The annotated correspondence of

**AMIKA ACCIAI**
Sixth child of the House of Steel, and prospective

**Exemplar of Ambition**

By Rafael Barossa d’Apulian

Introduction

For the past two years, I have been in contact with a group of pilgrims of the Way in Asavea. I became their patron in Summer 384YE and have been providing them with spiritual counsel, strategic guidance, and material aid ever since. Many members of Conclave, and especially the Sevenfold Path, have been aware of this for a long time, as was former Asavean Ambassador Ashborn Pakt.

Until now, I have been extremely wary of revealing the names and locations of any of my contacts. Indeed, Ashborn Pakt was the only other person I trusted with this information – a single word in the wrong Winged Messenger could have brought the weight of the Plenum crashing down and destroyed the whole project. At the time of writing, between the Winter Solstice 385YE and Spring Equinox 386YE, I believe the time has come to express my Pride in everything the Pilgrims of Felucca have accomplished, and what I hope is yet to come.

They are armed with weapons and armour made of mithril and forged by Virtuous smiths and artisans. The Kraken’s armies are closing in and soon enough the followers of the Way to whom I gave patronage will make martyrs on themselves, to fulfil Amika Acciai’s Ambition of being the sparks that will engulf Asavea in a firestorm of change.

Amika’s Ambition is, I believe, Exemplary – setting a huge goal, working at it one step at a time, and accepting the ultimate consequence to see it brought to life. My goal in publishing these letters, and handing the originals to the Lepidean Librarian, is for all followers of the Way of Virtue to be able to examine them with their owns eyes, and see what lessons can be drawn from a Virtuous historiography of the sixth child of the House of Steel.

First letter, received at the Spring Equinox, 384YE

Ave, I hope this letter finds you prosperous.

You may not remember me: it has been many seasons and news has arrived of a malady of memory across your shores. To this end let me reintroduce myself:

I am Amika Acciai, sixth child of the House of Acciai, or in Imperial – the House of Steel – I am a priest of the Way, trained by Sumaahese and Imperial masters in the Temple to the Way in Nemoria. I speak plainly here as I trust the courier that carries this letter beyond Asavea and to lands where secrecy is not so fraught. I beg, however, that you show vigilance in any response tendered – times are dangerous for believers here.

I write to you first to extend my thanks and the thanks of others whose courage and wisdom is guiding our efforts here. With the shipment of white granite, a little luck and a fair amount of coin, we have established a place of worship beyond the eyes of the Kraken – though still within its grasp.

We – those priests not cowed by suppression and the laity I have been able to gather – have constructed a suitable site within the caves beneath the *Île de Felucca* – homeland of my family. These ancient caves once served smugglers – and now they serve the Way and our human destiny. There is a small cove that, when the sea is calm, allows access by boat. It is of a small size and furnished mostly with our own pride, but our ambition offers all the comfort we need.

The second tiding I bring is less joyous – I write a warning but worry it is to (sic) slow in the sending, let alone the journey across the ocean – but more recent events have driven me to action:

In Nemoria, the Temple of the Seven Virtues has been unsafe for believers for many weeks now – it was that the few faithful courageous enough to worship before the crowds of idolators who oft gathered outside were simply met with jeers and degrading treatment by the soldiers placed there – but now the soldiers are gone and worship is forbidden to foreigners, slave and prole. The lack of recompense for the defilement of the Black Bull has led some zealots to seek their own remonstrations – wherever they find believers beyond the call of those who might defend them.

I formerly sought to debate on behalf of the Way in the forae – but no longer, I have retreated to *Felucca* in permanence to avoid the rhetoric of my detractors and the thinly veiled threats of violence. But, I fear, there is something more at play:

The Temple – and the land it stands upon – has been purchased by the House Traposdo – I know little of them, save they are prosperous in dyes and spices. Portilium Traposdo is behind this and he styles himself a follower of the Way – though at first I thought them an ally, I have heard them profess at the grand forum, and while they spoke of Virtues, the Labyrinth and our Destiny, they spoke of little in depth and always alluded to qualities of the gods or Plenum as being evidently Virtuous. I sought to visit the Temple, which *Portilium* is seeing rebuilt, to attend a ‘mystery’ they were to hold – but I found myself refused due to my low birth. I have heard that instead of liao, those in attendance debauched with wine and other adulterants of the senses.

Finally, our efforts here in Felucca are stymied by a lack of liao – to guide and grow our congregation, of coin – to support our priests and help keep our secrets, and white granite – to aid in expanding the temple itself. We are proud, but we are wise – all of us being low-born and attending to congregants of even smaller means that the fruit of the Way’s glory may soon wither upon its vine without the generosity of others. The journey is far, and the risk to any that might smuggle these things to us great, but those who would make it would be the sparks that one day, I hope soon, will engulf Asavea in a firestorm of change.

Walk with Virtue,

 Amika Acciai, *Île de Felucca*

In truth, I think this letter came to me in error – I have no memory of any previous interactions, certainly not sending white granite overseas, and even accounting for the problems caused by the fog in Autumn 383YE there is no record of it in the Civil Service either. I don’t know who this letter was supposed to go to, or why it came to me – but I am very glad it did.

Second letter, received Summer 384YE

Rafael Barossa di Tassato, Grandmaster of the Sevenfold Path, Hero of Anvil, Defender of the Way, I hope this message finds you safe and your home prosperous.

Now we are known to one another, may this magic of Autumn hold our secrets and evade the eyes and ears of the deists.

Your Pride inspires me: often in this last year I have found my Courage tested as I have questioned the Wisdom of so brazen a desecration of the idols of the Asav. It was a spark that lit a fire that many who share our faith here beneath the Kraken’s coils have been burnt by – some immolated in totality. But Courage is not a straight road and Wisdom is not a clear glass – I find solace in your Loyalty in aiding us, in shaping this fire as Tian once did to bring about the transformation that we both seek. Let us work together, let us create a future free of slavery and false idols.

I shall begin with the news that we have secured ourselves and believe we can now obfuscate our activity at the port of *Île de Felucca*, allowing us to receive suitably concealed cargo. When I travelled to the Empire, I heard the arrangements we have made are called a ‘Ministry’ and through it we will be able to receive the items needed to continue our work. In return – and abhorring charity as our Prosperity demands – iridescent gloaming from my family’s small orchard will be sent in return. I leave it to you to seek the best means to assign this arrangement – knowing well the importance of secrecy.

