

Not Quite Sundown

by Vincent Rupp

1 – Introduction

“Of course, yes, we’ll start immediately. Where is the body?”

Aukthom stared at him with hard eyes. It was an uncomfortable sight. The Anbiolist, precisely marked from head to toe, wrapped in clean scant robes; Aukthom, littered with marks added where he found room, his head bandaged, a brown-red stain all down his side.

The line of daylight across the room narrowed and vanished as the door closed. The foyer’s light was dim, but accented with a flicker emanating from Aukthom’s head and waning down his arms.

The Anbiolist was patient; the visible crackling of Aukthom’s emotions would pause, and then he’d answer. The Anbiolist focused on his breathing; this part was always difficult, especially when-

“There isn’t one.” Aukthom said the words harshly, but contained his anger.

The Anbiolist looked at Dominick and Jasmine. They both cast their eyes down.

He looked back at Aukthom, sympathetic to how his next words would sound. “There must be something. A leg or a hand, even a few pieces of-”

Light flared from Aukthom – bright red, silver fringes. Fists and jaw clenched harder. The light trembled with his breath, fading a little, restarting a little less.

Through the massive double doors. They’d put the body in the ink-black pool, and all the devotees would gather. They’d breathe and chant and move in time, slowly bending apart the layers of space to open the tiniest conduit.

The Anbiolist waited for the light to fade, for Aukthom to regain outward control. “Really, as little as a tooth.”

Days of work, maybe a week without pause, to pull the pattern through, to hold it in place until complete. The body was easy, but a life is more than its tissues.

“I said there’s nothing.”

The Anbiolist looked at Dominick and Jasmine again. Still they said nothing; they already knew what would happen here, the futility of the visit. Still, they’d watched Aukthom march right here, a whole day without stopping, ready the whole time to toss aside anyone in his way. But no one did; their situation required no dispensation.

The Anbiolist looked back at Aukthom, eyes searching his face. “Nothing? At all?” He finally understood. He stepped back, a hand to his heart. “Oh no, not her.”

And finally the doors would open again. She’d emerge, whole and perfect. The soft unblemished purity of her skin would press against his rough unworthy flesh and then they’d

Aukthom turned quickly. The room ignited in light of ember-fire red. He’d known too; everyone knew. The body was the focus, its holography the link.

He flung the door open. "Let's go."

It stayed open long enough for Dominick and Jasmine to walk after him, and closed on the old priest, his eyes lingering on the door, arms heavy, staring into an approaching night.

Aukthom walked along the cobbled street, headed back outside of the city. It was so different two days before. Three days? He couldn't judge by the number of times he'd slept. He tried to remember how many times it was dark. That didn't work either. How many dawns had there been? Three dawns, three days.

Jasmine put a hand on his back. "Where are you going?" She spoke softly, calmly.

Three days ago, everyone watched them leave. It was all cheering, jubilation, shouted wishes of blessing and luck. Children ran up to peer at their skin and to hug Jasmine farewell.

Aukthom didn't stop or answer. After a moment, Dominick walked in front of him and gripped his shoulders. "You need to rest." He stopped then, but avoided Dominick's eyes.

But three days ago, four people had walked along the street. The Weapon and the Saint, no less awe-inspiring for their familiarity. With them the Chimera, the star-eyed marvel, wonder of a thousand ages. With her, the Savant, her love, his strangeness erased at her side.

Aukthom shook his head violently. "No, we have to save her! Come on!" He pushed at Dominick's grip, but weakly.

Now there were three, and the people held back. They murmured and whispered in doorways. They looked up the road leading outside the city and back at the Anbiolist Temple.

Jasmine came around to put a hand on each of them. "Let's go to the manor. We have to tell them what happened."

Their leaving promised only glory; the question was rhetorical: How could they fail? Now three returned. Regardless of outcome, they'd lost. Now the question was insistent: How could this happen?

Aukthom shook his head again. "No. I can't-. They just-" he waved his arm at the crowd.

Dominick nodded. "We'll tell them. You can be alone."

Aukthom looked up at last. His eyes were red, swollen, wild. "We can't abandon her!" He sounded desperate; his voice shook. He looked down again.

"We'll find another way. Someone will know, and we can leave in the morning."

Jasmine turned to him quickly and stared, glared, at him. Dominick made a small shrugging motion. She shook her head, furtive but aghast.

Aukthom's arms drooped and his legs relaxed, not agreeing but not resisting either. They turned him and led him toward the large house in the distance.

Aukthom stayed in the guest room, the same room he'd shared with Sarina only days before. Jasmine and Dominick met with the mayor and the other leaders, the same people who'd made them welcome only days before.

It had been an important dinner. Not only had Dominick and Jasmine arrived, but Sarina was passing through and had accepted their invitation. She was eager to meet the duo, had heard stories of them for the last few weeks of travel. Of course they'd heard of her for decades; news of the birth of a Chimera could not be constrained by space or time.

