer she and the hive of virm within climbed back out of the pit into the glow of the mosses above. The large cave had been dug for a family of ten, but their Lord had moved on, and the tribe followed. As they dug the new warren a few miles ahead she was punished with carrying the acid to the families new bathing pools.

Sholdih's father, Mirhol, ordered that she must do it alone, but her brothers, Hakel, Fomir, and Rahgal, had disobeyed and left some of their hives' members behind for her. As representatives from the three closely related hives merged and molded into the folds of her brain she became aware of the

presence of a few more of them scattered about the cave. It was strange listening to the thoughts of these similar, but slightly different groups of virm, they weren't quite the same as her own, but she had had enough contact with them in years past that it wasn't too difficult to communicate. Through this connection she called out to them to emerge from hiding and they came out of the holes and crevices of the walls carrying little bits of glowing crystals.

Scowling, she looked over the divine gifts. "Ok, this is too far. Helping me with strength and company is one thing, but stealing from the body of our Lord is... no. Father will provide what I need. Put those away. Brothers, that was wrong of you." She knew they wouldn't get the message until some of these virm returned to their bodies, but she wanted them to know how disappointed she was in their lack of faith in their father. While Mirhol's punishment had been rash, and perhaps a little overbearing, she trusted him.

Preparing for her holy punishment Sholdih pulled a cloth tiara from the families storage and settled it on her head, nestled between her ears and along the bridge of her long snout below her black and grey eyes. The feelers at the ends of her ear tips helped nudge it into place as she locked its edges under some of the smaller scales.

The triune colony of virm re-emerged from hiding the crystals and brought with them two metal buckets which she filled, dipping them into the pools of acid, and hoisted onto the ends of the ceremonial staff of labors. She set its crook across her back and started the march to the new warren.

With each trip she would leave the virm behind as she neared the tribe, it made her burden hard, but she could not risk her father seeing her disobeying his orders. Her people went about their duties in the pale glow all along the carved edges of the massive tunnel left by their Lord's passage. They looked upon her crown and knew not to interfere or offer aid and did their best to ignore her presence as she struggled to carry the great weight yoked upon her.

The new warren was at the very end of the tunnel as her family dug in the bright light of their

Lord's crystalline body, each swollen large and strong with their hives of virm. Other pangorath did their duties collecting the debris of their Lord, searching for the shiny gifts of Its very body for their communion. By these gifts their Lord granted them life and light in Its wake.

Two days went by before Mirhol would let Sholdih merge with her own virm once more, and even then only until she woke. She felt renewed by them, both the familiarity, and the blessing of their Lord which they bestowed into her body, for she had not taken communion for nearly three days and had been growing weak. She could have taken it from her brother's virm, but this would have been too great a violation of Mirhol's orders.

Early on the fourth day as she and the hives carried the empty buckets back to the old pools she came across the body of a strange young pangorath. His priestly raiment was tattered and torn from what must have been days of digging before he had fallen through a hole in the ceiling. She saw in the pattern of the weave on the back of his hands the signs of his tribe and she gasped. He was from one of the cursed tribes from above.

All her life Sholdih had heard of these heretics. This was no priest, for they had none. They had perverted the holy signs to common fashion worn by all, but even worse, they dealt with the demons from the world above. Everyone knew that to break up to the surface was death and damnation, but still these heretics lived near its edge and the demons, it was said, would appear from thin air to make their unholy schemes with any pangorath or virm corrupted enough to listen.

She stood to move on, for such a heretic did not deserve a proper burial, but as she did he let out a breath and Sholdih remembered her father's stories of compassion. Did they apply to heretics? She queried the virm for what her brothers would do and finally picked up his broken body, shifting several large rocks off of him, and placed it in one of the buckets. Without any virm in his body he was small and light. Instinctively he curled up into as tight a ball as he could, but his soft underside had been so wounded he couldn't pull his scales all the way closed. Using stones she filled the other bucket to counter

his weight and carried him to her old warren with its nearly empty pools.

While he cared nothing for them, Sholdih took great care in removing his holy garb as she slowly coaxed him to open up so that she could clean his wounds. Her brother's virm moved across his unconscious form and ate away the parasites and infected flesh. She carefully cut out several impacted scales which dug into the soft skin of his back and arms. But still she was unsure if she could save him. He had to have been digging for days on end, his virm all drained of their communion on the long journey.