Next, let me tell you a little of the times here in Asavea and the fortunes of our temple:

Within Nemoria there are many strange happenings: I have remained away, as my history serving in the Temple of the Seven Virtues marks me for harassment, but believers who have travelled recently to learn what they can have spoken of a near transformation of the temple there: the stones have been carved with figures, animals, and symbols in a stark profusion – slaves toil at the marble throughout the sweltering summer days and many more in chains haul statuary of bronze and mithril into the sealed sanctum. The ‘mysteries’ held each new moon inside have become the talk of the city – some of the high-born Plenum have even taken to tattooing their bodies with ‘symbols of the Noble Virtues’, adding them to their collection of deific brands.

The goings-on within the Plenum council are beyond me and most of the congregation here: but it would appear the antics of Portilium Traposdo have become of minor note – as they have styled themselves the ‘First Priest of Virtue’ and have been seen visiting with many of the priesthoods of the false temples.

Here in Felucca things move at a careful pace: I have mentioned the securing of allies in the port, but so too does influence spread within the families of the isle: we are Vigilant and each step would perhaps seem impossibly slow to the Empire – but each step is taken. Within my own family there is agreement: though the slaves my elder siblings once head (sic) are a great shame to them and myself – we have freed them as well as we can. Though beyond our estate they claim to be property of the Acciai, away from those who might victimise them they are bound no longer. Indeed, these freed believers are our greatest asset – it is a trifle to ‘lend’ a few of their number to other households for field work, where they can speak and find converts within the barracks of the enslaved. In this way we keep the fire burning.

But I have written at length. From all here on Felucca, Prosperity and Wisdom upon you. May we speak again soon.

 Amika Acciai, Felucca

I sent 35 liao to Amika the season following this letter, the first of many such contributions I would make. I chose 35 because it was the most their contacts were able to safely smuggle; I would have gotten a better “rate of return” in terms of gloaming had I sent only 25 but economic advantage was not even slightly in my mind.

I felt I owed Amika and his people a great Debt for the impact of my Statement of Principle in Winter 382YE and subsequent mandate in Spring 383YE, resulting in me leading a mob of virtuous architects, masons, and builders to remove and repurpose the idols carved into Imperial commissions by the “Asavean Architect,” Almodin Oktístis, upon whom I also placed a testimony of “Exceptional Idolator” when I met him. That mandate is also what led to my conviction for criminal damage and assault.

Third letter, received Autumn 384YE

Rafael Barossa di Tassato, Breaker of Chains, Emancipator of Souls, may this letter find you whole, upon this shore of the Labyrinth,

Much has happened and much is still to happen – so I must be brief – I must be in many places at once and ever-Vigilant. Not even the oblivion of sleep is open to me, Loyalty demands action. Ambition abhors uncertainty.

Though you bid us ‘Look to Chalonsio’ – we heard what was not said – that as the servants of *O Deus das Cadeas* were amassed – as they ‘Looked to Chalonsio’ – then their backs would be to us. We debated endlessly on what we might do to show our Loyalty and demonstrate our Courage in shared purpose. When your delivery arrived, secreted with a shipment of scrap beggarswood, we knew what we were to do.

Though it has taxed our coffers, we went abroad to the mainland of Nemoria proper and watched as the last ships of the Deus das Cadeas departed – seeking those priests left behind. Our Ambition was simple, our Wisdom direct – we anointed ourselves in Courage and, with our foe in sight, struck a blow for every soul condemned to bondage. We are not soldiers, not assassins – though I am proud (sic) of what we have done, it does not rest easy on my spirit – but with simple knives and bludgeons we set upon those minor priests left to manage the quarter, leaving auras of vigilance (sic) in our wake – so that their peers would find no peace. I have heard since that of the three we were able to accost, at least one has died – may their next life be in a world without Slavery.

Our missions was to be bold and here perhaps our Wisdom failed us. We hoped to give Courage to those still in bondage and set about laying auras of as strong an intensity as we could. As we lied to pass the guards I was reminded of Alexandre Verdadeiro and their Courage in sharing the truth, no matter the cost – that we wished to follow their example through lies was not lost on us! The spirit of Ahraz too, inspired us – indeed let it be known to any who care to hear that we did this in the name of the Liberator – though I fear our Virtue was not as great as his…

I spied the first fires as we made away to the docks – we had done all we could and many of our number, like myself, were known to the law in the capital. I fear I will never see its prominades (sic) again. We had to wait perhaps a week for news – first that the Slave Quarter in Nemoria was in revolt and fires had been set within the House of Chains and all across those narrow places where those who serve are permitted to live – and then of your work in Chanteollethi. We marvelled at the Ambition of it – of the Courage and Pride. We could only image the fleet sent by your people and its beauty and might. But our wonderment was tempered by a desire to help those across the strait of Felucca in their struggles.

It was not to be: as news broke of Chalonsio’s fate, the grasp of the Kraken was swift in crushing dissent. We have been told that many Imperials who could not flee in ships have been taken to be held and subjected to the Plenum’s fury – it is said that some have taken refuge in the Temple of the Virtues – and that the surrounding crowd demanding all within to subject themselves to the judgement of the mob grows larger each day.

We continue the struggle at home as well as abroad – those sworn and anointed in Virtue travel from island to island and draw together the embers of the future inferno.

I no longer have the second page of this letter and have no clear understanding of where it might have gotten to. It is deeply frustrating because this letter marks a clear watershed in my mind; firstly, in my response to them the previous season I had intended “look to Chalonsio” to provide them with a source of inspiration and a material demonstration that they were not alone.

They far exceeded my expectations, though, but it highlighted the importance of me sending them cash as well as liao, to let them bribe guards and otherwise facilitate their work. As such, I sent them 35 liao and 12 Crowns (again, the maximum amount they could make use of).

Fourth letter, received Winter 384YE

Ave Rafael, Virtuous friend from across the sea, Hero of Anvil. May this letter find you well.

As winter settles over these benighted isles and the seas in the strait of Felucca turn slate grey, the thoughts of myself and the others within the Temple turn first to the warmer climes of the past – and then to the future.