Aukthom was with her, as he'd been for months. Before then, outside of his family and a few friends, no one had ever heard of him. But being by her side, having her faith, everyone waited to see what about him was so extraordinary.

Only days before, "So it's quite fortuitous, some might even say providential, that you've all arrived. You see, we asked you here because we could use your help." He was speaking to Dominick and Jasmine, but looking at Sarina occasionally to include her as well. "Bodies have been disappearing. We think we know who's responsible, but apprehension is beyond the city's capability."

And now, "You've done our humble city a great service, and we're deeply indebted to you."

Only days before, to Dominick and Jasmine "We've no doubt you can resolve this situation" and to Sarina and Aukthom "but if you two were to accompany them," and then to all "perhaps you could achieve an even better outcome."

They'd agreed, with different emotions. Jasmine and Dominick had done this before; they knew what was likely to happen and the risk involved. It was a new experience for the other two; they greeted it with seriousness, but a little bit too much eagerness.

And now "We're all grieving at the cost. If we'd had any idea, we never would have asked you to go."

Only days before "When you return, we'll celebrate your victory in the grandest style our small city can manage."

And now, the celebration had begun when they were spotted on the road, before anyone had counted the number returning. Now, the fine wine sat in fine glasses, looking turbid to match the day.

Jasmine confirmed what they knew and gave a brief explanation, as little as would suffice. While she spoke, no one drank, no one whispered, no one moved. After the lingering silence faded to questions with no satisfactory answers, some drank too much; a few wept.

Dominick and Jasmine ate a little bit. If previous experiences hadn't inured them to loss, they were certainly accustomed to its effects. They took their leave early, and said they didn't know, when asked one final question: What will you do now?

They went to Aukthom's room. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor, where he'd later sleep, forehead on palms and elbows on knees. He looked ungainly, out of proportion, always managing an inexplicable awkwardness, regardless what he was doing.

There was a variety of food on the table, all untouched. "Have you eaten anything?" Jasmine asked him anyway, sitting by his side. He looked at her and shook his head. His eyes were still red, but now dry. The grief couldn't come out that way anymore. But by his pose and manner, she felt it settled huge and heavy in his heart.

Dominick brought bread to him and sat at his other side. "If you don't eat, you won't have strength to leave tomorrow." Aukthom didn't respond. "If there's a way to bring her back, time won't matter."

Aukthom nodded slowly and took the bread. He bit off a large chunk and habitually moved it around in his mouth. Jasmine gave him water to drink. They sat by him until he'd eaten it all.

They sat in silence, seeing if he wanted to talk yet. When he didn't, Jasmine put her arm around him for a moment. When she pulled away, a faint trace of golden light flowed along the markings from her chest to her palm when it touched his neck.

Back in their room, Jasmine said "You shouldn't say things like that."

Dominick shrugged. "I said 'maybe' and 'if'. He's not ready to accept it yet."

"False hope is only a temporary comfort. The sooner he accepts it, the better." She had undressed them while spoke, and all her markings could be seen, the tiny loops and whorls from fingertips to toes, paths conjoining and gaining intricacy as they met in a maelstrom over her heart.

"What you about you? I saw what you did."

"It'll help him sleep."

"Do you think he'd want that?"

"He needs sleep."

"What he needs is to burn through his suffering. The sooner that happens, the better." He smiled at her, repeating her words but without malice or taunting. His markings were different, not pathways but a uniform embellishment, so small that only from intimate distance could one observe that his skin wasn't gray at all.

"We're going to New Riyadh." Aukthom was waiting in the dining room when Dominick and Jasmine entered. "Have some breakfast. I've packed everything we'll need." It was early, but it was still summer, and the sky was already bright.

New Riyadh, the City of a Million Gardens, the largest city for a thousand miles, where the massive Tige river encounters the hard coast range and splits into a thousand streams before reforming slowly on the other side.

There, on a tall hill, visible from miles, was the Central Temple, all gold domes and white marble, bathed in sun from dawn to dusk.

Three packs were on the table in front of him. Dominick and Jasmine looked at each other, then started eating. Aukthom continued “It’s a big place. Someone there will help.” He was adjusting one of the packs, redistributing the weight, as though that were necessary.

Jasmine looked sympathetically at him until she caught his eye. “Aukthom, I was there; it’s where I studied. I don’t think they know any more than the priests here.”

He glanced at the markings visible on her neck and put his hands down on the polished wood. “You didn’t talk to the right people. You didn’t ask the right questions.”

She put a hand on his shoulder and spoke softly “Aukthom, listen”

“No. You listen.” He spoke fiercely but not harshly. “We are bringing her back. Someone will know.” Then, quieter, “Please.” He implored them both with his eyes.

Dominick shrugged and kept eating. “Worth a try.”

“Of course we’ll go with you. But what happens if we get the same answer?”