Even thinking on the matter, how anyone could treat their divine emissaries as nothing more than a food source, it sickened her. But without virm there was no question, he would die, unless... To share her brother's virm with such a heretic was almost blasphemy. She pushed the thought of it from her mind. The best she could do was keep him well as long as he would last and hope his people came for him in time.

As she opened his claws to remove the tattered cloth webbing that remained on his hands she saw a glint of light as if shining upon smooth obsidian. It's edges were of a strange silvery grey which failed to reflect much light despite its color. While dusty, the thin disk appeared to have suffered no damage in the long digging its bearer had endured. Her claw moved down the obsidian plate to test its strength, and though it did not scratch its reaction shocked her to drop it upon the floor.

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"I saw as the demon glass revealed to me the journeys of our Lord Dih. It would only be a few weeks till Dih and the heretical Lord Roh would be at war." Sitting at the edges of the gathering the young Jiram listened to Sholdih tell the tale of how she had saved her tribe from the heretics and become the new Matriarch. At the time she had been only a little older than Jiram and the rest of the gathered youths. He had heard the tale many times, often told by his mother and father who had fought at Her side to ensure Lord Dih's victory.

It was often said that the Matriarch had been destined to her role, even from the time her father

had named her Sholdih, meaning Light of Life. Before he succumbed to his wounds from the war with the people of Roh he always said he had named her such because after the death of her mother she was the last glimmer of hope in his life, but the mysticism persisted in spite of his words.

Jiram rose from his place in the crowd for he could never bear to hear the Matriarch lie about what she had done with the glass following the war. The demonic lure was too powerful, even for her, and she had been unable to bring herself to destroy it as everyone thought she had. He had seen it once when his family moved the Matriarch's Warren. He had seen it once more when she consulted it to find a missing child buried in a cave in. Everyone else attributed the revelation to her mysterious connection with Lord Dih, but Jiram knew otherwise, and didn't dare speak of it to anyone else.

With everyone distracted he snuck into her Warren to look for the glass's hiding place. Not old enough for hard labor he carried only a few of his family's virm, and these he released to look around. They reminded him not to search her acid pool, for most of the Matriarchal Hive would be feeding and resting within the nutrient rich fluids. He searched her palatial network of caves for hours, but to no avail. Eventually, she returned forcing him to hide.

From hiding he watched as she removed her symbols of authority, her metal tiara, the crystalline claw caps, and the satchel of pure white leather. He observed as her form shivered and shrank, the mass of virm wriggling out of her body, emerging from under her scales. Most of them dove immediately for the pool as others rose from its depths to cover her body in a feeding frenzy.

*Get in the pool, get in!* he thought from hiding. He was counting on the Matriarch bathing so he could check her satchel for the glass. If the virm cleaned her standing there then he would never be able to make it before she left to continue her work leading the people. Virm could not see, but they would notify her of his footsteps if he approached.

In haste he ran out, bull rushing her into the large pool. He looked through the satchel and found the demonic treasure within. He knew better than to touch it, for its hold was clear upon the Matriarch, so

he slung the satchel over his shoulder and began to leave. As he did so he was stopped when the Matriarch's long scaly tail slashed his feet out from under him.

He rolled over and saw as the Matriarch grew past the height of anyone he had ever seen. At nearly two meters she was ducking even under her highest of ceilings, and yet still she grew as more of the virm emerged from the pool and entered painfully through the thick skin of her legs. It wasn't long before her three meter body loomed over him in monstrous proportion and form, pinning him to the polished floor with enormous claws, hard as diamonds.

"How DARE you steal from the Matriarch!" the monster boomed into his swept back ears, the volume causing a ring to persist for several seconds. "I know you Jiram, grandchild of my sister in-law's brother, you are a faithful boy. What would make you do such a thing?"

The young rathling squirmed under her claws nervous of what she might do to him. He thought of what he could say, but only the truth would come to his lips. "The Demon Glass, mistress. I came to destroy it, for even now it taints our entire tribe by its presence." She was stunned by his words, so he lifted the scales on his arm to allow one of his virm passage. "You may test my sincerity if you desire such, but I believe you know this to be true already, my lady."

Tired by the strain of her size and the shock of his accusations, she shed the virm and returned to her natural stature. She pulled him up by the shoulders and dusted him off. "You are well spoken for such a youth," she deflected her apparent fatigue. "Pray, how did you come by it? And what know ye of the glass?"