In the past we find a heady mix of Pride and Courage – at what we have been able to achieve: teaching those who would chain others to live in fear, taking a smuggler’s den and building up a beacon of the Way and growing our congregation bit by bit: there is not a single Estate upon Felucca now where we have not found converts – and through our influence at the docks we have been able to send motivated souls to other islands – in and away from Nemoria. But we have perhaps lacked Wisdom – the brutality of the mainland’s reprisals for the embers our consecrations set amidst the slave quarter has not been seen in a generation; those avenues are now closed to us – without supreme risk.

But how could we not consider such risks favourable when we see too in the viscera of the year departing such victories for the Way as Chalonsio and Rachensgrab – Rafael Barossa di Tassato – I wish I had the power within me to share the imagines (sic) in my own mind – for I can only imagine the pleasure it would grant you to see the disarray in the forae, the shattered fortunes, the devastation that the victories of the Empire in eviscerating the wickedness of slavery have produced in Asavea. The Plenum struggle blindly without Virtue as their world goes dark – the human misery that had sustained them has been cut and to them even the sun’s rising each morning seems an uncertain thing.

We look then to this new future your people’s efforts – their blood and toils – has carved for all of humanity: our ultimate destiny seems all the closer. We continue to teach the skills of a true priest to those we are able and have designs over provinces long overlooked by those in power at the Kraken’s heart: we will learn from our mistakes and from our successes and seek to plant new seeds of faith wherever we find fertile soil. We keep a watchful eye for opportunities too – for ourselves and perhaps the Empire: as Nemoria stirs into war, we hope to do our part – just as passionately as any son or daughter of the Ten Nations.

We are many and we are driven – I wonder, Rafael – what is it you would have us do? Every day there are new questions, challenges and dangers: in my weakest moments the challenges arrayed against us seem insurmountable – far too much for a single mind to reckon and overcome. How does the ship on the sea know if it is driven by the tiller, or the immensity of the sea beneath it? Your Wisdom would be greatly appreciated.

It is a quieting thought that we have had luck beyond Prosperity so far – and that eventually some or all of us will be called to offer our lives for this cause. I wonder if I will be writing a letter like this again when the seas turn grey next year? Or will I have begun my next journey through the Labyrinth? I think it would be better soon in the crucible of change than later under the weight of victory – though I am in no great rush!

May the turning of the year treat you well,

 Amika Acciai, Felucca

I consulted with Ashborn Pakt, then-Ambassador to Asavea, on how to respond to Acciai’s request for direction. We decided to prioritise levering apart the Grendel and the Asaveans if possible, with a secondary option being to kill Alonzo Tarquinius. The Tarquinius family were a long-time thorn in the side of the Empire who regularly agitated their fellow Plenum families against Imperial interests.

Rereading this letter now brings me sadness and comfort in equal measure: Acciai’s wish for a death in the crucible of change was soon granted, after all.

I sent the pilgrims 35 liao, 12 Crowns, and 5 wains of white granite (again, the maximum the smugglers could take). The granite in particular was a dreadful rate of return from an economic standpoint – the materials sent in return worked out at slightly less than 3 Thrones’s worth. Nevertheless, I am intensely Proud of sending them that granite, knowing what great things they would accomplish from the base in the caves of Felucca. Both Pakt and the Highborn Benefactors are to be thanked for their assistance with a wain of white granite each (and 15 liao from the Benefactors)

Fifth letter, received Spring 385

Ave, Rafael, Hero of Anvil, steward of Virtue, Grandmaster of the Sevenfold Path – may this letter find you Prosperous.

All across Felucca people have taken to their homes, their windows shuttered against the cold and their courtyards quiet to all but the impotent wind. Beneath the earth, in the smuggler’s cove that is now our temple things are perhaps less warm, but the white granite rings with the echoes of our endeavour that rises and falls with each item of news delivered across the treacherous sea.

As the last season drew to a close the avenues and quarters of Nemoria became closed to us – ships of war painted in every kind of livery choke the span of the harbour – mercenary cadres of every sort having massed under the news of war. Priests of the Temple of Eyes have also been abroad in a profusion we have rarely ever seen: Pride and Courage demands honesty on this – we were afraid that our conspiracy would be undone by their gaze, or by the oppressive, tightening grasp of the powerful families current dominating the Plenum.

Before we chose to cease our efforts in the capital you will be gladdened to hear that we had found more evidence of the disarray the actions of the Virtuous had sown in the halls of Asavean power: the meteoric decline of the House of Chains into near vassalage beneath the priesthood of the Red Goddess; winter storms crumbling slave-wrought edifices left without labourers by emancipations at Rachensgrab; of ancient families collapsing into insignificance [unreadable] Prosperity that fuelled their [unreadable]. The atmosphere was one of pregnant uncertainty, of teetering on a precipice of change. More and more the forae of Nemoria are savage battlegrounds as former allies turn upon one another as they seek to weather the storm. Let them all drown!

We have weighed your suggestions in what our roles may be in the liberation of Asavea with utmost reverence: an opportunity for us to forge our Loyalty both to the Empire, the Way itself, and yourself – whose tireless patronage has given our Ambition form – is not being taken lightly. With liao manifestations to gird us and your shared Prosperity to secure certain favours in authority, transport, and alibis we have sent members of the temple to seek information and opportunity. Here is what we have learned:

In pursuing the Grendel and their blasphemous idol we were not swift or bold enough to act before it was taken aboard. However, riding upon a wind of good fortune, one of our number was able to take passage to Marracossa despite the strict restrictions on access imposed by the new Nemorian-backed Satrap. There we learned that a sizable estate in Nala once belonging to the Comasigne family had been given over to the orcs in the wake of the crushed uprising – rumours suggest that the members of the Comasigne family now serve the Grendel in chains. Before departing it was also discovered that the ship carrying the idol – and many other purple-livred (sic) ships in the Grendel style come and go from the estate – carrying slaves, plunder, and dignitaries bound for Nemoria.