“Then we’ll go somewhere else!” he yelled, unintentionally. There was a smell of burning wood. Aukthom snapped his hands back, charred handprints left in the table.

A cool spring morning, a pale yellow sun, stalks of new green grass. Sarina was still with her guardians then, though that title was archaic – no one wanted to harm her. They were mostly educators, teaching her about her ability and the world as they traveled.

Aukthom knew they would be passing through his town; it was all anyone talked about for days. He’d listened to the rumors, checked maps, done basic calculations, and left his house the night before. He’d walked since then, wanting to see for himself without the crowds and the noise.

Her group was readying to leave. He stood well back, behind bushes, and watched silently. One of her guardians had markings around his wrists and ankles, circular markings, with circles inside of them.

He was instructing Sarina. He stood with palms open toward the ground, and pushed up with his feet, suspending himself just above the meadow.

Sarina had no markings, needed none. She listened to her guardian and repeated his motions. But when she pushed up with her feet, nothing happened. He corrected and demonstrated again. She pushed up and managed a wobbling and unsteady hover for a couple seconds before falling over, laughing for her first success.

Aukthom couldn’t hear their words, but he watched their motions. He thought about the sensations in the wrists and the method they invoked to overcome gravity. He’d seen it before, in other forms, but not applied to oneself.

He started walking back before they’d departed. He walked fast, deep in thought. That night, when she stayed in the town, everyone came out to greet her and bask in her presence. She had a gift for radiance, but no one knew if that was unique to her or a trait of all Chimera.

Aukthom had shut himself in his room. He didn't come out until the following morning. Then he went right to where she'd been staying, but it was too late; they'd already departed.

So he ran after them. He ran for many hours on the quiet road. Luckily for his present self, and tragically for his self of only a few months hence, they'd stopped for a rather long lunch.

The clothes he hadn't changed in two days were soaked in sweat, he was gasping for breath, and that was her first impression of him.

His appearance startled everyone, put them on guard. He uncharacteristically caught himself, and he stopped to breathe deeply. His heart was beating rapidly from the exertion and the excitement of the moment, but he smiled and did his best to look friendly.

One of her guardians approached him. "Hello, may we help you?"

Aukthom ignored him, and spoke directly to Sarina. "I heard you can fly. I was hoping to see."

She saw his ragged appearance, knew he must have run a very long way, just for the chance to see her once in his life. She knew these moments were so important to those who wanted to see her, and she was happy to give them that happiness.

She walked over to him and, instead of asking where he heard that, smiled and said "I wouldn't call it that, but I'll show you what I can."

She faced her palms to the ground and pushed up with her ankles. She rose above the ground and held herself there steadily for a moment before gently tilting her palms to drift back down.

Aukthom smiled while his heart hammered in his chest. "That's pretty good." A short pause, and then he started again, faltering "You know, I can fly too."

"Oh really?" This wild man amused and captivated her. He wanted to show off a little, and she wanted to let him.

Aukthom nodded. "I just learned recently too. I'll show you, if you want."

"Yes, I'd like that." Her guardians were all standing nearby, watching intently. Chimeras are never regarded so casually; they didn't know what to think or do.

Aukthom took a step back and removed his shirt. New markings covered his arms, an interlocking fractal lattice of circles from his shoulders to his wrists, red and pink from the recent intrusion in his flesh.

He was so nervous he could feel his heart pounding. He hadn't had time to finish his leg markings and had only practiced this once, inside the house.

With his eyes closed, he took several long deep breaths to calm himself. It seemed like a confident dramatic pause to the observers.

He raised his arms over his head, crossed at the wrists, and bent his knees. He held the pose while he felt each square centimeter of his arms and legs, mentally thinking through each of the next few seconds at slow speed.

With a great flash of silver and crimson light, he brought his arms down rapidly. Foot-long iridescent feathers sprouted from his skin, trailing sparks as he leapt into the air.

A startled gasp from Sarina's guardians, and a surprised and delighted laugh from her.

Aukthom turned in a circle, twenty feet off the ground, and came back down. The landing was rough, but he dropped to his knees and they thought he'd planned it that way. The sparks trailed off, and the feathers dissipated in a breeze. They weren't real matter, after all. He wasn't that good, yet.

His insides were quaking with elation; he'd really done it. He smiled and bowed and waited to see what the reaction would be.

Astonishment ruled the moment. Her guardian who'd taught her the crude hovering now approached, all respectful tones and inquiry.

Aukthom explained in a fumbling way, for he didn't know the proper vocabulary, how he'd combined elements of different disciplines and invented markings that served that purpose.

The guardian was awed; his ability had taken years of perfecting, and now he saw something so far beyond his imagining. He was humbled and inspired, so it's better he never knew this had taken Aukthom less than a day.

Looking at Sarina, Aukthom said "I could teach you, if you want."

She looked at him with an expression that wouldn't take long to become one of love for the man who'd run all morning just to show her how to fly.