"My Lady," he bowed to her, his claws open and empty. "I study to be a Third Deacon of the Word of Dih. In time, if I am worthy, these claws will render the history of our people upon the walls of the great cavern as we follow our Lord's passage through the flesh of the world. As to the glass, I know you used it to prepare us for war against the heretics, it revealed to you how to guide Dih in safe passage around Jur so our peoples would not war, you succumbed to its temptations and keep using it when you

believe the reward to be worth the risks. From the etchings you have carved across its surface I saw that you tried to purify it with the body of our Lord, but in this you failed as well.”

She considered his words for several minutes as virm brought piles of leather for them to sit upon. “Very well. We have decided to trust you. I bestow a quest upon you Jiram. You desired to destroy the glass, but this is not possible. To do so would mean our fiery deaths. I have studied the history of other such demonic gifts and I dare not shatter it. No, you must journey to the Demon Warrens near the surface and bid them reclaim their infernal gift. I would go myself, but the temptation of their offers is too great, for I have experienced its wonders. Already the glass frequently calls me to them and it is all I can bare to stay my feet from that path.”

She removed the glass from the satchel and moved her claws across its surface. It glowed with a pale imitation of their Lord’s light. “Here, follow this path, it will guide you to the demons. It will be a long journey. My purifications will protect you enough to carry it, but do not answer their call should you hear it before you reach them. When you arrive say what you must, but do not listen to them, shut your ears from their devious words.”

Jiram took the quest very seriously. His journey was long and difficult, wending through many decades of old tunnels. She gifted him a travelers shell, glowing with the light of Dih, and a portion of her hive to sustain him, to grant him communion. As he neared the Matriarchs old warren from the stories, now a shrine to her deeds, the glass instructed him to dig upward. As he dug he heard the demons voices calling from the glass, but heeded them not.

He emerged into the tunnels of the heretical Lord Roh. The skeletons of the slain people remained scattered about the strange caves. When his ancestors had killed their tribe's pangorath their virm almost assuredly had been driven insane unable to merge with anyone's minds. They would have reverted to their instinctual state and devoured the corpses of their former hosts, converting them to shallow pools of acid. With so much meat and the abundant remains of their shattered Lord their population boomed, and

suddenly crashed as the supply ran low.

Now, after almost thirty years, the few remaining wild hives fought over the slowly evaporating pools and consumed the bits of Roh's body its people had used to decorate their architecture. If not for the large hive he was traveling with they would have consumed Jiram with little difficulty. The wild virm scattered as they sensed the presence of such a healthy hive and he was able to replenish the shells acid reserves from the shallow pools.

As they walked in these alien halls the demonic influence upon their ways was clear. The air was thin and cold. The walls were all highly polished and worked to extreme detail. Even the skeletons of the beasts of burden were hung with the remnants of the holiest of garb in mockery of their divine purpose. Beyond just light and nourishment the body of their Lord had been used to decorate every surface in elaborate designs. Some of the strange objects scattered around the cavern had dark surfaces not unlike the face of the demon glass when it was dark.

Jiram and the hive followed the gaudy tunnels toward the demon's warren. It has been so long since he had spoken with another pangorath, and already the hive was losing the imprint of the Matriarch. It was starting to become his hive. He searched his memory of ancient tales, but never could he recall hearing of anyone traveling so long alone. Even the tale of Wohun, the hallmark of isolation stories to scare young rathlings from wandering away, there had been frequent visits by demons to keep him sane. Whether from insanity or isolation, Jiram decided to name the hive within the shell.

It was still another three weeks journey before Jiram and Shryke came to a solid metal wall, yet the glass told them to continue forward. He stood there, looking at it for any weakness, any point of attack for him to open it. Shryke emerged from the shell and dispersed across its surface to feel out anything he might have missed. All the while Jiram was terrified of what he would find beyond. What were these demons like? He had already heard their sonorous voices calling him from the glass.

It was well know that all demons were tall and thin with large heads and flat faces, none had been

seen with claws or scales, none could roll up into a ball, only one had anything even close to the bond of virm, and even the few with normally sized ears were always flat against their heads. Demons came in so many different forms, each with their own ways. These could be Demons of Greed with large lumpy structures on their heads, carrying whips that could kill at a great distance. Perhaps they were the boney Rage Demons, almost as large and muscular as the Matriarch had grown and carrying their waving metal blades.

Worse than the prospect of demons in the tunnels however, what if beyond this wall was the surface? It was cold enough, the air thin enough. If he opened that passage he would be dead and damned long before he could utter his message. He just longed for his task to be over. He had been gone from his people for four months traveling uphill. Once his message was delivered he could abandon the shell, curl up and roll back down. He would be back to his tribe in less than a week.