I add here a note about the ‘First Priest’ Portilium Traposdo – without easy access to Nemoria we cannot act against him without risk and cost – but by all accounts he is another casualty of shifting fortunes in the capital; before we withdrew it was common gossip how his lectgures were chained (?) and his voice drowned out in the forum. Graffiti and damage inflicted by angry mobs mar the graven façade of his Temple lingers unrepaired and whenever he travels abroad he is derided in the streets as an agent of the Empire and a traitor – no bodyguards will take his coin and it seems to me that he is a problem that will eventually take care of itself.

As of the Tarquinius family – the promise of war has seen their fortunes rise: their long-standing criticisms of the Empire, the Way and its Nations have made them the keystone in a growing coalition in the Plenum. Their ancestral seat, like many old families, lies within the heart of Nemoria – but they have interests elsewhere. Working with members of our congregation who had the misfortune to once be enslaved by the Tarquinius to find and emancipate other servants of the household, we have learned of a family holding in the north – near Geberra. Here – far from the safety of the capital – many of the family often summer to escape the oppressive heat of the sun’s zenith and exploit a locum of the realm of Summer that can be found there in their rituals. According to these new converts, Alonzo himself was a frequent attendant to this vacation in his youth and may still enjoy its solitude.

In both avenues of action we are carefully considering our options. In matters of magic, our congregation’s talents are predominantly drawn from minor dabbling, or that skill required in ceremony demanded by our lives before the Way. Myself, as a sixth son to a family of merchants, I know a little of the lore of Autumn – we have those who once used Day ritual to guide ships, Spring ritual to enrich farms and so on – but we are not scholars or warriors, nor do we have access to the regalia, mysteries and temples of the idolators to enact powerful entreatments to eternals. We have begun to turn our shared Prosperity towards changing this – already we have obtained some modest means to increase the potency of our ritual – but Felucca is an island of agrarian commerce and we must reach beyond its shores for such means. Your generosity as our patron will aid us in this.

So in response to your offer of assistance we currently are capable of gathering the crystalized mana and will to manifest a ritual of magnitude twenty at least once and perhaps again each season if we can find avenues for resources. We are not familiar with Imperial Lore – and our understanding of the denizens of the Realms is limited – it has always been in the Plenum’s best interest to obfuscate and muddy the boundaries between this world and these otherworldly creatures. Thus, to both offers we must bind ourselves to your Wisdom: send to use those formulae which you believe will best help in our efforts – even minor enchantments to gird our agents away from this sanctuary; extend an introduction with those eternals with whom you believe we might find common cause in our endeavours; pass to us what artifice you see as vital to strengthening our ability – and in every case we shall put them to use for the betterment of all humanity and the furthering of the Way. In these things we accept our transitive role as the pupil.

We will continue to seek opportunities and pursue a way to capitalise on what we have already learned. Please extend our thanks to all those whose struggle in the Empire we are joined with through common cause. Your example and those of your Empire inspire us to greatness.

Amika Acciai, Felucca

Spring 385YE was an important summit – the Senate declared war on the Asavean Archipelago in response for the destruction of the Isle of the Osseini, legitimising an escalation in my overseas interference. And Conclave passed my Declaration of Dissemination for the ritual text Circle of Gold, a Magnitude 16 Autumn ritual that allows members of a band to drag each other up off the floor and stops them bleeding to death, while incentivising sticking together and defend each other.

I chose it after discussing it with several Generals and Conclave members, because of its obvious effectiveness for the task at hand and its low risk to the Empire if it were to fall into the Plenum’s grasp. I considered many others and rejected a few otherwise decent options on the basis of Pride; something like Anathemic Call of Bug and Briar is as demeaning as it is effective, after all.

Also of relevance is that Heralds of the Eternal Janon wanted to speak to me at this summit, considering me one of three “great spokespeople for Passion in the Empire.” I had previously had some dealings with mortal servants of the Shadowed Flame about a year prior to this, who gave me a uniquely enchanted circlet as a gift to reward me for me work destroying the idols of Almodin Oktístis. All Janon wanted in return was for me to keep doing what I was doing, which obviously I was going to do anyway!

In the meeting with the Heralds of Janon, I was given an arcane projection called Silver Tongue of Virtue, which is now in Imperial Lore. But I also took the opportunity to ask another favour; Janon is unequivocal in its belief that passion must be followed despite the constraints of society and will often provide support and inspiration to priests of Ambition, Courage, Loyalty and Pride. It seemed reasonable, therefore, that La Aubétoile would be delighted to assist Amika and his congregation, which is what I asked for – and what I received far outstripped my expectations.

I sent another 35 liao and 12 Crowns; the money I might have spent on white granite instead went on the fee to disseminate the ritual text.

Sixth letter, received Summer 385YE

Ave, friend in Virtue,

Forgive me if this letter appears terse. I write as we begin to travel – myself and my siblings in the Way, by many winding paths to a distant destination. There is still much to plan and do, and time drains like water through grasping hands.

First – let me share what I can of our plans: we are away to Geberra. There are a dozen of us, but we have prepared at length – as I said, we will disguise our intent by diverse lies, travelling by intermediary ports to thwart the Temple of Eyes and a vigilance born of fear. Were it we could not carry the expense, the lives of many of our number would be forfeit – it is through your shared Prosperity that we may hope to attempt this.

We have there secured space across the heathland of Esticar island – it is many hours of hard travel across those parched hills to the summer estate of the Tarquinius – but we will be hidden by wreaths of smoke from the burning undergrowth – a gift from the shadowed flame to keep our lungs hale and our movements hidden. Were it we acted alone, the guards of the estate would end our efforts with a single raised voice – it is through your Wisdom that we shall succeed.

Much of our accumulated ritual potency travels with us – hidden or obfuscated in purpose: with our own knowledge, and through our collaboration with La Aubétoile we will be girded magically, with the generous donations of liao from the Diplomat we shall be set in purpose and, with the delivery of further ritual knowledge I hope we shall be an insurmountable force.

Our plan is simple – to put an end to the Tarquinius’ political rise in the Plenum – to cut their voice from the clamouring for war heard across Nemoria. We have studied the news from the capital well to know the names among the family who clearly speak against the Empire and the Way. We will respond in clearer deeds.

Given our journeys are successful, we shall be within our assumed quarters on Esticar come the Solstice and we will act within the month that follows. You may reach me at La Casa Groga, Esticar – or, if I am taken by the Eyes – contact my second, Hélia Bûcheron – she, like all of us here in Felucca, knows the legendary efforts you have undertaken for our faith and future.

If the worst comes to pass, I leave my cousin Alberto Acciai overseeing our efforts on Felucca. May he be as valuable a comrade to you as he has long been to me.

I have spoken at length with Alberto on that which you asked us in your last letter – of those seekers of Virtue in Calatupos and Sulesca. I know of the Divines and the aberrations of dogma that have grown among those denied the privileges I have from my efforts in Maracossa, before I travelled to the Empire. We have spoken and thought on the topic of Saul of Cora too – though we do not know the name – we do know that their story is not unlikely many of the Courageous souls that carried the embers of the Way over the sea.

In the absence of those within our Temple that are travelling to Esticar, there are still many in Felucca that might begin to seek ways to act – but not enough that both avenues might be pursued fruitfully. We turn to your Wisdom on this – that there are those who seek Virtue who live in chains is a terrible wrong, yes – but so too can we see the power in unearthing a symbol of the Way’s struggles in Nemoria. Alberto is poised to act – we ask only in which direction.

Finally – perhaps a warning? We are unsure – agents of La Aubétoile have told us to watch for ‘Seven Cleansing Flames’ across the narrows to Nemoria. They will say no more. We still shun the capital – but we will watch. Perhaps this means more to you?

I go now – the ship is in the harbour. When next we speak may we be in a changed world.

 Amika Acciai, Felucca

This season I received the ritual text from the Civil Service and sent it to Amika via Ethereal Courier along with a Wayfarer’s Robe made by my uncle. I also sent 35 liao, 12 crowns, and 1 white granite.

Please know that the next letter may well be very hard to read, as it deals in detail with the assault on the Tarquinius family estate.

Seventh and final letter, received Autumn 385

Ave, Rafael,

I have many letters I planned to send. I wrote many as the time drained away towards the enacting of our plan. This I think was naivete – or wanting to believe what we planned to do was natural and everyday: that I could add it as a footnote in a letter of thanks as though we were visiting the market and your gift of a new basket was much appreciated. I wanted to believe that killing could be something expected of those who strive for Virtue: after all, haven’t we spoken of fighting for Human Destiny? What is fighting unless killing lies beneath – a dark potential under calm seas.

Your ‘basket’ – the gifts you abjured into our hands with the awe-inflicting Wisdom of your Empire – they saved many Virtuous lives. My reservations and doubt have too been balmed by reaffirming myself to the manifestations of Virtue that your liao and your uncle’s robe have allowed me. We have all suffused ourselves with such focus – in the before and after of our deeds. I am bedecked in the Purity of Courage – but still, despite my convictions, I cannot escape what I have seen and done.

I write from the open sea. We are becalmed upon the ship that ferried us to safety. But – enough – I must grasp the burning iron and tell you what has happened:

First – know that we have been successful. Alonzo Tarquinius wanders the labyrinth. His spirit is joined by his sisters, who used their standing in the Plenum to support the war – and who have seen their fortunes soar as Nemoria has awoken to conflict. It shames me to say that he is also joined by much of his and his sister’s family – and many of his slaves and attendants.

When the hour came for us to act, we worked the ritual La Aubétoile had offered us and from a prepared pyre sprang beings of shadowed flame that blended human beauty and avian form: their whirling, frenzied dancing cut a maze of embers over the summer-parched heath towards the Tarquinius estate and we, swaddling in linen robes and face wraps soaked in seawater, braved the labyrinth of fire their passage had made as we stole to the state beneath the pall of smoke.

We hesitated by the walls of the estate – servants and guards had not given them up despite the smoke and they desperately sought to douse the overgrown trees and briars before they offered a bridge to the flames. It is here that I recall understanding that I had perhaps misjudged the reality of our struggle – and the nature of our allies – for the mesmeric, winged silhouettes of fire shrieked and dashed themselves upon the walls – seeking out those struggling figures in the smoke to immolate with their flames.

But we pushed on – shattering the gates and beginning to comb the grounds for those on our list. The gardens had taken with flame and the wind had put the blinding, choking smoke through the estate – draining in billowing streams through the columned prominades and peristyled courtyards. We were lost to confusion almost immediately: bull-inked guard was indistinguishable from panicked servant as we sought to ensure no warmonger were allowed to slip away but even this resolve soon gave way to panic – we fought like blind, caged animals and I could not tell if my arrows found servants, soldiers or senators. Children – the elderly – fled into collapsing chambers and I had no air in my lungs for warning or reassurance – barely enough for survival. The fire was everywhere far faster than we expected.

The Tarquinius family temple was on a prominence overlooking the coast and rose from the smoke like an island upon an ashen sea – we found Alonzo there and faced him and his red-tattooed sisters in a struggle that claimed four of our congregation: it was not a heroic battle like those in the epics – we clawed and wrestled with knives and staves in the spilled blood of our kin. My mind reels when I try to remember – it was as though the setting sun had allied itself with the slavers – brothers and sisters in Virtue fell for want of being able to see against its glare. But our resolve was greater and ultimately those who did not cast themselves onto the rocks below died at our hands.

With our work done we carried our dead away to make a mystery of those who had committed the deed. What remains is a daze – there is only the smell of blood, smoke and burning – then the salt of the sea before we were aboard the ship Hélia had prepared for our escape. We departed on swift winds and let the angry black smear of the burning estate shrink into the gloom of night. Finally – my energy spent – I succumbed to dreams of fire and screaming.

Two days into this flight the winds abandoned us – falling to a whisper as the sky became empty. We have been listless ever since – pressed like insects upon the glassy barrier between the endless sky and the unfathomable deep – the sun watches us ceaselessly. We row when we can, but every day the fear of pursuit grows. It has been perhaps a week – we might make for a nearby port by oar if the currents are kind before our supplies are exhausted. It would be Pheraemos – of it I know little – it is a half-sunken place. It is our only hope.

Rafael – we know what we have done is right; we have done it willingly. Whatever becomes of us will always be second to our actions – that we chose to act – that we chose to fight when all of us could have continued to slumber in our former lives. I could have led sermons until I was old and grey within the halls of the temple beneath Felucca, I could have philosophised and taken the slow, safe road to the future: but we both know that the world will not change with safe words and deeds. I look at my burned hands and see the price of lifting but one brick onto the edifice of our shared destiny. I am filled with the desire to lift the next – and the next. That I will not will be my spirit’s only regret. I am tired now – my arms ache from rowing.