As he stood in revery of what his return would be like he heard their voices, the demons lilting tones. “HellllooOOOoooo? You've come so far, and now you're here, will you still not talk to me?” So he had arrived. He took the glass in hand, held it to the door and viewed the rounded brown face of the demon that peered through. In the past he had always looked quickly away for fear of what spell might carry past the Matriarch's purification rituals.

“I am here to return your glass and deliver a message from the Matriarch.” The demons face contorted in a strange manner that made Jiram think she was about to leap out and devour him, it's white teeth showing between large lips. Just then the hive on the metal wall shivered, they fell off as the metal parted down the middle. Shryke got back into its shell and the two entered the strange warren.

Three demons stood in the bright light, including the one from the glass. Each was covered from neck to toe in solid black cloth with blue or red patches near their skinny shoulders. Looking up at them Jiram recalled the tales to know what type of demon he was faced with. Demons of Cunning, surely. Though their ears weren't pointed, neither had been those of the Host who had confused Wohun with her

virm like bond, and she had been a Demon of Cunning as well.

“Demons of the Overworld, I bear a message from the Matriarch Sholdih. Reclaim your cursed glass and depart from our realm, never to return. Be satisfied in knowing that your cunning ways have lead our people to death and destruction.” One of the demons with blue patches dropped its tool and placed its hands over its mouth with a gasp.

The one with red stepped forward to take the profered glass and responded calmly. “Thank you for informing us. As per our contract with Matriarch Ruroh we leave at your request. May I know what came of her? As you can see my crew felt fairly close to her, we were saddened when her people stopped coming to see us.”

Jiram thought on this, for either the demon was lying to get him to reveal something, or they truly didn't know what happened to their consorts. It was dangerous to even be here, let alone what they might do with anything he might tell them. “You have the Matriarch's message. Now go.”

With those words he turned to leave, but Shryke remained. It felt there was more to be said, so Jiram turned to face the demons once more. Indicating the shell he spoke, “Shryke, the Virm Hive of the Matriarch Sholdih, wishes to inform you that by the power and will of its Mistress was slain the people of Roh and their heretical matriarch. It aided her in slaughtering their people in decades past, in its grip did Matriarch Ruroh breath her last breaths.” Jiram took a deep breath and tried to steady himself for what he was relaying, “Shryke did consume the virm from within her body, adding their essence to the Hive of the illustrious Matriarch Sholdih, and she will no longer tolerate your presence. Should you remain, or should you return, she will wage war against your kind to the end of our breath or yours.”

The demons nodded, and the messengers departed.

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All about were the sounds of soft thuds and slow sloshing as a black feline head relaxed, suspended in brown slime. A copper skinned human walked into the moist chamber and lay upon a raised slab of heated stone. “Evening RacingFeather.” The human said addressing the head. It simply nodded.

“These virm sure do know how to give a good massage.” Again, the head nodded. “I was so creeped out when I heard I was being assigned here.”

Two slimy black hands emerged and pulled the felines body up to look at the human. “Unless you've got detail about this world's history, please be quiet. I'm trying to relax here. I've just spent several days trying to rebuild a portion of the wall records written by the historian Jiram.” It settled back into the slime as tentacles pulled its arms back down.

The human woman thought on the matter as tentacles moved up the sides of the platform. “Jiram, huh? You know, one of my coworkers is bonded to Shryke.” She let out a deep breath as the virm moved across her body and began to pulsate, working her sore muscles.

“Yeah, so are about half the pango archeologists. It's a hive, it keeps growing. Each generation more pangorath in the family take up some of it to grow their own hives, and they are all Shryke. Virm hives don't have much in the way of long term memory, they rely on their hosts for that. I've interviewed them, they aren't much help in piecing together what happened to the early engineering teams that visited this world.”

“Hmm, all I care about is what's happening now, helping with their space program and stopping their world from falling deeper into the gas giant’s atmosphere. The Pangorath are such excellent engineers, we could use them, but they can't leave their planet for long. If it goes down they’ll never survive. The crystal the virm eat won't grow anywhere else and they won't let us study it to help figure it out.”

The head rolled its eyes, “Duh, it has to do with their religion, that's why the Stellar Federation sent me to study their past. We need to understand their people better so we know how to deal with them. They lost so much knowledge of why they do things the way they do, but their laws are very strict when it comes to the crystals of Sholdih, no outsiders are allowed to see them or study them in any way.”

“Right, right.” The human trailed off into silence, enjoying as the virm worked the knots out of

her shoulders and neck.