May we speak again,

 Amika Acciai

This letter, especially that final paragraph, is why I think Amika should be an Exemplar of Ambition in particular. The Absolution of Ambition fills us with a sense that our aspirations are of primary importance, and diminishes any remorse, regret, or guilt we feel as a result of our actions. The Clear Path of Ambition lets our doubt fall away and leaves us feeling confident and certain of our ambitions. The Calling of Ambition provokes a strong urge to prioritise our goal and puts pressure on us to pursue it before others. And the Drive of Ambition encourages us to seize any opportunity to further our aspirations – it feels better to take a small step towards our goals than to take no steps at all.

Or, to put it another way, it is better to lift one brick on the edifice of our shared destiny than to take the slow, safe road to the future because the world will not change with safe words and deeds. Amika paid the highest price to realise his dreams, but in his last moments he was glad of it.

None of that detracts from the great sadness I felt when I read this letter for the first time, or again today. Amika’s profound embrace of the Way – a foreign faith he found as an adult rather than being born to it as I was – is deeply inspiring to me, and his death was a great loss.

When composing my reply to him, which I sent to Pheraemos just in case, I took counsel from many of my friends and acquaintances who had killed before. I found those who have made a profession or personal calling of it least helpful; their pragmatic and accepting nature did not give me much insight into how best to provide pastoral care to Amika.

I must therefore give special mention to Veikko Bondforger, then-Cardinal of Loyalty, who gave me some truly valuable guidance. He told me that “it never gets any easier” to kill, and I like to think that his honesty and vulnerability helped Amika when my Winged Messenger arrived.

This season, I sent 35 liao, 12 crowns, and 1 wain of white granite to Felucca. The General Assembly of the Synod also passed the following Rewarding:

“Since Summer 384, I have been patron of a group of Virtuous rebels in Asavea. With the support of the Sevenfold Path, Highborn Benefactors, Ashborn Pakt, my family, and several others who do not wish to be named. I have sent them money to bribe corrupt officials, white granite to fortify their homes, and 175 doses of Liao so they can practice The Way. With the Conclave's aid I have also provided them with a ritual text to assist their work. The total financial value of the aid I have sent them is over 70 Thrones. This has resulted in a decapitation strike against the Tarquinius family, prime movers against the Empire in the Asavean Plenum. I claim full responsibility for this act and encourage anyone who is able to tell the Asaveans it was me. To cover those costs I incurred personally, and to ensure I can continue this work, I ask the Synod to reward me with 35 Thrones.”

Appendix A: First letter from Alberto Acciai, Autumn 385YE

Rafael Barossa di Tassato – greetings.

I am Alberto and I am family to Amika – we share the same name, though I was not born to it. I am not lucky enough to have made your acquaintance, but I see plainly the quality of your character in consequences of your deeds and am often told of your efforts. One who has earned the Loyalty of my cousin is close to receiving my own. I greatly look forward to working with you.

I have not many words and would rather ink gloaming on actions. What follows is a season of work: We travelled at cost and in care to Maracossa and spent our Virtuous Prosperity to see the state of Calatupos and of Sulesca. These places are still wounded by war: soldiers make and execute the law to create an appearance of peace. It is a punishment that rebels and loyalists bear alike – the only difference is uniformity of distribution.

Calatupos is a dry land whose wealth lies beneath its interior hills. In those hills, near the rivers that lead to the sea, is the capital, Marilen. Here Asavea massed its armies to siege Maragladia. While garrisoned here the conquerors consumed the settlement’s stores. Today the people of Marilen fear starvation after seasons of failing crops. The mines have been taken from Maracossan nobility and are held by the Asavi plenum who lead the remaining garrison. There is much suffering here. I have been told that the fountain at Marilen’s heart still runs red with spilled blood from the victory sacrifices made in its water. The slaves are closely watched and the nobility feel the spears at their back. We have made contact with some in the dry hills and less in the mines who are endlessly thankful for the liao we could give them.

Sulesca did not join in the uprising and many of its nobility were rewarded with grants of land elsewhere in Maracoss and then the seizure of their ancestral estates around in this area. Where now were leagues of farms, orchards and forest without stewards, the most loyal to Asavea saw their fortunes increase and many sixth sons and daughters from Nemoria who were granted titles. This is how Asavea has secured this port.

Lumber for ships, grain for supplies and much other cargo departs from the docks – all to Nemoria. Only empty ships arrive – this is not trade, it is payment. There are many slaves here but their masters are very attentive – they know the Prosperity they steal is greatly important to Nemoria. We have found many contacts – but we have also found complacency.

Rafael – my cousin has tasked me with delivering those enchained in Maracoss to freedom. I and others from the Temple have decided that there are several ways in which we might achieve this.

In Calatupos there are many rivers that travel into the hills. These rivers carry the wealth dug from the mines to the coast and then to Sulesca. This connection to the sea might allow decisive action in one of two ways.

First, with care and coin we might bring liao, weapons and other means to those enslaved in the estates and barren fields around Marlien – and work to rouse many all at once. The garrison of Marlien is wielded as one brutal club and it remains poised over the mines of Calatupos. Such a weapon would cut a slow arc as it turned to fall on one place. With this time those self-emancipated elsewhere might free others and travel to the coast before it turned to them.

Or, if not a breadth of effort then we might focus on Marlien alone. With care and resolve the Marlien’s garrison might be distracted long enough for us to arm and prepare the mines. When we are ready, La Aubétoile has shown us a means by which their burning envoys can be conjured to create the needed disruption for the freed to wash from the mountains and to the coast. The eternal has made this offer for only this audacious approach.

In both approaches there is a flaw. The number of ships needed to carry such a number of the freed is beyond our means. Those arriving at the Calatupos cost would need to find vessels enough to ferry them to safety. Felucca is too small and lies too close to Nemoria to be their destination. These ships must be ready to sail to a free land. I believe this is something you could achieve, Rafael: raise a call to the crews and captains of the Casinean Empire and secure the needed ships and prepare the destination. Such action would be noticed by Asavea – if not the call, then the consequence.

In Sulesca our opinion is that such immediate action is impossible: the threats are more distributed and the people – free or otherwise – too aware of their relative security. Into these circumstances we would seek slower change: building the way and establishing routes from the fields and lumber camps to freedom. Here, we are confident that we can apply our mutual Prosperity to deliver a safe, steady trickle of the enslaved to intermediary ports such as the Sarcophan. But it would be a trickle compared to the deluge that might be won by daring. Such care and patience might also be applied to Calatupos with a small amount of additional risk.

Rafael: we have the willing Virtuous and funds needed to enact one of these approaches in one of these territories. Be it through sudden, violent struggle or slow subversion – we are ready to spend these lives for the Way. My cousin has told me of your ability to send ritual texts and heirlooms across the Wind like this letter is sent to you. He has asked me to big you share what you believe will support our efforts.

Alberto Acciai,

 La Place de la Vertu, *Île de Felucca*

With Amika’s dying words freshly in my mind, how could I choose the safe, steady approach? As he said, the world will not change with safe words and deeds. As a Bishop of Pride in the city of Apulian, audacity has grown close to my heart. And the opportunity to leverage Janon’s assistance could not be ignored. As such, I advised distracting Marilen’s garrison and arming the miners, all the better to break free.

I contracted the late Adón i Martán i Erigo (the so-called “Mithril Man”) to get a Greater Majority in the Freeborn Assembly calling on corsairs to assist, which he delivered handily with only one priest voting against. I had paid his up-front fee before his death and have since paid the performance-related bonus to his widower.

At the request of a Marcher ally of mine (I have not asked permission to name this person, so I shall keep their identity concealed for now) one Friar Graffanner raised a similar statement of principle in the Marcher Assembly but it was just one vote short of a Greater Majority (not one priest’s votes, but a single vote). Deeply frustrating, but ultimately this did not affect the outcome.

Given the turnaround time of getting ritual texts prepared by Conclave, I couldn’t send any more of those. But as we will see, the assistance of the Shadowed Flame was likely more than enough.

Appendix B: Second letter from Alberto Acciai, Winter 385YE

Rafael Barossa d’Apulian –

I write from within Marilen’s broken walls, atop the garrison barracks. I can see along the burned main street towards the West. There are strange shadows in the deserted avenues and walled gardens as the sun rises. In places across the sky, smoke still linger from La Aubétoile’s passions in many plumes. Some have said they see faces in the char and soot, or hear whispering in the smouldering ashes. All here are on edge and are seeking whatever signs they can.

It was my plan to write to you from Felucca in victory. The season that has passed with our temple making ready: we used Nemoria’s distraction in making war with Casinea to find hidden ways into the hills. In this we have all been invested – our halls beneath the dirt of Felucca lie empty now. It was Amika’s teachings that we should all be prepared for Virtue’s calling, and to be ready for the purpose that all those who believe in Human Destiny must fully embrace to achieve it. Through this dedication and effort, we found those eager for freedom in each mine surrounding Marilen and gave them the means and materials they needed to win it.

When the time came to act, the fire spread quickly. The mine guards and overseers that had not yet fled from a season from a season of harassment and struggle were quickly swept aside. We threw open the pens and put an instrument of liberation into every willing hand. Concurrently, our coven brought the agreement with La Aubétoile to fruition and directed its flames down the barren valley and onto the city. The conjured flames took the form of a procession of beasts in the shape of humanity: though they walked upon [unreadable] in the form of hooves and had the horns of goats upon their heads they bore the faces of men and women. Each shadow cavorted and seethed with terrible emotion, leaving a smouldering trail of glittering coals in their wake. Here we were meant to withdraw. We had planned to make good our escape and reach our ships as the emancipated reached yours but in that moment as my brothers and sisters in faith stood in the wake of our ritual, something told us that we could win. We just had to try.

Spreading out, we gathered any of the freed who were willing to try with us. Those who had seen the burning column creeping towards Marilen had been gripped by the same animus. Soon we were a ragged army and we fell upon the estates and farms the passage of La Aubétoile had put into disarray and found our numbers swell.

Mariel’s garrison [sic] was not caught unawares. Its Asavi leadership had responded to our efforts in weakening the mines with paranoia and had consolidated its resources to protect themselves. While our spirits were steeled with passion and Courage, those of the defenders were put into route [sic] by the approaching flames and darkness. The living flames embraced soldiers even when cut and skewered and their oiled linens and wicker shields quickly caught and spread the conflagration. We made good use of this chaos encircling and butchering Calatupos’ oppressors with mining picks, stolen swords and smuggled spears. Those that survived fled into the south, down towards Sulesca and north towards Maragladia.

What followed was a scouring: we broke every chain in Marilen and every enemy of the Way was sent to the Labyrinth to languish. Marilen’s fountains ran red once more. Everywhere we went we painted works of the spirit with our stockpiled liao and roused a trampled people to fervour. By now we knew that the ships from Casinea were beyond reach and as the night turned to dawn we felt as though a greater calling awaited us. We were possessed again by a spark of the Firebrand – to fight and die free here rather than steal away into uncertainty.

In the days since we have left no estate, mine, farm, or villa untouched within a day’s travel. Some have chosen to test their fortunes alone, but most see that there is nowhere else to go and have been welcomed in Marilen. We have dug ditches, reinforced barricades and stockpiled supplies. We know a siege is coming. Though the Kraken moves slowly, we already see that they are massing from the North and South.

There is no hope of victory. We are an army of slaves and sixth sons and daughters playing at war and we are outnumbered by a score to one. Our faith sustains us and we are prepared for the end. We stand at a crossroads and we are spilt in purpose. We again ask you, Rafael – what should we do:

We believe that the fire kindled in our struggle here can ignite elsewhere across Asavea. Wherever the faithful languish beneath Nemoria’s cruelty the kindling lays ready to ignite and it awaits but a spark. We could be that spark. Given the proper tools Marilen could cost Nemoria dearly, searing our Courage, Pride and Ambition into hearts all across the archipelago. Ours would be an example these ancient islands need – cities and peoples so tired and cowed by generations of stagnation - we would show them Virtue and what the human spirit can achieve.

But – I was once a vintner. I know the Wisdom of patience and that impulsiveness is a false friend to Courage and poisoner of Ambition. For all the fire in my heart and my dedication to what has begun here – I cannot look across the faces of those who stand beside me – happy faces made grim by the heavy price that freedom has asked of them – and not believe that their death, however willing, is a betrayal of our mutual Loyalty. I know that they would follow wherever we led and this responsibility is like a knife in my chest. It could be then that we seek instead to escape. If we acted decisively, we could break through into the South and vanish within the scrubland and forests. So long as the might of Nemoria is tangled in war we would be able to set about the slow work of exodus. But this would cost many lives and put us in an uncertain future. I am left with the question: is it better to ask my brothers and sisters to die at the chance to live a hunted life or to lead them to a certain death?

Whichever route we choose, we would need whatever you might send us – but chiefly mithril. Amongst those willing to lay down their lives here are smiths and artisans who have toiled their entire lives for the benefit of others; whose hands burn to turn Prosperity to their own cause – our cause. Given enough of the metal we can fashion defences, weapons and armour aplenty to make the oppressors pay in blood – or to succeed in our flight to the south.

We have made contact with a merchant from Sarcophan. [Redacted] is a smuggler with a fast ship and broad connections. He has agreed to risk the journey to Marracossa to deliver materials and is confident he can reach us with enough time for us to ask. Their ship, [redacted], is moored in Robec and [the smuggler] is certain that any Casinean certificates they receive can be quickly exchanged for local metal. There is plenty of loot for his paying here – we have little need for the Plenum’s stolen wealth.

I am sorry that I have been so ungrateful as to not spend time on your questions. I often think of Amika and sorely miss his counsel and his friendship. But as I wrote earlier – he was resolute in impressing upon those he brought into the temple that the only two certainties in life are the present moment and the Labyrinth beyond it: everything else is something precious that must be fought for. It is a testament to his skill at words and letters that he achieved what he did in Felucca as the sixth son of a House in decline. Among those here in Marilen there are far better born defenders who are prepared to sacrifice the easy life their blood entitled them to because of Amika’s words.

People are stirring now amidst the free city of Marilen and there are sermons to be said and work to be done.

* Alberto Acciai, Marilen

When I first read this letter, I felt that exact same knife in the heart that Alberto describes. I have been Patron of Felucca for a little over eighteen months and I have developed a deep Loyalty to these brave pilgrims across the Sea of Salt. Much as my rational mind saw the benefit to the Empire and the Way of Alberto’s first option, especially in the context of the razing of Siroc by Asavean marines, I wanted these people to survive. I wanted their stories to continue.

I must thank Kaspar Yakovich von Holberg, Senator of the Greatest City In The League, who sought me out to give me counsel. He reminded me that the truly virtuous are loyal even through hardship and misfortune, and that I should support those I am loyal to no matter the cost. Remembering that made it easy to accept the right course of action; for me to deny them the opportunity to remake Asavea as a place of freedom and Virtue simply because of my personal feelings would have been to do them a great disservice. In a single conversation, Kaspar brought me great illumination and I am truly grateful. I wrote to Alberto and told him my decision.

In the end, I sent Alberto 8 wains of mithril (3 provided by Ashborn Trosk at no cost) and various other minor items, as well as 35 liao and 12 Crowns. As I write, missionaries and wayfarers sent by Athiel Westernborn of the Cenotaph, Sufyan i Zuhri i Erigo, and Cardinal Aspar bring word of the Doctrine of Enlightenment. Virtue lies in choice and action, and the time for action has finally come.

The Judgement of Recognition

We recognise Amika Acciai, sixth child of the House of Steel, as an Exemplar of Ambition. He reached out to Rafael Barossa d'Apulian, seeking help with his goal to "engulf Asavea in a firestorm of change".

**Pilgrimage:** Amika travelled to the Temple of the Way in Nemoria and studied there under Sumaash and Imperial priests

**Benevolence:** Amika turned his family estate into a safe haven for followers of the Way fleeing persecution by the Plenum

**Salvation:** Amika freed his family's slaves and taught them the Way. These pilgrims infiltrated other estates and spread the Way to the slaves there. Amika led the attack on the Tarquinius family estate, killing the oppressors there and giving his life for the cause.

**Inspiration:** Amika's death inspired his cousin Alberto, who led the attack on the city of Marilen that freed all the slaves there, and started the wave of unrest that is currently crashing across Asavea

A big limitation of the form of the Synod Judgement sheet is having to compress so much into so little space; the above is my best effort to bring the key points to life in a way which I aim to be accurate and thorough with a limited word count. I believe this document is a valuable companion piece to the Judgement of Recognition, however.

About The Author

Rafael Barossa d’Apulian was born in Tassato Regario in 345YE. He studied Virtuous Historiography at the famous School of Epistemology, before travelling to the Commonwealth to take up a post at the University of Leerdam for five years.

He met Natalia ‘The Falcon’ Barossa, and returned to the Empire with her in 380YE, whereupon she adopted him as her son and he joined the Crimson Foxes. That summer, Rafael went on a pilgrimage across the Empire with his new cousin Genoveva Barossa di Tassato, visiting the Blood Red Quays Art Gallery in Sarvos, the Grand Conservatory of Music in Redoubt, the Unbound Steel Hall of Lost Chapters in Reikos, the Bloody Great Theatre in Temeschwar and finally the Blood Red Rivers Museum in Tassato Mestra, where Genoveva dedicated Rafael to the Virtue of Pride.

Rafael first came to Anvil in Autumn 382YE, and the following summit raised his first Statement of Principle in the Pride Assembly condemning Almodin Oktístis, the "Asavean Architect". The following season, he enacted a mandate to lead architects, masons, and builders into buildings designed by Oktístis and forcibly remove idolatrous elements. He pled guilty to criminal damage and assault at the following summit, with clemency on the basis of Pride by Genoveva.

Rafael was elected as Auditor of Senatorial Accountability in Spring 383YE, and that Autumn gained a Greater Majority in the General Assembly denouncing the philosophy of the Sword Scholars. In Winter 383YE, he enacted a mandate reminding the Wise that they are part of the Empire, not above it. At that summit, he was elected Grandmaster of the Sevenfold Path for the first time, being re-elected in Spring 384 and Spring 385. He now lives in the city of Apulus in Spiral, where he runs a Congregation.

